

## THE TEACHER-PUPIL RELATIONSHIP IN A DEMOCRACY<sup>1</sup>

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MENTAL health was never more important than it is to-day. It begins to look as though the very continuance of what we call civilization will depend upon the recovery and spread of sanity. Whatever the causes of war, the perpetuation of peace can come about only through sounder minds and saner attitudes.

So fundamental are the psychological factors in human welfare, that we must reexamine and reconstruct the processes of education in the light of these psychological factors. If all the teachers in all the world taught the right things in the right way, many problems both national and international would diminish or disappear.

This pioneering organization, the Maine Teachers' Mental Hygiene Association, must be considered a significant step in the right direction. It may not prevent a war in Europe, but it may help to postpone one in America. And it may help to make the democratic form of government a more assured possession.

Democracy is a way of life which respects the rights and fosters the responsibilities of the individual. There is no hope of perpetuating democracy unless its distinctive way of life is realized both in the home and

in the school. For this reason we need to reexamine the mental hygiene of the teacher-pupil relationship. This complex relationship is essentially a form of government. It is a social system. It can favor democracy. It can favor autocracy.

### MOVEMENTS TO SAFEGUARD DEMOCRACY

The White House Conference on Children in a Democracy recently called by the President of the United States is an impressive fact-finding effort to strengthen the foundations of a democratic state. This conference, composed of representatives from every state in the Union, is concerned with four basic subjects: (1) The objectives of a democratic society in relation to children; (2) the economic foundations of family life and child welfare; (3) the mental development of children and youth in present-day American life; (4) the child and community services for health, education and social protection.

A report committee of twenty-five members will in 1940 summarize the findings and recommendations of this working conference which is visualizing the democratic process in terms of the children of to-day and of the future. Our adolescents who presently will become parents and voters are of most immediate importance in the preservation of democracy. But any long-range view must

<sup>1</sup> From an address at the annual meeting of the Maine Teachers' Association at Lewiston, Me., 1939

also take into account infants, pre-school children and elementary school pupils.

Although the conference was organized before the beginning of the second World War, the planning committee has announced that "in such a time as the present, the needs of childhood require particular attention. Despite international problems the responsibility for meeting the continuing needs of the children must be accepted. It can not be postponed."

Many straws in the wind show an increased need for safeguarding the sources of democracy. The annual convention of the American Federation of Teachers, with an attendance of 500 delegates from 200 locals, took as its theme "Equality of Educational Opportunity to Save Democracy." When Dr. Franz Boas, a Columbia University scientist and educator, addressed this convention he appealed for enlargement in the education of intellectual freedom: "We all know that on the whole our schools are administered on purely authoritarian principles," he said. (A recent article in *Time* magazine characterized the public schools as our most authoritarian institution.)

The General Education Board has just launched a large-scale study of schools in this country to determine to what extent democracy is practiced in the classroom and on the campus. Between forty and fifty schools from coast to coast will be thoroughly examined by an impressive educational committee.

There are two parts in the program: (1) The educators plan to examine existing practices as regards democratic ideals and procedures. Is the administration of the schools in accordance with democratic philosophy? (2) To what extent is the relationship between superintendent and teachers and between teachers and pupils democratic?

Our topic is broad enough without branching into the subject of superintendent-teacher relationship. But the very fact

that there is a problem here suggests that the promotion of the democratic ideal demands the preservation of democratic relationships all along the line, from the cradle through the nursery and elementary school into the high school and college; and in the everyday administration of the public school system.

As matters now stand, it seems that intelligent high-school boys and girls are not even able to define what the ideal of democracy is. Our schools are failing at the higher levels in giving direct instruction. But the fundamentals of democracy have to do with spirit and attitudes, as well as information. The fundamental preparation for an understanding of democracy in high-school pupils depends upon fostering wholesome relationships between parents and children and teachers and children.

In 1935 the National Education Association and the American Association of School Administrators created the Educational Policies Commission. Its central conclusions after three years of careful study are expressed in three brief statements: (1) The democratic way of life is being challenged at home and abroad. (2) The public schools are the foundation of democracy and its first line of defense. (3) The most urgent and intensely practical problem facing the teaching profession is the achievement and maintenance of democracy through education.

This is a good doctrine; but it amounts only to brave words unless we can reduce the doctrine to everyday practice. I shall, accordingly, try to show that the everyday teacher-pupil relationships have a profound and far-reaching effect upon the ultimate attitudes of the child who becomes an adult in a democracy.

#### PARENT-CHILD AND TEACHER-PUPIL RELATIONSHIPS COMPARED

The teacher is a supplementary parent. And the best way to understand the mean-

ing and the mechanism of the teacher-pupil relationship is to study its prototype, namely, the relationship between parent and child. Let us examine then these two kinds of relationships: (1) That of parent-child; (2) that of teacher-pupil. What are the similarities? What are the differences?

(1) The parent-child relationship is based on consanguinity. The teacher-child relationship is based upon authority conferred by the State. This authority is very august. From an educational standpoint it confers upon the teacher a certain advantage, because it puts him or her in a position to regard the problems of educational and personality development from an impartial and impersonal point of view.

It has been pointed out that childless parents who adopt a child sometimes prove extremely successful in the task of child-rearing because of the very absence of consanguinity. They maintain an enlightened objectivity. No one would wish to push this argument too far, but it is at least suggestive. The pupils who assemble in the teacher's classroom are to many intents and purposes adopted children for the time being and the teacher is indeed a supplementary parent.

(2) The size of the teacher's "family," however, is relatively very large. This, of course, confers a fundamental advantage upon the parent-child relationship. But when we recall that only a portion of the parent's time can be directly devoted to the task of rearing children, we see that the advantages are not all in favor of the home.

(3) The intimacy and restricted size of the home give the natural parents a maximum opportunity to become acquainted with the characteristics of their children. But here again the teacher is not at a complete disadvantage, because he or she has been professionally trained to perceive individual differences and to be sensitive to them. Moreover, the teacher has a background of professional experience which should make her insight more penetrative,

more discriminating. For professional reasons the teacher is obliged to adopt a diagnostic attitude and, therefore, if opportunities are used well, the teacher may understand some of the characteristics of the children perhaps even better than do the natural parents.

(4) From the standpoint of filial affection the parent-child relationship would seem to have a great advantage. Even so, no one is prepared to say that young children do not have affection for their teachers. Indeed, in candor we would have to say that sometimes the teacher is more sincerely loved than is the parent. The very fact that this can be true suggests the great potentialities of the teacher's status. Time and time again it is the teacher who compensates for those defects of home life which prevent the child from developing a normal affection for his parents. The schoolroom then becomes literally a mental hygiene agency which makes up for the deficiencies of the home.

And when we use the term affection in this context we are thinking of a wholesome, human friendliness. Because we are dealing with a powerful force which must be kept in balance, it sometimes happens that a misguided teacher shows a more than judicious affection to a child to whom she may be partial. The wise teacher has an enlightened affection which is meted out and regulated to conform to the developmental necessities of the child.

The teacher who has caught the concept of mental hygiene will be eager to seek out the children who are hungry for affection and for praise and whose sense of security will be increased by attendance upon school. Unfortunate is the child who attends a schoolroom where the very atmosphere is so unhomelike and so domineering that his sense of security is actually weakened.

#### TEACHER PERSONALITY

The teacher-pupil relationship is not a vague abstraction. It is something very

real. Perhaps it is the most complete measure we have of a teacher's true efficiency. It is a dynamic index. Is there any better indicator for the supervisor and the superintendent to take into account when he goes about looking for that which is good?

A recent investigation undertook an objective description of teaching personality in terms of pupil-teacher behavior.<sup>2</sup> By means of an observational procedure, checked for its validity and reliability, and through conversations with pupils and teachers, data were gathered concerning six teachers selected by a city superintendent and his staff as the three most outstanding and the three poorest teachers in a city school department of eighteen hundred teachers. The trends of the data are reflected in the psychological contrasts between Teacher One and Teacher Five.

Teacher One always wore either blouse, scarf or dress of some inexpensive but colorful material. She was playful and spontaneous in manner, her one ambition seemed to be to surround her pupils with the beauty, happiness and courteous human relations with which a deprived home environment might cause them to be unfamiliar.

Teacher Five was found to be domineering in manner and oblivious to everything except accomplishment ("busy-ness"). The children vigorously but blindly applied themselves to given tasks.

Teacher One: Excellent Third and Fourth Grade teacher.

Poised, deliberate, quietly plans details with pupils before having them begin any task. Definite in her requests but displays a kindness and sense of humor to which children respond with eagerness and joy. Teacher and pupils consistently aware of the comfort and happiness of "all members of the family." An original and creative teacher, encourages every pupil to accomplishment, and consistently stresses good work habits. ("I try never to lose track of a child for a minute.") Pupils

<sup>2</sup> By H. Bernice Baxter. A dissertation presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Yale University in candidacy for the degree of doctor of philosophy, 1935. Pp. ii + 166.

enjoy their school and beamingly express appreciation of teacher's kindness and freedom in permitting them to do what they like to do.

Teacher Five: Poor Fifth and Sixth Grade teacher.

Dominates the classroom situation by continual reference to herself and her son as examples of industrious and successful individuals. Imposes an unbroken routine of drill in reading, writing and arithmetic, with little evaluation except for the amount of energy expended. Incites pupils to vehement and loud attacks upon subject-materials (reading aloud and drumming on desks). Teacher and pupils carry on loud, harsh, sometimes ungrammatical conversation. Both teacher and pupils drive ahead in intolerant, personally important manner. Pupils aware of importance of subject-matter but express no concern for personal relations.

The excellent teachers in general proved to be "freer from narrowing inhibitions, were much more interested in getting the child's point of view and were less hurried and more relaxed than the poorer teachers."

#### FACTORS IN ADULT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

From the standpoint of mental hygiene, the important components in a healthy adult-child relationship, whether teacher-child or parent-child, are four in number: (1) Considerateness, (2) benevolent discipline, (3) sense of humor, (4) a philosophy of growth. These same elements are also essential to *education for democracy*. We conclude with a brief comment concerning each of these components.

(1) *Considerateness*. Considerateness is the first essential. The very word considerateness conveys the idea of respect for the dignity of the individual. Considerateness, it has been well said, is in itself a social system. It certainly favors the development of democratic attitudes.

If parents (and teachers) begin with the assumption that they can make over and mould a child into a preconceived pattern, they are bound to become somewhat autocratic. If, on the contrary, parents begin with the assumption that every baby comes into the world with a unique individuality,

they are bound to become more considerate. For their task will be to understand the child's individuality and to give it the best possible chance to grow and find itself. The same holds true for teachers.

Considerateness, as we use the term here, is not merely a social or domestic grace. It is something of an art, a kind of perceptiveness and imaginativeness, which enables one to understand better the psychology of the other person. It is an alert kind of liberalism which is sensitive to distinctive characteristics in other individuals. It is an active form of courtesy.

(2) *Benevolent Discipline.* Discipline, being a mode of government, may be either autocratic or democratic in spirit and in method. It is democratic when it is tempered to the capacity of the child and tolerant of his immaturity. Wise discipline aims not to strengthen the teacher's authority but to strengthen the child's self-control and sense of responsibility. In well-ordered homes harsh methods are entirely unnecessary. In a democratically governed school there are few crises.

When discipline is purely punitive it easily becomes despotic. There are countless homes in America in which mothers, fathers and other elders in the household use harsh methods of punishment even toward young children: scolding, slapping, cuffing, shaming and beating.

These primitive methods of government have no place in American life. They have not yet been adequately reached by our child welfare agencies. They are so grossly inconsistent with the genius of democracy that they should be attacked as a public health problem. They constitute a definite problem of preventive mental hygiene. They weaken the sources of democracy.

(3) *A Sense of Humor.* What is the sense of humor? It is a sense of proportion. It is a beneficent kind of pliancy. The function of humor is to keep the individual from becoming mechanized and

hardened. It is a play of the mind akin to the spirit of freedom. When a teacher has it, it protects her own mental health and that of her pupils. It is a safeguard against undue tensions and severities of discipline.

Do the pupils themselves, when they can exercise judgment, think that their teachers are over-conventional, over-serious? We received a substantial answer to this question from sixty-seven normal-school students. We simply asked them to count up the number of teachers they had had up to graduation from high school (the number totaled 1,679), and then to count the number of teachers they distinctly remembered as having a sense of humor or fun in the schoolroom. This number amounted to only 224, or less than 14 per cent. of the total. Forty-four, or two thirds of the students, remembered either three, two, one or no teachers answering this description. This study was made some years ago. I am sure times have changed and that the statistics exaggerate the gravity of the situation.

Although the students were asked to do no more than give the figures, it is interesting to know that they volunteered remarks like the following about those teachers with humor. "She was the best liked of all"; "She had the best control over us"; "I just loved her and was always glad to see her coming." One student to whom the question evidently appealed said, "I do not remember one grade teacher who could actually laugh heartily and live through it. Until I entered high school, I do not remember ever to have had a laugh worth while in connection with school work."

(4) Fourth and finally, we list an appreciation of the psychology of growth.

The child's personality is a product of slow and gradual growth. His nervous system matures by stages and natural sequences. He sits before he stands; he babbles before he talks; he fabricates before he tells the truth; he draws a circle before he draws a square; he is selfish be-

fore he is altruistic; he is dependent on others before he achieves dependence on self. All his abilities, including his morals, are subject to laws of growth. The task of child care is not to mould the child behavioristically to some predetermined image, but to assist him step by step, guiding his growth.

This developmental point of view does not mean indulgence. It is instead a constructive deference to the limitations of immaturity. It obliges us to accord more courtesy even to the infant, who is often unwittingly handled in an arbitrary manner because we have failed to understand the process of development. It obliges great considerateness on the part of teachers toward their pupils.

In every household, in every nursery, in every school, there is a web of life, an interdependence of persons which becomes registered in the growing personality. If the infant is cared for consistently and sympathetically, he acquires a sense of security. He learns to feel safe, confident and expectant in a world of vicissitudes. He belongs. He has faith that he will be fed, sheltered, assuaged and loved. This faith, this sense of security, issues in a slowly increasing self-reliance. The sense of security is not a mysterious intuition, but an organized disposition built up steadily by daily experience.

The make-up of personality is therefore importantly influenced by family life, by parent-child relationships, and by teacher-child relations.

But we must not jump to the confusing conclusion that we can mould the child as though he were so much clay. Assuredly he is not clay. Clay does not grow. Nor is he a bundle of conditioned reflexes. He is an individual, with inborn propensities, with inherent constitutional characteristicness.

We may indeed assist the child in his growth, but he must do his own growing. The first and almost the last task of the adult is to *understand* the child—that is, to comprehend the limitations and the configurations of his individuality. Infants are individuals.

We pay vastly too much attention to mere training and instruction. Our central task is to discover and to respect individuality, even in the child of tender age. If we focus upon this difficult but fascinating problem of understanding individualities, a new atmosphere will seep into home and school. There will be more tolerance, more kindness and much more humor. More humor, because we can not get a true estimate of ourselves or of others without that sense of proportion which is the sense of humor. More kindness, because if we appreciate the formativeness of the child's personality, sarcasm and other unnatural forms of punishment become impossible. More tolerance, because we would see the "faults" of children as symptoms of immaturity.

For all these reasons growth is the key concept for a sound philosophy of education and for the mental hygiene of the teacher-pupil relationship in a democracy.