

MENTAL HYGIENE AND THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS *

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CONSIDERABLE criticism has been directed by psychiatrists and social workers toward the public-school system and its leaders. Sometimes one wonders if the people concerned know what it is all about. Have we as social workers—and last, but not least, as taxpayers—the unlimited privilege of criticizing? How many of us have any real insight into school problems? How many of us know anything about those modern educational methods we want the schools to adopt? The application of social psychiatric criteria and methods to education is still a novelty, and indeed we must admit that we are quite hazy about the institution we should like to reform and also about the reforms themselves. After all, the question of who is to blame in the school system may be a far-reaching one, and it is not easy to differentiate between the teacher and the situation in which she finds herself. My own brief experience as a teacher in the public schools and a broader clinical contact with schools and teachers later has put me slightly on the defensive in dealing with the subject under consideration.

Possibly one difficulty with us has been our failure to grasp the implications of the fact that the public school represents the most powerful agency in the field of child welfare, that it touches practically every child and has jurisdiction over him during the important formative years. Yet perhaps of all agencies dealing with the child, the school is farthest removed from the application of social concepts to its job and continues considerably dominated by purely pedagogical atti-

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tudes. The advanced courses in university schools of education and the contents of educational journals deal almost exclusively with school administration, and educational thinking has not yet squarely faced the issues of socialization. Perhaps the job of tactfully confronting educators, educational politicians, and teachers with mental hygiene and social issues is one that belongs to us, and the opportunity for an alliance between the schools and social work exists if we see fit to take advantage of it.

In the first place, the school situation has to be diagnosed if we are to know what should be done to realize the social possibilities of education. Only in the more advanced communities and larger cities have socialized studies been introduced in this connection and only there do we find socialized schools. Schools are still quite generally in the hands of politicians who play football with school funds and divert public attention from their activities with oratory centering about the three R's, the poor taxpayers, and the necessity for preserving the Federal Constitution. The teacher is ordinarily underpaid and thereby cut off from most extra-educational memberships which would help to enrich her contacts. As a hireling she is seldom consulted about school policies. Few school systems have sufficient plant and many devote a great deal of their thought to the problem of how many children they can squeeze into a certain number of seats. Classes are crowded and teachers are forced to consider as one of their major duties the traffic problem of how to get children in and out of classrooms and halls. Moreover, school organization is an organization of hierarchies, based on feudal conditions and concerned with the discipline not only of children, but of teachers as well.

The teacher becomes a cog in the machine. She is subjected to long hours and a monotonous routine, carries a deadening amount of clerical work, and thinks of her own development largely in terms of favors and examinations for small promotions. Put in charge of large, unsorted classes, she has to be a policewoman, preserving law and order, establishing discipline as a necessary preliminary to teaching. She has little chance to know and understand her pupils as feeling and thinking individuals; she knows them only as a mass of

pedagogical material, to be forced through the "learning process" in a given time. Her curriculum, laid down by a "system", is rigid and full. It gives her little room for initiative, depersonalizes her and her work, and stamps out spontaneous expression of her interests and those of her pupils. She has to impose, year in and year out, the same standardized mold on diversified living material. Is it strange that she does not seek more stimulating contacts, that there is not more of the spirit of adventure in her work, and that there exists an aloofness from the social life of the community?

Very little in her training fits her for the struggle. Few normal schools and few university courses in educational psychology are prepared to give adequate instruction in mental hygiene. Most of them are poorly organized and show little appreciation of what mental hygiene means. Teachers, of course, need mental-hygiene training for their own healthy adjustment and for the benefit of the special problems they handle. As matters now stand, the teacher has not enough insight to identify problems except as nuisances, and even when she has a natural interest in understanding and helping her pupils, the lack of clinical facilities in the school system and iron-bound scholastic regulations tie her hands. Add to the situation the fact that the teacher has little or no access to the home and you will agree, I think, that there are obvious reasons why she sees the children simply as so many units. Of course, we all know teachers who are exceptions to the rule, who rise above the school environment, who realize their inadequacy in the classroom and are willing to go beyond the prescribed routine to assist in an adjustment, but if they are to remain in the schools as obedient public servants, they have to continue to hold their pupils to a system which denies their individuality, inhibits their interests, and thwarts their development as useful personalities in society.

The result is that the teacher frequently becomes a fixed, inelastic person, full of school prejudices, prone to narrow moral judgments, blind to child psychology. Her chief duty is to discipline and to run children through the educational mill. She develops into an authoritarian, the classroom overlord, and comes to defend the system of which she and her pupils are equally victims. Each child is given one-fortieth

of her attention, and she forgets that to him her personality may be far more important than anything she consciously teaches him. The average child thinks and feels much more about her than she suspects. His whole life may be colored by his experience with her, for he may learn more from her habits and attitudes than from school work, and the conscious attention he gives her is only a small part of his response. After all, his school tasks are not of his own choosing and the energies the school fails to recognize nevertheless come into play. Sooner or later the teacher has to learn that the whole child comes into the schoolroom and not merely an educable or non-educable mind.

For the most part, teachers have no conception of the causative factors of ordinary types of conduct and look upon behavior symptoms as the whole story. They do not realize that children have to be helped to learn by experience and they attach adult moral values to reactions largely determined by the child's environment. Because they must stand by their traditional rôle as disciplinarians, pouring knowledge into passive minds, teachers often fail to see that much so-called bad behavior is perfectly good biological behavior, that the youngster's resistance to rigid authority may be essentially wholesome, that his failures in attention may be indictments of an unsuitable curriculum, and that his restlessness may spring from normal, but thwarted desires for physical and mental outlets which the schoolroom denies him. That he is a sensitive personality, passing through innumerable phases of development, showing at times emotional responses to readjustment, is something the average teacher does not know. She is prone to make snap judgments and label the child for the term of his school career. A single slip may brand him as a thief, a liar, a pervert, and if he does not react to shaming or moralizing appeals, he is dismissed as hopeless and sent on from grade to grade with a glowing legend. Sometimes he is damned by his so-called heredity and not seen as an individual, with possibilities of his own, because his older brothers were school problems or his parents ne'er-do-wells. Quite commonly, the school dodges its responsibility by resorting to the practice of expelling its unfit or by consigning them to such special scrap heaps as truant schools

and special classes for behavior problems, facilities of which it is, on the whole, rather proud.

But the school cannot fill its place as a democratic institution unless it sees that its obligation to the public can be filled only by meeting its primary duty to the child. It must see that whatever it does with the child should aim toward preparing him to handle life's situations. In this, intellectual nourishment is important, but no human being can, except in fancy, be dissected into an intellectual and a striving, craving, struggling, responsive personality. Regardless of all that the school, the home, and both in unison offer him, he has to come to a realization of how his difficulties arise if he is to be able to appreciate and meet his responsibilities in relation to society.

It is a recognized fact that many mental-hygiene problems begin with the child entering kindergarten and that the school's further efforts to educate him may prove futile. It is not too early on his first admission to the school system to discover what sort of educational material the child presents and what problems the school must expect to meet in dealing with him. By the time the child enters kindergarten, his personality development may have been distorted by mal-adjusted parents, by inadequate habit training, by physical handicaps, and by his reactions to his own difficulties. The exactions made by the kindergarten may be too much for him and his real possibilities may be obscured for the rest of his school career because his energies were not redirected when the school first got hold of him. The three R's have loomed so large in the school's functions that their ultimate purpose of developing the child into a productive adult threatens to choke him by overfeeding on this one diet. The spoiled child who is not taught to take orders or to give and take with other children and who is referred to as the "teacher's pet" or "mammy's boy"; the youngster who has been five terms in the first grade because an uncorrected vision defect renders him unable to read or even to learn his letters, and who is displaying the beginning of an inferiority complex—these children may present more serious problems after five or ten years' experience painful both for the child and the teacher. Robert's failure in high school can be appre-

ciated only when one knows that his father's ambition to be a lawyer fell through and that the father is now trying to force Robert into an uninteresting curriculum to prepare him to fill the gap. Robert has different interests, but is unable to utilize them. Jane never fails, and so her teacher sees in her 100 per cent perfection in everything and a fine example for the class, although the class, the child's family, and the child herself may realize the one-sided type of her development. Her intelligence, moreover, will be of little service because emotionally she is unable to use it. The usual big bully on the playground, who may also be the class dullard, could probably be made to respond better if the connection between his bullying and his retardation were appreciated and the boy's legitimate cravings given satisfaction.

Even in the child's earliest years it is possible to discern symptoms of mental maladjustments in his temper tantrums, daydreams, lack of concentration, whining, and nervousness, and unless the school sees these behavior difficulties as symptoms to be traced back and studied and treated at their source, in the home and in the child's misunderstood personality, the school will not develop his potentialities through education. Too often symptoms are looked upon as wilful misconduct when they are only the child's blind reactions to intolerable stimuli of an external or internal nature. Such symptoms as stealing may spring from such varied sources as actual legitimate, unsatisfied body craving for sweets, desire to be popular with other children or adolescent desire to compete with others in dress, or as a substitute for sex activity in cases of morbid sex conflict. In other conduct disorders, such as lying, running away, sex delinquency, and so forth, the sources of difficulty are legion and can be discovered only by study of every aspect of the child's life. The school's constant problem from the kindergarten age is the adapting of the environment to the child so that he may properly develop. The school's capacity for doing this depends a great deal on its command of facilities for reaching the home. These facilities should embrace not only proper medical, psychological, and psychiatric service, but trained workers—nurses, visiting teachers, school or vocational counsellors—in sufficient numbers to keep communication between the school, home, and

the rest of the environment active. Needless to say, the study of the child's make-up and needs should be followed by interpretation to the teacher, family, and others controlling his development. This means in school more individual instruction for the child and the possibility of a more tolerant attitude on the part of the teacher toward difficulties which she is able to recognize as symptoms. Ultimately, by understanding the child's personality make-up, the school will be able to offset the child's weaknesses and build on his assets with the least possible waste of educational effort.

Throughout his school career it is to the school's interest to see that the child's home environment is adapted to his normal development. A school in possession of facilities for studying the child should convey to the family an appreciation of the child as an individual and should interpret to them the effect that their treatment of him and his experiences in general have had in causing the particular maladjustment. The school should be interested in relieving the pressure in the home which is crippling the child's educational growth, and whether it does this through its own social resources or through the coöperation of appropriate agencies in the community, it should consider this work with the home a fundamental condition to the achievement of the desired educational ends.

The fundamental aim of the school in education is the adjustment of the child to himself. This adjustment includes not only his intellectual training, but equally the releasing of all of his energies for a proper adjustment in life. Through the teachers and through the subject matter they teach, through the social contacts the school maintains with the home, he should be brought to see himself objectively and realize the relation between himself and his difficulties. Instead of being allowed to flounder in bewilderment, he should be helped to discover the connection between his behavior and other people's reactions to it. Understanding of this on the child's part would be the basis of a real moral and ethical training. The school, in coöperation with the home, should clear the way by helping the child to realize his good points, develop his abilities, and express himself to his *n*th degree. The school should make it possible for him to face

his weaknesses and disabilities without shame or inferiority and to compensate for them in a proper social way.

The effectiveness of the work of the secondary and high schools is largely conditioned by what has happened to the child during his progress through the elementary schools. This is seldom appreciated. It is only by emphasizing the responsibility the elementary schools should be carrying for the detection and treatment of personality difficulties that the higher schools will have a fair chance to deal with the problems that arise during this period.

The secondary schools' chief mental-hygiene problem should be the study and treatment of adolescent maladjustments and vocational guidance, so far as the latter is associated with personality difficulties. Of course the school's higher grades will have to take into account the same problems as are encountered in the elementary schools, since these will inevitably, under the best circumstances, be carried over to the higher grades in many cases. However, the problems peculiar to the high school are those of the child's transition from dependence to adult responsibilities, the instabilities accompanying puberty, and the direction of the child into that vocational field for which he is best adapted. These are the problems presented by every child at this period, though they may not be apparent or involve any school maladjustment. The greatest value of mental hygiene in the high school is that of conveying to the average child insight into the prevalent problems of adolescence, since one of the greatest stresses at this period springs from the child's belief that his difficulties are unique. The high-school teacher has the special advantage of filling a gap in the child's life during the gradual pulling away from parental control and of being in a position to help him to get on his feet without the usual conflicts.

The big problem of the high-school period is ordinarily recognized to be that of sex, though this is a somewhat crude interpretation of the emotional instability associated with personality difficulties of the adolescent stage and is too often disposed of by moral judgments and repressive measures. Adequate treatment of sex difficulties in the adolescent demands individual study of the child's personality and environ-

ment. Moral prejudice and social taboo should yield to a scientific and therefore sympathetic consideration of those factors in each child's life which are thwarting active social expression of the instinctive energies. The teacher should have at this time a flair for the shy, the prudish, the rebellious, the daydreaming, the over-intellectual types. The school should demand coöperation from the community in organizing those activities which permit proper outlets for pent-up emotions—dramatics, dancing, outdoor activities of all sorts—under sympathetic supervision. The bearing of inferiority feelings, intellectual maladjustments, family condemnations, and other possible repressions should be considered and referred for active treatment to clinics and other social agencies.

Another important problem of the adolescent period is that of guiding the child into those academic or vocational courses which will later help him to meet realistically the necessity for earning his living. Frequently the discrepancy between the child's abilities and his ambitions is a source of considerable conflict and waste. Too often the making of a vocational decision is left to the child or to parents who know nothing about his native ability, personality handicaps, or social limitations, and who have no concrete idea as to what practical use he can make of the education he has received. Sometimes the child is the only person who realizes that something is wrong and expresses his maladjustment by truancy or other conduct disturbances, such as rebellion against authority, grandiose schemes, and general lost motion. The school should make provision for studying all the child's assets and liabilities in the broadest possible sense, and should in its vocational training maintain close contact with the home and the actual industrial conditions which will confront the child on leaving school.

The school's dealing with problem children is handicapped by superficial knowledge of the individual as a whole and the conditions under which he lives. The boy who plays truant because he is inwardly protesting against a school law which makes it difficult for him to contribute to a meager family budget needs more than the casual attention of the attendance officer. The girl who through community contamination has

had sex experiences cannot be helped to adjust unless extra-school conditions are realized and met. The difficulties of the child for whom the school with its present curriculum has nothing constructive to offer because he has reached his academic limit are likely to be accentuated by a distinctive inferiority feeling that may express itself in characteristic adolescent desperation.

The school attitude toward education should be profoundly influenced by the mental-hygiene point of view. Should the rigid school formulations be made more elastic and teachers have training in the principles of mental hygiene, it would not be difficult to break down most of the barriers to mental hygiene in the schools. As the schools develop more individualized instruction and group children according to their personality needs rather than by an arbitrary system, as knowledge of the child and his environment is brought to bear on the school's treatment of him, the real purpose of education will be more easily served. The dangers of partial understanding, of pigeonholing the child on the basis of a group test or a snap judgment based on some passing symptom of maladjustment, can be averted only by the application of scientific methods of study to the human material which the school has been asked to prepare for citizenship.

If we are going to help healthy individuals to better mental adjustments and also prevent dependency, delinquency, insanity, and general social inadequacy, undoubtedly the school should be the focus for our attack. The home and school occupy key positions in relation to the mental hygiene of childhood. The school, however, surpasses the home in its potential understanding, its objectivity, and its possibilities of consecrated effort. The school's resources are just beginning to be realized. A rational grouping of all children on the basis of their needs rather than the needs of the administrative system is at present barely appreciated in most quarters. Dealing with problem children on superficial conclusions or by short-cut measures which do not take into consideration the fundamental development of their problems not only paves the way for failure to remove the problem, but by exerting blind pressures stirs up further trouble. The school

is thereby outwitted in its constructive ideal of developing a productive adult.

All of this is a slow process. Here and there school systems are endeavoring to meet their social problems and a few schools are developing child-guidance and other clinics, while others are taking on visiting-teacher work, but for some time a major part of the responsibility for pressing upon them the need for socialized education will be the social worker's. After all, socialization is our specialty and whatever we have to offer in insight and technique should be conveyed to the school. This cannot be done on an external basis of criticism, nor will it be properly done if we wait for the school to seek us out. We shall have to understand the school's situation and in terms of that work for a common understanding of the relation that should exist between all social effort and that strategic institution we call the school.