

GHS Instructor Makes Study Of Dramatics In State High Schools

By Clifton Britton

Up to the present, very little has been done to direct the attention of teachers, parents, and school officials to the real value of educational dramatics in the high school. Many principals and superintendents have assumed, without taking the trouble to investigate, that dramatics is a way for students to waste their time. Many parents have believed it is used as an escape from study, even some of the authors and compilers who have stated, in their prefaces and introductions, that their textbooks were planned for students and teachers participating in educational dramatics, have not shown a real understanding of the possibilities.

Write For Profit

If the educational value of these books is the chief contribution, then a number of the authors had better stop writing. Too many continue to write from a commercial point of view, placing the emphasis on the box-office receipts rather than on the development of the child. Educational dramatics has not yet liberated the powers and set free the energies of creative youth in the secondary schools.

President Emeritus Charles W. Eliot of Harvard, years ago made this prophetic statement:

Here is this tremendous power over children . . . that ought to be utilized for their good. It is true that the dramatic instinct is very general . . . So I say that this power . . . is one that ought to be in at least every school in this country, and, moreover, I believe that it is going to be.

There is a valuable truth in what President Eliot says, but the writer believes that very few teachers are using to the best advantage the power he mentioned. Well, what has happened? Rugg and Shumaker in their book, *The Child-Centered School*, state the reason that teachers have failed. After saying that the schools snatched at anything which promised to motivate school work, the authors enlarge upon the application of this plan to dramatics:

Dramatics was hailed with acclaim and made the cart horse for a lot of unrelated educational outcomes. Language and literature were dramatized; history plays were marshaled in order to teach the facts of the founding of our country. There were arithmetic plays, health plays intended to bring home the importance of observing hygiene chores, geography plays dramatizing the home life of peoples of other lands . . . The publishers advertised lists of "plays for every occasion."

Dramatics A Slave

Therefore dramatics in the public school is too often a slave and personal servant for every subject in the curriculum. It has nothing of its own to add. In this situation, the dramatization means little except further memorization.



The cast of Jane Parker's original play, "Mountain Laurel", is shown above. Members are Margie Perry, Robert Andrews, Billy Ray, and Catherine Robinson.

It is the pupil's place to learn his part. At the appropriate time he will be permitted to recite. The teacher is an autocrat director, producer, manager, . . . the mind behind the scenes. Children are puppets in his hands, just as they are during the formal recitation. Treated thus, dramatics in the school is foredoomed to die. It is perfectly clear that the teachers and administrators have had little effort toward developing a drama promoting the personal growth of the youngster.

From the earliest times children have participated in non-professional adult drama, though it was not till the establishment of the theatre of Mme. de Genlis, in 1784, that they had a drama all their own, guided to fit their special needs.

Religious Festival

In the religious and community festivals of ancient Greece, white-robed and flower-crowned children of shepherds and farmers appeared in the ritual before Pomona's altar; boys of noble birth, crowned with vine leaves, were cupbearers to the chorus of nobles in the Thargelian festivals, but these dramas were arranged to satisfy adults. Child players were never considered.

Herein should lie the difference between the ancient and modern play movement in relation to the child. Nowadays the benefit to be derived by the child participant should be the first consideration. Whether the Grecian child player benefited the play, or even understood what it was about was not considered at all.

Should Develop Pupil Work in educational dramatics

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for boys and girls should have as one of its major objectives the development of the personality of the individual student. What is the student's personality? Edmund S. Conklin says, "The personality is the combined product of a vast number of traits, abilities, characters, trends, drives, tendencies, and the like, much of which is still beyond scientific knowledge." Consider the contribution which proper training in dramatics can and should make to the personal growth of the boy and girl. This contribution may be summed up quickly as the development of the student's personality through controlled expressional activity in a cooperative social situation.

More specifically, work in dramatics gives the student, in a far greater degree than most classroom procedures can, opportunity for expressional activity. It is now a truism that boys and girls learn through activity—they learn much better through working in concrete situations.

These situations must give the child much freedom to develop the aspects of personality mentioned by Conklin. Too frequently the student is trained to receive acquiescently; too rarely he is trained to act on his own initiative. He sits in the classroom day after day receiving what the teacher gives; he is being trained to be passive. Schools provide far too many classroom situations in

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which the adolescent is supposed to learn by impression and far too few in which he can learn by expression. One of the great values of work in dramatic art is that it leads the student to learn by expression—by acting with his body, his voice, and his mind.

Aids Cooperation

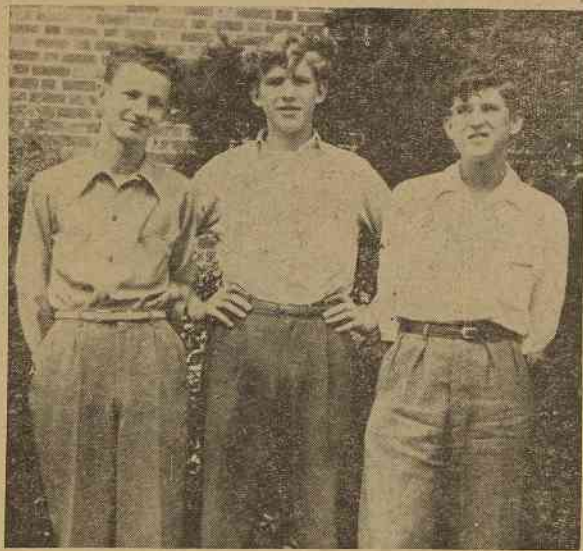
Yet another great value of work in dramatics is training the adolescent to act not simply as an individual, but as an individual cooperating with others to attain a social goal. A group of students sitting in a classroom taking notes from a teacher's lecture or answering questions which the teacher asks can hardly be said to cooperate. The same students working together to produce a scene are cooperating in the best social sense. Team play is demanded. This necessity for team play is fundamental in all work in dramatics, from the simplest dialogue in a classroom to the most complex and elaborate production of a Shakespearean play.

Some of the values which the adolescent gains from such team play are obvious; others no less important, are more subtle. The most aggressive boy and girl has to learn to be patient, to wait till his cue comes, and to modulate his part in accordance with the needs of the whole scene. The most timid student, the girl with downcast eyes who is afraid to speak above a whisper, is helped by learning that she is wanted and has her place, that others will wait for her, and that at the right time she must speak out loud and clear. Each student learns that his success depends on the activity of others in the group and that their success depends on him. Something more subtly, the adolescent learns that his success depends not only on what others do, but on the spirit in which they do it. He learns the difference between listless and spirited cooperation.

Individual Expression

Work in dramatics thus gives each boy and each girl an opportunity for individual expressional activity in a cooperative situation;

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and, if this activity receives the right guidance, it will be artistic. Through dramatics the student is helped to discover the reality of artistic values. He learns about art not simply as something other people talk about or as something his teacher believes in; he learns by taking part in a creative process.

He learns not only to act, but to act according to an excellent pattern. He uses speech more mature than his own and learns to make assumptions beyond his direct experiences. He discovers patterns by which he may shape himself.

A student well directed will be benefited by the many roles he

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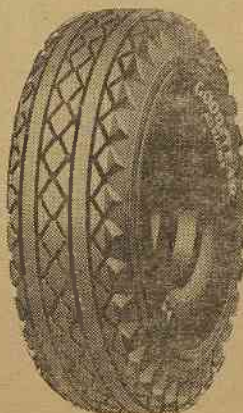
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cal aspect, and the personal mannerisms which are integrally a part of a particular human being." To do this a number of times cannot fail to enrich.

Must Play Part

The adolescent plays a role which is not himself, and is thus forced to project himself emotionally into the character of another person. The art of playing another's part forces him to get out of himself, out of the narrow boundaries of his habitual activity and to experience the emotions, the distinctive qualities, the mannerisms of another person. Thus he learns to see the world from another point of view, to feel the problems forced by another character in another situation. Therefore, the sympathetic social understanding of the student is enlarged; he becomes less narrow, more tolerant, more flexible.

There is no better way to understand — Continued on Page Four

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