Research on Mental Retardation : Teaching the Mentally Retarded

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I. — Focus

I will not likely forget a childhood experience, memorable not only because it is so well remembered but because, it was the very first time he thought about language as being something other than words. It was the first time this child began to understand something he does not yet fully comprehend; explicitly, he was made aware that human beings are circumscribed and bound, as well as freed, by their language, which is but a little more than the verbal-motor expression of one's totality. Awesome stuff for a nine-year-old, especially one who was neither a prodigy nor expected by his teachers at the time to amount to very more than a « middle level » student who might, just might, gain admission to City College.

What was the experience ? Someone, visiting our home, was heard telling my parents that a mutual acquaintance decided to stand for public office and, in order to influence public opinion, he bought a newspaper. Not for days later did this puzzled child understand that statement. Not for days later could be comprehend how making a nickel purchase — something the boy had done himself many times — could in any way influence public opinion, much less help anyone to be elected to public office.

Not merely children, or naive or stupid adults, live in worlds that are circumscribed by their language, by the metaphors they employ, by their understanding of the idioms of their culture, by what they know to be — or think they know to be — the « rules of the game ». Scientists, to, are culture-bound as well as time-bound, grounded by their experiences and, undoubtedly, victimized as well as enriched by them.

Stated another way, all words, and the language that words form, have antecedents. If there are no words to describe a thought, or a belief, or a wish, then not only do those become unthinkable ideas, but

impossible ideas. Add to that our peculiar human frailty for exhibiting either thoughtless contempt or unreserved awe for what we don't understand. Add to that the probability that, even the best of us, rather than struggle to fathom the complex and difficult, will wallow pridefully in our disdain or worship of the incomprehensible. Is it any wonder, then, that all too many of us in most instances — and all of us in some instances — search for guidance, for read maps, for *a priori* solutions, for the opportunity not to have to think, to struggle, to develop a unique solution, rather than to implement the standard solution. Possibly, the rarest gift, that sometimes curse, of all is independence of mind.

Like the Emperor's clothes, for many years research of the issues discussed in this paper preceded along experimental, quasi-experimental, and other traditional lines of investigation. And, inspite of the null hypothesis consistently obtaining, inspite of our inability to either learn very much or help very much — not necessarily related matters — we continue to apply traditional approaches to the study of very complex field problems, invariably with very unsatisfactory results.

The problem of relevancy of research methodology has been particularly troublesome in the broad field of research on children with special needs (1). With some rare exceptions, research on people with special needs has followed traditional lines of experimentation, survey analysis, and test construction and validation. With rare exceptions, participant observation procedures, situation analyses, historical research, autobiographies, and process analyses have not been applied to those populations or problems associated with them.

As we had said elsewhere, the above remarks are not meant to suggest antagonism to the value of formal experimentation. Our concern is with the extent to which traditional models have determined the kind of research that is being conducted — rather than, conversely, models determined by the nature of problems studied. Further, we are concerned that such traditional research models have also determined the kinds of independent variables (i.e. sources of intervention and treatment) that are selected for study and influence the scaling of independent variation. To state this in another way, researchers in the field of special education are confronted by the problems connected with the assignment of children to treatments and, to further complicate this, of teachers to treatments. This problem becomes formidable when the researcher attempts to effectively deal with triads of teachers, children, and methods. Therefore, when one designs an experiment that includes children (who vary) and teachers and, possibly, some other adults (who vary) in classrooms, the notion of homogeneity of variance that assumes there is a similarity of the way a treatment occurs in different classes with different teachers and different children is questionable. Traditional research strategy in education is based on the belief that the method of teaching (or the curriculum organization) is the most significant independent variable. In such studies, the kinds of children and the personalities of the teachers are considered

(1) The remainder of this introduction is a very brief summarization of our chapter « Teaching the Mentally Retarded », published in the *Second Handbook for Research on Teaching*, edited by Robert Travers, Rand McNally, 1973.

to be peripheral to the experimental comparison being made. Therefore, controls are employed to equalize the other potentially independent variables. One objective of Part III is to present a rationale that is a reversal of the above example. By this we will discuss the possibilities and values that may obtain by assigning specifically — for the purposes of field research on teaching — major independent variables which relate directly to teachers and children, and intervening variables which relate to method and curriculum content.

For example, much attention has been given to the proposition that the teacher-child relationship is critical to the teaching process, suggesting the importance of not only the « how » of teaching, but the relationship that develops between the teacher, on the one hand, and both individual children and the total group, on the other (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1966). An example of this phenomenon is the so-called *Hawthorne Effect*. By *Hawthorne Effect* we mean the change which occurs in an experimental group as a consequence of its participation in the experiment rather than as a consequence of the treatment itself. In fact, not only does the Hawthorne Effect persistently appear in psychological and educational experiments but seems to be more consistently related to improved performance than any particular method or curriculum. Therefore, the excitement generated by a research project (i.e. the « hawthorne Effect ») is an experimental side effect that appears to have more research significance than so-called main effects. Consequently, one assumption the researcher should consider is that something like the « Hawthorne Effect » is necessary to the development of a significant interaction. Yet another way of stating this is to specifically design *Hawthorne Effects* (one example may be to assure teachers that children can change under stipulated conditions) as important components of educational research.

Although we believe that something akin to the « Hawthorne » is necessary, we do not believe that, in itself, such an effect is sufficient. There are other questions to be answered. How do children spend their time in class-rooms ? How do they attend to what is going on ? How is their attention monitored ? How are they dealt with when they succeed and when they fail ? What kinds of questions do they ask ? What kinds of questions are asked of them ? Problems such as these — and a good many more are concerned with life in and out of classroom settings — must be studied if we are to learn more about behavior and how it can be modified. Yet, rarely do we pose such problems; rarely do we judge a teacher's effectiveness, for example, by other than an estimate of her acquisition of knowledge concerning her « subject » or her « teaching ».

In summary, the rationale for this section suggests the development of research strategies that are in harmony with discovering and evaluation what actually occurs in natural settings, be they classrooms, clinics, institutions, homes, or neighborhoods. Possibly, this orientation to research offers a solution to what Blackman (1969) described as the serious and ambivalent dichotomy between those who prefer experimentation as the method of proof and those who view education essentially as an art from, one which could lose its color and vitality if the movement to fractionate the teacher-pupil interaction achieves its apparent goal.

II. — Goodness of Fit or Matching

In numerous ways, individuals function differently. Research attempts to record these *ways* and *explain* the *ways*. For some researchers, description is an end in itself. However, the history of social science has, at least, one certainty about it; description always leads from and to something. There is no « unbiased description ». For example, when several groups are given IQ tests, almost invariably they will have different averages. Are these objectively derived differences ? We believe not ! A good deal went into the development of the IQ test, selection of items, and procedures for administering the test. The testing format is, itself, a very special structure for communication. Tests are validated in specific ways using specific criteria. They are developed to do *something*. The narrower that *something* is, the easier it is to validate the test; however, the test becomes more biased when used with other groups at other times.

We often talk about variability. What makes the greatest difference ? Is it heredity or environment ? Is it school or home ? Latin or home economics ? Discipline or therapy ? If a child has a problem, what (or who) had the most to do with it ? What is the main, most significant, most pervasive cause ? What is the best, very best, way of undoing the problem ? Does the answer to the first question (cause) lead to the answer to the second (undoing) ? Does what is wrong indicate what should be done ?

Eventually the question is : What should we do ? And, how do we obtain that answer ? Does it depend on who does it, or where it is done, or how much time there is ? It is wishful thinking to expect that there is a clear relationship between what exists, why it exists, and what to do about it. Useful reductions are impossible, at least in the usual sense. Prescriptive education is a reduction. Therapeutis education is a reduction. Montessori, Frostig, Kephart, Cruichshank, Bereiter, A.S. Neill, all offer reductions. To a degree, what we say about reductions is a reduction; hence the tautology of it all and, if we're not careful, the self-inflicted delusionary trap. In this book, as exemplified by the chapters in Part III, we have attempted to discuss the potential dangers of any reduction — be it « theirs » or ours. Simply stated, reductionists say *this* is what to do with children who present or behave in *this* manner. Whatever *this* is, there is the assumption that *this* can be identified, described and distinguished from something other than *this*.

What contributes to difference ? Some children are poor, come from families who have inadequate housing, food, medical services, space — are crowded into cities (or rurally separated) — and they do not do well in school ! Or on tests ! Or on the cello ! Often, they are migrant or immigrants. And, they do not speak Standard English. They are different. They do not fit well.

A lot of confusion exists about what people should do, how they should do it, and when it should be done. Who are to judge ? Are the judges' values my values ? Or yours ? How can it all be put together : poverty, delinquency, migration, retardation, language, values, disability, learning ? Or, can't it ? Is it psychology, sociology, anthropology, epistemology ? Some individuals in some groups do not fit. The first

problem is to decide about fit : individuals who do not fit, groups that do not fit, or individuals who do not fit groups that do not fit.

There are several differences to being an individual who does not fit (or is not well matched) rather than being in a group that does not fit (or is not matched). For example, the new field of learning disabilities has epitomized the Individual-no-match (Blatt, 1969) : Find out what is wrong, then treat it. The patient will subsequently get better. Mental retardation has always been in the Individual-no-match category. Unfortunately, this was a strategic error and interferes with progress in our field. For example, the Black population of the United States may be an illustration of an Individual-no-match category that did not begin to move out of a repressive society until they developed Black Power and Pride — i.e. until they assumed a Group-no-fit strategy.

III. — To Summarize and Conclude

The literature in our field indicates that the preponderance of published research is experimental. Most studies of teaching have used traditional designs, whether they were efficacy studies, follow-up studies of children in special and regular classes, studies of different methodological approaches, or studies of different curriculum approaches.

We believe there are more appropriate ways to study teaching-learning in classroom or tutorial situations. However, it is well known that researchers engage not what they want to do but what they are able to do, not in what is important but what is possible, not in what is risky but what is safe and gives assurance of completion. People do what can be supported and most of us engage ourselves in activities that are comfortable and appreciated by others. Possibly, the most accurate judgement we can make about research in special education now being published is that this is what the people in the field want or, possibly, there is not anything else known that they can or wish to substitute for their current mode of activity.

We conclude that :

1. There is nothing inherent in disability to produce handicap, i.e. a belief in one's incompetency. Further it is not the primary responsibility of the behavorial sciences to determine the validity of the aforementioned statement, but to make it valid. We have supported far too many studies purporting to demonstrate differences between groups of the disorders of one child in contrast with another. All these years, we should have promoted and encouraged research that sought to make it come true that a child would learn after participation in a special program or curriculum.

2. The above leads directly to a second recommendation, viz., the study of particular methods, for the purpose of demonstrating their efficiency, is rather fruitless and whatever is demonstrated will eventually be contradicted by subsequent research. Such « all or nothing » studies of methodologies prove little. By « all or nothing », we mean studies that compare the efficacy of one method with that of another or compare the superiority of one type of individual with that of

another (2). As methods do not exist outside of psychological-educational setting, and as they are implemented by unique groups of human beings, only a naive researcher could conclude that the demonstrated superiority of his method has direct and specific transferability to other educational settings. Our research preference is to study children, and how they change, in different educational environments. We believe it is more defensible, and will make greater difference, to generalize about children interacting with each other and with adults in situations than it is to generalize about procedures. It is from evaluations of varieties of methods, with varieties of children in more or less formal and informal settings, utilizing teachers with heterogeneous backgrounds, that hypotheses will be generated that will lead to viable theories concerning human development and learning. It appears to us that, in this kind of strategy, theory construction shifts from methodological concerns to those involving human interactive concerns.

We have attempted to discuss a relatively unpopular position among researchers, a position that assumes that human research should not be an activity that is separated from values and prejudices about people. Further, we believe that it is impossible for the researcher to separate completely his beliefs from his research activities, even if he makes deliberate efforts in that direction. Therefore, research with so-called disabled persons should proceed, first, from a statement of values, then to an intervention and evaluation, with careful efforts to explicate the former, rather than to submerge it in contrived research designs that merely conceal such biases.

What is our bias ? Put as simply as possible, we believe that capacity is a function of practice and training; e.g., intelligence is educable. People *can* change. And, as we have said earlier, it is a task of researchers, as it is *the* task of all clinicians, in the ultimate sense it is our *only* mission.

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(2) Or, as Campbell and Stanley (1963) incisively concluded, « ... we must increase our time perspective, and recognize that continuous, multiple experimentation is more typical of science than once-and-for-all definitive experiments... we should not expect that « crucial experiments » which pit opposing theories will be likely to have clear-cut outcomes » (p. 3).

On the other hand, we are not ready to suggest that there is *nothing but* uniqueness in an educational setting. There must be possibilities for building generalizations for, if « knowledge » is an objective, we must be concerned with the degrees of non-uniqueness. Unfortunately, as we stated above, the numerous dimensions of child-teacher interactions have been neglected and, consequently, hardly understood.