Charles M. Shapp

If Johnny Doesn't Care . . .

EVERY teacher knows Johnny. He's the boy sitting right there, chin in hand, gazing off into the distance. Johnny (or it might be Mary) has little interest in what is going on in class. He may be apathetic, phlegmatic or even despondent. Or he may be sullen, defiant and explosive. Although he learns almost nothing, we really do not know what his capabilities are. All we do know is that school seems to affect him not at all.

Though different in personality structure, though different in latent potential, disaffected children have this in common—they separate themselves from the program of the school, they drop out as soon as the law permits, or they simply endure school with little benefit derived from instruction. And when they leave the school, they go uneducated and unequipped to cope with life in our present society.

How are we to advise the teacher when he cries desperately, "If Johnny doesn't care, what can I do?"

First we must realize that there is no panacea, that no matter what the teacher does, he cannot hope to salvage all the disaffected Johnnys and Marys. Johnny's trouble is complex. The school is but one force in his life; its influence, though strong, cannot be total. Without this caution, even the most determined teacher may become discouraged.

Helping disaffected children begins with understanding them, and that understanding is based on one simple premise: A child's school behavior is determined by what he brings to school and what the school brings to him.

Every child brings to school a degree of mental acuity we call native intelligence. He brings a physical self, with its strengths or defects. He brings the values, mores, attitudes and habits acquired in home and community. To this child the school brings a specific course of study, a method of instruction, a teacher who operates within the frame of reference of values and mores acquired in his environment.

How does this two-way delivery system function for the non-involved children, the disaffected Johnnys and Marys?

A high percentage of them come with below-average mental power, an inherent shortcoming not related to limiting factors to be considered below. Physical handicaps are more prevalent than we

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suspect; these youngsters often hide visual and auditory deficiencies. Before the day of audiometer testing, I observed a magical change in a severely withdrawn girl who, the teacher discovered accidentally, could not hear a word, and who was subsequently successfully treated by a doctor.

The more destructive influences on Johnny, however, are environmental. The teacher who scrutinizes the circumstances of Johnny's life is likely to find that he has been emotionally damaged by one or more bruising, scarring, psychological injuries inflicted at home or in the street.

Parents, First Teachers

The child's very first school is the home and his first teachers, the parents. There are parents, in both slums and fancy apartments, who give children little love or even attention; others who manifest not the slightest interest in the child's academic achievement; still others who show disdain for things intellectual. I have seen homes in which there is not a single book, in which a child never sees a parent reading. In some instances, parents have neglected to appear at hearings called to consider suspension of their children. Most pathetic are children whose parents command them, from infancy, to keep silent and out of sight. These children come to school mute and unresponsive.

Then there are the Johnnys and Marys whose parents are "drivers," grimly determined to make their children become excellent students, regardless of aptitude. They try to make preschool Johnny read; they ceaselessly nag Mary about her studies. Their children all too often grow to hate books and schools and teachers.

Children bring their homes, as well as their parents, into school. An enormous percent of the alienated children come from homes marked by squalor, crowding, noise, disorganization.

Many nonparticipating children are the result of community influences. Slum living means day-to-day contact with crime, immorality, narcotics, drunkenness and gangs that "draft" unwilling youngsters by force. Many slum areas are ghettos for minority groups where the child almost inevitably learns to feel himself a lesser citizen, one who has little hope of climbing very far, one who is threatened and shackled by the majority.

These communities, and even more fortunate ones, are inculcating children with values utterly alien to those of the school. At every hand children are indoctrinated with the concept that making money, no matter how, is the most important goal in life; that living in luxury is success; that the criminal who is rich is a hero.

Not long ago the *New York Times* published a picture and an article showing an adoring group of teen-agers greeting a criminal of national notoriety who had just come out of the penitentiary. A bright young man whom I tried to guide to an academic course in high school flatly insisted on going into a food trades course because "the only man on my block with a Cadillac is the butcher."

Johnny is molded by these influences in the home and community and it is this hard mold that he brings to the classroom.

And what does the school bring to Johnny? All too often it presents him with a teacher who simply cannot make contact with Johnny's unconcern for the teacher's concepts of cleanliness, diligence, honesty, citizenship. Then this teacher offers to teach him a body of knowledge that bears almost no relation-

ship to what Johnny knows to be the realities of his life. Should we not face the fact that, despite our efforts to develop new curricula, many, many teachers are teaching the subjects they were taught and using the methods used on them by their teachers of a generation ago? We give Johnny textbooks in which he sees nothing resembling himself or his world. One teacher I knew found a boy who appeared impervious to any arithmetic, explaining to his classmates, the mathematical intricacies of a racing form! At least in part, Johnny's disaffection is rooted in the fact that he finds teachers "square," or "way out" of his existence. He may, in fact, be laughing at his instructors.

What can we do for the nonparticipating children?

First, understand what makes them so. With understanding comes compassion, patience, forbearance. Johnny and Mary sense these attitudes and sometimes begin to respond. Even if they do not, the teacher who knows what impels disaffection will feel less frustrated and will have more peace of mind.

Secondly, the teacher must be alert to detect physical defects. When defects are suspected, school health personnel can be called in. The teacher or school nurse can coax or even pressure a negligent parent to take the child for dental or medical care. Remarkable "cures" of disaffected children have occurred almost immediately upon the correction of physical handicaps.

Third, the teacher should evaluate Johnny's mental competence. Behind his noninvolvement in study may be noncomprehension due to inherent deficiency. Special individual tests may be arranged to determine the child's ability to learn. If this ability is limited, special class placement, or at least a suitable level of instruction, should be provided.

Fourth, teachers can try to influence homes and parents. Many parents of troubled youngsters simply do not know what to do. Conferences with such parents in school or at home are often warmly appreciated and prove effective. In areas where the incidence of unreachable children is high, teachers and guidance counselors can hold informal "workshops" or discussions with a group of concerned parents. Teachers often refer parents to welfare agencies for help in improving the home situation or the interpersonal relationships among family members. The heartache is in trying to get Johnny's parents to cooperate, for many of our children are unreachable because their parents are unreachable.

Fifth, the teacher can offer Johnny individual guidance. This teacher, or a guidance teacher, may be able to help the child find some accommodation between his problems and the demands of the school. Quite frequently the friendly one-to-one relationship, the realization that somebody cares, is sufficient to stir some positive response in Johnny.

Sixth, the teacher can try to influence the community. She can join and become active in neighborhood councils, or help organize one where none exists. In such an organization, the teacher, speaking as an educator, can press for constructive community action on issues that affect children's welfare.

Trigger the Interest

If Johnny does not care, the teacher who *does* care can try to teach more creatively. The most disaffected child is yet a child, and as such, a learning organism. It simply requires extra ingenuity on the teacher's part to trigger the interest mechanism that starts the learning

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process. The wheels of that mechanism are the day-to-day problems and experiences that Johnny encounters in his life outside school. That instruction should be related to children's needs has long been advocated by modern educators. In fact, however, this type of teaching is not done by enough teachers. For Johnny's teacher such an approach is a "must" because mathematics, science, history, geography, etc., have importance only if and when they bear on something that has meaning to Johnny.

In New York City there are teachers who accept assignments to classes with many disaffected children. One such teacher in a junior high school involved the class in a study of the narcotics traffic which ravaged the community. Even this excellent teacher was astonished to see phlegmatic boys suddenly galvanized into life. Reading, writing, computing, discussing, became daily activities. The boys decided to run a community-wide Anti-Narcotics Rally; they became involved in corresponding with proposed speakers, in designing posters, in composing, printing and distributing leaflets, in organizing the orderly handling of the meeting itself.

A teacher in a community rife with minority tensions wished to teach about the United Nations to his class of difficult students. He suggested the boys make a motion picture (16 mm.) entitled "Our Community—A Small United Nations." Students and teacher found themselves working seven days a week in planning and filming people at work, at worship, at play. Film had to be purchased and processed; camera technique had to be mastered. Since the film was silent, a commentary had to be written and practiced, then narrated at each showing. Besides involving all curricular areas, besides developing excellent concepts and attitudes, this type of teaching captures the imagination, to varying degrees, of course, of many disaffected teen-agers.

Disaffected children have always been with us. They created less of a problem in the days when they could leave school at age 14. Today, with the law mandating school attendance to age 16 and 17, our educational responsibility for these youngsters looms large, especially for those in their turbulent teens. We have learned much about how to approach Johnny and win him. Even with this knowledge, however, teachers must remember that their role is teaching. They cannot be doctors, psychologists and social workers rolled into one; they can do only that which can reasonably be done in the classroom.

American schools must face the challenge presented by the disaffected child. *The profession must seek ceaselessly and restlessly for newer, better ways of reaching out to Johnny.*

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