

Curriculum Research

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New Horizons in Field Research: The Self Concept

HOW ANY person behaves at any moment, modern psychologists tell us, is dependent upon two things: how he sees himself and how he sees the world in which he lives. Education has done pretty well with the latter half of this equation. Recently psychologists have been discovering fascinating things about the other half of the problem, the self concept which opens exciting new horizons for education.

How an individual sees and values himself has important implications for every aspect of his behavior or misbehavior, in school or out. We now know, for example, that most failures in reading and spelling are not so much matters of incapacity to do these tasks as unfortunate attitudes about them. Most children who come to reading clinics do not come because they have difficulty with seeing. Rather, they cannot read because they believe they cannot read and believing themselves unable they behave in terms of the self concepts they possess. Thousands of people in our society are the unfortunate victims of their concepts of self. Seeing themselves as inadequate, they behave inadequately.

We are even discovering that whether or not a person is "adjusted" is primarily a function of the kinds of self concepts he possesses. Well-adjusted people see themselves as adequate while badly adjusted persons see themselves as fundamentally inadequate. As a result many psychologists have been seeking to define more precisely the nature of a truly

adequate self. Such an approach to the understanding of human adjustment is concerned very little with the problem of deviations from the average. A concept of adjustment in terms of conformity to an average is pretty unexciting. Who, after all, wants to be average? Instead, these new investigators are seeking to describe what the truly adequate person is like. What, they ask, is a truly self-actualizing, self-fulfilling, adequate personality like? Such a definition provides us a goal to shoot for. To my mind this is one of the most exciting and stimulating areas of modern psychological thought. What is more, these explorations have tremendous significance for education, for it is the adequate personality that education seeks to produce and the definitions of such personalities we develop must be the goals of education as well.

Whatever light the researchers in other disciplines can shed on this question must, necessarily, be of tremendous import to curriculum construction and revision. We need the very best concepts we can gather about how such personalities grow and develop. The self concept, we know, is learned. People discover who they are and what they are from the ways in which they have been treated by those who surround them in the process of their growing up. Outside the child's own family no institution in our society is in a better position to affect the growth and development of an individual's self concept than our public schools. Indeed, this is a major responsibility. With a clear

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conception of the kinds of self concepts we want, we can set about the business of constructing a curriculum likely to produce them.

The Adequate Personality

From the writings of Rogers, Maslow, Allport, Fromm, May, and from my own explorations on this question, the adequate personality seems to be characterized primarily by the following qualities:

1. *Adequate personalities see themselves in essentially positive ways.* They tend to see themselves as persons who are liked, wanted, acceptable, able and fundamentally worthy people. People who see themselves in such positive ways are the truly self-actualizing, well-adjusted persons of our society. People who see themselves in these ways are no trouble to anyone. They are effective, efficient, creative people. It is the people who see themselves as unliked, un-

wanted, unacceptable, unable, who fill our jails, our institutions and our mental hospitals. People who see themselves in positive ways have a great inner bulwark against the exigencies of life and are able to deal effectively and efficiently with events that confront them. People who see themselves in negative ways are the frightened, easily influenced, potentially dangerous people of our world.

2. *Adequate personalities see themselves accurately and realistically.* They have clear, precise and accurate pictures of themselves. They suffer no delusions of grandeur or undue humility. They are able to see themselves for what they are and value themselves in accurate and realistic terms. As a consequence they do not battle ghosts and goblins but are capable of utilizing themselves as effective instruments for the satisfaction of their own needs and others as well.

3. *Adequate personalities are capable*

of accepting themselves and others. There has been in recent years, a good deal of confusion over this term acceptance. We use the term here to mean simply the willingness to admit experience into awareness. Truly adequate people do not find it necessary to defend themselves against their experience. On the contrary, they accept what is and govern themselves accordingly. They do not find it necessary to deny what they are. This kind of acceptance should not be confused with resignation. Acceptance does not require a giving in; only a willingness to examine the nature of what is. The importance of this characteristic can hardly be overestimated. The willingness to "admit any and all aspects of reality" into consciousness makes it far more likely that such individuals will behave in effective and efficient ways, for behavior arising from more data is almost certain to be more accurate as well. Be-

cause they are open to more data, adequate personalities behave far more intelligently than their less adequate brethren. Modern research indicates that acceptance of self is closely correlated with acceptance of others as well.

4. *Adequate personalities are characterized by a high degree of identification with other people.* One of the most interesting characteristics of the adequate personality seems to be his possession of a very strong feeling that he is indeed, "his brother's keeper." That is to say, adequate personalities seem to have a very high degree of a feeling of oneness with others, a feeling of responsibility and empathy for large numbers of the rest of mankind. Unlike some of the rest of us they do not find themselves limited to feeling identified only with the white ones, or the black ones, or the Jews, or the Protestants, or the Catholics, or the Democrats, or the Republicans, but seem

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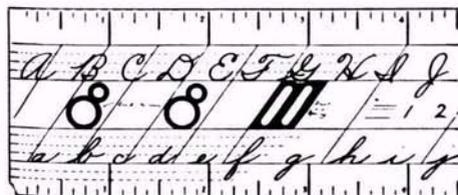
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able to understand and respect all kinds, sizes and varieties of fellow human beings. With such a strong feeling of identification adequate personalities are more likely to behave in ways that are good not only for themselves but for other people as well.

People with these four basic dimensions of the self concept seem to have a maximum number of the virtues and a minimum number of the vices characteristic of human beings. What is more, ways of perceiving one's self and the world in which one lives are not achieved by birth. They are learned. Indeed, Maslow found that most of the adequate personalities he could locate were well on in years, many of them over 60, a fact which I find extremely heartening and reassuring.

Words Are Not Enough

If this is what an adequate personality is like, what implications does this have for education? Well, it seems to me to provide us with a handy list of criteria in terms of which we can examine many of our current practices and carry on research leading to the development of more effective curricula. We need only convert the four characteristics we have listed above into questions to make them useful for curriculum exploration. We need only ask, for example: What are we doing to help people develop concepts of themselves which are positive, accurate, realistic, accepting of self, and identified with other people?

To find the answers to these questions, however, it will be necessary for us to change our usual method of approach. Since the self concept lies within the individual, it will be necessary for us to learn to see as others do. In order to judge the effectiveness of whatever we do, it will be necessary for us to ask the

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question "How does it seem from the point of view of the student?" We have vast mountains of research providing us with information about education and its processes as seen from the point of view of an outside observer. We have practically none in which the curriculum has been studied from the point of view of the learner. We know little or nothing about how what we do seems to the people we are hoping to affect.

Words are not enough in changing the concepts of self. You cannot help a person to believe he is acceptable simply by telling him. You have to *behave* as though he were. People learn their self concepts from the ways in which they have been treated by those who surround them, and this is a matter of experience. In examining how curricula are contributing to the adequacy of personality, therefore, it will be necessary that

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laymen, the bulletin should appeal to the latter group with its interpretation of how junior highs should avoid being "merely larger editions of elementary schools or junior editions of senior high schools."

• Fairfield Public Schools. *Educational Field Trip Manual*. Fairfield, Conn.: the Schools, 1956. 160 p.

A workshop group prepared this material to save time for teachers "planning to broaden the scope of their classroom environment through the field trip." Information appears on how to arrange field trips in Fairfield as well as in neighboring Connecticut and New York towns; included are suggestions for pupil-teacher preparation, educational values, and activities. The Fairfield Section index is by topic and includes a list of speakers who will come to the classroom. The Out-of-Town Section is alphabetical only. The manual represents a convenient resource for classroom teachers.

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we examine the nature of the activities we provide in terms of how they are experienced by the persons to whom they are occurring.

It has become fashionable in many educational circles to behave as though it were possible to explore the self concept simply by asking a student what he thought about himself. This confusion of the "self report" for the self concept is most unfortunate and can hopelessly confuse any research we attempt to do on this problem. The self concept is what a person deeply feels and *believes* he is. It is *not* what he *says* he is. What I feel I am and what I can say to you I am may be two quite different things. Students will not reveal the nature of their self

Other Materials Received

Educators Progress Service. *Elementary Teachers Guide to Free Curriculum Materials*. Fourteenth Edition. Randolph, Wis.: Educators Progress Service, 1957. 319 p. \$5.50.

Michigan Department of Conservation. *Conservation Teaching Aids: A Bibliography of Free and Inexpensive Bulletins, Books and Visual Materials*. Lansing, Mich.: the Department, 1957. 31 p.

New York City Board of Education. *Reading List for the Theme Center "The Self-Reliant Individual."* New York: the Board, 1957. 57 p.

Ohio State University, College of Education. *Resource Literature for Science Teachers*. Edited by John S. Richardson. Columbus, O.: the College, 1957. 65 p. \$1.00.

State Advisory Council on Educational Research. *1956 Addition to Annotated Bibliography on Education of Gifted Children*. Compiled by John C. Gowan. Sacramento: California Teachers Association, 1957. 43 p. \$1.00.

University of Tennessee, College of Education. *Mathematics Filmstrips*. Knoxville, Tenn.: the College, 1956. 8 p.

concepts solely on demand, even if they were aware of them, anymore than we would be willing to reveal our innermost selves to them on demand.

Determination of an individual's self concept cannot be approached directly. It can only be understood through a process of inference from the behavior we observe. We need far more research on the self concept and the effects of the school curriculum on it. The ideas which have been supplied to us by modern thinking in the field of psychological theory open whole new vistas for curriculum research and suggest new possibilities of finding new answers to old and difficult questions.

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