

A Project in Human Relations and Mental Health

KENNETH HELFANT

How can schools go about improving the mental health of people in their area? This practical question, which confronted the Rye, New York, Public Schools as a result of an anonymous gift, has resulted in a vigorous pilot project in education for human relations and mental health.

IN THE past ten or twenty years teachers and administrators have become increasingly concerned with children's emotional problems. In part, this reflects the public's increased recognition of the importance of emotional factors in human life. For a long time teachers have been aware that emotional factors are at the bottom of many children's behavior and learning difficulties. The general acceptance of psychotherapy as a way of bringing about changes in human behavior has pointed up for school people and for the public the importance of taking emotions into account in planning an educational program for children.

The first result of the schools' increased concern with the adjustment of youngsters has been an increase in efforts to spot and help pupils who are suffering from emotional difficulties. As a result of these efforts, many schools have felt a need for someone in the school who can recognize such difficulties and either assist school people to help the pupil or refer the pupil to an outside agency for specialized help. Many schools now have a member of their staff—the school psychologist, for example—who, as part of his duties, performs this function.

However, it is becoming increasingly clear to educators and others that if the problem of mental health is to be adequately dealt with it must be dealt with at the level of preventing serious emotional difficulties from arising, rather than exclusively at the level of treating emotional difficulties after they have arisen.

A Pilot Program

In the winter of 1952, the Westchester Mental Hygiene Association received a gift of approximately \$15,000 from an anonymous donor, with the stipulation that it be used to improve mental health in the area of Rye, New York. The association, after considerable preliminary thought and investigation, decided to turn the money over to the Rye Board of Education for the purpose of financing a two-year pilot program for preventive mental hygiene.

The Board of Education accepted the money and allocated the major part of it for hiring a full-time consultant to conduct a program in the schools in line with the purpose of the grant. The stipulation was made that the board was to take no financial responsibility for the enterprise during the first two years of its operation. At

the end of that time, however, it could (with the help of an evaluation committee which is conducting a continuous evaluation of the project) decide whether the project has shown evidence of being sufficiently worth while to be continued. If they so decide, the continuation of the project is to be financed by means of public funds as a regular part of the school budget.

The Rye Project is one of the first of its kind in the country. Since many people have expressed interest in the project and the rationale behind it, this article is an attempt to explain the background of the project, its theoretical justification, its aims and its progress. In order to do this it is necessary to review some of the salient facts regarding the need for preventive mental hygiene, its feasibility, and the attempts at evaluation of projects of this sort.

It has been estimated that there are about ten thousand trained psychiatrists and clinical psychologists in the United States and that there are about nine million people who are sufficiently emotionally disturbed that they are in definite need of psychological treatment. Since a psychotherapist can handle only a limited number of cases, it is apparent that there are many more people in the United States in need of psychological services than the existing number of psychotherapists can handle. In fact, it seems likely that we are producing emotionally disturbed people at a faster rate than that at which we are, or ever could (except by the most radical and at present undiscovered changes in training procedures), produce psychotherapists to treat them.

Medical doctors now realize that

Kenneth Helfant is director of the Project for Education in Human Relations and Mental Health, Rye Public Schools, Rye, New York.

physical illness can not be brought under control without doing something about the conditions which cause illness to develop. Similarly psychiatrists and clinical psychologists have come to realize that if a significant change in the mental health of the country is to be effected, it is necessary to do something about the conditions which cause mental illness.

As a result of these considerations, many educators are beginning to consider the feasibility of introducing factors into the educational program for the prevention of emotional difficulties, and the steps they can take with the already emotionally disturbed children they find in their classrooms.

Importance of Early Experiences

Evidence on the causes of emotional difficulties in adult life is available from clinical observation, and evidence on what can be done about reducing the incidence of these causes through education is available from experimental studies in education. This evidence indicates that preventive mental hygiene through education is one of the most promising avenues of approach to solving the problem of mental health.

Clinical evidence has repeatedly demonstrated¹ the importance of the early life experiences in determining a

¹ Cf. Horney, K. *Neurosis and Human Growth*, Norton, 1950.

Sullivan, H. S. *Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry*, Washington: The William Alanson White Psychiatric Foundation, 1947.

person's later mental health. On the basis of the clinical evidence it seems clear that, if children were given an opportunity to learn healthy attitudes and feelings about themselves and other people and to unlearn unhealthy ones, they would be less susceptible to emotional illness in later life.

A study by Arthur T. Jersild indicates that pupils have a greater need and greater capacity for self-understanding than is generally realized and urges that the idea of helping young people to understand themselves should be a central feature of the educational program from the nursery school through college.² A report of a work conference of high school teachers under the leadership of Jersild and Helfant explores ways in which the school might help pupils to acquire healthy ideas and attitudes concerning themselves, emphasizes that such a program will require greater emphasis on emotional aspects of life than the school usually has provided, and points out that in order to be able to help their pupils teachers need a deeper grasp of the meaning of mental health and greater opportunity to grow in understanding of themselves.³

There have been several experimental studies which have indicated that if teachers acquire more insight into pupil behavior, conflict between teacher and pupil is lessened, pupil attitudes toward the school change in a

more favorable direction, and pupils show a tendency to achieve higher scores in their school work.

Other studies have shown that if pupils are given insight into the causes of their own behavior and the behavior of others they will show signs of improved adjustment, do better work in school, be more understanding of the behavior problems of others, and have more hygienic attitudes.⁴

A Project in Preventive Mental Hygiene

At the present time there are under way five more or less unified efforts at preventive mental hygiene. They are generally known as the Bullis, Force, Ojemann (named after the persons who are primarily responsible for them), Massachusetts, and Forest Hill Village projects.⁵

The Rye project is an outgrowth of these projects and has borrowed many ideas from them, especially from the Ojemann Project. It differs from other projects to some extent in that it involves the consultant in a closer relationship with one school system than is generally the case and involves more community participation than is generally found in other projects. In its

² Jersild, Arthur T. *In Search of Self: An Exploration of the Role of the School in Promoting Self-Understanding*. Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1952, 142 p.

³ Jersild, Arthur T. and Helfant, Kenneth. *Education for Self-Understanding: The Role of Psychology in the High School*. Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1953, 62 p.

⁴ Representative of the studies on which these statements are based are those reviewed by Ralph H. Ojemann in his article, "How the Integrated Plan for Education in Human Relations and Mental Health Developed," mimeographed, University of Iowa, 1949, 8 p.

⁵ The reader is referred to the article, "Promotion of Mental Health in the Primary and Secondary Schools: An Evaluation of Four Projects," *Report No. 18*, Committee on Preventive Psychiatry of the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, 3617 West 6th Ave., Topeka, Kansas, for information on the Bullis, Force, Ojemann and Forest Hill projects, and to Bower, L. B., "Education in a New Perspective," *Educational Leadership* VII: 4, 1950, 230-234, for information on the Massachusetts project.

present stage of development the Rye project consists of work in five areas:

1. Bimonthly seminars held with teachers and administrative personnel of the high school and the two elementary schools.

2. Weekly conferences with the guidance staff of the high school.

3. An experimental series of human relations classes in the high school.

4. A parent education program.

5. A consultation service for parents and teachers who wish to discuss problems of individual children.

The object of the bimonthly seminars is not to make school personnel into psychotherapists but to explore with the help of the consultant the application of mental health principles to the job of teaching. Among the techniques used are short lectures, films and discussion. Topics so far have included the aggressive child, the withdrawn child, principles of emotional development of children, and techniques for handling problem behavior. These seminars are held after school, and attendance is voluntary.

In weekly conferences the consultant talks over with the high school guidance staff (consisting of the high school principal and the three dean-counselors) mental health problems which affect the entire school (e. g., problems of cheating, race relations, fraternities and sororities). The object of these conferences is to formulate school policies on important issues in the light of good mental hygiene practices.

The experimental Human Relations classes being conducted in the high school consist of a unit in human relations for about half of the junior class, and a guidance class for the en-

tire eighth grade. The unit in human relations for juniors meets twice a week for two months. The methods used in teaching this unit during the current semester included films, panel discussions, and class discussions. The subjects covered included the school, the family, dating, necking, and teenage driving and drinking. The guidance class for eighth graders meets once a week for the entire school year and deals with planning one's social, emotional and intellectual development. The class is run entirely on a discussion basis. Panels of students take responsibility for presenting various appropriate eighth grade problems in the areas mentioned. The instructors (one of the high school dean-counselors and the consultant) occasionally raise questions and make contributions when they seem appropriate, but the major part of the class work is carried on by the students.

In order to maintain contact with the community, an important aspect of the project, the consultant conducts a weekly class for parents entitled "Psychology of Family Relations." This class is part of the community Adult Education program, and is run almost entirely on a discussion basis. Films concerned with various aspects of child development are shown and discussed.

In addition to the more formal type of activities described above, the consultant maintains a consultation service for parents and teachers who wish to discuss problems of individual children. In the case of severe problems the children involved are referred either for private psychotherapy or to one of the County Child Guidance Clinics. In the case of less severe prob-

lems the consultant tries to help the parent and/or teacher formulate a program designed to overcome the particular difficulty.

Understanding Self and Others

The over-all aim of the program is to introduce from kindergarten through the twelfth grade a series of experiences designed to lead to increased understanding of self and others.

So far the project has met with general acceptance by teachers and administrators. Attendance at the bi-weekly seminars for teachers and administrators has varied from time to time and from school to school. The average attendance for the three schools has been about 80 percent. The community is only now becoming aware that the project is under way and what its aims are. Support from those portions of the community which have become aware of the project and its aims has generally been excellent.

The project this year consists primarily of "breaking the ground" for more intensive work next year. It is hoped that during this year the aims and methods of the project will be made clear to teachers and the community, and that plans will be laid for the introduction of **appropriate units** in all courses and in all grades where it is possible to introduce them. The materials for education in human relations and mental health developed by Ojemann for use in the primary grades of the elementary school⁶ are being

⁶Ojemann, R. H., and Byrnes, D. M. *Teacher's Manual for Behavior Materials in the Primary Grades* (Second Tentative Edition), 1949, mimeographed, University of Iowa, 57 p.

used by some of the elementary school teachers. In the high school plans are under way for making the study of human relations factors in history, English, literature and social science an integral part of instruction in these areas.

The tasks confronting schools in the implementation of the concept of preventive mental hygiene are great. Yet even in the short time in which the Rye project has been under way, we have found the rewards also to be great. The children in our experimental classes have responded with enthusiasm to our attempts to help them come to a better understanding of their feelings and the feelings of others. Teachers and administrators have reacted to the seminars and to the children's responses with the feeling that something significant is being planned and accomplished in an area of great concern to them and to our society as a whole.

Maintaining Mental Health

The problem of the maintenance of mental health is one of the most critical questions of our age. It is a problem with implications beyond the hundreds of thousands of patients in our mental hospitals. It is a problem which is intimately bound up with our whole conception of democracy. Democracy demands that an individual be able to think and act freely and independently, and with respect for the integrity and rights of himself and others. Psychological research indicates that only if a person is emotionally free and reasonably mature is he able to fulfill these requirements. An impoverished emotional life or a distorted or immature one is the condition on which to-

talitarianism feeds. Emotionally impoverished, rigid, insecure individuals, to the degree to which they suffer from such manifestations of emotional illness, are only too willing to give up their freedom to a demagogue or dictator. They find emotional release in submitting to a strong outside authority which sanctions behavior typical of a lower level of personality organization.⁷ If democracy is to continue and flourish in a society, that society must produce individuals capable of practicing and holding on to democracy.

The aim of preventive mental hygiene is to prevent emotional illness by fostering the development of self-respecting, happy and cooperative people. In a democracy, this is also the over-all aim of education. Thus, pre-

⁷ Cf. Fromm, E. *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Rinehart, 1941, 305 p. Adorno, T. W., et al. *The Authoritarian Personality*. New York: Harpers, 1950, 990 p.

ventive mental hygiene cannot be looked upon as merely a "frill" or auxiliary service to be added to education. It must be regarded as a central concept of a democratic education.

Educators can make a tremendous contribution toward the solution of the problem of mental health and the production of people capable of democracy. They can do this only if they accept the task of providing children with experiences which will help them to solve their current emotional problems, and the task of developing in children healthy emotions and attitudes so that the groundwork will be laid for an adult life free of neurotic problems. Our present techniques and procedures are but fumbling attempts to reach this goal, but only by continuing to work with what tools we have, improving them as we go, can we move toward the goal.

Learning for Use

Instructional materials in the social studies should help pupils to relate information and skills to present-day problems. For this reason, Silver Burdett stresses *reasons, relationships, and applications* in its programs in geography and history.

THE PAST THAT LIVES TODAY

World history for high schools.

MAN IN HIS WORLD

Geography, grade 4 through junior high school.

OUR BIG WORLD
THE AMERICAN CONTINENTS

OLD WORLD LANDS
A WORLD VIEW

SILVER BURDETT COMPANY

45 E. 17th St., New York 3 • Chicago, Dallas, San Francisco

Copyright © 1954 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.