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"Green is beautiful, but so is gray, the color most frequently attributed to the urban scene, a scene in which children explore and learn as actively and inquisitively as their suburban and rural peers" - Ellen Jacobs

Developing Teachers' Awareness of the Young Urban Child's Environment

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ABSTRACT. An appreciation of the positive attributes of the inner city environment, where most of the population of the country lives and works, can lead to its use as a learning environment. Through proper training we can help the teacher reach out into the community and to bring the community into the classroom. A positive attitude toward the values of the urban environment can increase the self-esteem of the inner-city child and make his education more relevant. Rural and suburban environments should not be presented as utopian, for the stimuli they provide are different but not necessarily better. The teacher can obtain constructive learning support from the milieu in which the child grows and develops.

THERE HAS BEEN increasing emphasis recently on nature as an ideal environment for the child. In accordance with much of America's literary mythology, life in the city has been presented in a negative light. But an urban or suburban child's home range can play a positive role in the learning process for both the child and the teacher.

My premise is that the child's environment, his home range, and the teacher's understanding of it form an essential support system for the learning process. Emphasis is traditionally placed on what the child should learn; but in this paper, stress is placed upon the teacher's understanding of and involvement with the child's home range.

The teacher's awareness and understanding of a child's home range are of utmost importance in developing a meaningful rapport between the child and the teacher. The expectations of the curriculum and the teacher are more realistic when they are based on knowledge that belongs to the world of the child rather than to the world the teacher brings with her.

In an article on teaching in inner-city schools, Waddles and Robinson (1968) wrote about one

school where a particular group of children were consistently late returning to school from the lunch break. These students resented having to remain after school to make up time. When a concerned teacher walked home with the children at noon, she discovered that a 40-car freight train blocked the student's path on their return to school. In this case normal administrative expectations were unrealistic and had to be altered in light of this teacher's findings.

Knowledge of a child's home range provides insight into the types of environmental experience to which the child has been exposed. This insight helps the teacher comprehend the particular child's reaction to the method of instruction and the subject matter being presented. With this knowledge, the teacher can be better prepared to meet the child's needs and help him further his learning in a meaningful way.

Experience within the home range plays a major role in the total development of the child; in ignoring its existence, one is ignoring an integral part of the child. For example, each morning teacher A is greeted by the sight of John arriving at school out of breath and wringing

wet. The teacher knows that he lives two short blocks from school. John's mother says that he leaves for school 20 minutes before starting time. John refuses to reveal the reason for his harried appearance. But a mapping experience has been introduced to the class: the children have been asked to draw the path they take to school and to include the points of interest and danger along the route. John's map shows that he takes a four-block detour to avoid a point of danger—a menacing bully. Now the teacher can try to help John deal with his problem effectively, and she can understand that this problem has taken the joy out of walking to school and has affected his self-esteem and his ability to concentrate in class.

TEACHERS' ATTITUDES

The teacher's attitude toward the environment in which the child lives has a great effect on the child's self-esteem. For the most part, the teacher's attitude has been molded by the values handed down from previous generations who extolled the virtues of rural and suburban life and presented the urban core as a dirty, unpleasant place in which to live—a place where one lives by necessity but not by choice.

If the teacher were to view the home range of the urban child through the child's eyes, the inner core might undergo a complete facelift. The gravel-covered back alleys and lanes, which may look unpleasant to the passer-by, provide local children with relatively traffic-free practice areas for football, soccer, baseball, and hockey. The gravel surface also provides enough friction for a child to have a relatively easy experience learning to ride a two-wheeler. None of these facts is apparent initially; one must glean this information from discussions and interviews with the children of the inner city.

CHANGING ATTITUDES

At Concordia University in Montreal, a course was developed to help future teachers understand the importance of viewing the child's world through the child's eyes. Several communities on and off the Island of Montreal were studied quite thoroughly. In each community, the student investigated the presence or absence of recreational facilities and programs, health and

dental clinics, schools, religious centers, summer camps, youth groups, and day care facilities.

The students spent 3 months developing a questionnaire which they thought would help them piece together the home range of each child and find out how the child felt about his or her home range. After interviewing the child, the student observed the child's classroom to assess how closely the curriculum corresponded to the child's environment—whether it drew from his or her environmental experience and enhanced his or her learning, or ignored the child's world and presented unfamiliar things in an unsettling way.

FINDINGS OF QUESTIONNAIRE

The responses of the children to the interviewer's questions differed with the child's home territory. In response to the question: "What can you see from your balcony?", children in suburban Beaconsfield listed trees, grass, squirrels, birds, and a brook, while children in the inner city listed cars, trucks, street-cleaning machines, train tracks, men digging up a road and laying pipes, and telephone poles. Although the home territories are quite different, one is by no means a better learning environment than the other; the two are simply different and provide different experiences.

To compare inner-core environments, three students chose to study a downtown area on the Island of Montreal called Milton Park/Carre St. Louis. They divided the area into thirds: the community north of Pine Avenue, the community east of St. Laurent Boulevard, and the community west of St. Laurent Boulevard.

THE COMMUNITY NORTH OF PINE AVENUE

The area north of Pine Avenue is inhabited mostly by Portuguese immigrants. The children's responses to the questionnaire indicate that it is a close-knit community. All of the children have relatives living close-by, and many have grandparents sharing their living quarters. Where a mother is not at home at lunch time, the child has lunch at the home of a relative or close family friend, but not at school.

Most of the services the people use are found entirely within the community. Although there are several Health and Dental Clinics in the immediate area, the people who were interviewed are treated by the one Portuguese dentist, although he does not have a Canadian license, and the one Portuguese doctor, although he is not a member of any clinic staff. The Portuguese tend to shop only in small grocery stores owned and staffed by Portuguese people, which has caused large chain stores to pull out of the area. The parents of the children interviewed work in factories within the community.

All the children interviewed attend Our Lady of Mount Royal School and Portuguese School on Saturday. They lead quite an active life within the community; they swim in the indoor pool on St. Laurent and they play soccer in the school yard, which is left open on Saturdays because there are no parks nearby. All of the children interviewed take part in all of the extracurricular classes offered by the school: photography, art, music, and swimming. The school also runs a summer camp for the children who are not in Portugal over the summer. It was found that, although these children rarely move outside of their community, all of those interviewed had been to Portugal at least once since their move to Canada.

THE COMMUNITY EAST OF ST. LAURENT BOULEVARD

East of St. Laurent Boulevard, the community is quite diffuse. The people come from many different countries and the differences in language and customs seem to have been barriers between them.

Of those children interviewed, two are from the Philippines, one from Portugal, one from Hong Kong, and one from Sweden. The families in this area live in small apartments with no backyards and both parents in each family work. St. Patrick's School does not have any extracurricular activities and the children do not have access to a "Y" or a boys or girls club. There is a swimming pool on St. Laurent, which they do not use, but there is no summer camp available to them. Very few have traveled outside of the community and only two have ever used the Metro (subway).

THE COMMUNITY WEST OF ST. LAURENT BOULEVARD

The majority of the children interviewed in this area speak English at home. Their families live in row houses, except for one that lives in an apartment. They all have backyards in which to play. All stated that their fathers worked and that mother was home at lunch and after school. They have all traveled outside the community and all have flown. The majority go to day camp in the summer. Although St. Patrick's School does not provide extracurricular activities, all of the children interviewed were enrolled in private music courses and various other activities.

As indicated, students from communities east and west of St. Laurent Boulevard attend St. Patrick's School. Teachers there are faced with classes of students from diverse environments, with different experiences and opportunities. How, then, can the teacher plan the curriculum?

PROGRAM PLANNING

To plan an effective program of instruction, the teacher must meet the child where he is and work from his strengths and his past experiences. The child's home range, as viewed through his eyes, gives the teacher information she needs to plan an effective and relevant teaching program.

The home range is an intricate composition of the child's home, his family, friends, and relatives; the street on which he lives, his neighbors and the atmosphere of his neighborhood, the boundaries of the area which he is permitted to explore, and the facilities available to him—medical, recreational and extracurricular.

There are a number of ways the teacher can explore the child's environment with the child: Questionnaires and visiting, mapping, and photographing the home range have proven most effective. The teacher's exploration of the community she is working in gives a view complementary to that seen by exploration with the child. People who work and live in a community are usually quite willing to give information. Local entrepreneurs (especially owners of small restaurants), policemen, city hall employees, and people on the street can provide diverse views of the community.

So long as the teacher maintains an interested, open, and accepting attitude toward the child's environment, there is much she can learn about the stimulating and varied experiences available to the child in the urban environment.

ASPECTS OF THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

Teachers have a tendency to regard what happens in rural settings as more educational, greener, and more pleasant than what happens elsewhere. Many teachers in urban schools have a penchant for busing children out to see the cows, chickens, pigs, and horses on Olde MacDonald's Farm. Yet inner-city pet shops have animals that are equally interesting and make better pets. A trip to the latest demolition site usually triggers a series of questions complex enough to require help from a resource book. Field trips are relatively simple in the city, as one may visit a variety of factories, garages, stores, movie theatres, live theatres, concerts, museums, libraries, and greenhouses. There is so much happening in the city that the supply of learning materials and situations will never be exhausted.

While attending this symposium, I took a trip with the children of St. Stephen's School, an inner-city school in Washington, D.C., to one of their favorite play areas—an abandoned dairy which they called the Scary Dairy. It is a place that provides them with constant adventure. There is a variety of visual, auditory, and tactile stimuli. The children pass small green trees

growing through the concrete, the stark white processing area, the gray gravel roof, and the green entrance hall. They can hear their voices echo. They can, and do, jump from one level of the building to another. Their depth perception is heightened. The walk along the land to the dairy was delightful; red roses were in bloom and dripping over the fence of one of the backyards opposite the dairy.

The trip continued on to the creek. This 5-minute walk from the dairy seemed to take us from the urban core to scenes one would expect to find in the wooded country. The creek was swift and surrounded by dense green trees. The children said that they played around the creek frequently and enjoyed it almost as much as the dairy.

If a teacher at Stephen's School lived outside the area and did not explore it with the children, she would not know about these two very special places. Consequently, she would not be able to draw upon the children's experiences in these two locations and would not be able to use these places to help further the children's learning.

Green is beautiful, but so is gray, the color most frequently attributed to the urban scene, a scene in which children explore and learn as actively and inquisitively as their suburban and rural peers.

LITERATURE CITED

- Waddles, B., and Dale Robinson.
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