

## Discipline as a Skill

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UNDER THE DAMAGING TITLE, "Modern Schooling Makes for Poor Soldiers,"<sup>1</sup> the following unanalyzed and misleading statements appear:

"... Recalling the objections to the modern trend in education, we realize that this undisciplined freedom and self-expression is the main evil. These so-called 'Progressive Education schools' are 'child centered schools.' The child does what *he wishes*, studies what *he wishes* and *with no effort at discipline*. And without discipline there is no self-control. . . .

"Self-control, the product of discipline and proper teaching, becomes a matter of life and death at the battle-front. *When parents are sufficiently aroused, discipline and the 3 R's will come back.*"

Outbursts of this type against modern developments in education would be merely interesting examples of wrong conclusions which can follow emotional bias and insufficient study of facts, if they were not dangerous. Such attacks as this on education are dangerous, however, and must be taken seriously because they help build up "modern education" as a scapegoat for the complex ills of a nation hard-pressed by war. Education is both the foundation and the defense of the democratic way of life and must be

valued, strengthened, and improved in times of crisis, not used as a scapegoat or allowed to regress and deteriorate.

No responsible and reasonable American questions that self-control may make the difference between "life and death at the battle front," or that self-control is "the product of discipline and proper teaching" if—and it is a big if—the meaning of discipline and self-control are clearly defined in keeping with American democratic ideals. Much of the present controversy and confusion about the content of education and the methods of discipline in education result from failure to agree upon meanings and to state the issues clearly in democratic terms.

It is easy enough to say that everyone knows what discipline means but the statement is not true. "Discipline" can and does mean many things: to some it means harsh punishment, severe and systematic training based on fear, or outward control gained by enforcing obedience; to others discipline and education are synonymous and mean the sum total of training, guidance, and experiences which strengthen, develop, and perfect the individual as he grows from the complete dependence of infancy to the independence and self-control of maturity. The first view emphasizes the use of force, doing things to people and making people do things; the second sees discipline as a skill which is learned by each individual slowly but

<sup>1</sup> *Bulletin*, "Friends of the Public Schools," VI, No. 2, Serial No. 62, Washington, D. C., August, 1943.

surely through many different kinds of experiences which serve to build up competence, self-respect, and self-control. If true discipline is to be learned, such experiences must be consciously and carefully planned in homes and communities as well as in schools.

It is essential, therefore, to know what kind of discipline is meant, and discipline for what end, before the disagreements about educational methods can be understood or resolved. The same reservations must hold for generalizations about self-control. Granting that self-control is both desirable and necessary throughout life, it is still essential to ask, "Self-control for what purpose, developed by what methods, and in the service of what faith or ideals?"

#### *The Three R's Can't "Come Back" Because They Never Left*

There can be general agreement that discipline and self-control are of primary importance in the public schools, but it does not follow that "when parents are sufficiently aroused, discipline and the 3 R's will come back." Incidentally, if parents are to be "aroused," let it be for a *real* cause, that of promoting true equality of educational opportunity for all American children. The

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*We are accused of being "soft" with children, of contributing to a rising delinquency rate by failure to "discipline" boys and girls. This would seem to imply that we should "get tough," impose a rigid discipline, and exact blind obedience. Mary S. Fisher, Professor of Child Study at Vassar College and Director of Vassar Summer Institute for Family and Child Care Services in War Time, reminds us that such logic will not stand when we remember to examine the purposes of discipline in a democracy.*

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three R's have never left the schools; so they can hardly be "brought back." Regardless of the type of school—large or small, rural or urban, public or private, traditional or progressive—the basic skills of reading, writing, and figuring are universally the key or core subjects. It is impossible to teach *any* kind of subject without teaching first and always the use of the written and the spoken word. The suggestion that the three R's have left the schools becomes absurd as soon as facts are examined.

In the same basic sense, "discipline" has never gone out of the schools. Teaching children without some form of control or regulation is as impossible as attempting to teach subjects without the use of language. Unfortunately for the children's sake, all teachers are not capable of conducting well-ordered and democratic classes. Teachers, like parents, differ in their experience, training, understanding, and skills. This means that some schools are inevitably providing better experiences for learning and developing discipline and self-control than others, just as some schools are providing better experiences for learning language and mathematics. It serves no serious purpose, but again reduces a very important educational problem to an absurdity, to charge in a wholesale way that in modern schools "the child does what *he wishes*, studies what *he wishes* and *with no effort at discipline*."

#### *What Are the Goals of Discipline?*

Before attempting to suggest the kinds of experiences in discipline and self-control which American parents have the right to expect and demand

in schools which they support, it is necessary to return to the basic question: For what goals or purposes are American children to be disciplined? Comparing two types of individuals "disciplined" for very different goals may help to illustrate the importance of the question. The ideal citizen of Nazi Germany obeys orders without question, does not presume to think for himself, and accepts blindly the right of his leaders to control his personal life, his political, economic, and social activities, and his religious faith. There is no question that he is well-disciplined and for a definite purpose: to serve his rulers.

In dramatic contrast to the disciplined Nazi, the disciplined American does not obey orders without question; he insists upon thinking for himself; he assumes responsibility for his personal, economic, and political activities and his religious faith. Translated into other terms the ideal or disciplined American is responsible, cooperative, self-controlled, independent, and reasonable; he believes in the worth and dignity and rights of individual men and women regardless of his particular religious faith. The ideal or disciplined Nazi, on the other hand, is personally irresponsible, controlled by orders, dependent on authority, and fanatical; he believes in the destiny of the "master race" to rule the world by force.

Few Americans admire the Nazi character or really want to "discipline" our children into dependent, irresponsible, fanatical adults. Yet current attacks on modern educational methods of the kind earlier referred to reveal either confusion and complete misunderstanding of the whole educational process,

or else a wish—conscious or unconscious—to defeat and deny democracy in our own country.

### *It Is Easy to Discipline Slaves*

Democracy as a way of life for a nation is a high and austere ideal which can release and perfect the most constructive and creative powers and capacities in human nature as soon as we understand and accept the educational implications of our ideals. Truly democratic personalities cannot be easily and automatically trained by imposing certain specific courses of study, keeping children and other minority groups in their places, enforcing obedience or conformity, and encouraging fear and suspicion of change and growth. Such methods contradict and deny democracy and will lead to its eventual destruction if they become more widespread and more generally practiced in homes and schools.

It is much easier to discipline slaves than to develop independent, responsible, self-respecting, self-controlled men and women. Looking at discipline as a skill to be learned at home and at school demands much more of parents, teachers, and administrators than is comfortable to consider. Children *can* be forced, at least for a time, to be quiet, to be docile, to do what they are told. Children can not be forced, however, to become cooperative, reasonable, independent, and to develop the initiative and responsibility which we like to believe is essentially American. They can only be helped to develop, gradually and slowly, within themselves the kind of inner strength and integrity which expresses itself in creativity, working cooperatively, taking responsibility, and

giving up immediate personal desires for the welfare of others.

Specifically and concretely the only educational methods which will serve and save democracy are those which teach "discipline" through giving children from their earliest days, both in homes and schools, continuous opportunities to share, to plan, to take real responsibility, to serve others, to learn independence, to be accepted and respected for whatever skills and capacities they develop. Together homes and schools, parents and teachers must learn how to bridge the present dangerous gap between children and adults.

In spite of many recent gains American education still emphasizes and encourages dependency, passivity, and conformity. Yet we all know that survival in total war, both for individuals and society, depends upon the capacities of our soldiers and citizens to carry responsibility, to make right decisions in new and complicated situations, to sacrifice and share, and to develop self-control based on strength and integrity. Far too many American boys are unable to meet the hardships and strains of

army life because homes and schools together have failed to provide the kinds of basic educational experiences which alone can teach true "discipline." It is too late to help many of these casualties of inadequate education because they have been deprived and neglected since early childhood. We can learn from our failures, however, and give the generation growing up in war a better chance.

Narrow concepts of education as something which happens within the four walls of the schoolroom are as obsolete as any equipment used in the last war. National willingness to permit the children who have the most inadequate homes also to have the most inadequate school experiences is already proving a costly mistake in judgment.

If we can agree that the purpose of education in a democracy is to help all children develop disciplined, responsible, democratic personalities, we cannot fail to perfect the appropriate methods. It will not be easy to "retool" American education to serve the fundamental needs of a democratic society surely and efficiently—but it can be done.



Sketch by Vera Nelson  
Courtesy of Manitowoc (Wis.) Public Schools

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