

# *Developing Better Understanding of Children and Youth*

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Essential to improvement of the learning environment is the gaining of a better understanding of children and youth. This article indicates some of the problems in this area and suggests various procedures and resources for meeting these more effectively in the school program,

**I**N MARCH hundreds of supervisors and curriculum directors from all over the country will meet to study the big problem of "creating a good learning environment." Fourteen groups plan to approach this main problem from fourteen different practical angles, each of which involves a better understanding of children and youth.

In so doing these study groups face certain basic common problems: (1) identifying significant concepts about human growth and development which should be known and applied, (2) drawing valid educational implications from current scientific knowledge, (3) assessing resources and roadblocks to progress, and (4) re-examining techniques and procedures through which a better understanding of children and youth develops. Such top-level deliberations should give educational leaders a deeper understanding of these problems, help draw them into a cohesive national task force, and open new vistas of ways of working more effectively in their local school situations after the conference.

In one sense the chief beneficiaries of the national meetings are the teachers with whom educational leaders work directly in their respective local situa-

tions, and the pupils, with whom they work indirectly. The problem of "creating a good learning environment through a better understanding of children and youth," should, therefore, be broadened to include a good learning environment for teachers, and a better understanding of them.

It might be wise, also, for educational leaders to focus attention on "a good school environment through a better understanding of children and youth," and then figure out ways to help teachers develop a better understanding of children in their own classrooms. By so doing educators would pinpoint realistically the schools' role in the total education of children. They would thus avoid two extremes: (1) giving up because the odds are too great or (2) attempting to take over roles that belong to out-of-school educative agencies.

Part of the schools' job of educational leadership is to win active allies who understand how home, school and community environments affect children's growth, development and behavior. This takes time. Chances of success in this enterprise are greater, however, when classroom teachers have opportunities to assimilate scientific know-

edge functionally as they work with children. As they understand children better they can be counted on to constitute part of a powerful task force to influence public values in a positive way. The widespread "child growth and development" movement in education, viewed as a slow gradual influence on human development, has tremendous potentials. Educational leaders must accept responsibility for directing its course in such a way as to give its findings wide application and acceptance in schools.

### Identifying the Concepts

The first problem—identifying the basic concepts essential to a better understanding of children—involves the assessment of current scientific knowledge for its practical implications. There are several reasons why this is a big task. First, research bearing on human growth, development and behavior, has proceeded along many lines: physical growth and development, health, pediatrics, medicine, psychiatry, psychosomatic medicine, juvenile delinquency, family relationships, mental health, anthropology, sociology, curriculum development, and so on. The results have not been synthesized into a set of principles or an integrated body of scientific information which gives "final answers." The researches afford tentative best knowledge, clues for further scientific pursuit, and the validation of a few significant principles for widespread application.

Second, research has proceeded asymmetrically. For example, more conclusive data are available on the physical than on other aspects of growth and development, more evidence exists

about young children and adolescents than about middle childhood. Data from studies of emotions, especially those dealing with psychosomatic factors, are now trickling into educational literature. Curriculum research from the point of view of child growth and development is still in its infancy.

Third, research is an on-going process. How to keep abreast with scientific progress, to discriminate between opinion and evidence, between promising ideas and tested knowledge, between clues and substantiated facts pose real difficulties for educators who are usually loaded with full-time daily responsibilities on their jobs. Danger exists, on one hand, of premature action based upon fragmentary evidence; on the other hand, of postponement of action until all the facts are in. What reliable principles and scientific information should be known by school people for better understanding of children and youth? What do these imply in terms of practical application?

Out of prolific current research and professional literature a few foundational principles of human growth and development can be drawn. Among these are: (1) Each person has his own individual growth pattern though it resembles growth patterns of others of his same age and sex; (2) development is a process of the whole organism—what affects one aspect affects other aspects; (3) with the processes of growth and development needs emerge which individuals attempt to satisfy through whatever possibilities are available in their environments; (4) behavior is caused; (5) development is a lifelong process—each stage being significant in present and future development. Each

of these generalizations is freighted with meanings and implications. Each is supported by scientific information which can be used in understanding people of any age. They are useless as a set of platitudes. What experiences, then, should educators have through which they can derive increased understanding of human behavior?

### **Drawing Valid Implications**

The second problem, that of drawing valid implications, obviously is open to controversy. School people with different backgrounds naturally approach this task with different viewpoints. The main implications for supervisors and curriculum directors may be somewhat as follows:

(1) Each educator needs, as part of his professional equipment, considerable scientific knowledge bearing on human growth, development and behavior.

(2) School education is only a fraction of a person's total education, hence some means must be devised (a) to define the school's unique role, (b) to enlist public action in dealing constructively with children's out-of-school environments, and (c) to effect better communication between professional educators and the public on matters pertaining to children's education and welfare.

(3) The school curriculum supplies the conditions and materials which help children and youth develop as persons. Each field in the school curriculum has its unique function in the total picture of human development. How can these functions be defined more clearly? How can concepts be developed that "behavior" includes speak-

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ing, writing, reading, quantitative thinking and the functional use of other school subjects? That "behavior" includes also each person's success in problem-solving, and his attempts to adjust himself to circumstances or expectancies? These are practical problems for supervisors, psychologists and curriculum directors who work with teachers and parents.

(4) Each classroom teacher affects the growth, development and behavior of each child in his classroom. If he is to understand his children and create good learning environments for them, the situation in which he works must be such that he has a reasonable chance to succeed.

(5) The role of supervision is to help teachers improve their understanding of children and their planning of educational experiences with their particular groups. Just as teachers daily face the task of identifying the needs of individual children and of providing for these needs, so do supervisors, directors of curriculum and administrators face the task of identifying the needs of individual teachers and of providing for these needs as they seek to understand children better. Fortunately this does not require a new set of scientific concepts of the principles of growth and development, but only their extension and application to adulthood.

(6) Supervisors and curriculum directors have the double role of influencing administrators who determine policies and set the limits of school environments and practices, and of influencing

teachers who work with children within these rigid or flexible boundaries. Their procedures and expectancies should be realistic in terms of local conditions and possibilities.

(7) Some policies regarding teaching assignments, programming, grouping, grading, promotion, class size and parent-teacher conferences might well be re-examined in the light of their effects on development and behavior of children, and on teachers and parents.

(8) Creating good learning environment through a better understanding of children and youth is part of the universal problem of developing human understanding. Each local situation is unique. Just as each teacher finds himself in a unique set of circumstances, with his own developmental history as a help or a hindrance to him and to others with whom he works, so does each supervisor, curriculum director and administrator find himself in a unique set of circumstances which involves children, teachers, parents, the school board and the community, with their histories of past successes and failures which help form the climate of feelings and opinion in which each works. No formula has yet been discovered that is applicable to all situations.

### **Assessing Roadblocks and Resources**

A third problem, that of assessing roadblocks and resources in developing understanding of human growth, development and behavior, might well be studied from both a broad national view and from a close-up view of the local scene in which each educational leader works. Concerted efforts on a national scale may be required to remove

some roadblocks. Local concentration may be necessary to remove others. Some of the chief roadblocks to progress are: mobile population, large classes, double sessions, shortage of educational personnel, conflicting philosophies, traditional curriculums, inadequate space and supplies, public sniping, too many meetings and not enough study sessions, not enough time for educators and parents to know each other, anxiety, low morale and discouragement. How to remove these is the sixty-four dollar question.

Fortunately, resources are increasing: alerted interest of national, state and local educational associations; teacher recruitment programs; vigorous activities of organizations concerned with mental health, child-care, juvenile delinquency, crime, family life and religion; publication of more readable scientific literature; improved means of mass communication; widespread questioning by parents who show real concern for the character and personality development of children; and promising current school practices. The greatest common resource is our concept of democracy as a way of life. Scientific principles of human growth, development and behavior support democratic tenets. How can educators use these resources to the greatest advantage in creating a good environment through a better understanding of children and youth?

### **Techniques and Procedures**

Fourth, what techniques or procedures can be used in helping teachers and other educators better understand children? Various types of procedures are used in different sections of the

country. Some systems have continuing child study programs that afford interested teachers of all grades an opportunity to study children in their classrooms, make anecdotal records, detect behavior patterns and learn to interpret behavior. Through pooling ideas, synthesizing information about individual children of all ages and using consultants, these teachers derive deeper understanding of children and of themselves. Their values, attitudes, knowledge and techniques seem to undergo a gradual change which enables them to apply scientific principles in dealing with children and adults. Modifications in the curriculum and in methods of handling children are made gradually as implications for change become convincing to each person. The process is slow, but it represents growth in understanding rather than an accumulated plaster of knowledge about child growth and development.

The heart of these child-study programs is the small on-going study group. These groups are supplemented by public lectures, panels, forums, conferences, home and school visitations, and coordinating counsels of community agencies. The programs begin in a small way, developing depth and breadth through a period of years. Beginning strategically with the individual teacher and his own group of children, they gradually extend throughout the school, into the children's homes, and leaven the community itself. Such long-term programs are feasible only when administrators, supervisors and other school personnel are wholehearted participants. Continuity of experiences is easier to provide in school systems whose administrative, supervisory,

teaching personnel, and school population are relatively stable than in those school systems characterized by mobility; easier to provide in school systems that have progressed with the times than in systems whose educational programs have lagged, or overshot their communities.

School systems that have not yet evolved full-fledged programs of child study provide promising beginnings by such means as institute sessions, workshops, lectures on human growth and development, grade-points toward promotion for attendance at university summer sessions, and adult education projects. Some systems employ teams consisting of psychologists and curriculum consultants to work with teachers and children. Other practices are to reformulate curriculum plans cooperatively on the basis of "what research says" about the developmental tasks of children, or to make reforms in grouping, grading, cumulative records, etc.

The chief considerations in making headway are: (1) That the procedures and techniques be appropriate to the personnel and the circumstances; (2) that continuity and depth of experiences be provided for all school personnel; and (3) that communication between schools and the community promote mutual understanding. Since each person operates on the basis of his own developmental history, and since each school district and community likewise is the outgrowth of its preceding development, obviously what works best in one situation may not be best in another. The sharing of different ideas among educators through national conferences should open new vistas for progress.

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