

AMERICAN EDUCATION

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A handful of kids in a handful of schools around Boston have it very easy. They sit there in class, being kids, and their teachers bring the world to them. All the work has been done and now all they have to do is be fascinated and thereby learn.

But someone had to do the work; someone had to find the artisan who knew how to make the wampum out of the bits of quahog shells for the Algonquin kit, and someone had to locate the French missionary in Canada who had contacts among the Netsilik Indians who could get the harpoons, bow-drills, snow goggles, and fishing jiggers for the Eskimo kit.

The someone who did all that work was actually a group of people: subject matter specialists, teachers, and staff members of the Children's Museum in Boston, working on Project MATCH Box (Materials and Activities for Teachers and Children—placed in boxes). This venerable museum has been breathing life into the daily routine of Boston classrooms since shortly after the turn of the century and since 1937 has been conducting a loan program of materials and exhibits for local schools. Project MATCH Box is the latest and perhaps the most promising extension of that program.

The idea grew out of a conviction of Project Director Fred Kresse and Museum Director Michael Spock that elementary education is too heavily dependent on verbally presented material. As a result, they submitted a proposal to the U.S. Office of Education for a grant under title VII-B of the National Defense Education Act. The Office awarded an initial \$188,000 (since upped to \$373,000) to develop appropriate materials.

Now fourth-grade Bostonians toil with a primitive mortar and pestle, grinding up toasted corn kernels. Once they have reduced the kernels to a powder they pass around a large clam shell filled with water and mix a paste. Then, a bit hesitantly, they have their first taste of nokake, a staple food of the Algonquins back in the 1600's. They are participating in the life of the Algonquins just as when working with the floor plan of an ancient Greek house and Greek artifacts they are imaginatively transported back to the time of Homer.

"We believe that something special can happen when an object is brought into the classroom," says Kresse. "For instance, you bring an Eskimo bow-drill into the classroom and the pattern of communication between the teacher and the children is altered—both the teacher and the children have to come to the object, the bow-drill, together. And this changes the normal teacher-pupil relationship where teachers dole out knowledge and children accept it. The teacher in this situation becomes a human being sharing a learning experience with a student."

The initial series of MATCH Boxes spans



MATCH BOXES

A project in Boston takes learning out of books and puts it in children's hands: wigwams, igloos, mud chinks, and chopsticks — youngsters handle and explore them all.



the elementary grades. They lend themselves handily to use in classes where grades are mixed. "Grouping Birds" was designed for grades K-2, "The City" for 1-3, "Seeds" for 3-4, "The Algonquin Indians" for 3-4, and "A House of Ancient Greece" for grades 5-6. (The Eskimo kit is part of a second series of seven boxes: a total of 16 boxes will eventually be developed.)

Cost ranges from \$180 to \$800 which means that at present they are not likely to be a red-hot item for ghetto schools or rural poverty areas. Possibly, though, mass-production would lower the cost of the Boxes and permit their distribution to school systems across the country.

But Kresse stresses that the main purpose of the project is to discover more about what part real objects play in the learning process and to identify ways in which these objects and associated materials such as film loops, slides, recordings, maps, books, and instruction manuals can best be related to learning objectives. Success, he points out, depends on how well the various ingredients work together. The Boxes are designed to kindle a

special something between teachers and children—a spirit of common exploration. If this doesn't happen, then the items in the Box add up to nothing more than uncoordinated, expensive teaching aids.

The City Box, for instance, introduces first and second graders to "cityness." They listen to recordings of city sounds, see films on the city and on man's life in the city, study photographs of the city, and manipulate models of buildings included in the Box. These overlapping activities not only give the children an idea of the meaning and the feeling of the city, but, more importantly, give them an opportunity to express their own feelings about the city and city life. They speculate.

To date the Boxes have received an excellent report card from the Boston schools where they have been used. "We think this concept has vast potential," reports one administrator; "it puts the kids in the driver's seat," says another; "makes book-learning old-fashioned," says a third.

And from one of the kids, sitting back after scraping a deerskin from the Algonquin box: "No wonder the wigwam was so dirty."