

Our Task As Interpreters for Children

BERNICE BAXTER

Bernice Baxter is director of the 1950 White House Conference on Children and Youth—on leave from the Oakland, California, public schools where she is administrative assistant. Miss Baxter looks objectively at the school's role as it works with the home, the church, and public and private agencies in meeting the needs of children. She asks whether the school is willing and able to play its peculiar role as one—but an important one—of the many institutions which affect the child's development as a socially mature individual.

OUR PROBLEM in education today is to provide socially orienting experiences for children and youth. To make a wise selection of activities which assure social understanding and mature social behavior is a constant challenge to all of us in education. Agencies and organizations within the community, including home and church as well as school and other services for children, are faced with the necessity of coordinating their guidance and service potentialities so that every child has the opportunities for living and learning which he as an individual may require.

Whether the school is sufficiently oriented itself to serve children as the times demand will remain to be seen. The extent to which the school is equipped to interpret the personal needs of each child is an open question at present, as is its readiness to spearhead the efforts toward coordination within the community.

Try the Direct Route to Understanding

Educators have an excellent vantage point from which to make significant and continuing contributions to the in-

telligent guidance of children and youth. They are in daily contact with young persons in classrooms all over the country. Their opportunities to see children not only as individuals but as the products of families from which they come are unique. When they are alert to the attitudes, aspirations, and social behavior of families, children's social behavior becomes understandable.

The educator has direct access to the source of behavior patterns and is, therefore, strategically located to act as consultant to all of those who seek to serve, advise, and counsel children. The educator, be he a classroom teacher or in a position which brings him less directly into contact with children, should be so thoroughly conversant with the causal factors in behavior that he can relate behavior manifestations to their antecedents.

Look for the Real Evidence

In relating causes and effects as these are found in the context of the home, attention may be given to the superficial evidences of living which can be seen through a cursory glance at chil-

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dren and their parents or at the physical aspects of the home. The accepted status which the family appears to have in the community may be taken for granted and conclusions drawn from this casual acceptance.

While these evidences seem to be readily discernible, they are not conclusive and may be misleading. There are more revealing sources, factors which are more deeply imbedded but which, when discovered, should constitute a dependable basis for interpretation. These factors derive from the inter-personal human relations within the family, from the family's own reactions to its acceptance or rejection, from the family's own aspirations for itself, and from the extent to which the family is able to achieve its aspirations.

Viewing the human relations of the family, the educator will try to find with some accuracy the role which each of the parents fills, the sibling relationships, and each child's own feeling about his place within the family group. These are clues to an understanding of the child and the nature of his relationships with other persons. The place which the child as an individual holds in the family group and the human relations within which he lives from day to day are most significant influences in the child's social and emotional development. These influences are apparent to the skilled observer.

Family Culture Makes a Difference

As a background for comprehending the individual child's beliefs, his ethical values, and the motivating forces within the mores which operate in his particular life, the educator will need to know something of the ethnical, racial,

and general social environment from which the family customs have developed. To know the child means to know the culture from which he springs and the emotionalized values which the family holds. The physical aspects of the environment play an important part, too, but fundamental differences in personality stem from the deeper emotions of family culture.

Educators are today challenged with educating each child as he needs to be educated so that he may relate himself most effectively to other persons. Who the child is makes an essential difference. What his family experiences have been likewise make a difference. If he is to be educated to the fullest of his capacities for his own personal satisfaction and achievement, as well as for citizenship locally and with a growing understanding of state, national, and world affairs, the educator must know both the family's aspirations for the child and the child's own inclinations and motivating drives. Somehow, despite the multitudinous detail with which it is faced, the school must cut through to a view of the child's total living pattern and assure guidance for him which will bring integrity into his life.

The School's Role Is a Coordinating One

For the points at which one community agency supplements another in providing for a child's needs, some central guidance or coordination will be necessary. Each agency, including the home, the church, and the school, sees the child in varying relationships to the several other segments of his environment. Under some circumstances the

home can encompass the over-all planning for children. Under other circumstances the school, church, public or private agency must assume a responsible role. Under all circumstances, however, the school should be ready to interpret each child's needs fully and comprehensively. This means that the school is constantly in touch with all that is happening to each child and with his reactions to his daily experiences.

To meet the demands which guidance such as this places on the educator will require of him familiarity with findings from the related professional fields which may throw light on some of the needed interpretations. Anthropology, psychology, psychiatry, social work, research in child life, all will have contributions to make. Educators who lift their sights beyond their own educational mechanisms can broaden their perspective and share in the wisdom of other persons who also are vitally interested in children and their development.

The school will educate to the extent that it can interpret with fundamental accuracy that which will contribute to each child's becoming his best self from both a personal and a social point of view. The classroom may contribute one type of social experience, the home another, the church another, and leisure-time activities still other qualitative experiences. If the educator can help to relate these so that they mesh together into an environment which both stimulates and encourages every child to accept himself and to find a unity of existence with other persons, he will be filling a role which is most significant today. Anything short of this is too little, educationally speaking.

It Has Also a Consultative Task

The task which education faces is one which calls for serious thought. The school cannot be all things to all children. During the war years the schools became centers for child care, child feeding, and numerous other services to children. Without preparation for these additional services, educators became critical of their own inabilities to do all that was asked of them. They were likewise critical of the quality of service rendered by emergency personnel recruited to supplement the regular professional, certificated staff. The school has, however, moved out into broadened fields of responsibility for children. The question, therefore, arises as to how the school can grow to serve in a consultative position, assuming responsibility for studying and knowing children, without taking unto itself assignments which it cannot fill. Educational leadership will depend, it would seem, upon the ways in which it can work with other child-serving groups.

Educators who are alert to the complexities of life today can promote co-operative school-community action in behalf of children and youth. If the school will serve as an agent for interpreting children's needs and as an instigating force in getting things done for children, it will do more than if it isolates itself or tries to do all. Educators will have to be persons of insight and broad social perspective if schools are to perform in this way. American communities will have to seek for intensified social competence in their teachers, and teacher preparation will have to be rooted in deeper psychological and sociological foundations.

Educators Have the Data

If education cannot interpret the needs of all children, who can? The school sees children as they come daily from their homes. It sees the effects of rest or fatigue, good or poor nutrition, emotional strain or relaxed exuberant spirit in children. The school hears accounts of children's everyday activities, their interests, their likes and dislikes. It hears about their parents and friends. The school is the repository of most of the information about children which they themselves divulge unthinkingly. Because it is information given gratui-

tously, the school has an obligation to treat it scientifically, and not personally. Teachers have a wealth of crucial data at hand about children.

Can They Use It?

If the school can reach its maturity in interpreting children's needs it will assume a role in which other professions will have confidence. Educators seem to be going in this direction slowly but they do need to feel the pulse of modern life, to know what young persons are experiencing, and to be realistic in their relationships with adults.

Wanted: Mentally Healthy Teachers—

C. R. McRAE

It is imperative, certainly, that the teacher of children—or the teacher of teachers—be actively concerned with the mental health of children and youth. Of equal importance is an objective assessment of his own personality as a teacher and as a person. In this third of a series of articles from fellow educators in other countries, C. R. McRae, professor of education, University of Sydney, discusses likenesses and differences in the work of teachers in Australia and in the United States and draws conclusions concerning their mental health applicable on both sides of the Pacific. Mr. McRae was a member of the staff of the UNESCO Seminar on The Education and Training of Teachers held in England in 1948.

SOME YEARS AGO W. C. Trow contributed to *The Journal of Educational Sociology* an article entitled "A Child Who Feared Teachers." This was a long-term study, from first grade to adult life, of a girl's social and educational development. The story took the girl through primary, secondary, and college education to responsibility

for a one-teacher school. What the reader saw was a shy and sensitive child made hesitant, nervous, and finally incompetent by a succession of rebuffs from unsuitable and unsympathetic teachers.

No doubt that girl was more than ordinarily unfortunate. Nevertheless, her story illustrated, in extreme form,

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