

Education and Differentiation

By G.M. Prince

The original purpose of schooling seemed simple and clear: to teach children the thinking skills of the three "R's"—reading, riting and rithmetic; skills they would need to get along in the world. Schooling has evolved in this same goal-oriented way: with the emphasis on helping people acquire information and learn the skills necessary to apply this information.

Most attention has been focused on achievement of facility in the subject taught and being able to demonstrate this in tests.

Recently, more and more emphasis has been focused on tests to prove that students are "getting it."

In the last 50 years there has been a great deal of research into child development; identifying infant and child needs that ideally must be met if the child is to realize a maximum of his or her potential for effective thinking and learning.

Awareness of these needs together with our increased knowledge about the creative/learning process and brain function suggest that a modified approach to schooling might pay enormous dividends in raising the level of thinking ability in graduates.

At the same time, by designing learning environments and practices that focus more clearly on the child and youth needs, we can help parents become more aware of the benefits of more informed childrearing.

The Needs

The two instinctually rooted drives that power all of us are: the need to become autonomous, competent and self-respecting, and the need to belong; to be together with others and be accepted, respected, appreciated and able to accept, respect and appreciate others.

Learning to balance these two opposing needs is what maturity and differentiation are all about. Perhaps the clearest delineation of the requirements are outlined in Dr. Murray Bowen's chart of differentiation below.

Bowen's Scale of Differentiation

0—10	Can't distinguish between feeling and thinking—has given up on relationships. No self. Incapable of being an individual in a group. Complete fusion/enmeshment—no separation from family. At this low level one is so highly sensitized to world around—has lost capacity to feel—is numb. Most energy into “loving” and being “loved”. Difficulty maintaining long-term relationships. Much reaction to failing to get love. Hard core schizophrenic. High chronic anxiety—few situations are comfortable.
10—25	Functions almost totally governed by emotional reactions. Reactions range from automatic compliance to extreme oppositional behavior. Live in a feeling world. Skid row alcoholics, drug addicts. May have been able to function in a favorable relationship, but when it collapsed through divorce or death, they did too.
25—35	Highly suggestible—ideological chameleons. Look outside for religion, culture, law, rule books, authoritarian figures to support their positions. Direct much life energy to being loved, loving. Little left for self-determined goals. Under stress—psychotic incidents, delinquency, intense symptoms. Lacking beliefs of their own, they adopt the prevailing ones. Low levels of <i>solid-self</i> ...an important component of <i>basic differentiation</i> . Reasonable levels of <i>pseudo-self</i> , an important component of <i>functional differentiation</i> . Feelings soar with praise—dashed by criticism.
35—40	Better than the 0—25, but highly influenced by feelings. Sensitized to disharmony—to the opinion of others—to impression management—to tonals and non-verbals that may mean disapproval and therefore threat.
40—50	Poorly defined self, but a budding capacity to differentiate between feeling and thinking. Higher levels of <i>solid-self</i> . Many of the characteristics of those higher on the scale. When under stress develops neurotic symptoms—recovery after stress removed seems complete.
50—60	Well-defined opinions and beliefs on most essential issues. The intellectual system is sufficiently developed to make a few decisions of own. Hesitates to say what he/she believes. Knows there is a better way to live—still follows life course of those below 50.
60—75	The intellect recognizes that discipline is needed to overrule emotional system. Less emotionally reactive. Under sufficient stress, develops fairly severe physical, emotional symptoms, but they are episodic—recovers fast. Less chronic anxiety. Freedom to move back and forth between: a) seeking emotional closeness, b) pursuing independent goals, and derives pleasure from both.
75—85	Free to participate in highly emotional situations—confident can extricate self with logic and reason. When trouble comes, he/she can take over and deal with it to avoid life crisis. More <i>solid-self</i> . Individuality better developed.
85—95	Principle oriented and goal directed. Begins in infancy to grow away from parent. Sure of beliefs and convictions—not dogmatic or fixed in thinking. Capable of hearing and evaluating (entertaining) the views of others. Can discard old beliefs in favor of new. Can listen without reacting. Can communicate without antagonizing. Secure within self. Can respect the identity of another without becoming critical or emotionally involved in trying to modify that person's life course. Able to assume total responsibility for self. Sure of his/her responsibility to others, but not overly responsible. Realistically aware of dependence on fellow person—free to enjoy relationships. No 'need' for others that can impair functioning. Others do not feel used by him/her. Tolerant and respectful of differences. Not likely to engage in polarized debates. Realistic in self-assessment. Not status conscious. Expectations realistic. Tolerates intense feelings well—does not act automatically to alleviate. Chronic anxiety very low. Tolerates high anxiety well. Can adapt and/or self-soothe under most stress.
95—100	Person has fully resolved the emotional attachment to family. Emotional maturity. Can be an individual in the group. Responsible for self. Neither fosters nor participates in the irresponsibility of others. Differentiates clearly between feeling process and thinking process.

Implementation

With the clear objective of speeding children and youth toward differentiation, we can experiment with modifying teaching to keep these goals in mind.

A first step is to take a small group of willing teachers through an experience that increases their awareness of the cultural field forces that move children toward and away from differentiation. As they increase this awareness they can together invent ways of modifying their practices to support increased autonomy and belongingness.