AN EXPERIMENT
WITH A
PROJECT CURRICULUM

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION

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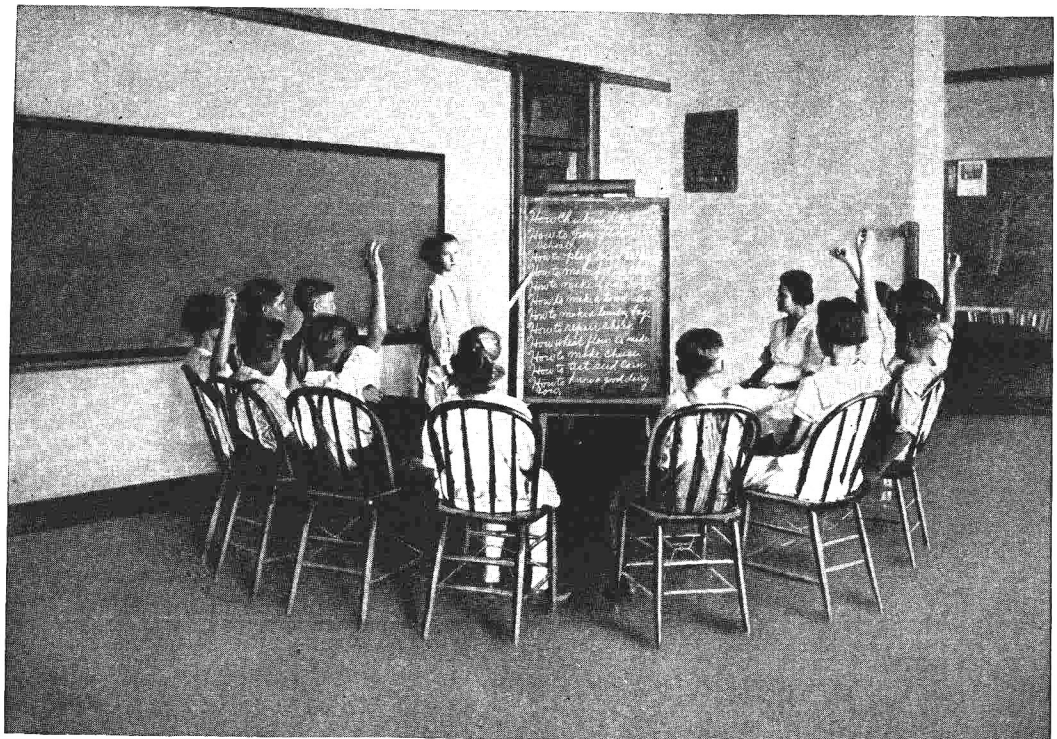

PUPILS OF THE SECOND GROUP SELECTING THEIR OWN PROJECT

To

Christene and Jewell

Leaders in a Democracy

of Childhood

FOREWORD

THIS report of an experiment in rural school curriculum making embodies an endeavor to interpret and state the basic ideas implied in the concept of *project method* as formulated by Professor William H. Kilpatrick and to use them in the enterprise of rural education. In particular the discussion includes (1) a statement of the principles that controlled the procedure of the experiment; (2) an account of a concrete application of these principles in a typical country school; and (3) an attempt to evaluate these principles in furthering the growth of boys and girls in terms of certain outcomes of the experiment.

Three points should be observed in reading this report. First, the point of view involved is that "life is the great thing after all; *the life of the child at its time and in its measure* no less than the life of the adult." Childhood is not a vestibule through which we pass into adulthood; it is an intrinsic room in the mansion of life. It is a real period of life to be lived for itself. It is not to be regarded as merely a preparation for the adult stage. "What is to be thought, therefore, of that cruel education which sacrifices the present to an uncertain future, that burdens a child with all sorts of restrictions and begins by making him miserable, in order to prepare him for some far-off happiness which he may never enjoy?" [1] As teachers, we are not to seek to abbreviate childhood in such a manner; we are, on the other hand, to endeavor to further the *present growth* of children, for it is the *continuous growing*, life itself, of boys and girls that eventuates in the worthiest type of manhood and womanhood. Second, the essence of the curriculum as used in this experiment is the *purposes* of boys and girls in real life. As such it is necessarily as

[1] Rousseau, J. J., *Emile*, Book I. (Translation.).

broad as life itself and is not limited to any set of prescribed performances to be engaged in by boys and girls in a particular sequence as is the usual interpretation of the school curriculum. In this sense the curriculum is a living thing, *child experiencing*, no more capable of standardization in the sense of performances nicely prescribed in advance and from above than is any other living, growing thing. Third, the findings as here reported are the outcomes of this one single experiment and as such are necessarily tentative. Further experimentation will certainly be necessary to test the full validity of these findings in their wider application in the field of rural education.

The reader to whom this report brings any new insight into the laws of child growth, power in curriculum making, or interest in rich details of concrete child life becomes a sharer in my debt to my teachers and advisers in this study, Fannie W. Dunn, Junius L. Meriam, Frederick G. Bonser, John Dewey, and William H. Kilpatrick. I would be unjust not to mention the reviewers of this report, Edward S. Evenden, Milo B. Hillegas, Mabel Carney, and Rudolph Pintner, whose services have been of incalculable value in rendering it more serviceable for use in further experimentation in rural curriculum making. It is a pleasure, also, to acknowledge indebtedness to the intelligence and sympathy of the children and teachers of this experiment with whom I have had the honor to associate intimately for several years. The friendship and love thus developed are to me "a thing of beauty and a joy forever."

ELLSWORTH COLLINGS.

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
August, 1923.

INTRODUCTION

The reader will find in this book pioneer work along three lines, first in the guiding aims of the school described, second in the means (both content and procedure) used for attaining these aims, and third in the kind of data brought forward to indicate success. The first two of these will be discussed in connection with the actual educative procedure and the theory underlying it. The last will appear in the evaluation of the experiment.

The ordinary school teaches a number of "subjects," such as arithmetic, spelling, or geography. Its hoped-for results may include character or citizenship, but its actual aims are the knowledge and skills included in the typical school subjects. To secure these, it assigns "lessons," typically written down in books. Pupils study these and "recite" upon them. Success is technically indicated by ability to stand certain tests, and these of late years are increasingly "standardized" by a scientific procedure.

Professor Collings has worked along a very different plan. He did not teach "subjects" as these are commonly understood. The actual aims of his school were not the conventional knowledge or skills, but the bettering of the present child life of his pupils. His starting point accordingly was the actual present life of the boys and girls themselves, with all their interests and desires, good and bad. His first step forward was to help guide these children to choose the most interesting and fruitful parts of this life as the content of their school activity. Following this, his aim was twofold, first to help the boys and girls do better than they otherwise would the precise things they had chosen, and second, by means of the experience of choosing and through the experience of more effectual activity gradually to broaden the

outlook of the boys and girls as to what they might further choose and then to help them better effect these new choices.

Professor Collings' philosophy was that this gradual and continuous enlarging of power and outlook, so as, however, to stay always within things that his pupils liked as boys and girls to do then and there, would promise most both for their present and for their future. His faith was that, if the school were run efficiently on this basis, the results would be evident in more wholesome attitudes toward school and toward life in general; and that these attitudes would along with the ideas and skills they were gaining work themselves out, not only at school, but also at home and in the community, and be spread at least in some measure from the children first to the other members of their own families and perhaps later to others in the community. His experiment was to have the school run on this basis and to note the results. To make it more telling as an experiment, a contrast was instituted with other schools, and comparative results were carefully noted.

The underlying theory of the experiment is thus unmistakably at variance with the usual procedure. Before considering the results of the experiment it may be well to examine this theory still more closely. Four interrelated ideas constitute Professor Collings' position. *First*, in order that the school may properly discharge its function *the pupils must purpose what they do.* Parenthetically, to "wish what one does" may be miles different from merely "doing what one wishes." Here the pupils with the teacher decided after due consideration on each next "project," the teacher having final authority to refuse assent if necessary, but in fact seldom if ever using this veto power. The enterprise being so chosen, plans for executing it were similarly discussed and decided. This procedure followed out to the end constituted in the main what is here called the "project method." But the other three constituent ideas are also implied, as will be evident.

The *second* constituent idea is that *actual learning is never single.* In addition to the matter immediately at hand, there are

always in simultaneous operation many concomitant learnings, chiefly perhaps the building of attitudes toward various other life interests involved in what is going on, as for example some degree of self-confidence, some sense of responsibility, a liking for or against the matter at hand, for or against the school as encouraging such, for or against the teacher for his part in it. These attendant learnings inevitably accumulating in character determine here and now the issues of current life. So understood with their immediate bearing they constituted perhaps the chief objective of the school's endeavor.

The *third* constituent idea in the position here presented is, that *all learning encouraged by the school is so encouraged because it is needed here and now in order to carry on better the enterprise now under way.* In the traditional school the activities set up by the school are precisely and intentionally subordinate to acquiring certain prior chosen subject matter. This process is here exactly reversed: the activity is first chosen, and learning and subject matter are henceforth subordinate to it. If, for example, arithmetic or history were needed for the better doing of an enterprise under way, the children learned then and there exactly what was so needed for that specific purpose. The felt pertinence of this to the purpose at hand would by well-known psychologic principles make its learning easier. It is necessary to emphasize here that to Professor Collings this procedure was no "back door" or "left-handed" method for "putting over" the conventional subject matter. In comparison with his real aim of growth in and through better and better living here and now for his boys and girls, he literally did not care whether they got the conventional subject matter of the schools. If they needed it, it would be called for and learned. If it were not called for, it was not needed. If it will later be needed, learn it then. His contrasts of comparative learnings in the matter of formal subject matter as herein presented were in fact undertaken, and are here introduced at the wish of his advisers. The reader who wishes properly to orientate himself as he takes up this book must accept at the

full this statement regarding Professor Collings' attitude, however great a strain it may give one's customary habits of thought.

The *fourth* and final constituent of Professor Collings' position is that *the curriculum is a series of guided experiences so related that what is learned in one serves to elevate and enrich the subsequent stream of experience.* These experiences are guided by the teacher in the light of the three constituent ideas already discussed and of the principle of "activity leading to further activity," namely, that other things being equal, those activities are to be preferred which promise most in their leadings to further like fruitful activities. For the practical execution of such a curriculum theory four lines of activities were simultaneously carried on in the daily work of the experimental school, each of course being broadly interpreted: story telling, construction, play, and excursions. It was felt that if these four typical aspects of life be daily represented in the child's experience and if each single enterprise-experience chosen for execution be made to yield its reasonably rich return, then the future both immediate and remote is better cared for than on any other basis of selection. The emphasis here of course is on what Professor Dewey calls the "continuous reconstruction of experience." The principle of "activity leading to further activity," it may be pointed out, takes adequate care of the moral and social bearing of proposed activities. The curriculum then was continuously made "on the spot" by the joint action of pupils and teacher, present interest and foreseen possibilities, jointly judged, being the deciding factors. The fundamental thesis was that a curriculum so made would best care for all four constituent ideas here considered and so would mean most for the living of the children, — for their present living because it would best call forth their present active powers, for their future living because promising most *for* their present experience it accordingly promises most *from* their present experience.

So much for the theory underlying the experiment. What now of the results? The experimental school made far and away the

best showing. Does this prove then the experimental theory? Does it establish the new position? "Prove" and "establish" are strong words, to be used only with care. If we were able to say that the experimental and the control schools were alike in all respects save the one difference in theory, it would then be in order to accord a corresponding superiority to the experimental theory. But, as Professor Collings points out, we cannot assert that the difference of theory was the only variable involved. Other variables would creep in, some seeming on the face of it to favor one side, others the other. Among those thus favoring the experimental school was a more extended and sympathetic supervision. There was also more extensive equipment and, as is to be expected under such circumstances, probably more zeal on the part of the experimental teachers. Besides, the presence of two teachers possibly more than offset the larger number of children they had to teach (the preparation and quality of all the teachers seeming to be about equal). As favorable to the control schools may be noted the greater familiarity of teacher, pupils, and patrons with the aims and procedures of their schools. The teachers of the experimental school were by contrast not so familiar with their novel procedures: in large measure they had to devise them as they went, and their patrons had to be persuaded to accept them, being at first distinctly hostile. Moreover, the procedure of the control schools had been smoothed out through the practice of many generations in countlessly many schools and it was especially worked up for these teachers in a well made state syllabus. The experimental school procedure was in contrast almost entirely new, much of it hastily contrived to meet pressing needs out of inadequate material. Mistakes were many. Outside of the three people concerned in the scheme there was little opportunity even for consultation with others. To those who accept the traditional theory and procedure as best the control school would have here a distinct advantage.

What conclusion then do we reach in view of these additional variables? The answer is not easy. A range of positions is

possible according to the relation of all the variables to each other. Do the additional variables, some favoring one side and some the other, cancel each other or leave perhaps a balance of influence favorable to the old? Professor Collings thinks yes. If so, the decision goes to the new. Its superior showing would indicate the superior worth of its theory for use in schools. This is one possible interpretation. If the additional variables, however, do not cancel each other but leave two or more factors of comparable force, any of which might explain the superiority of the experimental school, then we simply do not know from the data of the experiment what produced the superiority. This is another possible position as to interpretation. At one extreme, then, this contest between the old and the new, it would appear, becomes a clear victory for the new; at the other, a stalemate where either side may claim and neither can refute. Anything else to be got from these data will lie between these extremes with a greater or less victory for the new, depending upon how nearly the additional variables cancel or unite so as to leave the difference in theory to be in greater or less degree the dominating factor in the situation.

The cancellation of variables we considered above, but not their *uniting*. Let us now consider this. In the light of other known experience, the more extended supervision is urged by some advocates of the old as a factor likely to go far towards explaining the superiority of the experimental school. They say in effect to the new: Your theory is bad, and, were it not counterbalanced by other factors, would show evil, not good results; it is your supervision that is good, this has — at least in large part — brought these good results. Then reply the new: The supervision given was hand-in-glove with the new theory; it accentuated this theory and gave it more power in its own direction; how then can this theory be given a minus sign and be counted to work evil, while the supervision is given a plus sign and counted to bring good? And this answer seems hard to deny, for the theory and supervision certainly worked in unison together to

the same end. Similar considerations can also be urged, though perhaps in less degree, as regards equipment, the two teachers, and even zeal. In the degree that the variables on either side do thus unite in only one possible direction of influence, in that same degree would the contest seem to be simplified in the direction of a standard control group experiment.

We saw above that a stalemate result at one extreme is the best these data seem to hold for the old, every other interpretation favoring in greater or less degree the new. Now we see even the stalemate threatened with dissolution in favor of the new. Still further the advocates of the new comfort themselves. Suppose the results had been reversed, with the experimental school outcomes as far behind as they are now ahead, does anyone doubt how the results would have been interpreted? The new theory would have been laughed out of court. Believing this to be true, the advocates of the new are, with the situation now in their favor, but human if they cling to their claims.

Leaving the more detailed argument, some other things can be said which will perhaps help us interpret the matter as a whole. First and most obviously, the school as a school was a success, a distinct success. A glance at the record suffices for this. It can now no longer be said that the theory won't work. It has worked. A régime of child purposing is feasible. We can lay aside school subjects as such and succeed, — succeed admirably. Comparisons aside and difficulties yet to be considered, the new curriculum theory with its new aims and its new procedures can be made to go, and go well. This much is clear.

Second, counting the theory as an hypothesis to be tested, the success was just the kind called for by the theory. Consider the new attitudes that were built. Official county records show a marked change of pupil attitude toward school. Enrollment and attendance rose to a point well nigh perfect. Tardiness and punishment dropped to practical zero. There was a great increase in the number to go on to high school. And all the while the neighboring traditional schools maintained their old figures, far

below these and substantially the same as obtained in this school before this régime. But this was not all; for unusual zeal even along traditional lines might conceivably accomplish analogous attendance records. More striking as confirmation of the theory, though the measures are cruder and at times less reliable, are the changed attitudes as regards home and community affairs. More and better periodicals are taken. More and better books are read. Home and farm conveniences are installed. Illness from preventable diseases shows a marked decrease. These indicate, of course, more than attitudes, and again is the theory confirmed in the growth of the habits and skills and knowledges that properly accompany the attitudes. It was in fact life that was being reconstructed, accumulating on the one hand more content and meaning, on the other more disposition and power. It is hard to resist the conclusion that real education was here in progress, far and away above what usually comes from the traditional curriculum. To attain some of these results it is difficult to see how any amount of zeal using the conventional curriculum could avail. It might build favorable attitudes toward school, for these follow principally feelings of success, but the degree of favor here built and the range of application to home and life could hardly come save through activities closer to child and community life than the traditional school subjects. These results strongly corroborate the theory.

Third, while not demanded by the theory, this curriculum procedure actually got in the aggregate more of the conventional subject matter than did the control schools. To appreciate this achievement we must note first that the control schools spent their entire time seeking such subject matter while the experimental school sought it only as it was subordinately needed, and second that the experimental school was here tested by measures devised for the traditional curriculum. Suppose, as regards this second consideration, that the process had been reversed and the control schools had been tested by measures fairly devised for the experimental school. We can well imagine the dismay of

pupils and teachers as they would have faced matters almost utterly foreign to their previous work. It is, of course, highly unfair to the experimental school that we do not also have before us such records. If one were willing, it would be an easy surmise, though of course still surmise, that had this been done, the experimental school would show a superiority of intellectual achievement (knowledge, general information, etc.) quite in keeping with its superior achievement in attitudes. Something of this seems in fact indicated in the superior geography and history results. Surmise aside, however, that the results actually got could be attained with so much less attention paid to attaining them is again a corroboration of the underlying theory on its method side. Again does the theory get exactly what is needed for corroboration.

The fourth result, as an achievement more valuable to those who accept this theory, is the emphatic attention herein called to a new set of school aims, a new procedure for the schoolroom, and new measures for indicating success. True, the trend of American theory and practice has for a hundred years been moving in this same general direction. True, also, that in explicit theory these matters have been before the American public for more than two decades, but so opposed are they to the common way of thinking that many who have read the theory in plain black and white have failed to see what was really meant. This experiment will act then as an object lesson. In this account we see what actually was done in this school and how it was done. Emphatic attention is called to the contrast between the old and the new. Professor Collings' success puts the matter now out in the open where it must be seen. Pointed discussion is bound to take place.

Attention ought in conclusion to be called to what Professor Collings counts as the conditions necessary for success in schools run on this basis. The experiment was conducted in a rural school, though the principles apply equally everywhere. The requirements are more exacting than the conditions usual in rural