

IMPRESSIONS OF A STUDENT AT THE FAIRHOPE WINTER SCHOOL



I WENT to the Fairhope Summer School because I wanted a close up of progressive education. I had read about it, visited progressive schools for a day now and then, and even made some experimental application of progressive tenets to my own work as a public-school teacher. But I had a suspicion that a better understanding could be obtained by living in an experimental school for six weeks, seeing not only what an occasional visitor sees, but studying the day-in and day-out procedure, the times of stress and strain as well as the smooth-going intervals.

The first thing that happened at the school was that Mrs. Johnson disapproved of the program I elected. I wished to take all my work in the education courses. The other courses offered were chiefly art, music, science, and physical training, and as an English teacher, I saw no direct benefit in these. Clay-modeling and folk-dancing—of all things to recommend to a mature and bookish woman! But I bethought me that I was a pupil now, and as I so often have occasion to point out, pupils should cooperate. I enrolled as advised, but with a mental reservation to allow myself liberal cuts.

Then the unexpected happened. I found out what a marvelously responsive medium clay can be; and the real artists in the studio group were not scornful but sympathetic toward the beginner. In the folk-dancing, instead of the boredom of work too childish, the difficulty was to think quickly enough to play my part in the charming patterns we wove to the inspiring music. The nature hikes were not, as I feared, a matter of attaching Latin names to simple wild flowers, but behavior studies of digger wasps, compass plants, and countless other performing troupes of the wayside. Surprising as was the interest and pleasure to be found in these courses, this was not my greatest discovery.

I had not lived at the school very long before I began to remark what a friendly and interesting group of people we were—all like one big family! We all felt at home with each other, like people of long association, yet we were strangers from all parts of the country. At first I marvelled at what seemed a general coincidence of congeniality in the school personnel. Then I noticed that in myself the social channels were more open than usual, both outward and inward, and I began to suspect that the good understanding, stimulation, and joy of our intercourse were due, not to our being remarkable people, but to the conditions provided by the school.

In the education classes talk and debate occupied more time than book work. Mrs. Johnson says of herself that she never had an original idea in all her life, but the way she elucidates the great principles she has adopted is itself a unique contribution. Indeed, among the authors she expounds, who could speak from a background such as hers—twenty-five years' experience in running a modern progressive school? Her class procedure generally was to review some wellknown progressive principle, and then call for actual example or demonstration, supplementing the contributions of the students as needful, with a wealth of illustration from life, and an eloquence all her own.

Every one has heard of the student who went all through high school

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before she found out that Julius Caesar in the Shakespeare class, Julius Caesar in the history class, and Julius Caesar in the Latin class were the same person. I do not smile at that student now. Summer school was half over before I realized that the interest and pleasure in our joint activities, and the remarkable social development among us, were the very thing expounded in the education class—Dewey's familiar theme of socialized education. That experience recognized was the greatest discovery of my summer.

Whenever an educational success is achieved, the conditions are noteworthy. A striking feature of the Fairhope Summer School was the provision for our mental and physical comfort. There were no examinations to worry about. Nevertheless, we worked. We did not always complete the amount of work planned for the hour, but sorry as we felt to omit anything, we did not hesitate to hold up the class to thresh out our problem. Again and again, time was forgotten as we sat in a circle under the trees and discussed the vital questions that arose from our reading or from our work as teachers.

Of rules and regulations there were none, except those dictated by common sense. Even the children were, as a rule, too busily engrossed in their occupational groups to get into mischief. There was no soft pedagogy, however. Once, when ripening fruit in a neighbor's orchard proved too tempting for some of our little boys, and they started to pilfer, they were no sooner boosted up into the tree, than their teacher appeared below, un-boasted them, and talked to them like a Dutch uncle. They did not try that again. Mrs. Johnson feels that children must conform to law, although of course, appeal to reason and justice should be employed to induce willing obedience as much as possible.

Visitors to the school were always welcome, and at appointed times, the people of the neighborhood were specially invited. Many came with personal problems in child welfare. One day a mother of the vicinity button-holed me, when she could not get at Mrs. Johnson, and her questions being typical, I will set them down:

"What is the progressive way to teach concentration? My child of nine failed in arithmetic last term and is to make it up this vacation, but when she is doing her examples, unless I sit by her and make a game of it, she dawdles."

Calling to mind our class discussions, I answered that a child is not a little adult. Even a grown-up student would find such a situation hard. Either this child of nine should be excused from the work, or the mother should sit by her and make a game of it.

The summer school is over, but I hope the vision seen there will not fade away. We teachers always go back in the fall full of good resolutions, but often, when we turn over a new leaf, it is only to find that in a short time it shows the same errors as the previous page. Yet hope persists, and something of the inspiration of the Fairhope Summer School I shall retain and pass on.

MADALENE D. BARNUM.

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