



Courtland Park Elementary School

As one turns from rue Pont Briand onto Wolfe, a typical elementary school comes into view. Nothing about its external appearance distinguishes Courtland Park from many other elementary schools. The first indication that something very interesting is happening occurs as one enters the brightly coloured corridor on the ground floor.

The Courtland Park Educational Project has developed naturally over the past nine years as the identity of the school evolved. This identity, reflected in the comments of interviewees, is composed of a community orientation, planned active learning, and an open and warm atmosphere. It was through grass-roots initiatives, enthusiasm, and hard work that it all evolved and gradually became formalized as an educational project.

The emergent and development phases

The educational project at Courtland Park can be traced in part to an active School Committee which has functioned effectively since 1972. The ground was fertile for parent involvement, since the community had a high interest in education and the teaching staff was open, enthusiastic, and hardworking. These conditions precipitated community participation and made the first steps of the project an easy beginning.

In 1974, three teachers, encouraged by government regulations, the school board and principals, were busy obtaining their Special Education Diplomas. During the clinical stages of that program, they became interested in participatory learning and the development of a resource room. These teachers formed a committee to plan such a room to be housed in

Courtland Park School. They petitioned the board to remove the wall between two rooms to supply the necessary space.

The Board did not act immediately. It took three additional years of more detailed planning and negotiations to achieve the desired results. During this waiting period, the Special Education teacher at Courtland Park, June Rosevear, was already using her special education room as a free-flow room in the afternoons to which children came for remedial help. The free-flow room was activity oriented, so in 1977 when the board at last agreed to eliminate the designated wall, it was removed between her classroom and the next. Her free-flow area expanded into the extra space, and the "activity room" was born.

Afraid of the term "resource room", which in many settings is often reduced to a storage cupboard, she chose the name "activity room", and then collected and organized pertinent, interesting teaching material and solicited community volunteers to help. It was at this point that the project began to form. Community interest and teacher enthusiasm had taken focus. A portion of the curriculum was beginning to involve parents, teachers and students in a common effort.

At present, the school houses 230 children from Kindergarten to grade six and operates as a single-track system. The children come from a wide range of backgrounds and there is a certain fixed turnover of students, as approximately one-third of those attending Courtland Park come from the St. Hubert Air Force Base. Of the ten educational staff, one acts as head teacher and carries on the daily administrative functions as well as some teaching.

The principal visits twice per week, and a physical education specialist on three-quarter-time teaches all the grades during his Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays in the school. A full-time secretary is the only non-teaching person other than the nurse, who visits the first three Mondays of each month. Additional facilities run by the school (e.g. the library) function under the direction of a large core of parent volunteers who are in the school on a regular basis each week.

By 1977, June Rosevear had taken on the organizational responsibility for the activity room and was delegating to teachers the planning of some of the activity centres. The parent volunteers were actively participating in helping children at the centres, and were beginning to collect easily accessible resources that were pertinent to the areas of study. Board members who visited the room were impressed and gave the necessary support. The board requested that some videotaping be done while the room was in session, underlining its tacit approval.

"Any such action of the school necessarily involves all of those who are directly concerned: students, parents, teachers, non-teaching personnel and the school administration. With the

help and co-operation of the school board, they assume joint responsibility for the educational project. Together they reach a number of decisions that determine the direction the school will take, so that its development is no longer a matter of chance but the result of real choice." (MEQ, p.2) Courtland Park School had reached this stage in the development of its project.

Maintenance and adaptation: the activity room re-shaped

The beginning of the maintenance phase was a gradual re-shaping of the activity room.

"The evaluation can be done at various times. . . evaluation is built into the various activities so that it is an ongoing process. Whatever the method, evaluation is essential to the development and adaptation of the project." (MEQ, p.30)

What had begun as a series of loosely-connected activity centres for all children, staffed rather informally by volunteers, now evolved into a thematic approach to the curriculum. The teachers became able to initiate or expand appropriate learning for the particular grade levels in their classrooms. Then, in the activity room either prior to or after the classroom learning, the children became actively engaged in tasks which developed concepts and skills related to the theme, within the umbrella areas of science, cooking, and the arts.

Under the direction of June Rosevear, the teachers would agree on a theme that was meaningful for all the children from kindergarten through grade 6. Then, during an approximately three-week planning and preparation period, activities were prepared. Community resources were tapped, and volunteers had an instructional session where they were shown how to operate the centres and guide the children in their tasks. In addition, the volunteers were encouraged to share experiences and expertise pertinent to the activities at the centres.

Themes have now been systematized into three per year for a period of seven weeks per theme. This amount of time evolved as being realistic, given the time required for planning and preparation. One and one-half days per week are set aside for the activity room. Each class visits the room once per week for a forty-minute period. There are always seven centres so that each class has the opportunity to work at every centre. The volunteers and teachers who operate the centres rotate through the centres during the seven-week period to avoid the monotony of repeating information to the many groups. All centres offer activities that engage the children in something visual and something auditory. The work they do results in a product.

For each theme a "surprise centre" is created. The centre is enclosed and its contents remain unknown to the pupils until their group begins work at the centre. There has been an overwhelmingly enthusiastic response to the surprise centre from all grade levels.

In order that the materials and tasks meet the various ability levels across the grades, they are prepared with appropriate cut-off points or with parallel activities. This allows all children to participate at every centre, and involves the entire school in a common curricular area of study. As in the classrooms, the library becomes a spin-off point for the current theme. It is not unusual to see books displayed featuring topics related to those at the centres. The volunteers who run the library find themselves peripherally involved, answering questions and book requests which are generated from the theme.

During the current year the themes have been "know yourself", "know your neighbour", "know your community". These were chosen because they had the potential of interesting all the children and because they would help the students learn more about each other's background as well as familiarize them with their immediate environment, St. Bruno.

Wider and wider involvement

Although the activity room has been the pivot point throughout the development of this project, it alone does not constitute the educational project at Courtland Park School. It facilitated continuity in involvement and provided a focus for participation school-wide.

With the passage of Bill 71, the members of the educational community realized that Courtland Park School already had an orientation. The task before them was to clarify its focus and make it better known to the community.

The impetus for the formation of an Orientation Committee came from the teachers and the School Committee, who approached the school board in June 1980. The committee was formed in September of the same year with the usual composition of three parents, two teachers, one administrator (the present head teacher), a non-teaching member (the school secretary), and a board representative. The main function of the Committee to date has been to consolidate its orientation and to isolate areas of development which will extend and re-shape the educational project.

The first step in re-shaping was the formulation of a questionnaire which was distributed to the parents with the hopes of engaging them in a "paper dialogue" about the various aspects of the school plant and its functioning. The results of the data were tabulated, and from these the committee produced the following statement, which formalizes the school's orientation and operational areas of its project (Courtland Park, 1981):

"Orientation of Courtland Park School

In addition to providing a sound academic base, Courtland Park

School will continue to facilitate and encourage the enrichment of student life through a positive interaction with the community.

The Educational Project

The Courtland Park Educational Project will emphasize the development of sound intellectual, physical, emotional and social growth through:

- 1) the continued development of the Activity Room and the encouragement of an inquiring mind
- 2) exposure to as many facets of human knowledge as possible
- 3) the appreciation and preservation of the environment
- 4) the development of an open-minded and tolerant attitude.

In implementing this project, priority shall be given to the further development of an Art and Music program."

In 1981, during the year of this study, a Student Committee was formed composed of eight representatives from grades 4 through 6. This group was formed to involve the students more actively in the planning and decision-making, by acting on suggestions from the general student body (obtained by a "suggestion box") and presenting proposals to the head teacher.

At the end of the 1981 school year a questionnaire was sent to parents by the orientation committee asking them for their input about the workings of the school. The results of these questionnaires indicated that parents were generally pleased with their school and were very much in support of the activity room. One suggestion that emanated from several sources was that the school should put more of an emphasis on the creative arts. As a result, the theme for the following year was the creative arts, and the material developed for the activity room had this as its focus.

Other kinds of community involvement have also evolved. Each year there is an annual Junior Olympics Day, and community expertise is utilized for hobby instruction during noon hours. These sessions were initiated by the teaching staff as a result of student requests.

The focus of the educational project, the communicative structures of the orientation committee and the student committee, and the ongoing community involvement make this educational community very much in tune with itself and very receptive to new ideas and change.

The visible identity

At Courtland Park School the corridors and rooms reflect an atmosphere of congeniality. There is a hominess and enthusiasm as children's laughter is heard and teachers give a

friendly hello to a visitor in the school. The united efforts of children, staff, and parents are visible in current products displayed throughout the school. The staffroom is filled with animated people conversing over coffee during break time. What at first glance seem to be teachers turn out to be an undefinable group of parents and teachers, interacting happily. This friendly atmosphere, which attests to the unity within the school, is only one visible facet of its orientation. The other dimensions of its identity can probably best be summarized in the spontaneous comments of various members of the school community.

Secretary:

"The school is friendly, it has a good atmosphere. There is a nice attitude with the kids. . ."

Parent Librarian:

"There is always active parent involvement. The atmosphere is fairly free yet controlled. The community is a part of the school. The unique feature is the activity room. It is broadening in terms of the individual child and the outside world."

A teacher of 16 years:

"There is a warmth and caringness. There is a strong relationship with the community because of the active school committee."

Teacher of 5 years:

"There is a school identity. It is reflected in the friendliness and involvement."

Substitute teacher:

"I like coming to this school. The atmosphere is open. The substitutes and volunteers feel an equality with the teachers. The activity room is unique. The children learn a lot and are motivated to continue learning."

Student Committee

(grades 4-6):

"It is a good school. It's friendly. It is interesting because of the activities. In the activity room it is not boring, we get to do things. We learn a lot from parents. The teachers are open, they tell what's happening before it happens. We get individual help. We have a good library. We have lots of assemblies. We are getting a new playground."

Kindergarten children:

"School is fun. I like school. The activity room is fun. . ."

What has evolved at Courtland Park School appears to have occurred naturally and easily, perhaps in part facilitated

because it is a small school. However, hard work and dedication are apparent in all aspects of the school's functioning.

In the school's community, knowledge of the school and a consensus about its identity are very apparent. This positive consensus will change and grow through time, with plateaus, peaks, frustrations, and rewards. The ingredients are present, the mechanisms are in operation; what remains is the continued commitment of all the people concerned.

REFERENCES

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- Courtland Park Elementary School Orientation Committee. Orientation Policy Statement. 1981.
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