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Nurturing Intelligence in the Classroom

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There is a fine balance, a significant subtlety, for a teacher to sustain in order to be a functional force in the classroom nurture of intelligence. Keenly sensitive perceptions are required if teachers are to *"follow along,* so to speak, ahead of the children, helping them to clarify, organize, and extend meanings as they reach out for understanding."[1] Teachers' roles in this process demand a high degree of knowledge about our language and an active, creative part in its use. Pervasive habits of observing and listening should be enmeshed in the whole approach to teaching. More than that, as children seek constantly to organize their knowledge into conceptual structures, their efforts must be met by teachers with responsible steps to support, to stretch the scope, of these understandings. Challenges and choices facing teachers in designing programs for classroom learnings then become the crucial fulcrum in understanding and counter-poising the differing aspects of what children *do* know, *can* know, and *should* know.

The quantity and quality of skills, information, and behaviors children *do* know and possess at the time they begin regular schooling are astounding! Unfortunately, these are often disregarded, or discounted, by teachers. This is a grave mistake. It indicates a lack of knowledge, or restricted understanding, of the components and character of intelligence. It is unjust to children. It is equally unfair to those who function at a superior level and to those who operate at, or below, what is arbitrarily determined as "average" for their groups. Implications from documented observation and research are that mature capacity for thinking grows through an evolutionary, developmental process.[2] From the moment of birth, some believe even during the gestation period, human individuals start learning, imprinted and influenced by genetic and environmental factors, as well as cultural patterns and practices and humans around them. All of these influences affect future physical and mental development. They also help to determine psychological accommodations under conditions of stress or deprivation. How a child functions at any given period in this continuum is most germane in planning for further knowing and growing.

At the age of five or six years, children already are experts in oral language. Through experiencing a large variety of language utterances during these first years of life, they have usually acquired the complex patterns of their language, and are able to speak and understand thousands of sentences they have never previously heard. All this takes place with no formal teaching, sequencing, ordering, or programming in any particular way.[3]

Longitudinal studies of elementary children through the sixth grade

show that the positive relationship between general language ability and reading ability evident at an early age continues throughout each succeeding year of elementary school life, and expands to include writing skill as well.[4] While many teachers accept this as being true for young speakers of standard English, classroom teaching practices have reflected ignorance, or incertitude, concerning divergent speakers. Their language, when they enter school, is equally grammatical and systematic, within the norms of their dialects, with that of other children.[5] It is a recent fact, and a tragic one, that the courts have had to force the truth upon some schools, to adjure administrators and teachers alike to acknowledge this vital link between all children and the world of humans and learning.

In addition to the more obvious, observable language skills, children began formalized learning in schools in possession of varied potentials for conceptualization. Those who have acquired early in life an abundant accumulation of perceptual patterns and verbal labels have a tendency for greater facility in constructing more complex patterns and new labels required for later conceptual thinking.[6] Directly related, also, to genetic and previous environmental factors are their numerous response patterns which have been innately structured into "schemas," used by young learners in progression towards more objective, abstract thinking, and basic to individual, autonomous learning.[7]

Individual "will to learn," the foundation for autonomous learning, is intrinsic in the human species. Young children possess it in varying degrees and intensity. Some members of any typical class will have been allowed to exercise it freely and creatively in their pre-school years. Others may have been repressed in its use. It is a motive for learning "that finds both its source and its reward in its own exercise." It consists of "natural energies that sustain spontaneous learning—curiosity, a desire for competence, aspiration to emulate a model, and a deep-sensed commitment to the web of social reciprocity."[8] Again, early environmental forces, as well as genetic constitutions, exert great, differing influences upon children's attitudes towards problem solving. This, in turn, affects use of free will in making choices and decisions.[9] Emotions, too, play their part in igniting and directing "will." The study of affect in its relationship to social behavior and social structures indicates its centrality to learning which takes place within a social milieu.[10]

At least one powerful emotion can be considered prerequisite to the "will to respond," the core of learning activity. It is the feeling that something, or someone, outside of the self really matters. It is called "care." About the time that children commence formal education they are moving out from gross egocentricity towards recognition of others like themselves. They feel and respond in identification with feelings of others. It is this conscious caring which is inseparable from valuing and willing some actions over others. It is a source for motivation which catches children up in the excitement of learning.[11]

All of these things that pupils *do* know—their internalized language systems, concepts formed from perceptions and verbal labeling, their wills

to learn and respond, and the ways they manifest caring about themselves and for others can be used by discerning, responsive teachers. Knowing children in the classroom well enough to be aware to their competencies is a good starting point for pacing and determining teacher strategies. Such knowledge enhances evocative teaching, to inspire children's efforts for excellence. It becomes the basis, and the life, from which all further movement toward what *can* and what *should* be learned on the way to intellectual maturity can proceed.

Intelligence is no longer considered to be a fixed, finite, pre-determined property of an individual. The mind and intellect can continue to expand and grow as long as the brain remains healthy and active. Most people never approximate their total capabilites. Many members of the scientific community, and the general public as well, have concluded that people use only a very small fraction of their intellectual capacities, perhaps as small as ten per cent.[12] From working with computers and other technological devices, scientists have discovered that, wonderful as machines can be, abilities of the human mind are superior to them and can far surpass what anyone has dreamed. They know that:

> . . . the number of possible interactions within the brain alone is beyond the current skill of our best mathematicians to compute in a meaningful manner. The best way of expressing the total creative capacity of the human central nervous system in layman's language is that for all practical purposes it is infinite.[14]

Experimentation and research in other areas have led to the belief that humans may have a mind resource to control their physical structures and mental processes. There is much still uncertain about the limits of mental control of mind and body, but exploration to discover what brain waves and their patterns mean to human mental activity has only just begun.[15] These findings present a paradox of both onus and opportunity for educators.

Not all that *can* be taught *should* be taught. It has been stated that, "Any idea or problem or body of knowledge can be presented in a form simple enough so that any particular learner can understand it in a recognizable form."[15] But, it is also cautioned that curriculum material must not be prepared without regard for "the inherent structure of the material, its sequencing, the psychological pacing of reinforcement, and the building and maintaining of predispositions to problem solving."[16] Teachers would save themselves and their students much anxiety and wasted energy if they developed a strong, empirically based awareness of what *can* be known by the age group they teach. Many judgments asked of children require maturity and objectivity which ". . . the meager and highly subjective experience that forms the world of the child does not permit . . ."[17] Affirming that *all* children, not just the elite few, need to be stimulated, to be encouraged, to be allowed to develop and use their potential abilities, teachers must assume the responsibility of when and how

to present what *should* be known, according to the ages, backgrounds, and behavioral/cultural styles of the groups to be taught.

Taking this responsibility means knowing when to wait, when to move cautiously, and when to pursue boldly. It includes knowing how to expand areas of learning, both horizontally and vertically, and allowing children time and freedom to construct their own knowledge. It requires teachers to strive always to strike that delicate balance between their will to show and children's will to know, the proper mix that nurtures academic success, intent participation, and self-motivation for continued learning.

Under pressure from various sources for positive action, many school districts are developing special programs for children labeled as "especially bright," "gifted," and "talented." However, most classroom teachers face teaching heterogeneous groups throughout the school year. All children need intellectual nurture; that is the reason for the existence of public education. There are some practices, though, that can help teachers accomplish this better than others. One great teacher in the area of creative power has classified three types of effective learning:

> 1. *Experience-learning:* it leads directly into effective behavior. "Knowledge without a good behavior outcome is apt to remain sterile;"
> 2. *Research-learning:* it is based upon a genuine desire to accomplish something; it can be done by groups or individuals; and
> 3. *Creative-learning:* it is the individual outcome of what is done with mind/hand expression of individuality; it is not capable of being copied or imitated exactly.
>
> (The first two usually cover larger areas of knowledge than texts; they are brought about through a *sharing process,* one of the most powerful motivators and builders of positive self-concept.)[18]

Another teacher, with expertise in the development of human potentialities, has listed these qualities of the productive learning environment:

> 1. *Freedom from role:* Role-taking is depersonalizing, distancing, fragmenting to the whole person, restrictive to the impulse life, and limiting to creativity.
> 2. *Serenity and inner peace:* Greater growth can form internal drives that emerge from inner peace. The need to believe that conflict is the only road (or even a major one) to creativity is produced as a rationalization by conflict-prone modern man.
> 3. *Interdependence:* It is not enough to be free, to do what I want, to *allow* others freedom. The essence of the human condition is to be *with* others, to grow with them, to be aware of the dependency we share with all men, to love with, to care for, and to respond together.
> 4. *Delight in another's joy:* The ability to experience sustained

and uncontaminated joy and the ability to delight in another's joy are correlated . . . with the attainment of human potential.

5. *Trust in self and others:* The barriers to person potential are all variants of fear, derivatives of distrust: alienation, hostility, impotence, psychological distance, indifference, loneliness, and competitiveness.[19]

Some more specific things that teachers can do best in their own personalized styles are to:

1. *Observe children's questions:* to assist in assessing their individual learning styles;
2. *Anticipate the wide range of language development to be found in any one classroom:* to reduce unproductive anxiety and frustration;
3. *Respect children's rights to fluent speech, according to their internalized rules of grammar:* in order to respect the thought/intelligence behind what they say;
4. *Beware of regarding adult social expectations as typical and appropriate for the range of children's interests in thinking, speaking, and writing:* to aid in appropriate planning/valid evaluation;
5. *Give "superior offerings" the advantage of a conspicuous setting:* to promote inspiration, discrimination, and information of values;
6. *Capitalize on childhood's complete receptivity to new stimuli and new situations:* to keep enthusiasm for learning high; and
7. *Provide conditions for enlarging children's range of choices:* to enable them to learn how to exercise free will, so basic to motivation for growth.

The nurture of intelligence is not easy. As a profession, it might even be considered hazardous. To do it well demands great amounts of time. It takes much more effort than day-after-day page-flipping of teachers' manuals; more planning than distributing, collecting, and sorting reams of prepared seatwork and prescription sheets; more concentration than assigning one exercise after another to all, alike, in a workbook, however "teacher-proof" these materials are planned to be. It so immerses the heart and mind that there may be a constant tugging back to the problems of the day outside of regular teaching hours, and beyond classroom walls. It requires deep thought and tremendous energy.

Above all, it takes courage: personal courage, to accept disappointment, but, to continue to affirm daily the commitment to what seems best for all children; social and moral courage, to stand up for convictions when facing parents, colleagues, and administrators; and creative courage, to extend oneself beyond the usual, the routine, and the expected. Most of the rewards will be intrinsic. When the teacher steps back to view and assess

the delicate balance, the satisfactions will be found in classroom enthusiasm to enhance experience; individual artistry for all to appreciate; beauty to behold in language, thought, and action; and increased intellectual power to propel each toward lifetime learning.

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