Educating for Adjustment

THE CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS OF
MENTAL HYGIENE

BY

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D. APPLETON-CENTURY COMPANY
INCORPORATED
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TO
MY STUDENTS
AT THE COLLEGE OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
WHO HAVE EXEMPLIFIED THE TRUTH OF THE ANCIENT ADAGE
"ONE LEARNS MUCH FROM HIS TEACHERS, MORE FROM HIS COLLEAGUES, AND MOST FROM HIS PUPILS."
THE MENTAL HYGIENE OF THE TEACHER

It is folly to suppose that we can carry on the education of the child apart from the education of the teacher. 1 Nowhere is this statement more nearly true than in the field of mental hygiene. The teacher, like all other men and women, has her personal problems. She may solve them wisely or not at all, but in either case, her method of solution affects her personality and is reflected in class. The teacher's mental health is thus influenced by her own development as an individual, as well as by her success in overcoming the special menaces to emotional stability inherent in the nature and the organization of school work.

The mental hygiene of teaching has not received the objective investigation it requires. The number of valid, thorough, and objective investigations is seriously limited. Consequently, we have only incomplete answers to such questions as the following: "To what extent does the teaching profession attract particular types of personality?" "Are teachers more susceptible to nervous and emotional disorders than are other members of the general population?" "Which types of emotional disorders are common among teachers?" "Does teaching present any special hazards to mental health?" "Are there any preventive measures of known efficacy that can be adopted?" "To what extent does the teacher's adjustment influence that of her class?" Obviously, a thorough program of

research is needed for a better understanding of the problems involved in the teacher's mental hygiene.

After studying 700 maladjusted school teachers, Mason arrived at the following conclusions: 2

Teaching as a profession did not seem to be the direct cause of the psychoses.

Teachers were committed to hospitals at an earlier age than the general psychopathic population.

There was a higher percentage of unmarried teachers than of married ones, 61 per cent of the men and 81 per cent of the women being unmarried. This is not surprising in the case of women, since the majority of women school teachers are unmarried.

The psychoses most prevalent in the group were dementia praecox and manic-depressive psychoses. Paranoia seemed to rank higher in the teacher group than among maladjusted people generally.

Since heredity seemed to be an important factor in the psychoses of their group, some consideration might be given to family history in the selection of prospective teachers, especially at this time when the country has such a large surplus.

In diversity of interests and in the possession of those traits that make for a well-rounded personality, this group of teachers was particularly lacking. School systems could be of assistance here by giving teachers more leisure for outside activities and freedom from too strenuous duties in the classroom, so that fatigue would not interfere with physical activities after school hours. Particularly should teacher-training institutions encourage participation in varied activities other than teaching which the student could carry over into his teaching career.

An intellectual status of above the average was not effective in producing emotional control, as evidenced by the large number of difficulties arising from problems of sex.

Apparently teachers are not especially subject to psychoses. Fewer data are available relative to the incidence of minor mental ailments among the teaching group. It is probable, though not certain, that the nervous strain of teaching, with the overwork and worry commonly accompanying it, is not without its effect on teachers' mental health, even though the condition may not be serious enough to lead to hospitalization.

PROBLEMS ARISING FROM THE TEACHER'S PERSONALITY

Introversion. Investigations disclose that experienced teachers, on the average, manifest a greater degree of introversion than do new entrants to the profession. In the absence of definite data, there are three plausible explanations. First, extroverts find teaching unpleasant and leave it for other types of work. Second, since modern schools place greater emphasis on personality development than did older schools, there are fewer extreme introverts among recent graduates. The average normal-school graduate would therefore be less introverted than the average experienced teacher. Third, the teaching profession may exaggerate the introversion tendencies of its practitioners. There is, at present, no objective evidence to indicate which of the three explanations is correct.

Moderate introversion is no more objectionable than is moderate extroversion, and extreme introversion is no less objectionable than extreme extroversion. In fact, success in teaching requires introvertive traits. The problem presented by marked introvertive traits among teachers is not one of safeguarding the teacher's sanity or even that of inducing a definite change in her personality. The teacher of children should have a rounded personality expressing itself by the cultivation of diverse interests. Her free time should be concerned not merely with books and ideas, but also with people and things. It is therefore the teacher's problem to manage her personal life to provide for both types of activities.

Wider social contacts are necessary for the teacher who is to retain a desirably fresh outlook. The amount of clerical and routine work required of the teacher must be reduced to a minimum to allow sufficient leisure time for the cultivation of outside interests. When necessary, she must set about deliberately to develop a circle of friends and acquaintances, particularly among those who are not teachers.
Self-Criticism. Like most intelligent persons, the teacher is likely to be too self-critical. Such questions as "Am I successful?" "Why don't I feel happy?" "Why don't my pupils love me the way I used to adore my teachers?" and "Why does my principal always ask someone else to serve on important committees?" easily lead to unnecessary self-reproach. Self-criticism is useful only when it is the basis for self-correction. The teacher should not be smugly contented with her present characteristics, but she must recognize the existence of a point beyond which mere self-criticism cannot take her. She must admit her own limitations and attempt to adjust her ambition to her capabilities. "Divine discontent" is an attractive phrase; it is also a handicap to the attainment of robust mental health.

If the teacher is to lead a happy life herself and to aid her students, too, to enjoy a full life, she must retain a sense of proportion. A sense of proportion is even more important than a sense of humor, for humor without proportion laughs at conditions that demand sympathy, understanding, and help. The teacher must be wary of exaggerating her insight into the background of human behavior till she misunderstands her own and others' actions and wonders why Mr. R— invited her to the theatre and what hidden machination led little Bob to offer to wash the blackboards. Wholesome personality is not attained by worrying about it or by excessive self-analysis. "It is only by losing one's self that one finds one's self."

At times the teacher should forget her knowledge of mechanisms of adjustment and be just a normal human being. And when politics or intrigue deprive her of a promotion she deserves but won't stoop to grab, let her weep or swear at politics and intrigue and go to see a good play, instead of indulging in excessive self-analysis. At times like that one sees not reality, but only its most discouraging phases. After the initial shock of disappointment has worn off, there will be time enough for clear thinking and for formulating a more
positive plan of correcting what seemed at first a hopeless situation.

Fallacious Sense of Values. So much of the teacher’s time is spent with children that she may easily grow arrogant and domineering unless she is sensitive to changes in her personality. One rapidly becomes accustomed to instant and unquestioning obedience and forgets that children are individual personalities whose wishes must be considered. Within the four walls of her room the teacher is a despot whose word may not be questioned, and few people can be despots gracefully. Freed from the challenge of constant criticism, she develops points of view that are unjustifiable. Who has not met the English teacher who judges people by their success in using “shall” and “will” correctly, or the elocution teacher whose speech is so meticulously overexact that the listener hears enunciation and pronunciation instead of ideas?

There is always the danger of pettiness. Formal education pays much attention to the minor virtues, often without appreciating that they are only minor virtues. It is disillusioning to sit in the principal’s office and to see how unimportant are many of the offenses for which children have been excluded from class. If the teacher regards pupils as whole personalities, she asks of herself, fairly often, “What of it?” when viewing children’s conduct and misconduct. She must not become indifferent to children’s misconduct, but she must never forget that if a pupil heads the paper incorrectly or goes up a “Down” stairway he may violate school regulations, but these acts need not indicate moral lapses.

Pettiness often expresses itself in other ways. Every experienced principal has encountered the “complaining” teacher who always feels that she is being imposed upon. Why are disciplinary cases always sent to her class? Why is her register always larger than Miss C’s? Why must she put on three assembly programs when Miss W. is asked to do only two?

The most effective safeguard for preventing a fallacious
sense of values is a full life that is rich in the many outlets it affords the teacher's interests and energies. The teacher's social life is an effective antidote to pettiness. She should get away from children and schools and see how other people of intelligence and discrimination view the school's standards. She should be interested in the development of some particular youngster from the home's point of view—if not her own child, then a nephew or a young neighbor—so that she can see the narrowness of a school that regards children as pupils and not as children. Within the classroom, the teacher should avoid a dictatorial rôle. Adopting the progressive point of view, by focusing attention on the child instead of the curriculum, assists the teacher to view pupils as individuals.

Monotony and Lack of Challenge. "Teaching is a dull job and an inspiring profession." The teacher who views her work merely as a job soon finds that it presents no challenge. After a term or so, she has a complete set of lesson plans and at the same time finds herself comparatively free from problems of discipline. The absence of challenge easily leads the teacher into a rut. The teaching that follows may be satisfactory as judged by the usual standards of supervisors, but it is unsatisfying and does not contribute to the teacher's growth.

Various devices have been suggested for relieving the monotonous aspects of teaching. Some teachers destroy their lesson plans at the end of each term. Other teachers change their approach each semester. Thus the history teacher uses biographies extensively one semester and then emphasizes the historical aspects of current events the next term. Sometimes the teacher can vary the content of the course and still satisfy the demands of the curriculum. The English teacher, for example, uses different short stories and composition topics each term. A few teachers find stimulation by conducting experimentation within the classroom. The type of preparation can be changed each semester. Since no teacher has ever mastered
completely the subject she teaches, she can then devote each term to her own detailed study of one part, in the meanwhile calling upon her general background for the remainder of the course. Thus, even a teacher assigned to the same grade of an elementary school need never lack new worlds to conquer if one term she devotes part of her free time to a study of children's literature, another term to a study of the customs of the countries she teaches in the geography classes, a third term to a survey of current research in American history, etc. Yet, these devices will not stimulate growth unless they are accompanied by a desire for growth. Really professional leadership by supervisors is, therefore, far more effective than is any device mentioned above. Of course, the person who teaches children instead of subjects never lacks challenge, for her pupils change from term to term, and their personalities grow from month to month.

Excessive Mental and Nervous Strain. The layman rarely appreciates the physical and emotional strain in teaching. Even the stolid teacher finds herself becoming annoyed and irritable. The person who is tense and high-strung suffers still more. Children's energy and ambition are delightful when one is fresh; they become unbearable when one is tired. Add to this the strain of clerical work, of getting the stated percentage of children to pass the tests, of keeping versed in the special interests of the unusual children, and of dealing with the problem pupils, and it is small wonder that the conscientious teacher is exhausted by her day's work. When the teacher is high-strung to begin with, the emotional strain of teaching is harmful to her and to her class.

Remedial measures are available. She can plan her day's work so that she has periods of comparative relaxation. For the tense teacher, the lunch period and other recess periods should not be spent in clerical work. Such teachers must learn to take mental "cat-naps" during the day by some sort of re-
laxing activity or inactivity. It is unfortunate when an inadequate salary and burdensome obligations necessitate her holding an additional job after school hours.

These are merely palliatives. The solution necessitates guiding the overtense teacher out of the profession. It is cruel to discharge a teacher whose nervousness is the result of her sacrifice to her work. The school must view this condition as an occupational disease and should provide for retirement on a disability pension rather than for discharge as an incompetent. A more hopeful approach lies in the careful selection of new entrants. The normal schools and colleges owe it to the student herself not to permit the unusually tense person to continue her preparation for teaching. Boards of education must consider not merely the scholastic attainments of the prospective teacher, but also her emotional balance. Since there is no single test that can be applied for the detection of the potentially high-strung teacher, we shall have to rely upon the integrity of the appointing board not to distort this evaluation of personality into a circumlocution for selecting teachers for political or other unworthy reasons. When the young teacher is appointed, her supervisors should see that she is not continued in her position unless her emotional control is sound.

The policy that has just been advocated is kinder to both the teacher and her class. The high-strung teacher should be guided into other fields of work to which she is better adapted and that are better suited to her. This guidance should come early enough for her to make the necessary personal adjustments. It is only a blind, maudlin sentimentality that permits her to ruin her life in a profession for which she is ill-adapted. The success of this policy depends wholly on the good judgment of the administrators. Present knowledge of personality growth is so inadequate that they cannot be certain of the wisdom of their decision. Many a teacher who is strained and unhappy in one situation improves markedly when she is shifted to another school or to another type of work. Where there is
may doubt, it should be resolved in the teacher’s favor. But when there is no longer any question, there is only one honest course of action for the teachers college or for the public-school system. Above all, this person should not be given the impression that she is queer, erratic, emotionally unstable, or potentially insane. She may be none of these and yet be undesirable as a teacher. For her sake, she should be spared the shock of a label that is probably incorrect and certainly harmful.

PROBLEMS ARISING FROM THE TEACHER-ADMINISTRATOR RELATIONSHIP

Exaggerated Importance of Administration. A desirable teacher-administrator relationship is second only to a sound teacher-pupil relationship as a factor in the teacher’s emotional health. The confusion of means and ends in education is often evidenced in the administrator’s attitude toward the teacher. The school’s chief work is helping the child to educate himself. The teacher is only one of the agents who guide and encourage this process. Supervision and administration should be subsidiary to the teaching process; it is the work of the school administration to facilitate and to improve the learning activities that go on in the classroom. Yet schools are administered as though the organization and the administration of the school are all-important.

In one school, a principal discontinued an experiment with the Dalton Plan, conducted by several of his abler teachers who were willing to devote the additional time and energy entailed, because it was more difficult to locate individual children when needed by the office. Another teacher was asked not to use the project methods because she could not show that the number of minutes devoted to the separate subjects of the curriculum followed the time-allotment plan drawn up by the administrative office.

Educators seem to assume that it takes a higher order of
intelligence to plan teachers' programs than it does to inculcate a love of literature or to give high-school students an appreciation of the economic and social problems confronting our civilization. So far as salary schedules go, generally the less personal the relationship to the child, the higher the remuneration. Thus classroom teachers receive less than principals, and superintendents are paid highest of all. As a result, a selective process operates to lead the more capable teachers to seek advancement outside the classroom. The process of pupil adjustment is relegated to a less important position.

Undesirable Teacher-Principal Relationship. Fear is as unsatisfactory a basis for the teacher-administrator relationship as it is for the teacher-pupil relationship. The supervisor need not be a "hail fellow well met" who is ready to tolerate indifference and inefficiency. Nevertheless, the running of the school should be a co-operative enterprise in which teacher and principal work together. Failure on the part of the children in the class must be looked upon as a school problem and should not be interpreted as being solely the result of teacher inefficiency.

The capable supervisor tries to improve the quality of the learning process. His visits to the classroom must not be solely inspectional, for the purpose of rating teachers. In the typical classroom, the entry of the principal is the signal for extraordinarily careful behavior. The children straighten up, and only the young exhibitionists dare to participate in the recitation. The teacher, too, is on her guard and calls upon the more reliable children. She finds that two can play at the game of inspection, and the lessons she gives are those which are least likely to reveal unsatisfactory classroom situations.

In the conference between teacher and principal that follows this visit, the attitude of the teacher resembles that of the child who is up for reprimanding. She tries to justify what happened in the classroom and to gloss over defects which may have been noted. The principal, on the other hand, makes a
written note of the suggestions that he makes and the faults that he finds. This is kept on file so that should anything go wrong in the future, he has the evidence that on a given date he did suggest a remedy. The whole atmosphere of the visit is wrong since it assumes that it is the principal’s duty to evaluate teachers rather than to assist them.

Need for Respecting the Teacher’s Personality. The growing concern with the needs of children’s personalities sometimes obscures the fact that teachers, too, have personalities to be respected. They, too, want the sense of achievement, the satisfaction of having their attainments recognized by others. Principals, like teachers, tend to take faithful work for granted. As a result, most of the criticism that comes from the superior is likely to be adverse. The teacher thus gets a false impression of failure and of being unappreciated. The principal must be as ready to commend as he is to censure.

The teacher must feel that she has her principal’s support in her dealings with pupils and their parents. She should not be rebuked in the presence of a pupil or a parent. Even when the teacher is wrong, it is often possible for the principal to explain the case to the parent from the teacher’s point of view. There will be ample time later for the principal to talk with the teacher. There is no reason why the principal cannot be tactful and considerate of teachers’ sensitivities.

The Teacher’s Sense of Responsibility. With teachers, as with children, the ability to take responsibility can be developed only by affording opportunity to exercise this trait. In many schools, the teacher is given the impression that all major problems are solved by the office and that she is to do merely the journeyman’s work of carrying orders into effect. Questions of policy are decided by the administrators, and it is considered bad taste for the teacher to suggest changes. Even minor questions involving only a slight degree of discretion are settled by general orders. An examination of some of the regulations of school systems reveals them to be almost as de-
tailed as a city charter. There seems to be general fear among supervisors that teachers are queer and irresponsible and must not be given any great share in the determination of school policy.

Too often, changes in educational procedures are made from the top down. The curriculum is revised by a committee appointed by the superintendent, and the fundamental philosophy is "determined" by a board of education on which the teacher has little if any representation. Unless the teacher accepts these changes whole-heartedly, the educational process remains unchanged regardless of all the resolutions passed by boards and all the orders promulgated by supervisors.

If the school is interested in developing children's initiative and the ability to shoulder responsibility, it is necessary for the pupils to have teachers who themselves have the traits in question. Why must teachers be deprived of initiative and responsibility? A visit to progressive schools is often surprising to the teacher who comes from a traditional school. The policies are frequently determined by the teachers in conference, and the routine work of the organization is reduced to a minimum. Teachers in such schools have a refreshing interest in their work; the "schoolma'am" is less often found. With freedom to experiment in the classroom comes the desire to experiment and to try out new ideas.

PROBLEMS ARISING FROM COMMUNITY ATTITUDE TOWARD TEACHING

Taboos. The teacher is surrounded by taboos. Modes of behavior that are acceptable even among leaders of society are frowned upon when used by the teacher. The young woman must dress in the conservative styles that the mothers of her pupils would never wear. In a community that accepts a reasonable use of cosmetics and of tobacco, the teacher is nevertheless supposed to set an example of abstinence. Every attempt on the teacher's part to satisfy the needs and the wishes
of her personality is frowned upon if it goes counter to the standards of even a small part of the community. The teacher is not expected to be interested in politics, and she must see experiments in social reform and in economic change without expressing an opinion, lest she alienate the support of some of the citizens.

The habit of smoking, for example, is not essential to emotional health, but the right to smoke if one cares to is. Provided that the teacher does not go to ridiculous or unjustifiable extremes, her personal habits should be determined by herself and not by meddlers. The community has the right to regulate the official life of its teachers, but it has no right to interfere with their personal life when that has no direct or indirect effects in school. The teacher should not be asked to sacrifice her privileges as a citizen.

The easiest way to obtain freedom of personal action is to live in a community other than that in which one teaches. The development of modern methods of transportation make this possible even in rural sections. There is, of course, the danger that the teacher will not be acquainted with the special needs of the students and may not know the environment from which they come. These inadequacies can be remedied, however, without compelling the teacher to live in a show-case for twenty-four hours a day.

A more effective method is to have educators, as a group, convince first themselves and then the community of their privileges as individuals. Through their professional associations they must insist that teachers be assured of their individualities. They must come to the assistance of the single teacher who is being treated unjustly. As long as teachers are ready to surrender their individualities meekly, there will be communities to demand the sacrifice.

The Teacher’s Salary and Tenure. The teacher’s salary should be sufficient to enable her to maintain a satisfactory standard of living without working outside the classroom.
Though the teacher is a servant of the community, the citizenry must be taught that the teacher's salary is not a gift, the size to be determined by the government's generosity. People generally make little distinction between the money paid to a teacher and that paid to a political appointee who may not be particularly well qualified for the position. School systems get as good teachers as they pay for. The teacher must not be humiliated by the taxpayer's constant reminder that it is he who is supporting her position.

Educators are too modest of their achievements. Contemporary social standards virtually compel the school to publicize its attainments. Radio talks, newspaper feature articles, school exhibits, Open School Week, Parent-Teacher Associations, and civic societies are all available for the unpleasant, but necessary, task of advertising the attainment of modern educators and their schools.

Permanent tenure is an important factor in the teacher's feeling of security. The teacher who must spend her time trying to impress the appointing authorities with the wisdom of reëngaging her or in trying to secure another position cannot enjoy the peace of mind essential for good teaching. A teacher must have the reassurance that so long as she does her duty conscientiously she will be unaffected by changes in the municipal administration or in the superintendent's office. Permanent tenure does not require the retention of the incompetent; legal means of removing such teachers are always available. It should mean, however, that the teacher is free to give her thoughts and energy to her students, knowing that only demonstrated incompetence or some other serious dereliction will be considered grounds for removal, and then only after she has been afforded the opportunity of presenting her side of the case.

Selection by Merit, not by Need. The community must be educated to select its teachers solely on the grounds of merit. When a member of the family is seriously ill, we consult the
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best physician we can afford, not the one with the greatest number of dependents. A similar standard should be applied when teachers are engaged. Whether a teacher be married or single, a resident of the community or of another, whether she be wealthy or poor, are all irrelevant considerations. Economic depressions accelerate the tendency to engage teachers on the basis of their financial needs. Though the community cannot ignore the claims of the destitute, it is unwise to staff the schools with inferior teachers. It is degrading for the teacher to plead for her position on grounds of poverty. It is demoralizing when she realizes that she has been engaged or retained for reasons other than her own abilities. For the teacher’s self-respect, for the school’s efficiency, and for the community’s welfare, teachers should be selected and promoted on merit.

PROBLEMS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Mr. P. is a competent, conscientious teacher of physics and chemistry in a small high school. He is sensitive to criticism and is certain that his colleagues and the principal do not appreciate his excellence. Because of this teacher’s many years of service and general superiority in mastery of both content and methodology, the principal, a much younger man, avoids saying anything that may hurt Mr. P.’s feelings.

One day, Mr. P. accused one of his pupils of loafing during the laboratory periods and of cheating on a classroom quiz. When the boy indignantly protested his innocence, with unnecessary aggressiveness and too little tact, he was warned that the teacher intended to ask for the boy’s expulsion from school.

The student then brought his father to the principal, whose investigation soon disclosed that there was little justification for the teacher’s outburst.

How far should the principal go in defending Mr. P.’s actions?

2. While observing a high-school history lesson, the principal heard the teacher give an entirely erroneous account of the Boston Tea Party. After listening for a few minutes, the principal interrupted the teacher tactfully and spoke of the way in which recent historical research indicated that the teacher’s explanation was inadequate. The principal then proceeded to make the necessary corrections.

a. Do you approve of the principal’s actions?
b. If you do not approve, what alternative do you propose?

3. Mr. B. is a junior at a teacher-training institution. His intelligence ratings place him in the highest 5 per cent of the general population and his scholastic standing is appropriately high. However, his personality traits suggest that he ought not to become a teacher. He is exceedingly sensitive to slights, has few friends because he is tactless in his dealings with others, is generally depressed, and is easily led to threaten suicide. (When he was fifteen years old, he did make one attempt at suicide.) In class, he is ordinarily reserved except when his answer is criticized by the instructor or by the other members of the class. Then he defends his reply so aggressively that he becomes almost abusive.

What should be done with him in view of the fact that he has already completed two years of work at the college? How can it be done?

4. In one community, teachers are not permitted to join any political organization. This is done in order to keep political influence out of the schools. Thus teachers may vote at elections, but they may not be members of any political or civic organization.

All told, do you approve of the rule set up by this community?

5. How can the principal reduce the excessive amount of time which his conscientious teachers spend in doing clerical work and in preparing for class?

6. What sort of investigation can we conduct in order to determine whether the nature of the teacher's work offers any special menaces to her emotional adjustment?

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