

An Adventure in Creative Teaching



By JULIA WEBER

Foreword by FRANK W. CYR, Professor of Education, Teachers College, Columbia University

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HARPER & BROTHERS . NEW YORK AND LONDON

FOREWORD

By Frank W. Cyr

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This book will interest many readers. The general reader will enjoy the flavor of the country, of the little schoolhouse on the hill, of the wood smoke curling from the chimney, and of the children and teacher working and living together as they come to know and understand better their own little world and its place in the larger world of today.

It will be of even greater interest to those responsible for the schooling of the nearly four million children in our oneand two-teacher schools, who will see in it the unfolding of an educational program which helps pupils to develop their innate abilities, and to acquire the habits and attitudes they need in order to solve the problems of everyday life and to become healthy, useful, responsible citizens. The discerning reader will recognize here the basic problems which every teacher faces in helping a group of children to work and grow together, and in discovering effective ways such problems can be met.

The simple and direct manner in which the needs of the children are studied and met will be an inspiration and help to parents and teachers alike in dealing with small children. Teachers will find the kind of teaching they would like to do, parents the kind of education they want for their own children, school board members the kind of learning they want in their school, supervisors and superintendents the kind of education they are striving for, and teachers' colleges the kind of teaching for which they want to prepare their graduates.

This book is important in that it goes to the heart of education—the way in which learning can affect children's lives and the life of their community. Americans have a deep and abiding faith in their public schools. The pioneer forefathers set out to build a school within walking distance of every child, and the school has been constantly expanding ever since. But too often the school has been content with merely teaching the three R's or being a place where things are done for children rather than a place where children learn how to do things for themselves. In "My Country School Diary" the teacher and children are shown planning, working and living together. The teacher came to know her children, their hopes and fears, their successes and failures, their lives at home and school. Then as a wise counsellor and guide worked with them in deciding what should be done and how to go about it.

Then as a wise counsellor and guide worked with them in deciding what should be done and how to go about it.

The author is particularly well-qualified to write this book. Her deep understanding of rural children, her fine conception of the way in which the school can help them to grow and develop, and her faith in the ability of the individual to meet his responsibilities are all evident throughout the book. The careful diary she kept over a four-year period in order to watch the development of each child is characteristic of the thoroughness with which she worked. Friends who encouraged her to make this diary available to others through this book may review the results with a sense of deep satisfaction.

Rural communities are being reshaped by modern trans-

Rural communities are being reshaped by modern transportation and communication, by modern machinery and equipment, and by the new world which these are creating. If these changes are to build a finer community life, they must be guided and used by the people who live in the country. The new problems must be solved and the new opportunities met. To do this, rural people must be effectively educated. This book points the way to the kind of learning on which such education should be built.

PRELUDE

O spare me your talk of fate! Human reason needs only to will more strongly than fate, and she is fate.

Thomas Mann-The Magic Mountain

This is the story of four years in a one-teacher school in an isolated mountain neighborhood. Leaving the last town, the road climbs up until suddenly the summit is reached and we can look down into a small, narrow valley along the crest of the mountain. The road, with about a dozen houses strung on either side of it, dips down and continues to wind along the bottom of the valley. At the end of the road, in a clearing in the woods, is Stony Grove School. As I turned the last bend in the road, the scene always came upon me suddenly even after I knew it well. It was pleasant on these mornings to be welcomed by the call of the ovenbird, "Teacher, teacher!" I knew I belonged here. Ever since I was a little girl I had wanted to teach in a school such as this one. That privilege has now been mine.

I kept a diary during those years at Stony Grove for, above all, I wanted to learn to be a good teacher, and writing what was happening seemed to be a good way to help me to think more clearly. Some of my friends thought that the diary should be published. I am a teacher and not a writer, but in spite of my literary shortcomings I decided to undertake the task of preparing the diary for publication because I felt I had something to say. In the next few years education has to make serious decisions concerning the direction it will take. I want to add this story to the many others which weight the balance in favor of the kind of education that will make a difference in the living of people. It is my firm conviction that education can significantly improve the quality of living.

But to make this significant difference, old methods will not

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do. We must have something more than book learning. We must know children, what they are like and what they need. We can best meet these needs by capitalizing on their interests, by using the resources near at hand in their environment, and by supplementing these resources where necessary. In this way we can help children to develop wholesome personalities and to meet creatively the challenges of our unpredictable world.

Since the present book is one-fourth the size of the original diary, it is necessarily somewhat of a summary. There is much more to knowing children and their backgrounds than I have been able to indicate here. I hope that you will feel this knowledge of the children and their environment buried deep within each sentence. I have not tried to give any technical treatment of such subjects as the teaching of reading. This has been adequately done by others. What I have tried to show in this book is a way of living and working with children.

The group living reached its highest quality in the fourth year. This could not have come about without the struggles of the three years preceding it. Perhaps in reading about the difficulties we had in arriving at this level of growth, you will find something of interest, some help, and perhaps even some inspiration.

Before I went to Stony Grove I taught for three years in larger schools in our county. During this time I learned to overcome many of the difficulties which are faced by every beginning teacher. But even more important than this, I was inspired by the work of the county and I learned what teaching can mean.

In our county we have the superintendent of schools who is appointed by the State Department of Public Instruction to direct the work of the schools. We have, also, three Helping Teachers, as rural supervisors in New Jersey are called, who work closely with the teachers. These four people have provided a sound and forward-looking leadership. They have studied and experimented and have taken the initiative in trying to find better ways to provide for the wholesome development.

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opment of boys and girls. There has been the closest co-operation among them in serving the children of the county.

One member of this group has been in the county for more than twenty-five years working consistently on the belief that children are important and that what happens to them matters a great deal. This consideration of children has been the foundation of our educational program. The state leadership during this time, also, has been such that the counties have been able to work together in building a better program of education all over the state.

Several agencies in the county co-operate in the program of the school. Rural nurses make weekly visits to the schools. A County Library with a well-trained librarian supplies the schools with abundant reading materials. A home demonstration agent and a 4-H Club agent in the Agricultural Extension Service guide the work of the 4-H clubs in the schools and help the boys and girls as well as the adults of the community to appreciate and to improve rural living.

The policy of the county and the contributions of these agencies were in evidence when I went to Stony Grove. The children were happy and had a nice relationship with their teacher. The teacher had worked on committees sharing in the development of the educational policies of the county. She knew the children and was trying to meet their needs. There was an established hot lunch program, with excellent equipment, planned by the home demonstration agent, the helping teacher, and the teacher together. There was close co-operation between the Township Board of Education and the County Department of Public Instruction.

Stony Grove was a good place to be in. I did not have to conform to anything. I was in a state and a county whose educational program for years has taken children into account. It was a developing program in which I could have a share. When I began to teach at Stony Grove I was ready to learn and free to experiment to find out how a group of children and their teacher may reach a high level of creative and democratic living. If I have succeeded somewhat, it is because all the roads

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were open to me. I had every opportunity and invaluable help to discover for myself what mental hygienists have been telling us, that human nature and the situation in which we find ourselves are not fixed but, to an important degree, are what we make them and that they can be changed. We can arrive at a social arrangement through which each individual can realize to the fullest his potentialities and through which, all together, we can experience a high level of human living—if we only will!

I want to express my gratitude to all these people I have mentioned. My indebtedness to them is immeasurable. I am also deeply indebted to my parents, who, humble folk though they are, have always recognized the power of education; and to my many wonderful friends, who, over the years of my life, have helped me to be a better person than I might have been, and therefore a better teacher.

Dr. Frank Cyr gently but persistently goaded me until I promised to prepare the diary for publication, and then he read and criticized the manuscript and presented it to the publisher. Dr. Fannie Dunn, Anne Hoppock, Blanche Moran, and Dr. Percy Hughes also read the manuscript and gave me helpful suggestions and criticisms. To them I am especially grateful. My thanks go also to Mr. and Mrs. Wallace Clark, who typed the manuscript and gave me editorial advice.

Most of all I am indebted to Marcia Everett. She gave unselfishly and abundantly of herself that I might become a creative teacher. This book is one tangible result of our long hours of inspiring conversations and discussions both at school and before the cheery fire in her home. She read the original diary page by page as it was written over those four years. She watched and guided our growth in this little school closely and sympathetically. Without her devoted help and friendship this book might never have been written.

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I prepare for the first day . . . I have two purposes for the first year . . . The first day . . . I learn to know the children through observing and discovering their needs . . . through personal conferences . . . through home visits . . . The daily program . . . Some needs are met through using the environment . . . through opportunities for democratic living . . . through individualized instruction . . . through opportunities for self-expression . . . through group play . . . through adjusting the school program . . . through enriched curriculum experiences . . . through housekeeping activities . . . through opportunities to initiate and plan activities . . . through parent-teacher co-operation . . . A summary.

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I write my philosophy to clarify it ... The children have increased ability for recreation ... They work together for the improvement of the common life ... They find joy in their work ... They see new ways of doing things ... The

children learn purposefully to control essential skills...I observe how the children learn to appreciate co-operation... The children plan to develop more efficient practice of habits of healthful living... They take the initiative in solving their own problems... Normally, new problems are always arising... My helping teacher and I together analyze the new problems... We face the new problems... Rich experiences make for wholesome personality development.

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I plan to evaluate all along . . . I continually study the needs of the children, to meet them . . . Abundant interests impel into many fields of rich experiencing . . . The children learn to think independently and to act on their thinking . . . I prepare in order to recognize what is significant in the experiences of the children . . . I learn to select experiences which contribute to the children's growth . . . The children learn to act in consideration of each member of the group ... They begin to form conceptions of the responsibilities of society . . . They learn to be critical and to check sources of information . . . They develop self-confidence in their own ability and intelligence . . . They develop a sense of values to guide judgment and action . . . We begin to meet the needs of society by meeting the needs of the children . . . I make choices in selecting curriculum material . . . The children learn to appreciate the complexity of human life and its problems . . . They gather an expanding body of knowledge which helps them to understand better their own situation . . . A summary.

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THE FIRST YEAR

1

I Learn to Know the Children

FRIDAY, JUNE 5, 1936. I visited today the little school in which I shall begin to teach next fall. It gave me a strange excited feeling as I drove up to the front door of the clean, white boxlike structure, shining in the sun. I have a deep faith in oneteacher schools and in the opportunities they I prepare afford to prepare children for a continually for the developing creative and democratic life. Here first day I shall have an opportunity to live closely with a group of children and to learn to know them intimately. I shall have them long enough to watch them grow and develop their capacities under guidance in as rich an environment as it is possible to make for them. I paused for a moment at the door and looked around at the woods surrounding the little schoolhouse. The recent rain made the leaves shine and the woods smelled so nice. "All this will be our laboratory." I thought.

The children were preparing a circus for their annual Play-Day when I entered the room. A few cast shy glances in my direction but all went on working. As the children worked, their teacher related to me significant items concerning their background, their abilities, and their emotional development. My notes from this conversation and a list of the children with their ages and grades were the only records I received.

| | | Age |
|-----------|--------------------|--------|
| Grade | | YrsMo. |
| 8 | Anna Olseuski | 13-5 |
| 8 | Olga Prinlak | 15-8 |
| 7 | Ralph Jones | 13-7 |
| . 7 | Catherine Sametis | 15-2 |
| 7 6 | Ruth Thompson | 11-3 |
| | Sophia Sametis | 10-8 |
| 6 | Doris Andrews | 11-3 |
| 6 | Mary Olseuski | 10-10 |
| 6 | Frank Prinlak | 14-8 |
| 5 | May Andrews | 9-3 |
| 5 | Warren Hill | 9-7 |
| 5 | George Prinlak | 12-4 |
| 5 | Edward Veniski | 10-10 |
| 4 | Helen Olseuski | 8-o |
| 4 | Andrew Dulio | 12-2 |
| 3 | Albert Hill | 8-3 |
| 3 . | Pearl Prinlak | 10-1 |
| 3 | Martha Jones | 8-9 |
| 3 | Joseph Dunder | 13-5 |
| 3 | Verna Cartwright | 11-2 |
| 3 | Alex Cartwright | I 2-I |
| 3 | Gus Cartwright | 13-2 |
| 2 | Alice Prinlak | 8-8 |
| 2 | Walter Williams | 7-I |
| 2 | William Sametis | 7-8 |
| Beginners | | |
| - | Richard Cartwright | 8-6 |
| | John Dunder | 8-4 |
| | Joyce Williams | 5-4 |
| | | |

Monday, July 6. I went to the schoolhouse and emptied the cupboard of its books. For the most part they are good although few in number. At the very top of the cupboard I crammed the old and out-of-date books that I know I shall never use and yet do not dare to destroy. The others, after laying aside one of each kind to take home, I stacked neatly where I could get them easily in September. I shall need to stay close to the basic texts until I have learned more about the children and also about managing a one-teacher school.

There are about a dozen books of the library type, and from their appearance I judge that the children must have read them over and over again. I'll stop at the County Library before school opens and get an armful of new books.

This first year, it seems to me, I have two purposes. The first is to learn as much as possible about the needs and abilities of

I have two purposes for the first year the children. The second is to begin to meet these needs and to develop these abilities through such opportunities as arise in our daily living together and through the resources near

at hand in the community.

Monday, September 7. The schoolhouse looked so alone today with the weeds growing up around it. Schoolhouses should be used in summer too. Mr. Hart was washing windows when I arrived. He told me that he comes once a year to clean the stove and the chimney, the windows, the walls, and to oil the floor. The rest of the time it is up to us to keep the place clean. I "rolled up my sleeves" and began to arrange the room and to get out the material we shall use the first day. The seats and desks are movable. Besides these, the only other furniture in the room consists of two small movable bookcases, an old organ, a teacher's desk and swivel chair. I have fallen heir to a homemade table and four chairs made from orange crates, which probably constituted the library corner in other years. There is a jacket-type stove in one corner out of the way. At the entrance end of the room there is a small hall, one side of which has a sink but no running water. This side is used as a cloakroom. The other side is a kitchen. Two built-in cupboards rise from the floor to the ceiling giving ample cupboard space for the cooking and eating utensils. There is also a two burner oil stove. (See Appendix p. 258.)

When Mr. Hart and I left, the schoolhouse looked and felt clean. The interior has been repainted this summer in soft cream yellow.

Tuesday, September 8. During the summer I reread Four Years in a Country School by Fannie W. Dunn and Marcia A. Everett and also became familiar with the textbooks I am to use. Today I settled down to the important task of planning

for the first day. The children must feel that they have accomplished something and have had a happy time doing it so that school is worth going back to the next day. The program must allow some opportunity for me to observe the children while they are working in order that I may begin to know them and to think in terms of them. At the same time, the program must be definite enough to give me confidence so that I can laugh with the children and have them know me for a friend. So much of the success or failure of the whole year will depend on this first day. This is the outline of my plans:

9:00-9:30 Adjust seats and desks to fit the children. Distribute books and materials. (This will give the children something active to do from the beginning.)

9:30-10:30 Social Studies. For the first ten minutes make a little speech to the children. Get them to talk about themselves if

possible.

Assign the first few pages in the history text to the upper grade group (6, 7, 8) and to the intermediate group (4, 5). Questions to be answered will be written on the board. These children will study while I talk with the primary grade children for twenty minutes.

Talk with the primary children about their summer fun. Little children usually get around to their pets when they talk. Try to have all the children contribute something. Plan with them to make booklets, perhaps of their pets. Let them draw a picture to describe what they have contributed to the discussion.

The primary children continue to draw their pictures while I work with the intermediate group for fifteen minutes. We shall

go over the questions one by one and discuss them.

The primary children go outdoors, with a child from the intermediate group in charge. The intermediate group continues to study as I suggest to them during the discussion period. I work with the upper grade group for fifteen minutes and follow the same procedure as with the intermediate group.

10:30-10:50 Physical Education. Start the children from grades 4-8 playing Dodge Ball and then play with the primary children.

10:50-12:00 Give the primary children the Clark-Ingraham Reading Diagnostic Test. (This is for the purpose of finding out something of their reading ability.) In the meantime the older children will read the first story in their readers and answer some questions to check their comprehension. When they have finished, they will have access to the new library books I shall take to school with me.

12:00-1:00 Twenty-minute lunch period followed by outdoor play. 1:00-1:30 Devotions: Bible reading, Lord's Prayer, Salute to the flag, America.

Music. Have the children sing songs of their own choosing

from the Golden Book of Songs.

1:30-2:15 The older children will have a diagnostic arithmetic test.

The little children will have access to the library books and then will go out to play. This period will allow me to watch the work habits of the children.

At 2:15 the primary children go home.

2:15-2:30 Physical Education. Play a game with the upper grade children.

2:30-2:45 Spelling. Combine grades 7 and 8 and use the eighth grade words in the spelling test. Combine grades 5 and 6 and use the sixth-grade words. Use the fourth-grade words for grade 4. Take the whole class together and teach them how to study their words independently and efficiently.

2:45-3:30 Arithmetic. This will be largely individual. Each child will begin with the review lessons in the beginning of his book. I shall have further opportunity to observe the study habits of

the children.

Although this program is rather formal, my attitude toward the children can be informal and friendly.

Wednesday, September 9. I started out with fear and trembling this morning. In spite of the fact that I was prepared and knew that the room was in order, the materials handy, and the day carefully planned, all my inchesting law heavily upon my It is gleven

The first day inadequacies lay heavily upon me. It is eleven miles to the schoolhouse from home, and as I drove along I rehearsed my speech. I would tell the children how happy I am that I shall be one of them; how fortunate we are to live in such a beautiful place and have it all to explore. I would tell them, too, that this year will be pretty much what we make it. We shall solve our problems together and try to understand each other.

I began to be afraid that the children would not understand. Perhaps I should tell a story, a humorous story, but for the life of me I could not think of a single appropriate one.

When I arrived at the schoolhouse, all the children were gathered around the door so that I could hardly get to it. They

entered with me and took seats, shifting around until each found a seat that suited him. Finally, a calm settled over the place and the children looked at me expectantly. There was nothing left to do but start school. We raised and lowered desks and seats adjusting them to fit the children. Ralph and Frank supervised the job. By nine o'clock we were ready to start work. The children were silent today and for the most part did only what they were asked to do.

Some of the children stand out from the group. Ralph and Frank, the two big boys, and Anna and Ruth were willing to help wherever there was an opportunity. Martha's eyes sparkle aloud. The Hill boys have nice smiles. Olga is so big and shy and seems to feel out of place. The two little Williams children seem to be nervous. There are so many Cartwrights. Joseph Dunder, who is a borderline case, as the report from the psychological clinic indicates, was really a nuisance. All the children seem shy and retiring.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 10. The order of the day was somewhat similar to that of yesterday and my main purpose was to find out more about the children. During the I learn to reading periods, I heard each child read orally know the chiland I have decided how I shall group them dren through temporarily. I discovered that the history texts observing and are entirely too difficult for the two groups, discovering with the exception of the eighth graders, to their needs understand. Andrew, who should be a fourth grader, cannot read a primer. The primary children did well on their reading test, but from the fourth grade on up the feading is generally poor. Only a few of the children like to read. All looked at the pictures in the library books but only a few of the girls began to read the books. All this shows that one of my big jobs is to help these children to get the most from a printed page and to find joy in reading. I think that one reason for low reading ability here is lack of experience. I noticed that they substitute colloquialisms for certain words in their reading.

Two other needs became apparent today. First, these chil-

dren do not know how nor do they like to play together. Yesterday the girls had trouble with the boys in their game of dodge ball. The girls said the boys were too rough. Today the girls asked to join the game the little children were playing. The game I had started for the boys soon broke up and they stood watching us. I invited them to join us and got a response of laughter. I noticed that Ralph seemed to be the leader and I made a mental note to figure out how I could get him on my side.

Second, these children feel insecure when they are asked to take part in an activity other than what they consider schoolwork. Most of the boys do not sing. They tell me they can't. I asked them if they would like to learn to play the harmonica. The response was fine. This will help these oversensitive boys to have some experience with music.

I got a little closer to individual children today. Warren had two crying spells because he was unable to do his work. The first time I ignored it, but the second time he was crying

I learn to know the children through personal conferences

so hard that I took time from the physical education period, while the others were playing, to talk to him. I said, "Warren, we should not cry about our problems but try to solve them. Part of my job is to help you with the problems which you cannot solve by yourself. Instead of crying, won't you tell me what your troubles are?"

Between two heavy sighs he said he would try.

John and Joseph Dunder were absent today. This gave me an opportunity to visit the home and get acquainted with

I learn to know the children through home visits

their parents. Warren offered to go along to show me where the Dunders live and I welcomed this opportunity to get to know him better. Warren's brother, Albert, and Walter Williams wanted to go along too. After school

I went first to the homes of Warren and Walter to get permission to take the boys with me. Mrs. Hill was baking bread when we arrived. The Hills bought this small farm three years ago and are fixing the house over. Warren delighted in taking me around the house to point out the improvements. I liked