

# HELPING TEACHERS UNDERSTAND CHILDREN

By

THE STAFF OF THE DIVISION ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT  
AND TEACHER PERSONNEL

*Prepared for the  
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## THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EDUCATION

GEORGE F. ZOOK, *President*

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Established by the Council in 1938, the Commission on Teacher Education consists of the persons whose names appear on a front page of this publication. It operates through a staff under the supervision and control of a director responsible to the Commission.

# Foreword

ONE OF THE first acts of the Commission on Teacher Education was to take steps designed to help widen and deepen understanding of human growth and development, especially of the growth and development of children. It was not only impressed by the basic professional importance of such understanding for teachers, it was also convinced that the significance for them and their work of many recent research projects had thus far been but imperfectly realized. A staff member, Daniel A. Prescott, was accordingly asked to develop plans for activities in this area and, upon approval of such plans, special funds were sought to make it possible to put them into effect. The General Education Board, which had already supported many studies in the field of child growth and development, responded generously to the Commission's request and Dr. Prescott undertook to serve as head of the consequently created division on child development and teacher personnel.

Through this division the Commission carried on, from 1939 to 1944, a considerable program. A collaboration center was established in quarters provided by the University of Chicago, to the faculty of which institution Dr. Prescott was appointed at about this time. At this center an unusual store of research material was collected and here, for several years, the Commission enabled representatives of college and school faculties to seek out and synthesize the implications of such findings for use in the education of teachers. All told, some fifty individuals—research specialists, professors of psychology and education, directors of student teaching, school psychologists and directors of curriculum, guidance or teacher education, classroom teachers, and others—served as collaborators, most of them devoting a full academic year to such activity.

Many though not all of these persons came from the schools

and colleges that were participating in the Commission's co-operative study of teacher education and other field enterprises. A major purpose of the arrangement was, of course, to enable them to serve their home institutions more effectively upon their return. But the division on child development and teacher personnel also shared in the Commission's general program of field work: its staff representatives went to numerous schools and colleges to consult with groups there respecting projects designed to improve their local programs.

This book is a report of one such project, developed by a particular school system and carried on over a period of years with Commission assistance. It should be noted that the system found means of continuing to support the program after contributions from the Commission were no longer available. The story is appropriately enough developmental: it reveals classroom teachers and principals growing, through the intelligent and persistent study of children, from a level of quite limited insight to one of greatly increased understanding. It also shows clearly the steps whereby this growth was attained. Its purpose is to demonstrate that similar growth is widely attainable.

In the preface that follows this foreword Dr. Prescott explains how this book was written. The Commission wishes to express its appreciation to him and to those many others, named and not named, who shared in its composition and in the activities it describes and analyzes. The manuscript was reviewed by three members of the Commission—Mildred English, W. Carson Ryan, and Ralph W. Tyler—but the authors have, of course, been at all times free to express their own views and they assume responsibility for all statements made. As in the case of all Commission volumes where the contrary is not explicitly stated, the action of the director in recommending and of the Commission in authorizing publication of this report does not necessarily imply endorsement of all that is contained therein.

KARL W. BIGELOW  
*Director*

# Preface

THIS BOOK describes the behavior of dozens of school children and partially analyzes the forces that led them to act as they did in various situations. Yet the book is not about children. It is about teachers. It demonstrates how individual classroom teachers and teaching principals gradually deepened their understanding of the causes that underlie the conduct of children, and how they increased their skill in identifying such causes in the case of particular children and groups. The method of demonstration is to supply the reader with samplings of what these teachers wrote at different stages during the first three years of the program in child study in which they were participating. It is because much of this material is so vivid with the life and feelings of children that it seems necessary to warn the reader that it is the development occurring in the teachers that he is especially asked to observe.

Some explanation should be given of certain precautions that had to be taken in drafting this report. The children described in it are real youngsters, still in school. The facts about them and their families, recorded in the effort to understand their motivations and needs, are intimate and personal. It has been necessary to reproduce such facts here in order to show what kinds of information a teacher must have about a child and how that information should be arranged for use in the interpretation of behavior. It has also been necessary to duplicate the teachers' own language with little or no editing, in order to provide convincing evidence of their growth in understanding. For the protection of the individuals concerned, however, all names of persons and places have been changed; nor has the location of the school system in which the study program was conducted been revealed.

The method by which the report was prepared illustrates the

collaborative procedure that so strongly marked all activities sponsored by the Commission on Teacher Education. A detailed two-volume description of their child-study activities was first prepared by the local program leader and a number of the classroom teachers and administrators who had participated in the study. This material was then taken by that leader to the Commission's collaboration center in child development where, during the course of a summer workshop, it was carefully analyzed by the center staff. At the same time a tentative outline for the report here presented was jointly agreed upon. During the ensuing school year the program leader prepared first drafts for each of the sections of the projected volume and forwarded these, upon completion, to the center. There staff members reworked the manuscripts in order to provide further analysis and interpretation. The new versions then went back to the local leader and her colleagues for criticism and, if necessary, additional rewriting. In this way every question of fact and of interpretation was checked and rechecked, and both the development and expression of ideas became the work of a number of persons. This collaboration is believed to have resulted in a volume that is more truthful about the processes and more expressive of the real values in a program of direct child study than any that could have been prepared by one or two persons working separately.

A number of acknowledgements should be made. The teachers of the school system where the study was carried on now are more advanced students of human development than they were when they wrote what is herein reproduced. They now see many defects in their earlier work and realize that their anecdotes and analyses reveal many weaknesses of insight and understanding. Nevertheless, because of their sincere professional interest in child study, they have been willing to have their first halting steps revealed and their mistakes pointed out in order that other teachers may be encouraged to seek a better understanding of their pupils. The local administration, the program leader, and the Commission staff appreciate this fine professional attitude.

The staff of the collaboration center also desires to acknowl-

edge its indebtedness to the school administration and the program leader for their unflagging cooperation. Without the possibility of receiving personal recognition for the many contributions they made to the development of the study program and the preparation of this report, they have spared no effort that seemed likely to enhance the value of either.

The consultants from the Commission staff who served the school system in connection with its program of child study were Fritz Redl, Caroline M. Tryon, and Daniel A. Prescott. Each made a distinctive contribution and each learned much of value from participation in the study. Dr. Tryon and Dr. Prescott, aided by Mrs. Helen K. Bieker, carried responsibility for the final drafting of this report. To members of the central staff of the Commission on Teacher Education acknowledgement is due for help both in developing the program of child study and in preparing this book.

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# I

## What It Means to "Understand" a Child

WHAT WOULD you do with a child who steals? How would you handle lazy children? How would you handle children who constantly annoy others by punching and pinching? How would you treat cheating? What are the ways to stop so much inattention?

These were the questions asked of a psychologist at his first meeting with the teachers of a certain school system. He was in this community as a consultant, sent by the division on child development and teacher personnel of the Commission on Teacher Education. His function was "to help the teachers improve their understanding of children," and his work was part of a large cooperative study of teacher education launched by this Commission of the American Council on Education. The questions indicated what the teachers felt they did not "understand" about children.

The purpose of the cooperative study was to experiment with various ways of improving both the pre-service and the in-service education of teachers. Twenty colleges and universities and fourteen school systems or groups thereof were involved. The plan was to have each institution or school system analyze its own problems and then experiment with ways of improving its practice. The Commission was to help out by providing consultants, by arranging conferences and workshops, and in various other ways. The present report to the Commission will describe how the teachers in one of these cooperating school systems tried to gain a better understanding of their pupils, but it will cover only the first three years of their work, which is

still in progress and will continue for some years, perhaps permanently.

The questions asked of the psychologist during his first visit might have been asked in almost any of the cooperating school systems. Indeed, they were characteristic of what psychologists are asked over and over again by teachers all over the United States. They indicated the kinds of behavior that teachers believe to be undesirable or wrong in school. Their baldness signified lack of sensitivity to the fact that all behavior has underlying motives and causes; for it is obvious that these teachers were not seeing their pupils' actions as the symptoms of needs, or of aspirations, or as based upon earlier experiences. Their wording showed that the teachers were looking for techniques for managing the behavior of children. Perhaps the most disconcerting thing about these questions was that the teachers seemed to expect answers to them. The inference that general procedures, applicable alike to all children, could be worked out and used effectively to prevent the behavior mentioned, clearly indicated that the teachers did not understand why boys and girls acted as they did.

In this report the challenge imposed by the fact that teachers ask questions like these is accepted. It is admitted that most American teachers do not adequately understand their pupils. We then go on to show how one group of teachers took significant and effective steps toward acquiring deeper insights. Nor are teachers blamed for their failure to understand the behavior of children. As educators of teachers we have not yet developed effective means of evoking the needed understanding through professional education, so teachers as a group cannot now be expected to show greater comprehension than they do. We present this volume in the hope that it will aid in clarifying the tasks involved in educating teachers to work effectively with boys and girls, and with the expectation that the interesting experiments described herein will stimulate others to still more fruitful undertakings.

The general mood of this report will be optimistic. We shall indicate what we mean by "understanding" a child, and we shall

demonstrate that many classroom teachers actually can develop this understanding. The material to be presented will reveal teaching as an intensely interesting profession and show that teachers' capacities for sympathy and friendliness increase steadily as they gain insight into the behavior of children. Our story will show teachers growing in confidence as they learn to gather and order information about their pupils and as they fill in the gaps in their own knowledge about the facts and principles of human development. It will convey their increasing appreciation of the significance of their own daily work as they study the relationships between scientific principles and the facts they have learned about individual children, and so develop a better comprehension of their pupils' actions.

This introductory chapter will describe where the teachers were at the beginning of the cooperative study and will give a general idea of the progress they made during three years of work. Succeeding chapters will describe in detail the activities and experiences through which this progress was accomplished. We shall then present the testimony of the persons concerned as to the value of their experience in the child-study program. Another section will tell how the study was managed, and we shall conclude with a statement of what we believe we learned about teacher education through the study.

#### EARLY CUMULATIVE RECORDS

The teachers of the school system with which this report deals had been keeping cumulative records of their pupils' progress for a number of years. These records therefore seemed a logical place to begin their study. Accordingly, a number of teachers started to analyze their records with the help of local leaders and the Commission consultant. Very little real information about any child was found. There had been a tendency to record only generalized or summarizing statements with very few supporting facts. Furthermore, most of these generalizations were evaluative rather than genuinely descriptive; they took the form of judgments on the child. Worst of all, these judgments were not at all scientific in character; they did not take into considera-



tion the actual motivation or needs of the youngster in question. They were based, rather obviously, chiefly on the relationship between the pupil's actions and the teacher's own purposes, desires, and values.

The following samples, selected more or less at random, from among the hundreds of notations will illustrate the kind of entry these teachers had been making on the cumulative-record sheets:

Henry is a good leader and adjusts well to the group. He is very dependable and self-reliant (grade 2).

Selby is a constant talker and meddler. He likes to tattle on others but resents correction himself (grade 5).

Mary is a precious child. She is very dependable and does excellent work. I was sorry to see her move away (grade 3).

Elizabeth does not work nearly as hard as she should. She has a good mind but does not show up well enough in her studies. She does not play or work with many children (grade 3).

Charles annoys others. He is too boisterous and wants to be the center of attention no matter what is going on. He is so dirty that no one likes to be near him. His family has been helped by organizations so long I doubt if they have any concern about their condition anymore. They could do much better if they were not so trifling (grade 6).

Tess is very quiet in manner but does sneaking things that children do not like. She stirs up trouble when you least expect it. She is very meek when faced with facts (grade 4).

Larry is a very hard child to appeal to. His attitude towards the group is very poor. He has to be pushed to do any kind of work. He is not a good sport and does not enter into games (grade 4).

Beulah comes from a home situation that is difficult to help. The parents are not greatly concerned about her work at school. Beulah herself does not try to help herself. Just recently she was out of school for a week. When she returned she had a new permanent wave in her hair, and this in spite of the fact that her parents have never paid her school fees (grade 7).

Dorsey: I can't understand why the K's do not attend PTA. They are so nice. Father is manager of a department store. Mother stayed