

Teaching Beyond Ourselves

How shall we help our children go beyond us in their learning? How shall we teach feelings and understandings and skills which we have not ourselves achieved? This article gives positive answers to these important questions.

A GROUP of eleven-year-olds plan a class reunion to be held in the year 2000. They figure that their teacher will still be living at the age of ninety and can join them. Their teacher is not so sure—not about being alive at the time, but about attending. The reunion is to be on the moon!

Most of the children and youth we teach are projecting themselves in various ways into a future we will never know and which we often find it hard to imagine. College seniors preparing to teach belong to a club making serious plans for an expedition into outer space. When their instructors express a certain amount of skepticism, the young enthusiasts accuse them of being "earthbound."

A boy of elementary school age announces his intention of inventing a gasoline that will sell for one cent a gallon. A child of five in India dictates a description of the airplane he will invent when he is a man. "It will not fall," the child promises. "If it goes bad you can stop it in the air and put it right and for that I will make stairs . . . if it goes bad and cannot be put right in the air, then it will come slowly and slowly to the ground like a parachute."

High school youth in their spare time are building and launching rockets and inventing new television tubes and intricate electronic combination locks.

Not all of these young people are concentrating on material improvements. One young boy plans to invent a self-control button!

What kind of education shall we provide for all these members of the oncoming generation? We speak of educating for twentieth century living, but six-year-olds entering first grade this autumn will be only a little past forty in the year 2000. It appears likely that they will spend more than half their lives in the *twenty-first* century.

Every generation in every society faces the problem of inducting its younger members into the wisdom and ways of its particular culture. The problem is exaggerated for us because the accelerating pace of change in modern times has made the distance between father and son, teacher and child, greater with each passing generation.

Teaching Beyond the Way We Were Taught

Our children take for granted mechanical developments which are still a source of wonderment to their elders. Unless we can keep up with such changes, at least in their broadest outlines, and unless we can anticipate and welcome the even more radical changes to come, we cannot expect to communicate with our children and therefore cannot hope to teach them.

Neither can we hope to teach our children what they need to know in their lifetime if we insist on passing along only the information with which we are familiar, using only the tools and materials of instruction with which we are comfortable. Just as our children have new sets of questions to answer, so is there available new information for answering these questions. Our children have many sources from which they may secure this information, but they must learn to use them properly.

Billy's first speech, long before he is two years old, comes out in the form of sentences and paragraphs. He uses long strings of "words" for which he has no meaning, for he is merely imitating the rhythm and flow of the advertisers he hears on television. Does this have any implications for our present notions of language development in young children?

The problem of concept formation in children presents new facets in a push-button age. A five-year-old wants to know what machine made the world. Seven-year-olds talk knowingly of the atom as a "genie" because it was so explained on a television program. They know that the genie is a large and powerful figure because they "saw" him; they are not quite so certain, however, whether he is real or pretend.

When so much information is taken in so fast, misconceptions can accumulate rapidly. Marshall McLuhan says, "Modern children are subjected to a tremendous flow of information; helping them to order and process this flow is the important task of the educator."¹

What implications have we here for revising elementary school reading series with vocabulary control based on research done in the 1930's? In fact, what

kinds of vocabulary control are useful in an age when language grows and changes so fast? What about the scope and sequence of elementary and secondary school social studies, laid out basically in the twenties and thirties and altered all too slightly since then? What of textbooks that fail to include in their views of people of other lands changes brought about by postwar developments? What about science and mathematics courses that have not caught up with nuclear fission and other modern approaches?

Unless we can teach beyond what we were taught and beyond the ways we were taught, in many instances we shall fail to reach our students at all; worse still, we may teach untruths and erroneous ways of learning.

Teaching Beyond Our Worse Selves

The problem of bringing up to date the information we try to teach the next generation seems easy by comparison with another aspect of teaching beyond ourselves. How much more difficult it is for us today to help our children to feel and act more nearly in line with our ideals as a society than it was for our elders. By way of the newspaper and daily examples in actual life, many lessons are being taught by our worse selves. Our young people have only to look about them to see citizens deprived of the vote or discriminated against in employment, housing or vacation spots. Often they grow up hearing name-calling indulged in by adults whom they admire and imitate.

ALICE MIEL is professor of education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, N. Y. Dr. Miel is also chairman of ASCD's Publications Committee. With P. D. Brogan she has recently written the volume, More Than Social Studies (Prentice-Hall, 1957).

¹ In a lecture at Teachers College, Columbia University, summer, 1956.

Nor do young people have to look far to see emotionalism supersede intelligence in such matters as loyalty to country. For example, they might run into the type of thinking reflected in the following newspaper account:

The [members of a well-known patriotic society] today demanded that United Nations "interference" in United States affairs "cease immediately and completely" . . .

Mrs. . . ., only one to speak against the resolution, said if the [organization] is "requested to believe rumors of concealed world federalist pressure, we should have accredited observers at the UN to prove or disprove the charge."

Mrs. . . . was applauded when she arose and said that sending an observer would "undignify the great organization" . . .

"Forget about observing," she said. "Let's go after them with clubs and what-have-you, like our forefathers."

The article, significantly enough, was entitled "Club-Ladies."

It is fortunate, indeed, that the illustration just mentioned can be matched and strongly outnumbered by positive illustrations. Teachers and parents can help our youngsters to observe and learn from those in our society who, now and then at least, exemplify our highest values. We must and can teach beyond our worse selves. We must and can help our children to use a more intelligent approach to problems, to act on the basis of informed judgment, to apply our democratic values in more and more aspects of living.

Teaching Beyond Our Better Selves

But something more tantalizing remains, the task of teaching beyond our better selves.

Writing on the subject of "Man's Outmoded Loyalties," Brock Chisholm² has stated:

Facing this generation in the immediate future are revolutions such as never could

² *The Nation*, July 9, 1955, p. 41.

have been dreamed of until now. More than half the people in the world are born hungry, will be hungry all their lives, and will die hungry. But never again will these people be content to die peacefully, because they know now that hunger is not necessary.

Chisholm goes on to say:

. . . it is the well-fed people who are going to have to take the lead in changing the living standards of the peoples of the world.

. . . It has not been required of anyone until recently that his loyalties should go beyond national boundaries, or beyond group boundaries of some kind. But the world at this stage of development needs people who are able to function as world citizens, whose concern is undifferentiated as between peoples defined by race, color, religion, nationality, ideology, or anything else.

. . . there is much hard thinking to be done. And the only effective thinking can be done by people who are free of taboos and of many types of loyalties which we have hitherto regarded as admirable.

The task being emphasized by Chisholm is one of helping our children to build broader and more socially useful meanings for sharing and loyalty than are the meanings currently associated with these terms. For most this will not mean discarding their loyalty to country but we should be prepared to understand a Garry Davis, self-styled world citizen who has dramatized his stand by giving up citizenship in any country. All sorts of road blocks are put in the way of his operating as world citizen No. 000,001; for example, he has no country from which to secure a passport and the world does not yet have provisions for such a case.

We shall have to be our most creative selves to find ways to help children and youth stretch their meanings beyond the limits we have had set for us by habit and tradition. An example of imaginative teaching is furnished by the teacher who worked very carefully for days with

her first grade children going through the pledge of allegiance to the flag of the United States of America until, in their way, they understood every word and phrase. Then, with these children, she built a pledge of allegiance to the flag of the United Nations.

Other large tasks face us in teaching beyond our better selves. One of these is helping the oncoming generation to realize the potential of democratic institutions for responding to changed conditions. Another is helping the young ones who will follow in our footsteps to develop skills of international problem solving that will be adequate for their future needs. As Chisholm has put it so well, "There is no plan for the human race that can be evolved successfully from within one culture."

Somehow, also, we must be able to help our children to develop a view of themselves in relation to others that is quite different from the one which is rather generally held at present. We have grown up in a nation which has developed more resources and more comforts for the average man than has many another nation. In subtle and in not so subtle ways, citizens of our country have taken on feelings of superiority. Even more unfortunately, we have reflected these feelings in our dealings with newcomers to the country and with people we meet abroad. Within our borders, too, many of us have depended, for our feelings of worth, on having more possessions than our neighbors. Now, in the rather near future, it is predicted, the "haves" for the first time in history will become a majority. The forecast is that, within our country at least, most people will have plenty of leisure and plenty of income for needs and some luxuries. Can we help our children to build the values they will need for this kind of

world—self-respect that is not earned at the expense of another man's self-respect, ability to choose well in consuming more than one actually needs for subsistence, ability to spend a large amount of leisure time in ways that enrich the self and society?

Some are rather concerned over the phenomenon called "mass culture." They see a danger in too much conformity to group norms in everything from housing and dress, art and music, to politics and church attendance. Our way out cannot be to restrict the enjoyment of art and music and other adornments of civilization to a cultural elite. Neither can our choice be to try to put an end to all conformity. We are challenged to help our children to conform to our rules for living together which make it possible for people with many differences to live in harmony. Constructive use of conformity gives the individual a considerable degree of freedom because he knows what to expect of himself and what he can rather surely count on in the behavior of others. At the same time we are challenged to help our children continue to develop individual, creative approaches to their lives, to achieve a sense of direction which will guide them in their decision making.

How shall we help our children go beyond us in their learning? How shall we teach feelings and understandings and skills which we have not ourselves achieved? Two things we can do. We can arrange the kind of environment that is open for the development of new learning, new organization of experience. Then, in this setting, we can learn along with our children and, hopefully, keep ourselves somewhat up to date. In this kind of interaction lies the hope of teaching beyond ourselves.

Copyright © 1957 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.