Meeting the Crisis in Educational Leadership Today

Why are we so susceptible to the “educational epidemics” that sweep the country? We need to watch our herd tendencies in education and to strike out in as many directions as seem to promise us better answers to the acute problems we face in education today.

Educational leadership occupies a strategic position in the world today. Many accumulating factors are making it increasingly imperative that we examine, re-examine and define the concepts, values, goals, methods and evaluative procedures that are needed to meet the crisis in educational leadership that is now apparent.

It would, indeed, be a simple solution if one could point in the direction of the changes that are occurring now and say in the voice of authority, “This is the way we should go. This philosophy, this method, this procedure will bring us to the threshold of our fondest dreams realized in abundance.”

No intelligent, honest person living in the chaotic world of today would be so arrogant and so lacking in humility as to imply that he has discovered “the formula.”

We examine, as objectively as possible, our present situation. Our survey tells us many things about methods that we have used in the past. There are some positive evaluations that are obvious. There are, also, many negative evaluations that are equally as obvious if we care to look at them. The largest and most important problem in the field of education today is the challenge that is ever-present in the acute struggle for the minds of the children, the teachers, and other professional workers that has created a din that can be heard even above the ordinary commotion to which we have become accustomed.

Search for Truth

I am writing this article as an educator and a psychologist. I have been an elementary teacher in the public schools. I have been affiliated with professional schools of education both as a student and a faculty member. I have had professional training as a clinical psychologist and have done extensive work in the field of mental health. I have had many kinds of experiences in these different areas. Some were intellectually stimulating and challenging and full of enough material for thought to be well worth the time and money invested in them. I have had other experiences that have impressed me with their utter emptiness—even mockery—of hollow words batted about without meaning. I have
met and known professional people whose integrity and values and courage and intellectual stimulation were as refreshing as a spring garden after a rain. I have known others whose lip service might seem impressive, but whose practice efforts were a denial to all the glowing terms used and whose sense of moral values was woefully deficient.

I have known and known well many children growing up. Some of them “went through school.” A few of them were educated. The same observations can be made in our colleges and graduate schools. I have become increasingly concerned with the seriousness of this problem and I have studied it carefully for many years. I have asked myself one big question: Why are so few people educated to become the kind of person who uses more fully his capacities for intellectual achievement as well as for social and emotional maturity?

I flinch when I ask that question because I am fully aware of some of the answers that have contributed to this state of affairs. We went through the “self-expression” period. We went through the “permissiveness” era. We passed through other colorful eras. There was the “what-do-you-want-to-do-and-talk-about-today” period. The “let’s-do-it-in-a-group” era, the “group-dynamics” era, the “search-of-self” period, the “you-must-be-creative” period, and the “group-therapy-is-the-answer” period followed in quick succession. Every one of these approaches to learning had certain values that were important. Every one of them was run into the ground. Some of the approaches were getting involved in psychological and psychiatric problems that the leaders had no right to be stirring up because they were totally incapable from the standpoint of training, experience and responsibility to lead such groups with the necessary professional competence. The search for truth, a concept of scholarship to meet the needs of our times, and the development of the independent mind more often than not were lost in the shuffle.

Perhaps the tense of my verb is inaccurate. Perhaps we are still doing these things in a mad rush to get everyone in line, thinking the same thoughts, doing the same things, gargling the same formulas, losing our individual identity.

As a psychologist and educator I am saying that the leadership that has been placed in many strategic places has failed miserably to safeguard the fundamental rights of every individual to utilize his capacities to the fullest and to help him develop socially, emotionally and intellectually.

The leadership has hopped from one bright-colored bandwagon to another. The teachers have been caught in the web of all these various cults. Too many were looking for a formula to cushion the way and too many people were ready to hand out a formula!

Even some of our basic concepts of democracy have become distorted. Take the word “liberalism” as an example. That word today is used to describe anything from a genuine belief in the individual’s freedom of thought—to the right for communistic infiltration in the name of “freedom.” There are some vociferous “liberals” who try to tell us what to think and value and do. Sometimes one wonders if the word “liberalism” is not, occasionally, used to cover up attempts at planned thought-control.

Developments in the field of mental health that have grown out of studies

VIRGINIA M. AXLINE is professor of education, New York University, Washington Square, New York, N. Y.
of psychotherapy and the implications that it might have for education indicated a possible way for us to increase our understanding of the individual and so help us to utilize more fully the total capacities of the person. And what is happening now as a result of this? The emphasis upon psychotherapy as a miraculous cure-all is building up and some educators almost refer to their students as “my patients.” Group therapy is the vogue now. The latest slogan states that if we give teachers “group therapy” or refer them for “analysis” we will turn out omnipotent teachers — apparently equipped by this experience to psychoanalyze every child, parent, fellow teacher, and citizen in the community. Here, again, is an illustration of going overboard for a point of view and of not seeing the forest for the trees.

Psychotherapy does not provide all the answers to every current problem in education today. And it can be damaging if it gets out of hand and permeates the entire fabric of education. Interpretations of “unconscious motivation” are now a dime a dozen and as inaccurate and unscientific as they are common.

Out of this current vogue is growing another practice that is becoming rather common in the field of education. Some irresponsible “educators” are now using pseudo-psychiatric diagnosis in an attempt to control the thoughts and actions of faculty members. One hears reports with alarming frequency of teachers who have been accused of being “emotionally disturbed,” “in need of psychiatric treatment,” or “acting inappropriately” when the individual’s values, observations and conclusions were not in agreement with the ones set forth by the administration.

Mind you, I am not saying that all administrators are using these methods to keep faculty and students in line so they will think and behave in a certain approved manner. It does happen with enough frequency to merit a critical examination of the motives and objectives of those who employ it.

All teachers should know that only an unethical quack would use such pressures to stamp out any threat he might feel to his over-all goals—whatever they might be. But such an accusation, suggesting possible mental illness, is an unexpected, and many times a frightening and crushing experience to the victims of such attacks. They do not know the prevalence of its use for what might well be called attempts at brainwashing. They do not always realize that no competent, ethical and professionally adequate psychiatrist or psychologist would ever resort to such mental cruelty. It takes on added significance when one is more fully aware of the reasons why the so-called leader wishes to discredit the capacities of a co-worker who refuses to be a blind, unthinking follower.

Self and Change

Some readers may think that these remarks represent such a rare and extreme situation that it is unnecessary to mention it as a critical problem in education today. If it happened only once that would be often enough to focus a spotlight of attention upon it and to make very sure that it does not become the pattern of thought control in the field of education. However, it is the kind of attack that has happened many more times than once. It is the kind of experience that the victim hesitates to advertise. And yet, if it were shouted from the rooftops it would cease to be so commonly practiced. Pseudo-psychiatric diagnoses, when used by an unethical person for his own ulterior purposes
should be thoroughly investigated. Only when this practice is challenged vigorously and openly will we be exercising the true meaning of the rights of the individual; and only then will we justify our claim to independent, individual thought maintained with integrity. Only so will we be able to safeguard psychiatric diagnosis and psychotherapy for legitimate, ethical professional use.

I have some questions I would like to raise about the practice efforts of a leader in the field of education. How much respect for human dignity does the person who is in a leadership position hold for his co-workers? How does he react when he is under pressure of any kind? How does he react under threat to his sense of power and prestige? How does he measure up when he is confronted with a head-on clash of personal, political and educational philosophies among his colleagues?

We will by-pass his words because most of these persons can speak and write words fluently.

How does he implement his basic concept of respect for the individual? What are his attitudes, values and beliefs that show up in everything he does in his day-by-day relationships with others? How does he cope with any crisis, large or small, that seems to challenge his authority? What a person practices is far more important than what he preaches.

People are learning something all of the time; seldom, if ever, what someone thinks he is teaching. We learn in many, many ways—from our experiences, our observations, our studies, our feelings, our attitudes, and from our exposure to the attitudes of others toward us.

Our concept of self is changing all the time. Those who would cram it into a muffin tin and label it will be disappointed at their failures. Human behavior is not of a nature to be stereotyped. It cannot be classified, labeled, packaged, mass-produced and rolled out in a group on a conveyor belt. The concepts of self that are important to every human being are simple and basic. Every person should be able to have the kinds of experiences that help him develop a concept of self that feels secure, worthwhile, adequate, respected, capable, valued for what he is and for what he can give to others.

Many times we stop too short and think that if we can provide the kinds of experiences that enable the person to discover himself and all his feelings, attitudes, observations and conclusions that we have arrived. Too often this brings only a preoccupation with one’s self and an indulgence in experiencing and analyzing one’s feelings to the exclusion of other important, fundamental factors. Unless we take this self-awareness further we have failed. As we find ourselves so must we also find others who can be regarded as important, as sensitive, as worthwhile as we think we are. Unless we do, we are walking down a lonely, dark, one-way, dead-end street. We are seeing a shadow and not a real person. We are hearing our own empty echoes and not the sounds of a living, thinking, feeling, peopled world.

All people face change every day in their lives. It is inevitable and unavoidable. People face change creatively and constructively when they are free to do so, when they are given the tools to use so they can maintain independent thought, and when they have substance in their understandings based upon a rich background of living that has included in its compass the development of functional use of intelligence as well as the opportunities to achieve social and emotional maturity.
All people learn something every day of their lives. They learn what it is like to be happy, sad, successful, a failure, afraid, courageous, anxious, secure. Life offers all of us a balanced exposure to emotions both through direct and vicarious experiences. But, unless each person also learns that his responsibility is to see to it that he does nothing to prevent anyone else from having the same opportunity, he has blocked off an important avenue of his own learning. He has deprived himself of the interplay that generates new concepts from the interaction of individual differences.

Resources Within

The basic psychological ingredient of change that we all need to know more about is the nature of the functional intelligence of the person.

There are many, many examples of the resources within the individual that can arise to the occasion when the need to use those resources is challenged sufficiently. If, in education, we raised our sights considerably and understood the capacities of the individual more fully we would certainly change many of our educational practices. We would cease immediately the observable trend of stressing to the exclusion at some times of all other factors, the analysis of every emotion we think we feel. We would use that psychic energy to develop further interests, thoughts, activities and goals. We would differentiate more clearly and concisely. We would inject into our educational practices more objective research that would enable us to get many of our procedures out of a few deep ruts. We would use what we know about children, and adults, and learning in such a way that we would pass beyond the labeling stage and start mixing some new ingredients. We would evaluate what we see, what we hear, what we feel, what we read, what we do. We would make every effort to differentiate between subtle propaganda and individual freedom of thought. We would make available to every man, woman and child in this country all the materials that contribute to genuine learning—not using a spoon here and a steam shovel there as it serves our own vested interests. With all of our increasing knowledge about personality and learning we would work with untiring effort to insist that every individual become a critical thinker and that he assume the responsibility for his individual thoughts, feelings and actions.

There is now, sweeping the schools of education, an outcry that “group therapy” is the way to make teachers “more productive.” Let’s take a penetrating look at this latest trend. Before going overboard, let us consider some extremely important factors that must be examined and evaluated objectively and scientifically. There are certain dangers in this practice that cry out a word of warning.

In the first place all educators are not adequately prepared professionally or personally with sufficient knowledge and skill to lead group therapy discussions. We should, also, be fully aware of the fact that all things called “group therapy” are not necessarily therapeutic, educationally advancing, or even helpful. We should realize that, at this writing, any concept that people experience changes toward greater teaching productivity through psychotherapy is an untested hypothesis, regardless of the individual, clinical experience of some of the enthusiastic exponents of the method. We should define the terms used specifically. What, exactly, is psychotherapy? How is it effectively practiced? How are the end results evaluated objectively and scientifically? What are the over-all and spe-
cific goals predetermined by the therapist as important for the subject of the therapy? What is meant by the term, “greater productivity” of the teacher? Is this another way of achieving an “organization man” whose vocabulary may change, but whose thoughts, feelings, and actions are molded by his psychotherapeutic experience?

We should underline in bold strokes the absolute need to keep out of any and all educational experiences the cloak of secrecy that is coyly presented as “guarding the confidential nature of the experience.”

The open door policy of inspection of all activities, plans, procedures, objectives, goals and hypotheses can and should be made available to all. This can be done—and will be done by all professionally competent persons who gladly explain the hypotheses, assumptions, procedures and results without violating the confidence of any individual. If the proceedings of any group in any school of education cannot be publicly stated and openly evaluated, then they are inappropriate to be a part of the school’s program. They should be returned to the clinics, hospitals and appropriate sources for professionally competent psychiatric and psychological practice.

In the field of psychotherapy there are more untested and unproven hypotheses that are being propagandized as the answer to all problems than there are objective evidences that all experiences called psychotherapy are, indeed, therapeutic. This is especially true of that undefined, nebulous “group therapy” which is being promoted in some corners as the means by which one increases the “productivity of the teachers”—whatever that means. It is certainly not the answer to the serious and critical problems in professional schools of education today. Take a look at the alarming and startling similarity of many “psychotherapized” individuals who think, feel, experience life, search for and express the self with monotonous “creativity.”

Let’s stop building bandwagons and producing barkers with loud voices who emphasize again and again the GROUP.

If we must turn our professional schools of education—and ultimately our public schools—into treatment centers, let’s start by vaccinating all the people who enter therein against the fads that continually invade the organization; and hope that they will achieve immunity from all kinds of propaganda—whether it be called “therapy,” “creativity,” “liberalism,” or any other blurb. Let’s let the individual think, develop, feel, experience, grow, and make his own personal choices and decisions, select his own values and goals without any helpful, enthusiastic “leadership” skillfully prodding the person along with the goals all set and a new trap all ready to spring.

Let’s consider how we might most effectively provide for the intellectual development of the individual and emphasize the need for the individual to be fully equipped to maintain self-determination to achieve goals he sets for himself.

Psychotherapy is a learning experience. We can discover many things about the process of learning from research in the area of psychotherapy. However, it is a fallacy to conclude that education is, therefore, psychotherapy. Let’s keep the couches out of the classrooms and the administrative offices. Let’s concentrate on the development of programs of education that reduce the repetition, the oversimplification, the spoon-feeding, the congealed group, and the pseudo-psychiatric orgies. Let us replace them with those experiences that capitalize upon the tremendous capacities of the indi-
Let's see what an individual can do alone, as well as in a group.

We need to put the brakes on our herd tendencies in education and to strike out in as many directions as we need to explore to find more satisfactory answers to the acute problems we face in education today. The movement must be forward—not backward. We need to demonstrate by our actions our ability to respect the dignity of every human being, to provide adequate resources for him to realize more fully his capacities. We need to understand that what we discover as a partial answer today may be totally inadequate for tomorrow's problems.

If we could eradicate the educational epidemics that continually sweep this country, we might not have a formula to propagandize, but we might develop a more integrated, intelligent, functioning individual who does not apologize for independent thought, who is not ashamed of the fact that he reads good books, who does not despair if he finds himself daring to take exception to the ultimatum of the group, who does not feel that the magic answer to all questions is psychoanalysis, and who is not terrified at the prospects of being alone occasionally. In fact, it is quite possible that the day has come in the field of education when all the teachers should be inoculated against fadism and groupitis and with their newly acquired immunity, from both within and outside the profession, would be free to seek out the truth for themselves—wherever it might lead.

JOHN U. MICHAELIS

Educating Children for Change

"Let us help children develop creative persistence in continuing to try to resolve conflicts that appear at the present time to be irreconcilable."

FOUR FACETS of education for change have been singled out for consideration in this statement. Certain points about the child's frame of reference for reacting to change are made first. This is followed by attention to selected aspects of two interrelated processes involved in dealing with change. Illustrative concepts related to change as found in basic sciences are summarized next. Finally, a few pitfalls and related challenges are noted. Because definitive research is not available, only tentative inferences and general suggestions can be made.

A fact that must not be overlooked is that children are actually living change in a day by day complex of experiences. They are a part of it and they interact with change via TV, radio, the press, experiences in school, community activities, and experiences in a variety of non-school educational agencies. What may seem like a dramatic change to an elderly person is really just life today for the child. For example, in the 1920's an expression of great speed was "going like forty" which later was changed to "going like sixty" and still later to "going over a hundred." Recently the writer heard children say as they engaged in dramatic