

Communal Education: The Society of Brothers

The Hutterian Society of Brothers, located in Rifton, New York, balances individual needs with those of the community in the education of its young children.

How does a religious community view basic values for young children? What is basic? Are there things we can learn from the Society of Brothers as we grapple with statements of values, goals, and basics in our professional associations, individual schools, and homes?

The Mid-Hudson (New York) AEYC expressed the need to reconsider basic values, as have many early childhood educators. Over a period of many years, we had been on friendly terms with the Hutterian Society of Brothers, but we knew about their educational philosophy and practice only in general. The Society is a religious community which has assumed responsibility for the schooling of its children from birth through eighth grade. High school and college-age youth attend public schools. As part of our program, we organized a visit to the Society to look closely at, and ask questions about, the Society's educational approach.

Daily activities

The family is central in the children's lives, but the care of the children is shared by others in the community. Community members have made a lifetime choice for their way of life. Because all adult mem-

bers of the Society have a responsibility to the group, small children and babies from six weeks of age are cared for in a day nursery while parents share in the community's work.

After breakfast with the family, all the children go to groups with other children their age. Children of elementary-school age attend school in the large old family home of the original estate. From 9 a.m. to 12 noon, babies and younger children play together and have snacks (baths for babies), dinner (mothers come to feed their babies at noon), and rest time (from noon to 2 p.m.). The children are all at home from 2 to 3 p.m. for a snack and time with the family. They return to school from 3 to 5:30 p.m., where children from the fifth grade on down also have their supper before going home again for the night. As the children grow and move up from group to group, their teachers often move with them.

The young children spend six days a week in small groups—"Welcome to Our Dear Ones"; "Our Lovely Fours"—in simple, uncluttered rooms. One of the

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most impressive features of these groups is the near absence of learning materials familiar to other early childhood settings. The teachers place a small selection of manipulative materials on high shelves to be handed out at particular times for quiet play. Some large wheeled toys and blocks are parked on the floor or on open shelves. The central area is kept clear for playing, eating, or sleeping. The great outdoors is enjoyed as one of the major resources with walks through the woods and around the community. The outdoor play areas include not only fenced yards but also long, covered porches, useful in all weather.

The staff arranges schedules which allow time for family and other demands. Teachers and helpers can easily coordinate the day's plans because everyone lives in the community. No one is expected to work more than a reasonable length of time without a break from the close supervision of babies and toddlers. Morning and afternoon teachers who teach in the baby house (age six weeks through three years) will often do completely different work during the other half of the day.

On our first visit to the community, the elementary school was undergoing its regular Saturday cleaning. The children spent part of the day helping with the sweeping and mopping and another part of the day in special projects such as hikes, pottery making, or play rehearsals. We returned to observe the Monday through Friday schedule, which covers the standard academic subjects. The school is organized into the conventional eight grades with one conspicuous difference: Only 6 to 15 children are in each grade.

The day began with Kinderschaft, a morning gathering of teachers and children. This particular occasion honored the birth of twins to the wife of one of the teachers. He spent several minutes describing a visit to his wife and twins in the hospital, and then the entire group sang a number of lullabies. As choral singing is a daily part of community life, the verses and harmonies flowed smoothly.

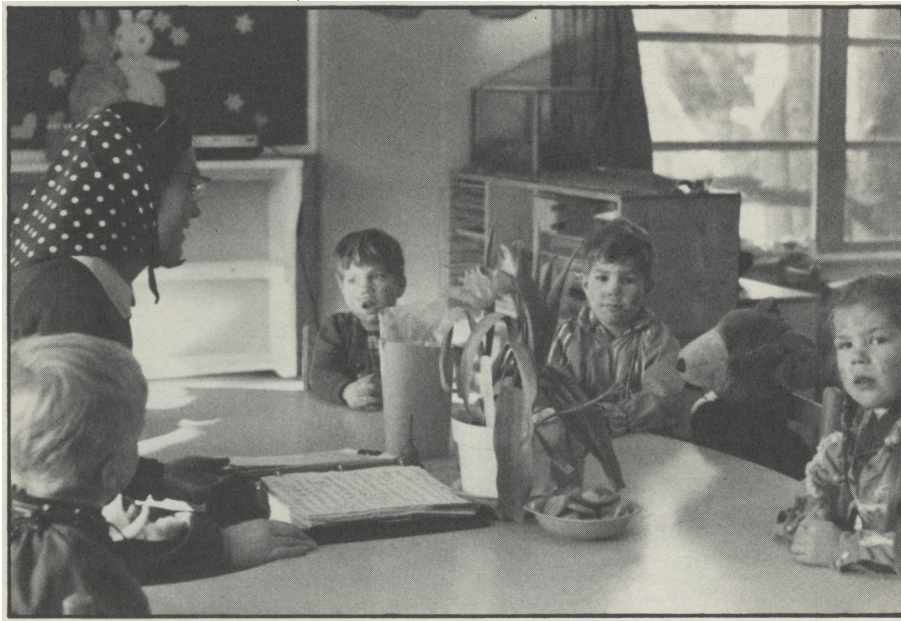
The hours from 8 a.m. to noon are devoted to formal school lessons with a mid-morning recess. In the traditional atmosphere, the children sit quietly while the teacher directs the lesson. All the children work at the same assignment and wait patiently to be called on. Children are grouped according to age, regardless of academic ability. A girl with Down's Syndrome worked along with the rest of the class although not necessarily at the same task.

During the morning lessons, the first-graders were wiggly but attentive. Their cheerful classroom was more casual than the older grades, but still orderly. We saw all the children taking turns reading aloud from a Scott, Foresman reader. Although there were obvious differences in ability, no impatience was expressed by either the children or their teacher. During the math lesson, the teacher began a review using flash cards with the class chanting aloud. No manipulatives were used for the work,

Two-year-old children at play in the day nursery.



Photos courtesy of the Society of Brothers, Inc.



Four-year-old children (with faces made up for a play) singing before having milk and cookies.

even though some of the children were counting on their fingers. At one point, an abacus was used briefly.

When the teacher was free, we asked questions. Why were the children not allowed to work individually so that the more skilled among them could move ahead more rapidly? The teacher explained that calling attention in this way to an individual's skills or talents, thus making her or him different, would be contrary to the goals of the group. This basic attitude was evident in many instances. Each child is given equal opportunity, but no single child is considered better than or inferior to another. I saw children lovingly but firmly reminded to consider other children's feelings.

At 12:30 p.m., the community shared a meal to which we were invited. Children younger than seven years of age eat separately, but second-graders and all older children and adults eat the mid-day meal in the large dining room overlooking the Shawangunk and Catskill mountain ranges. Breakfast is eaten in the family apartments. Members of our group, sharing tables and conversation with community families, sat scattered throughout the dining hall. The food was simple as are all

facets of Society life. Basic material comforts are considered necessary but not of major importance to a religious life. The meal began with a welcome to us, a song of thanks, and a moment of quiet contemplation and concluded with another short silence.

Adults generally return to their apartments for a quiet interval after eating. Mothers are at home with their children between 2 and 3 p.m. For the children, the rest of the afternoon is devoted to different projects. Under adult guidance, not necessarily that of the classroom teacher, field trips move out; rehearsals get under way; and the various workshops are busy. (The Society manufactures Community Playthings.) The teachers may use this time for class preparation and other community responsibilities.

The Society of Brothers is a consistent community. Sex roles are largely traditional, and all children are wanted. The number of children is less of a problem in this communal group than it might be in the nuclear family. Ideals of family love and the value of children are cherished. School is neither physically nor culturally separate. The school day is simply the child's work in a community where each

person knows her or his role. All community members—children as well as adults—share the responsibility for the well-being of the entire group so that children help adults as well as receive from them. While the children's role clearly differs from that of the adults, it is integrated into community life.

The children's participation as responsible members of the Society is widely in evidence: Children set tables for the evening meal and help with clearing and washing up; they distribute clean laundry to the families; and they bring milk from the main food supply area to the Children's Houses. During the summer, the children are gardeners, providing fresh vegetables for the kitchen and for as much canning and freezing as can be managed to feed the 380 members of the Society. Young adults are apprenticed to the manufacturing plant and to other adult jobs, and the young women help clean the Children's Houses. A small livestock operation is maintained primarily for the

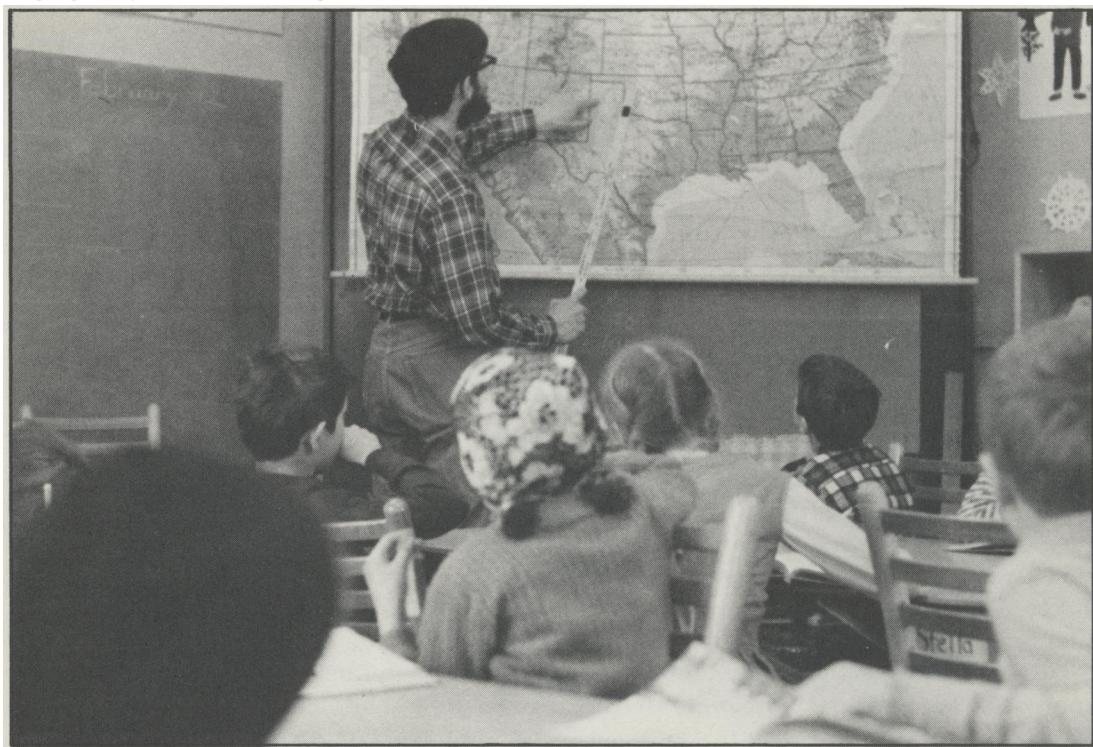
children's experience. Energy conservation takes the form of heating with wood, which is gathered, cut, and hauled by the children. As one adult member of the Society said, "We really depend on them! They are held responsible for a good quality effort."

Educational values

I identified several values characteristic to the schooling of young children in the Society of Brothers:

1. The adult is model, leader, and director.
2. The child's role is to be an attentive learner.
3. Expression of individuality is de-emphasized; group membership is highly valued.
4. Clear-cut lines of proper behavior (modestly lively but never rambunctious) are imposed. Self-control is a

A geography lesson for third-graders.



common characteristic of all Society members.

The community's religious precepts guide its members. There is a careful balance of meeting individual human needs along with providing for the greatest good for the community. Teachers are not pressured into making reading and math take precedence over a child's life as a human being.


In educating its children, the Society has established some of the following objectives:

1. *reverence* for God, for parents and teachers, and toward others
2. *gratitude* for all that exists from God and all that children and adults receive
3. *freedom to dare* to be brave in games and to face correction by parents or teachers
4. *self-discipline* by not giving way to selfishness or loveless attitudes
5. *loving truthfulness*
6. *freedom from possessiveness*
7. *purity*, including physical purity and healthy attitudes
8. *childlikeness*, i.e. that children *be* children, not little adults, but also not more childish than one could expect. (The

child gradually becomes more helpful and responsible as she or he grows older.)

9. *sympathy for poverty and suffering* without overexposing a child to every detail but so that a child can be guided to have compassion through wise and loving presentation of actual events

What is meant by *basics* in education? Too often we assume basics mean reading, writing, and arithmetic. However, our experience with the Society of Brothers helped us reconfirm our definition of the word. We saw a school where human values, as defined by the Society, were also conscientiously taught and practiced.

Each of us, in cooperation with parents and school administrators, must identify our basic values for education. If the values call for loving, sharing, and helping, then these behaviors must be considered along with other areas of the curriculum as we plan for young children. 

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