

Reaching Teens Through Minicourses

Are They Really Those Terrible, “Turned-Off” Teens?

By Rona C. Swaine and Minerva E. Straman

Do you need an answer to the problem of academically apathetic early adolescents? A successful curriculum change during the past five years in the seventh and eighth grades at the Ruth Murdoch Elementary School in Berrien Springs, Michigan, has provided a necessary motivational solution to this puzzle.

It all began when a math teacher attempted to answer the question posed in the title of this article. Several of her students possessed math ability but were underachievers as well as discipline problems. By providing after-school opportunities for these students to learn macramé, the teacher was able to develop a rapport so that these students were then willing to attempt school work in which they had not previously met with success. The visible carry-over into the classroom led to this teacher's providing further craft opportunities for other students during the study-hall sessions. The evident improvement in both academics and personal relationships led to greater interest on the part of other students. Further minicourse offerings using the nonacademic expertise of each teacher soon followed.

Formerly, the required non-

academic afternoon activities in these grades consisted of the following choices: band, choir, physical education, home economics, or shop. The usual “baby-sitting” study-hall situations accommodating the large student overflow were replaced with a totally different program. The entire pre-lunch session was lengthened to include all the basic academic classes of Bible, science, history, math, health, and English. The lunch break was shortened. This then provided adequate time for the inclusion of an innovative and appealing approach to the problem of previously “turned-off” students.

To the afternoon selections of band, choir, physical education, home economics, and shop were added other classes that could help the students discover their hidden talents as well as introduce them to present and future leisure-time enrichment.

Each quarter, the students were allowed to choose the minicourses they preferred. This freedom of choice, plus the help of sufficient volunteer teachers, resulted in small class sizes. Because the choice of minicourses varied every quarter, the students were able to take as many as 24 courses within their two-year stay in the program. Many of these classes enabled the students to complete the requirements for Adventist Youth Honors. Sculpture, ceramics, oil painting, quilling, needlepoint, crewel embroidery, bell choir,

silk and wood fiber flowers, macramé, candlemaking, foil and foam art, decoupage, and bread dough artistry were among the many fine arts included in the program.

Community Volunteers as Teachers

With the goal of establishing positive student attitudes toward various groups of people, it was decided to enlist community volunteers as resource teachers. The students soon saw the school custodian as a photography teacher as well as the building helper. A retired grandfather was seen as an expert in philately. An industrial-arts graduate student shared his plumbing expertise. The Hebrew professor not only taught the language, but also archaeology. The wives of graduate students were no longer only homemakers, but experts in crocheting. Knitting became the forte of a professor's wife and of an adolescent's parent.

Some hours each day should be devoted to useful education in lines of work that will help the students in learning the duties of practical life, which are essential for all our youth.¹

In accordance with this advice, classes in cooking, clothing, small engine repairs, household repairs, wood, plastics, and metal crafts were offered. Practical skills like typing and printing would prove to be useful acquisitions for the future.

To strengthen the tie of sympathy between teacher and student there are

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few means that count so much as pleasant association together outside the schoolroom. . . . No recreation helpful only to themselves will prove so great a blessing to the children and youth as that which makes them helpful to others. . . . In planning for the culture of plants, let the teacher seek to awaken an interest in beautifying the school grounds and the schoolroom. A double benefit will result. That which the pupils seek to beautify they will be unwilling to have marred or defaced. A refined taste, a love of order, and a habit of care-taking will be encouraged; and the spirit of fellowship and co-operation developed will prove to the pupils a lifelong blessing.²

The students planted flowers, blossoming shrubs, and ornamental trees along the main highway by the school. This provided enjoyment to the passers-by, as well as encouraging in the students a refined taste and the habit of care taking. Many of these students had never before worked with the soil and with growing things.

Training Student Aides

“Where the number of students is large enough, assistants should be chosen from among the older ones.”³ Following this counsel, the student-aiding minicourse was initiated. The lower-grade teachers requested student aides to help their pupils individually, to make bulletin boards, to assist on the playground, to run errands, et cetera. Not only did the lower-grade students and the teachers benefit, but the adolescent helper gained a sense of self-worth through the realization that his skills were useful to others. The responsibility and punctuality demanded by this work had a character-building side effect.

It is necessary to their complete education that students be given time to do missionary work—time to become acquainted with the spiritual needs of the families in the community around

them. They should not be so loaded down with studies that they have no time to use the knowledge they have acquired.⁴

Opportunity was provided for service to others in the Christian witnessing class. The students searched local newspapers for names of bereaved or hospitalized people in the community. They designed their own cards, devised ways to raise money for postage, and did follow-up, which resulted in many grateful responses. In some instances, the student contacts led to friendships between students and thankful recipient families.

A Transformation

The minicourse program has resulted in a transformation in many areas. A few of the results include: an overall reduction of discipline problems; a more balanced school program; an integration of faith and learning; improvement in student self-worth; appreciation for and active participation in unselfish service for others; a positive perception toward work; and a new awareness and use of undiscovered talents.

Previously there had been cases of serious individual and/or group behavior problems in and out of school time, but now students became more self-disciplined because they were occupied with an exciting and relevant curriculum. When a student is occupied with reconstructing his minibike in the small engine repair class, he has other things on his mind than getting into mischief.

The curriculum had formerly been overweighed in the direction of mental pursuits. Now a balance of social, emotional, spiritual, physical, and mental development was provided. Even the learning-disabled student who could not find success in the wholly academic program now had an outlet for his

(To page 45)



Top: The gardening class's flowers, shrubs, and trees beautified the highway near the school. Bottom: The Christian witnessing class designed get-well cards.

baked beans, still bubbling with onion and tomato. Maggie McDonald had made a roast out of something made in Battle Creek that tasted a little like meat.

The children looked back on that day with pleasure. And there were other days of outings and picnics.

"It doesn't seem possible that school could be so much fun," Chester confided to Jennifer, one day after he had gotten a hundred in arithmetic. "I am not scared anymore. Seems like I can think better."

"Course you can," Jennifer agreed. "No one can think when you are afraid. Miss Murphy doesn't get mad. She talks kind even when kids are bad."

"I know. Ain't no fun bein' bad when it makes Miss Murphy look at you kind of sad-like. I sure was mad at Rakie when he sassed her the other day."

"Yeah. An' Bill told him at recess he'd better cut it out if he knowed what was good for him."

And such was a slice of life from our family, after our father and mother decided to send us to church school. No wonder we decided to go all the way with Jesus, for we learned that happiness is found in kindness, and obedience, and love.

Descriptive articles and poetry that illustrate principles of Christian education are welcome from time to time. We invite our readers to submit such materials.

Those Terrible "Turned-Off" Teens

(Continued from page 11)

energies and a source of fulfillment in this new, more diversified program. Though this type of student could not excel in English or math, he found his outlet in bell choir or student aiding.

Seeing the Teacher in a New Way

Often a school program provides only one picture of the teacher—that of science or history instructor—but with a greater variety of experiences, opportunity for the integration of faith and learning is increased. The informal atmosphere of these minicourses helped the students to see their teachers in a new light. These courses provided an excellent milieu for the student to see the teacher as a Christian in ordinary, everyday experiences. Here was the English teacher learning macramé from a seventh-grade student who had been taught the craft by the math teacher. The English teacher's Christianity was displayed in the manner with which she coped with the same frustrations the student had met.

Due to an improvement in school spirit which resulted from the changed school program, there was a dramatic reduction in vandalism. A student who formerly had vented his frustrations with failure by smashing classroom windows now was unwilling to mar or deface the place where he found fulfilling enjoyment.

Typically, this age level is indifferent to the challenge of learning. However, the minicourses aroused the adolescents' potential for self-motivation. Not only was their enthusiasm for the minicourses obvious, but the carryover was evident in improved school attendance, better home relations, enthusiasm for academic subjects, personality development, and tolerance for the individuality of fellow students as each person found his unique skill in a variety of projects. The girl who in the past had delighted in leading her group in degrading and shaming her fellow students now found happiness in bring-

ing joy to the sick and the disadvantaged. She has even decided to pursue a career in which she can serve the unfortunate and the handicapped.

Encouraging Self-Confidence

Generally speaking, an early adolescent's self-concept is not easily reinforced within the scope of the typical school curriculum. Many students lacked self-worth and were a heartache to the teacher, particularly in Bible class. The student-aiding minicourse, which helped the older student value himself as a teacher of younger students, encouraged the development of a new self-perspective. Students participating in this area subsequently felt self-confident enough to share constructive thoughts and valuable contributions in Bible class.

Obviously this curriculum change has provided an appropriate answer to our original question of the problem of the academically apathetic early adolescent. It has shown that

in the invigoration of mind and body, the fostering of an unselfish spirit, and the binding together of pupil and teacher by the ties of common interest and friendly association, the expenditure of time and effort will be repaid a hundredfold. A blessed outlet will be afforded for that restless energy which is so often a source of danger to the young. As a safeguard against evil, the preoccupation of the mind with good is worth more than unnumbered barriers of law and discipline."¹

FOOTNOTES

¹ Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1913), p. 283.

² _____, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1903), pp. 212, 213.

³ *Counsels to Teachers*, p. 200.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 545, 546.

⁵ *Education*, p. 213.

Saving Energy—and Money—in Schools

(Continued from page 6)

work equally well as long as the "R" rating is maintained. (The "R" rating is a standard numbering system that rates the