

A Plea for Further Exploration

RUTH KOTINSKY

Where do the school's responsibilities begin and where do they end? Ruth Kotinsky, former assistant director of fact finding, Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth, calls for further exploration of the learning process and a clearer definition of the school's special function.

THE GAP between what is known about good curriculum, on the one hand, and general school practice, on the other, is wide, deep, and on occasion appalling. How can we take time and energy for poking and probing into what is not yet known—about the meaning of experience to the young, the learning process, the appropriate design and ordering of school learning—when a generation of children is not yet profiting, or not profiting to the full, from gains already made? When the schools—not all of them, but more than can be served—are waiting?

Yet there is room for a plea that a larger proportion of creative energies be released from pressures to do and to serve, immediately and on the spot, and be devoted instead to delving more deeply into the nature of learning and the effects of experience on children, and into the peculiar role and responsibility of the school in the midst of all the other institutions that also bear upon the young, and so provide the matrix of their learning experiences in the years before they come to school, and in all their out-of-school hours, days, and months.

NEED FOR DEEPER CONCEPTION OF THE LEARNING PROCESS

Here, the plea takes its departure from the fact that prevailing concepts of experience and learning are being challenged to take on new perspective and dimension. It is invigorating to ride forth to do good in the curriculum field, armed with the untarnished premise that the individual learns and his selfhood is shaped in terms of his purposes. Only the question arises always more insistently: would not more good result if the conception of purpose were broadened to include that to which the relatively new field of mental hygiene calls persistent attention?

In essence, as they impinge on the school and on educational thought in general, the mental hygienists reiterate that not all purpose is as conscious, as clear-cut, as identifiable and articulate as we have in the past assumed. The purposes we recognize and to which we try to give rein but skim the surface of all that impels a man or a child, influences his choices, colors the meanings he builds. There remains always an un-

fathomed well of primitive impulse, never, at least in our culture, completely incorporated into socialized forms. And, in addition, again in our culture, there is so much to thwart the channeling of up-welling primitive drives that for many, if not most, they must, in some measure, small or great, perforce find molds of expression that are "underground," as it were—that have no social meaning, and that for the individual provide no true satisfaction, but only momentary release, he knows not why. Smoking, gum-chewing, avoiding cracks in the pavement are minor examples. Apathy, "temperament," inability to get along with people, or to decide, or to learn to read, or draw, or carry a tune are less trivial. Delinquency and illness, emotional and mental, constitute the extreme.

Since all these symptoms of "underground" channeling bespeak the person functioning (or perhaps more accurately, malfunctioning) as a whole, since they are acquired in the course of experience, since they interfere with the individual's control over his accruing experience and with his always more complete socialization, they would seem to call for some broadening or deepening of prevalent conceptions of the learning process.

The experiences of children are both distorting and forwarding their growth as socialized human beings in ways that are not accounted for by theories of learning on which forward-looking curriculum builders for the most part rely. The next step in finding out what a child or a man really is, as a whole, still remains to be taken, however tentatively and experimentally, and in finding out what this means for learn-

ing conceived as reconstruction of experience and for guiding the learning process.

The situation has all the earmarks of one of those challenges to established theory which, faced squarely as a stubborn fact, turned over in the mind, planfully attacked, in the long run yield new knowledge and insight, a better way of conceiving experience, more control over it. This has held true in all the exact sciences, and it runs counter to the spirit which underlies advanced curriculum thinking to act as though there were no such challenge, or as though, since nothing can be done about it next week on the field trip, one might as well look the other way and continue to operate on the tried and true, "practically"—leaving to the starry-eyed and the long-hairs the challenge of facts that do not fit.

To What Motives Should the School Respond?

Meantime, all but a few schools at the very forefront continue to operate as though all motive were encompassed in conscious purposes for as long as a child "gets along all right" in the classroom; as soon as he falls by the wayside, the concepts and techniques of mental hygiene are called into play, or at least are held to apply—many of these resting on a theory of motives not readily identifiable either by the child or by the naked eye of the untrained observer. Inarticulate, inchoate motive either plays a part in giving experience its meaning or it does not; it would not seem likely to crop up out of the nowhere and exert its influence at some times with some children and not at other times with other children.

This does not necessarily mean that it is the school's function to respond directly to motives and drives as yet unformulated into purpose. Nor is the cure of that which has gone awry with socialization and personality development necessarily the school's business: tuberculosis also affects the functioning personality, and the school quite properly gives over the problem to the medical field, restricting its concern to good conditions for health within the school community, and to the attempt to provide a kind of learning experience that produces citizens increasingly able to cope with this as with other problems in their midst.

It may very well be—in fact, it is more than likely—that, on exploration, it will turn out that the school should not be diverted from its central concern with defined and conscious purpose, and helping the child to deal realistically and creatively with the world of people, things, events, in order to achieve his periodically re-examined intent ever more fully. But, in order better to conceive the learning process and so to guide its efforts more accurately and astutely, the school can scarcely fail to profit by drawing upon knowledge of how individuals come to misconstrue this world and of why they are so frequently unable to outgrow inappropriate and ineffectual ways of responding to it.

Have Conditions for Social and Emotional Health Been Explored?

And have we yet truly tried to explore to the full the conditions for social and emotional health within the school community? Have we stopped to query the extent to which democracy, as we

conceive it, may be possible only at full maturity? Or to ask what forms and types of group life, human association, approach to experience, appropriate to each child and stage of development, will most surely lead to the dedications of democracy when the time comes? What happens when democratic group process is insistently relied upon in co-educational groups of eleven-year-olds, who revert, once they are out of earshot of their well-intentioned mentors, to gangs and groups made up of boys or girls, exclusively and emphatically, and run with a rigid devotion to follow-the-leader principles? Have we even stopped to question seriously the over-feminization of the teaching profession, and whether or not this affects not only the profession, but the children in the schools? And so on and so on. Time out seems to be called for in order to explore more deeply, and with guidelines from all relevant fields, the meaning to the child of various facets of school experience and what he may therefore be expected to learn from them, and in which directions grow. What does it mean to have to go to school at all?

NEED FOR CLEARER DEFINITION OF THE SCHOOL'S FUNCTION

Beyond providing material to work with in delving more deeply into the meaning of experience and the nature of the learning process, the mental hygiene field lends its own emphasis to the necessity for the school to define its special function more concretely than it has of late been inclined to do. Since school learning has come to be seen as part of all learning, and the whole of life to have learning inherent in it, small attention has been paid to

the specific role of the school in relation to all the other strategic influences in the child's experience.

The outreachings of educational thought have, it is true, called attention to social factors and their influences, but have contented themselves for the most part with an analysis of the mis-educational effects of many facets of the social environment, rather than with an examination of the special role of the child's school experience in relation to them. The lines between school and not-school have become blurred, and this has been very much to the good, especially in making school less "schoolish," and in drawing attention to what the child learns elsewhere. But now the time has come when this lack of distinct lines may be leading to confusion, if not to a certain degree of consternation.

One of the first findings that turns up when the contributions of mental hygiene are taken seriously into account is that experience in years prior to schooling is as strategic as any—if not more strategic than most—in molding the personality. The groundworks of a self are already laid down when the child comes to school at five or six. He already approaches his experiences with meanings that go deep in terms of feeling, attitude, orientation of self in relation to that which confronts it. At the gang age he is more responsive to his peers than to adults. Always he is subject to the limitations and contradictions in the cultural tradition. Yet the school has tended to assume major responsibility for the formation of the self and for forwarding the growth of sound personalities equal to the demands of maintaining and enhancing

the democratic tradition. How much latitude does it have when experience in the home and elsewhere is untoward? What is its distinctive contribution when this experience, or most of it, is on the side of the angels?

The crux of the matter may be made graphic by a simple illustration. For reasons that are elusive, in some communities the cure of delinquency has been both thrust upon and widely accepted by the schools. The roots of delinquency are seen in factors social, economic, cultural, and emotional—the sad culmination of many evils of the times in the life history of the bewildered individual who can find no better resource for asserting himself, making an impact, getting what he wants, than through striking out or striking back. Yet in many instances schools are ready not only to do what they can, along with other agencies concerned with the welfare of children and youth, but to assume full responsibility for programs designed to correct that which derives from the whole of creation as the ways of creation are at the moment working themselves out in our midst.

Where Set the Limits and How Define the Task?

The school has the child under its influence five hours a day five days a week for something like nine months of the year beginning at about age six. Somewhere the limits of what it proposes to accomplish must be set, and, more important, somehow its distinctive function must be defined. The whole of life is rife with learning, but the schools are not and cannot hope to be-

come the whole of life, or even of the child's life. If they are concerned that the whole of a child's life shall be good, forwarding his personal well-being and his rewarding and fruitful integration with society, the same may be said of the social agencies, the church, the mental hygiene movement, the recreation movement, the advanced echelons of the medical profession. This is all to the good, and much of it has stemmed from advances in educational thinking during the past half century. But this progress now calls for more.

The fact that all institutions consciously concerned with the child's welfare and the social good accept a share of the great common responsibility does not mean that each has no special contribution to make. The recognition that life experience has its effects, just as school experience does—or vice versa, that experience operates in the learning process no differently inside the school and outside—does not imply that the school should merely reiterate the rest of the child's environment, or at least those aspects of it that are beneficent. How, in the midst of the multifarious influences that bear upon the child does the school define and cut the special swath appropriate to it? What are the experiences which, if the school does not provide them, will be lacking? How shall the school fashion its special oar, and where put it in, in order to contribute most strategically to the common effort?

It is not sufficient to answer in terms of what the educator shall concern himself with, as educator, in society. This he must in all conscience and consistency do, as must the doctor, the social worker, and even the engineer. But

the doctor who combats the social conditions that give rise to certain diseases and their spread is also obliged to deal with patients, to study and learn the responses of individuals to many kinds of treatment, preventive and therapeutic. And the educator also has his more strictly defined professional activities in the classroom—or, if classrooms as such are henceforward to be abandoned, then surely in his guidance of the experience of those who stand in the relationship of pupils and students to him. What does he offer that the wise parent does not? Or the skilled group leader? By what artifice does he fashion the experience to make it strategic? And to what more proximate ends? What does he leave to other professional fields? To the home? And to the pupil or student on his own?

Such questions as these constitute a second major ground now apparent for some drawing aside from the immediate job of spreading far and wide the good word of new ways in the curriculum to devote some fair measure of concerted energies to further exploration and definition. Here the case has been made on the basis of gauges thrown down by a cognate field; it could as well derive from looking steadily and long at confusion about appropriate design and ordering of school experience after the early years, or from listening carefully to the stammering that ensues when representatives of the various institutions concerned with the well-being of children are asked to define their own more proximate and specific aims.

Nor can these questions be entirely answered through the by now custom-enshrined and hallowed "democratic group processes." The atom was not

plumbed by the pooling of ignorance in no matter how free an atmosphere, and there is no reason to believe that what goes into the making of a man is any less complex.

The learning process, profoundly conceived, is a challenge to the universities, as is the problem of helping

institutions shape themselves to their appropriate uses. The dissemination of what is now known must go on, but without a background of sustaining skepticism and eternal quest for more inclusive answers it is more than likely to degenerate into a new formalism, no matter how undidactic its approach.

Our Schools Need a Partner— the Whole Community

VIOLET EDWARDS

To carry out the responsibilities of freedom, school and community must become inseparable in striving for improved living and learning. Violet Edwards is executive director, Connecticut Fact-Finding Commission on Education.

THE TROUBLE WITH OUR schools is that our communities are in trouble. By and large, we in our home towns and cities are not working together on the basic task of our times: redefining the role of our communities and of our schools in relation to the challenge of history that confronts us as Americans in the world today.

Instead of the pooling of knowledge and resources at the local community level, we have compartmentalization—a plethora of skilled organizations with laudable aims, but with each working separately within its own framework and upon its own specialized problem. Instead of truly representative community-wide participation in behalf of better public schools we find segmented and oftentimes abortive efforts, or “sets of pressures” on our public schools which go unanalyzed and un-

challenged by any representative, over-all community body.

SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY ARE INSEPARABLE

In preparing ourselves and our young people to be practicing freedom-loving citizens who deeply understand the human values at the heart of democracy, the challenge to the American community and to American education are inseparable. The development of the ability to carry out the responsibilities of freedom must take place in our local communities and their schools all over the U.S.A. For, it is in our home towns and cities that we have, or must carve out, the opportunity to learn how to work together on our common problems. Here it is that we can develop new approaches and new ways of reaching agreement in the in-

Copyright © 1952 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.