

# Education at the Crossroads

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Classroom control can no longer be accomplished with the traditional methods, with the teacher functioning as an authority. With the democratic evolution, adults have lost their power over children. Neither parents nor teachers can make a child behave, apply himself, or prevent him from doing mischief.

The traditional ways of influencing children have been autocratic. These autocratic means have lost their effectiveness in a democratic society. If one wants to have discipline and control in a class today one has to use group dynamics. Unfortunately, group dynamics are presently not being taught in teachers' training institutes. Most teachers who can effectively control a group of children have developed the necessary leadership which enabled them to do so, by themselves, and out of their own experience and personality. The principles of group dynamics will have to be taught, so that all teachers will be able to utilize the various means which are now available to keep the interest of the class, to integrate the class and to influence the class.

The most important change in our classroom procedures will be the active participation of the children. We need group discussions. We have to win the support of the children, and we will have to give the children a certain amount of self-determination. It doesn't mean that we have to give it to them because in reality they have it. Rather, we can direct the self-determination of our children in the direction of our educational goals. Without such leadership of the teacher, this self-determination will very often lead to disruptions, to disturbances, to opposition to the teacher, and even to fights with the teacher.

The democratic classroom of the future, and we are moving very fast into a democratic era, will require full participation of the children in running the classroom. This is not to say that the students will impose their will on the teacher, but rather they will be working with the teacher. The children are honestly looking for guidance; only they don't find it in our schools or even in their homes. As long as the teacher doesn't know how to utilize the self-determination of the children, how to direct them into constructive channels, this same self-determination of the children will take antisocial and anti-educational forms. The proof of this statement is all about us.

## **The Group Approach**

It is impossible to give in a few words all the essential characteristics of the group approach. The basic goal, however, is the integration of all children into a group whose direction is moving and working towards a common educational goal. This class integration requires certain, quite definite techniques. Basic to all of them, is the maintenance of a certain atmosphere and enthusiasm. At the present time, our teachers operate still as if they would teach a given number of individual children in a class, without realizing they are teaching one class consisting of a given number of children.

A beginning for a training program would be to teach sociometry. Without the use of sociometric techniques, the teacher cannot understand the sociometric position of each child, the existence and development of subgroups. Without the knowledge of these subgroups the teacher cannot understand what goes on in the class.

Unless the teacher uses group dynamics in the class, the group dynamics that exists in the classroom may well work against her. Unless the teacher is a group leader, and is familiar with the methods to establish the proper group procedures, she cannot possibly deal with the group effectively.

Another important part of this group interactions is group discussion. By that, I mean children once a week freely expressing themselves, individually and collectively. In this way, the teacher can sit down together with the children to discuss common problems. In this way, she can integrate the class and help motivate the children to understand each other and to help each other. Without group discussion, no integration in the classroom for a common endeavor is possible. According to our experience, very few teachers are able to conduct group discussions effectively because they simply don't know or haven't been taught how to do it. They either preach or pointlessly talk themselves; or they let the children freely express themselves, but without any leadership.

Group discussion really means drawing all children into a discussion of their common problems. It is basic to the group dynamics approach.

### **The Teacher as Psychologist**

We found all kinds of objections to our approach; one objection was that the teacher as a "psychological manipulator" is inappropriate in a true democratic classroom. Naturally, the teacher is a psychological manipulator; so are the children. Everyone who is in contact with someone else is a psychological manipulator. By this I mean he tries to evoke reactions which are favorable to him, and to change the motives which work against him. The teacher who uses psychology is doing that to influence the children's cooperation. Manipulator means influencer.

Now, there are people who think perhaps people shouldn't be influenced, and perhaps that people would do it by themselves; however, this kind of thinking encourages anarchy. If you don't want to influence their thinking you can neither teach them, which means change their thinking about the subject matter, nor can you help them or correct them.

So, I must say that if anyone considers psychological influence as inappropriate in a democratic classroom, then I think he should give up any idea of teaching children; because teaching them and giving them information and making them learn something is also a psychological influence which changes the concept of children.

### **Grading**

The grading process has undergone considerable changes. There was first the absolute grading of being good or bad, incompetent or effective. The student got his grades solely according to accomplishment. Then came the so-called grading on the curve; you compared the accomplishment of one student with the accomplishment of another and the grade depended on this plus-minus relation-

ship. Then came the idea of grading the student on his effort. That is to say, if he improved, he got a higher grade. Under this system if the student did not improve, he got a more or less unsatisfactory grade. Indeed, some school systems have given up grading altogether, and merely give impressions of the child and his problems directly to the parents during a conference.

My thinking on grading is that all of these systems are questionable. They would be more effective if they system worked both ways. There is no reason if the teacher can grade the child, why the child shouldn't grade the teacher also.

Actually, the teachers **are** graded by the children. Only without knowing it. The child always expresses his "grading" of the teacher in his relationship with her and by his general classroom behavior. In reality, all this grading could be considered pretty much nonsense — because whatever the results, they, the students and the teachers, must continue to live with each other.

### **Tests**

I predict also that, before very long, the use of tests in our schools will become a heated and controversial issue. It is my belief that tests are only needed as long as educators do not really understand children in their motivation. Because of this deficiency in our understanding of children, assessing them as we work with them, we try to find tests which will quickly give us this information. Actually, these tests often represent mere labels. We label the child according to the tests.

A typical point in regard to this question is the intelligence test. The intelligence test is, in my opinion, one of the greatest hazards in modern education. The routine use of tests is misleading. For example, if the student has a high I. Q. then the teachers are very often discouraged because their performance does not live up to it. If the test is low, then the teacher is discouraged and does not expect anything from the child.

Of the greatest importance to teachers, the I. Q. score is only reliable in a positive sense. It is impossible for a child to get, for example, a score of 135 on the test unless his intelligence or his ability is at least on this level. Yet, the I. Q. cannot be reliably used in a negative sense. In other words, if a child has an I. Q. of 90, one can know only that he functions at least at the level of 90; but it does not mean that he cannot function at higher levels. A teacher must never use the score of an intelligence test to limit his impression of the ability of the student.

### **The Bankruptcy of our Educational Institutions**

I see a bankruptcy of all our educational institutions, the family as well as the school. Both have definite assignments. The family has the assignment to raise children with proper values, proper behavior, and proper personality patterns. It seems that our parents can't do that. They can't because they don't know how to influence children. They try with the traditional methods of making children behave, but they aren't successful. The traditional methods no longer function.

Our new methods do not attempt to induce conformity through pressure, but rather to develop a sense of responsibility and proper behavior through proper inner stimulation.

Although these new methods are not known to most parents, that does not mean that all children are bad or misbehave. Some assume children have to

misbehave. Most parents haven't the slightest idea what to do about bettering the situation. For this reason, I consider the educational practices in our families as inadequate; the American family is truly "bankrupt" in fulfilling its obligation to help all children to behave properly and to develop properly.

In terms of our schools, we have the best teachers. However, they are only good if the child wants to learn and wants to apply himself. If the student decides neither to learn nor to apply himself in his studies, the teacher doesn't know what to do. She simply hasn't learned how to deal with these problems.

Whatever the typical teacher does to correct deficiencies and misbehavior is usually ineffective. Some teachers have the proper feeling for the child through sympathy. They seem to know what the child needs, and are able to influence him. But they haven't learned it in colleges or universities. It is a personal knowledge of only a few. Only a very few teachers are so talented. As a result, we find an increasing number of children who go to school, but don't want to learn. They go to school only because they don't want to or can't stay home. They go to school because they want to be with their friends. They go to school to have fun, at the expense of the teacher. The percentage of children who really want to learn is rather small. Those who want to learn do it often for wrong reasons: either to be better than others, only interested in glory or prestige and superiority, or simply to go to college to earn more money. The number of "drop-outs" and "throw-outs" is on the increase. There are more and more children who don't learn to read or write properly. There are more and more underachievers, students with intellectual ability who don't want to apply themselves. We are deluding ourselves if we continually refer only to the many children who are academically successful.

### **Drop-outs**

The drop-outs are not recognized yet for what they are, the result of our educational bankruptcy. We keep children in our schools without stimulating them to learn. And all plans for the drop-outs consider what to do with them only after they have already openly expressed their negative attitude toward education by leaving school. In brief, the problem, in my opinion, is how to stimulate these youngsters to want to learn.

One other related and more serious problem is that of the "throw-outs." By this I mean those boys and girls forced to leave school. They are the greatest danger because they usually are those who seek their place in delinquent population. No school should have the right to throw out children. As long as the parents are obliged to send their children to schools, the schools have to find means and ways of influencing them. They can't wash their hands of them, and merely throw them out. This "throw-outs" problem will be perhaps one of the critical points, where a rebellion on the part of the parents will force the schools to develop better techniques of giving service to all the children for whose education they are responsible.

This is a crucial question. What is the function of the school? Can we limit the school assignment to impart knowledge, to teach subject matter, and to give basic instruction; or should it provide other services like guidance adjustments, etc.? Are these activities out of the range of the school? Many are convinced that the teachers will ever be able to teach academic subjects unless they become

concerned with the adjustment and developmental problems of the students; only then can they be able to influence them.

At the present time, school psychologists, guidance workers, and counselors are necessary to help in the adjustment of the children, and so facilitate the teachers' instruction. There will be, however, a time when every teacher will be sufficiently trained in understanding the motivation of the child and have the ability to influence his behavior; then we will not need many school psychologists and counselors. At the present time, unfortunately, even guidance counselors and psychologists are often very limited in their ability to understand the dynamics of children, and in their ability to help to correct their behavior.

### **Ability grouping**

The question of homogeneous versus heterogeneous grouping is equally related to the ability or inability of the teacher to integrate the class. No class or group is by itself homogenous. It can be homogeneous, despite individual differences. Even if all students are on the same academic level, some members can make quite different contributions to the group. For this reason, every teacher has to develop the skills to integrate all children, despite their individual differences. Once a teacher has learned to integrate a class, he can then take any variety of individual personalities and intellectual abilities and integrate them into one functioning and productive group. Every child, even on different levels of development, can be useful, as the advanced student can help those less advanced.

The idea of the homogeneous ability groupings is a poor substitute for good teaching. Naturally, there are limits to this idea. There are perhaps certain levels of achievement which are probably prerequisite for students working together. Yet, we are inclined today to ask for more homogeneous groupings, primarily because our teachers do not possess the skills necessary to integrate different kinds of abilities and personalities into a single group which is both effective and efficient.

Special classes are another expression of our educational bankruptcy. A well-trained and capable teacher can integrate all the students in her class into a single learning group. In a normal class, the gifted child can be utilized to make available his greater ability for the enrichment of the whole class program. He can take part in a common class project, yet accept tasks according to his abilities, which may well be greater than other children. It is apparent that most of our teachers still teach individual children and don't realize that they are, in reality, teaching one group. Therefore, they become interested only in the individual child and his progress, unavoidably contrasting and comparing him to others. This practice is itself against every principle of successful group integration.

Furthermore, our advanced classes, our accelerated classes, our classes for the gifted, etc. are only creating snobs. The superior students only discourage the rest of the students who feel that they are inferior second class citizens. These rejected students are stimulated against the whole school system and the whole learning procedure.

## **Possible Development**

If I had unlimited funds and complete authority, I would organize the community to meet the needs of all its children. The steps a community could take to meet the problems of youth would include the realization that there is a "continuum of norm-violating behavior," from the small infringement of the order in the family to juvenile delinquency. Some of the first steps would not deal with the question of curriculum of the material which the children have to learn and teaching methods as such; rather, I would consider the social and psychological aspects of schools and homes.

The first thing to do is to teach the teachers in their training schools psychodynamics and group dynamics. Teachers have to learn to understand the goals of the child; the immediate goals (the four goals of disturbing behavior); and the long-range goals of the child's life style. Everyone who is teaching children has to understand motivation and can learn to counteract the direction of the child. This means changing his goals. The teacher has to learn group dynamics in order to integrate the class to create a good learning atmosphere.

Further, the children have to be represented in the student council. This should not be a fake student council as we usually have it today. It should be a council of students both at the classroom level and for the entire school. The students and the teachers would work together to solve the problems of each student. This kind of school organization would necessitate the students having a say-so in the general affairs of the community, a community-student council. The children would also take part in the making of family decisions through a family council.

This brings us to the next step. Not only do the teachers have to learn to understand children, but the teachers have to help the parents to learn how to win the cooperation of their children. Some schools take on this responsibility. They provide for parent study groups and for parent counseling centers.

Furthermore, it would be advisable to make the technique of raising children a subject in junior high or high school, so that the students at this level would be prepared for parenthood, preferably with some practical work in nursery schools and kindergartens. These young adults could, in this way, learn to understand children and learn what to do with them. With such knowledge of how to effectively influence children, they will become an important part of the community.

## **What is Democracy**

Many assume that democracy is primarily a political system of representative government. Therefore, there cannot be a democratic school system, because the municipal or state government institutes an organization, without the consent of the children. Now, democracy means the right of self-determination; not only in regard to political issues, but also in regard to one's own private life.

We became free to determine, to decide, what we are to do. We no longer must submit to powers if they try to force us to do what we do not consider right. Naturally, there are laws that we all have to obey. Most people obey the laws, not because they agree with all of them, but because they agree with the needs for laws, and the need to observe laws.

This is a crucial point, the children have no right to decide what to learn from whom and when. They have no rights, but they take them. We can no longer "make" them do what we want them to, nor prohibit them from doing what they want to do. We have to take into consideration this right which the people in a democracy have gained and which now all people, including children, claim for themselves. A democratic classroom presupposes a situation where children willingly volunteer to accept the rules and participate in the establishment of them. In the democratic school of the future, children will play an exceedingly large part in determining the function of the school. Because, unless they participate in the determination of what goes on in the school, they will be no longer willing to accept the obligations which the school and the adults have demanded for them.

Democracy in the family means participation of all members in the activities of the family. Democracy in the school means that the students will have something to say about determining the goals and procedures of the group to which they belong.

### **The Comparison of Educational Systems**

In autocratic school systems the children are willing to mind, to be told, to conform; one can influence them with the traditional means of reward and punishment. But, reward and punishment have become obsolete in a democratic setting.

Today we need other methods to stimulate our children; once these methods are available, the academic achievement of American students will not be second to any other. Yet, as long as we do not have new methods of motivating children to study and to learn to develop, our academic results will be far behind that of autocratic, fascist or communist countries. When the democratic evolution will take place in other countries, their difficulties with children will also increase.

We, naturally, have in America also many excellent students. Some of them may be equal or be ahead of European students. But the vast majority of the American students are not stimulated to work up to their potential.