



Human Interaction: A Source of Affective Learnings

RECENT literature dealing with "disadvantaged" children has focused on pupil interests, attitudes and values as these relate to school learning. Jackson and Strattner (*Review of Educational Research*, December 1964, p. 513) summarize these noncognitive factors believed to impair or enhance learning:

Learning effectiveness is enhanced by the possession of particular psychological strengths, such as positive attitudes toward school, realistic achievement goals, and feelings of self-confidence.

Values Pupils Hold About School

These affective variables operate in the lives of all children, but they are especially important in disadvantaged children who often have little motivation for school learning. Many have (a) low values regarding school and the outcomes of schooling, and (b) unhealthy

feelings about self and others. Following are a few simple suggestions for strengthening those motivational factors through a high quality of human interaction in classroom and community.

Milton Rosenberg ("Cognitive Structure and Attitudinal Affect," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, No. 53, 1956; p. 637-72) suggests that a "response to an object is rooted in a cognitive structure of beliefs about that object's potential for enhancing or hampering progress toward desired goals." If children have come to believe that the school does not like them or that school learning will be of little use to them, they will not learn well in school. For such children, the image of school and teacher must be changed.

Since it is people whose feelings and behaviors invest the learning situation with its real meaning, it is people working productively together who must create the new image. In this process, "school people must take the lead," says Patricia Sexton (*Education and Income, Inequalities in Our Public Schools*, 1961, p. 111-12).

*An older child
helps a younger child
become accustomed
to her school surroundings.*

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Teacher Leadership for Desirable Interaction¹

It is necessary to let children and parents know they are wanted, needed, respected, and that much is expected from them in return. One teacher tells pupils about her own family and things they do together. Another says, "I follow up the placement of a child new to the school by a visit to one of his classes, or a chat in the hall." Many schools assign "new" children to a "buddy" who helps them become adjusted to the new school home. Some teachers use able children from higher grades to work with special class projects, and sometimes with small groups of slow learners.

Many teachers say they always explain "why" when they have to do something that affects children. They agree that it is not so much *what* teachers say as *how* it is said. One teacher illustrated this:

I recall a young male teacher in my school . . . quieting his cafeteria line by saying, "children," and the class responding jokingly, but respectfully, "yes, Father." Only this teacher could talk this way and get results—and only to this teacher could the children respond the way they did. They knew he would understand.

Teachers understand also that other adults contribute to children's feelings about school. They visit the home (preferably when the child is not in trouble) to "get to know parents" and let parents get to know them. They invite parents to school for activities involving the children and for discussions with other parents. They work with parents and other adults on community improvement projects sponsored by block clubs or

¹Many of the "promising practices" and teacher quotations cited here were drawn from a recent "Survey of Teacher Behaviors Deemed To Be Effective, with Disadvantaged Children," prepared by the writer of this article. Specific schools are not named.



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The author's son and a friend together start their science explorations.

community councils. They do so recognizing both a lack of leadership in the neighborhood and a need to develop indigenous leadership.

Many adults feel they are not welcome at school. Many an "unfortunate" incident has grown out of a situation in which an inarticulate parent seeking a simple bit of information was rebuffed by an overly defensive school person. Of course, a certain amount of wariness on both sides is understandable when there has been little two-way communication between school and community. It should be remembered always, however, that schools are supported (though sometimes inadequately) by and for the communities they serve.

Promising School-wide Approaches

One school holds a series of luncheons to which are invited neighborhood ministers, businessmen and civic and organizational leaders. Every school employee is recognized as a human relations agent, thus all are involved in the luncheons. Name tags are worn proudly by

secretaries, maintenance men, teachers and administrators alike. There are no speeches so there is more opportunity for informal conversation. Comments indicate that the guests approve and appreciate the educational experience and share it widely in the community.

Some schools welcome "new" parents with special recognition at a P.T.A. meeting or, in some cases, with special orientation sessions dealing with school policies. Such practices assume added importance for many of these parents who feel alienated from the mainstream of community influence. They view sincere recognition and welcome from the school as an important step toward "belonging."

Many schools extend their function to include broad social action in the community. One such school in an older part of the city initiated a massive effort to fight the encroaching blight in its service area. Teachers and administrators worked with parents in committees and block clubs, and interceded with appropriate municipal agencies on behalf of the largely inarticulate neighborhood leaders. In the process, local residents came to look upon school people as friendly, concerned, helpful human beings.

This cooperative process has been fruitful in the development of "Youth Behavior Codes." Usually the school or P.T.A. plans ways by which teachers,



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*Group activities help children gain
a feeling of "belonging."*

parents and young people can have face-to-face discussion of behaviors which they value. Agreements reached regarding homework, dress, public conduct, dating, etc., are generally sound, but more important is the good spirit and human warmth engendered in the process.

Even the disadvantaged neighborhood is rich in its human resources. Many schools make use of these resources in their classrooms. At one level, citizens are brought in to talk to children; in other cases, they work more directly with children. Fathers with military service in a foreign land, or knowledge of mechanics or carpentry; and mothers with sewing or weaving skills are used in a variety of school projects and study units. In many neighborhoods, parents with a high school education, and less, volunteer for tasks such as reading to small children, lunchroom supervision and tutoring.

A variation of this practice is found in a few schools where "senior citizens" are used as classroom resources. As a result these schools report that their youngsters seem to feel less need to wage war on the older folk. Similarly, the old timer, after a session with hammer and saw in the construction of a classroom "store," has been known to straighten up, mop his brow and remark that "maybe school isn't such a bad place after all." He (the old timer) may not promise to vote for the next millage election, but chances are he will not go out speaking against it, as he did the last time.

The school's involvement with its community does not automatically ensure that children will learn in school, although the parent who said, "Since I started coming to school, my daughter seems to be doing better," gives us encouragement. Yet there is an accumula-

tion of good feeling essential to a healthy image of the teacher and the school. There is good reason to believe that the major job of working with children in school can be done better when purposeful, healthy interaction has created a school-community climate of mutual confidence and respect.

Improving Pupils' Feelings

What a person is undoubtedly is affected by many *things* as well as people. The poet Whitman had this in mind when he wrote, "A child went forth every day, and the first object he looked upon that object he became, and that object became a part of him. . . ." It is equally certain, however, that a child must *see* himself through the eyes of other people. Long ago, Gordon Allport (*Personality: A Psychological Interpretation*, 1937, p. 173) noted that a child's need for "self respect and self-esteem" requires careful nurture from family and society. This suggests that familial love and support as a source of positive self-reference must be reinforced by acceptance of the individual in society as a whole.

Even children from so-called "favorable" environments encounter risk to self-esteem upon entering the school setting. They must face the possibility of damaging answers to such questions as: Will the principal be friendly? How will the teacher feel about me? What will other children think of me? Will I be able to do what they want? If answers to these questions are crucial to the self-concept of children from favored milieux, they are doubly important to disadvantaged children. Teachers who are aware of their importance to these children offer clues to desirable practices.

Teacher Leadership

It is important to learn each child's name and correct pronunciation as early as possible; and use it as often as possible. Knowing, and using, the name of a child who is accustomed to being called "boy" or "hey-you" may be a shock to him, but it aids, however minutely, in the formation of his self identity. Similarly, teachers urge that each child be treated courteously—"thank you," "please," and a smile when he enters or leaves the room. Some teachers select an outstanding pupil and feature his picture in the foyer of the school, accompanying the photograph with an appropriate write-up *by a fellow student*. One teacher reports a chalkboard on which she records pupils' birthdays for the month. Some teachers also send cards, or have the class send letters on birthdays, or when there is illness or misfortune in the child's home.

Many school people stress the importance of a place in the school which the child can call his very own. Some schools respond to this need with a "cubby" in which the child can store his personal belongings. In others, teachers "reserve" a special space on a bulletin board for each child. Each week the child selects what he feels is his best work and puts it on the board himself. Many teachers urge praise for a job well done, in any activity—out of school as well as in school.

Great stress is placed on the use of a variety of "feedback techniques" in improving pupil self-image. The old "show and tell" device takes on new meaning when used as a means of encouraging the disadvantaged child to verbalize the frustrations in his life experiences, as well as his accomplishments. Role playing also is used as a

means of helping children to examine themselves in a relatively non-threatening manner. This is but one of many group activities which can be helpful to the purpose under discussion. It should be noted that in all of the latter practices, the key is pupils speaking—to each other and to the teachers, with teachers listening—really listening.

Promising School-wide Approaches²

The task of improving the pupil's self-concept is further complicated when the pupil is a member of a racial or ethnic minority. A prime reason for this lies in the nature of traditional school instructional materials, according to Otto Fineberg (*Saturday Review*, February 16, 1963). A teacher of Mexican-American children agrees:

By the time our children reach the sixth grade, and even before, they are looked down upon by other segments of our culture. Some have heard and accept the fallacy that Mexicans are bad. They believe this because they have been told so.

Similarly, the story is told of a six-year-old Negro girl who took home her first reader, excitedly stretched out on the floor to scan its many-pictured pages and then, with a puzzled look on her face, asked, "Mommy, where am I in this book?" Receiving no satisfactory answer, the child took her crayons and colored some of the pink faces brown.

The teacher of Mexican-American children found a textbook unit which provided information about Mexican culture. Her children wrote a play and put it on for parents; and afterward, her

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² For a fuller treatment of the influence of school materials on pupil self-image see Charles E. Stewart, "Correcting the Image of Negroes in Textbooks," *Negro History Bulletin*, November 1964.

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pupils "seemed to have a better concept of their rich heritage." A teacher of Negro children did not have available a unit, or even a chapter, on the history of Negro contributions. Her class also wrote a play entitled, *All About Us* (later published as a book), but their effort required much cooperation from librarians, community groups and scholars having knowledge of the Negro in our history.

Implicit in the foregoing discussion are ways in which children improve their feelings about others while improving their feelings about self in interaction with peers, school people and other community adults. Another potential for pupil-pupil interaction is the *interschool* pupil exchange, including that of public and parochial pupils. Examples range

from "one time" visits between safety patrols or an exchange of school assemblies, to a year-long program of exchange between fourth graders of two schools—one white, the other Negro. Pupil evaluations of the latter example emphasized changes in their beliefs and feelings about each other.

Our disadvantaged children must be given the technical competence required for productive service in today's world. They need also the human values required to direct and enrich their technical competence. Improving the quality of human interaction in school and community will contribute directly or indirectly to both. Nor will the disadvantaged be the only instruments for transmitting the benefits of human interaction. School people too will find themselves changed in the process, and the total community will be the better for it.

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