

The Visiting Teacher's Role in Guidance

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In rural schools a primary responsibility of the visiting teacher is that of assisting the classroom teacher in solution of guidance problems.

"GUIDANCE is an important but difficult word in modern education—important because it symbolizes the concern for better means of helping the individual human being as a person and as a member of society; difficult because it is used in so many different and often seemingly conflicting ways."¹

Basically, I would say, the principles of guidance are the same whether we are concerned with guidance programs in rural or city schools since all children face common developmental tasks. The differences are found in such factors as the environment, the life experiences of the individual, the cultural background and the available facilities for meeting the needs of people, thereby creating what appear to be specifically rural or specifically urban problems. Therefore, I believe very strongly that all school personnel concerned with the guidance of children should have not only basic understanding of the growth and development of the individual but must necessarily acquire a knowledge of and a "feeling with" the people of the community in which they serve.

In the area of guidance as in other areas there is a recognized scarcity of specialists in rural schools as compared with city schools; thus leaving the rural

classroom teacher "on his own" with much of the guidance of his pupils. Nevertheless, whether there be many or few special teachers or other so-called specialists in our schools the classroom teacher remains the key person in the child's school life. It is he in whose presence he probably spends more waking hours than with any other adult; it is he who has the opportunity to observe the child in many relationships and situations that are not permitted to others; it is he who hour by hour, day by day, week by week, month by month throughout a whole year or more can learn about the child, use his knowledge to assist each individual child, and who can see more clearly than anyone else the changes in the child which we call growth—physical, mental, social and emotional.

In recent years as school people everywhere have become more aware of the importance of understanding the growth and behavior of children, schools of education have placed more and more emphasis on this area in their teacher training. Generally speaking, beginning teachers today have some preparation for providing the kind of guidance that will contribute to the mental health of their pupils. Many teachers who have had little or no special preparation in their pre-service training in the area of guidance are

¹ The introductory and closing sentences are taken from an editorial on "Guidance," in *Understanding the Child*, April, 1949.

now taking advantage of the opportunity to grow personally and professionally in this area through child study groups, mental health and human relations institutes and various other types of in-service training. Regardless of whether he has had much or little training it is still the teacher, and I believe rightly so, who has both the privilege and the responsibility for the guidance of "all of his pupils most of the time and most of his pupils all of the time."

The most important kind of guidance in the child's school life takes place in an informal way when there is a healthy teacher-pupil relationship. The teacher who can accept all children emotionally as well as intellectually and who believes in the worth, potentialities and rights of every child can do much to establish and maintain such a relationship with most children.

Meeting Adjustment Needs

In a broad general sense of the word, guidance is going on throughout the whole educative process. Teachers in their strategic position will do a better job of guidance for all pupils when boards of education and administrators provide opportunity, in terms of time and facilities, for in-service training, for relieving teachers of routine clerical work and for specialized services beyond what the teacher is equipped to give or expected to perform. Some of these services are for all children, such as psychological testing done by a psychologist or under his direction and vocational guidance for all high school students.

Other specialized services are needed for certain children whose failure to make a satisfactory school adjustment

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shows that they need a special kind of help in addition to and different from the guidance provided for all pupils. Many schools now have visiting teacher service (school social work programs) to help meet the needs of such children. Legislation in several states (Georgia, Louisiana, Virginia, Maryland, Michigan, Illinois, Texas) providing for state-wide programs has brought visiting teacher service to rural schools. This is a casework service provided as an integral part of the school program to help children who are unable, without individual help, to take advantage of what the school offers. "Their problems may be such that the teacher cannot help the child alone, whether she has the particular skill or specialized training or not, because the help required, if she attempted to give it, would complicate her role as a teacher. She individualizes the child, but she can only do this to the extent that it permits her at the same time to discharge her responsibility to the group in the classroom. The casework relationship requires a use of self in the interaction of two people which cannot be achieved under such group circumstances."² The child's difficulty in using the school may appear in the form of one or more symptoms such as the following: non-attendance or irregular attendance, failure without obvious reasons, timidity, shyness, resentful or aggressive behavior, stealing,

² Boston, Opal, "School Social Work in Modern Education," *Understanding the Child*, January, 1950.

lying, inability to get along with pupils and teachers, and illness when confronted with difficult situations.

In the casework relationship the visiting teacher helps the student to identify his difficulties in relation to school adjustment and to work towards a solution to the problem. The student participates in all plans for working out his adjustment and is helped to take as much responsibility as he can in doing so. This relationship does not take "the place of" and is not considered "better than" the relationship the student has with the teacher. It is "different from" and "in addition to" the guidance the teacher gives and is directed towards helping the student function more adequately in the school setting in relation to the teacher and the group.

The visiting teacher also works with parents in interpreting to them the child's difficulty in school and in helping them to find ways of working cooperatively with the school for the child's benefit. Since the focus of this service is the "child in school," the visiting teacher in many cases helps children and parents to use other agencies for services which are not within his function.

Working with the Teacher

The visiting teacher works closely with the teacher in helping children with school problems. The method of working together which will be most helpful to the child is the cooperative, interprofessional, sharing relationship between teacher and visiting teacher. In order for their work together to be effective, the teacher and visiting teacher must have mutual respect and accept-

ance of each other as professional people who have different functions, responsibilities and skills for helping children make maximum use of their school experiences. Again, the teacher must be recognized as the key person in the child's school experience. The teacher may also use the visiting teacher as a consultant in relation to problems of children who are not referred for casework service.

In addition to the direct service which the visiting teacher gives, he has a broader function in relation to the total mental health program of the school in the area of prevention. This may be through leadership and participation in child study groups for parents and teachers and in other in-service training programs. As a member of the school staff, he also has responsibility to help set, evaluate and change school programs and policies. His contribution here, as in working with children, is different from and supplemental to that of other school personnel. Because of his understanding of developmental tasks and needs of children and his knowledge of difficulties which individual children are having, he can offer valuable assistance in curriculum planning.

A preventive mental health program has its greatest opportunity for functioning effectively in schools because not only do practically all children attend schools but also because symptoms of maladjustment can be detected in their early stages. Because most people accept and understand the function of the school, it is not too difficult for them to move into the use of any service connected with the school. Successful and satisfying contacts and relation-



ships with visiting teachers can give people confidence and understanding of the whole field of social work. If children can grow up knowing and using this special casework service in schools they will not only be able to accept and use similar services later but will know that such help is available and will have some knowledge of how and where to find it.

The following summary from a visiting teacher's record illustrates how a teacher and visiting teacher, through a working relationship focused upon the child, contributed to the child's adjustment.

Thomas, age ten, grade four, was referred to the visiting teacher by the principal. He was having trouble in the classroom and had been involved in several fights on the playground, sometimes picking on the younger children. He seemed to feel that everyone was against him. Both Mrs. W., the teacher, and the principal had

been trying to help Thomas make a better school adjustment. Mrs. W. welcomed the principal's suggestion that the visiting teacher might work with them in helping Thomas.

In their initial conference the teacher discussed freely the difficulties Thomas was having and shared with the visiting teacher the many ways in which she had attempted to help him. She felt that she was usually successful in reaching her pupils and expressed her concern because everything seemed to fail with Thomas. During the past year or two Thomas had acquired the name of being a "bad little boy" and a "problem child." Although somewhat discouraged by what his previous teacher had told her, Mrs. W. felt a challenge to help Thomas get along better with his school work and with other people.

Because of a previous contact with the family the visiting teacher knew that Thomas' mother had a rather resentful attitude towards school and seemed to have a "bitter outlook on life" which was very similar to

Thomas' feeling that everyone was against him. This was shared with the teacher. The teacher discussed some further plans for trying to reach Thomas. Both teacher and visiting teacher understood that the ways in which they worked with Thomas would be different, that the help the visiting teacher could give would in no way replace what Mrs. W. was doing but was an additional service which Thomas seemed to need.

In the first interview with Thomas the visiting teacher told him about her work with boys and girls who seemed to need a little extra help to get along better in school. Thomas was able to recognize his problem and to express his concern about it.

In regular interviews every two weeks for about six months the visiting teacher helped Thomas to use his own strength in working out many of his school adjustment problems. Thomas was aware of the close working relationship between teacher and visiting teacher and shared with each his experiences with the other.

In regular conferences the teacher and visiting teacher shared with each other their experiences with Thomas.

As Mrs. W. and Thomas separately discussed with the visiting teacher their plans whereby he could earn praise and recognition, she tried to help him meet the challenges as well as prepare him for some failures.

Mrs. W. found it helpful to know from the visiting teacher that Thomas was aware of his problems and dis-

cussed with her his failures as well as his successes. She understood that remarks in the classroom like "I don't care" and "I didn't do anything" were only defenses for covering up his real feelings. It was also helpful for her to know that there were indications that much repressed hostility towards parents and sibling rivalry were directed towards teachers and children at school. Often the visiting teacher, from her contacts with Thomas, could point out certain needs he seemed to have and the teacher in her own way could find the best method for meeting these needs in the classroom situation.

Before the end of the school term the teacher, visiting teacher and Thomas felt that he had made a satisfactory adjustment to school. The principal and other teachers had noticed the change and it was evident that teachers and children felt differently towards him. Best of all, Thomas was a much happier little boy and felt so much better about himself.

"When we talk about guidance today, therefore, we have many things in mind. A good counselor—whether teacher or guidance specialist—is concerned with understanding the development of an individual through every possible means and helping him to grow toward adult maturity, to cope with life in an extraordinarily complex world."³

³ Editorial, *Understanding the Child*, *op. cit.*



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