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SOME EXPERIMENTS IN GROUP-WORK

C. B. SHAW
Wells School

In 1904 Dr. Scott, of the Boston Normal School, gave a series of talks before the Dunton Club on matters pertaining to the education of children, emphasizing the value of self-organized group-work. I became interested in his accounts of work which had been done in the West, and resolved to allow my pupils to suggest some line of work they would like to pursue, and to give them a place on the regular school programme for carrying out their plans. I first consulted our principal, who readily agreed to our trying it.

The work was begun with a fourth grade of girls, the greater part of them the children of Russian Jews. The girls of this district are a very bright, interesting set, to whom getting an education means all that is pleasant; and perhaps this latter fact will account for their choosing at first some regular school-work like arithmetic, or writing compositions, during the half-hour which I offered them, instead of something which might seem more attractive to other children.

On the afternoon when they were to tell me what they would like to do, the list of things suggested was a long one. Some things were never attempted at all, as many girls gave up their own plans to join some other group. On the list were sewing, crocheting shawls, drawing, arithmetic, reading stories, playing house and store, elocution, etc.

Of course, the kind of work or play in which a child wishes to engage is largely influenced by his home-life and the resources which he has. Many of these children are very poor, and many of those who are not poor live at home very differently from our American children. Groups in photography, for instance, were not thought of where no child owned a kodak and few had ever seen one used.

Some of the groups carried on their work in different corners of the schoolroom, while some used an empty room in the hall, and others the teacher's dressing-room. The time allowed was only one half-hour a week, but through interest in the work much extra time was spent on it before and after school and at recess.

That year the group that remained practically unchanged from beginning to end, and that did the best work, was, surprising to say, the elocution group. I must admit that the word "elocution" alone was enough to arouse my doubts, and I frankly told the leader I had no experience in that direction. She didn't seem to need any assistance, however, for she told me she had a book which explained all about elocution. She gathered six or eight girls about her and taught them the appropriate gestures for grief, joy, surprise, supplication, etc. Then she gave them each a selection to learn in which the proper inflections and gestures were used.

After this things were rather at a standstill until the teacher suggested that they give a little play. The leader took a book from the library and selected the little drama "Cinderella," but after some work upon it they all decided that the songs and dances were too difficult, and, moreover, they didn't know what to do with the boys' parts. (We have since had many plays and tableaux in which the boys' parts have been well taken by girls.) Then a play called "The Little Needlewomen" was chosen. The parts were distributed and learned, and the rehearsals conducted without any aid from the teacher. When the group was ready for the final rehearsal, the teacher was invited to see it. There were some mispronounced words to correct and stage-setting to suggest, but their interpretation of the play was good. It was given for the class and for guests. At the end of the year, when their class and two others held their picnic at Franklin Park, the girls of this group entertained the three classes by giving a dramatic representation of "Bluebeard" and a little play called "The Coal Famine," which the leader had adapted from one called "The Bread Famine."

The following year the work was carried on in a sixth grade

by many of these same girls who had received a double promotion. Their experience of the year before had given them a better idea of the work. They began to get away from selecting the regular studies on the school programme, and were readier with ideas of their own.

Groups for acting plays and stories and poems, which they themselves dramatized, and for the presentation of tableaux, still held a prominent place and seemed to have the most attraction for these children. Of course, the dramatic instinct is strong at this age, and particularly among the Russian Jews. At Christmas time one of the groups presented "How We Caught Santa Claus," an original play written by the leader, a girl of twelve years; and another group gave "The House of Santa Claus," taken from a book of plays.

About this time we were asked by a friend what would help us most in our work, and we immediately said: "A curtain to go across the front of the room for our theatrical performances." The material was bought, and the girls made the curtain and sewed on the rings. Then our principal had a copper wire put up across the front of the room, and the curtains were hung when needed, and taken down and put away when not in use. The groups did not resort to the Elizabethan way of representing scenes by simply writing on the front board, "This is a street in New York," but always had as much stage-setting as they could collect. When an interior was shown, they brought rugs, table-covers, sofa pillows, etc., from home. Right here was the teacher's opportunity to help these children make a room look homelike, to put together quiet, harmonious colors, and to arrange flowers and books on a table. The only lamp we had offered for one play had seen better days, and there were some fearful and wonderful table-covers brought in.

Another original play given this year was "Patsy and Laura," written by a little eleven-year-old girl of French parentage. Several times during the year other classes in the building were invited to our room to see what a group had to present. In May our class gave a little entertainment on a Saturday afternoon in St. Andrew's Hall to raise money for a private charity. All of

the twenty or thirty tableaux which were given were originated by a twelve-year-old girl, and were posed by her personally just before the curtain rose. The play, "Patsy and Laura," was repeated, and other plays selected by the teacher were given.

At different times during that year there were five or six groups for giving plays and tableaux; three groups in cooking; and groups in sewing, crocheting, and cutting and pasting to make scrapbooks. There were many difficulties in the way of the cooking group, but overcoming difficulties is one of the helpful features of this work. Our principal gave the first cooking group a gas stove, and it bought its own pipe. The other groups brought their own stoves from home. There was only one gas-burner in the room where a pipe could be attached, and, as all the groups had to use that, there was considerable waiting. Sometimes a group would make something that didn't need to be cooked, as stuffed dates. Among the different things that were made were cocoa, jells, farina, and several kinds of candy. One morning the first group made fudge which was too soft, and it immediately said it should make it again next time and get it right. The second group had a bad time getting started, and often tried things that were too hard with which to have great success. The leader didn't seem to have much ability in carrying out the work. After spoiling peppermints and muffins, the children meekly tried stewed prunes, which they prepared successfully. Later they brought in a freezer and ice and made lemon sherbet. The members of the cooking groups always passed to the teachers portions of whatever was made.

This fall my sixth grade has begun its work, but, as it had no opportunity for carrying it on last year, the results will probably not be so satisfactory as could be wished.

One group is at work in dolls' dressmaking. The first thing it did was to make little muslin or calico bags to hold thimbles, needles, etc. There are several groups for acting, and a group which is cutting out paper furniture and pasting it on sheets of gray paper in imitation of furnished rooms. The leader of one group, who had a book of Wordsworth's poems at home, wished to have some of them learned and recited. She

selected "To the Cuckoo" and "The Reverie of Poor Susan." One little girl said she wished to make some drawings which could be represented afterward as tableaux. "But," I said, "you would have to make drawings of people; can you do that?" (The school programme doesn't allow much time for pose drawing, and never for a *front* pose in our grade, I believe.) The child was quite sure she could do what she had in mind, however, and I asked her to take a sheet of paper home and draw something to show what she meant. Next morning she appeared with a good drawing of a little girl standing at a table and blowing soap-bubbles. The table was decorated with a fringed cloth, and a bowl of water was standing on it. The little girl in the drawing was facing full *front*, and, even to the buttons on her shoes, her appearance was faithfully represented. There are two little girls working in this group now. It is the first work of the kind that has ever been suggested. The girls do not copy their drawings, but "make them up" as they go along. The titles of some of these pictures are "Saluting the Flag," "Taking Dolly for an Airing," "Playing Telephone," etc.

At the teacher's suggestion one group is preparing to give a representation of the old ballad, "King John and the Abbot of Canterbury," and another the Lullaby for Titania from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The leader of this latter group, who also belongs to the drawing group, has set the words of the Lullaby to a little song which she had learned in school, and just now she is carefully teaching it to the girls who are to take the part of the fairies.

On Friday afternoon, November 16, we had our first finished piece of work, an original play entitled "The Orphan," by a ten-year-old girl. It was a simple little play of three acts. In the first act a child is begging on the street. People jostle her and speak to her rudely, and, as she herself says, no one seems to care for her. At last, one woman stops and asks her some questions, and when she finds that the child is alone in the world she asks her if she would like to go home with her and be her little girl. The second act shows us little *Rosebud*, still in her ragged clothes, eating her first dinner in her new home. The

third scene is the street before *Rosebud's* new home. The little girl, in pretty new clothes, is playing with other children. Among the passers-by is one woman who had spoken roughly to *Rosebud* when she was a beggar. Now she looks at her with eyes of envy, as one of the children expressed it, and tries to steal her away, but *Rosebud's* adopted mother appears just in time to save her, and they live happily ever after. The leader of this group has since written another play, which the teacher decided was too much of a tragedy to be given, and so she is now looking over some plays in books in order to select one.

On the following Friday the members of another group gave a collection of recitations and songs. The pasting group also hung up for examination the sheets illustrating furnished rooms.

The criticism of the class upon the work presented by any group is one of the most helpful parts of the work.

This group-work is not always carried on without friction between the leaders and those under them; the children's ideals are not always very high; and their productions, particularly the original writings, are very crude and faulty; but it seems to be all in the right direction. The children gain a great deal in power of independent thought and action; the desire for leadership is satisfied (which should make the teacher's work in discipline easier); difficulties are overcome; and work is often attempted and done easily and pleasantly which the teacher would think too difficult to give.

These are some of the simple experiments we have tried, and from results already attained we feel encouraged to continue the group-work.