Learning is not confined to the classroom nor is it restricted to the growing child. Teachers need and want an unlimited scope of mental and social development. Too often, however, the means of fulfillment are not provided, as some leaders in education are not cognizant of any void in the life of the teachers with whom they work. How all parties concerned can become better acquainted with each other and work out a plan for their mutual benefit is proposed by Willard E. Goslin, superintendent of schools, Minneapolis, who urges—

Know Your Teacher

Willard E. Goslin

A GROWING CHILD needs a growing teacher. Too often education is used synonymously with “going to school,” and thus becomes an exclusive activity of youth. Education is a life-long function related to the process of building a self. A self can be built only in social situations as one grows in his ability to communicate with others, to put himself in the place of others, to work and play with others with understanding and mutual enjoyment. Thus a growing self comes about through the continuous process of challenging experiences. It develops to the degree that the individual is able to utilize these experiences in broadening and deepening his understanding of human beings.

The question arises as to how a teacher can continue to grow—even after 5, 10, or 15 years of teaching experience. The leadership group in the school system, commonly known as administrators and supervisors, is in a strategic position to stimulate growth and to remove barriers which hamper growth on the part of teachers. There is a real need for this leadership group to understand that the teacher's professional growth is only a part of her total program of living.

As leaders come to have a wider acquaintance with teachers and come to know better their abilities and interests, they will be able to open many additional avenues for teacher participation in the functioning of the school system itself, over and beyond regular classroom duties. Although the scope of this article will be concerned only with the function of administrators and supervisors in stimulating growth of teachers through participating in a program of well-balanced living, there is no intent to separate the teacher's growth “in-school” from her “out-of-school” growth.

If the administrator or supervisor is to succeed in contributing to the growth and development of teachers in a program of well-balanced living, he must demonstrate that he knows teachers and their problems by recognizing the importance of: (1) Understanding teachers as human beings; (2) Recognizing the needs of teachers; (3) Helping teachers meet their needs. These three aspects of the importance of knowing your teachers will be discussed briefly.

Understanding Teachers As Human Beings

One of the important aspects of a leader's work is the continuous endeavor to know and to understand those with whom he works. For one who has as many as a hundred or more teachers under his leadership, this represents a major task. For all administrators and supervisors, the task is one that never ends and which has varying facets from day to day.

Knowing and understanding teachers present the same problems as knowing and understanding people in general. The school administrator needs to realize that teachers are human beings and that they bring with them into their schoolrooms all their human frailties, all the ups and downs of their physical and mental health, all their varied interests and enthusiasms as well as their lesson plans and their teaching techniques. Thus Sally Brown, teacher of the five-year-olds, may come to school on Monday morning with a headache and a vague fear that she's going to have to wear glasses. Margaret Dodd, teacher of ten-year-olds, may come spilling over with enthusiasm for a recently developed unit of work. Hazel Gregory may be puzzled about how to conceal her distaste for the Negro boy who has recently entered her room. Each of
these teachers and each of their million associates brings her total self to school—the headache she awoke with as the alarm sounded; the prejudices she has acquired as she’s grown up; her likes and dislikes; the fear that her monthly pay check won’t quite stretch to include that trip to visit Jack; her ambitions, desires, hopes, and her daily emotional upsets.

It becomes evident that knowing and understanding teachers cannot be left to incidental chats in the hall or an occasional half-hour conference—valuable as these may be. The school administrator and supervisor should analyze systematically the characteristic behavior which is unique to each individual teacher, just as a teacher studies each of the children in her room to see what makes him “click.” Only when he has done this and has taken into account the fluctuations occasioned by daily experiences is he in a position to know and understand each teacher sufficiently well that he is able to make the maximum contribution to her growth and development.

As the school administrator becomes better acquainted with his teachers as individuals, he is in a position to help set the stage for the continuous growth of each individual and for the entire faculty as a unit. The leadership group will be helped in their endeavors to stimulate the growth of teachers if they recognize some of the universal needs of teachers.

Recognizing Teachers’ Needs

The teaching profession has certain occupational hazards which should be recognized in determining the probable needs of teachers. Four of these seem universal enough to discuss: (1) Teachers need the opportunity to accept responsibility on an adult level; (2) Teachers need opportunities for play experiences requiring physical exercise; (3) Teachers need experiences that lead them out of the school environment; (4) Teachers need a degree of economic security.

Because teachers live all day with immature personalities, they need to have the opportunity to accept responsibility on an adult level. This responsibility should be broad enough to include social and civic activities. It should occur in situations which require effective leadership and the ability to follow graciously. For many teachers the ability to take the lead and the constant assuming of leadership in the classroom tend to create an exaggerated sense of responsibility which causes teachers to be known as “bossy” or “officious.” You recall the teacher who always herds her friends off the streetcar at the right corner, the one who always asks all the questions. Can’t you just see her taking care of her flock of children as they take a trip to the zoo as she goes about telling her friends what to do and when?

Then, because teachers are human beings, one is just as likely to find the timid soul who is completely inadequate outside the schoolroom. She doesn’t know how to ask directions; she is confused and embarrassed if called upon to say a few words at a social or civic gathering. Each of these teachers is in need of assuming responsibility on an adult level but in different types of situations. The school administrator or supervisor, if he knows and even partially understands why each teacher is as she is, can do much to make possible the needed kind of participation. Every teacher needs to take part in adult activities which challenge her to learn as she participates.

Teachers as a group are inclined to live sedentary lives. Their work is recognized as requiring an unusual amount of nervous energy. Mental health hazards are high. All of these factors point to the need for teachers to participate in play experiences requiring physical exercise.

The beneficial effects of physical activity in wiping out worries, in reducing tension, in securing complete relaxation are recognized by the medical profession. These benefits are needed by members of the teaching profession. Teachers need to continue to dance, to skate, to fish, to play active games, to swim; or if they haven’t learned these skills during childhood, they should be encouraged to acquire proficiency in a few skill activities during adulthood.

Too often the teacher’s social life is confined to formal dinners, bridge clubs, going to movies, and the like. In other words, teachers are inclined to assume the “spectator” role during a large share of their out-of-school time. Can you imagine anyone really relaxing while seated at a long, formally set table, struggling with half a fried spring chicken, silently praying the whole thing doesn’t land in his lap? Such affairs have their place, of course, but they shouldn’t con-
stitute the play life of the teacher. Some school administrators have discovered how much easier it is to discuss Miss Brown's problems with her after they have met around an evening picnic camp fire. We believe there is an urgent need for teachers to have opportunities for physical activity in order to remain mentally and physically fit.

Unlimited Horizons

The third universal need of teachers—that is, the need for experiences outside the school environment—is closely related to the first two. If a teacher has an opportunity to accept responsibility on an adult level and if she participates in play experiences that require physical exercise, she is likely to have associations outside the teaching profession. It is true that the atmosphere of the schoolroom traditionally is limited to a narrow range of activities and to the maturity levels of children and youth.

Teaching is rightly concerned with an idealistic concept of life, but it must have deep roots in realistic human understandings. The teacher needs varied experiences in many walks of life, if she is to develop and to retain an idealism which is functional. Retaining a functional idealism calls for the ability to defend this philosophy against the onslaughts of cynicism and selfish interests. Therefore, teachers need to understand such functions of modern life as collective bargaining, trade agreements, subsidies, cartels, fact-finding boards, interchange of scientific data, and the like. They need to be able to grasp the scope of such organizations as the United Nations Organization, the Foreign Policies Association, Political Action Committees, and numerous others. It is easy to isolate oneself in an ivory tower—especially so, if nearly all of one's experiences have been within that tower. This is the case with many teachers. Many of them have gone to public school twelve years, and then four more to college, and then to teaching. The average teacher comes from the middle-class and unless she has had experience outside of teaching, her understanding of the lower economic classes is limited to theoretical knowledge.

The war period served to broaden the horizons of many teachers. For the first time jobs were available in defense plants, in retail stores, in commercial firms, and in the Armed Services for many teachers who were willing to work during summer vacations, in evenings, or on a full-time basis. The school administrator or supervisor will contribute to the long-run growth of teachers if he recognizes that these experiences have value in broadening the understandings of teachers. Work experience, however, should not be selected merely to supplement a meager income, but rather because of the possibility it offers the individual teacher for a worthwhile additional experience. During the past five years, one very successful teacher has been a nurse's aid, operated an elevator, helped farmers gather their fruit crops, and learned Spanish in an extension course. She is able, on the basis of her own activities, to bring to children new and interesting experiences and she is building a self which is constantly reaching out.

There are other avenues, beside work, for the teacher to extend her understandings beyond the school environment. Trips taken with people from other occupations, membership in lay organizations, hobby interests are a few outlets. Regardless of how the individual meets his need for broad experiences, if he is to continue to grow, his participation in social situations should expand. It is the administrator's and supervisor's responsibility to help find outlets satisfying to the individual teacher. Especially is this an urgent need for young teachers. They come from an active college life where membership in five to eight organizations is normal and often find themselves in a situation which confines them to a bridge club that meets once a month or some similar activity. Teachers coming into a new community should be informed by the leadership group of the resources of that community. It should not be necessary to have to spend a year or two finding out these resources. Participation in organizations such as the League of Women Voters, Service Clubs, hobby clubs, church activities, political organizations, and Red Cross work should be encouraged. Attempts should be made to discover organizational interests for all.

Financial Fears Are Mental Hazards

The fourth universal need of teachers is for a degree of economic security. This involves
salary, tenure, retirement provisions, hospitalization and sick leave provisions, and credit unions. On a nation-wide basis there are few teachers who do not have serious financial worries. That these worries interfere with effective teaching has been proved over and over. Administrators and supervisors have a responsibility to interpret the financial needs of teachers to communities on local, state, and national levels. They likewise have the responsibility of supporting the efforts of teachers in securing for themselves enough financial protection that illness, retirement, or any sudden need for money doesn't constitute an ever-present mental hazard and a consequent deterrent to good teaching.

How Can We Help?

If we accept the point of view that it is important for administrators and supervisors to think of the total well-being of teachers, and if we can agree on some of the more urgent needs of teachers, then how can the administrator or supervisor help the teacher in meeting her needs?

First, each school administrator must recognize his responsibility as a leader. One has heard principals say, “I don’t care to know what my teachers do outside of school. That’s their business.” Such an attitude may be indifference disguised as democratic practice. This article is not a plea for “nosey” administrators, but it is impossible to draw a line and say, “From 9 until 4 I, as a school administrator, am interested in what you do, but what happens after 4 is your own business.” If a school administrator or supervisor recognizes that knowing teachers and understanding their problems and caring about what happens to them—in and out of school—are important, and if he recognizes that part of his work is to help teachers live a well-balanced life, the first step has been taken toward securing active, growing teachers.

The next step is that of developing a program which will provide outlets for teachers. This program calls for mutual confidence, and confidence can be developed most effectively if administrators and supervisors participate as working members in the various activities as they develop. Administrators and supervisors want to avoid being in the position of saying, “I think you need _______.” Why don’t you try _________?” Rather the approach should be, “A group of us—some parents and some teachers—are square dancing tonight. Wouldn’t you like to join us?” A group of teachers in a community organized a square dancing club. Neighborhood groups became interested. Thus an active interest permeated the whole community until within a year’s time there were numerous square dancing groups and teachers were a part of many of them.

Work and Play Together

Let us be specific in enumerating just a few of the ways a school administrator can help teachers meet their needs:

1. Recognize each teacher as unique and growing with undeveloped potentialities.
2. Recognize play and work experience outside the classroom as valuable means for broadening understandings.
3. Attempt to make possible the participation of teachers in civic and social organizations. Thus teachers should be given opportunities to hold membership in clubs and service organizations. Arrangements for their attendance should be a part of the school program.
4. Organize within faculty groups interesting activities which call for participation, such as recreational clubs and forums.
5. Interpret teachers’ needs to the public.
6. Help discover interesting and worthwhile community outlets which are available to teachers and take the initiative in organizing outlets where none exist.
7. Participate with teachers in mutually developed programs.

The administrator’s or supervisor’s responsibility for encouraging teachers to develop along professional lines has been omitted from this discussion. Needless to say, his responsibilities in this area are clearly defined and are closely related to his responsibility for knowing his teachers as human beings. The most interesting people are those who are genuinely creative in their approach to life. They are the people who are sparkling with enthusiasm because they have discovered the zest that comes from exploration. The school administrator has it within his power to live creatively with teachers through a participating program of work and play.

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