

Enabling Children To Achieve

Helping the child to achieve a worthy self concept is an important element of the teaching-learning relationship.

TEACHING is necessarily a complex process because the human being is a complex organism. Because of this it is not easy to be fully aware of all that goes on in the teaching-learning relationship. One major concomitant of teaching, and one which is perhaps not fully appreciated, is the gradual development and demarcation of a self picture in children. From what is known about this psychological process it can be said that every lesson assigned and evaluated, every question posed and responded to, every word or act of condemnation, praise or appreciation—every form of interpersonal relationship contributes to this self picture whether so intended or not. This is vitally important because the self picture carries over into all occasions of self expression. It might justifiably be said that the self picture represents the essence of man.

This last idea deserves some further comment. Man's worth could be appraised in various terms. In terms of elements (calcium, iron, sodium, etc.) man is of negligible worth. In terms of energy man cannot match a mule. In terms of ideas, attitudes, vision and aspiration

man's worth is inestimable. These attributes of man vitalize his makeup and direct his energies. They do so, however, only in proportion to the trust man has in himself or, in the terms we have been using, they do so in accordance with the quality of his self picture or self concept. This self picture can vary in quality from one of strength to one of weakness, from one of ableness to one of incapacity, from one of worthiness to one of worthlessness.

In the main much is done in our schools today to give children the kind of help and support they need. Our society provides little opportunity for children to become significant contributors to the life and economy which surround them. Under these circumstances it is likely that the enriched school program and the quality of human relations in today's classrooms contribute immeasurably to carrying many children successfully through these years of comparative uselessness. Perhaps more children than we might expect finish school with a positive self picture. On the other hand perhaps more children than we would willingly allow acquire, as a concomitant of current school experience, a disabling concept of self.

It should be worthwhile to look more concretely at some aspects of the teaching-learning relationship as these contribute to the child's picture of himself.

JOHN J. KURTZ is professor of education in the Institute for Child Study, University of Maryland, College Park.

What follows is not intended as criticism of current educational practice; rather, it is an attempt to bring into focus some aspects of teaching which are likely to be overlooked as we go about our daily work. At stake is an impelling and worthy goal which is related to all our professional hopes and aspirations, the kind of self concept in children which will enable them to achieve.

The graphic or manual arts provide a good beginning point for discussion. Who does not know children who, after several years of school experience, claim readily that they cannot draw? Many teachers who have heard these words of self valuation know how intimately the product is related to the child's feelings about his drawing ability. Some, through patient help particularly in modifying self-appraisal, have made possible remarkable progress in "retarded" drawers. While we may no longer stifle a child's creative productivity by calling his trees elephants and his elephants trees, there are other ways in which we may cause children to doubt their abilities.

Other procedures which can contribute to a disabling picture of self are: pointing out particular drawings as good; placing the "best" drawings on the board; allowing only particular children to make a drawing for classroom use, and so on. These things cannot be done without the possibility that some, perhaps many children will come to feel that drawing is not for them—one step in the process of coming to doubt if anything is for them.

In the manual arts the same kinds of things can happen with the additional possibility of rebuke, downgrading, or outright rejection of the child's product. If this happens enough in the various areas of school experience is it not likely that a child can come to feel that he can do nothing? Once the child is convinced

of inability it is to be expected only that no further voluntary effort will be made toward achievement.

Sensitivity to the Child

The foregoing illustrations should not be taken to mean that teachers should avoid helping children do better. As teachers, we must help, but there are ways of doing so without depressing a child's picture of himself. There are two considerations which urge this point. In the first place children are more than likely to be doing the best they can at the time and under the circumstances. In the second place the teacher's judgment and appreciation are not infallible. Giving an honest opinion, reaction or suggestion can surely be helpful, but these approaches do not necessarily involve passing absolute judgment on the child. If we feel that a child's product is less than it could be, we can do other than pass judgment. We can accept the idea that the product is his present best. From an appraisal of the child's work we can note principles of form or design which the child seems not to know about. These we can help him know. There may be tools or other aids which we can introduce to him to help him achieve accuracy and faithful reproduction of ideas. Grading a piece of work cannot do as much. It is hoped that in the years ahead we will find and hold to better ways of appraising and furthering children's progress than by grading them.

What is true in the graphic or manual arts is in some ways intensified in the academic area. At least, this is a more crucial area because a child is so heavily judged as a person by his academic performance. In life much more is required for success than reading, writing and arithmetic. In school, in spite of lip-service to other attributes of develop-

ment, the academic is the classification yardstick.

A brief look at specific areas is in order. We know that many children feel they cannot read well, or do arithmetic, or write, or spell. In the last mentioned area Prescott Lecky¹ has well established that (a) when children feel they cannot spell well they do not spell well, and (b) when children do not spell well it is often not spelling ability that they lack, and (c) children will be helped most in spelling (or reading, or arithmetic) if teachers can help children see themselves as capable of such achievement. Thus we might question the effects of such procedures as spelling contests in one form or another which can teach many children that they are mediocre or even hopeless spellers. We might question overemphasis on oral reading in which it can be demonstrated to many a child how poorly he reads. At the very least, periods of individual help (while others may be reading silently) should intervene; help in word recognition, word grouping and so on. In this way each child's succeeding performance can be expected to be somewhat better and the child can come to see himself as progressing. Similarly we might also question the practice of grading a child's creative writing with little or no help in acquiring the skills of written communication. In connection with his own writing, suggestions in word choice, sentence arrangement and the like will have real meaning and provide encouragement. Without such help a child's grade is likely to be repeatedly low and he must inevitably despair of any higher level of achievement.

It would not be sound to go much further in this vein without some clarification. Not all spelling contests or read-

ing circles and other techniques are conducted in a manner which is depressing of self attitudes in children. Many teachers function in remarkable empathy with children even when employing various competitive devices. Reading circles, involving the grouping of children by reading level, are in themselves designed in part to safeguard children from feelings of inadequacy. Yet we have not completely learned how to keep this same practice from impressing many children, particularly those in the low reading groups, that they are poor readers or even poor learners. It is also true that some children gain inner strength through various opportunities for public comparison with classmates. Yet it is still likely that many times this number acquire as a concomitant of such school practice a disabling concept of self.

The illustrations used thus far are reasonably open, but there are more unknowing ways in which children may be taught to doubt themselves. The following incident, witnessed by the writer is an example. Children of a fifth grade classroom were reporting on social studies projects prepared in committees. In one report the term "secondary schools" was used. The teacher asked that the term be defined. In defining secondary schools, the term "elementary schools" was used by way of contrast. The teacher then asked if anyone knew another word for elementary. The answer, "graded," was offered enthusiastically by one little girl. The teacher's reception of this correct answer was definitely less than enthusiastic. When a second volunteer offered "primary," the teacher responded with pronounced approval. In this case, only the answer the teacher had in mind was considered good. We need not consider this a devastating experience for the little girl whose answer was passed off lightly.

¹ Prescott Lecky. *Self Consistency*. New York, New York: Island Press, 1945.

She happened not to volunteer again for the remainder of the period. We can only speculate how much experiences of this kind contribute to self estimates which are less than they might be.

Parental Influence

While this article is intended for professional educators it is not assumed that the job and the challenge are theirs alone. Parents often, if unwittingly, place strong barriers in the way of their children's achievement by undermining children's faith in themselves. From his earliest years a child is often directly or subtly chided for unsatisfactory progress in learning. All that seems necessary is for a neighbor's child to stand up at ten months while ours is still crawling and we go into action. Of, if our six-year-old does not read as well in our judgment as a six-year-old cousin, something must be done at once. We take no comfort from the fact that Woodrow Wilson did not learn to read or write until he was nine years old. We ignore the widely known truths about normal variation in growth and development. We seem unable to allow our children to be themselves. In the process we cannot fail to show our concern or dissatisfaction, the kind of experience which can foster self doubt and hinder the very achievement we desire.

This acknowledgement is not intended as an easy out for the schools. Among the items of agenda for PTA meetings, surely human growth and development is one. We can and must help parents see that each child is a unique human being developing at his own rate; that each will arrive in good time providing we do not work to instill lack of self trust. Moreover, while the psychological climate of the home is a potent force the school is not therefore impotent. If the home is

not supportive the school must not fail to provide some basis for building a positive self picture.

Some aspects of discipline are also relevant to the foregoing discussion and should be briefly considered. Since the individual is a unified being, how the child is treated for his behavior in the lunchroom, playground, hall or cloakroom is related to the kind of person he feels himself to be when he is doing arithmetic, or reading, or some other curricular activity. In other words, a picture of unacceptability in one area of behavior is not likely to be ruled out merely by virtue of a change of activity. Coercive discipline is a particularly devastating thing when we recognize that children are continually working earnestly and responsibly on the job of growing up. That children may at times aggravate us or seem lazy and irresponsible to us suggests the need for help rather than cause for rebuke.

It is not farfetched to see troublesome children as children in trouble, children who need help, children who have problems they do not know how to resolve. It is exactly at such times that one must have self trust. To be humiliated or berated at such times (the more common experience) is not likely to be helpful or effective in terms of ultimate goals. A child is more likely to act worthily when he feels worthy.

One final question at least remains: Is there risk of building an inflated sense of self trust, headed inevitably for deflation? Admittedly the idea that every child can achieve what any other child can achieve is unrealistic and untenable. It is also uncalled for. The reality of individual differences does not stand in the way of working toward furthering achievement in all children. It must also be admitted that it is difficult to know

what an individual's potential is. In this state of affairs we stand to gain in our purpose to help all children go as far as they can educationally by keeping growth channels open. The ideas discussed here are presented with this goal in mind.

Teaching is a complex process. There is much more to it than carrying through the lesson plans. The teacher's role is much more significant than we often realize. An attempt has been made to show the nature and importance of one fundamental process attending the teach-

ing-learning relationship—the process of building a self picture. This self picture is related not only to the successful mastery of school subjects but also to the development in children of coping powers which equip them to deal effectively with problems that lie ahead. In the interest of supporting what is already being done in this area and of adding to it, it is suggested that a conscious and continuing goal of education be that of fostering in children an enabling concept of self.

ALBERTA MUNKRES

Relating School and Community:

An Exhibit

Three piquant sketches suggest the possible benefits to boys and girls of improved relationships between school and community.

I HAVE set myself the task of drawing, in words, three thumbnail sketches, each representing a little world in itself, in which children, parents and teachers are the chief participants.

These sketches are not synthetic, but genuine in the sense of portraying situations which exist in time and place, and persons who, heir to all the problems and rewards which attend work with human beings, have, through cooperative efforts, made a difference to their schools and their communities.

Each of these situations is unique in the sense of being different from any other imaginable situation, yet holds enough in common with all other situations involving school and community relationships as to prove suggestive of possible goals, procedures and results.

The value of the sketches depends less upon artistic ability in portrayal and more upon their fidelity in capturing reported experiences in words so that all who look may read and understand, even pause to ponder.

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