

Mental Health Principles and School Practices

Two social scientists attempt in this article to help school people
"to act in a definite but temperate way in the name of mental
health."

RESearch and clinical studies in human behavior and development are relatively new. Adaptation and use of these findings—often no more than working hypotheses—sometimes take the form of slavish adherence to their suggestive conclusions. Current trends of thought and action must, therefore, be tempered in light of this with a close tie to practices which have proved of worth in the past, with objective evaluation of present scientific knowledge, and with an humble attitude toward what future research and clinical study may bring. Nowhere more than in social science are absolutes a fallacy.

A Point of View

Dogmatic adherence to any one set way of contributing to mental health through school and classroom activities and procedures is not yet warranted. On the other hand, those who function in the field of social action as do school administrators and teachers,

cannot afford to work on the basis of broad generalizations without recourse to research and clinically validated theories.¹

Careful evaluative research is an imperative need in the application of presently accepted principles of human behavior to classroom and school practices. Nonetheless, while such studies are progressing slowly through action research channels for scientific refinement, school personnel are faced with the necessity to work with children and youth each day. This, then, is a modest attempt on the part of two social scientists to help administrators, classroom teachers and other school people to act in a definite but temperate way in the name of mental health.

What Mental Health Means

A mentally healthful person is one who has problems and meets them with confidence and skill. His interpersonal relations are conducted with generosity and dignity. He has the ability to respond with feelings appropriate to his stage of development. He has the facility to integrate his

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¹ See brief suggestive listing of social scientists at the close of the article whose research findings and clinical contributions have added to current scientific knowledge of human behavior.

group experiences with his own unique individual capacities so that he may be creative and productive in his living.²

Thus, the question of promoting mental health is concerned with how individual personalities can be strengthened to meet their life tasks; how they can be helped to work out solutions to some of their problems; how they can learn to handle others which, perhaps, can never be solved but which can be lived with, without severe emotional strain.

As such, mental health is not something one "has" but something one lives.

Sometimes the Contribution of the Classroom Teacher Is Overlooked

A re-examination of mental health as it applies to curriculum and instructional methods is of particular significance to school administrators as well as to teachers. There has been a tendency to think of "mental health" in the schools as "special services" for individuals with acute needs or obvious problems rather than as the day-by-day relationships of the total school program to the development of healthy personalities—superintendent's, principals' and teachers' included.

Nor does this minimize the importance to mental health of the counselor, the visiting teacher, the school nurse or the remedial teachers. Sometimes the contribution of these special services personnel is preventive in the sense that "a stitch in time" may save serious involvement. Again, their work is remedial with individuals

whose problems have already become disabling in so far as ease of participation in the classroom and in other school activities is concerned.

Contribution to mental health of children and youth is not a matter of either/or: administrators or teachers or special services personnel. Close collaboration, one with the other produces maximum results.

How the Curriculum Makes Its Contribution

Overlooked too often as a contributing factor of the schools to the development of mentally healthy individuals is the curriculum, itself, and how it is taught. Some areas of study are specifically designed for personal development—the humanities, the arts and crafts, home and family life, social studies, health and physical education—to name a few. Others are equally important because they furnish the tools of communication and the scientific skills necessary to make knowledge and experience usable.

No longer are children and youth divided into competing subject areas. When students used to go from mathematics to English, from biology to music, from history to homemaking, with little or no integration of these areas of study—and sometimes with a belittling of one subject by the teacher of another—learning was treated as segmental, with each segment occupying a special compartment in experience. Many times these segments never got together into a related whole in the minds of the learners.

For the curriculum to make its potentially great contribution to mental health, its subject matter now is treated as integrated and is shared by

² Adapted from Lawrence Frank, "The Promotion of Mental Health," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, March 1953, p. 163-174.



AUSTIN, TEXAS, PUBLIC SCHOOLS PHOTO

In preparation for reading, primary children tell stories, interpret pictures, learn poems and songs directly related to their experiences.

teachers and students alike. Moreover, extracurricular activities are now considered a part of the developmental process. Relating a variety of learning experiences, then, is one of the ways administrators and teachers "put personality together again" into a functioning whole.

Elementary schools, with their self-contained classrooms, as contrasted with the old platoon system of shifting from classroom to classroom, subject to subject, and teacher to teacher, have given advance to making each child an entity.

High schools are approaching this same important mental health need with interdepartmental planning conferences, exchange teaching between related subject areas, and use of a broad range of materials designed to make a whole of several parts.

A Four-Way Stretch Is Essential

For the curriculum to do well its share in personality development, it should be broad enough in scope to be useful, in part at least, to the present life of the students. Equally important, it must be soundly grounded in a working knowledge of the past. And likewise, its significance for the future should come into focus.

The fourth stretch is equally important. The teacher and the instructional methods employed should also offer the need to "stretch to reach" the next step ahead. The "stretch to reach" should not overreach abilities to the point of risking continuous failure. Nor should it be so easy that success comes with little effort. Education should challenge and develop the ability of each child or youth.

Stimulation to Effort Is a Part of Mental Health

Administrators and teachers who take the mental health of their students into account in all they do, are those who never forget their own stimulus function. Enthusiasm, coupled with realism, are important facets of whatever is being taught or whatever activity is being promoted. Excitement and thrill from accomplishment are the emotional responses to excellence in teaching. Recognition for curricular or extracurricular achievement is real incentive.

Identification is recognized as important in creating interest and in choosing a life work or goal, as well. Ambition and high purpose come through contact with persons who are admired and who kindle to new effort.

Narrow-minded, sarcastic, cynical or dogmatic administrators or teachers do more than contract the learning range of those with whom they work. They kill initiative, deaden interest and may develop resentment, not only toward themselves, but toward all the school may have to offer.

On the other hand, breadth of knowledge, depth of insight, sympathetic understanding, wide experience, imagination and idealistic vision go to create the "principal or teacher I shall never forget."

Discipline Is Learning

Discipline, itself, becomes an integrated part of learning if school experiences are to make major contributions to healthy self-disciplined personalities. Self-discipline and disciplined habits of work go hand in hand. These are ex-

ceedingly important to character formation and imperative to meet adult problems successfully.

Discipline, not too long ago, was considered subjection to rule and domination. Too often it was directed toward the personal comfort of adults. Threat of failure was assumed to be a good technique for increasing effort. "Being sent to the principal" was supposed to be incentive to good behavior. Ridicule was thought to be positive in effect. Making a failing or frightened youngster "an example" before his fellow students was disguised as "good" discipline.

Newer conceptions of discipline come from the understanding that each lesson learned well—in or out of the classroom—increases ability in self-discipline. Authority rests on the students' respect for the principal or teacher as skillful, intelligent leaders.

However, in all honesty, self-discipline is among the more difficult "lessons" to learn or to teach. Today, only clues are available as to how to become and how to help others become, self-disciplined individuals.

To achieve self-discipline, children and youth need day-by-day encouragement, help, correction and supervision. Coming to understand what is and is not acceptable behavior, what are and are not productive attitudes, what constitute and do not constitute worthwhile moral and spiritual values, results from tedious effort, failures and successes sprinkled along the way. Development of self-discipline likewise comes from opportunity to discover one's capacity to make decisions—and to take the consequences of these decisions.

Skill in human relations is learned through association with one's own age group and with school administrative and teaching personnel, who are representative of older age groups in the family and community. It also comes from working and playing with different personalities from different culture patterns and family backgrounds as represented in every classroom.

Students used to recite back what teacher had taught. No real group process was involved. There was little or no interchange of ideas or interaction among students themselves except on the playground. This older concept minimized relationships and maximized individual study and performance. Now, there is real danger the pendulum may swing too far the other way.

Individual study, performance and achievement are important parts of education. The individual should read, study and even play alone at times. He needs opportunity to use his own initiative and to perform as an individual in and out of the classroom. At the same time, he also needs to develop the ability to be a working group member. The balance between group participation and individual opportunity to "pursue one's own soul" is delicate to achieve but necessary of achievement. It is necessary because life after school is like that. Most jobs require working with other people plus individual skills in performance.

Individual differences in children, innate and acquired, suggest that different degrees of participation in group action are needed for personality de-

velopment. No one pattern can fit all children! Children and youth will be as different when they leave school as they are when they come into school. Our democracy makes room for a wide variety of persons. Nevertheless, every child needs to feel he belongs in the classroom and is a part of the school and all it does. Rejection comes when he senses he is unwelcome and when he is only tolerated by teachers, administrators and fellow students. Communication of intolerance is often too subtle for words.

*Mental Health Develops
Through Democratic Leadership³*

Whether school in all its phases contributes to mental health is determined, in a final analysis, by how administrators and teachers play their dual roles of group leader and individual supervisor.

Each individual leader has responsibility for planning and coordinating activities in the classroom or in non-classroom situations. He is a poor leader when he cannot delegate responsibility, when he delegates too much responsibility, or when he feels he has to be personally involved in every operation. Moreover, he limits individual development if he demands that all learning be achieved through group activity that leaves no time for individual enterprise, or vice versa.

While administrators and teachers do carry primary responsibility for planning, effective learning comes when children or youth gradually ac-

³ David Krech and Richard S. Crutchfield, *Theory and Problems of Social Psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1948. Discussion on leadership, p. 417-422.

quire the ability to share in the planning to the degree of their competence and within the limits of the objectives to be attained.

Democratic leaders are always *experts* in their groups. They are the sources of readily available information. They know where the limits on behavior need to be set. Out of their maturity and years of study and rich experience, they are guides to learners who are only started on their way to acquiring knowledge, competence, skills and basic understanding of relationships.

Leaders represent their groups in the total school situation and act as official spokesmen concerning regulations and activities of the school. Again, this function is shared by students insofar as their stage of development indicates.⁴

⁴ For those who wish to pursue the research background of some of these ideas—and no research in the field of education itself is included because of the familiarity of educators with it—the following names will be suggestive:

John W. M. Whiting and Irvin L. Child on child training and personality; John Dollard and others in a series of studies on learning, psychotherapy, and aggression; Fritz Redl and David Wineman on discipline and handling of aggressive behavior; W. Allison Davis, Robert J. Havighurst and others on cultural factors in personality development; Kurt Lewin, Ronald Lippitt, Dorwin Cartwright and others on group process and democratic leadership; the study of "authoritarian personality" by T. W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswick, Daneil J. Levinson, R. Nevitt Sanford and also on power in authoritarian and democratic social systems as affects of behavior; Albert Deutsch on rejection; research reports in journals such as the *American Journal of Ortho-*

By the same token, leaders are controllers, but not dominators, of internal group relationships. Conflicts and tensions are mediated and arbitrated by the mature personality in the group. Impartial judgment is a necessity in arbitration and mediation.

The model for the group, as has been said, is its leader. The model should be keenly intelligent and high in standards. At the same time, he must be democratic, empathetic and understanding—an inclusive ideal toward which to grow.

School administrators and teachers, then, in the day-by-day leadership and supervisory roles—with an assist from able special services personnel—make a consistent and major contribution, equaled only by that of the family, to the mental health of millions of children and youth each year.

psychiatry, the *Journal of Human Relations*, *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, *American Psychologist*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, and special issues of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*.

Psychiatrists and psychoanalysts whose writings based on clinical findings have added to the insights and understanding of behavior, personality development, and mental health include Karen Horney, Sigmund and Anna Freud, Adolf Meyer, Franz Alexander, Eric Fromm, Harry Stack Sullivan, James Plant, William and Karl Menninger, William Alanson White—to name a few only. Other penetrating insights have come from such men as Charles Horton Cooley, George Mead, William James, and many others.

A recent analysis of the limits of the group approach has been contributed in popular form by William H. Whyte, Jr., in *Is Anybody Listening?*



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