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the role of the parent in education

H. GLUCKMAN

In a Tiger Cartoon, Tiger is asked by his little friend how he did in Arithmetic. He answers, "Not quite as well as I'd hoped".

"What are you hoping for?"

"I was hoping to pass," he answered.

I think that cartoon sums up what most parents are concerned about. All parents want their children to pass; but not merely to pass — to do **well** at school. If however, they do not, whose fault is it? What has gone wrong? Let me analyse the situation.

Johnny or Ethel, a normal average child, goes to school. Is it a **good school** with teachers who stay long enough to provide continuity and stability? Is it well equipped, in pleasant surroundings, comfortable to work in? Is it provided with sports fields, libraries, laboratories etc? These are variables, factors to consider. The school can affect a child's educational chances.

What about the **principal**? Is he warm and sympathetic to parents, children and staff? Does he allow experimentation in the school? Do the children, teachers, parents respect him? The head of the school is also a variable to consider.

The teachers? Are they warm and sympathetic? Do they care about their charges? Do they KNOW their subjects? Do they know how to teach in an interesting way? Can they stimulate a child to want to learn? Teachers are very important and so are the methods they use.

Important too, is the **class** the child is in. If the other children in the class are not well-behaved, learning will be hindered. If they are all above the child's level he will feel out of his depth. If they are below his level, he will be bored. They can stimulate him, or depress him. They too are variables to consider in analysing a child's level of performance, and so are the subjects he studies.

Is he being forced to take **subjects** which mean nothing to him, in which he has no interest? Or are they relevant to his needs? Does he work at them eagerly, or is there a constant battle to get him to open a book?

All these variables — the school, the staff, the subjects taught and method used — are all important factors in a pupil's success or failure, but the list is not complete. It is only in recent years that researchers overseas have shown that another group of factors is equally important:

— the parents,

— their interests, their co-operation.

Let me describe some of these researches. Jackson and Marsden in a book called **Education and the Working Class,** described a survey done on 88 Working-Class children in an industrial city in the North of England. These children, despite their lower-class backgrounds, managed to be admitted to predominantly middle-class Grammar schools. which in Britain are prestige Government schools for academically bright children. The authors followed these pupils from the beginning of their Grammar-school career through to University and adulthood to find out the effect of their social class position on their educational achievements. In the course of their investigations, they also discovered that the encouragement of the parents, particularly the mother, was vital for the child's success. Where this encouragement was present, the child was able to survive the alien atmosphere of the middle-class Grammar school. Where this encouragement was lacking, the child 'dropped-out' — left school prematurely, even though he had the ability to complete his schooling.

Another piece of Research entitled, **The Home and the School** by J. W. B. Douglas, followed 5 362 children born on a particular day in 1944 to every type of family in every part of Britain. Douglas and his workers kept a close watch on these youngsters for 16 years, testing them when they were eight years old and again at eleven years. One of their findings was that the parents' aspirations for their children had a very profound effect.

Those whose mothers wanted them to go to Grammar school and stay until they were seventeen years old, obtained 11% more places in these schools than was expected. Put in another way, those children whose mothers actively encouraged them, did much better than their IQ tests led people to expect. Moreover, at both 8 and 11 years, the highest average scores in tests were made by children whose parents were most interested in their education. These children achieved relatively high scores and improved most between 8 and 11 years.

Yet another piece of research illustrating the importance of parents in education appeared in **The Star** of April 22, 1971. This report described research done in Israel in 1967-1969 on immigrant nursery-school children from the Middle East and North Africa. Again, one of the findings of the research was that children whose mothers had little interest in education remained culturally deprived. Despite intensive compensatory methods employed by nursery-school teachers, the children made little progress. Even the most concentrated educational efforts, starting as early as 3 years of age, failed to help these children. "The researchers," the article continued, "turned to the 'deprived' children's homes to better understand their slow development. In contrast with the 'privileged' mothers who shared information with teachers and for the first few weeks stayed with their children at the start of each school day, the 'deprived' ones were reticent and simply delivered their children and went away."

Research reported in The Star of January 5, 1973 stated: **Middle-class areas in Britain get more Sixth-formers to University and it is Parent-power that puts them there.** Education chiefs claim, 'Good scholars are essential, but far more important is **parents** power.' One education officer claims, 'We would not have so high a number of children going to University if it wasn't for the **constant interest** of parents at all levels. They **support** the **schools,** they **create** the **interest** in **learning** and **sustain** it'.

However, how does one translate all this into practical terms? How can the parent show 'constant interest'? How can she 'actively encourage'? How can she 'create interest in learning and sustain it'?

The following scenes show how **not** to behave, if the child's scholastic success is important to the parent.

Years ago when I was teaching at a high school in the Northern suburbs of Johannesburg, I had a lad of about 13 in my class who showed no interest whatever in his work. When I pointed out to him that he was jeopardising his future chances in life and that without an education there were a limited number of jobs open to him, his reply was, "My dad says I don't have to worry. He's got a good business, and he is waiting for me to join him. So why should I waste my time swotting?"

The danger of this situation is highlighted by quotations taken from **Dropout: The Causes and Cures** by L. Cervantes. "Failure in a success-oriented culture is hard to take." (A. Fromm).

"In the modern labour market, an unskilled worker is almost as obsolete as a dinosaur." (Area manager—Division of Employment).

"The inadequately educated and ill-trained school drop-outs are likely to form the nucleus of the future hard-core unemployed." (**Manpower Report of the President of the USA.** 1964).

Here is another illustration:

"Right Paul, as soon as you've had your lunch, you are to do your homework."
"Okay."
"Not just 'Okay'! Let's see you do it."
"Okay."
"Because today I'm not having the same nonsense as yesterday."
"Okay."
"Okay! Okay! It's easy to say okay! That's what you said yesterday and it still took you three hours to get down to work. And the day before you did ....."
"Okay.So I'll do it now."
Half an hour later.
"Paul???"
"Yes Ma?"
"What. are. you. doing?"
"Huh? I . . . I . . . I'm working ma."
"Oh, no, you're not."
"I am."
"Then why are you holding that comic?"
"Comic?"

"That's a comic you're reading."
"Heck?"
"Darn it all, you know it is! You promised that if I bought it for you, you wouldn't read it until your homework was finished. You promised on your word of honour. So much for your promises!"
"Gee ma, I'm not reading it. I'm just looking at the pictures."
"Well, that's the last time I'll ever allow comics in my home!"
"Okay, ma."
"Believe me, I mean it!"
"Okay, okay!"
"Now do your work!"
"Yes ma."

And so on. Do you think that is what is meant by 'actively encouraging'? or 'showing a constant interest'? Ma is clouding the issue with emotionalism, anger, impatience, irritation and side issues about broken promises and comics. That is what she is communicating and that is what Paul is reacting to. A firm, "I'll sit with you and sew/knit/tat/embroider/do the crossword, while you work, so that I'm nearby if you need help," would possibly be a more constructive approach. Try it.

Here is yet another scene to avoid:

"Hey ma! Guess what happened at school today?"
"Hmmm . . .?"
"The teacher said . . . Hey! You're not listening!"
"Of course I am."
"You're not! You're not!"
"Hmmm . . . ?"
"Put down the newspaper."
"What? Why? I'm listening."
"Well, the teacher said that anyone who could answer this question would get . . . Ma?"
"Hmmm . . . .?"
"I was trying to tell you what happened at school . . ."
"Mm . . .?"
"Aw, skip it!"

"What? What were you saying? Darn it all John (Joan), how many times have I told you not to wipe your dirty hands across your face. Just look at yourself! Don't your teachers ever teach you anything about neatness, cleanliness? You're old enough now to take an interest in your appearance . . . Oh, for Heaven's sake, go and do your homework!"

Is **that** showing a 'constant interest'? Is **that** 'actively encouraging'? The lack of communication in this scene is much more obvious than before. In **Drop-out: The Causes and Cures,** this is spelled out. Drop-outs and graduating students were asked questions like, "Does your family talk things over with each other?" and "Can you confide in other members of the family?"

Eighty-one percent of the students who had dropped out of school prematurely (i.e. even though they were capable of completing their career) reported **in**adequate inter-communication. Eighty percent of graduating stud ents reported that they could and did communicate with their family. Is it so difficult ma, to put down your enthralling newspaper and listen for a minute to what is obviously a matter of great importance to your child?

Here is yet another scene that is all too common:

"Have you brought your **Report Card** home?"
"Yes, dad."
"Let's see it. Umm. Average 58%. That's not too good, is it?"
"But most people got less than that!"
"How much did you friend David get?"
"Well . . . well, 68%."
"Really? Well, if he can get nearly 70% why can't you? It's not as if Std. IV was a difficult year . . ."
"But dad . . . ."
"Damn it all, when I was in primary school, I never got less than 72% aggregate. I'd like to think that my son can do better than a mere 50%!"
"58%".
"50%—58% what's the difference?"
"But the teacher said . . ."
"It doesn't matter what she said. If the Mendelsohn's kid can get 70%, I don't see why you can't."
"But I got 17 out of 20 for Geography, and he only got 12 out of 20."
"Any fool can get good marks for a swot subject. It's your aggregate that counts. And if young Mendelsohn, whose father as every-

one knows is an idiot, can get 70%, then why the hang can't you . . .?"

Is Dad 'actively encouraging'? Again, this is a problem in communication. Dad doesn't even understand himself because what he is really saying it, 'Look how your poor marks reflect on me!' **The Drop-Outs** put it this way:

"Unfortunately, a child's school failures are highly 'visible'. Thus shame and embarrassment are added to the other emotions the child is experiencing, especially since the parents often view children as extensions of themselves. Thus parents will often 'try everything' to get the child to improve and this chronic inconsistency can do a lot of damage!

Here is another illustration:

"Peter, go to bed."
"Ag, why?"
"Because . . . "
"But why?"
"Because I say so."
"But ma, why must I go to bed so soon?"
"Because if you don't, you'll soon **know why.**"
"Well, why?"
"THAT'S WHY!" SLAP, SLAP, SLAP!

In what way is mom actively discouraging Peter's growth of conceptual understanding? In point of fact, what Peter is unconsciously learning is that the reason for going to bed is either because of someone's arbitrary command or in order to avoid a slap. However, the real reason why he goes to bed is because he needs sleep in order to remain healthy, i.e. a cause of good health is sufficient sleep. Peter is being taught false relationships.

There are different relationships involved in:

— 'Come here when I call you.'
— 'If I call you, come here.'
— 'As soon as I call you, come here.'
— 'Come here because I am calling you.'
— 'While I call you, come here.'

However, a mother who always uses simple sentences only i.e. 'Come here. I am calling you.' is **not** teaching her child the relationship of **time** or **condition** or **reason,** that will enable the child to think abstractly in later childhood.

A great deal of research has been done on the importance of **speech** in a child's mental development. It has been found that children in institutions (e.g. orphanages) are grossly retarded in vocabulary, sentence structure and the power of abstract thinking. Basil Bernstein, found that the language the child was surrounded by could either raise or depress the level of his verbal IQ. In a study done on the effects of streaming, Jackson, after researching a quarter of a million pupils, found that parents of A stream youngsters included the children in their conversations, whereas the parents of C stream children read little, wrote little, spoke in simple sentences using concrete language involving very few abstract ideas or relationships.

The point of all this is that speech is the vehicle, the tool of thought. You cannot think abstractly unless you have words to think with. It is in the early years of a child's life that he learns language. It is from the parent that he learns it, and it is with the parent that he must practise it. The following quotations show just how important speech is.

"When the mind is thinking, it is talking to itself." (Plato).

"Language , as such, is man's primary vehicle for thinking. Brains think with words . . . We cannot think without speaking, or speak without thinking . . ." (J. O. Hertzler: **A Sociology of Language!**)

"Language is not only the medium by which all our thoughts, feelings, emotions and ideas are obtained from and communicated to others, but language is the instrument by which the mind itself acts. This is so true, that we think in words, we cannot reason or reflect except by words. They are the very material on which the mind works, and the implements with which it works." (Judge L. Shaw)

The moral of all this? If you want to help your child to achieve, if you want to know what **your** role as a parent is in the education of your sons and daughters — Communicate with them, with a loving touch and a smile, and talk to them. And then listen, with a whole mind, while they talk to you.