

## SELF-EXPLORATIONS OF TEACHERS IN A SEMINAR IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS<sup>1</sup>

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This paper attempts to explore the nature of an educational experience, the experience of teachers in a two-semester Seminar in Interpersonal Relations.<sup>2</sup> Data for the study come from tape recordings of the sessions, from personal notes of the teachers written after each class, and from reports submitted at the end of the course. The impetus for bringing the material together came shortly after the publication of the author's book, *The Teacher and the Child*, from a number of letters requesting information on the kind of experience which helped teachers evolve personal classroom relationships.

### STRUCTURE OF THE SEMINAR

*Theoretical Foundation.* Though the structure of the seminar is still in the process of emerging and constantly changes with each year's group, a core of value, attitude and conviction is maintained by the instructor which provides a continuing substance and essential pattern in the course. It is the instructor's personal philosophy that the creation of an accepting, non-judgmental atmosphere where the individual is valued as a person, is conducive to significant growth, i.e., to the expression and exploration of personal and professional experience, and to the development of understanding, respect, and sensitivity in personal relationships. The instructor encourages teachers to do what they really want to do in their classrooms, to be and become more fully themselves, i.e., to express consistently their own values and convictions and to stop acting as they think they should or on the advice of experts. He believes in the dynamic value of the teachers' experience, attempts to nurture and cultivate their ideas, and recognizes the significance of personal insights which emerge from a natural unity of thought and feeling.

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<sup>2</sup>This is an off-campus Merrill-Palmer course, extending over the academic year, which has been made available to school systems during the past seven years.

In the first five meetings of the class, the instructor presents his approach through lectures and discussions on the self, taken from the list of readings at the end of this paper. This list is made available to the teachers at the beginning of the year. The instructor presents a philosophy of health as a positive self-fulfilling force, as the unified and consistent organization of personality rather than the absence of symptoms or presence of standards and norms of behavior. This view provides a way for seeing, sensing, feeling, and knowing the significance of the personal relationship. Though he presents his view with definite conviction, the teachers are encouraged to seek to know their own values with greater clarity and to evolve a philosophy of personal relationships which is consistent with their own experience.

The following principles briefly characterize the instructor's approach.

1. Only the individual can develop his potentialities. This development occurs most fully in an atmosphere where the individual is encouraged to explore his own unique interests, choices, and directions.

2. As long as the individual is accepted, valued, and loved as a unique personality, he will continue to grow and develop his potentialities. When he is taught to imitate others or if he is rejected, criticized, or attacked, he becomes static or defensive rather than exploratory and actualizing.

3. The individual's perception of himself in a non-threatening situation is more valid, i.e., true to his experience, than any outside analysis can be. When free from external pressures, the individual knows himself and can relate and explore this knowledge with others.

4. Every individual wants to develop healthy relationships and to realize his potentialities, therefore he strives to create and participate in learning situations conducive to growth.

5. The individual learns only if he wants to, and learns significantly only those things which *are* involved in the growth of the self. Any other type of learning is temporary and disappears when threats are removed, or persists in a context of personal anxiety.

6. We cannot teach another person directly nor can we facilitate real learning in the sense of making it easier. We can make learning possible by providing information, the setting, atmosphere, materials, and resources; and by being present in the full human sense, through listening, empathizing, supporting, and encouraging.

7. The educational situation which most effectively promotes significant learning is one in which (a) the uniqueness of the learner is deeply respected and treasured, and (b) the person is free to explore the ideas, materials, and resources available to him in the light of his own interests, potentialities, and experience.

8. When the individual acts in accordance with his own being, he more and more fully realizes his potentialities. He must be free to do what he wants to do. If both internally and externally free, the individual expresses his own self and is able to grow. The result is *expression of the self*, i.e., unified, consistent behavior, and not the wild, confused, and fragmentary "acting out" often designated as *self-expression*. This kind of self-expression is externally motivated, a reaction to frustration, denial, and rejection, i.e., to not being a self. In contrast, expression of the self is the natural emergence and development of real potentiality in unified holistic behavior.

*The Tape-Recorded Sessions.* The material is taken from a single year, when eighteen teachers participated in the Seminar, in order to provide a continuity for the investigation. The recordings were not begun until after the first five meetings. Sixteen of the twenty-seven remaining, open, sessions were recorded, each lasting approximately two hours. The first session was prefaced with the instructor's remark that the group was free to use the two-hour period in any way it wished.

The recorded data show the attitudes, concepts, and experiences which were significant to the eighteen teachers in the group. These discussions offered an understanding of the underlying dynamics of the teachers' perceptions and attitudes and the changes which occurred. While it is not possible here to present the complete transcripts, enough excerpts are included to illustrate the experience of the teachers as a meaningful whole. Brief comments of the author follow each section.

*Instructor's Behavior During the Open Sessions.* The instructor did not function in any pre-designated or predetermined fashion during the open meetings of the class. He expressed himself spontaneously, intuitively and in terms of the total context of immediate situations as he saw them. In retrospect, it is possible to point to some characteristics of his behavior: he listened to encourage further exploration on the part of teachers, but also to understand and to learn for himself from the experiences of teachers; he encouraged individual

teachers to maintain positions they felt were right and valid, but tried to do so without minimizing the value of majority opinion or suggestion; he expressed his point of view from time to time, but encouraged others in the group to maintain their own perceptions and convictions; he directly supported individuals in the group when he felt their integrity and self-respect were being threatened or destroyed; he encouraged teachers to experiment and try out ideas that came to them through the class exploration; and he tried to show his belief in the worth and dignity of each teacher in the group, his belief in their potentialities as creative teachers, and his acceptance and empathy in response to each expression.

#### SELECTED TAPE-RECORDINGS, SUMMARIES, AND COMMENTS

##### *Relationships with Children*

During the year a variety of relationships with children were discussed by the teachers. These were not presented as cases for analysis in the group, but rather as a way for a particular teacher to explore with others his own involvement with a child, the nature of this personal relationship, the possible development of a positive approach to the child, and a resolution of existing problems. One of these relationships has been selected to illustrate the nature of the discussion and the meaning and value it held for individual teachers. The following excerpts, from the transcription of a meeting early in the year, refer to a first grader who is rejected in school.

Mrs. SALL: I'm trying to figure out the best way to refer a child for special services.

Mrs. LONG: You should talk this over with your principal.

Mrs. DASE: I feel you should discuss it first with the mother. Could you?

Mrs. SALL: Yes, I think she can be approached as a wonderful mother. She is sensitive. I think I've been reluctant to tell her something is wrong. If she wasn't such a grand person, I could dislike her for what she's done to the child. But she is so wonderful I don't want to add to her burdens. I really don't think I'm the one to talk with her.

Mr. MOUSTAKAS: You're afraid if you told her it would be very disturbing to her.

Mrs. SALL: That's right. I don't know what she would do. She's our room mother and she's done so much. I know I shouldn't let that enter in. The child should come first, but I just don't want to add to her troubles. I don't know what he lacks but he hasn't done any school work in two months. I get after him and he cries or he crawls under the table or hates school and doesn't want to come back. He'll hate you one minute and love you the next. In spite of it all, he's a lovely little reader, and does his workbook without any instruction. I didn't think he'd ever be able to

read. I don't know when he concentrates. He never seems to be looking when I'm instructing. He's so entirely babyish. I've seen little two-year olds act like that. His mother was quite surprised when I told her he could read and that he does work difficult for my top group.

MISS TARS: Is the child accepted in the group?

MRS. SALL: The child isn't very well accepted by the group. His mother is very clever at making puppets, and she puts on puppet shows, and the children who were invited to the party were just wonderful to Bill until the party and then after that, they dropped him again. It was so obvious. They were so tickled they were invited to the puppet show, and after the party was over, he was the same child, picked on again. I can't get him to converse. The only thing I get is "so and so hit me." Of course he started it. I've seen it over and over again. For no reason at all he hits. The mother tried to have him take the bus at noon, because the children were cruel to him in the riding group. He is very awkward, quite large, but there must be something there or he couldn't read like he does.

MRS. DASE: Do you mean the mother would be in the car and ignore all this that goes on?

MRS. SALL: Well, she doesn't ignore him in her heart but she tries not to say too much to the children because she says she really doesn't understand how much of it is Bill's fault. I can see her position too.

MRS. DASE: I don't know why the parents would just sit and not try to do something about that in some way.

MRS. SALL: I build Bill up. I try to do it constantly by remembering how well he reads. I build him up in everything he does, but what he doesn't do is so obvious. He's such a pest with other children. It's hard to build him up and have the children respect him one minute and not the next. Sometimes he gets wild with his hitting. He goes through all kinds of facial gestures. When the mother comes, she takes over the whole thing. She does everything well.

MISS WHET: I think it's a shame when parents give parties for children and then showoff their own cleverness.

MRS. SALL: Well, but the children were really interested in the puppet show. He's a child who will share his crayons, paper, and pencils. I think he does it mainly with a will-you-be-my-friend attitude.

MISS WHET: He's buying friendship.

MRS. SALL: He feels he must pay for everything he gets. He acts cantankerous when he's rejected by the other children.

MR. MOUSTAKAS: Then he hurts others, because he expects them to turn against him.

MRS. SALL: There's a neighborhood feeling against him too. The poor child is just crucified it seems to me. For what? I don't know except he hits. I've had note after note from parents saying, "Please don't let my child sit next to Billy." What am I going to do? Of course, I've never told the mother. She hears it all the time in the riding group and in the neighborhood. As I say I just lack the courage to tell the mother.

MR. FRANK: I would be interested in knowing if the neighbors think she's such a splendid person. That's the big question in my mind.

MRS. WALK: I would also like to know how the family stands in the neighborhood, what the other mothers and fathers say about the family.

MR. SALL: That would be a hard thing for me to do.

MR. FRANK: Sometimes you get it voluntarily without asking.

MRS. SALL: But she's so wonderful. If I find a little boy crying and say I'm going to take him home, she'll say, "Don't bother, I'll take him home."

MRS. WALK: Would a child accept a ride with her?

MRS. SALL: Oh yes! They think she's very nice and talk kindly to her.

MRS. CONE: I had a similar situation. I had a mother last year who had an only child and this little girl was just as backward as a child could be and her mother was constantly getting her into Brownies and other groups. She was a member of the PTA, very active in the room, came about twice a week to see what was going on. As far as the little girl was concerned I think it was all wasted. I think she thought she was doing all that for the child. The child wasn't interested at all. It just made her go back into her shell because her mother was the active type and the girl was more passive. She wouldn't come forth with anything which her mother did. She put her in ballet school and brought things to school for her to show and the little girl didn't appreciate any of it. The other children didn't care for the girl because of her personality. I do think with older parents many expect too much of them, but I think it's just the opposite here. I think they've done everything for this child and it's all been wasted because the child never learned to do anything for herself.

MRS. SALL: But this little Bill, he comes up and kisses me and anyone else he feels like. He's rather an affectionate little youngster and Tom who is a very sophisticated youngster said, "Bill has to kiss the teacher all the time. He's a baby." Bill looked at me and said, "I don't have to kiss you all the time, do I? I would kill you if I wanted to, but I won't. I love you."

MRS. WALK: Is this mother just facing the situation now?

MRS. SALL: No! She had many conferences with the kindergarten teacher last year. They talked it all over and the teacher suggested Bill be retained. The doctor suggested this too. So did the principal. The mother agreed, but the first day of school she brought him to my room against everybody's advice.

MISS SHAWN: It seems to me she was more worried about what the neighbors would think than about the child's welfare. But you say he's a good reader and does his work well.

MRS. SALL: Yes, but he hasn't written a single word since he's been here.

MISS SHAWN: But he is a good reader.

MRS. SALL: Yes, but I don't understand how. I introduce a word once and it's his forever and he doesn't seem to be listening.

MRS. WULL: He'll catch on to writing one of these days. I had a child who didn't write all year in first grade but he writes beautifully now.

MRS. LONG: Maybe he's really very bright. Do you think he would have benefited by remaining in kindergarten?

MRS. SALL: I don't believe so. I don't know what holding him back would have done to him.

MR. WANN: Maybe he's just an individual chap who isn't going to be molded or pushed around. I always hated writing and still don't do it except when I'm forced to. I think I'd worry more about his personal happiness than about academic work. I have a feeling that when he proposes to learn himself that he'll do it.

MRS. SALL: Are you advising me not to even speak to him about his work?

MR. WANN: I'm not offering advice, just giving my reaction.

MISS WHET: If I were you, I'd put the whole thing up to his mother. It doesn't work to force him to do school work. There's no point continuing it. Try to get the parents to help.

MRS. SALL: What about when he's disturbing others?

MRS. DASE: Could you let him do something constructive he wants to do? Could you get some books for him to read?

MISS WHET: It sounds as though his parents have never let him do things on his own.

MRS. ALLEN: These older parents often go along with a child and do his thinking for him and don't give the child a chance to learn to take care of himself.

MRS. LONG: Is there anyone in the room he likes real well?

MRS. SALL: He tries to like them all. He'll go up to one and say something nice and they'll shove him away and I'm very sympathetic and that makes me always feel—I always try to build him up. In fact I sent him off to the kindergarten the other day with a book to read to his former teacher and while he was gone I told them not to make remarks. I told about some children that had their teeth and some that did not and some that hadn't lost any yet, just to show them that children will grow differently, and that maybe his hand could not write just now like the others. Just like second teeth, some have lost their first teeth and some haven't. I said, "Just see the difference how we grow. Now Bill just can't do it." I didn't know how to explain it to them because they were just making such fun of him for a long time. They've never made fun of his work since then. I feel somehow I can't bring out what the child has. I feel an inadequacy there, whether I can't inspire him or what, I don't know. I've taught a good many years and I've never had a child like this.

MR. MOUSTAKAS: You would like him to write?

MRS. SALL: I would like to know what I could do to make him want to write.

MRS. WULL: Do you remember Jimmy, that child that wouldn't write? The thing I'm thinking of particularly was there was quite a lot of upsetness in the room, and he was given a large clump of paper and a new pencil and said he could just scribble all he wanted. Do you remember? And he started in and all he would do is just make these great big circles. In three weeks time, I think we decided that if he did anything that looked like a letter that I would point it out, "Well, this is a nice 'O'," and he made two or three O's, and I think "A" was the next letter that he did. And it went on, but he certainly had a lot of that to get out of his system, and it was treated respectfully. Out of this very large movement he began making just two or three letters. Of course he did have other physiological situations there, but he developed so much. He could go to the board

or do it on paper. He seemed to have a drive all the time to do something, and he didn't know what he wanted to do. And finally after a month he was writing words.

MRS. SALL: Maybe I could try that (pause) and just ignore the very fact that he doesn't finish his work.

MRS. WHET: Are you going to talk with his mother?

MRS. SALL: I don't think so. I just thought that maybe if she could feel he was getting along, there would be a different feeling in the air. Then they'd think more of him.

MISS DEAN: I think there's an awful lot to his being an only child. It's awfully hard when you have to make that break from your parents. I know it was for me. I wouldn't have gotten on a bus for anything without my mother. I wanted my parents in a big crowd. I wanted to be shown. And it stayed with me even though I was mature in other ways. I was all right after I went through it once. But it was such an awful feeling—doing something for the first time on your own, until really I was pretty big. And it was kind of a blow when I finally had to. I've overcome it now, but gee, I think I was at college. I'm ashamed to say it, but I was a big girl and afraid even to buy my own clothes for fear I'd make a mistake. My mother never pushed me. She just kept doing things for me.

MR. MOUSTAKAS: It's easy to see why you would be so frightened about going somewhere or doing something on your own, some new experience.

MR. FRANK: But she turned out all right. It seems that we overcome a lot of things that happen when we are children.

*Comments.* Mrs. Sall starts this discussion apparently interested only in information. After her initial statements, she feels free to venture into the special problem she faces in the classroom and, specifically, in relation to one of the mothers. It seems clear that Mrs. Sall is not just reporting, but is actually exploring her own personal feelings and experience. As she talks, some of her questions, confusions and doubts begin to disappear. She sees new possibilities for growth in her relationship with Bill and Bill's mother. Some of the teachers in the group are concerned mainly with a background picture and conditions impinging on the child. Others, for example, Mrs. Cone and Mrs. Wull, empathize with Mrs. Sall, support her, and encourage her to maintain her faith in the child's potentialities. Finally Mr. Wann refers to the uniqueness of the child and the importance of his individuality. He offers the idea that the child will learn when he himself proposes to learn and not from external direction. Mr. Wann values the child's personal happiness over academic work. Through it all, Mrs. Sall listens and learns. She emerges finally with her own conclusion not to talk with the mother, believing that the mother must continue to feel that school is one place her child is doing well, and

hoping that in time this will lead to a "different feeling in the air" at home. Mr. Frank ends the discussion on a positive, hopeful note.

Mrs. Sall's apparent decision not to destroy the mother's illusion will undoubtedly be questioned. When she began to relate this reluctance to approach the mother with the reality of the child's unhappiness in school, the group on the whole felt she was not facing up to the issue, but as she continued to explore the problem, most of the group became convinced that Mrs. Sall's decision to maintain a wholly positive relation with the mother, to let her continue to feel that her son was making progress in school, and to continue to work toward a happier school life for the child was a meaningful, logical, and healthy solution.

#### *Relationships with other Teachers*

The nature of teachers' relationships with each other was an important theme in the meetings. On four different occasions, the teachers explored their struggles and concerns. Strong feelings were expressed in the criticism, rejection, and hostility of teachers toward each other, and in the cleavage between experienced and inexperienced teachers. The excerpt below illustrates these discussions and shows how the experience of teachers in school can influence relationships outside of school.

MRS. WALK: The first time in a long time that I sat down in class and considerably enjoyed myself. I felt peaceful and that's a very unusual feeling, because I haven't been feeling that way. Of course, it didn't last long—only one day. Then Mr. Frank [the principal] and Dr. Howard [the school psychologist] came over. They came into my room, just to visit. I would like to tell about that.

MR. FRANK: When we stepped into Virginia's [Mrs. Walk's] room her first remark was, "I'm being a very strict teacher today." The children were sitting very quietly. They were having an arithmetic lesson. They were being taught simple addition by a very unique method. The thing I noticed mostly was that the kids seemed to enjoy not knowing how to do it. Each time Mrs. Walk asked, "How many do not understand?" about three-fourths of the room had their hands up. Then she'd ask, "Now who would like to explain it?" and the same three-fourths put their hands up. They seemed to be making a game of it, but it was a very well-behaved group of kids. I observed them later on the playground. They seemed to be a very normal, lively bunch of kids tearing around and fighting. I got the feeling that things were not in a turmoil, not so bad as Mrs. Walk has reported.

MRS. WALK: The day Mr. Frank came in, I had decided to be a strict teacher and I didn't enjoy it. I didn't enjoy seeing myself be that kind of teacher.

- MR. FRANK: Well, one thing that impressed me, the kids didn't seem to object. You set limits but they accepted them.
- MRS. LONG: Possibly they rebelled by pretending not to understand what Mrs. Walk was teaching them.
- MR. FRANK: I sensed you were uncomfortable. They were getting you down and you didn't like it.
- MRS. WALK: I find children frequently say they do not understand when they do. After you left, things got bad. I stuck my neck out. I put a note on the bulletin board asking that the teachers who were complaining about the noise come and tell me about it instead of going to the principal. I started the note in a very negative way, not meaning to. It angered one of the teachers who pounced on me. She harped at me how I unconsciously was trying to hurt some teachers in the building, how it was a pattern I had set up in my life—digging at others and wanting to hurt them. She completely—I couldn't—I felt so completely broken down.
- MRS. LONG: Why did the note anger her so?
- MRS. WALK: It--it started her on me. She told me she was telling me everything she had felt about me for a long time. Things she said she could not have said earlier.
- MRS. DASE: She picked a good time when you were having so much trouble with the children.
- MRS. WALK: She was honest but it hurt me badly. Her criticisms and what she said all the others in the building thought about me, that I was unfit to be a teacher.
- MRS. DASE: Sometimes I wonder what kind of a profession we have. We go around with such an air of dignity and then destroy the sense of value and the integrity of a fellow teacher.
- MRS. SALL: It's happened to many of us. One of my colleagues told a member of the Board of Education that I was an unfit person to teach.
- MRS. WALK: I know exactly where my difficulties are. I have felt, in the first place I'm the only young person in the building, and the older teachers resent it that I don't have their program and their discipline. I guess when I put the note up, I was striking back. There's a great deal of resentment against me. Last year there was another young teacher in the building and they criticized her a lot. This year she's not here, and I'm feeling all their resentment. It all boiled up and burst out with my note. This class is the only place where I find any acceptance at all from teachers.
- MR. MOUSTAKAS: Even when you know why people resent you, it still hurts very much.
- MRS. WALK: That's very true. It's very hard to shake it off. Yesterday I was called away from recess to straighten out a lumber bill. We needed the lumber to build a stage. When I got back outside, I said to another teacher, "It's kind of cold out here, isn't it?" She retorted with sarcasm, "How would you know, you haven't been out here."
- MRS. CONE: We have a teacher in our building with a sour disposition. Many times I come away with that feeling—in fact I'm cautious about expressing myself in front of her because I'm never sure.
- MRS. ALLEN: I don't go near people like that. I always keep my distance.

MRS. WALK: I don't do that. I want her to understand me, but I can feel so hurt talking to her. Why should I want to be near her? Why should I knock myself out when the situation is practically impossible? Anyway it's her life. It's up to her.

MRS. SALL: Is it just this one person?

MRS. WALK: No, everyone in the school.

MRS. HOCH: I know how you feel. When I first taught in our building I felt the older teachers were always staring at me and what I did. Everytime I was in charge of a school function I got sick. I think it's why I never had any children of my own. I just put out all of my emotions trying to meet the other teachers' standards and never quite making the grade.

MRS. SALL: I don't think we can size it up to young and old.

MRS. HOCH: No, I never meant that.

MR. FRANK: You'd find the same thing if you worked at General Motors or any place else. When I first started teaching, I could have got into a great deal of trouble. I was given a sponsor. She just thought her way of teaching was the only way. She brought one thing after another to me when I got ready to teach certain skills in arithmetic or reading. I could have said to her, "I'm sorry, but we never learned to teach it that way in our methods classes at the university." But if I had talked that way to her, I would have spiked my guns with her right then and she would have made my life miserable. You'll find that in any job, I'm convinced. Wouldn't you say it takes a certain amount of tact?

MRS. WALK: I know part of it is my fault. I've resented their surveillance and disapproval and I've bounced back at them.

MISS DEAN: My school has been good. The older teachers have taught me a great deal, but I have also observed some petty things, as you say.

MISS WHET: Do you feel you need their approval?

MRS. WALK: No, I don't.

MISS SHAWN: When I first came here to teach, I had a rugged time, because all the other teachers had been at the school a long, long time. I was all alone. My supervisor never worked with anyone. It was hard for her to accept me there. I did things differently than she did. She was at the North Pole and I was at the South Pole. She had taken her training a long time ago and I was just taking mine. I had different ideas and different ways of doing things. Everything I did, according to her, was all wrong. I could see what made her feel that way. After a while I understood it. I avoided issues with her, kept my feeling inside. Once in a while I got awfully tired of the great pretense. She even had me in tears once. My children were always breaking the toys. My children never put anything away. My children were completely undisciplined. I kept saying to myself, "She can't help it." I guess I could go on growing, knowing she was a sick person. I might be entirely wrong, but it helped me to understand why I threatened her and why she resented anything I did that was new. I don't think it's so much a question of your being younger. I think they are teachers who stopped growing a long time ago when they finished their training, and they resent your broader insights. They criticize what you do, not because you are young, but because your work involved extra initiative and resourcefulness and understanding.

*Comments.* This meeting began in a very exciting way. In the presence of her principal, Mrs. Walk openly expressed her distress and disturbance in teaching, and described her pretense at being a strict teacher. She learned for the first time that Mr. Frank supports her and approves of what she is doing in the classroom. Encouraged by Mr. Franks' remarks, Mrs. Walk ventured into another problem in the school—the antagonistic and critical attitude of other teachers when she attempts to face her relation with them in an open fashion. Mr. Frank summarized her problem in terms of lack of tact, but a number of teachers recognized her dilemma and supported her through experiences of their own, particularly Mrs. Sall, Mrs. Hoch, and Miss Shawn. A few of the teachers considered withdrawal from others the best solution, but most of them regarded the open facing of conflicts as the best approach, even though the consequences might be painful and disturbing. There was a feeling among many of the teachers that the integrity of the teacher must be maintained, and that this often meant calling upon sources of strength from within, and standing by one's convictions and values.

The self is not free to grow without this inner freedom of expression and development. Here, for the first time, Mrs. Walk, recognized and supported, was able to get a sense of her own being as a teacher and as a person. She could see her dishonest, false self in teaching, and could begin to move toward an integration and consistency in what she is doing with what she is.

#### *Relationships with Parents; Summary*

Relationships between teachers and parents, both in specific and general terms, were brought up again and again throughout the year. These discussions show a striking paradox. Parents are viewed, both, as the chief threat of the teacher and as the most significant resource. They have information and skills which help the teacher, but they also come with ideas and plans which threaten. The teachers explored various aspects of their hostility, resentment, fears, and condemnations in interactions with parents, as well as their dependence on friendship and help from parents. Some of these feelings and attitudes seemed to lessen in intensity as greater clarity on the concrete issue was achieved. Some of the problems seemed to be resolved in the course of discussion. In every case, emotional release was felt by the teacher in the expression of feelings, and in the understanding and support given by some members of the group.

Though parents were mentioned in many other educational issues, e.g., grades and evaluation, problems of children, fast and slow children, and punishment, only the two discussions which focus on attitudes of teachers toward parents are summarized in this section.

*Parent-Teacher Irresponsibility.* A number of parental failures were pointed out by the teachers: Parents are afraid to face the facts; parents who need conferences most fail to come for them; parents make children aware of their shortcomings; parents make children feel that failure in school is a terrible personal defeat; and parents do not realize that the child's growth is more important than his grade level. On the side of teachers' failures it was stated: A child's difficulty in school involves a mutual responsibility between parent and teacher; teachers try to work miracles; teachers expect too much of parents; teachers are too anxious with parents; teachers force parents to act against their own wishes and convictions; and when parents, in consequence, make their children insecure, they know it and feel badly.

Many facets of parent-teacher irresponsibility were explored by the teachers. Although some were quick to see the shortcomings of parents, others recognized teachers' attitudes which contributed to misunderstandings and irresponsible behavior in relations with parents. The discussions gave those who looked at specific parents as hopeless and interfering an opportunity to reconsider the relation and their part in it, as well as to recognize possibilities for initiating positive approaches to these parents.

*Parent-Teacher Cooperation.* The problem of failing children always brings parent and teacher together in a relation which can create problems and conflicts, or one which can result in a mutual agreement and a plan. It is clear that the parent's attitude, value, or belief cannot be ignored in the failure of a child, and that the incorporation of the parental viewpoint, as well as the child's, is vitally necessary for reaching a decision which really will contribute to the child's growth. A child who feels that failure is a terrible personal defeat, whether this is transmitted by the parent or not, bears an emotional scar that cannot help but be destructive in his school experiences. Criticism of the parent only aggravates the symptoms of a child's failure and increases parental resistance. The teacher must strive to understand and accept the parent's view, however distorted or inconsistent it may seem. The teacher must not put pressure on the parent, but must devote his energies really to help the child. This

help cannot be given by finding all the answers to the child's retardation in faulty, irresponsible, and rejecting parental management.

*Self-Reference of the Group; Summary*

On three occasions the group referred to its own experience in the Seminar of openly expressing and exploring personal relations. The main concern in these discussions was whether it was safe to relate personal feelings and ideas in the group. Could members of the group really trust each other? Would teachers' personal expressions be repeated outside the group? Is it not wise to keep bad experiences to oneself? In these meetings some teachers expressed their reluctance and doubt, but as the discussions proceeded, there seemed to be a consensus of feeling in the group that without confidence, spontaneity, and freedom in the Seminar, true growth would not occur.

Discussions of this kind occurred only during the first semester, but not during the second semester. This shows that initially, there was distrust and fear by some teachers in the group. But as the discussions continued over the year, these reservations and doubts disappeared, and open expression of vital issues took place in the Seminar with a feeling of safety and confidence.

*Personal Reference; Fear and Freedom*

Throughout the year there were numerous discussions of teachers' personal convictions and attitudes. These discussions centered upon their freedom, guilt, frustrations, fears, feelings of inadequacy, failings, and hostility. Part of a discussion of freedom and fear has been selected to illustrate the manner in which personal references were made and how the discussion evolved.

MRS. DASE: Young teachers are often afraid to act on their own spontaneous thoughts, to use their own judgment. That's what they need to learn to do. We've got some excellent young teachers in our school system. The old ones keep telling them how to teach, how to discipline, etc. They're not telling them the right way. If you young teachers would just go out and have the courage of your convictions, you'd do it the best way you knew how, and you'd be fine teachers. Don't be so worried about what old teachers think who are anxious to tell you how.

MISS MORSE: Oh, it isn't that. They have more experience and can help us.

MRS. SALL: They have the experience, I grant that, but they often lack sympathy and kindness toward young teachers, because they think they know so much about it. They don't give you young teachers a chance to work it out your own way. I've seen it happen again and again. If you follow their preaching, you'll turn out to be poor teachers, because you can never really teach someone else's way.

MR. MOUSTAKAS: Unless what you do comes from you, you cannot act on your own and have firm faith in yourself?

MRS. WALK: I'll admit I was afraid really to try something new. All along I've been talking only on the surface. About a month ago I decided to give children the freedom of choice they want. Now I'm going through complete chaos and turmoil. I've been wondering whether the turmoil is really within me or in the class, whether it's all because I've got troubles. No one has ever given me any techniques that really helped in a relationship. I'm very sensitive to the children's feelings during these times, but I don't know what to do. A little girl came up to me a few days ago and said, "I hate you." She said it twice.

MISS WHET: Maybe she really does.

MRS. WALK: Yes, but what can I do. Other children say things to each other. Other teachers and the principal have come into my room. They think I'm crazy to let it all go on. It doesn't bother me if that's the way the children really feel. — Yes, it does bother me. I've been trying to figure out if it disturbs me, because when I was in the second grade I had to maintain a stony silence. I remember I resented it but I have not been able to shake the need for a quiet room out of my system. All that's happening in my room is children are expressing themselves wildly. I'm not teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic.

MRS. SALL: If the children are learning on their own, does it matter that you're not teaching?

MRS. WALK: But there is noise all the time. When I try to get control of the room, I lose control of myself. They don't care about me. I go home at the end of the day and say, "I'm never going back. I'm going to quit teaching, give it up, retreat."

MR. MOUSTAKAS: That kind of turmoil is extremely bad for you and the children. Is that it?

MRS. WALK: Maybe I've given the wrong impression. I don't believe my room is what you'd call turmoil. But there are times when the children make plenty of noise and I take ten minutes to quiet them. That's ten minutes wasted. Then they're all quiet. So what? Why should I feel I want to quit teaching?

MR. MOUSTAKAS: The children in your group are bringing out strong feelings and this is troubling you.

MRS. WALK: There is a funny thing about my situation: As much as I hate it, as much as I dread going into the school room, at the same time for the first time in my life I feel secure at home. I feel more truly understood. I feel I am accepted, my qualifications and my limits.

MR. MOUSTAKAS: You feel disturbed like the children when in school, but more satisfied with yourself at home.

MRS. WALK: Perhaps the children feel that way too.

MRS. SALL: The best thing to do in the classroom is to take the plunge and have the courage of your convictions. Give children the freedom to express themselves, regardless of school pressures. If it fails, drop it; if not, continue it no matter what. We keep on with workbooks and texts because they're quiet and safe activities.

MRS. ALLEN: The problem of allowing that kind of freedom is, too much noise.

MRS. SALL: There are limits of course.

MISS TARS: What limits?

MRS. SALL: Whichever we feel we must set. It will differ with each of us.

MRS. ALLEN: What about the teachers around you, shouldn't they be considered?

MRS. SALL: What are you suggesting, that I go around and ask the teachers next door and above and below me how much noise they can stand and keep just under the maximum?

MISS SHAWN: I think the best way is to do what you feel is right and not ask your friends and neighbors.

MRS. DASE: I think teachers are afraid to let children express themselves, because they are afraid of what will happen.

MISS WHET: You've said the classroom must convey freedom to the child so he can express his potentialities. I have told children during a free period they could do anything they'd like. Some just sit there. You may tell them they may draw, and some draw the same thing everytime.

MRS. SALL: Every child is creative, but he just can't get it out without the teacher's guidance. You have to give them an idea. Maybe I'm wrong, but I find that if I give them a general subject, they can draw anything in that area and can get up and talk about it.

MR. MOUSTAKAS: I'm not so sure that a child's sitting silently is not his choice and of value. I remember sitting in silence with a child in a play therapy situation for as long as five hours. If the child decides to remain silent and apparently inactive, I accept this decision. Sometimes I think we're afraid that if we do not break the silence or interrupt inactivity, the child will remain static.

MISS WHET: There's a pressure on us from parents to accomplish something with their children. If they were observing and saw their child just sitting silently, I fear they would be very critical of us.

*Comments.* In this meeting Mrs. Walk searched for some key to her disturbance and confusion, and to the difficulty which arose when she permitted children to express themselves. She explored the ambivalent aspect of her feelings. She tells how her fear of trying something new in the classroom created a conflict between *wanting* to give children more freedom and thinking that the classroom *should* be a quiet, orderly place. As she looks at the confusion in her classroom, she comes to an exciting discovery. With all the feeling of dread in facing free, noisy children, she finds a growing security at home and a feeling of being more truly understood.

Mrs. Walk received much support in the group, as other teachers conveyed their own feelings of anxiety which resulted when children had freedom to express their real selves. When the teacher becomes

the provision for freedom in the classroom, the difficulties which sometimes occur often constitute a real challenge and threat which the teacher must meet with a special kind of courage, ingenuous guidance, and an unyielding faith in the growth potentials of free, expressive children.

### *Educational Issues*

Apart from the discussions on relationships with children, parents, and other teachers, on the group itself, and on personal problems, two educational issues received considerable attention.

*Grades and Spelling Contests.* There was a great deal of feeling in the teachers' voices during the discussion on spelling contests. With the exception of three people in the group, the teachers nodded affirmatively when Mr. Frank stated that spelling contests were tests of memory and iron nerves in the face of terrific, mounting pressures. The main support for spelling contests was that competitive experiences under pressure would help children better face the realities of life.

The group, as a whole, believed that in the light of the emotional impact spelling contests induce, the illness and the broken hearts, their continuation indicates lack of understanding of the basic issues and values involved. The breaking down of a child's moral fibre and self-confidence with the resulting sense of shame and personal defeat is a serious matter, hardly justified by strengthening the competitive powers of the few who emerge victoriously.

Regarding grades, the teachers in the group unanimously agreed that if they had a choice they would vote them out. A basic evil of grading was described as the pernicious effect of comparing children with each other. Some members of the group felt teachers should stand by what they believe and think of the child only in terms of himself and what he is doing. Several teachers felt that pitting one child against another had its value in developing competitive ability and in helping the strong to grow and thrive: without competition, nothing could remain but rubble. Others felt that competition was a natural, inherent part of human life, inescapable, and without which civilization would decay. Some teachers thought that true growth and discovery did not stem from competitive urges but from the exploration of an idea or plan, the fulfillment of potentiality.

The issue of whether cooperation or competition is inherent and natural to the human organism was not resolved in this group. How-

ever, the majority of teachers believed that competition was based on cultural values and conditioning, while cooperation was seen as a natural impulse of human life. Though research evidence is conflicting on this point, the question remains: What does man want for himself? If he wishes to develop a spirit of cooperation among human beings everywhere, then he must stop inculcating children in the belief that competition is inevitable in social life and begin to value the growth of the cooperative attitude in all human endeavor.

*Punishment and Praise.* These topics recurred in many themes of the group throughout the year but were discussed as topics in themselves only on four occasions. Punishment became a most difficult and complex problem when it was a case of one child physically attacking another. The teachers could accept destructive acts of a child, but the unjust hurting of another child was most difficult to deal with. While retaliation was mentioned as a way often used to teach the child, all agreed that this method was not effective and sometimes did more harm than good. The issue also arose as to whether punishing the child on the spot and in anger is a sound method or whether waiting before punishing results in a better solution. No conclusion was reached on these problems of punishment. The following excerpt is from a discussion on praise.

MRS. CONE: I would say that through praise you might change the individual's attitude toward his work.

MR. MOUSTAKAS: Have you found that to be true?

MRS. ALLEN: I was told that if you praise the child when it is genuine praise, it will affect the child's attitude.

MR. MOUSTAKAS: Don't you think that what is good work will be felt and perceived as good by the individual?

MRS. CONE: I don't think people realize too often how well they've done. Somehow they have a feeling that what they are doing is not good, yet it actually can be.

MR. MOUSTAKAS: Then you believe that attitudes of worthlessness are changed through praise.

MRS. CONE: Don't you believe that's true?

MR. MOUSTAKAS: I believe that satisfaction is experienced from within, and rewards are intrinsic to the child's direct experience.

MRS. CONE: But are you discouraging any kind of remark?

MR. MOUSTAKAS: I do not believe that all remarks have to be evaluations.

MRS. ALLEN: Then you are opposed to giving a child gold stars when they do exceptional work?

MR. MOUSTAKAS: Yes, I am. But remember this is based on my own experience. This is me, not you. You may find it's worth while, that it has an important place in the classroom, and then I would say, "By all means

continue it." But as I see it, too often in such a situation work is done to please or for some other external reward, not for an inner sense of satisfaction. Too many children learn to behave on the expectations of others. When they make a tree or house, it has to be just exactly as it appears. They soon are unable to draw or paint as they feel. When this happens, I think something very basic is missing, namely, the freedom to express one's potentiality in some medium without the pressures of records and outside standards.

*Comments.* Some harmful effects of praise and approval on the development of the child's potentialities and sense of value were briefly discussed in this session. It furnishes an example of how the instructor presented his own beliefs, pointing to what may have been a different orientation for some teachers. He, at the same time, encouraged the teachers to maintain their own convictions and methods of influencing children's attitudes as long as these approaches proved meaningful and led to beneficial changes for teacher and child.

#### WEEKLY NOTES AND FINAL REPORTS

*Weekly Notes.* The teachers were asked to write their personal reactions to the class meetings each week. A number of experiences were mentioned in these notes which conveyed changes in attitude. These included the discovery that children could do things for the inherent pleasure in activity rather than for something else, that there is value in permitting children to experience fears fully without teacher direction or interpretation, and that children can be helped to grow without pressuring or pushing them. Some of the teachers achieved a feeling of inner relaxation and peace of mind in the class experience. They mentioned the value of the meetings in bringing them in touch with a warm human philosophy when numbers, phonics, and marks dominate so much of the day; in centering them on "witness" in relationships as against looking at academics and goal achieving. They also mentioned being filled with a desire to give more of the self and to try harder to understand each and every child, and leaving the Seminar class with a refreshed and relaxed feeling about children after a week of many school frustrations and tensions. Many teachers referred to personal experiences in education that involved stifling, difficult relationships especially with parents and administrators, problems in passing and failing children, emotional reactions to other teachers in the group, and difficulties in helping disturbed children.

The notes mentioned frequently that the opportunity for self-exploration and open discussion in an atmosphere of acceptance and

personal caring is a meaningful experience for teachers. It enables them to stop and contemplate the meaning of teaching and of being a teacher. The teachers further mentioned the value of such meetings in self-growth, in bringing them to a state of communion with other teachers, in providing a source of strength, and in encouraging healthy strivings in personal relations.

*Final Reports.* The outcomes of the self-exploratory experience are clearly stated in the end-of the year reports which were asked of each teacher. Some indicated that the Seminar class helped them "to let off steam," and to reach a better understanding of people, a greater awareness of feelings for children and adults, and a deeper knowledge of the individual child and the group. Others learned to listen to people without pressing or advising, but with true acceptance. The value of the experience in the development of self-discovery and personal insight was mentioned frequently. Some stated that the experience led them to new methods in the classroom, to a more positive attitude with children, to a more positive approach to classroom discipline, and to ways of helping children release their tensions and move in the direction of self-growth. In brief, these statements point to new paths of relatedness inward toward the self and outward toward others, and to a new integration or unity of the teacher's experience in school as a professional person and his total life situation.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

An investigation of the nature of an educational experience has been presented. The classroom experience involved was a Seminar in Interpersonal Relationships for teachers. The philosophy of the instructor and the emotional climate of the Seminar were discussed as a basis for understanding the structure and process of the course experience.

Data for the study consisted of transcriptions of tape recordings of the sessions, personal notes written after each class meeting, and reports written by the teachers at the end of the year on the meaning and value of the Seminar.

Verbatim excerpts and summaries were selected from the 16 recorded sessions to illustrate the growth of the teachers in accepting and trusting themselves and each other; and in exploring relationships with children, parents, and other teachers, as well as two educational issues. Comments on these data were made by the author as a

way of including a totality of his experience, his perceptions of the Seminar, and his view of patterns and forces not easily evident in the data themselves.

The following conclusions were reached: (1) In an atmosphere of freedom where teachers are valued, fully accepted, and respected, a group of teachers is its own best resource and can serve as the primary basis for emerging insights and the resolution of problems. (2) Their most significant concerns are the personal relationships with the children, parents, and other teachers, rather than a concern over academic tasks. (3) Given the opportunity, teachers are capable of deep exploration and the discovery of basic issues and underlying values as well as related principles and facts. They develop a growing respect and empathy in personal relations, a deeper understanding of the unique personality of the child, and a broadened appreciation of the human element in all learning situations. (4) Self-discovery and professional insight, when there is freedom to explore and grow, comes from the teacher's own vital and dynamic experience. (5) Free open discussion in a strengthening climate, provides an opportunity for emotional release which frequently eventuates in broadened knowledge, in discovery of new classroom approaches to the individual child and to the group, and in modification of teachers' attitudes toward children, parents, and other teachers, in the direction of seeing the other person as potentially positive and healthy even in the light of defeating threats and pressures.

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