

For The Record: Poverty, Professionalism, And Change

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THE WAR ON POVERTY has entered the lives of public school teachers primarily as an intensified effort to compensate for the environmental deprivations of poor children, thereby enabling them to learn. Because the war drums began rolling at a time when education was being conceived mainly in terms of cognitive development, the battle in the schools has been conducted against "cognitive deficit" in one or another of its forms. This was the fundamental emphasis of the Great Cities project, Higher Horizons, and the other initial programs. It is the focus and *raison d'être* of the pre-kindergarten movement and Head Start.

Not surprisingly, considering the technical complexity of the challenge, educators have seemed relatively unconcerned with the role to be played by the school in community life itself. Preoccupied with bringing the children of the poor "back to society" (in Michael Harrington's words) by equipping them with desperately needed cognitive skills, they have said little about a matter which once concerned them greatly: the responsibility of the school with respect to social change.

Individuals, to be sure, have been aware of the cultural factors which account for deprivation, as the articles by Martin Deutsch and George Henderson in this issue of the Record make clear. Now and then (as in the case of Ernest H. Austin, Jr., writing in the October, 1965 Phi Delta Kappan) an educator will ask whether the schools are not evading "the question of the source of deprivation" by concentrating on alleviation of the results of poverty. But, with few exceptions, those working in the schools have tended to leave the hard questions about institutional change to municipal government or to the social work profession.

The exceptions, of course, are men like Richard A. Cloward of the Columbia School of Social Work, director of research at Mobilization for Youth, Frank Riessman of Albert Einstein Medical School and a former staff member at MFY, and Jacob Fishman of the Center for Youth and Community

Services at Howard University. All three have been engaged in training representatives of the poor to perform stated non-professional functions in the communities. Their work is a response to what is probably the most innovative and dramatic aspect of the war on poverty: the "involvement of the poor" in community action and organization.

Teachers have been largely unaffected by this development thus far; and they have not had to confront what some see as a serious challenge to professionalism. Dr. Cloward (The Nation, August 2, 1965) quotes a report issued by New York's United Neighborhood Houses, describing some of the newly established community groups as "grasping at the chance to get control" and downgrading "every social agency that has its roots in the past, even though its current ideas and programs are forward-looking and ahead of the times." He attributes this to the same uneasiness demonstrated by certain local politicians (*viz.* the attack on Mobilization for Youth) and finds its source in a defense of "vested interests," jealousy of long-standing prerogatives, and a fear of the pressure the poor will exert on "oppressive institutions"—thereby effecting perhaps unlooked for social change.

Whether or not this applies to most social agencies or to only a few, there does exist some legitimate objection to certain forms of "involvement." It is an objection raised in the name of professionalism and against the background of a conception set forth by Bernard Barber (in "The Sociology of the Professions," *Daedalus*, Fall, 1963):

Professional behavior may be defined in terms of four essential attributes: a high degree of generalized and systematic knowledge; primary orientation to the community interest rather than to individual self-interest; a high degree of self-control of behavior through codes of ethics internalized in the process of work socialization and through voluntary associations organized and operated by the

work specialists themselves; and a system of rewards (monetary and honorary) that is primarily a set of symbols of work achievement and thus ends in themselves, not means to some end of individual self-interest.

If Professor Barber is correct in calling social work an "emerging" profession, we can better understand the reaction of some social workers to what strikes them as a threat.

The arguments posed in favor of continuing use of non-professional personnel center around the idea that representatives of the indigenous poor in any given neighborhood are needed to mediate between the community and the mainly middle-class professionals attempting to meet their needs. No one can fully understand the "culture of poverty," it is said, with its distinctive myths and languages and hopelessness, unless he has lived in it and experienced what it means. Moreover, the helplessness of the poor (and their "invisibility") are likely to be exacerbated by efforts simply to do things for them. Only as the poor themselves are involved in making policy and carrying out programs, will they be enabled to help themselves.

This is unquestionably appealing on many levels and makes considerable operational sense. The arguments, in fact, have struck many teachers as an application of a basic democratic principle—that everyone affected by a policy ought to participate in framing it. Numbers of teachers, too, are familiar enough with the Deweyan and progressive tradition to find in the "involvement of the poor" something reminiscent of grass roots and town meeting democracy. Participation, they are likely to say, is by definition "good." It must be remembered, however, that there have been few incursions by the participants on the teacher's particular professional field.

But there are signs in the wind; and it may be that teachers will soon have to come to terms with some very hard questions, including the question of their attitude towards far-reaching social change. If so, it will be an interesting and perhaps a fruitful development, at a moment when the focus

is on technical problems of teaching and learning rather than on the "old" issue of the function of schools in society.

One sign is an article written by Brendan Sexton in *The Progressive* (October, 1965) entitled "Realistic Vistas for the Poor." Sexton, presently director of the new Center for Leadership Studies of the United Automobile Workers, was recently a consultant in the Office of Economic Opportunity and, before that, Director of Education for the UAW. He would appear to be in a position not only to speak out of direct experience with training the poor but to deal with the problem from an "educational" point of view.

The burden of his article has to do with the importance of making possible something more than a merely ceremonial inclusion of the poor on boards dominated by clever and articulate people from the professional middle class. The poor, he says, have a far better opportunity to enter meaningfully into community action if they are assigned paid jobs as non-professionals and if training programs are developed which will "enable non-professionals to participate effectively and progress up through the ranks of the agencies where they are employed."

Making the perfectly good educational point that an individual deprived of hope of advancement will soon cease performing effectively, Sexton goes on to propose that the concept of the non-professional be used "as an entering wedge, to think of restructuring much training for professional and near-professional occupations along lines that hold promise of many desirable consequences."

Here is where the "entering wedge" may move many educators to pile desks against the door in order to keep it shut:

If one muses a little about the conception, one can imagine a situation in which an intelligent boy is hired into a public school in Harlem as a beginning teacher aide, and without ever returning to formal class situations passes a series of graduated steps, to emerge one day, with the approval of the professionals under whom he has worked, a full-fledged, certified teacher. For

such a young man or woman, training and education will occur as he works and earns enough money to support himself. One can believe that development in this way is possible if one also believes that the live workshop and laboratory where learning problems are immediately dealt with under the guidance of skilled professional practitioners is as adequate a setting for training as the college classroom where the retired professional lectures in the abstract about principles which he thinks of, or may remember, as having had some relevance earlier when he practiced his profession.

There are several assumptions here which cry out for critical attack, just as there are several instances of simple misunderstanding on Mr. Sexton's part. Most serious is the implicit neglect of theory and of the growing body of knowledge relative to teaching the disadvantaged child. One has only to consult such articles as those by Deutsch and Henderson in this issue of the Record to be reminded of how much is being learned about the special problems and pathologies of the deprived. To be reminded of the amount of research being done and the precision of the resulting knowledge-claims, one has only to consult such a compilation of working papers as the one published by Benjamin S. Bloom, Allison Davis, and Robert Hess under the title *Compensatory Education for Cultural Deprivation* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc. 1965).

The matter of language development and of the varied approaches to reading, not to mention the unresolved questions of testing and evaluation, can, it would seem, scarcely be tapped in "the live workshops and laboratory" by those lacking conceptual preparation. In fact, knowing what we do about perception and conception, we might even ask whether the crucial problems would even be recognized by the conceptually innocent, much less defined.

But much of this has been said before in educational discussion, since it has to do with the justification of teacher training in professional schools; and much will continue to be said. Our present concern is with the implications of a charge against such training in the context of programs for the

poor. As is well known, no amount of exact information can finally settle questions of how teachers ought to react or what decisions ought to be made.

It seems evident that teachers need to clarify their notions of what is meant by "direct experience" and of the significance of such experience in dealing effectively with the disadvantaged young. Mr. Sexton takes it for granted that desired changes can be brought about by enlisting the poor themselves—after, it must be granted, a certain amount of training. He does not, though, define what he takes to be desirable where young children are concerned; nor does he confront the necessity of teaching for cognitive development—or of overcoming the deficits which stand in the way.

He does, however, pose a challenge, simply by talking of "democratizing" the profession and by linking his proposals to the "involvement of the poor." The schools, it would seem, like the community organizations and the welfare agencies, will have to come to grips with the need for such involvement; and this will mean defining a new orientation to their function in community. What ought to be a teacher's attitude towards the institutional changes being sought? Towards community action? Towards non-professional workers and their roles within the school?

Defensiveness appears to be uncalled for; the schools have long been committed to improving social conditions and the terms of human life. The school should contribute, wrote John Dewey, "through the type of intellectual and emotional disposition which it forms to the improvement of ... conditions." Others, like Theodore Brameld, believe that the school should play a deliberate and active role in reconstructing social life. We may have reached the point in educational history where the two activities are continuous: It may be necessary to confirm the work done in overcoming deficits by helping to involve people in remaking their own impinging world.

We need to think about the range of activities which are educative and about the possibility of defining the diverse roles to be

performed. Sexton is right in warning against the freezing of non-professionals on the bottom rung of the ladder, but the fact that advancement is so often closed to them may be testimony to the professionals' lack of imagination—not to the ineffectuality of their work. Teacher aides will be needed with various degrees of skill; mediators will be needed, interpreters who can explain the neighborhood to such teachers as those Sidney Simon has described. Community workers may be needed to work in association with the school: people to conduct after-school and summer programs; people to introduce and supervise work-study programs; people to do research in the community, to assess and explain persistent and emergent needs.

Much depends upon the school's ability to orient itself to the community, to identify the multiple forces working in it, to make the distinctions which must be made if public education is to improve conditions of learning as well as living—and continue to nurture the life of the mind. We may have reached the point at last at which teachers can turn outward, even as they work deliberately to teach children to think. We may have reached the point at which the theorist and the technician within the school can reach out to the community, not by reducing standards or by becoming less rigorous, but by working through those who must be enabled to attain dignity—the non-professionals who are involved in trying to change the world.—MG