

How Tough Are the "Tough" Schools?

IN MOST of the larger urban communities of the United States there are schools which may appropriately be referred to as "tough." Considering what Americans want of their schools and compared with the "ideal school" often presented to teacher trainees, these "tough schools" seem to fall far short of community expectations.

Good schools are among the most important bulwarks of American society. Understandably, therefore, the ideal school which is presented in the teacher education classroom conforms to this value. The visitations and practice-teaching opportunities of teacher trainees give added support to the alleged reality or near reality of the ideal school. The facilities, programs, services and personnel of such a school are said to be well adapted to the transmission of information, skills, attitudes and values which conform to the more dominant norms and expectations of the community. Considering the nature of American society, this means, in effect, that schools are expected to be middle-class oriented.

As already indicated, many schools fall far short of community expectations. They deviate significantly from the ideal school of the textbook and of the teacher-preparation classroom. These "tough

The disadvantaged youngster does not see himself reflected in the standard school curriculum

schools" tend to be concentrated in the slums and socioeconomic ghettos and their students are principally of minority group status.

By comparison with suburban schools, for example, "tough schools" appear to be significantly inferior. Quite often their plants, instructional materials, specialized programs, and professional services are markedly inadequate. In addition, such schools are often architecturally obsolete, inadequately ventilated, poorly lighted, and surrounded by physical dilapidation and unsightliness.

Usually, students in "tough schools" are economically disadvantaged. Many of them appear to be at best only moderately interested in learning. A considerable proportion of these students are "underachievers," are regarded as "incorrigible" and are said to be "slow-learners"; some of them are even said to be

Burton W. Gorman is Professor of Education; Oscar Ritchie is Professor of Sociology, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.

"unteachable." Certainly these schools provide a high proportion of truants and dropouts, and the rate of teacher-transfer requests is high. Yet do these inadequacies, real and alleged, preclude optimal learning by children in these schools? The answer to this question is of crucial significance.

Report of a Study

In the light of the American value of equal educational opportunities, the observable inadequacies found in "tough schools" require an examination of the impact these inadequacies exert upon the learning process. Aside from the inadequacies that are material and those related directly to the curriculum, any differentials in the scholastic achievement and self-discipline on the part of children in the "tough schools" are, of course, worthy of serious study.

Disregarding, for the present, any direct concern with the shortcomings in physical, material, service, and personnel factors, this paper is concerned mainly with the learning process—with the teachability of children in "tough schools." To get some insight into this problem, the attention of the writers, along with the field study of a select group of teacher trainees, was directed toward the organization and procedure, the program and personnel, and the rapport and relationships in a selected school.

The Setting

Viewing the teaching of the culturally disadvantaged from close range, a perspective which the Cleveland Hough Project provided, the elements of solution are both simple and complex. They are simple in broad outline, so simple that one wonders why they were not

recognized and attacked at least fifty years ago. Certainly the problem has been present longer than that. Elements of the problem are complex and difficult of realization, however, because they involve changes in belief and changes in attitude. The purpose here is to examine these elements one at a time, and to reflect the forms in which nine youthful teacher trainees met them.

Four young men and five young women participated. Typically, the age was 20, the Kent State University level was the first quarter of the junior year, and each of the participants had had at that time only one of his professional courses, educational psychology. The project covered the eleven and one-half weeks of the Spring Quarter, 1964. The project was centered in the Addison Junior High School (7-9), which enrolls approximately 1,900 pupils, and which lies in the heart of the Hough area, largest culturally disadvantaged community in Cleveland. The trainees, however, made visits to various other Cleveland area schools for purposes of comparison. A Community Action for Youth project had already been in progress at this school for three years. Trainees were under the immediate supervision of that organization's educational director, James Tanner. The participants were visited, additionally, in regular weekly seminars and conferences by four Kent State professors representing the Departments of Sociology and Anthropology, Special Education, and Secondary Education.

The Observations

The elements which loom large but which are so intertwined and interdependent as to make any separation a bit artificial, are presented below as questions which should challenge us.

1. *Is great human potential more*

widely distributed among human beings than has been commonly supposed? What if human capacity for mental development does not fit the Gaussian curve, as presently conceived? Perhaps the curve of human potential is abnormal rather than normal. It is quite possible that the greatest educational revolution now in progress is that which is quietly reassessing human intelligence. It has been generally known among students of education and psychology for a generation that I.Q. tests measure acculturation rather than native ability or capacity for development. Perhaps such tests tell little or nothing about how far the pupil can go, but only give some indication of the point at which work with him must start.

This is one of many areas in education in which past emphases may have brought forth wrong answers because wrong questions have been asked. Not all of the ancient thinkers regarded human potential as rare. Quintilian, whose birthdate paralleled that of the crucifixion of Christ, wrote as follows:

... there is absolutely no foundation for the complaint that but few men have the power to take in the knowledge that is imparted to them, and that the majority are so slow of understanding that education is a waste of time and labour. On the contrary you will find that most are quick to reason and ready to learn. Reasoning comes as naturally to man as flying to birds, speed to horses and ferocity to beasts of prey: our minds are endowed by nature with such activity and sagacity that the soul is believed to proceed from heaven. Those who are dull and unteachable are as abnormal as prodigious births and monstrosities, and are but few in number.¹

Present day educational authorities in Russia refuse to recognize any sizable

¹ Robert Ulich, editor. *Three Thousand Years of Educational Wisdom*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950. p. 103-104.

segment of Russian youth as being unteachable. Learning failures are laid at the doors of the teacher and the pupil. That the Russians may be right about this is not beyond the realm of possibility.

2. *What can the culturally disadvantaged child learn?* Like the middle-class child, he can learn those things that lie adjacent to or which represent modifications, refinements, and further interpretations of his real-life experiences. Here he is usually handicapped, of course, by having a middle-class teacher who sets her examples in the context of middle-class life and whose experiences are foreign to the kinds the pupil has had. Likewise, the textbooks. As early as 1915 it was perfectly clear to John Dewey "that education is a constant reorganizing or reconstructing of experience."² It follows then that it is impossible to know what any person at any stage of his educational development can learn until something about his previous experience is known, appreciated, understood, and taken into account in the instruction.

Theoretically, this truth is widely recognized in educational practice. The total sequential pattern of educational organization is based upon such recognition. The listing of prerequisites in college catalogs is *prima facie* evidence of its academic sanctity.

While honored in organizational practice, however, the idea that instruction must be related to the past experiences of individual class members has often been treated casually, sometimes totally ignored. For the reasons stated previously, the culturally disadvantaged youngster does not see himself reflected in the standard school curriculum. One

² John Dewey. *Democracy and Education*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961. p. 76.

of the first things that the project trainees discovered, therefore, was that Addison Junior High School had three years earlier cast aside the junior high school curriculum conceived in the central office. Further, the trainees discovered that those teachers who were observed to be most successful in teaching Addison youngsters were the teachers who had gone furthest in developing and adapting their own curriculum to the interests and lives of their pupils.

From this it must not be supposed that the curriculum at Addison is one of skim milk or that it leans heavily upon the manipulative or manual skills. The writers saw one of the school's very able teachers teaching a transition group of seventh graders about air currents and the causes of weather with a sophistication that would have seemed not out of place in their own college meteorology classrooms.

A heavy emphasis is placed upon reading and upon the building of vocabulary, not only through special classes in reading but in the presentation of each individual subject. This tends to compensate for limited social experiences at home and for the deficiencies of elementary schools which sometimes have contained these children and pushed them onward and upward without in truth instructing them.

A situation reported by one of the trainees in a "log" entry may help to reflect some things about both content and approach or method that appear to be successful with these young people. Excepting a substitution for the teacher's real name, the two paragraphs which follow are quoted from the trainee's log without editorial alteration.

The social studies class I observed was far more interesting to me than several other classes I have seen. There was life and

vitality in that room! The teacher was interested in his students; it showed; the students knew he was interested in them; and they in return were interested and responsive. . . . In discussing the history of Europe between 400-1000 AD the question of king and lord relationship arose. The teacher drew on the blackboard two stick men, one larger than the other, and he labeled the larger one *king* and the smaller one *lord*. He asked the students what they thought these men should be named. One student responded, "King Spunker." This happens to be the last name of this teacher. From what I could observe I felt this was a display of high regard for this teacher. Mr. Spunker just laughed and asked if these names were good. He wrote on the board "King Got a Lot o' Land," and "Lord Want Some Land." These names created an immediate interest and gave a clue to the relationship they were looking for.

Reading skills employed in the social studies class were many. There was silent reading, and oral reading when proving a point. A diagram was used with labels. Comparisons and differences were shown with such words as feud and fief, nobleman and lord, page and squire, serf and surf.³

3. *What is the role of teacher faith in learner potential?* Trainees at Addison discovered that Hough area youngsters will respond to the teacher who believes in them and will seldom let him down.

In weekly sessions with the nine trainees, the name of one teacher was mentioned again and again. Finally, one of the writers asked the future teacher, who had just made glowing reference to this person again, "What does this teacher do that is so different, and that apparently makes him so successful?" "Well," said the trainee, "he believes in these youngsters, and they know that he believes in them. They, therefore, try to live up to his expectations."

(Continued on page 603)

³ Barbara A. Hinkel's "Log."

13. Pauline S. Sears and Edith M. Dowling. "Research on Teaching in the Nursery School." In: N. L. Gage, editor. *Handbook of Research on Teaching*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1963.

14. Fred L. Strodtbeck. "Progress Report: The Reading Readiness Nursery: Short-Term Social Intervention." Chicago: University of Chicago, August 1963. Mimeographed.

15. Joan W. Swift. "Effects of Early Group Experience: The Nursery School and Day Nursery." In: Martin L. Hoffman and Lois W. Hoffman, editors. *Review of Child Development Research*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1964.

—BERNARD SPODEK, *Assistant Professor of Education, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.*

Teachers—Dixon

(Continued from page 566)

to license teachers and retain only role occupants of decided competence.

2. Work to secure adequate salaries for teachers. Many teachers are required to attend summer school periodically to hold their jobs. Also, they must buy the trappings of class status which the community requires. Often through no fault of their own, many teachers are victims of loan sharks. Others, especially men teachers, turn to moonlighting to supplement their inadequate salaries.

3. Work to attain job security for teachers. Teachers should not have to bow before school boards and the public to maintain their jobs. Teacher tenure laws should be sought. Teachers should be protected from scurrilous attack by laymen and the caprice of administrators.

4. Work to develop a national system of award for outstanding teacher performance. Such awards should be as significant as the Pulitzer prizes and should be based upon clearly defined criteria.

5. Work to develop a strong, positive image of teachers. Mass media should be carefully studied to determine the image

cast about teachers. Ways should be devised to prevent an Ihabod Crane image of teachers from being disseminated. Professional associations on all levels must themselves develop a strong, effective system of public relations which adequately portrays the profession to the public.

6. Work for full and complete involvement of Negroes in all aspects of professional endeavor. Professional associations need to purge themselves of the guilt of moral bankruptcy caused by decades of silence and lethargy in this matter.

7. Work to exert greater influence in local, state, and national politics.

Vigorous and intelligent action can foster greater social mobility for teachers. With the war on poverty already joined, teachers and teaching assume a new importance. This, coupled with a greater need for lifelong education, forecasts teachers as more important role occupants. A country which rests upon an informed citizenry must commit itself to increased wealth, esteem, and social power for teachers.

"Tough" Schools—Gorman & Ritchie

(Continued from page 552)

Faith in the learner is fundamental. Too many teachers appraise a situation and find it hopeless. They let themselves expect limited results. It is not at all surprising that those are exactly the results achieved. The teacher must have faith in the learner's ability and willingness to learn, and he must have equal faith in his own capacity to teach him. The reverse is common on the educational front generally, but nowhere is it more frequently found than among culturally disadvantaged pupils.

4. *Are culturally disadvantaged youth inherently reluctant learners?*² The nine

College of Education trainees who spent the Spring Quarter in Cleveland say "No!" Let us put this in the words of one of the trainees, who spoke in the final seminar of the quarter somewhat as follows:

Before we went into this project we were told that these youngsters show little interest in learning, that they do not like to learn or care to know. In my judgment this just isn't so. I have seen too much delight in learning and too much satisfaction with success to believe it. The secret is in the way these young people are approached. They must be met on their own terms. I have seen the same pupil perform as a star in one class and become an immediate discipline problem to his teacher of the very next period.

This same observer went on to report on the field trip of a science class to an arboretum some miles from the school. The adult guide spoke at first in simple terms, saving her technical language for more sophisticated visitors. Following her explanation of the second plant, however, one of the eighth grade boys stepped forward, apologizing for his intrusion, corrected a technical error the guide had made, gave the Latin name for the bush, and explained some of its idiosyncrasies which had previously been omitted. From there on out the excursion was conducted on a different, and higher, plane.

† The young people and the sponsors involved in this project appear to have gained certain insights which might indicate that the toughness of such schools has been overdrawn: (a) Practically all human beings have vast stores of untapped potential which awaits only the knowledgeable person who knows how to take the lid off. (b) The culturally disadvantaged require the same general education as others, but they must be met by a willingness to start where they are

and they must be moved by a pedagogy meaningful to them. (c) Success is undegraded by a bond of faith which embraces and binds together learner and teacher, giving hope and satisfaction to both. (d) The delights and satisfactions of learning are no less coveted by the culturally disadvantaged than by other segments of society. Indeed, such satisfactions may be more genuine and more lasting than among those sophisticated youth who apparently already have been everywhere and seen everything.

Tutors—Chesler

(Continued from page 563)

Yet many educators may seek to help, despite whatever professional reservations they may have. Right now, the tutorial programs are doing a job the schools cannot do without major structural reform and redistribution of funds and facilities. Hindering the tutorials would be a blow at the ultimate goals of the urban educational system, and an exacerbation of the gaps and ills that have led to the growth of tutorials. Help may take many forms, and some of the most needed aids include: procurement of resources such as texts and other materials for the tutors to use if they wish; offers of aid in training or teaching tutors how to teach—given their unique goals and styles; and offering collaboration on records and consultation with teachers who are working with the same tutee.⁵ It would be a marvelous enrichment of the teaching team to have a college tutor join one or two teachers to discuss the growth potentials of a disadvantaged youngster.

One of the main differences between acts that hinder or help, is the attitude of

⁵ These examples are drawn from actual cases in such cities as Boston, Massachusetts; Hartford, Connecticut; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Detroit, Michigan.

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