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A NURSERY SCHOOL
PUTS PSYCHOLOGY TO WORK.
by BARBARA BIBER



CURRENT NOTES ABOUT CHILDREN
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TEACHERS AND PARENTS . . .

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A NURSERY SCHOOL PUTS PSYCHOLOGY TO WORK

By Barbara Biber

It is the purpose of the following discussion to describe, in part, the working attitude of a progressive nursery school with respect to the important problem of individual adjustment. The overlapping functions of school and clinic, in so far as both are operating toward the fullest possible effectiveness in the individual, are sketched in the first section and the policy of one school tentatively defined. Any school needs to develop an explicit policy in the course of its work if it is to meet the challenge presented by those of its children who, for various reasons, do not seem to be utilizing the stimulating opportunities in their environment to a degree commensurate with their powers.

Some of the children live amicably in the school group. Others become disruptive factors and are more commonly recognized as requiring special attention. All, however, deserve the studied attention of the adults who are associated with their education. In the brief space available, it is not possible to describe fully a school's method of organizing the study of an individual child. Instead, one phase of the work has been chosen and illustrated in appended summaries from case material. These are intended to indicate the possibilities for rounding out a behavior study of a child by combining school record and psychological test material.

The Child Is the Product of Home and School

The school cannot afford to neglect the major importance of home factors and must take a genuinely inquiring attitude if it wishes to comprehend what forces are already playing about the child who, on the face of it, seems so new, so impressionable, so simple, so unformed. Are his parents living a mutually satisfactory life; is the child serving as outlet for one or both parents' desires; has a disciplinary situation subdued him; has indulgence led him to build negative power mechanisms; are his sisters or brothers better looking, and so on? A school must make every effort to understand the child in his total life situation. So much is certain. The rest is less certain. What shall the school set as its limits of influence in those situations in which equilibrium has been upset?

The staff of the Harriet Johnson Nursery School in New York City works toward a common goal, which is easily defined: thorough understanding of how a child is behaving at any given period; first,

with respect to his own capacity and, second, in comparison with the levels of performance of children of corresponding age. These two criteria have been broadly conceived, as it is now generally conceded they should be. Capacity is taken to mean the total resources of the child against the background of personality characteristics and emotional hindrance or facilitation, as the case may be. Levels of performance are intended to include spontaneous creative and constructive responsiveness as well as standardized test problems. Inasmuch as it is impossible to consider fully the question of a child's capacity without taking into account the factor of effectiveness as involved in his total personality, the problem is one that is the joint concern of psychiatrist and teacher.

The second of these criteria, namely, comparison with the levels of performance of children of corresponding age, lies primarily in the field of the psychologist. From the point of view represented here, this comparison remains incomplete unless the psychologist can supplement his theoretical knowledge derived from test and laboratory situations, with direct observation of the finer, more elusive features of child activity in a spontaneous situation.

Where School and Clinic Meet

School and clinic attack the problem of individual effectiveness at different points, and have advanced far enough so that some clear separation of their respective functions is timely. School, in this connection, refers to the progressive school since, up to the present time, only progressive schools have been in a position to do intensive work with individual children and to incorporate the needs of individuals into programs for group activity.

In a sense, the school is creative and preventive; the clinic is corrective. The school starts with positive factors. The clinic, for the most part, takes up its work where failure, in some form, has crept in. The clinic has physician, psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker and others on its staff. The school, if it is sufficiently prosperous, has, in addition to its teaching and directing staff, the services of physician and psychologist. The school is equipped to carry along most of its children with fair certainty that it is insuring beneficial conditions for individual growth. The school, however, encounters its failures at points where specific problems do not yield to tested procedures. The school must ask itself: has it used its total resources most effectively? Is this one of the problems that should pass over into the sphere of the clinic, into the hands of other specialists? On what basis shall we decide? In the November issue of "69 Bank Street" this problem is discussed in one of the excerpts from the late Harriet Johnson's unpublished writings.

The daily procedure of the school, its basic attitudes, incorporate much of the clinic's therapeutic recommendations. One need only mention, as illustration, the school's concern for grounding each child's gratification in his own work relations rather than in some competitive relation, its recognition of the easily upset security feeling

of young children and its efforts to keep interchild relations realistic, to be on guard for defensive reactions, for excess in phantasy modes of release. Furthermore, just because these ideas are part of its daily practice, the school is the most skilled instrument operating toward their fulfillment.

In short, the active progressive school is, up to a certain point and under differing circumstances, covering ground similar to that covered by the mental hygiene clinic. There is a definite need in two directions which follows from this apparent overlapping. First, the school needs to learn to recognize those situations which require more expert advice or treatment than its staff is equipped to give. Second, the clinic needs to realize the extent to which educational procedure and mental hygiene principles are similar and to avoid, accordingly, the error of recommending to the school only that which the school itself has long ago absorbed from its daily experience.

A Policy and Program for the Individual Child

At the Harriet Johnson Nursery School, the study of individual children has become a joint staff venture in the course of which such questions as these have stimulated us to attempt the formulation of a position with respect to them. Directors, teachers, psychologist and physician cooperate in the analysis of successive cases. We do not ever intend to serve more than a pre-clinical function and have consequently defined two limits beyond which we do not try to exert influence, depending upon other specialists, usually the psychiatrist, to take the lead.

1. We undertake no interviews or contacts with the children for the purpose of probing unconscious mechanisms. We limit our analysis to what can be observed from the child's overt behavior in various situations. We limit our recommendations to variations of school procedures on the assumption that by these means some measure of adjustment can be accomplished.
2. Realizing the potent influence of the home situation, we try to win parents over to an acceptance of attitudes which are consistent with those of the school and in agreement with what other schools and mental hygienists have come to consider as desirable. We do not consider it safe to deal directly with the more subtle aspects of the relative adequacy of the interparent relation. For that, too, we consider another specialist is necessary.

The training of an experienced staff of progressive school teachers is necessarily such that they are acquainted with the fundamental ideas and the relevant material which form the basis for study of the individual child. They could scarcely be considered trained teachers

were they not familiar, for example, with the underlying principles of mental hygiene. These resources require organization within the school if they are to be of greatest benefit to the children in attendance and at the same time prevent duplication of work by school and clinic.

One special problem has interested our school staff recently, namely, the question as to what possibilities may reside in the use of standardized tests that can be of distinct aid to a progressive school in its understanding of individual children. In the selected group attending progressive schools the need for differentiating normal from sub-normal is, naturally, only occasional. The use of standardized tests, however, facilitates the judgment of the ratio between capacity and expression, which is the question uppermost in the teacher's mind. Mental traits, characteristic work habits do not appear in total scores. The psychological examination is treated, therefore, as a controlled laboratory situation in which the child is responding to specific stimuli. A full record is kept, including scoring and behavior, and a stenographic report supplies the conversational background.

These results, together with reports by the staff on the home situation and an organized body of detailed observation records of the child's behavior within the school situation, are pooled at our joint staff meetings. When we have gone as far as we can toward understanding the child and formulating a tentative diagnosis, we settle down to drafting a program of recommendation. When this program has been in effect for a reasonable length of time and the child shows no signs of improvement, he is referred to a psychiatrist or a behavior clinic. At this point, a bulk of careful organized records and a full case history are available to be passed on to the next person who becomes interested in the child's problem.

In the course of the three years during which this work has been going on, many questions have arisen, most of which are stimulating yet defy answer. Our experience has been that joint meetings at which these questions are raised have a clear value for us though, in some instances, they do not lead directly toward the solution of the immediate problem. We have found this an excellent way of keeping alive certain educational queries without which experimentation can become so easily stereotyped. We have found ourselves questioning, for instance, the bias of the progressive educator against standardized psychological tests or, again, stopping to wonder how correct is the thinking of educators who lay such a multitude of wrongs at the door of the home.

In the following pages a few current questions are presented with brief summaries from case studies as illustrations. The summaries as given here describe results from psychological examinations more fully than school activity or home situations, not at all because we consider psychological tests most revealing but rather as a demonstration of how it is possible to use the child's behavior in the psychological laboratory as an integral part of a total behavior analysis. This depends, of course, upon a detailed study of test results, not merely upon a statement of total score and relative ranking.

Is a High Intelligence Quotient
a Guarantee of Successful Nursery School Participation?

The understanding of the individual child would be a simple task if any child who indulged in seriously aggressive sallies against other children, who became a passive onlooker in a busy school world, who could get no real gratification from his work products without first soliciting adult approval or who resisted, seemingly to the point of unreason, the simple routine procedures of collective child life, could be placed consistently either in the low or high register of general intelligence. The facts are against this simple understanding and, indeed, repeated encounters with bright children, unhappy or maladjusted or both, lead one to wonder just how the factor of intelligence does affect the question of adjustability.

Lawrence D. impressed his teacher as a child of keen understanding though she was hard put to substantiate her impression. At the age of three years, four months, most of his school play was at two rather than three year par. His most active interests were baby play patterns such as sucking wash-cloths, playing with doors, throwing things into the toilet, pushing chairs about in front of him, while blocks, paints, clay, a varied assortment of raw materials for constructive and dramatic play, lay inertly by. To Lawrence, school was, presumably, offering a stimulus. Corresponding stimulation in Lawrence was lacking. Children as well as materials were neglected. When Lawrence did make contacts he usually directed himself to adults or, through excessive silliness, giggling and throwing himself about, made a bid for group attention. In contrast to this picture of immature behavior, he managed himself well through all the routines of dressing, undressing, washing, and was less inclined to indulge in babyish silliness while they were in progress.

His teacher's impression of Lawrence's brightness, despite this kind of evidence to the contrary, was based on those rare occasions when he did settle down to some play activity which was up to the group level. At these times he worked constructively and efficiently and did not seem to lack ideas or ways of expressing ideas. These sporadic periods of constructive play were not sufficient, however, to make Lawrence an integral part of the group's activities, and the readiness with which he would slip back into some meaningless form of puttering about enlisted him as a problem in the teacher's mind. He was a problem primarily in terms of himself, not as a source of disturbance to the group. To the teacher and the school, he presented the challenge of a child living below his own limit, missing the opportunity for full growth in the sense that growth involves absorption of and response to experience up to the limit of capacity.

While his play responses were at this low ebb, Lawrence developed a strong disinclination for his school dinners, co-

inciding with growing refusal to eat at home, which had become prominent at an earlier time. A direct attack on the feeding problem proved profitable. Smaller portions, some help in being fed, a little urging and reminding, were successful for only a short period. A definite program was instituted in collaboration with the school physician. Lawrence was to be separated from the other children at meal time, given ample time, congratulated when he completed a meal, fed by his teacher and only gradually weaned from being fed. By the end of the first half of the school year, Lawrence was eating with the children, making no more refusals than is common among them, and no longer being fed.

Psychological examination bore out the teacher's impression of Lawrence's superior capacity even as viewed against the high average of his selected school group. Before he was three and a half years old, Lawrence gave a five-year-old performance on both the Kuhlmann-Binet and Merrill-Palmer scales, giving him an intelligence quotient above 150. His discriminations were unfailing. Differences in weight, size and color were expertly judged. His speedy, efficient, true handling of the materials used in the test bespoke also an immediate sensing of problems and procedures. He was equally at ease with materials and concepts, with form and content, with words and numbers, with present and bygone. His conceptual organization was clear-cut and entirely adequate to his relatively large store of information. He read meanings into pictures: "the maid is cooking dinner." He was quick to respond to comprehension questions: if it is raining when you start to school "you should put on your raincoat;" if you miss your car "you have to go in a new car."

He had a ready imaginative response. Not only did he use the cylinder board as a boat, a common play among the children, but added that it was blowing its whistle because it was getting out. Part of a picture puzzle on its blank side was named doggie. The distant horizon on one of the Binet pictures was identified with New York City's skyline which, in fact, it resembled strikingly. In addition to dramatizing every possible situation, he wove a pleasant rhythmical cadence into many of his responses, often establishing a rhythm which was taken up by the examiner. An experimental attitude toward his own experience was revealed incidentally. In following out the three simultaneous commands of the Binet test, the watch which he had placed on the chair had spun about accidentally just as he was approaching the door to close it. He assumed a causal connection between the spinning of the watch and the closing of the door. There followed a series of experiments in which Lawrence tried to test this assumption. He closed the door; he examined the watch. It had not spun. He got inside the bathroom, closed the door, came out and examined the watch. It had not spun. This went on, as he varied one condition after another, until the conclusion must have seemed clear to him and satisfied his question.

In response to the fact that Lawrence, a child of distinctly superior ability, was in no way using the school situation as a genuine growth opportunity, the suggestion was made in a joint staff meeting that Lawrence be placed with the group of next older children

where the schemes and content of play would be closer to his level of mental ability. Objection was raised by Lawrence's teacher and others who felt that Lawrence could be on a par with older children only in a restricted intellectual sphere. On all other counts he was, in fact, less mature than his mental age or even his chronological age would lead one to expect. His immaturities so clearly suggested the infantile that it was considered essential to gather further information concerning Lawrence's outside relations which might illuminate what unsatisfied need was expressing itself in regressive behavior. A program was planned for increasing contact between home and school, inviting the mother for regular school visits, seeing Lawrence in his home situation at frequent intervals.

If additional information of this kind had indicated a deep underlying cause for Lawrence's emotional immaturity, the school would not have placed him ahead with older children. Such a move might have complicated his emotional situation in relation to his school group at a time when he was proving inadequate to the strain of a relatively simple life. In this case the advice of a specialist would have been in order. If, on the other hand, more contact with the family had indicated the operation of some factor such as misunderstanding on the parents' part as to how to partake in a child's maturing, what to expect and what not to expect, the next step would have been to elucidate this situation for the parents and, at the same time, to place Lawrence ahead with the next older group. A more stimulating school situation, a maturing parent attitude to keep apace of the child's maturing, might have brought Lawrence around to a fuller utilization of his powers.

The question as to whether or not Lawrence's infantilisms were deep-rooted was never fully probed since Lawrence had to be withdrawn from the school when the family moved into the country. The question of placing him ahead would have depended upon this point. Obviously, in Lawrence's case as in most others, there are no set rules to follow. A bright child should not automatically be placed with older, equally bright children. A child's equilibrium depends upon an assortment of variable factors all of which need to be taken into account in trying to adjust any of his difficulties.

Why Do Some Children Stand By and Look On?

It would probably be impossible at the present time to find an opponent to the idea that health in childhood - mental and physical - is synonymous with active participation. The adult may get by in the role of spectator. Not so the child. The child who is willing to stand by and watch worries his mother and distresses his teacher. To the latter it is slight compensation that he may make pungent observations in well-constructed language as he loiters by the side of adults. She is pressed to understand why he cannot share more fully in the life of his peers and investigates possible causes.

During the course of two school years Winifred L. had maintained a distinctly non-participant role. She adjusted easily to the school routines of eating, sleeping, etc., but seemed not to be responding at all to the school opportunities. Materials were treated indifferently and used superficially as compared to other children of her age. She was not developing expressive techniques and only occasionally took part in a bit of domestic dramatic play. She was noticeable in the group for generally slow motion, sluggish responding, and restricted body actions. She waited patiently for any chance to make a contact with an adult, proved herself adept conversationally at an early age but made no move toward the children. When at last, after an entirely uneventful social history, she did build up a relation with another child, it was in a subsidiary role as the slavey of a little girl whose capacity was much inferior to her own. Beyond her social inactivity and lack of interest in the kind of experience presented by the school situation, Winifred could not be considered a problem. There were no attendant behavior signs bespeaking an undercurrent of emotional strife and her easy manner with adults, strange as well as familiar, denied any assumption of excessive timidity.

A psychological examination at the age of four years and two months proved fruitful in trying to understand what kind of person Winifred was and in what kind of experience she could find gratification. Her mental age was almost two years in advance of her chronological age on the Kuhlmann-Binet scale - intelligence quotient above 140 - and eight months in advance on the Merrill-Palmer scale. She had a clear drive toward generalizing. Her responses to questions put to her indicated this at once. She defined a chair as "a furniture" and though the questions on differences were clearly a new kind of problem, only half grasped, she managed to corral her experience and make appropriate distinctions, as her replies indicate.

Examiner: What is the difference between wood and glass?

Winifred: Wood makes fire and the glass drinks water.

Examiner: What is the difference between a stone and an egg?

Winifred: An egg breaks when you eat it and a stone when you bang it on the hammer, it breaks.

In describing the pictures, she spontaneously included imagined relations as well as perceptual impressions. To quote: "A little boy sitting on the floor and his mummie wants to make his dinner. He wants to play with all the toys. There's a chair but he doesn't want to sit on it. Why doesn't his mother put him up on the chair?" That she was not always walking on solid ground was obvious in instances in which her inclination to generalize deteriorated into an abandoned traffic in words and loosely related meanings. An illustration follows:

Examiner: What is a horse?

Winifred: A horse is for riding. A taxi could go faster than a horse, because a horse stops every minute and a taxi doesn't.

Examiner: Is that why?
Winifred: Because there are not so much people.
Examiner: Where are there not so much people?
Winifred: Some is asleep and some is sick.
Examiner: Where aren't there so many people?
Winifred: Out on the street. They're home.

Another special facility in Winifred's make-up came to light in the course of examination and checked with incidental notes in school records. She seemed to have an unusually strong kinaesthetic sensitivity, expressed in outstanding proficiency on such tests as comparing weights, imitation of tapping, paper folding, as though the feeling of a motion or an imagined motion made a deep impression upon her. In this connection, it was observed that her general slowness in motor responding seemed to be due to an inclination to linger on each motion as it was performed rather than to any ineptness of coordination or delay between stimulus and response. In indicating left she inclined toward the whole left side of her body instead of using the common hand gesture. On a trip to the cellar to watch coal being shoveled into the furnace, she was observed nodding her head back and forth in unison with the motions of the person shoveling the coal.

A nursery is characteristically full of action. When we think of a child of such keen kinaesthetic sensitivity in such a situation, the possibility comes to mind that her own overt motor responsiveness may be inhibited as a result of the multitude of stimulations present. This possibility was strengthened by reports of much more active and rapid responding in situations outside of school.

What may be considered Winifred's talents, namely, her conceptual interest and her tendency to get motor experience kinaesthetically, were neither of them likely to facilitate participation in a nursery school group. Yet the evidence that her interest in generalizing was often uncontrolled was an indication that Winifred needed just what nursery school has to offer - opportunity to experience directly on a child's level and to enrich each growing concept with a mass of perceptual background. Practically, it was the school's problem to make this a real instead of a theoretical opportunity for Winifred by easing her out of her role of non-participant. One method by which this might be tried would take its cue from the outline of her motor make-up sketched above and accordingly provide for periods of active play in smaller groups of perhaps only two or three children.

Study of this child's problem, at this stage, threw the burden of work back on the school. There was no indication that other specialists needed to be called in until the school had done its job of adapting procedure to individual need in so far as that is possible. Adaptation of procedure includes of course not only arrangement of routine and group play, but also change of attitude and emphasis on the teacher's part where called for.

What Is a Confused Pre-School Child?

As compared to the later ages of developing childhood, the pre-school child has only a narrow circle of relations to keep in order. It is interesting and surprising to realize how wide is the range of individual differences in the clarity and in the degree of organization which the children sustain in their understanding of their limited experience. Adults who live with these young children at home or at school come to have a rule-of-thumb expectation as to what they will do. The school finds it important to formulate, in its own mind, legitimate expectations, in terms of most common behavior, for various age levels. Frequently, a child falls short of fulfilling these expectations and gives the impression of being confused. The summary that follows describes briefly the behavior characteristics of one such child at the pre-school level.

Certain qualities of Bernard's behavior deeply impressed the teacher of the three-year-old group, of which he was a member. He could keep up a normal amount of activity without appearing to be doing anything. He could aggressively attack other children without seeming to be involved at all. He wore a wandering, staring manner at all times, no matter how he was occupying himself and though, in a sense, he was partaking of school life, he seemed scarcely to be participating in his own reactions to the people and things around him. This detachment, on the one hand, seemed almost to be of a piece with an emotional derangement and, on the other, seemed to fit in with a lack of awareness of relations, an inability to react to anything but a very restricted content.

Bernard used materials in a way that suggested a two-year-old more than a three-year-old. He handled objects such as covers, dolls, trains, and trailed them about for short periods and quickly exchanged one for the other. When he became interested in blocks, it was to pick them up or to pile them formlessly. Clay and paints were for messing, and there was nowhere any evidence that Bernard had graduated from that baby stage of exploring all things as things to that stage in early childhood in which some things are recognized as tools, and techniques elaborated accordingly. He was manipulating materials, not expressing interest in meaning or form by means of them.

Bernard was constantly doing the unexpected, not in the sense that the imaginative child of three years carries his experience one step further but in the sense that the unaware child of three years fails to take certain minimal relations for granted. He dragged wagons upside down, he used wheelbarrows for piling rather than loading, he poured pebbles down his clothes. He was compliant about the routines of school procedure but could not always be counted on to carry these through. As like as not he would forget what he started out to do or take directions literally, completely misunderstanding their purpose. For instance, though he was willing to comply with the rule for wiping paint brushes, there is a record of Bernard's running up to his teacher, paint dripping down the handle of the brush and on down his arm to the elbow, exclaiming, "Look, I wipe!

it." A record of Bernard at a later date reveals again an unusual degree of automatic behavior when, in taking off his own coat, he tried to unbutton the ornamental row of buttons. The failure to get results did not check him and he continued his fruitless attempts until given further directions, with which he then complied pleasantly.

Psychological examination clearly eliminated a possible explanation of Bernard's behavior in terms of inferior intelligence. At 41 months he scored a mental age of 49 months on two scales - intelligence quotient of 120 - placing him above the average mentality for the total population and only a little below the average of the selected children comprising his school group. The test situation is, in many ways, less taxing to a mentality such as Bernard's than is the freer school situation inasmuch as the form and procedure are set for the child. Bernard was weakest in those tests in which it is necessary for the child to understand general procedure in order to respond successfully, and scored most easily where the test is a simple give-and-take between the child and examiner, such as telling sex, repeating numbers, telling what to do when it rains, pointing out similarity in simple forms.

The quality of Bernard's test responses shared the characteristics of his total school behavior. There was an outstanding immaturity in the methods he used. In comparing weights he made the babyish error of choosing a constant position. He perseverated his ideas. Having defined a fork as something to eat with, he defined all the other words that followed in terms of food; he used a Part 1 response in Part 2 of the Pictures from Memory Test though it was entirely inappropriate in the new context. On the form boards he reacted to difficulty in matching by trying to push pieces into the wrong recesses or by removing pieces already correctly placed. Failure to take certain simple relations for granted appeared in the testing in several striking instances. Having matched the dissected parts of the Manikin he tried to stand it up, disregarding or unaware of the physical impossibility of making unconnected parts stand as though they were a single object. Again, upon noticing a woman washing windows in a neighboring apartment house, he commented, "I see Daniel's teacher." The association of seeing a woman near-by and knowing that somewhere near-by was a woman who was his brother's teacher was not inhibited by the attendant facts that the next building, though near-by, is not the same building and that teachers are not usually engaged in washing windows.

In the case of Bernard, it was important to make an attack on two fronts at once. The home situation which, for lack of space, cannot be discussed here, was probably contributing to the child's lack of organization and actual confusion and might yield to the school's influence, were it well-directed. The school situation called for distinct treatment of Bernard as an individual: his range of experience was to be limited to a minimum for a child in his age group by cutting down participation in trips, etc.; he was to be dealt with verbally only when more graphic action was impossible; when dealt with verbally, communication had to be kept simple and specific; he was to be helped explicitly to comprehend the everyday relations of his everyday living.

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