Vol. 44, No. 3 March, 1970

CONTENTS

ADVERTISERS

EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED CHILDREN IN THE REGULAR CLASSROOM

G. Bunch

It is difficult to prepare an accurate survey on the prevalence of emotionally disturbed children in the school population but a minimum of one per cent definitely suffer sufficient disturbance to render normal classroom progress impossible, while at least three to four per cent would derive benefit from extensive psychiatric services. One study indicates that ten per cent of the school population requires aid, but only one point six per cent receive it; that the under fifteens are the fastest growing group in need of help; that the most ignored group are the adolescents. Morse[1], in quoting this study, makes the point that most emotionally disturbed children remain in regular classrooms without specially trained teachers.

As Morse has indicated the under fifteens provide the bulk of those demonstrating emotional problems in the public school system. A study[2] undertaken in Rhode Island indicates that fewer children at the extreme ends of a scale from five to eighteen years suffer from this handicap. The greatest number is concentrated at age fifteen. Evidence suggests that relatively few are diagnosed at the extremes since the younger present greater difficulties for successful behavioural assessment while the older have learned to modify their behaviour, or have left school. This study and an interesting study by Tennebaum[3] support Morse in pinpointing the greatest problem in the upper elementary and junior high grades. Tennebaum found six per cent of sixth and seventh graders hated school and the most intense hatred was demonstrated by the group designated as emotionally disturbed by teachers.

Identification poses a major problem to teachers and administrators. Though the overt, unacceptable behaviour of many children identifies them as emotionally disturbed, there exists a significant number of children whose covert behaviour shields them from identification. Many teachers are not aware of the various adjustments children make to their difficulties and may consider the withdrawn or chronically ill child naturally quiet or susceptible to illness, and the healthily exuberant child emotionally disturbed. Degree of involvement is difficult for a layman to assess even when a child is correctly assessed as disturbed.

Most teachers would find Blackham's[4] definition of emotional disturbance easy to comprehend and useful as a guide in identification. To Blackham a child is emotionally maladjusted when he is "so thwarted in satisfaction of his needs for safety, affection, acceptance and self-esteem that he is unable intellectually to function effectively, cannot adapt to reasonable requirements of social regulation and convention, or is so plagued with inner conflict, anxiety and guilt that he is unable to perceive reality clearly or meet the ordinary demands of the environment in which he lives."

One must realize that emotional disturbance is a continuum and every child has a unique position on this continuum. Most children present acceptable behaviour at least part of the time and at other times present a myriad of cues to their degree and type of problem. When unacceptable behaviour is being presented most teachers would find it useful to utilize Cleugh's triad of intensity, frequency and duration as indicators of relative severity. Teachers

may also investigate the child's ability to socialize and to feel concern for others since diminished ability in these areas has been found to be a fairly accurate indicator of emotional disturbance.

Even if one is able to identify emotional disturbance and to quantify its severity in an approximate manner, only symptoms are being assessed. This point underlines one of the great problems facing the classroom teacher. Should he treat the symptom or probe for the cause of deviation? It is my opinion that the latter is not within the capability of most teachers while, in many cases concentration on symptoms will alleviate causes.

Role of the Teacher — theoretical view

Modern theory has progressed from the belief that the emotionally disturbed should be treated by medical personnel only. There has been a realization that the school is able to provide a base for prevention and that the teacher augments the work of others. Many educators and medical personnel have concluded that the teacher must take an active part in the total treatment picture. From modern theory has sprung the concept of a new role. This may offer tremendous promise for the future. The therapeutic-teacher trained to understand and fuse the basic elements of pedagogy and dynamic psychology may possess the ability to note the symptoms of emotional disturbance but bypass these and respond to the underlying causes. He could be an intrinsic part of a highly skilled team poised to combat emotional disturbance where it is most evident, the market place of the school. Various theorists have studied classroom tone, curriculum, structure, play and motivation with a view to training such personnel but few actual training programs are in existence.

Practical View

Most emotionally disturbed children remain in classrooms taught by ordinary teachers with a modicum of training in the area of emotional disturbance. Often these teachers are not available for extensive training. A realistic view of the situation must be taken and two areas of training provided: basic philosophy on the role and function of teacher and child in the school and basic intervention techniques to cope with unacceptable behaviour. In-service or summer school training could be provided with a minimum of difficulty and time loss while doing much to prepare the teacher to see the emotionally disturbed child as a true student but one whose behavioural aberrations may necessitate special techniques.

Most authorities believe that a teacher has definite beneficial effect on a disturbed child if classroom conditions are such that the child feels secure in expressing himself to a person with whom he identifies and who will not react negatively to his self-expression. It must be pointed out to teachers that a disturbed child has achieved low levels of socialization but that he "can be assisted in modifying his behaviour by experiencing and accepting, predictable, and safe relationship with a helping person."[5] Instruction, as the authors of "Taxonomy of Educational Goals: Affective Domain" stress, is a social process involving a teacher and child and minimal mastery of social skills is required for progress in the instructional process.[6]

Minimal mastery only is required though many teachers mistakenly assume that a good deal of mastery is necessary. They fail to appreciate that progress need not mean improvement in test scores or apparent reading ability but may mean one less disturbance per week, or aggressive behaviour directed against a wall rather than a person. Bruner whose studies indicate that any child at any age can learn any subject in an intellectually honest form would support this "thin edge of the wedge" theory. It would be rewarding for most teachers of emotion-

ally disturbed children to become familiar with Bruner who stresses the importance of the school and the teacher in the life of any child. The concept that "Intellectual activity anywhere is the same, whether at the frontier of knowledge or in the third grade classroom"[7] is intrinsic to education of the emotionally disturbed and can be a bulwark to those involved with the educational and life problems of a disturbed child.

One point of basic philosophy should be made. The teacher needs psychological support to grapple with the problems of emotional disturbance. A revitalized well of knowledge drawing on the beliefs of our leading theorists can provide this support even if the teacher does not fully understand much of the revelant theory. There is a need to realize that others feel such children can be educated and that one is not alone.

Interventions must be learned.

An intervention is action by the teacher designed to reduce unacceptable behaviour while reinforcing acceptable behaviour. The child's attention is focused internally through the use of external media with the goal of acceptable interaction of child and environment. It is probable that the teacher will need to use a variety of intervention techniques discarding some, retaining others and introducing still others. Outlined below are some main categories of techniques though the list cannot be considered complete since the teacher will create an extensive repertoire based on the needs of each child. A wide variety of intervention techniques must be available or the teacher will feel powerless to cope with various manifestations of emotional disturbance after he has exhausted his personal repertoire.

Pre-interventions

These interventions are planned before the child experiences difficulty with a situation and are designed to eradicate or reduce disturbance arousing and to reinforce positive stimuli in the instructional environment.

a) Individual tutoring to provide personal support with academic difficulties and close personal contact with the teacher. One danger is that the disturbed child will react unfavourably while waiting his turn to enjoy the attention of the teacher.

b) Multi-sensory or multi-machine approaches are designed to involve the whole child in the instructional situation and to allow him to lead from his strength. These techniques reduce personal contact for those who find it abrasive while continuing to emphasize learning.

c) Discussions alone and in groups offer opportunities for the child to express himself to a trusted individual on a one-to-one basis, or in the relatively anonymous to others with similar problems. It is important that such discussions do not include ineffective moralizing and do not degenerate into pseudo-therapy.

d) Physical activity is often a source of catharsis. Group work, projects, experimentation with various media, construction of playhouses, participation in games and useful employment offer physical release, social experience and continued learning. Activity must not be planned haphazardly but designed to draw out strengths and to bolster weaknesses. In the hands of a thoughtful teacher activity is a most useful tool.

e) Operant conditioning techniques are useful and, if one can see their over-all utilization, applicable in the ordinary classroom. A red check mark for correct work, a refusal to attend to unacceptable verbalization, a smile for a good attempt and other such minor teacher supports and disciplines may be termed part of general operant conditioning of a social and academic nature. The writer does not feel children should work towards a candy or chocolate bar though these might be used on occasion to reward or treat all

class members. Individual treats make the child stand out as different. It is important that the teacher be consistent in the use of operant conditioning techniques if they are to be selected since inconsistent application will destroy their value and lead to greater frustration.

f) Structured lessons and structured class areas are often supportive of acceptable behaviour. Some children react well if they know the day's timetable before school begins, if they know verbal questions will follow silent reading, if they have a place for their books after each lesson or if they are able to use a carel for some activities. It should be stressed that structure techniques should not result in undue attention from others since the effect may be the reverse of that desired.

g) Learning disabilities may add to the problems of many emotionally disturbed children. Proper programming for their mediation should be instituted but care should be taken not to emphasize disabilities peculiar to one child.

Post-interventions

a) Corporal discipline is rightly frowned upon in most educational jurisdictions. The writer cannot see its positive use for any child considered emotionally disturbed since it is, in itself, a traumatically anti-social and brutal act. This intervention technique, favoured by many, is mentioned here only to emphasize its negative aspects.

b) Isolation can be an anti-social punitive act but in many instances can be therapeutically positive. Removal from some situations for a period of time will calm a child and give the teacher an opportunity of reassuring the child. There may be need for a carel to let the child carry on without distraction. Some children benefit from being removed from the classroom, allowed to sit in a comfortable area and to return to the classroom when they wish. This technique is usually consistently successful in producing significant periods of acceptable behaviour upon return to the classroom and this control can be ascribed to the child's internalization of his own desire to return to the class rather than remain out of contact.

c) Psychological removal in which the teacher ignores unacceptable behaviour is often an effective intervention. In this technique the teacher does not react to anything except proper behaviour. Some feel that unacceptable behaviour should be followed by a period of ignoring even during times of acceptable behaviour. This may be queried since it appears to be essentially anti-social and may reinforce the child's feelings of inadequacy and pose problems of identification with the teacher.

d) Discussions of what led to an outburst, what the child did and what occurred afterwards are used by some teachers. This can be positive if the child initiates such discussion and if the child does not appear to be seeking proof of his badness or wickedness. Such discussion with a trusted person can be cleansing to the mind and tension-releasing.

Emotionally disturbed children of varying degrees of involvement are in normal classes and are being treated and taught by teachers untrained to meet their needs. The day when therapeutic-teachers are in sufficient supply to meet the demand may never arrive. We must do our best to support our teachers now since the children are with us now. This support should be of a dual nature-theoretical and practical. Though the teacher's problems will not be solved, they will be reduced. If we begin as outlined above, the problems, though still present, will be

clearer and teachers will have some idea of whether they can be successful to any degree and how they might work towards success.

REFERENCES

1. Cruickshank, Wm. M. (Ed.), Education of Exceptional Children and Youth, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1958, 1967, p. 573.
2. Ibid., p. 573.
3. Ibid., p. 577.
4. Blackham, Garth J., The Deviant Child in the Classroom, Wadsworth Publishing Co., Belmont, California, p. 73.
5. Ibid., p. 85.
6. Krathwohl, Bloom and Masia, Taxonomy of Educational Goals, Affective Domain, David McKay Co., New York, 1956, 1967, pp. 29-33.
7. Bruner, Jerome S., The Process of Education, Vintage Books, Toronto, 1960, p. 14.

Other Works Consulted:

Haring, N. G. and Phillips, E. L., Educating Emotionally Disturbed Children, McGraw-Hill, Toronto, 1962.

Morse, Wm. C., Intervention Techniques for the Classroom Teacher of the Emotionally Disturbed, Educational Programming for Emotionally Disturbed Children, ed. Knoblock, P., Syracuse, University Press, Syracuse, 1964, pp. 29-41.

Bruner, Jerome S., On Knowing, Belknap Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1966.

Mr. Bunch is the Assistant Superintendent of the Ontario School for the Deaf at Milton, Ontario.

CLASSROOM TIPS

If you have an hyperactive, short attention span, highly distractible youngster in your classroom who is a handicap to the other children as well as to himself because of his fidgety behaviour then do the following:

Create an "office" for him. You can do this by re-arranging your classroom furniture, especially if you have a three-drawer filing cabinet which makes a good wall. Three sides of a large refrigerator crate painted a soothing colour is useful. If you have a handy industrial arts teacher, a handy husband, a handy parent or are handy yourself then build a hinged, three-sided sturdy cubicle about six feet high. A desk and a chair should comfortably disappear into it.

However, there is a definite philosophy in its use:

1) The child's parents must know your plan of action and agree with it.
2) There must be nothing punitive about the placement. This is Johnny's office which helps him to be less restless so that he can get on with his work. NEVER place another child there as a punishment (however tempted) because then in the minds of Johnny and the class that is the place you are put when you are "bad".
3) The office must be within arm's length of the teacher and not placed in the far corner of the room.
4) The teacher must be able to see Johnny, but he should not be able to see the other children.
5) This is not a place of banishment. He can come out for group activities, but if he is disruptive then he must return.
6) The ultimate aim is to teach Johnny self-control. He can use it on a difficult day, and he can discard it when he can manage 100% of the time as a member of the whole class.

JOAN KERSHAW