

# These Make the Difference

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In his discussion of some of the intangibles that govern the quality of learning, W. Carson Ryan, professor of education, University of North Carolina, draws upon his own observations as well as recent studies of significance to educators. His emphasis upon the mental hygiene aspects of teaching and learning have implications for evaluating the effectiveness of our schools.

SOME YEARS AGO I was visiting an elementary school in a large eastern city well known for its educational tradition. When I handed my card from the superintendent to the principal, who was teaching an eighth grade class of boys; this principal (a good-looking, rather substantial person) turned to her class and said, "Sit up tall for the gentleman." (I hadn't heard "sit up tall" for so long that I sent for my wife, who was outside in the car, to come in and provide corroborative evidence of what I was about to witness.)

The boys "sat up tall." I had a minute or two to take in the room—it was plain, not to say drab. The forty or so desks were lined up in obvious permanence. The only thing I noticed in the room besides the desks was a table in one corner on which stood a black box designed to show how quickly one would be asphyxiated by sleeping in a room with the windows shut at night. But the principal was not unkindly. Having released the class from its "sitting up tall" position, she provided a boy to show me around the school, and we started.

## A Study in Contrasts

At the first door we came to the boy jerked his thumb and said, "The dumb-

bells are in here." We went in—and the contrast was striking.

Here were fifteen boys (there could not have been more under the regulations governing such classes). There were no fixed desks. The room was a busy, happy place with signs of activities everywhere. A young, attractive teacher was in charge. The boys were working individually or in groups of two or three. In a prominent position was a booth for the display of what they were making and selling—valentines, appropriate to the season. I noticed one or two boys computing costs for the sale campaign that was to follow.

It was an obviously delightful, effective learning situation. I could not help but wonder about the children in that other room—children whose only handicap was that they were merely "normal." Why could they not have a learning situation as favorable as this one designed for children who were either "subnormal" mentally or emotionally difficult?

In another room in the same school a teacher sat on a raised platform directing a class of girls. She wore long black cotton gloves. I thought of a hand injury, but my wife was less kind. She was sure it was because the teacher

didn't want any personal contact with the nice little Italian girls who made up the class.

In still another room in this school we found a woman in her sixties, undoubtedly at one time superior in charm and refinement, but now failing mentally to the point of childishness. Hers was a first grade group. Apparently the authorities had placed her with these young children because she "could do least harm there."

This was a few years ago, and these are extreme cases, but there is some evidence that we have still not fully understood the possibilities for good or ill in the environment for living and learning in schools.

### Cause for Concern

Recently an inquiry was made in another school system—one with a well-deserved reputation for good educational philosophy and practice. Bruce Robinson, the psychiatrist who directed the study, published an interesting article under the title, "Neurotic and Normal Discourtesy in the Classroom."<sup>1</sup> The storm of controversy that broke over newspaper accounts of the study was reassuring to the extent that it showed that most teachers of today believe in better ways of working with children. It also suggested that some of the findings were, unfortunately, justified; not for this one really excellent school system alone, but for many others.

### Discourtesy of Varied Kinds

In his article Robinson points out that in our schools we treat children with

discourtesy of two degrees—one the well-recognized extreme (neurotic) discourtesy, and the other the "normal" discourtesy adults show to children. He is convinced that we need to get rid of both!

"Neurotic" discourtesy, he says, is associated with a show of anger toward the child. It consists of "hollering"; calling names (*dumb-bell, dope*); making derogatory remarks about the child (*You act like a pig, Are you going to be a baby all your life?*); giving commands in an uncultured manner (*Oh, shut up!, Get your big feet out of the aisle.*). Such discourtesy, as the article points out, is a symptom of severe personality defect. No educator defends it, of course; that it is allowed to continue at all in our schools is disgraceful.

"Normal" discourtesy is something else. It exists in classrooms largely because it occurs in any situation where children and adults are together. Among the common "normal" discourtesies to children listed are: peremptory commands, inconsiderate criticism, interruption, contradiction, showing impatience and anger, sharp reproof, refusing to listen, showing disapproval or annoyance by raising the voice, pushing or pulling a pupil, sarcasm, dislike, contempt.

Robinson suggests we imagine ourselves using the same tone or manner of speaking to a respected adult. Does the principal in a faculty meeting shout, "Sit down!" and "Keep quiet!" in order to get the teachers' attention? As hostesses would we talk to respected guests as we do to children in the classroom? "Stop mumbling your words." "See if you can keep quiet for a time

<sup>1</sup> *Understanding the Child*, 15:8-10, January 1946.

and let someone else talk." "Stop wiggling around." "I suppose you think that's funny."

Watching children play school, suggests Dr. Robinson, might give us something to think about in this matter of a courteous, humanly desirable classroom. "Discourtesy, peremptory commands, scolding, derogatory remarks, are embarrassingly common when they play the part of the teacher."

### The Key to Liking School

That children are sensitive to good and bad attitudes of teachers has been shown in a number of recent informal studies. When Louis Monash, a New York City elementary school principal, undertook to find out how many of his children liked or disliked school, and why they liked or disliked it, he drew some revealing answers.

Most of the children said they liked school, but the reasons they gave for or against very frequently bore directly upon the teacher's attitude and relationship with pupils. One girl said she had taken a special liking to all her teachers—"I think school is wonderful!" Another said, "I like school very much because we have a wonderful homeroom teacher and the other teachers are nice." Still another said, "There are lots of nice people here, including the teachers." And another, "I think the teachers are lovely. They try very hard to teach us."

Some of those who disliked school felt that the teachers were "inconsiderate"—especially as to amounts of home work. One pupil said, "Most of the teachers make the subjects very interesting; then again there are some who just say words." And one pupil said

his attitude toward school wasn't good or bad. "I'm neutral—it depends on the teachers I have."

### More Support for Teacher Influence

What is perhaps one of the best studies ever made of "emotional climate" in the classroom and the teacher's part in it was made by Bernice Baxter some years ago in a western state. Miss Baxter sat in six classrooms for a matter of months observing teachers of widely differing personalities to see what kind of child behavior these teachers would have.

There was the third and fourth grade teacher, with the attractive classroom, whose one ambition seemed to be to surround her pupils with beauty, happiness, and courteous human relations, and whose children "expressed their awareness of her kindness and showed their consideration for others." The teacher who had an intelligent interest in world affairs helped children to display an unaccustomed alertness to world happenings and to be characterized by freedom in thought and action. There was a quietly enthusiastic teacher whose children "with quiet eagerness worked through their tasks in a concentrated, happy manner."

And over against these was the nervous and erratic teacher whose children expressed "animosity and noisy, erratic behavior." The physically handicapped, disappointed teacher had children who "conformed in an unanimated, listless manner." And the teacher of domineering method had children who "vigorously but blindly" applied themselves to given tasks.

No one can insist upon too definite a causal relationship in these instances

nor be certain how permanent such personal contagion is, but we have a right to feel that there is something significant here for education. In the famous Locut Point study, similarly, when children early diagnosed as almost hopelessly feeble minded or emotionally unstable were years later found to have made unexpectedly adequate adjustments as adults, it was chiefly to the influences of sympathetic and understanding teachers that the investigators attributed the surprisingly gratifying outcomes.

### Our Trust in Buildings

There are, of course, many more or less intangible factors in a desirable environment for learning, whether in school or elsewhere. Certainly adequate school plants and equipment, desirable as they are, do not provide the full answer. Indeed, there are some situations where well-built structures actually interfere with real learning. As a people we have tended to put entirely too much trust in buildings and too little in human relations. Lynette Messer asks, "Can the average child solve his problems in the average combination of cement, wood, plaster, and glass that has harassed the lives of our children for these many generations?"

### Relationships at Every Level

There are certain kinds of changes, too, that need to be made in administration and supervision for the sake of better learning situations. Some of our recent administrators have shown the possibilities that lie in more flexible, less mechanistic types of administration; and modern supervision has worked wonders in creating the right conditions of learning. But there is still a problem in relationships here, involving the public as well as the profession. A teacher who had been appointed a supervisor after a successful career in teaching once came to me with the question: "When I was teaching I had many friends, but now that I'm a supervisor it's all different. Why?"

Underlying all this problem of the desirable learning situation is, of course, the fundamental question of a philosophy of life as well as of education. Desirable environments for learning will, in the long run, come only as we accept certain basic convictions as to the possibilities of all human beings; only as we come to recognize that all children and all people are worthwhile, no matter who they are or where they come from; that all *can* learn, and that each individual can be helped to make his contribution to our common life.

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Of interest to readers of the February issue of EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP, which dealt with group dynamics and its implications for leadership, is the February issue of the *Adult Education Bulletin*, Department of Adult Education, NEA. It is a special issue containing six important articles describing techniques and results from recent research on planning and conducting work conferences. Copies may be obtained from the Department of Adult Education, 1201 Sixteenth Street, N. W., Washington 6, D. C.

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