

Who Goes to School?

Is the Child Really There?

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THE child at school is a person possessing a special combination of learned behaviors. Such behaviors may sometimes reflect the feelings of one or both parents, the rejection of a sibling, the experience of being lost, or frightened of the dark, the fear of making a mistake and being punished. Who goes to school cannot be determined by studying the normal population of children and concluding to generalities. The classroom teacher—the educator who sees the child each day—is the logical investigator of children's differences.

The statement, "each child is different," as a basis for challenging the teacher to individualize instruction, may have been posed too frequently in educational literature and lecture. Perhaps this statement needs clarification stemming from the following logical set of sequences: "Why does each child differ?" "How can differences be detected?" and "What teaching-learning designs promote individualization?" The simple recognition that children differ is meaningless unless answers to such questions are adopted as both the theoretical and technical framework for governing the development of the child's curriculum.

Some major considerations of this article are important determinants of children's differences—determinants that are both inside and outside the classroom but are not generally evaluated as basic to the learning process. Additional attention is given to recommendations in program and observation

models which may facilitate the detection and treatment of the individual's uniqueness.

Parental Influences

To answer the first question, "Why does each child differ?" speculation herein is limited to the prime influences of the parent-child and teacher-child interactions. The child learns a unique set of behaviors and responses as he interacts with his environment, which is composed of a unique set of things, events, and others.

The most significant others in any child's life are his parents. The person he is and will become is primarily determined by the parent-child interaction. In fact, the child's degree of social-emotional adjustment and intellectual development may be, in a large measure, a result of such parent behaviors as acceptance-rejection, consistency-inconsistency, permissiveness-dominance. These factors seem to have a prevailing influence on the child as he grows older.

Hurley¹ found that third-grade children who rate low in intelligence have parents who exhibit a high degree of rejecting behav-

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¹ John R. Hurley. "Parental Acceptance—Rejection and Children's Intelligence." *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 11: 19-31; 1965.

ior. From a study of the attitudes of 400 college students, Itkin² reported a significant positive correlation between the subjects' attitudes of acceptance-rejection toward parents and their parents' attitudes of acceptance-rejection toward children. It can be assumed then that one major and continuing educational effect on the child is the parental effect. The process of acquiring uniqueness may include stabilizing misinformation and being underdeveloped, as well as learning acceptable behaviors.

The classroom teacher must accept the child rearing process as a major educative process and, therefore, design with parents programs which will benefit children. Such programs should supply the parent with information, suggest appropriate adult-child interactions, and provide situations through which the parent can develop problem-solving skills that will better equip him to function in the parent-child relationship.

When launching a program that includes parents, the school must recognize that parents differ as to needs, concerns, and problems. The values, expectations, and social skills of various socioeconomic and ethnic groups are often dissimilar. Diversity among parents, as individuals and groups, necessitates the utilization of many approaches to parent involvement. Provisions may be made for the following approaches: individual parent-teacher contact via home visitation and/or school visitation by the parent; child study groups and interest groups at the school or, more conveniently, at a neighborhood facility or home; observation of children engaged in learning activities; participation in school activities or as teacher assistants, parent curriculum improvement committees, and others. All parents should not be expected to engage in *all* activities of a program, and especially in all activities at the same time.

The behavior patterns accepted by the parent may differ and perhaps conflict with those expected by the teacher. Consider the

² William Itkin. "Relationships Between Attitudes Toward Parents and Parents' Attitudes Toward Children." *Journal of Genetic Psychology* 86: 339-52; 1955.

case of a four-year-old child who was from a one-parent home where the parent worked 16 hours each day. Deborah's responses puzzled the nursery school teacher. Upon the "suggestion" that she should engage individually in a simple learning task, her response was attentive but without movement toward the activity or facial indication of the degree of understanding. However, the child responded to activities which were required of all the children, such as standing in line, forming a circle, sitting, preparing to eat. Despite elaborate coaxing, exposure to a variety of interesting activity choices, enthusiastic adults, and spontaneous peers, Deborah made no self-initiated move to engage in a learning task.

One day, the teacher became a bit impatient and gave Deborah a "direct," firm, but kindly spoken, command. The child hesitantly made a move toward the activity. The teacher smiled, nodded approval and repeated the command firmly. Deborah followed the direction and received a rewarding verbal response and friendly pat from the teacher. She smiled, the first time since she had entered nursery school four months previously.

Conflict Between Systems of Behaving

The responses of this child imply that the dominant pattern of verbal interaction between parent and child was parent's direct (definite and simple) command—child's positive reaction—parent's approval, whereas the pattern of verbal interaction between the teacher and child was customarily teacher's suggestion (indefinite and complex)—child's positive reaction—teacher's approval.

Apparently the child had had little, if any, association with the indefinite direction. Opportunities for choice were practically nonexistent prior to her preschool experience. The classroom teacher should be sensitive to such differences in systems of behavior and be able to function within various systems, gradually giving the child experience with generally accepted adult-child interaction patterns.

Deborah's case as well as others indicate that the degree of educational progress made by a child is significantly related to the degree of progress expected by the teacher. Rosenthal and Jacobson³ investigated the assumption that poor children often fail in school because that is what is expected of them. In a school where most of the children were from low-income homes, it was found that the children from whom teachers expected greater intellectual gains showed such gains.

Furthermore, these children were described by their teachers as having a better chance of being happy and successful in later life; showing a greater degree of curiosity and varied interests; appealing socially to other children; and being better adjusted emotionally. Ironically, the children involved in the experiment were chosen randomly from a group of average achievers for that school. The treatment involved nothing more than labeling the sample as potential intellectual "spurters" and giving their names to the teachers.

Additional data were collected on the children who were placed in low-ability classrooms. Of this group, those who made the greatest intellectual gains were given the most unfavorable ratings by their teachers. In other words, it is unlikely that a child who has been labeled "low," "slow," or perhaps "poor," even if his IQ is rising, will be seen by his teacher as well adjusted and successful.

From the preceding example, it appears that the perception that the teacher has of the child's potential, whether it is negative or positive, may be an additional, pertinent influence on the degree of intellectual and social-emotional gain that the child will experience. The teacher must develop technical skills that will allow him more objectively to view the child and evaluate his learning progress as a basis for constructing curriculum and setting the conditions for learning.

Although the term "reinforcement" is not generally used by teachers, it describes

a widely acceptable technique which most teachers utilize in the teacher-child relationship. Characteristically, reinforcement is applied through variations of approval-disapproval. For many purposes—giving a child a measure of self-security and confidence, enhancing his productivity and creativity, helping him eliminate unacceptable behaviors—teachers traditionally use verbal praise or disapproval, friendly physical contact or a good shaking, negative or positive nods, smiles or frowns, and more subtle ignoring or accepting behaviors.

Reinforcement Needed

Some teachers use isolation and other punitive techniques as the most "expedient" means of eliminating unacceptable behaviors. In fact, it is common to find a frequently used "baby corner" in the kindergarten and a comparable "kindergarten corner" in the first and second grades. Having the child stand just outside the classroom door or sit in the principal's office for a period of time can be categorized as additional isolation practices. When Bereiter and Engelmann⁴ came forth with their statement that isolation is effective under certain conditions, many teachers were shocked and claimed that such ideas were totally inhumane. These same people may not have considered the feelings of the child in the "baby corner." In other words, many teachers may be quite unaware of the types of reinforcement which they normally use and, particularly, the effects of that reinforcement on children.

Although teachers generally agree that reinforcement, particularly in the form of praise, is an effective motivator, the basic understanding should be that of what types of reinforcers are most effective for certain children. In recent years, many researchers have attempted to answer questions about the appropriateness of reinforcement techniques in classroom situations. For example, Zigler and Lanzer, from a study of various verbal reinforcers, found that middle-class

³ Robert Rosenthal and Lenore F. Jacobson. "Teacher Expectations for the Disadvantaged." *Scientific American* 218: 19-23; 1968.

⁴ Carl E. Bereiter and S. Engelmann. *Teaching Disadvantaged Children in the Preschool*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1965.

children respond more to verbal feedback indicating "correct" and "right," while lower-class children respond more to personal statements of "good" and "fine."⁵ This finding implies that, as a child becomes more self-confident as a learner, reinforcers of attention and praise decrease in importance and are replaced by the knowledge that one is correct and achieving.

O'Leary and Becker⁶ found that a teacher will be more effective at helping children control their deviant behaviors if he employs a token or concrete reinforcement program. It may be assumed then that a more tangible means of reinforcement is necessary to elicit the desired responses from some children.

The teacher must also take into consideration the motivating influence of negative reinforcement. Kelly⁷ found that children who receive simple negative reinforcing statements ("That's slow—not too good"), while performing a learning task, will show the highest response rate. Notice that rate of learning rather than quality or depth of learning was the desired response. There are times in the regular classroom when speed and efficiency as well as quality are expected.

Observation

Reinforcement procedures may be more effectively used by the teacher who remembers that the child will work to obtain something that is meaningful to him. Rewards that attract the child seem to stimulate learning to the degree that they relate to the following levels of need: tangible knowledge of success, other-oriented knowledge of success, and self-knowledge of success.

To discover the child as a unique being,

⁵ Edward Zigler and Paul Lanzer. "The Effectiveness of Two Classes of Verbal Reinforcers on the Performance of Middle and Lower-Class Children." *Journal of Personality* 30: 157-63; 1962.

⁶ K. Daniel O'Leary and Wesley C. Becker. "Behavior Modification of an Adjustment Class: A Token Reinforcement Program." *Journal of Exceptional Children* 33: 637-42; 1967.

⁷ Richard Kelly. "Comparison of the Effects of Positive and Negative Vicarious Reinforcement in an Operant Learning Task." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 57: 307-10; 1966.

the teacher must first be careful *not* to apply the authoritative generalizations about how children learn to the individual who sits in his classroom. He must be especially sensitive to unexpected influences which may prove to be major determinants in the child's educative process. Each time he observes or thinks of "Debby," the individual, he will evaluate his own behavior in terms of the child's needs and expectations. His extensive knowledge of child development and education will help him understand that *all* children learn, and that learning rates and levels may be circumscribed by stifling influences which originate from various sources, some of which may be the techniques, curriculum, and expectations imposed by the teacher.

A second challenge for the teacher is to discover ways to detect differences among children and provide for individuation. One old but promising technique of detecting differences is the observation method. For example, a teacher may conduct a thorough observation of one child each day. As the child moves through a series of learning situations, the teacher may choose to record the child's approaches, reactions, and successes for a duration of five or ten minutes while he is engaged in selected activities. On the other hand, the teacher may choose to study random samples of the child's behavior as it is presented in response to randomly selected learning tasks. This technique should facilitate observation of more than one child each day in a shorter length of time and for a specific purpose.

Among the children in his classroom, the teacher should discover variations in learning rates and levels, interests, and systems of behaving. As a result, the teacher may even find it possible to make some assumptions about the types of influences which have an impact on the child's learning process. Consistent evaluation of rates and levels of learning will allow the teacher to construct a realistic curriculum for each child—presenting to him learning tasks which are appropriate to him as an individual learner. Each day, the teacher learns more about the child, the person who goes to school. □

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