

Our Children's In-School and Out-of-School TEACHERS

"We should remember that our basic resources for facing an unknown and threatening future are to build on the strengths of children and youth, to recognize and give support to their aspirations because it is that human striving and the capacity for not only learning, but for *unlearning*, that has made it possible to attain whatever we now have."

IT IS SIGNIFICANT how in the field of education we are becoming more aware of the many dimensions of the process which earlier we tended to overlook or ignore. Thus, the former preoccupation with the cognitive or intellectual processes of the child has been enlarged to include the emotional and affective aspects of learning, with a recognition of how a child's socio-economic and especially his cultural background and traditions enter into his learning.

Our thinking about *learning* has been changing as we become more concerned with the way a child relates himself, through all the different modes of perception, through feeling, thinking and acting, as contrasted with

the earlier preoccupation with *teaching*, that is, with the rather limited picture of an adult imparting specific knowledge and skills to a more or less passively recipient pupil.

This growing concern for learning reflects the increasing recognition of the transactional processes in *knowing*. As formulated by John Dewey and Arthur Bentley in *Knowing and the Known* (Beacon Press, 1949), the age-old preoccupation with the problem of knowledge may be replaced by a conception of a "knower" and the "known," with a transactional relation of knowing. This knowing is not the simple response to a stimulus, but an active scanning, a searching of the world by a person whose selective awareness, patterned perception and cognitive understanding operate to invest the world with meanings to which he responds according to his previous experiences and his present feelings. The knower-learner has to create his own stimuli, so to speak, has to impose or impute order and significance

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to the world, like having a private radar set, as Dr. Strode suggested.

Thus, instead of a simple one-way relation of stimulus upon a responding organism, we may think of this as a dynamic, circular, reciprocal process in which the learner relates himself to the world of situations and persons. He develops concepts as patterns or templates for patterning his perception and interpreting the meaning of his selective experience. Concepts are learned with language since each language operates to order experience, to give the world its meaning and its relations according to the traditional assumptions and beliefs of each culture. But each child accepts and uses these traditions in his own way. Thus, the child builds up his language and his conceptional framework early in life and thereafter uses that language to relate himself to the world and to persons, including himself, always idiomatically.

This concept of knowing and learning gives human learning an added significance and import. It also makes us aware of those aspects of human learning which infra-human organisms may be able to achieve under appropriate human controls, coercion and direction, but which they do not otherwise exhibit in their organic functioning. Moreover, we are reminded of the immense learning-relating which the human child, with the largest uncommitted nervous system of all organisms, masters before school. He learns to orient himself in space-time, to speak and recognize visual and auditory symbols and, what is highly significant, he gives up and relinquishes, often eagerly, without coercion or immediate rewards, what he has, often painfully,

learned. Thus he matures by continually superseding, replacing and improving his awareness, perception, cognitive, conceptual relations and his patterned conduct. A baby sucks many times a day for months, he is rewarded, the sucking is continually reinforced, but at his own time, he gives up sucking and wants to eat and drink like adults (not very tidily at first). He wants to feed himself and is frequently badly frustrated by his own clumsiness, but he continues his efforts to master what he sees adults doing. He does not have to be "motivated" by adults any more than he needs such external motivation to learn to creep or crawl, and then to give up such lowly progression for standing erect and walking. Indeed, nothing is more enlightening about human learning than to observe a baby painfully pull himself up, perhaps terror-stricken when he cannot sit down; but despite bumps and bruises and collisions, he keeps on learning to walk, to balance himself with less and less outstretched arms and extraneous movements.

Likewise, it is sobering to see how the eager courageous two year old, venturing to explore the world, often is curbed, threatened and intimidated by parents ("Look out, you'll hurt yourself. Be careful, don't you do that, stop that at once!"). He loses his courage, his self-confidence and learns to perceive the world as a dangerous place where he must walk and play with caution, often refusing to participate lest he get hurt or be scolded and punished. Later we try to contrive various artificial motivations for what the child once did spontaneously, but gave up as unwise.

It is not unwarranted to say that much of our educational psychology is largely a teaching psychology concerned with what you do to and for a child as understood and explained in terms of animal experiments, especially trial and error learning, and the conception of learning as primarily governed by awards and punishments, the reinforcements that fixate what the subject is more or less compelled to learn.

However valuable are these contributions from learning experiments, they are predominantly based upon studies of laboratory animals who differ from human subjects, especially children, in two highly significant ways. One is that what an animal subject learns in an experimental situation is always what a human experimenter has decided he should learn, and when an animal exhibits learning that seems to be similar or analogous to human learning, such as recognition and response to a symbol or manipulation of mechanisms, we must remember that no animal parent ever teaches such lessons to its young. Therefore what the animal subject learns may reveal unsuspected potentialities for learning under varied conditions, such as deprivation of food, water and, under coercion of electric shock, punishment, with rewards that are primarily biological, such as food and escape from pain.

This is not intended as a criticism or attack upon animal experiments, but rather to point out that human children may exhibit much the same kind of learning, but in addition they are capable of *learning to learn*; in the sense that having once begun to use concepts and to recognize and deal

with symbols such as language, or to manipulate things, they show an eagerness to go on learning and develop a capacity for relating themselves to the symbolic cultural world of human living through which they exhibit their unique human potentialities.

Another aspect of animal experiments which needs to be clearly recognized is the assumption that the stimulus situation or problem presented to the subject will mean to that subject what the experimenter wants it to mean. The conception of purely objective experimental method rests in large part upon the conviction that if the experimenter excludes all *recognized* irrelevant events or variables, as they are called, and rigidly presents exactly the same situation to each subject, he is observing all the canons of the experimental methods and the animal's behavior response can then be regarded as objective data. Not only has it been found that our recognition of what is being perceived by the organism is often very limited so that only later do we discover that some event or some aspect of the experimental situation has been operating without our awareness, but, what is more important, it is becoming clear from the cumulative evidence from both experimental and clinical studies that the human organism and probably many of the so-called higher mammals have a highly selective awareness and idiomatically patterned perception with emotional and affective responses that may operate very seriously to alter the seemingly objective stimulus situation or problem for each such subject.

Again, this is not offered as an attack upon experimental psychology

through which we are discovering many significant aspects of learning and behavior, but rather to emphasize that each human subject may learn in a different way *from the same situation or lesson or experience*. Each one selects what is to him highly relevant or individually significant and may ignore all else. Moreover, to learn the same, or equivalent, each child may need a variety of experiences, visual, auditory, tactile, graphic, plastic, etc., through which he gains understanding and learns to relate himself, in his idiosyncratic way, to the world. Subject matter, therefore, can rarely be objective, and efforts to make it so may defeat learning by many children.

Learning—Within the School

The foregoing is offered as a somewhat abstract theoretical orientation to what is a very specific question involved in the major theme of the Conference. Thus "Crucial Problems of Today's Schools" may be interpreted as raising, among others, this question, "What are our children learning, not only from their experiences in school, but in their varied contacts and exposures to the outside world?" This focuses our concern not so much upon the content of what is being taught, which we hope and expect children will master, but upon all the relevant, and apparently irrelevant, learning that takes place during that teaching, and also in the varied experiences where children are not even aware that they are learning. A concern for this kind of learning is more than justified, if for no other reason than the growing recognition of how much the systematic

academic learning which the school is attempting to foster may be hampered or distorted by this other learning which we are apt to overlook in our preoccupation with the teaching situation.

Thus, to be concrete, children are growing up to become citizens who must actively participate in our social order where we may say the maintenance of a free society demands the highest standard of self-disciplined conduct as distinguished from the kind of submissive obedience to authority that is expected in a totalitarian or authoritarian society. The question then is how far are children learning this essential pattern of self-governed (not student government) conduct in our schools where we may very conscientiously impart knowledge of civics and teach all the ideals of our democratic society? These teachings, however, may remain more or less abstract verbal formulas with little or no significant meaning for the child who has had no experience to give those symbols meaning and to respond to them with the kind of learned conduct that these ideals and symbols imply. Indeed his experiences in school may wholly contradict his formal teachings about democratic living and self-discipline.

Here we have a situation not unlike that in the home where the parents may be conscientiously concerned with teaching a child how to behave according to all the requirements of social order and in doing so, employ a variety of methods which humiliate the child or give him painful punishment, often create resentful hostility so that he learns primarily to fear parental wrath, to watch for every opportunity to

escape adult detection and becomes increasingly convinced from parental punishments that "mamma doesn't love me." There is no question about the intent and the conscientiousness of the parent, but we can today point out that there is a difference between what adults are attempting to teach children and believe that their child is learning, and what children are actually learning from their experiences. Thus, we might say, even in terms of trial and error learning and reinforcement theory, that often, in a classroom, the child is given many opportunities and seeming encouragement to practice many of the patterns which the teachers may find objectionable and attempt to curb by scoldings and penalties. A child, for example, may, day after day, rehearse his feeling of being ignored and rejected at home by frantic efforts to get attention through clowning, through disorder, through any number of different practices which rarely fail to evoke attention even though it may be unpleasant and undesirable. Again, a child may be in a large classroom with other children where no one can speak or otherwise act overtly except when called upon by the teacher to recite. In the long intervals between his being called upon or recognized when he wants to volunteer, a child may indulge in a variety of daydreams and fantasies wherein he may be rehearsing all his grievances and unhappiness and thereby further intensifying his personality difficulties although outwardly he is well behaved and gives no trouble. He is learning "inattention."

There is no need to elaborate this point since a little reflection on the part of any classroom teacher will

enable him or her to supply innumerable examples of how children are learning a variety of patterns of thinking, feeling, acting, and especially of interpersonal relations, which are not an intended part of the curriculum and may often be quite contrary to what the school has set as its goals and objectives. Perhaps we can make this situation of in-school learning a little more dramatic by thinking of the classroom as it is frequently conducted—fortunately this older picture is and has been changing. When a number of children are in a classroom with fixed seats in which they are expected to sit quietly, not to talk or to move about, not to work with another child, to wait until they are called upon since no child is expected or permitted to do anything except when and as the teacher initiates such action; we might say that the child is in a "psychological straitjacket." This effectively interferes with, or completely prohibits, much of the learning that we might say is essential for healthy personality development and for learning to live in a social order.

A child's misbehavior or disorder in the classroom, his inattention, his apathy or overeagerness may be regarded as what he is learning as the one way of living in such a situation. He is being deprived of the opportunity to talk when verbal communication, especially in grammar school children, is a basic pattern he should practice, he is forbidden to study, work and do tasks with other children in which they can not only help and encourage each other, but in which they can also learn some of the basic patterns necessary for a social order.

Parenthetically it may be remarked that in much of our dealings with children in the home and in the school, we have accepted a theory of learning that is not always explicitly stated but implies a conviction that learning is accelerated and becomes effective largely through dwelling upon the child's weaknesses and defects, his failures and inadequacies, continually reminding him of these with appropriate scoldings and punishment and exhorting him to do better. In other words, we are trying to foster learning by emphasis upon weaknesses rather than by trying to recognize and build upon the strengths of the child, and especially his own aspirations. This theory is sanctioned by centuries of traditional teaching. It has been apparently confirmed recently, by the clinical study of problem and disturbed children and delinquents in which quite justifiably the emphasis has been upon the weakness of individuals which the psychotherapist must clearly recognize and try to treat, just as the physician must recognize, diagnose and treat the patient's illness. But therapy is effective only in so far as it does invoke the patient's resources and potentialities, which should be also the major concern of education.

We may raise the question, "Where do children learn to live in a democratic society?" At home their conduct and relations are governed by the intimate interpersonal relations and feelings of parents and children and siblings. In school, at least in the traditional class situation, they are learning to be submissively obedient and responsive to an adult with authority who can administer awards and pun-

ishment on a purely individual person-to-person basis. Except for his spontaneous games and play activities and what he learns from comics, movies, radio and television and, hopefully, from what we call literature, he may have little or no opportunity to learn how to be a social being who can actively participate with others in group projects, how to relate himself not only to individuals, but to the groups in and through which as an adult he will be expected to collaborate.¹ We might say that the attempt to develop projects and activities, including many of the non-intellectual activities, such as dramatics, dance, and other group programs, represents an effort to provide more of these essential learning experiences. In these the individual personality as such is not expected to make "a good social adjustment" in the sense of conforming and adapting passively and at the sacrifice of his own individuality, but rather the individual can develop, as an individual, and discover and cultivate his own potentialities by learning how to contribute to the groups to which he belongs and, what is no less important, to learn how to accept and recognize other individual personalities and their more or less unique contributions. This point may be emphasized because we have recently begun to recognize the inadequacies and hazards of mass methods, the "lock-step" in education and other aspects of large classes and many of the traditional school procedures.

This has led to a concern for proj-

¹ See Lawrence K. Frank and Mary Frank, "What Makes Children Tick?", *N.E.A. Journal*, December 1953 and January 1954. Lawrence K. Frank, *How To Be a Modern Leader*, New York: Association Press, 1954.

ects, more individual instruction and encouragement of personality expression and development. It may be desirable, therefore, to point out that these goals of individual development and personality expression are not necessarily incompatible with class activities, group projects and similar programs involving a number of pupils. This is especially important today when we are confronted with an overwhelming number of school children and insufficient classroom space and a grossly inadequate number of teachers. Perhaps what would be most helpful today is to recognize the many highly ingenious and creative efforts by teachers all over the country to cope with this situation by providing for small group activities within the larger class situation and finding unsuspected opportunities, even in a large class, for learning experiences that are productive for individual children. This becomes more attainable when we recognize that children have their own idiosyncratic patterns of learning and of relating themselves so that these often highly differentiated ways of perceiving and responding to the world may be utilized in a group, the way an orchestra conductor utilizes different instruments to produce what no single instrument alone can achieve.

Learning—Outside the School

In the limited space available, we ought to recognize the out-of-class learning. Here again, instead of bewailing and denouncing the many different kinds of experience to which children are exposed, we should begin to examine these from the point of

view of how they might be utilized far more constructively to foster learning by children and especially to help them to mature. Assuming that children are going to be exposed to comics, television, moving pictures and the many forms of illustrated periodicals, what can the school do to give children what they may desperately need, namely, some help in learning to select among these and to develop some capacity for judgment. This does not mean teaching children that every experience must be judged in terms of its adherence to the canons of what are often termed "great" art or "great" literature, or other high sounding phrases which often mean a verbal relationship to these great achievements, rather than having had a truly aesthetic experience of them.

This question can be put more concretely by asking whether the school is ready to recognize that it exists in a social-cultural situation which is at least as potent, if not more compelling, than the school experience in the lives of children today. Recognizing this, then, the school may ask how it can be helpful to the child in learning to live in this world wherein he, as an individual personality with his cultural traditions, his personal susceptibilities and anesthesias (because every individual lacks some capacities for perception and feeling), can nevertheless learn to utilize the great diversity of experience, actual or aesthetic, as resources for his own personal fulfillment and maturation.

Here we might emphasize that by maturation we mean the process whereby as the child grows, develops, enlarges his perceptions and his capaci-

ties, he can and should relinquish what he has previously learned and replace it with new patterns more consonant with his cumulative experience, his growing capacities and his increasing responsibilities. This means quite specifically accepting the child's interests, his curiosities, his perplexities, as well as his aspirations, in each stage of his development, helping him to explore and further these so that he can then go on to the next phase or stage in his ongoing development, without a burden of "unfinished business."

We must continually remind ourselves that outside of the school many different persons, professions, agencies and organizations, operating for a variety of purposes, are engaged in providing the many kinds of experience to which children are exposed. Those who are responsible for these experiences are not educators ordinarily. They have little awareness of or concern for what they may be doing to and for children and youth and even adults, because of their often single-minded concern with the organization, task or goal they are working for. This may be entertainment, or selling of goods and services, as in advertising and promotion, it may be what is known as public relations, or it may be just sheer profit. We have tried by criticizing and other methods, including various appeals to persuade these purveyors of experience to recognize more clearly what they are doing and to refrain from some of the more obviously undesirable or even demoralizing impacts upon people, particularly children and youth. These efforts to date have not been very effective and it is likely for some time to come these

persons and organizations will not develop much in the way of responsibility or self-discipline.

In the face of this, it would seem appropriate for the schools to ask "How can we, without indoctrinating children with any specific criteria which will lead them to discriminate against any one of these various activities (which in many cases are vested interests that cannot be safely attacked by the schools), help children to become self-consciously aware of these activities? How can we foster among children, and especially among youth, the idea that they must make choices and decisions which will be their own?" This can be very productive and will, insofar as they are helped by the schools, further develop their capacity for judgment, selection, appraisal of these offerings and impacts.²

Schools have long accepted as legitimate the giving to children of some critical appraisal of literature. Indeed, one of the frequently stated goals of education is to help children develop some appreciation of "good" literature. Therefore this enlargement of the school's concern for the variety of other experiences which children and youth are exposed to may be considered a legitimate extension, or perhaps refocusing, of the school's program.

Some years ago educational discussions were concerned with the question of how far the schools should go by way of "indoctrinating" children with specific ideas and beliefs about the social order and, more particularly, the inculcation of "a set of values" which were considered to be essential

² Cf., discussion of comics in public schools, Atlanta, Georgia.

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or central to our way of life. The heated controversies aroused by this topic died down for a while, but seem to be reviving with interesting reversal of attitudes. In the earlier discussions there were heated outcries against the supposedly radical proponents of indoctrination who were then regarded as enemies of a free society. Today we are hearing an almost equally vehement outcry against those who are urging that we keep open the possibility of free inquiry and protect the thinking of children and youth from regimentation to one pattern. These reactions are symptoms of the dismay or even anxiety that is generated by any proposed alteration in our traditional orientation toward society which has become acute today. In this situation therefore it may be urged that educators, who are all individual person-

alities with their own individual convictions and loyalties and anxieties, recognize that the most important task in this time of turmoil and change and of uncertainty is to help children grow up with as much self-confidence and courage as we can help them to develop or retain. Further, we should remember that our basic resources for facing an unknown and threatening future are to build on the strengths of children and youth, to recognize and give support to their aspirations because it is that human striving and the capacity for not only learning, but for *unlearning*, that has made it possible for the human race to attain whatever we now have, and will enable succeeding generations to go on striving because that apparently is one of the unquestionable attributes of what we call human nature.

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