

Poverty and Reeducation

He who has more—or less—than another . . .

POVERTY and reeducation imply that those who are poor may possibly become rich and that those who are ignorant may perhaps become wise. Yet composite equality in time and degree and by everybody, one by one by one for the whole mass, is impossible! Of course. What is there to be said, therefore, which has not already been said over and over—until we now live by its implication as if we truly and consciously believe it? Do we wish to take a look at poverty and reeducation for what they really are and for what they actually mean and, by doing so, run the risk of coming face to face with consequent and inescapable indications of what we ought therefore to do? I believe we do.

Of Mind and of Means

Who is poor? He who has less than another? He who has less than he might wish to have and might possibly acquire? Poverty is by definition a comparative term. Webster says poverty is "Any deficiency in what is desired" and also is "Lack of some particular element or quality." Had I written a dictionary I would have said of poverty, "Any state of being at less than the best possible for

every individual and for the entire mass of creation of which each is one essential factor."

Less of what? Less of material goods, especially money, and all the other elements of what we in the United States call the "good life" is the usual answer. Yet this answer is incomplete. As a matter of fact, this answer itself is a valid measure of our lack of vision, our lack of desire, our lack of hope, our lack of "education"—meaning development. Poverty of mind and of spirit are related to poverty of means to supply material needs and wants. However, poverty of mind and spirit are elemental and basic and of prior concern in any hope or plan of successfully involving man in a search for fulfillment which will eradicate the poverty of each day just past and will create new wealth by comparison in each new day to come. This is true, of course, because the battle is never permanently won!

If poverty—and ignorance is poverty of the most basic sort—is any deficiency in what is needed and desired, then man

P. F. Ayer is Executive Secretary, Council of the Southern Mountains, Inc., College Box 2307, Berea, Kentucky.

will always be poor today in terms of what he should have and should become tomorrow. Similarly, he may, if he chooses, always be rich today compared with what he had, and compared to what he was, yesterday.

All this has been said before. It is implicit in what we write and in what we say and in what we hold up as the ideals and goals of organized education—the school system. Yet we persist in a myopic and undignified scramble to select and graduate only those who will do us and our methods and our system honor in their graduate achievement, by their professional status, or with their vocational earnings.

Operating within this habitual reaction pattern, reeducation is taken to mean simply the retraining of people. Through such retraining, they are expected to react without too much thought to new circumstances as they occur and to perform skillfully and for the highest pay possible new and routine tasks, while remaining unconcerned about any great human purpose or ultimate human destiny. Thus poverty, deep poverty of the mind and spirit, may become the norm even when and where economic prosperity and material security have been temporarily achieved.

To Nurture Life

First, then, we must recognize and really understand and believe that eagerness to see and to experience with all the senses, to know, to dream, to try and to fail and to try again is synonymous with being alive. Thus our business—if we are to combat poverty with anything like an even chance to prevail—is to nurture this basic and almost but not quite indestructible life factor. This we must do throughout life—from birth through early child-

hood, in “preschool” situations, in “schools,” among dropouts, for teachers and parents and people of every kind and condition.

When this inborn motivation has atrophied or has been practically destroyed, we must then rearouse in mankind, one by one by one, a new version of what he may perhaps now become—and, of course, have—which he now is not and does not now have. We must develop effective functional interrelationships between every man and his environment, including his friends and also those he believes to be his enemies and those he despises for no real cause except that he does not know them and erroneously imagines himself to be in competition with them even unto the death of one or the other.

If I have not lost your interest and—hopefully—your partnership already, think with me briefly about the specific problems about which one would be expected to write under this topic. Poverty in all its easily seen aspects—inadequate diet, poor housing, wretched clothing, no spending money, limited experience in the realm of concepts and communication of abstract ideas, uniform upper and middle class goals beyond mental reach and any reasonable hope of practical achievement—is the great factor of discrimination in this nation. Lack of intellectual potential is not disproportionately the norm among the poor and the children of the poor.

Rather an environment favorable to the development of intellectual potential does not exist for the poor either in preschool years or in early school experience or in the home and the community. Social acceptance is denied by the peer-age group. Faith in and shared responsibility for the recognition, development, and appropriate reward of full develop-

ment of those who live in poverty are not universally evident among professional educators and the economically and socially secure segment of the whole population to whose position of advantage most education and reeducation are oriented. Poverty, therefore, is both the cause and the result of poverty—poverty of the mind, and of the spirit and of material goods.

"Reeducation," quoted straight from the title of this statement, means "re-education" of those whose formal schooling—or the lack of it in either or both time and quality—leaves them at this moment in history unable to be needed, functional, and effective participants (for pay) in this society. It means compensatory education in the so-called preschool years, as a part of the public school responsibility and function or otherwise provided by society. It means a new faith in the possible intellectual—not merely "vocational"—potential of each child and adult and therefore adaptations and readaptations in our methods until we discover the key to the ongoing interest and continuing development of each and every one. It means working with the individual in school, after he has graduated, while he is employed, while he is unemployed, as he functions as a parent and a citizen, and as he tends to sign off and coast the rest of the way.

I purposely do not propose a plan or a curriculum because the irresistible and often valid response to specifics is "that wouldn't work here"; and with this attitude it would not work. What is required is that we arouse ourselves out of our satisfaction with our poverty of ideas and go on from here according to each particular situation and the possibilities it offers and will tolerate.

Reeducation under the compelling pressures of vast and deep poverty also

means reeducation of those of us who have been right here on the job while this present situation came to pass. Just as the undereducated and unemployed and unneeded and poor person must be reeducated in order to become again a needed and a contributing and a self-supporting member of society, so also must the educated and the employed and the economically secure person be reeducated to understand the true nature of poverty.

To Begin the Dream

We must come to understand the true and relatively unlimited potential of each individual and to understand the total interrelationship and interdependence of all. We must begin to dream of what society must now do to make life a process of becoming rich tomorrow compared with our individual and mass poverty today. We must come to be concerned about our poverty tomorrow compared with our individual and social "wealth"—body, mind and spirit—on the next day after that.

I am often called an idealist by those who mean to render a negative judgment by this term. They do me honor, though unwittingly, because there is but one alternative to idealism and that is acquiescence to poverty in its broadest meaning. I am also often told, "It is not that easy!" To this I reply, "Who said it is easy? Nobody, that's who!"

Must the conquest of poverty and ignorance be easy to be the only alternative to defeat? Must poverty—absolute and relative—be accepted as inevitable and beyond all hope of improvement merely because our present system of values and our present habitual and relatively comfortable methods have not yet been able

(Continued on page 618)

Reeducation—Ayer

(Continued from page 542)

either to alleviate it or to recognize our responsibility to do so? Has man reached the end of his road because we excuse ourselves by invalid clichés about the poor and the ignorant?

Mankind—one by one by one and en masse—is poor in body, mind and spirit compared with what he could have, but may yet, become. Poverty (in personal income) and therefore retraining (to be temporarily competent in some new "job"—for pay) are matters of importance to give thought to in this world of increasing numbers of people faced by a decreasing need for what they have always been needed to do. Genuine understanding of man's inadequacy and effective reeducation which amounts to a daily becoming something more nearly what man was created to be are the two factors basic to any hope of overcoming gross poverty—both specific and general—by education worthy of the name.

Kindergarten—Olson & Larson

(Continued from page 558)

undoubtedly had a great effect upon the curriculum as it was presented to the children, it is necessary to describe her. She had obtained her degree in primary and nursery school education, and was working on a master's degree in mental retardation. Miss R. had nine years' teaching experience.

Her attitudes toward the experimental kindergarten were open and accepting. Her teaching style was informal, with use of a wide range of vocal tones and facial expressions. Often, her face communicated nuances of emotion without the assistance of a spoken word. She laughed

and scowled often. She spoke firmly one moment, gently and softly the next.

The preplanning and post-evaluation of field trips were marked with Miss R.'s commitment to variety. She activated multi-sensory stimulation through the use of many projects and techniques within a short time span. Discussion, singing, rhythms, cut-paper projects, taped talks, creative drama, and role playing were standard. Free play periods were not restricted to a set time allotment.

In summary, this article describes a curriculum specifically designed to meet the assumed educational needs of culturally deprived kindergarten children. A theoretical framework based upon the psychological differences between deprived and typical elementary school children was described. Discussion also considered activities, materials and the teacher.

References

- Anne Anastasi. "Heredity, Environment, and the Question 'How?'" *Psychological Review* 65, No. 4, 1958.
- Basil Bernstein. "Social Class and Linguistic Development: A Theory of Social Learning." *Education, Economy and Society*. A. H. Halsey, J. Floud and C. A. Anderson, editors. Glencoe: The Free Press, 1961.
- Michael Harrington. *The Other America*. New York: Macmillan, 1962.
- Samuel A. Kirk. *Early Education of the Mentally Retarded*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958.
- Richard Larson and James L. Olson. "A Method of Identifying Culturally Deprived Kindergarten Children." *Exceptional Child*, November 1963.
- William Raschaert. Personal conversation. Detroit, 1962.
- Patricia Sexton. *Education and Income*. New York: The Viking Press, 1961.
- Florence B. Stratemeyer et al. *Developing a Curriculum for Modern Living*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1957.

Copyright © 1965 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.