

## THE SATURDAY-GET-TOGETHER:

### AN EXPERIENCE IN LEARNING

Today almost everyone agrees with the concept of educating handicapped children along with their "normal" peers, but few are putting the rhetoric into real practice. I believe that placing children in homogeneous learning groups promotes ignorance and intolerance of people who are in any way different. In order to cope with the increasingly complex and diversified society in which our children are growing up, they must be given the opportunity to learn with all kinds of people before prejudices are entrenched. If children are to grow up truly accepting of one another, environments must be created where this value is actively promoted. In September of 1980 I set about, under the guidance of Dr. Marsha Forest, to put together a pilot programme to test the theory that a varied group of children can and should live and learn together in an atmosphere of harmony, trust and co-operation.

To test our thesis that not only is such a programme possible, but psychologically and pedagogically sound, we put together a group of children as varied as possible along the following dimensions: age, race, sex, social class and intellectual ability. To date there are twenty children in the programme. Three children have been labelled "Trainable Mentally Retarded" by their home schools, one child is profoundly deaf, one child is in a wheel-chair, another has cerebral palsy, one is severely learning-disabled, and the rest are bright, lively "normal" children, some very verbal and others quiet and shy.

The programme is run under the direction of Marsha Forest. I am responsible for the overall teaching and programme planning which is carried out with the assistance of two other education students, Kathy Milligan and Sue Shearer and a part time Atkinson student, Clark Hortsing. The programme has been running on Saturdays since the beginning of October.

The major aim of the programme is to instill in each child a sense of confidence in his or her own ability to learn, as well as feelings of acceptance

and responsibility towards one another. Even the "normal" children originally came to us with feelings of inadequacy and an inability to commit themselves in any way to another's well being. This has changed dramatically over the weeks.

Much planning and preparation is required for such a programme. The diverse needs and abilities of the children posed many obvious problems. The pattern of the day as it now exists emerged after much trial and error. We found very quickly that the children were the best gauge of what worked and what did not. When we first began to actively seek their evaluation there was reluctance to offer concrete suggestions, but, as they came to believe their advice would be followed, they gained confidence and trust in us.

The focal point of the day is the morning general meeting. These meetings were established to give the children an opportunity to explore their feelings on a variety of subjects important to them. Topics we've dealt with so far range from "What does it mean to be handicapped?" to discipline, sexism, the Iranian Hostage crisis, voting, etc.... Some discussions come directly from the group while others are sparked by carefully selected stories, movies or newspaper clippings. Even though the children range in age from four to thirteen years, they each have found ways of expressing their opinions and dealing with the issues on their own level. These meetings, more than anything else, have helped the children come together to form a sharing and caring community. They have become increasingly aware of each other's needs and more important, they take the initiative in helping one another.

After the meeting, time is spent with individuals working on specific reading and math skills. Though the older children at first took this time to read or play games with some of the teachers, there is now a strong shift towards more academic work.

Lunch is prepared each week by a different group of children. Time is also taken at this point to discuss an artist, composer or musician and to look at his

or her paintings or listen to classical music. Out of this has grown an interest in instruments and we are providing a variety of instruments for the children to experiment

The afternoons are reserved for group work or special outings. Trips have included cross-country ski outings and a visit to the Science Centre and a printing shop. Group activities usually begin on some common ground with everyone involved and then break into smaller groups for more specific learning activities. A good example of this was our exploration of colour. It began with a fictional story of how the world was given its colour. From there we divided into two groups, according to age and ability. One group experimented with paint and coloured water to find which colour combinations created new colours. The other group worked with prisms and explored light refraction.

The programme is bearing out all my beliefs about how children learn. The values implicit in this model may not be able to be put into practice today due to economic restraints, but pedagogically they work -- they enhance learning and they certainly have taught me more than anything I have ever done before.