

# It's Our World Again

ALICE MIEL

To conceive of the basic skills in the narrow confines of the three R's would be to let the world down at a time when it is looking hopefully to the schools for inspired leadership. This article points the way to an education based on the highest level of social intelligence yet envisioned by man. Here, we believe, lies the answer to the question, What are the basic skills? The author, Alice Miel, is assistant professor of education at Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, N. Y.

"IT'S YOUR WORLD AGAIN," an Army lieutenant wrote on V-J day to a friend in education, "and I only hope it never again reverts to military control."

So it's our world again. We can't any longer plead the war emergency as an excuse for marking time in education. We can't any longer go on dreaming of what we shall do with the postwar world. It's here, that responsibility of ours. We must roll up our sleeves.

The choices that are made by educators the world over this year and the next will determine who will survive. The skills which educators consider basic and the means they employ to develop those skills in the young will be deciding factors in the peacetime struggles between opposing social philosophies everywhere.

We may well reject summarily the proposition that organized education *return* to solutions once tried and found wanting. A return to old-fashioned discipline, to a narrow definition of skills in terms of the three R's alone—such proposals hold no promise.

Instead we may accept the proposition that only the cooperative can survive in this modern world. We may then turn our attention to helping a whole generation of people to learn the skills of cooperation.

Recently some experienced elementary teachers and principals, representing all kinds of schools, were asked each to list five or ten social learnings believed to be important responsibilities of the school. The results were interesting and significant. Most lists fell into one definite pattern. That pattern reveals clearly the level of cooperative living which most teachers in this country apparently have been led to covet for children. It is worth-

while to examine these results very carefully.

Items frequently mentioned were teaching children to be self-controlled, to get along with others, to be responsible for themselves, to be obedient, to be tolerant, to abide by majority decisions, to be kind, to limit their freedom in relation to the freedom of others, and, of course, to be able to read and write and do arithmetic. These items are so familiar from all the literature on character education that the reader may have scanned the list with merely a "so-what" reaction.

But look again; take this cluster of proposed social learnings as a whole. What a really low level of aspiration it represents. In a society needing badly to have numbers of outgoing, contributive persons, educators have commonly conceived of social competence in passive, if not individualistic, terms. The average teacher who has not been prompted to examine his beliefs in this area defines desirable social learnings in terms of the characteristics that make a youngster a model, that is an easily manageable, member of a school group.

The group of elementary school workers that, on first thought, listed the low-level social learnings enumerated above, rather quickly arrived through group thinking at some social learnings on a higher plane. Toward these, it was agreed, schools should be contributing. The group realized that one must at times be satisfied temporarily with lower-level learnings while helping individuals to progress toward more mature and complex points of view and behavior. Nevertheless, the group felt, educational workers should be aspiring toward higher-level learnings needed for effective participation in the world that is shaping.

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## Some Social Learnings for Which the School Should Share Responsibility

### A DIRECTION CHART

<i>Level 1</i>	<i>Level 2</i>
a. Maintaining self-control	→ Bearing a friendly feeling
b. Being kind to others	→ Having concern for all mankind
c. Exhibiting tolerance of difference	→ Valuing difference
d. Getting along with others	→ Being a contributing member of a group
e. Conceiving of freedom as extending until it interferes with the freedom of another	→ Seeing the necessity of a cooperative search for conditions guaranteeing maximum freedom for all
f. Taking responsibility for doing one's own job	→ Taking responsibility for a share of the labor involved in a common enterprise
g. Being satisfied with majority rule	→ Working for "unanimous consent"
h. Showing obedience to authority	→ Evaluating and cooperating with authority
i. Understanding and accepting the status quo	→ Refining constantly one's conception of the "good society"
j. Acquiring the mechanical skills of reading, writing, and figuring	→ Making full use of communication skills

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The result of the group's thinking is summed up in the "direction chart" shown above.

#### Interpreting the Chart

It is not enough merely to maintain self-control—not to exhibit anger or dislike of the behavior of others. It is not enough merely to be kind to those with whom one comes in contact. It is not enough merely to tolerate, put up with, suffer differences in skin-color, hair texture, religion, economic level. People must bear a friendly feeling toward other people just because they are all human beings with dignity and certain basic rights on this earth. People must extend their concern for others, to mankind itself. People must see the likenesses in all persons and value differences for the opportunity they offer for achieving a richer whole.

It is not enough merely to get along with other people, being satisfied with keeping the ripples out of one's own pool. It is not socially intelligent to want to push one's own freedom into every nook and cranny that one believes to be unoccupied by the freedom and rights of anyone else. That is the competitive, the grasping, the power-seeking way of life. It is not enough to take responsibility for one's own conduct, health, job. Many of the jobs that need doing in this world fall into the space between individuals and between institutions. We need individuals who have the skill to be contributive in

the groups to which they belong. We need individuals who can define with others the conditions that will provide the truest freedom for all persons and the jobs that need to be done to achieve and maintain those conditions. We need individuals who will then share responsibility for carrying out the plans made by the group.

In all group work it is not enough merely to take a vote and let the majority will prevail. To secure intelligent and sincere cooperation on the wisest plan a group can produce, it is necessary to persist to the point where, to all practical purposes, everyone agrees on a plan as the best that the group can at the time evolve. This will mean that every individual must gain increasing control over techniques of group functioning, which involves:

1. Learning techniques of group discussion, analysis, and planning, division of labor, record-keeping, and evaluation.

2. Learning to exhibit behavior that "lubricates" human relationships—courtesy, humor, tact, sportsmanship.

3. Learning to make creative use of conflict and criticism—learning to harmonize differences.

4. Working out satisfactory leader-follower relationships—practicing both roles.

5. Working out satisfactory majority-minority relationships—learning to build on strength wherever found.

It is not socially intelligent to be indiscriminately obedient to authority. When Ger-

trude Stein was asked recently to state what she believed should be done to reeducate the Germans, she said:

... there is only one thing to be done and that is to teach them disobedience, as long as they are obedient so long sooner or later they will be ordered around by a bad man and there will be trouble. Teach them disobedience . . . make every German child know that it is its duty at least once a day to do its good deed and not believe something its father or its teacher tells them, confuse their minds, get their minds confused and perhaps then they will be disobedient and the world will be at peace. The obedient peoples go to war, disobedient peoples like peace, that is the reason Italy did not really become a good Axis, the people were not obedient enough, the Japs and the Germans are the only really obedient people on earth and see what happens, teach them disobedience, confuse their minds, teach them disobedience, and the world can be peaceful.<sup>1</sup>

In her own way, Miss Stein has said what our group of educators was trying to say on its direction chart—we need people who will evaluate authority in its various forms, who will weigh conflicting authorities, who will select carefully the authority with which they will cooperate. People in modern societies must know how to deal with power and authoritarianism in different guises. There is need to know how to allocate the authority of the group temporarily to experts, to leaders; and, just as important, there is need to know how and when to withdraw authority from those in whom it is vested.

It is not socially intelligent merely to understand and accept the status quo in our social arrangements. A growing understanding of the realities of our present economic order, of our political movements, of the use of our human and natural resources is essential. But added to that must be a growing understanding of what is achievable in family, community, and other human relationships. There must be a growing understanding also of what is achievable in beautifying surroundings for all people—their homes, public buildings, and places of work,

<sup>1</sup> *Life*, 19:54-58, August 6, 1945.

their streets and roads, their yards, their parks and river banks. The characteristics of a desirable socio-economic system must be thought through. In short, people's conception of the "good life," the "good society," must constantly be undergoing refinement.

Finally, it is not enough merely to learn the mechanics of reading, writing, and dealing with numbers. In a democracy people must make full use of the tools of communication for getting and giving information. They must learn the dynamics and control of public opinion and the channels through which that opinion is formed—radio and press, film, theater, and other arts.

### The Job Is Ours

What a host of skills is called for if people are to operate on this higher level of social living. How meager and barren has been our conception of those skills. We speak of the "skill subjects," little realizing that some of the most basic and difficult of those skills fall *between* subjects into a no man's land that few teachers plan for.

The program of a better-than-average school in a favored suburban community, which was studied recently, exemplifies the typical situation with regard to skills. There was emphasis on a narrow type of drill on the usual tool subjects, with little opportunity for practice of those skills in useful work. Almost no time was devoted to practice of such skills as individual and group planning and evaluation or discussion techniques of any kind. Skill in the arts that give meaning and satisfaction to hours of leisure was not being developed to any appreciable degree. The subtle and delicate skills associated with a high type of human relationships were forfeited in favor of group progress through science and social studies textbooks, arithmetic workbooks, and spellers.

Until such things as learning to win and hold friends, learning to deal with competition, frustration, and aggression, learning to share ideas, goods, services, and experiencing satisfaction and joy and security as a member of a group can take their proper place in our conception of the basic skills, we shall continue to allow children to leave our schools as passive, self-centered, naive members of a world society. This must not be. If it's our world again, let's develop the skills necessary for first-class citizens.

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