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An Experiment in Educating Emotionally Disturbed Children

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AN EXPERIMENT IN EDUCATING EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

After years of uncertainty, there is now widespread interest in the emotionally disturbed child in the schools. This change suggests that educators now see the disturbed child as an exceptional child, a handicapped child in need of special attention and assistance.

While the delineation of responsibility between school, home, and mental health agency is not yet well defined, it is as if the schools are now saying, "We are not quite clear about what other agencies intend to do, but we intend to do whatever seems appropriate and feasible in the school setting."

Several recent events have apparently contributed to this change: emotional disturbance has been redefined as behavior disorder; federal legislation now provides funds for teacher training, special classes, and other innovations for emotionally disturbed children; and there is new professional interest in the problem.[1]

The education of children is a major responsibility of society. Indeed, a democratic society tries to educate all persons to the fullest extent. Yet society often falls far short of the ideal expressed in this laudable enough purpose. There are still large groups of people in our society who are certainly

not educated to the fullest extent. Among these groups are the emotionally disturbed children about whom interest is now rapidly developing and expanding.

Many questions about these children come to the minds of teachers and other interested adults. "Who are these children? Are there some in my classroom? What can one do for them? How educable are they? What are their strengths and weaknesses? What is the best way to develop an educational environment for them?"[2]

An answer to the previous questions will be sought in this study.

EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED CHILDREN DEFINED

Emotionally disturbed children are children who have more or less serious problems with other people--peers and authority figures such as parents and teachers--or who are unhappy and unable to apply themselves in a manner commensurate with their abilities and interests. In general, one might say that an emotionally disturbed child is one who has a sizable "failure pattern" in living instead of a "success pattern".[3]

In the past several years evidence has accumulated that it is more scientifically sound and feasible to classify emotional disturbance as a behavior disorder which consists of inadequate or inappropriate behavior that is learned and can therefore be changed through the application of learning procedures. Several

theorists have pointed out how the disturbed child's inadequate or inappropriate behavior is embedded in the child-school community relationship.

When emotional disturbance is seen as a learning problem and a problem in socialization, the school is clearly a focal point for any widespread remedial effort because the school is one of the oldest socializing systems in the child's environment.[4]

A HISTORICAL REVIEW

Efforts concerned with emotional disorders of children lead to the amazing disclosure of the total absence of an allusion, however casual, before the eighteenth century. Folklore, which seizes upon every conceivable aspect of human life, is peculiarly silent. Theologic, medical and fictional writings have nothing to say. This does not warrant the assumption that infantile emotions always ran a smooth course in the past and that the occurence of their disturbances is a relatively recent phenomenon.

There was no comprehension of the kind of children's difficulties which manifested themselves in disorganized feeling, thinking, and acting. As an example of medieval ignorance to emotional disturbance in children, the following example is cited:

> This 7-year old girl, the offspring of an aristocratic family, whose father remarried after an unhappy first matrimony, offended her "noble and god-fearing" stepmother by her peculiar behavior. Worst of all, she would not join in the prayers and was panic-stricken when taken to the black-robed preacher in the dark and gloomy chapel. She avoided contact with people by hiding in closets or running away from home. The local physician had nothing to offer

> beyond declaring that she might be insane. She was placed in the custody of a minister known for his rigid orthodoxy. The minister, who saw in her ways the machinations of a "baneful and infernal" power, used a number of would-be therapeutic devices. He laid her on a bench and beat her with a cat-o'nine-tails. He locked her in a dark pantry. He subjected her to a period of starvation. He clothed her in a frock of burlap. Under these circumstances, the child did not last long. She died after a few months, and everybody felt relieved. The minister was amply rewarded for his efforts by the little girl's parents.

Such was the general milieu in which the alienists of those days came upon specimens of childhood psychosis.

Around 1900, there was an assortment of publications, ranging all the way from single case reports to elaborate texts and announcing to an astonished world that children were known to display psychotic phenomena.

Yet it was not until the 1930's that consistent attempts were made to study children with severe emotional disturbances from the point of view of diagnosis, etiology, therapy, and prognosis.[5]

THE EXPERIMENT

One of the strongest considerations of practical school administrators is whether or not the cost of special classes and programs for the education of emotionally disturbed children should be the responsibility of the school. The cause for concern has been real. In many instances the special classes have proved expensive. This has been true even in cases where little improvement has been seen in the child's behavior and academic achievement. It is believed, however, that school administrators

could accept special programs if the cost were within reason and if the program could demonstrate its worthwhileness in educational rehabilitation. If educators of exceptional children are to renew their assertions that public school systems can and should assume the responsibility of the education of these children, they must demonstrate that children in these classes can make substantial educational and behavioral gains.

The report that follows is the result of a study which was initiated in 1962 in Arlington County, Virginia, near Washington, D.C.

Experimental Procedure

The experiment was conducted in nine schools in the Arlington County Public Schools. The children in the study were moderately to severely emotionally disturbed and had reflected their disturbance in a wide range of behavior symptoms. These children had provoked frequent hours of case conferences, involving ten to fifteen highly paid professionals, with little improvement resulting in the children. They were children who were selected--by the aid of the files and personal knowledge of the coordinator of special education, principals, supervisors, teachers, visiting teachers, and school psychologists--as children who has presented serious and protracted problems.

The Arlington County Public Schools assumed the obligations

of developing ways to cope with the classroom behavior of these children and or providing an educational program suitable to their needs. The administration and the board of education of the school system had a sincere interest in seeking more practical and effective ways of educating these children and offered their full cooperation. In the effort to study the problems, three different methods of teaching and three grouping situations were utilized.[6]

Selection Criteria

All of the children were referred on the bases of their behavior and educational performance as observed by teachers, school psychologists, and supervisors. The general diagnosis of emotional disturbance was required before final selection was made. This diagnosis was made by the school physician, the chief psychologist, the director of speech and hearing, the chief school social worker, and each child's teacher. Each speech, hearing, pediatric, and psychological evaluations. The teachers' observations and the psychologist's report were important influences in the final selection of the children. Although the neurological evaluations of the children did not reveal positive signs, the possibility that some of the children in this experiment had organic brain pathology cannot be entirely precluded.

Specifically, the following four criteria were used for selection of the children:

1. Hyperactive, distractible, attention-getting behavior; withdrawn, uncooperative behavior; or tendencies to both

2. Average or near average intelligence (with the recognition, however, that tested intelligence might be an underestimate owing to the emotional disturbance)

3. Presence in the school at least one year (preferably two) before the referral, with educational retardation of one year (preferably two)

4. The likelihood that the parents could and would cooperate, attend parent group meetings, and generally support the school's efforts.

Since the study was done with elementary-age children, grade levels two to five, an implicit criterion was that the referred child be in the research study at least one year, preferably two, before going on to junior high, in order that time for follow-up would be available before the child moved from the elementary school level.[7]

Teaching Methods and Settings for the Three Groups

Description of Group I (Structured)

There were three groups of emotionally disturbed children with, for the first year, fifteen children in each group. The children in Group I were placed in two special classes. One was a primary class (aged seven to nine), the other an intermediate class (aged nine to eleven). These classes provided a highly structured, stimuli-reduced educational setting. The teachers closely followed the general aim of increasing order and structure. . . . Preliminary conferences with the teachers and observations of the classroom climates were carried on by the

coordination of special education and the project psychologist throughout the first year. As the teachers became acquainted with structured methods and were settled into the routine, less supervision of their techniques was necessary. The following are some of the educational procedures used with Group I.

Assignments and Skill Limits of Each Child. Assignments were determined initially on the basis of intellectual and achievement tests and on the basis of information in each child's personal file. Modifications of assignments were necessary in cases where, for example, a child disliked arithmetic or was especially poor in spelling. The children often tried to postpone work on disliked subjects or acted as if they did not understand directions sufficiently well to proceed on their own. To remedy these conditions, assignments were made very brief and clear; a close, consistent follow-through was then maintained by the teacher. As the teacher got the feel of each child's attitudes and work skills, she gradually gave the child more independence in his work. Piece by piece, day by day, these tolerances were extended.

Seating and Movement Limits. In addition to regular seats in the classroom, there were two small work tables, about two and one half by five feet, and five "offices" or booths. The booths were used to enable the children to work under a mimimum of distracting conditions, to increase the tolerance for independent work, and to handle restless, hyperactive, and socially disturbed behavior. The booths, which lined one wall of the

classroom, were about three and one half by three and one half feet with a movable chair and fixed table-level desk across the back of each. Sometimes children stored supplies in the booths as well as in the assigned desk each had in the center of the classroom.

Play and Recreational Limits. Children were held to the completion of assigned work before play or recreational opportunities were available. Most of the academic work was done in the morning; physical education, art, music, and free play periods came in the afternoon provided a child's work was up to par. Brief periods allowing for free play with art materials or clay were sometimes sandwiched in during the morning work periods if the child had completed work assigned to him. Care was exercised not to allow the recreational pursuits to crowd out assigned work, and assigned work had a constant, first-order priority at the beginning of each school day.[8]

Free Moving Privileges. Free moving privileges included access to the rest rooms, moving about in the classroom, moving from group to individual desk work, occasional errands to the school office, and getting in line for lunch. Children asked permission to leave the room. Tasks and errands were distributed weekly among the children, so that all got a chance to carry on "official buisness" with the school office. The children were free to move from desk to booth to work bench provided a move was closely related to the assigned work. Free roaming about,

or movement in lieu of doing work, was kept to a minimum. To preclude the development of fatigue, the group would be taken at appointed times for a walk and thus be allowed a "seventh-inning stretch" during the morning work period. Water in the classroom sink was kept off; art materials were kept under cover so as to minimize distraction. The children knew these materials were available after they qualified to use them, and it did not take long to establish these elementary limits concerning the use of supplies.

Social-emotional Conduct Limits. Some of the childred provoked others unrelentingly, especially at first. Others often came to school "in a bad mood" and hypersensitively interpreted classroom problems personally. They displayed attidues characterized by refusal to work, to communicate, to participate. In these situations, which were difficult to control effectively and constructively, several guidelines helped. The teachers did early what they would normally be required to do later in the way of setting behavior limits; they did not participate with a child who was upset, i.e., become involved in his upset, but instead gave him time to calm down first, gave one warning, and then acted; isolation was normally the preferred and most effective technique when a child's behavioral disturbance adversely affected others; and a specific emphasis was always placed by the teacher on solution or resolution of a problem in preference to queries as to why the child behaved as he did.

Parent Discussion Groups. The parents of children in Group

I were invited to meet with the teacher and psychologist on an average of once a month for the first year of the study. Only four parent meetings were held in the second year, and only four in the third year....[9]

Description of Group II (Regular Grades)

The children of Group II were in regular classrooms in six elementary schools in the county. The teachers used methods of teaching emotionally disturbed children generally employed in a regular class setting. The parents were brought into the situation by the teacher as incidents of a child's behavior became disturbing. Nearly all techniques for coping with behavior problems in a classroom were used from time to time.

Teaching Methods and Materials. To the extent that was possible, the children assigned to the regular classes were given the regular curriculum used in grades one to five. With this range as a reference base, the teachers made every effort to understand the emotional problems of the children and made all the modifications in their classes which could be permitted. The following considerations were uppermost in the practices of the teachers of the children in Group II:

1. All assigned work was well within the child's ability.

2. Wherever possible, the school work was modified to suit the child's interest.

3. The child was given experiences in which he could find success.

4. The child was given opportunities to find accomplishments and recognition.

5. Extra privileges and responsibilities were provided in order to give the child attention.

6. Punitive responses to the child's aggressive, rebellious behavior were avoided by the teachers.

Description of Group III (Permissive)

The fifteen children in this group were assigned to a special class. The children in this class, like the children in the regular classes, had available the services of the psychogist, physician, visiting teacher, nurse, helping teacher, elementary supervisor, and remedial reading teacher. The teacher of Group III had some experience in and educational background for teaching children with emotional disorders.

The following teaching methods, curriculum, and classroom environment comprised the educational setting for this group:

1. The curriculum was modified to suit the interests of the children.

2. The teacher reflected friendliness and warmth with the children.

3. An atmosphere of relative permissiveness was established, so that the children felt free to express their feelings and anxiety.

4. The teacher recognized the children's feelings and reflected these feelings back to them.

5. When limits were set, the teacher still made sure that the children's feelings were accepted and reflected back.

6. The teacher believed in the importance of meeting the real emotional needs of the child, not only the material, academic needs.

Summary and Discussion

From a practical standpoint the children who wer placed in the structured, academically progr mmed special class showed

an increase in academic achievement and behavior adjustment. It can be argued that these are only overt changes and that the child still has within him the same disturbing feelings, fears, and anxieties, which must be brought out and resolved in order to effect real changes in the child's adjustment. It is not possible to say whether this assertion is true or not. It can be said, however, that the children who were placed in the experimental class showed improvement in that they were (a) more constructive and tractable in the classroom and the home, (b) eager to learn and to accomplish academic tasks, (c) significantly higher in school progress as a whole, and (d) able to complete assigned chores in the home. In general their system of behavior became better organized. They became more goal-oriented with much less meaningless, random behavior.

This experiment demonstrates to public school administrators first that special classes can be productive in the education of emotionally disturbed children and that the cost need not be out of proportion with that of educating these children in regular classes. When one considers the amount of time normally required of the high-salaried professional school personnel by these children when in regular classes, the special program is not markedly more expensive. In addition, the special class is not considered a permanent place for the majority of these children.

The advantages of a structured type of classroom environment for meeting the needs of emotionally disturbed children exceed those of the other types discussed above, and exceed the expectations of the authors and personnel involved in this study.

Thus, the study also showed that a teacher can successfully teach a class of the type of youngsters studied herein provided she has instruction, direction, and support from experienced psychologists, special educators, and principals. Good teaching is the model to follow; it involves knowledge of each child's potentialities and the ability to give the specific direction necessary for the child's growth and progress. A structured classroom is one in which clear direction, firm expectations, and consistent follow-through are paramount; this is presumably a healthy state of affairs for normal children, as well as necessary for optimal growth of emotionally disturbed children.[10]

CONCLUSIONS

The emotionally disturbed child is the most recent, if not the last, type of exceptional child that the schools have recognized as not benefitting from regualr classroom instruction. The vagueness of the entity, perhaps, or the delicate question of whether this was not truly a mental health responsibility, may have accounted for the reluctance of many school administrators to intervene at this time. A notion has been contained that special education programs for emotionally disturbed children in public schools might well be patterned after their counterparts in residential treatment centers, where some success was being achieved. Implicit in this assumption was the need for clinical personnel to contribute, from their theory and understanding of mental functioning, to the educational activities of school per-

sonnel, rather than utilizing an individual clinical method at the school. Major differences between the two settings were immediately encountered, necessitating considerable revision in thinking and in method.[11]

Teachers of children with emotional, behavioral, and learning problems in one way or other have been doing many things in an effort to help these children overcome these problems. That they have not always experienced success with such difficult children may be largely due to a need to refocus on readiness training and the value of a systematic approach for launching children into learning. Such a reorientation of teachers and emphasis on systematically helping children get ready for school while they are actually there has been of major concern.[12]

FOOTNOTES

[1]Henry Dupont, Educating Emotionally Disturbed Children (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969), pp. 1-2.

[2]Norris G. Haring and E. Lakin Phillips, Educating Emotionally Children (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962), p. 1.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Dupont, op. cit., p. 2.

[5]Donald H. Clark and Gerald S. Lesser, Emotionally Disturbances and School Learning (Chicago: Science Research Associates, Inc., 1965), pp. 9-12.

[6]Clark, op. cit., pp. 223-224.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Clark, op. cit., pp. 225-226.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Clark, op. cit., pp. 228-234.

[11]Eli Rubin, Emotionally Handicapped Children and the Elementary School (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966), pp. 215-216.

[12]Frank M. Hewett, The Emotionally Disturbed Child in the Classroom (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1968), p. 334.

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