

The School's Responsibilities for Mental Health

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Adequate planning for mental health of our children and youth cannot be taken care of within the confines of the school alone. Rather, the school's responsibilities must be defined within the context of the total life of the community, writes George S. Stevenson, M. D., medical director of the National Committee for Mental Hygiene, New York City.

IT IS AS IMPOSSIBLE to plan for mental hygiene in the schools without taking the rest of the community into account as it is to promote mental health in the home, the court, or industry without at the same time considering the schools. There are still those who unrealistically think that mental hygiene can be conceived and practical plans formulated within the confines of specialized segments of the community. It is as if the school or public health office or neighborhood or church could stand independent of each other without regard to the fact that they are just parts of community living and in no case complete in themselves.

A Community Responsibility

As one looks at his community agencies to see in what way and to what extent they are exerting an influence on mental health, he finds three categories. First, there are those which deal with relatively normal people—the public health nurse, the minister, and the teacher. These three are concerned, at least in part, with maintaining and developing the effectiveness of those who have not in any way broken down as yet. Secondly, there are those who deal with breakdown of various

sorts such as the doctor, the social worker, and the court. Third, there are the psychiatric teams as found in hospitals and clinics which deal directly with mental deviation.

It is evident from this review that the schools occupy a strategic front line. It is also evident that the schools cannot defend this line entirely on their own, but only as part of a team with all of the other agencies of the community.

The Child's Needs

Part of the school's share in this task is an understanding of a child's needs and the realities within which these needs must be met. The child entering school is often thought of as a bit of pliable material placed in the hands of the teacher to be shaped. Nothing could be farther from the truth. A substitute parent, such as the teacher, cannot begin to function until the child is well along in his preparation for society under the tutelage of his natural parent. The child in his early years needs a different and more individual kind of nurturing than can be given outside of the family.

The task of the school is, first, to take material that is already fairly well shaped and to modify it within the

limits set by its past experiences so that it can meet life's realities.

Second, the school needs to recognize that children bring into the classroom practically all of the influences that shape their lives. They bring in the problems of the home; they reveal in school that they are caught between conflicting cultural patterns, whether they are the children of foreign-born parents or not. Even in a typical American home the customs were fixed a generation ago, and in a changing world the children are confronted with ways of life that differ from those faced by their parents in their formative period. The school can serve as a buffer for such children and allow them to live a part of the day in an atmosphere that is less constricted.

Third, there are certain periods in the lives of children that are more critical than others—the time of starting school, the early teens, and the time of making plans for the years beyond. The school is necessarily involved in these critical periods of life. If it fails to recognize this, it is apt to bungle with some of its "behavior disorders."

Fourth, children differ in almost every conceivable way. The public has sometimes recognized differences in intelligence by special provision within the school, but failure to recognize more subtle differences has created problems where the school should be helping to solve them. A curriculum is etymologically a running course. But running courses take differences into account. There are different courses for horses, for dogs, and for men. Some are for men of high speed and some for slower, longer races; and some take nature as it is for cross-country races.

In designing a course for pupils their individual differences are often ignored. This might be more disastrous except that human beings have a considerable degree of adaptability and self-reparative capacity, so that adjustment by the school does not need to be measured to its last inch. However, when the demands for adjustment by the pupil exceed his capacity for adaptation, the school fails in its purpose and the mental health of the teacher, the child, and the whole class is endangered. Problems of mental health narrow the teacher's and the child's adaptability, and so demand finer adjustment on the part of the school.

Fifth, children are living their lives for today and not merely for the future. One matures for the future as a result of effective handling of today's problems, not by planning what he is going to do tomorrow. This is a basic principle in psychiatric treatment.

Sixth, children will be facing demands tomorrow that can only be partly foreseen today. Some can be anticipated and for these, special skills can be taught. Others can be no more anticipated than could it have been seen fifty years ago the extent to which radio, television, plastics, and the airplane would affect everyday life. For these unknowns the only preparation can be a preparation to accept change.

Obstacles to Meeting the Child's Needs

If something is to be done for the child, it is important for the teacher's own morale to understand why well-recognized needs of the child are not being met today. One may blame

deficiencies of science, but we are still not using all that we know; or one may blame deficiencies in the teachers colleges, though many already give their students more than they later use on the job. One may put his finger on the school administration, and yet there are school administrators all over the country who would like to do more than their boards of education provide for. One finds himself, then, looking critically at the citizenry represented by the board of education. The problem becomes essentially one of creating an understanding and demand on the part of the public that will express itself through those boards.

The trouble is that the public tends to stick to the old and familiar, and to act as if the school can live apart from the other agencies of the community. Politics becloud a clear pursuit of the school's purposes particularly in the selection of teachers. Then there are boards who put the administrator under so many constraints that he in turn is forced to give administration first priority and the children second priority. The harassing of the teacher with so many interferences and interruptions that her work plan for the day is ruined not only deprives the children of that program, but confronts them with a teacher who is emotionally disturbed to a point where her personal value to them is materially reduced.

In almost every community there are citizens who believe that schools should provide a mentally healthy atmosphere for children and buffer to their psychological accidents outside of school—at home and at play. The school staff can help such citizens lead

the public to a better understanding. It is also possible for the school staff itself to help children realize what the school could really do for mental health if it were given the fullest support, and prepare them so that later, as citizens and potential school board members, they will be more likely to support an educational program that fosters mental health.

The Teacher's Job

It is, therefore, part of the teacher's job to understand that the child who comes to her at the age of five or six or later has already been through major hazards to mental health and that he has had his cultural training in the home and neighborhood. Much of this is firmly rooted and must be accepted as a fixed part of his life, and the teacher must understand that "disturbing behavior" is not an interference with her job any more than is the inability of a child to read and write. They are a part of it. And so are his troublesome parents; they are in the everyday routines of a teacher.

Unless the teacher sees this, she is apt to think of these things as obstacles and interference and failures, and be demoralized by them. It is unrealistic to think that she can find a teaching job in which these elements are absent. The failure to prepare her to deal with these things in her professional education is a reflection of our inadequate concept of professional responsibility. The doctor, too, acts as if the anxieties and lack of cooperation of the patient were extraneous to his job. The lawyer acts as if the inability of his client to be cool, calm, and collected were not a part of the trouble he is in, without

which the lawyer would be unnecessary.

The school is really a second lap for children, a buffer and an opportunity to get into a regular stride for those with an emotionally disturbing past at home, and a continuance of wholesome opportunity for the others. A child soon learns to run the maze of unfriendly experience at home, and avoids being hurt by it, at least in part, but he is not prepared for the more complex situation in school and so runs head on into trouble that he could not anticipate. Then his symptoms appear. Often this appears to be the school's deficiency rather than the previous sensitization that is at fault, but that hazard is inherent in the very nature of the school's situation.

A More Adequate Curriculum

All sorts of ways have been tried to construct a curriculum that will allow the school to serve the child in accordance with his needs and the realities of his situation. We have special classes for children of limited intelligence, and in privileged communities special classes for those having emotional peculiarities or special talents. The universal difficulty with these special classes is that they tend to become too formalized.

Probably the finest work in meeting the mental hygiene problems and fostering the mental health of children is to be found in many rural schools. The teacher there has the knowledge of the child and his family and all that he brings to school with him. She makes adjustments on the basis of common

sense and knowledge of the community. Her school facilities and the more formal techniques which she has been taught become background rather than foreground. Administration doesn't over-ride the child. The key to her success is her flexibility and freedom. Perhaps we should say that the child with special needs should have something more like the cross-country course than the quarter-mile track or hundred-yard straightaway.

The human relations classes as carried on in Delaware follow this principle. They are not based upon, right and wrong answers, but upon participation by the child in a discussion focussed on his interests and inclinations. Almost any topic may become the focus or take-off for discussion, but it is his needs as he feels them today in his home or in his neighborhood that are given opportunity for expression. This could become an element in every class regardless of the subject.

The teacher who is overwhelmed because things do not go right must constantly keep in mind that she has control over only one arc in the cycle that represents the day, the year, or the life of a child; that each cycle has its own peculiar form; and that other arcs fall within the scope of community functions that are not now cared for as adequately as education, and because of this, additional problems are created for her. Her capacity, then, to influence the life of the entire community as a citizen is a service not only to the child but to her own peaceful living.

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