

# Mental Health and Education:

## A Play in Three Acts

by Eli M. Bower

WHAT interaction and transaction of the professional fields of education and mental health have taken place in the 20th century? Perhaps this can best be illustrated and hopefully understood through a three act play about a group of men who are fishing on the banks of a swiftly flowing stream.

In Act I of this apocryphal drama (a fisherman's tale, if there ever was one), a host of drowning children suddenly appear in mid river, desperately calling for help as they are carried rapidly downstream. The fishermen jump in and swim about wildly trying to save as many children as they can but succeed in intercepting only one or two who are about to go down for the third time. In Act II the fishermen decide to find places in the river where they can stand and where the current is less swift so they can pull out and save a greater number of children. As Act III opens, one fisherman is seen departing up-

stream. When asked by his companions where he is going, he replies, "I'm going upstream to find out who's throwing those kids in."

### A Beginning

Historically, Act I of the education-mental health drama opened at the same time that Clifford Beers was getting the first State Mental Health Association started in Connecticut. In Chicago of that year, 1908, Dr. William Healy held the first of a series of meetings to plan a child guidance clinic for juvenile offenders. Interestingly, also in the same year, Dr. Henry Goddard at the Vineland School in New Jersey began to use a new standardized scale devised by Drs. Binet and Simon to appraise the "mental age" of children. In this act or era of the child guidance clinic movement, the focus of activity was essentially one of doing something about juvenile delinquency. The curtain on Act I is still up as clinics, family service agencies, welfare departments and other community agencies attempt to increase

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their "fishing out" batting average with individuals and families moving rapidly downstream.

Act II opens sometime in the 1920's. With the help of the Commonwealth Fund and the National Committee for Mental Hygiene (now the National Association for Mental Health) a five year program for the "prevention of juvenile delinquency" had been launched. In part, the program grew out of the realization by mental health personnel in clinics, schools and family service agencies that they needed to redesign their strategy of help if they were to have any significant impact on the problem of "drowning" children. Specifically, the fishermen discovered that professionally they could do little without enlisting the active help of the spectators lining the banks. They also found, to their dismay, that many children and families about to go down for the third time had been traveling downstream for some time.

Finding a place up-river where children could be rescued earlier and more effectively seemed to be a reasonable first step to mental health personnel and educators. This objective led to what was probably the first large-scale research study to find out if such an idea could indeed be translated into an effective preventive effort. One such program—and perhaps the most notable—was developed and tried out in the Cambridge-Somerville area of Massachusetts (1). In this study, 650 predelinquent children, ages 9-11, were identified by the school; half were given special help and guidance over a period of 8 years (1938-1945). Early evaluations of the effectiveness of this program in reducing delinquency were less than enthusiastic at first (2), but later follow-up studies seem to be more encouraging (3).

Action in this act of the drama is still going on. Effectiveness of attempts to fish children out of the stream early rests on the ability of fishermen to discover platforms from which one can develop significant leverage for rescue. Such platforms would need to be placed in strategic places along the way so that children could be fished out no matter at what point of the river they fell in.

### In Midstream

As readers or spectators of, or as participants in this drama it would be difficult to ascertain the exact place in the play at which we have entered. It appears as if the curtain has gone up on Act III, yet Acts I and II are still being strongly played on different parts of the stage. To present this play in modern dress all three acts would need to be given simultaneously with our hero in Act III probably just beginning to turn his head upstream.

One could, if one wished, call the play *Angling Along Preventive Streams* with Act I, Tertiary Prevention, Act II, Secondary Prevention and Act III, Primary Prevention. One might bemoan the fact that what comes first should be last; but in any drama in which all scenes are played at once, one can become involved in any of the three acts.

The plot of the whole play is simple and uncomplicated—how do we keep children from succumbing to the destructive currents in the stream of life? Spectators have noted that not all children who fall into such currents are hopelessly unable to cope with the pressure. Some seem able to swim and manage to emerge downstream often better able to deal with other life crises. Since there is little one can do about making swiftly flowing streams disappear (as a

matter of fact, they may be necessary for irrigation and transportation), perhaps one may need to help children cope more effectively with slippery banks, rapid flow of events and the problem of keeping one's head above water.

In the early relationship between the mental health professions (psychiatry, psychology, social work, and psychiatric nursing) and educators, the former have often found themselves in stations far downstream while the educators have generally been plying their jobs farther upstream. While there have been some signals between the two groups along the stream, the coding and communication have often been muddled. Being closer to the beginning of things, educators had many more children to contend with; on the other hand, the mental health fishermen were able to study in depth many of those rescued and to send signals upstream which might have preventive possibilities.

Early attempts at collaboration between the two groups bogged down primarily because each circumscribed its tasks, purposes and general plan of operation in different territorial waters. It has become clear to both groups (at least to some in each group) that one can only help the other if one is willing to work within the general purposes and goals of the other.

For example, educators define their task as providing an optimal amount of cognitive and affective nutrients to all children. In the past, members of the mental health group may have seen their responsibility in this endeavor as rescuing the failures, the downstream drowners as it were. They would now, however, like to bring the full weight of their experience and professional know-how into the territory of the teacher, school administrator, and other school workers to

help them carry out *their educational tasks* more effectively for more children.

It has become clear that the search upstream must uncover ways of helping all children to swim scholastically. A child who fails in learning makes an outstanding candidate for a failure in living. Research studies by Ginzberg (4) and O'Neal and Robbins (5), to name only two from widely separate fields, have confirmed the relationship and to some extent the cause and effect transaction of school learning and mental health.

Ginzberg studied men rejected or separated from the armed forces and their emotional and educational background. He found that although a high level of educational attainment was no safeguard against emotional disorders, the lower the educational level of a region, the higher was its incidence of men rejected because of emotional disorders.

O'Neal and Robbins investigated a group of adults who were referred to a child guidance clinic 30 years ago. To make sense out of their findings they also selected a control group of adults who as children lived in the same neighborhood as the referred children and who were similar in age, sex, IQ, and race. It was intended to use the control group for comparison purposes only. The investigators, however, were struck by the fact that the simple criteria used to select the control group—no excessive absences, no full grades repeated, no disciplinary action recorded and an IQ of 80 or better—had yielded a strikingly healthy group. The success of the control group as adult citizens was particularly notable in view of the fact that the group was drawn largely from lower socioeconomic families and that a history of broken homes was found in one-third of the cases.

*(Continued on page 63)*

tive mental health related to school activities will allow an on-going study of the educational progress of children and youth. The national scope of the program will give it an opportunity to affect practice throughout the country. Further, the multidisciplinary character of the project will help in solution of major problems of coordination of services, making for readier focus on the instructional program.

#### Mental Health—Bower

(Continued from page 10)

Any society that insists and compels all its children to go to school must also insist that the experience be profitable and rewarding to all. The failure of a child to become an effectively functioning human being cannot be prevented *post facto*. The coming era of collaboration between mental health and education will be one of investigating together the nature of cognitive-affective experiences so that more effective growing and learning processes can be instituted in schools to increase the emotional robustness and cognitive effectiveness of coming generations. There will also continue to be collaborative efforts in discovering better ways of educating children with experiential, sensory, intellectual and emotional limitations as well as specific studies of the variety of educational processes needed to produce wise, responsible and free human beings.

It is doubtful that the curtain can be drawn on this drama in the near future. One is hopeful that one or two fishermen will find their way upstream and can make the most of an old Taoist inscription which reads: "He who would cleanse the current of a stream begins by clearing out its source. And he who would straighten the end of a process

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must commence by making its beginning correct."

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