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CONTINUITY OF EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS *

R. Z. Swaab,
Chief, Division of Studies
and Advisory Services,
Bernard van Leer Foundation.

These extracts are from a discussion paper by Mr. Swaab, under the same title, presented at the Council of Europe sponsored Workshop on Action Research Concerning Compensatory Education for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Children with Particular Regard to Pre-School and Primary Education in Strasbourg, France, 7-11 October 1974. The full text will be published in the Proceedings of the Workshop later this year.

BACKGROUND AND BASIC VIEWPOINT

The Bernard van Leer Foundation promotes and supports innovation in education aimed at enabling children and youth of school-going age who are impeded by the social and cultural inadequacy of their environment, nevertheless to achieve the greatest possible realisation of their innate potential. It is important to stress that this approach centres on human development. I fear that a philosophy which emphasises that human development should be the basic goal of educational innovation has not been generally accepted. Thus in recent attempts to prevent 'school failure' (including those based on the concept of 'compensatory education' on which I will comment later) the term certainly is not meant to be taken literally, i.e. 'failure of the school'. On the contrary, the term has been taken to mean that the child has failed to adapt to school. It would appear then, that in such innovative attempts achieving the goals of the existing school system has been the central objective rather than fostering human development. In other words, in this philosophy it is the existing school system (and the values it represents) and not the human being that receives priority. Educational innovations clearly need to be based on a philosophy that moves beyond such one-way adaptation; this is the view the Foundation holds.

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'Where children are forced for socio-economic reasons to exist in an impoverished environment, an attempt at compensation should be made by specially enriching their school environment', it is said in some projects. However, I think we must be very careful with this kind of statement. Of course, the school as an intermediary institution, wanting to extend the area of experience of its pupils, will provide for them a broad range of new objects and new situations. But why call this 'compensation'? The school's basic institutional goal should surely be to present pupils with a broad knowledge of the society they are living in, in particular those parts of society which a child in a specific environment does not normally encounter. Is any middle class school compensating for its pupils' lack of experience with blue collar situations? Is it not then falling short of its basic goal? The term 'compensation' is unfortunately used in a one-sided way only and should, therefore, preferably be dispensed with.

The value system of our traditional school system has become very autocratic. It implicitly assumes that all pupils are able to realise their innate potential in the same way and using the same means. Before the social sciences came into being, the child who could not match the regular goals and means of the school system was considered 'stupid', now - compared with those who do match - he seems to be 'disadvantaged' in terms of his social or cultural background. Often his disadvantage is to be deprived of the possibility of using his prior experiences unless those prior experiences are in themselves limited because of malnutrition or miserable housing conditions. However, in the other cases, disadvantaged generally signifies imposed discontinuity of educational environments. This rather aphoristic description of 'disadvantage' holds for many kinds of disadvantaged communities the Bernard van Leer Foundation meets in the projects it supports.

In choosing a cultural description of disadvantage, I made abstraction from the socio-economic position which goes with it. Cultural deprivation mostly is generated by economic deprivation. Educational projects as such are not in a position to change the economic base of a society, but they can help to interrupt the vicious circle of poverty and lack of education, particularly because they imply the recognition of the disadvantaged group as fundamentally capable human beings. When an educational project involving disadvantaged groups is accepted, it means at least this recognition has been reached, even when no direct economic measures are envisaged.

In promoting and supporting only projects relating to disadvantaged children and youth, the Bernard van Leer Foundation constantly confronts the question of continuity of educational environments. In fact, this question is closely tied to formal instruction : discontinuity happens both at the beginning and at the end of formal instruction.

The school system is an institution intended to favour and extend the child's socialisation. When the school first becomes a part of a child's environment, there is no reason why it should have more weight than the child's prior 'educational' experiences in the home. Clearly the school should not be an environment in opposition to the child's prior experiences. Indeed, if the school is to be an institution for learning, the child needs to be able to make continuous use of his prior experience and to trust his educators to be aware of those experiences. Yet to many children the school happens to form a strange, hostile environment; and when they fail to adapt to it the school tells us : for sure those failures must be imputed to the home environment!

When stating that the young child's experiences in the school should be continuous with those in the home, we use broad, complex categories. 'The home environment' is far more than only the parents and the housing situation; it includes the siblings, sometimes the extended family, often the neighbourhood (both the personal and the physical aspect of it), all generally reflecting the same value system. Similarly, 'the school environment' is a complex entity in which generally one normative system is valid. This environment includes the teachers, the principal, eventually the school board, teacher-trainers and trainees, but also the buildings, the textbooks and other media.

Because of this complexity, it is highly improbable that continuity of educational environment can be achieved by partial changes, like a change of attitude of teachers, a change of textbooks or a change of housing conditions. Such partial changes do not match in the total system and, therefore, risk not to affect the discontinuity at all. Continuity has to be looked for in a quite comprehensive way.

Only recently has the disadvantaged home environment been widely recognized as a functional value system rather than a kind of 'non-value' from the point of view of regular society (a view basic to the compensatory education philosophy). This recognition, accepting a subculture as fully functional to its members, permits

the disadvantaged home to show its identity instead of being denied one. Then the learning process in the school, while being continuous to prior experience, does extend the field of experience, thus allowing the child to live in one and be alive to the other. The case of language is highly instructive here. The school should be using the child's own vernacular or dialect as a basis for instruction but ensuring that such instruction will lead to communicative competence in the standard language.

Let us look more closely at practical efforts to establish continuity for the young child, utilising the experience of a number of projects that have been supported by the Foundation over the past ten years. The teaching-learning activities in the pre-school years are geared to motivate children to relate to materials and people. By exploring carefully objects, materials, persons and situations familiar to the child, the teacher soon will be able to introduce other persons and situations as yet at the periphery of the child's environment. In order to make use of the daily experiences of the young child, many projects produce curriculum blocks organised around a succession of familiar themes. The themes are continuous to the child's experience and at the same time, can offer a framework for e.g. systematic perceptual and psychomotor experiences. Looking at the curricula developed in different projects with disadvantaged children around the world, we find them very different in both the main curriculum elements and the suggested sequencing of the curriculum. Some are focusing on a more individual approach, like the 'experience units' developed in Jamaica for use with four year olds, for example :

Living in the classroom

Personal health

People who supply us

Others do rather depart from social activities, like the series of themes produced in a low-income urban project in Amsterdam for four and five year olds, for example :

House

Mail

Party

Still others are specifically directed to the development of a favourable self-concept as in one of the Australian Aborigines

Education Programs where this is made explicit as the point of departure for curriculum blocks based on the experiences of five year olds, for example :

Self-concept : I am

Personal competence

Home and family

Of course, I am commenting here on labels, but even these are indicative. Clearly organising themes into a curriculum is not a simple, evident matter, even when aimed at disadvantaged children in more or less similar circumstances. I would like to emphasise that the overall diversity is not due to cultural differences (these appear in the details only), but very much to personal insights and philosophies of the curriculum-makers.

Regardless of the specific organisation of the curriculum, the themes or experience units give the opportunity to contact the neighbourhood, to involve the homes. The choice of learning materials can also be made to promote continuity of environment. A lot of found or waste materials can be used not only for expressive activities, but also for language development, perceptual play, introducing mathematical concepts. In some countries the use of those little things in pre-school (and primary) education is quite familiar, in others they are not yet usual. When the parents or other persons at home join in collecting this 'waste' material their activity is not only profitable to the school but will in itself constitute a contribution to 'continuity'.

In the field of materials, continuity of environment should not be pursued from one side only. The school will know about toys and (picture-) books which are not yet known in the family. Disseminating this knowledge induces parent education, but at the same time for the child it will amount to a continuity of environments. In different projects the issue is met in different ways according to circumstances: either by exhibitions of toys and books or by providing them directly to the homes (through a toy library, the services of home visitors, etc.).

With regard to educational toys not known to disadvantaged parents, puzzles for instance, I should like to remark that the question of sophistication should be scrutinised in its own right. In developing countries, instructional materials have to be obtained

in the cheapest possible way. So educational puzzles and some other toys are very often produced on the spot, by teachers, by local people or by older children. I wonder, and I am not the first one to make this suggestion indeed, whether older children - say twelve to fifteen years old - producing *in school* educational toys for disadvantaged homes to be distributed through pre-schools, might not become involved in an important multipurpose activity. This activity would serve :

The manual skills of the older child

His sense of community service

*Co-operation between levels of the
educational system*

Educational equipment for the disadvantaged

*And eventually, when the older child originates
from a disadvantaged home: continuity of
environments.*

I should mention that I realise that continuity of environments is a concept not applicable to all situations. The home environment can on occasion be so chaotic, unorganised and not directed to any future or growth, that it could truly be called non-educational. This situation occurs, in particular, when the family is practically excluded from regular society, for instance in the case of permanent unemployment. Such families must first be helped to escape from the chaos, to create a 'new universe' in which they find human value, before bothering about children and their future will make sense to them. The Foundation has been confronted with this situation in different projects (for example with Australian Aborigines and in the Caribbean) where during periods of disorganisation caused by unemployment, all interest in education dropped considerably.

A FINAL NOTE

Throughout the paper I merely touched upon a number of questions which should be spelled out at greater length. And, of course, broad generalisations about particular projects tend to blur important local features of such projects. Deliberately, I concentrated on one specific line of philosophy. Perhaps I should still make clear that focusing on the continuity of educational environments is but one step towards the realisation of the broader community school approach that seeks to make the school the dynamic centre for community

regeneration and growth. Where possible, the Bernard van Leer Foundation is now also endorsing such a trend towards 'integrative education', a trend which reflects a stronger and more direct commitment to the goals of social change and human well-being that has been at the base of most educational innovative activities in past years.

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AEISF Study.

A study has been completed which evaluated the operation and performance of the Aboriginal Education Incentive Scholarship Fund (AEISF). AEISF provided scholarships to Aboriginal students attending Victorian primary and secondary schools from 1965 to 1974. Copies of a summary of the report on the study may be obtained by contacting AEISF, 5 Ashby Court, North Balwyn, Victoria, 3104. Copies of the complete report have been distributed to all Australian University Libraries, and further copies will only be made available if the demand is great enough.

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