

To Teach About Human Behavior...¹

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CHILDREN do enjoy the study of behavioral science and learn surprisingly complex concepts readily if we arrange the conditions properly. As the Gryphon told Alice in Wonderland, "The adventures first. . . explanations take such a dreadful time."

This method of teaching behavioral science to fourth, fifth, and sixth graders was developed in a pilot project in 1967-68. Eighteen children of the fourth through sixth grades participated in the experiments and games provided and the discussions following them. The results of this study were most encouraging both in terms of the feasibility of children's capacity to learn concepts in the behavioral sciences, and also for the practicality of providing a curriculum of mental health education within the school program (Long, 1969).

A second study is currently under way in a class of 37 sixth graders in the St. Louis Public School System. It is already clear that children need not be of superior intelligence in order to grasp the meaning of the lessons in behavioral sciences. The children of the present study have IQ's ranging from 80 to 125. The class of 37 is not too large for a curriculum concerned with self-understanding.

The experiential method of teaching, with minor changes, seems as appropriate for a large class as for a small one. Since

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the children learn by their own behavior and their experiences, as well as their discussions, the content of the course is largely non-literate. Therefore, the material seems applicable to a wide range of intelligence, literacy, and age.

The experiential method was found to be most satisfying and stimulating for children as well as providing the most useful framework for their learning and development. We often forget that learning is rarely a simple intellectual exercise. The children in the two studies so far attempted have demonstrated again that the study of human behavior has real meaning at the visceral level for children of any age.

Some of the impressions gained in these studies indicating a method of presentation for lessons concerned with human behavior are the following:

The Curriculum

1. *Proceed from the specific to the general.* Scientific research, which is in reality the original discovery method for learning (Lorenz, 1967), is the way in which a child of elementary school age learns most easily. The progression from a general theory to specific instances is difficult for the child to follow and hence does not help him to grasp meaning. Each lesson follows the general plan of the experience first, discussion afterward.

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2. *Concentrate the emphasis on process rather than content.* There is time enough for details when a need for them is thoroughly established in the minds of the children. Children view behavioral science in a very personal way and are very impatient with facts and figures to be memorized.

3. *Develop concrete and specific physical experiences for the students* which clearly illustrate the concept desired. Verbal description alone has far less impact with anyone—particularly with children. In addition, there is a kind of kinesthetic response by the children to each experience, which reinforces the acquisition of memories and meaning.

a. The classic experiment can be performed singly or in pairs. Demonstrations by the teacher should be avoided. Children simply must perform the experiment themselves if they are going to truly assimilate the experience and its meaning.

b. Simulation games are extremely useful and have the added value of being enjoyable for the children. Discussion can often be taken in a variety of directions because of the open-ended quality of the games. The playful quality of a game ensures safety for the students in their expression of emotion (Linehan and Long, 1970).

c. Periodic question sessions combined with role playing are useful. It seems to be necessary for children in a behavioral science class to be allowed to ask questions that concern them and be given a chance to discuss these in class. Answers should be avoided by the teacher and reliance placed on class discussion and role playing or experimentation wherever possible.

d. Stories can be read aloud for the children to discuss. This is the classic method employed by several investigators (Ojemann, 1958; and Ojemann *et al.*, 1955). The impact is often less than the previous methods, however. The active participation by the students is missing in this method. Nevertheless, occasionally a lesson cries aloud for the inclusion of a particular story to round out a concept.

e. Films are sometimes useful. If

the course is being adapted to the children's interests, it is difficult to plan far enough ahead to order the films. Logistics become complicated. However, in spite of this, and in spite of the passive position for the children, films do now and then illuminate the subject.

4. *Tie the curriculum as closely as possible to the group's developing interests and never mind about "finishing everything in the course."* It may well be necessary to develop much more curriculum material and on many more topics than would appear to be needed for any school year. In this way, the teacher can select from a wide array and suit the course to the particular children, and not the children to the course. They may never touch on a particular topic. However, one bonus in working with children is that there is always next year.

5. *Avoid beginning the course with "Psychology is a science."* This automatically traps the teacher into "proving something," encourages lectures, and encourages working from the general to specific again. It also delays getting under way with the content of the course. They find out that psychology is a science soon enough when they begin to experiment and develop hypotheses.

6. *Some of the curriculum can be packaged as individual or paired experiments.* This is most useful for the standard laboratory experiments and is very enjoyable for the children. It is obviously unsuited for the study of group behavior or similar topics requiring the cooperation of the entire class.

Nevertheless, this individualized material is not the panacea it may appear to be. The temptation to avoid the discussion time in the interests of more programmed instruction should be avoided. Children gain great meaning and fulfillment from the class discussions of their discoveries and should spend a significant part of their class time in these debriefings. The logistics of arranging discussion time or topic when the students are proceeding along individual lines at different paces would appear to be all but impossible, but good teachers seem to manage in a mysterious way.

The Teacher

1. *The teacher is a catalyst for learning and a moderator.* His contribution should be mainly in the form of questions that aid the children step by step to their discoveries. He should make this contribution and get out of the way (Erickson, 1968).

2. *Trust the children to lead.* They will lead, and most emphatically, once they learn that their opinions and needs are valued. Contrary to expectation, experiments that fail are a godsend in this regard. The children usually catch on quickly as to what was intended, and seem to be compelled to redesign the experiment until it works (Long, 1969). This involves them deeply and leads them into more abstract problem solving and encourages a speculative view of behavior.

3. *Leave some loose ends.* There is no real need to cover all the possible implications of a certain experience. We often become too compulsive about details. The Zeigarnik effect, or principle of the unfinished, will work for us and stimulate further exploration by the child as a kind of echoing activity if we leave the discoveries in his hands.

4. *Refer back to real life as often as possible in class discussions.* This implies an acceptance of the child, his right to recognize himself, and his right to internalize the information he receives in class. It is also an official acceptance of the role of feelings and emotions in the learning process (Jones, 1968). The idea that "this is real and hence valuable, and so are you" may even spill over into other course content as well.

The Course Content

In a real sense, this cannot be designated. However, most, if not all of the general topics in the behavioral sciences such as learning, personality, and even mob behavior can be studied in an experiential way to some extent by children. This automatically precludes the kind of lessons that are made up of stories read by the teacher and judgment to be passed by the children on

the "best" way for Johnny to behave or feel. This is often done in the name of "real-life situations," but the children are usually aware of the preaching that is implied and react according to their present feelings about authority. They seem to respond far more enthusiastically when actually given a chance to experiment and draw conclusions. The demands on the curriculum designer are much greater in this plan, and they are also greater upon the teacher. However, the impact on several levels of thinking and feeling by the children is probably far greater also.

This model for a behavioral science curriculum is one that seems to be useful for primary prevention of behavioral disorders. The opportunities for enhancing ego development and psychological comfort appear to be great. In addition, the children in these two studies have demonstrated enthusiastically that the most fascinating subject of study for mankind is still man and his behavior.

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