

# THE ACTIVITY PROGRAM

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## PREFACE

THIS book is intended as a sequel to my earlier books on progressive teaching. Its writing could not have been possible five years ago. So rapid has been the development of activities in public schools that situations which were obscure but a short time ago are clearing. As our vision clears, however, the dangers of a previous insouciance become more actual. Enthusiasms which carried pioneer teachers through the shoals of ignorance are not available to pilot the average run of those less original. Clear definition of terms and practical suggestions concerning the activity program are eminently needed. If the content here offered can provide these it has still a serious peril to avoid. The greatest danger to which teaching is subject is that of mechanical and unimaginative imitation of a good model. Unless these pages are received not as rules of teaching but as suggestions to be developed by teachers and children their ultimate failure will be complete.

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## CHAPTER I

### PREVENTING CHILDREN FROM LEARNING

A DEEPENING consciousness of childhood, a closer walk with children is drawing many teachers to richer ways of teaching school. Said one little boy, victim of a modern system of schools—"I don't know what they do with five whole hours of time a day! I go through it every day, but I don't see how they manage to fill in the time. They don't *do* anything." In school this little boy is required to fill in five of his precious hours sitting still at a desk. His school day is a round of "periods." Arithmetic, penmanship, geography, history, spelling, and more arithmetic. Out of school he plays football, wanders through a great toy shop on Fifth Avenue, builds a "buggy" out of four old wheels and some grocery boxes, makes a cabinet for his bedroom, painting it orange and black with brushing lacquer, visits the Museum of Peaceful Arts to watch its hundred wheels go round, and to sit in the airplane model manipulating the stick. In every spare moment of what is ~~left from the five hours commandeered~~ by his school and his play life he paints pictures with poster paints, sketches pen-and-ink drawings, and ~~makes out of the left-overs in his environment such~~ things as a cardboard representation of a Mexican Temple, or huge portfolio of corrugated board for his drawings. Is it a wonder that to this boy the hours he spends in school seem a waste of time? He is ready to say so, and many teachers are today willing to listen.

This little boy, a real boy in a real school "system", is being prevented from learning by his teachers. He is getting his education outside of school. While his teachers are ~~thwarting~~ him for five hours a day, he is learning on his own initiative for the remainder of the time. Often under the guidance of a more enlightened teacher he eagerly pursues out of school the very subject matter from which in school hours he turns nauseated away.

One day this youngster, whom we may call Richard, was complaining about his morning's arithmetic. It was to him "uninteresting" and

"boring." Let any grown-up who doubts him take a pencil and paper and work out ten or twelve problems of the type he was engaged upon, beginning with the changing of three quarters of a dozen to decimals for no reason at all. Yet this same Richard, on this same afternoon, being told that a certain lady was hoping for \$50,000 a year to maintain an integrated school and college burst out with the exclamation that it was "a lot of money!" and the question, "How many 'Milky Ways' (unfortunately merely candy bars) could you get for \$50,000?"

"I wonder," said his teacher, handing him a pencil and a piece of paper.

Whereat this Richard who is bored by arithmetic worked out the following:

Since a Milky Way costs five cents, twenty could be bought for a dollar. Thus multiplication—

$$\begin{array}{r} 50,000 \\ 20 \\ \hline 1,000,000, \text{ a million.} \end{array}$$

So astounding a result could not fail to raise the question of how long it would take to eat a million candy bars. This brought up the serious problem of how many he could eat a day. He thought ten. After a brief discussion, in which the deleterious effect of too much sugar on the digestion was readily admitted, it was nevertheless decided that since this was a purely imaginative proposition, he would prefer to think of himself as eating ten a day. The following problem in long division was now written down:

$$10)1,000,000($$

This was an opportune time to remind this student of decimals that a simple moving of the decimal place would save him considerable work. "Oh yes," he realized, and the solution was a simple 100,000 days or 365)100,000(years, which being worked out presents the appalling spectacle of about 274 years, or about four life times. This leaves enough candy bars for the other three members of the family.

But now the teacher returns to the beginning of the conversation

with the question, "Which do you think would be the best way to spend the money, on candy or on education?"

"On education."

"Then which is the best way for you to spend five cents?"

"On education, but sometimes on candy."

"I agree with you, but the American people as a whole spend more money on candy than they do on education."

"I bet I could find out how much they spend a day on candy without looking it up. I would find the number of stores and estimate the amount sold by each and multiply it."

But here the subway reached its destination and what was there for the teacher to do but quench this efflorescence of a little boy's interest in arithmetic. Verily, no teacher in the world can keep up with children's interest in anything, even in arithmetic.

So much for arithmetic, but what of other things? Are all the legitimate fields of learning touched by so incidental a method? What is there in the world that children are not curious about? A subway car passes with only one occupant. The teacher says,

"He must have commandeered it."

"What does that mean?"

"Commandeer means to take over for your own use on your own command."

"Oh, yes, I could commandeer Hugh's bicycle." Such a bit of English is supplemented when, pausing before the Trans Lux moving picture theatre in which two programs are set forth, one of short amusement pieces, another of news reels, he reads the two, contrasting the programs to see which he would prefer if he were going inside, which he does not ask to do. Later on a bit of science comes into the extra mural program when he is told of a lecture on audible light, and experiments with the photo electric cell which changed the sound of a lighted match into a click. "It would be useful" says the assimilating personality "to get messages from the stars."

Contrast the eager, willing learning of a child provided with experiences to think about, with the routine of a classroom. The picture is only too clearly drawn by a metropolitan teacher bemoaning his inability to teach according to the active principles he approves.

"To attempt any appreciable application of progressive principles

is almost impossible without conflict with the demands made upon us. We are too harassed by lack of time; and sometimes by the ideas of superiors. Let me give you an idea of what I am up against:—

"English is divided into twenty subjects. Each subject has a complicated set of flash cards. Each set of flash cards has a definite way of being used. For example, in word study the teacher gives out cards to more than half the class. The prefixes go on one side of the room, the suffixes on another side, the roots on a third side, the words in one corner, the word lists in another corner. The teacher calls the word 'importation.' The boy with the word holds it up in front of the room. The boy with the root comes up and says—"I am the root 'port.' I mean," etc.—Then the prefix 'im' comes up and says "Good morning! I am the prefix 'im.' I mean" etc.—"May I join you?" The suffix comes up and says "I am the suffix 'ation.' I mean" etc.—"Good morning! May I join you?" The ensemble says, "We are the word 'importation.' Our etymological meaning is" etc. "Our common meaning is" etc. "Herbert, will you please give a sentence with the word?"

"Need I go on? It is the same in every one of the twenty subjects. Every move is dictated. The sentences are stereotyped. I have only spoken about English, but each operation in arithmetic is also represented by cards. I have about twelve sets. History and geography are taught by cards. It is rumored that drawing and music will be caricatured also!"

This literal account gives a clear example of the way in which a school system may dam up the energies of children and stultify their personalities by "teaching." Let it not be thought, however, that the writer is generalizing here about public schools as a whole. He has no such intention. He has elsewhere expressed his vast admiration for our public schools in large cities and in small. It is because we believe in education that we are sometimes critical and work for a better education.

The point of this chapter is that there are economical ways and uneconomical ways of teaching. The same child who turns idly away from his work under one method of teaching pursues it eagerly under another. Method is a matter of economy. Whatever method picks up the good impulses of the child and carries them forward to desirable goals with the minimum waste of energy is good. That method which

first deadens the child and then hopes to reawaken him to a teacher dictated task is always poor. It is the plan of this book to outline an approach and a method of teaching which will enable children to fulfil their own lives and in so doing enrich the lives of their fellow men.





## CHAPTER II

### CHILDREN LIVING

CHILDREN are essentially and fundamentally dynamic. They are energy clothed upon with personality. They are bursting with tendencies, desires and drives. One has only to watch them as they go about their own affairs to realize their intensely active nature. Spend a few moments some morning watching them on their way to school. What child of them simply goes to school as a prosaic business man goes directly to work? Not one; for these children are poets to whom going to school is an excuse for doing something else by the way. They are not merely interested in getting there, they are interested in going. This one is walking a railing, that one is experimenting with a bird-whistle, another is dropping stones in a puddle, while two more are playfully wrestling. So it is all through the day. Never through a meal, with its passive controls, that they are not ready for baseball, never a moment with idle fingers, always a missile to be tossed or a ball to be bounced. Never a walk, always a run. They seem to have a veritable mania for speed and action, these children of the highways and the byways.

Modern education with its science and its philosophy and its incessant involvement with psychology and statistics has forgotten children. It has lost the dynamic conception of childhood. Too often modern educational psychology has laid the child forth like a cadaver for dissection and analysis. It has examined the most intricate processes of learning each in isolation. It has classified, catalogued, and listed. We know vast amounts about eye movements, and speed in computation, and age for beginning reading; and the thing called "intelligence." In these forests of psychology we have lost sight of the tree itself. Educational philosophy has thoroughly discussed the how, the when and the if, yet were a child to appear among a group of educational philosophers he would be a stranger in their midst. We have remembered our "subject" of education, but we have forgotten its object—the whole human child.

Teachers and schools sorely need a dynamic conception of childhood. Pestalozzi understood it long ago. Froebel realized it to the full, this emerging of an inner force in outward action. Listen to his words and answer why in the face of this emphasis we have so easily forgotten.

"The starting point of all that appears, of all that exists, and therefore of all intellectual conception, is act, from action, must therefore start true human education, the developing education of man; in action, in acting, it must be rooted and spring up." Could anything be plainer?

Yet we have forgotten in our own hurry and bustle to base school life on this active principle. Because schools have neglected instead of treasuring this quality, they have prevented children from learning.

Nor has this been true only in teaching individuals. The sum of a number of dynamic individuals should be a dynamic group. The school itself should be children living. It should not be a series of unrelated and inactive children. It should be a community on the move. It should be a group of children doing something.

Schools have too often brought children to a standstill before allowing them to learn. Children have been treated like clockwork toys which begin at a dead stop and must be wound before they work. One morning I visited a schoolroom full of first graders on the first day of school at nine in the morning. The youngsters were full of the thrill of their first day of school and the wonders that lay ahead in a new world. The bell rang. The teacher stepped before the group which had been tucked away in screwed-down seats, and said, "Now children, don't anybody move from your seats and don't anybody talk." The first move of the school was to produce a dead stop. From the first day on there followed an avalanche of *don't's*. A teacher in a city school was teaching a lesson in English. She had prescribed the reading of "The Gold Bug" and had given numerous exercises to be worked out when it had been read. In the back of the room was a lad who had finished reading "The Gold Bug" and was eagerly perusing "A Son of the Middle Border" which he had brought from the library. "John, what are you reading?" interrupted the teacher, sensing something wrong.

"'A Son of the Middle Border.'"

"Have you read 'The Gold Bug'?"

"Yes, I finished it."

"Have you analyzed the plot?"

"Yes, in my note book."

"Have you written a description of the characters?"

"Yes."

"Have you written an account of Poe's life?"

"No, I didn't do that yet."

"Then put your book away and finish your work."

Turning to a sympathetic visitor at the back of the room the youngster said, "Say, why is it they're never satisfied unless they stop you from doing what you want to do?" Nor are teachers satisfied with stopping children's flow of living at the beginning of the school day. The pupils are started by the devious processes of "motivation" on some topic in arithmetic. They are stopped again by the bell. New motivation,—geography. Bell again. "Put away your work." New winding up and motivating and then a little hygiene. Traditional systems of schools have deliberately organized their time tables, and their rigid seating, and their topical organization of subjects, and their routine methods so that the living and moving dynamic life of the children is blocked and dammed up. Bubbling over, it results in dissipated energies and so-called misconduct.

Schools and teachers should pick up children on the move and keep them moving forward. What a different first day of school is that described in the following account:<sup>1</sup>

"The class expected on the first day of school numbered twenty-five boys and girls from five to seven years of age. This particular group had had no kindergarten training. With a different group, either smaller or bolder or more homogeneous, the procedure and the progress would be different. The teacher's chief aim for this and other days was to make and keep the environment such that the children would engage wholeheartedly in activity which would lead them on profitably, the teacher selecting and directing these activities in the way which gave most promise. Selected materials (cf. pp. 17-23) were

<sup>1</sup> Specimen Activities of the First Grade, by Florence McVey Meadowcroft, *Horace Mann Studies in Elementary Education*, Teachers College, Columbia University, N. Y., 1922.

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placed about the room where they were easily accessible to the children. The program planned by the teacher was as follows:

- 8:35- 9:00. Welcome and introduce the children.
- 9:00-10:00. Individual and group activities.
- 10:00-10:30. Prepare for lunch.
- 10:30-10:50. Luncheon.
- 10:50-11:10. Individual and group activities.
- 11:10-11:35. Individual and group activities on the campus.
- 11:35-12:00. Raise standards for care of material.
- 12:00-12:20. Gymnasium and free period.
- 12:20-12:30. Dismissal.

"The teacher cordially greeted each child as he came into the room, showed him where to hang his wraps, and introduced him to the other children. The children talked with each other, gazed about, manipulated the materials, sat with folded hands, or stood about waiting for directions from the teacher. At nine o'clock the teacher struck a chord on the piano and called the children together, explaining that this would always be a signal for attention. She pointed out the materials one by one to the children and explained that these were entirely for their use. Several children were encouraged by this to tell of their previous experiences with similar material, and were listened to with close attention by the teacher. A special point was made of manifesting great difficulty in hearing when several children spoke at the same time.

"At a quarter after nine the teacher allowed the meeting to break up and went to her desk apparently to write but in reality to observe. Most of the children became active at once. Although their greatest interest was in each other, they immediately began to handle and use the materials. Hardly anything in the room failed to make its appeal to some child. Before the period was over vigorous activity was evident: carpentering, building blocks and nature materials were most popular with the boys; clay, crayolas and paper, nature material, and the doll attracted the girls. A few children played as individuals, but the majority formed groups of from two to five in number. In all this activity there was wide variation in initiative, purpose, interest, and control of self and material.

"After a little observation the teacher went around among the

children showing a friendly, uncritical interest in their activities. Now and then she answered questions about the material or stopped to approve some bit of work, but on the whole she spent most of her time observing and getting acquainted with her children. It was not until a little girl burst into tears that nearly every child turned to the teacher. Two boys who were chasing each other around the room had accidentally upset a cup of water over the little girl. The teacher professed ignorance of what had occurred and asked for explanations. Many children volunteered, all speaking at the same time. The teacher explained that it was not possible for her to hear more than one at a time, and then each gave his explanation separately. During this part of the proceedings the little girl had dried her tears and with nearly all the other children of the class had become much interested in what was happening. The boys who had just upset the water were then questioned and they explained that they were running so fast they had not seen the girl. The teacher asked if they thought the room a good place for running. They answered that they did. The same question was then asked of the other children. A few agreed with the two boys, but the majority were against them. Numerous objections were voiced against running, but only two were selected by the teacher for special emphasis. There were in the room many objects of a kind to interfere with running and there were besides many children who wished to do other things, and they must not be disturbed. Then the question as to whether the room was a good place to run in was voted upon. A child was chosen to count the votes. The majority voted in the negative. At the close of the discussion the teacher told the children of the big gymnasium and of the campus where boys and girls could run and play without interfering with each other.

"At ten o'clock the teacher called attention to the hour and said that it was time to prepare for lunch. Some of the children had brought their lunches with them and others had brought money with which to buy them at the school. The teacher wrote upon the board the name and price of each article of this lunch, accompanied by a rough picture of the article. The children were invited to select from the list, and as each child gave his order the teacher made a mark on the board. The children then visited the lunch room with the teacher. The lunch was purchased, placed upon a tray, and brought back to the

classroom. Here it was placed upon a table and those who were to take part seated themselves. A child complained about the clay and papers scattered over the table, and an animated discussion, encouraged by the teacher, followed. This resulted in all agreeing that a clean table and clean hands were necessary for good health. Lunch was then eaten.

"At ten minutes before eleven the teacher informed the children that she had a book for each one. These books (*The Story Hour Primer*) were distributed and after the distribution about two-thirds of the children remained around the teacher, commenting upon the pictures, making believe or really reading familiar rhymes to each other. The teacher was asked to read one of the stories, so she began. By this time some of the children in the other group had become busied with building blocks, carpentering, and with other noisy activities. Some of those listening to the reading of the story complained that they could not hear. The others were then called to the teacher and the complaint made to them. They realized the difficulty and promised to find some quiet work. The teacher continued the reading of the story. At the conclusion several children asked if they might take their books home, and permission to do this was granted.

"At ten minutes after eleven the teacher sounded a chord upon the piano. Those who responded promptly were commended heartily. The teacher told the children that they were all going out upon the campus to play, and invited them to take jump-ropes, reins, and volley ball. These were counted by the children before they were taken from the room. For the next twenty minutes the children, with the exception of a few very shy ones, played actively upon the campus at ball, soldiers, horse, or chasing squirrels. Before leaving the campus, the playthings were counted again by a child to see that none had been lost. At half-past eleven the children returned to the classroom, which room appeared most disorderly after the activity of the morning. The teacher, suggesting that it was almost time to go home, asked the children to look about them and see if anything should be done. Many things were suggested, including the one the teacher was seeking: that the room be put in order. This suggestion was, under the guidance of the teacher, finally adopted. Volunteers did this work, and one did not have to be a keen observer to see that the majority

of the children were willing to have the few do it and that these children had very vague ideas of order or of the proper care of material.

"At twelve o'clock the children were taken to the gymnasium where they were introduced to the teacher and placed in her charge.

"When they returned to the room at twelve-twenty and began to prepare to go home trouble arose over several children claiming the same *Story Hour Primer*. Others found that they had lost theirs, and all turned to the teacher to straighten out the difficulty. She explained that she had no way of telling the owner of each book and led the discussion in such a manner that all finally realized that the owner's name should appear in each book, and that every child should have a place in which to put his own property. She promised to satisfy these needs on the following day.

"Time for dismissal had now come. In parting the teacher shook hands with each child and endeavored to call each one by name."

So a teacher may enlist children's energies while they are on the move.

A further example may be given of the way in which a school may take advantage of a real situation to build its own organic life. A building of the Hessian Hills School was destroyed by fire. A new building was set up in its place, but it was scarcely completed for occupancy when the children came to school in the fall. The school, however, capitalized on this emergency.

The workmen moved out one weekend in November. The next weekend the local workers moved in.

"Every available parent, teacher, and interested neighbor arrived at the school, bearing saws, rakes, axes, hatchets and hammers. By night play spaces were visible, terraces could be distinguished, litter had disappeared, and carloads of lumber had been sorted into 'school material' and 'home consumption'—the latter carried away to family woodpiles. School opened with ~~gusto~~ on Monday."<sup>2</sup>

Winter allowed no more group work. In the Spring the painting of the building was begun. "Laborers ranged in ages from twelve to fifty. Whole families stood upon the scaffold, working without distinction of sex or age; ability to wield a brush, the only qualification. From eleven in the morning till six at night, laughter and voices inter-

<sup>2</sup> A Community-Centered School, Alice Thompson in *Progressive Education*, May, 1932, p. 379.



mingled with the steady swishing of white paint going on over the dull gray cement. Cracks from winter shrinkage, ravages of cold weather, all were taken in the stride of volunteer workers. Windows, splashed in the wake of eager painters, were cleaned and polished by a crew of window washers recruited from the visiting graduating class. Furniture was scrutinized and a call sent for more painters. As weary groups sat contemplating their handiwork at dusk, they planned a gardening work-day when shrubs and vines would be brought from overflowing gardens for planting at school." By such active coöperation with the community children literally make their school their own. The tasks they engage in contribute to and vitalize the everyday work of their classes.

One further example may help to emphasize the way in which a real community task, which the children are led to accept as a responsibility, may build itself into the very warp and woof of the school. Whether or not we agree with the aims and philosophy of Russian educators we cannot but admire their method of attaining community coöperation and devotion to the group.<sup>3</sup>

"When the school was first started, the main task given to the children was to check on the illiteracy of their own neighborhood. Literacy is interpreted by them as meaning the ability to read the daily newspaper and to write the answers to questions based on the newspaper content. The school selected a large number of articles from the paper and formulated questions about the articles. The children went over the neighborhood, putting their parents, friends, and neighbors to this test. They were given cards on which to make their reports, and those members of families found to be illiterate were reported to the Department of Education in Moscow, where provision would be made for young people, perhaps, members of this very school, to teach the illiterates to read and write. . . .

"Two hundred children between the ages of eight and seventeen attend this school, which is directed by nine teachers. The day we visited this little school we found them much in earnest because forty of their best qualified members were preparing to go to a little fishermen's village, north of Leningrad, a distance of more than five hundred miles.

<sup>3</sup> The Red October School, by Gretchen M. Switzer, *Progressive Education*, May, 1932, p. 356.