

## VILLAGES IN OUR FIELD

Burton Blatt  
Dean and Centennial Professor  
School of Education  
Syracuse University

### The Past-The Future

In January 1981, Phi Delta Kappa published a special 75th anniversary issue on education's heritage and its future. It was a mixed treat for this writer to read about these versions of the past and speculations about the future for education. Probably, most readers will "believe" more of the history here than the prophecy, but it's probable that both are flawed, slanted, prejudiced, inaccurate. Nevertheless, it remains "fun" to look at old pictures and conjure up what "really" happened "then"---and to think with the philosophers, the psychologists, the educationists, and the futurists as they conjure up the next society. Shane (1981) surveyed the opinions of curriculum professors and nominated a hundred publications issued since 1906 which appeared to have influenced the shape of educational practice in America. At the top of the list we find: books by Ralph Tyler and John Dewey (of course); Maslow's work on motivation and personality; Bloom et al.'s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives; the NEA report on reorganizing the secondary schools, books by Kilpatrick, Havighurst, Thorndike, William James, Bruner, Counts, Whitehead, Piaget, Jersild, Carl Rogers, Gesell, Conant; and books by Coleman and the newer educational heroes of the 70's and 80's.

In that special issue, there is but little mention of works having to do with special education. Terman's revision of the Binet-Simon intelligence scales makes the "top twenty". Of course, Skinner and his students had a great deal to do with rethinking and reshaping training for the severely mentally retarded. The Supreme Court *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision and the aforementioned works by Coleman are closely related to our conceptualization of the problem of mild disability. And of course, Arthur Jensen, John Holt, Rudolph Flesch and a few others noted did work which bears on our field. But, without stretching logic or knowledge, there's little here directly relevant to this field. Stated another way, as proposed by informed educators the list of "significant writings" that have shaped American school curricula in this century has no room for the contributions of Wallin, Ingrams, Cruickshank, Hungerford, Kirk, Sarason, and the many others honored in special education.

In another article in this exceedingly interesting anniversary edition, Franklin Parker reviewed the "Ideas that Shaped American Schools" (1981).

Parker's nominations include: The McGuffey Readers; Abraham Flexner's Reform of American Medical Education; Terman's Measurement of Intelligence; the works of Counts, Bruner, Coleman, Skinner, Dewey (of course, of course!); and a few others. There are also articles in this special issue which deal with: occupational education, (but not germane to special education, such as Hungerford's Occupational Education) Indian education, conflicts between private and public schools, how well students do in various parts of the country, who the young leaders are in American education, who the pioneers are, what our future looks like in terms of curricula for the next century,

what our future looks like in terms of the new technology, what our future looks like in terms of strategic planning, and what our future demands of the field of education. Back and forth the authors go--examining history and predicting the future. They ponder the historic Brown decisions, and the intended and unintended consequences of it. They examine again the Scopes trial--what it meant then, and what it means now in light of moral and other majorities. They appear disturbed about the campus revolutions during the Vietnam crisis, while some of us worry today about campus silence in light of world hunger and possible atomic holocaust.

What is most striking about this comprehensive special issue, was the almost seemingly deliberate avoidance of disability, "difference", handicap. We in the field of special education have developed the idea that everyone in society worries about the disabled the way we worry about the disabled. But the truth may be that few people actually worry about these people (despite considerable superficial general consciousness raising during recent years). Consequently, we may have more to worry about than even we think is necessary. We may have more to worry about than even we think is desirable.

### Russian Villages

The idea of segregated programs and institution (and their permutations) as analog to the Vietnam War keeps intruding into my more optimistic nature. Another analogy to mull about is the field itself as analogy to a Russian Village--something which appears to be substantial only from afar, but is merely a temporary superficial structure. Of course, there is a paradox, the

obverse of the Russian Village; we who are closest to the field of special education may be the last to know that it's no more than a Russian Village, one set up to mislead the people. By this I mean that, if our field is a Russian Village, only those of us in it will really know it. However, if it is a Russian Village, many of those who will be the last to want to know it (that is, be the last to admit it) will also be people in the field. Unfortunately, most everyone else either won't know, won't want to know, or won't care—even if he or she knows.

There is still another question to be asked beyond whether the field of special education is or isn't a Russian Village or whether our institutional system is or isn't another Vietnam. Is there merit to what we do? How do we answer that question? Do we ask Phi Delta Kappa's Outstanding Young Leaders in American Education? Do we read the hundred most influential books on education written in this century? How can we—since neither those people nor their books appear to be either informed about or interested in this problem? That is, while our field of special education may be monolithic (as I have suggested elsewhere), so is the general field of education. It too has its established traditions, much more established than ours. It's very difficult to get a rational and fair evaluation of our field from a group that apparently hardly ever speaks or writes about it (and, presumably, doesn't think about it). It's very difficult to get a fair evaluation of chiropractors from physicians. It may be that special education has a valuable contribution to make to the general field of education. However, the inclination may be to reject these special approaches because they are different—just as I think the field of

special education rejects much of general education because it too is different. But if there is any scholarly or rational basis to our business (here, I'm speaking about the field of special education), we must defend the principle that to be different is not the same as to be wrong. Because we have our biases, we must be especially careful to make sure that what we object to in "their program" really is wrong, and not just our pretext for dismissing a disturbing intrusion.

#### Camp Hill and Other Villages

Camp Hill Village is not too far fetched an object lesson. It is a "different" type of environment, even for the field of mental retardation. Similarly, B.F. Skinner's doctrines on child development and educational theory are different from the doctrines espoused by Sigmund Freud and his followers. What usually occurs is that we don't evaluate Camp Hill Village (or Skinner's doctrines) but, rather, we pronounce it good or no good because it is or isn't identical to our cosmology.

One point predominates. We should not merely seek orthodoxy but, rather, validity, or truth, or efficacy--or some other intellectually and morally defensible value. Then, the problem shouldn't be whether "our great leaders" (i.e., the leaders in special education or mental retardation) make the list of great people in education, or that "our writers" make the "best 100" list, but whether this program or that program is intellectually and morally defensible. Who really does have evidence that verbal facility is better elicited by one method rather than another? Who really does have evidence that Distar is better than "Kirk's" method for teaching early reading? We don't think such demands

should be made of an educational theory or technique. The events that take place in schools (be they elementary schools or universities) are determined by cultural preferences, more esthetic than scientific. To be an "effective" teacher is to find a congenial school. To be an "ineffective" teacher is to be placed in a school which isn't congenial to your practices and philosophy. This may be another overstatement, it may be too negativistic, it may be too jaundiced for the reader to entertain, but it is also a version of life which might be examined. Students become teachers by teaching, and even mispent training and confusion pass with time and experience. This is not to say that years spent in an intellectually stimulating university are without benefit. Rather, I am making these admissions because it's possible we have oversold what teachers can do for pupils and what pupils can do for teachers. Possibly, we have undersold what people can do for themselves. Possibly also--and here I again return to the special Diamond Jubilee Issue of Phi Delta Kappa--if for no other reason than the fact that so few other people worry about these problems, there seems to be a continuing (if troubling) need for the field of special education--even if our accomplishments are embarrassingly modest and our knowledge base is simply embarrassing.

I now come to this paper's close with an "on the other hand". Possibly, a small annoyance to those on the outside is the perception--oftentimes untrue--that professionals are more interested in their careers than in their clients. In personal discourse, Wolfensberger adds an interesting nuance to this discussion. He argues "that those who do the calling (in our field) should themselves had had a call--and those who exercise power over afflicted people will perpetrate only

harm--if they do not have intimate and sharing contact with those whose lives they affect". Possibly, if we better heed this advice there will be less need for a federal spy system to ferret out professionals who kill damaged newborns in the hospital nursery, or commission of medical ethics to suggest that the killings are ethical under certain circumstances. That is, with the ever increasing influence of teacher and professor unions, with notoriety given to salary squabbles on all levels, and with so much attention devoted to job burnouts, the idea surfaces that the career is the career--not the work itself. That's unfortunate. Another unfortunate perception about both professors and teachers is the idea that etiology and prognosis are more on their minds than what can be done about the problem itself. Of course, it is important to know the cause of the condition and what might happen as its result. But the "man in the street" wants to know what we can do about it. What do we know about learning disabilities or about mental retardation? How do we understand "it", not neurons or learning theory? But again, we're getting back to the proliferation of Russian Villages.

### References

Parker, F. Ideas that shaped American schools. Phi Delta Kappan, 1981, 62(5).

Phi Delta Kappan. Special Diamond Jubilee Issue, January 1981, 62(5).

Shane, H. G. Significant writings that have influenced the curriculum, 1906-81. Phi Delta Kappan, 1981, 62(5), 311-314.