

## Limits on

# Involvement in the Educative Process

HEALTHY, happy infants and preschoolers spend most of their time actively exploring the world about them. They wholeheartedly enjoy new learning situations. They seem to ask a million questions and are willing to try almost anything. If you have observed normal youngsters in the upper elementary grades or in secondary classrooms, you are no doubt aware that most students lose this unbridled enthusiasm for learning. What takes place in the classroom to bring about this profound change, to discourage children's creativity and involvement?

Going to school is a lot like joining the army. For the most part, school learning is an adult-run operation with one general and a lot of privates. Before beginning school the child usually determined both the schedule and the content of his learnings. He asked, "What makes it rain?" only if he was interested, and he was the one who decided whether to jump from the ladder to the floor.

When the child gets to school, however, adults begin to "call the shots." He

learns that in the classroom adults do most of the talking. Usually children speak only in response to a direct question. Children whose vocabulary and use of verb tenses are different from the teacher's, learn to reserve their talk for playtime and after school and become known as "nonverbal" children. Wendell Johnson has said that stuttering usually begins in the ear of the mother, not in the mouth of the child. Similarly, it is our thesis that children's lack of involvement in the educative process usually begins in the child's interaction with his teacher.

### Teachers Influence Involvement

Some of the teacher behaviors which have the greatest effect for good or ill on children's involvement in schooling do not have much to do with the curriculum. For example, on the first day in kindergarten Bruce was looking forward to showing his teacher that he had already learned to write his name. The teacher passed out paper and while doing so asked the children not to put anything on the paper, to wait for directions. Bruce proudly wrote his name at the top of the sheet. When the teacher saw this she held up the paper to show the class

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an example of what not to do. Then she tore up the paper. Subsequently she managed to get through the year without ever putting a star on any of this child's papers or pictures. Similarly, the teacher who spanked a child for eating her cookie before her sandwich, thus violating the teacher's sense of propriety, affected this child's learning environment.

Marilyn, a second grader, composed a little song about some Siamese cats. After her mother wrote it down for her, she showed her creation to her teacher. The teacher's only comment was, "The word is Si a mese, not Si mese; three syllables, not two." Perhaps I should not have been shocked when I recently found that the first chapter in a book, *The Difficult Child*, is titled, "The Creative Child."

On matters more clearly related to the curriculum, teachers commonly think that some aspects of the curriculum are more intellectual and more important than others. Unfortunately, their attempts to emphasize these areas often backfire. For example, teachers often do not realize that when they say, "If you get down to business and finish your writing assignment, we'll have time for art," they are also telling their pupils: "Art is pleasant, but unimportant; writing is important, but you won't like it." In time, children learn that only a fool would read more than is assigned or would write for the fun of it because reading and writing are unpleasant work.

Individual and group punishments often affect involvement in learning. If, for example, copying pages of the dictionary is used as a class punishment when a child or a group of children have misbehaved, will children be more, or less, likely to use this reference book? If we require a child to write spelling words ten times as punishment, learning be-

comes associated with punishment, and in the child's mind learning to spell becomes punishment.

Almost any child who is intelligent enough to have essentially mastered the English language before he begins school is smart enough to learn that in school children usually are expected to be passive, to be like sponges, those absorbent animals which look like plants. Pupils are expected to listen, to copy assignments neatly, to take notes, and to go along with the syllabus. At school, the usual teaching-learning roles are reversed. Adults, not children, ask almost all questions except procedural questions, and adults decide when and what tasks will be attempted.

### Self-Selection Affects Learning

Although we know that humans learn most efficiently when working on self-chosen tasks in which they are ego-involved, only occasionally is there time for this at school. The syllabus grows thicker every year so if we are to "cover the ground," we must increase the pace and give the child more work to do at home. Too seldom is the teacher's, "We don't have time to discuss that today," followed by, "But we can set aside a few minutes tomorrow to look into that."

Occasionally the student may get to work on a problem in which he is vitally interested, but he must learn to put the project aside when the hands on the clock reach a certain position. Further, at school he must always finish any task he begins, not to his satisfaction, but to that of the teacher. "Responsibility," by which we mean carrying adult-chosen tasks through to completion, is the highest virtue. Educational psychologists tell us that humans learn most efficiently when working on self-chosen tasks in

## Need for Flexibility

which they are ego-involved, but there is seldom any time during school for self-chosen tasks. Students in secondary school and college are allowed a few elective choices, but basically we feel that only Ph.D.'s are sufficiently mature to decide what they already know and what they still need to learn.

Students of learning tell us that we learn most rapidly when we are faced with a problem which we would like to solve, but somehow it is easier to begin with a syllabus. Unfortunately, teachers are faced with the fact that children are not acquainted with what is to be learned at the various grade levels. The anthropologist, Jules Henry, tells us how his first grade teacher met this problem. When she asked him to pick out three letters from among those on her desk in order to make a word, he unfortunately picked out the w, a, and r and spelled war. Of course, he could not receive credit because, "We haven't had that word yet, have we?" An ordinary child might have become less keenly interested in learning new words as a result of this experience, but perhaps the teacher felt that she was stimulating the child to look forward to the day when he too could read the syllabus and find out what he would learn next.

Many pupils are in effect told over and over again, "You wouldn't be able to understand that now, but that will be covered in the next grade." Do responses such as these lead to passivity and lack of involvement? Perhaps they are effective in gradually reducing the numbers of questions children ask. Implicitly the children are assured that eventually their questions, even if unasked, will be answered. The implication is that if the question is not covered by the teacher it will come up later; if it does not, it is unimportant.

In addition to having some measure of control over what is learned and when it is learned, there is a need for more flexibility in how the child learns. School systems shift from one method of teaching reading or mathematics to another, and each time we find that the new method reaches some children who were previously not learning very efficiently. When will we be wise enough to recognize that children do not all learn in the same manner, that if John seems unable to learn by method A that we should diagnose his specific learning problem and shift to method B or C?

At present, if a child moves from one school system to another, he must learn to divide by another method. This in itself is not harmful, but sometimes the child gets the feeling that his old method is not just different, it is wrong. When the teacher says, "In my class you will do it this way," most children will stop looking for alternative solutions; they become passive.

Teachers discourage learning if they see themselves rather than the child at the center of the learning process. Teachers sometimes fail to see themselves merely as expeditors in the child's quest for understanding of the world about him. If a student suggests an alternative or disagrees with them, they feel attacked. At the elementary school this may result in, "The correct answer is Cuba. Don't argue, just put it down."

In college, the professor's response must be slightly more sophisticated. The professor who wants to avoid embarrassing questions and create the impression that he is the expert says, "Please don't interrupt the lecture, but I will be very glad to answer your questions after class." If a teacher says, "You didn't study

for me last night did you?", in effect he is telling the student that he, the teacher, is responsible for determining what learning will take place, and that he, rather than the student, is responsible for organizing the student's knowledge.

When something which was difficult becomes understandable and then easy, a child feels good about it. He tries it again and again. He wants to show others that he has mastered the new skill, but usually he is soon ready to move on to a more complex skill. On the playground or in instrumental music, a child usually moves at his own pace in learning new skills and in these subjects children often demonstrate that involvement leads to a high level of accomplishment. But in the classroom, ready or not, instruction in division begins on Thursday. Those children who already know how to divide must listen to the teacher explain it time and time again for those who do not understand. Is it surprising that children's attention wanders? When the teacher finally announces, "Now, you may proceed to work the problems on pages. . . .," everyone works the same problems. In most schools, there is no "placing out" of an assignment or a course. There are few rewards for listening carefully the first time and thus achieving early mastery.

There are, however, some punishments for being unusually slow. The pupil who failed to learn division when the others did comes not to expect a great feeling of satisfaction when he eventually "makes the grade." Sometimes the teacher's "motivating" response destroys the satisfaction. Sometimes the teacher communicates, "At last—I thought you'd never get it. Well, you're still six months behind, so you'd better get down to business if you're going to learn long division before June." Students of learn-

ing say that specific positive feedback gives the child a sense of accomplishment, but can you call it accomplishment when he is six months below grade level? If not, don't expect involvement.

### Limits on Involvement

Should positive feedback be reserved for the bright? Would children make more progress if we learned to stop responding, "right," "wrong," or "you got a C," and substituted, "Bill, you seem to understand the process of . . . because you answered numbers 2 and 5 correctly, but you still seem to be having difficulty with. . . . What part of the process don't you understand?" If testing situations are used only to evaluate students negatively, much of their value is lost.

Involvement is restricted when we deal too early with problems distant in time, place, and psychological distance from the lives of our pupils. A group of Negro fifth graders can study the economy of Nigeria; I have seen it done. Yet, would not a unit on the wages paid for various types of work in their own city have resulted in greater student involvement? Let us make our problems as meaningful as possible.

Our spiraling curriculum often reduces children's involvement in school. We come back to certain subjects time and time again. As one junior high student put it, "In the second grade we studied the Pilgrims and it was new. In the fourth grade we studied them again and I learned some more. In the sixth grade it was review, and in the eighth it was boring. When are we going to stop learning what we already know and start exploring what we don't know?"

Finally, choosing the same four or five bright youngsters to take the lead in class

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2. A. T. Jersild. *When Teachers Face Themselves*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1955.

3. S. Milgram. "Behavioral Study of Obedience." *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67: 371-78; October 1963.

4. D. A. Prescott. *Emotion and the Educative Process*. Washington, D. C.: American Council on Education, 1938.

5. B. E. Ruebush. "Anxiety," in *62nd Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part I, Child Psychology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963.

6. M. H. Schrupp and C. M. Jerde. "Teacher Growth in Attitudes Toward Behavior Problems of Children." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 44: 203-14; 1953.

7. E. K. Wickman. *Children's Behavior and Teachers' Attitudes*. New York: Commonwealth Fund, 1928.

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#### Why a Taxonomy—Darling

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omy serves to generate significant and worthwhile questions which need resolving. The question is, can they be resolved? The authors of the taxonomy claim that the central research problem is how to measure affective behavior with greater validity, reliability, and objectivity.

What behavior will serve as evidence that a child is showing *commitment to a value* rather than merely a *preference for a value*? How does a researcher determine when a child is achieving the *conceptualization of a value* which is affective behavior rather than only cognitive conceptualization? There are many big problems to be solved in order that the affective taxonomy be made researchable.

This is the task of researchers. The writers of the taxonomy have done their task. Now it is up to researchers and

practitioners to do the necessary changing and refining.

Why a taxonomy of affective learning? The taxonomy can serve as an aid in clarifying the school's responsibility for promoting learning in the affective realm. The taxonomy may provide practical help to teachers and curriculum workers. Finally, it may further the study of education.

If schools are to meet the needs of an ever changing society, the schools must be in a position periodically to change their educational objectives. The two taxonomies lend themselves well to this task because they give visibility, structure, and definition to objectives which represent current thinking. As the purposes of the schools change, so ought the taxonomies or their replacements.

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#### Involvement—Liddle

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plays, pageants, and PTA spectaculars destroys the motivation of the vast majority of children who know that they will never be chosen. Let us realize that a finished production and a good learning experience are sometimes antagonistic. Let us decide whether drama, music, and similar activities are primarily public relations events or learning opportunities for children, and act accordingly.

The fact that we must educate children in groups rather than individually places some limitations on the degree to which we can build the curriculum on children's interests. Nevertheless, we should provide every child with some time to explore a subject of interest to him as deeply as he wants. Children are going to know more about some subjects than others when they arrive at high school and college. Let us stop lamenting this and start to encourage it.

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