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This conference paper argues that if schools are to meet the needs of a changing society, and if disadvantaged children are to learn effectively, the objectives and practices of the current educational system must be modified. To individualize the educational program, grade levels and the marking system must be abolished. Innovative curriculums and materials developed independent of the children for whom they are ostensibly created should give way to scientific considerations of the unique developmental, interpersonal, and environmental factors which influence the actual learning process. Also, a huge body of research on learning processes is presently being ignored. Moreover, educators should accept the personal worth of each student, regardless of his race or ethnic group. Finally, at the present time there is too great an emphasis in the schools on subject matter to the exclusion of other considerations in a student's education. The reactions of the conference participants to this paper are included. (DK)

**EDUCATION AND THE DISADVANTAGED**

**Proceedings of A Conference on the Disadvantaged**

**at**

**The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee**

**June 8 and 9, 1967**

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Assistant Professor of Education  
The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee**

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WHO IS  
TO BLAME?

Ernest Melby presented the participants with a comprehensive overview of the many conflicts facing the disadvantaged student upon entering school, with emphasis being placed on the destructive nature of our present grading systems, the need for school systems to develop new goals which are in agreement with the demands of our present society, the continuing failure of our "patchwork approach" to solving existing problems, and the unrealistic use of school facilities. However, his most blistering attack was directed toward the contemporary educator's concern with subject matter, with how many facts students learn, and their blatant lack of concern for the process of education, the effects of interpersonal relationships at all levels and their effect upon the learning process.

Implied in his discussion of the "ills" to which education is currently subject is the fact that we are currently directing all of our efforts toward dealing with undesirable situations which are merely symptomatic of basic inadequacies within our organizational structure while permitting the causal factors to remain untouched.

Another point of major importance refers to the inability of the numerous educational systems throughout the country to develop goals in substantial agreement with the requirements of our society and which would serve as "guiding lights" for the development of educational strategies. In effect, the implication is clearly made that we are currently attempting to "educate for the future" with techniques and facilities designed for the past. Contemporary educational practices are very similar to those of five decades ago regardless of the facts that our society has changed considerably, that the composition of our student clientele bears little resemblance to that of fifty years ago, and that the over-whelming weight of available

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research indicates the need for a drastic overhaul of present operations.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE  
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Ernest O. Melby\*

Having been asked to discuss the general problem of "Education and the Disadvantaged", I can only begin by pointing out that education, as we know it today, is seriously inadequate. Most people do not realize how outdated and routine it is.

Having learning difficulties is very much like being ill. You don't know how serious it is going to be unless you visit a doctor and have the condition diagnosed. Without proper diagnosis you will probably die. If we are going to face the facts regarding contemporary education, we must first recognize the major problems facing the profession; we have to face up to who we are, what we are, and where all of the problems are coming from. We must look at the situation in which we are living and working and ask ourselves how to best help the people with whom we work. We must seek out and put into effect those modifications which will most effectively and efficiently enable the "disadvantaged" to participate in the mainstream of American life.

A number of programs have recently been developed to deal with disadvantaged youth. One such program is Headstart; another is a remedial program to deal with dropouts and bring them back to the schools. Teachers say, "the Headstart program will get the kids ready for us." Note that they say

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"prepare the children for us;" not prepare us for the children. When the child then fails in the first grade, another teacher comes along, takes him in charge, and again "prepares" him for us. But this leaves us exactly where we were in the beginning; we operate as we did previously and feel that we have nothing to worry about. Young teachers are now part of a gigantic mop-up crew; the way we now teach children insures that this mop-up crew will have life-long jobs. While we work in one building attempting to educate children, we are at the same time seeing to it that the mop-up crew in the building across the street will always have full classrooms.

I want to point out to you that for these children, disadvantaged children, the school is a greater impediment to their becoming successful learners than is the community. I think this can be proved. Studies conducted with disadvantaged children in the inner-cities throughout our country tend to show that the schools must accept much of the blame for the low levels of achievement which these children attain. Between the first and fourth or fifth grades there is a predictable regression of scores on all standardized tests which these children attempt. Naturally, as their achievement test scores go down, their intelligence quotients also tend to drop. At the same time the students tend to dislike school more and more.

When children enter school today we expect them all to begin at the same point in the curriculum and to progress at similar rates. Knowing what we do about the way children develop, it is obvious that these expectations are highly unrealistic. All children do not begin to walk or talk or feed themselves at the same time, and we consistently point out that individual differences are significant factors affecting these variations. Why, then, do we become upset if every first grade child is not prepared to begin reading and writing? Do we assume that individual differences cease

to exist as soon as children enter school? How do we account for the fact that differences in communities, home situations, perceptions, and interpersonal relationships may affect the child's ability to learn? Or is it just possible that we make little or no attempt to correct for such factors?

Some have tried to correct the situation through the use of what is called a Personalized Curriculum (as in Flint, Michigan); others through the use of an Urban Boarding School (as in North Carolina). All of the current school approaches imply that all we need to do is to touch up existing programs a little bit. In retrospect, I believe the cause of many of the problems is the educational systems themselves.

So that is how it begins. As soon as the child starts school, the teacher begins to teach him what she thinks he ought to learn; the child hates school since the material to which he is subjected does not have any relevance to his needs; and the child, as a result, comes out second best.

There is a lesson to be learned from this. We have to learn to listen to other people. I have listened to an awful lot of speeches in the last ten years. Twenty years ago when I attended conventions and listened to speeches, a lot was heard about children. I listened to presentations about human growth and development. Now, I don't hear anything about children. I don't hear anything about human development. I haven't heard a speech on human development in the last five years. What is it I now hear about--- the new mathematics, the new sciences, the new team teaching, computers, and television sets. Anything about children? No, nothing.

In the last fifty years we have learned a great deal about the human organism, and also about learning. We know that science has contributed to this body of knowledge, pediatricians have contributed to it, the psychologists have contributed to it, and numerous others have also made important

contributions.

We are ignoring this whole body of knowledge. I am appalled when I hear my colleagues say that we need to search for a scientific basis for education; that we need more and better research if we are to understand the processes with which we are dealing.

The greatest problem isn't that we don't have enough research; the most serious short-coming is that we don't use the research we have. As we were getting into my car to go to Ann Arbor one day, I asked Dean Olson of the University of Michigan (who is probably one of our best known and most sensitive students of children) why is it that all this research on human development is being ignored? His reply was that we are afraid to face this knowledge squarely because we have not learned to deal with its implications. He stated that the implications to be derived from existing research is too formidable. We can't face it.

We think we can somehow manipulate the materials, and through such manipulation of materials, we hope to find the answers. I think this is a losing battle; one that is self-defeating. We must treat the causes of the existing problems, not their symptoms.

I am not against the new mathematics as long as they improve the learning of children, but I find that the children in the inner city don't learn any better with the new mathematics than they did with the old mathematics. It should also be pointed out that team teaching doesn't help them very much. They are no better off if they have four teachers they don't like than if they have one teacher they don't like. And they are no better off if they have four teachers who don't like them than if they have one teacher who doesn't like them.

We are very slow to realize that the central thing in education is not the subject matter, but it is the person. Education comes about through the interaction between teachers and children. If, as a result of this interaction, teachers are convincing children that they can't learn, that people don't like them and that they are not wanted, then all the subject matter in the world will not help them to become better learners or better people; nor will a computer or a television set help you to accomplish the task at hand.

I have been living, during the past ten years, a kind of a double life. I spend about two days a week in Flint, often going there early in the morning and coming back late in the afternoon. Sometimes, after returning from Flint, I go up to the coffee room of the Michigan State College of Education and share thoughts with others who are talking about teacher education. I can't describe how I feel. These people, these professors, good as they are, continue to talk about teacher education in relation to a non-existent world. There is no relation whatever between what they are talking about and the realities which teachers, superintendents, and principals face in the big cities of America. What they are talking about is teacher education for the little towns like the one in which I was superintendent of schools in Minnesota forty years ago. Our teacher education today is better suited to these little Minnesota and Wisconsin towns than it is to Milwaukee, Chicago or Flint, or even the moderate size cities. Until we begin to see this, the teacher colleges in the universities will continue to feed into the school systems of America more teachers who will face frustration and failure not because they lack a desire for or commitment to the job, but because they lack the training, the experiences, and the sensitivity for the tasks which they face daily.

I think we must talk about some other things which are also important. Subject matter is almost an obsession in our profession, as is also our commitment to the centrality of the school house. We tend to believe that everything can be done in the school house, and that everything can be done better in the school house than anywhere else.

It also seems to me that it is silly to say that no one can teach unless he has a certificate. I think there are a lot of people in America who can teach very well and who don't have certificates. There are mothers and fathers scattered all over this United States who could come into our schools to do the many things that are desperately needed and which are not being done because we don't have the necessary personnel.

I do not believe that any school, even a very good school, can solve the problems of the inner city if it pays no attention to the parents and if it pays no attention to the community. We can not defend the practice of locking up our schools in the afternoon and keeping them locked up at night when this is the time that adults could come in to learn. Because I haven't been here very long, I'm unaware of what Milwaukee is doing to make their schools effective centers of community learning. But I know that all over America there are thousands and thousands of schools that limit their activities to dealing with children and pay very little attention to the parents.

I recall, two years ago in Flint, sitting down across the table from a young teacher from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. I hadn't seen him for some time, so I asked how he was getting along. This was about the first of November. He had been working with us since early September and he said, "Since the first of November I have made seventy-one home calls."

He added that this was "not exactly part of a conventional teacher education program, but that it was considerably more educational than sitting in classes and discussing things about which he knew nothing."

Above all, I believe the teacher must be compassionate. People often feel that being "compassionate" means feeling sorry for people. This is not so. The compassionate person is a person who believes in people; who believes that he is involved with them at every level of living; who believes that such factors as race and ethnicity are irrelevant factors in the grand design of the human race. Education is a personal experience. I taught at New York University where my summer classes sometimes were more than fifty per cent Negro. In my dealings with people of all races and ethnic origins I found that I no longer noticed color; I finally came to see that it is a completely irrelevant factor. It has nothing to do with the worth of a person, or his ability, or his desirability, or anything else you might want to name. A few words are also in order regarding our current emphasis on desegregation. We are not going to solve our problems by desegregation alone, and this is not to say that I am against desegregation. I am concerned about what is going to happen to the Negro child who is placed in an all white school and who must daily face hostile white children and hostile teachers. In such cases I believe he might have been better off in schools with all Negro student populations. We must realize that once we have accomplished desegregation we have taken only the first step. What we have to do with these children is to instill in them a feeling of belonging; a feeling that they belong to us and we belong to them, and there isn't any way that this can be accomplished as long as the two races are kept separate.

As a white man, I believe that not to accept the Negro is to deny that

he is a man. I am he. We are one. I know that this must be. Perhaps he is sorry about this, but he is stuck with me. We are all human beings. This is a fundamental fact that somehow has to come into our minds and our hearts; we are human beings bound together in the great "game of life". The colored human beings in this world are our brothers and sisters. The only way we can be whole men and whole women is to fully accept all human beings as a part of us. If we in any way fail to accept any individual as equal in our minds and hearts because of the color of his skin or any other factor, we are then only partial men.

In the Middle East today there is a war going on that is really a religious war. The Arabs are united in their hate for the Israelis. Ten years ago I was over there and know a little about what it is like. The problems which exist there will never be solved until the Arabs and the Israelis learn to accept each other and begin to deal with each other in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

But we must realize that this can not be learned from a book. You learn this from working with people and living with people day after day, and finally it comes through and you see that the things you once thought were important are really unimportant and that the things which bind us together are so much bigger than those which separate us.

If we are to place greater emphasis in the schools on the quality of interpersonal relationships, a number of changes must be undertaken. At the outset, we need to get rid of the "sacred cows" which the educational establishment has chosen for its own. The graded school has to go. I feel this way about every single graded school in America, coast to coast. We must do away with Carnegie Units, do away with the whole credit system that now operates in our high schools. By the way, just so you don't think I

am completely "off my track" about this, let me tell you that there is a school being built in Brooklyn, New York, which is designed to house such a flexible program. It is going to be called The New High School and in this school there will be no Carnegie Units, there will be no credit system, and every thirty-six days the school will be reorganized on the basis of the needs of the children. If this can be done in New York City, it can be done anywhere. I think, definitely, that there is nothing in the world quite like the educational system in New York City. They face the most difficult problems imaginable. I was there for eleven years and know something about it. If such innovation can be accomplished in New York City it can be done anywhere because it is easier to do anything anywhere else in America than in New York City. So you see, attempts to improve our educational systems have already begun throughout the country.

The marking system which the schools presently utilize is, I believe, the most damaging single entity in our schools. To come directly to the point, if you don't do away with the marking system, you can forget about improving the rest of the system. If you don't improve the self-images of the children, it doesn't make any difference how well the reading lesson is taught. I want you to see that the teacher's biggest single responsibility is to send the child home every day liking himself better than when he came to school in the morning, and if you don't do that then you are not doing your job as a teacher. The child should go home every afternoon feeling that the day was good, that he had some success, that he liked the people he was with, and that he wants to come back in the morning. Don't worry if you don't teach him to read the first two days in school. I didn't learn to read until I was eight, and I learned too. I think that if I hadn't started school until I was ten I would read just as well as I do today, maybe

even better. I would be more worried if the youngster went home each afternoon not liking himself and not wanting to come back in the morning.

One of my graduate students brought a beautiful young girl to see me in my office yesterday. She was an innocent little thing, and the cutest eleven year old you ever saw. This girl was extremely bright; she had an I.Q. of 135. Nevertheless, she hated school---the teachers, the building, the classes, and everything about it. Situations like this exist because we consistently refuse to take into consideration the needs of the children. Instead, we place major emphasis on learning the subject matter.

We must also realize that children don't develop from the fifth year to the sixth year to the seventh and eighth years in even developmental steps. The physical anthropologists and the psychologists tell us that the growth patterns of individual children vary considerably; that they initially develop slowly and that the rate of development increases markedly at certain ages. High school records of individual children show how some children start out in high school doing very poorly in the ninth year, do better in the tenth year, are fairly good students in the eleventh year, and do pretty well in the senior year; but they are then unable to get into college because their over-all average is too low.

While parking our car the other day in the corner of a parking lot in an inner city area we were examining the observable characteristics of the people in the inner city. The most noticeable thing was the attitude of despair and hopelessness that surrounded them. I have talked to dozens and dozens of them, and it is a universal thing. They have given up hope, and we did this to them. They don't do it to themselves. It wasn't only the home or community which served as the major destructive force. It was also the school; it is after they start school and after they have been in school quite

a number of years that the impact of this poor self-image begins to influence every aspect of their lives.

Let me say a little bit about our teacher education institutions which must bear a heavy responsibility for the inadequacies of their past graduates and, even more important, for the inadequacies of their present and future graduates. I recently visited the college that I long ago graduated from in Minnesota and they were quite proud that the records show the majority of all the students in that college today were in the upper twenty per cent of their high school graduating classes. It is a tough college to get into today. At that time it was for everybody. Yet I didn't have a high school diploma when I started college and don't have one to this day. Without that diploma the same University would not accept me today as an undergraduate student.

Nevertheless, this can be observed as just one example of our obsession with subject matter, with what facts we learn. Who talks about what we are, what we are going to accomplish? We suffer in America today not because of what we don't know, but because we are not enough. This is largely true because people are not concerned with what we are. That people neglect the most important aspects of our existence poses numerous problems. When we look at these problems we can see that what we have become is the result of our interactions with the totality of our environments, with everything in our lives, our mothers, our fathers, our brothers, our sisters, the people next door, the people on the street, the church, the police, everything. When we express the opinion that radical changes in our school buildings will facilitate solution of the problems in our large cities, we are just as unrealistic as we can be. The housing patterns have to be changed, the police have to be changed, the parks, the health services, everything, all of us must change. And you know, if anything has received

major attention in the field of education in the recent years, it is teaching methodology. We are still seeking "the" best method, not admitting that no "best" method exists. The most successful things that we have done in the inner city so far are the places where we have "pulled all the stops," where we tried everything, work in the home, work with the community, utilized all kinds of methods, enriched the curriculum, and where all available resources were invested to solve the problems. That is what is required if we are to succeed in rebuilding the inner city areas.

I was in the office of a superintendent of schools during discussions with his principals regarding non-achievers. They had a list of some of the worst cases of non-achievers. Here were a group of boys who had on their report cards all F's, all failures. At best, they faced uncertain futures. The administrative staff decided to ask individual teachers to take a personal interest in these students and talk to them very frequently in an attempt to help them. After this was done for a short period of time, most of them did average work. Many of these students passed their courses for the first time; some were getting A's, and others were just passing. One student was so difficult that the principal couldn't get a teacher to work with him. So, the principal took the job upon himself. After a number of failures during some of which the student became quite violent, the situation slowly began to improve. Today that boy is a straight "B" student. That is as radical a change as can be expected.

And it might well be stated in closing that a great many changes must be made in our educational institutions if we are ever to successfully deal with the problems currently faced in our inner cities. This is in no way to imply that our schools must initiate massive changes purely "for the sake of change." What is implied is that we must initiate structural and

attitudinal changes that will permit us to deal with the causes of the problems which are threatening to overwhelm us in place of the current "patchwork approach". Each day that we refuse to accept this responsibility the conditions in our large cities become steadily worse; each day the severity of the problems increases and the possibilities of solving them in an orderly manner becomes increasingly difficult.

There is little doubt that our failure to behave in a manner consistent with known research also contributes to the low level of esteem with which educators are often viewed in our country by the many publics which constitute our society. Because of the nature of our responsibility there is little chance that we will be able to keep from public view our inability to marshal our forces and exert our influence in a direction consistent with the heavy burden placed upon us and with the needs of the contemporary American society.

Finally, most of the changes which must be initiated if educators are to maintain an important role in our society must be directed to improving the ability of all groups within our society to live together in harmony and understanding. Greater emphasis must be placed on helping our children and adults understand "what they are, who they are, and why they are." Before such an emphasis will be possible, a radical modification of the goals of the educational organization must be undertaken. Until only a few years ago, our educational institution did a fairly satisfactory job of preparing people for the type of society in which they lived; however, in recent years the nature of our society has been drastically altered but our institutions have plainly exhibited an inability to modify their goals in line with those societal alterations. The schools must change to meet the new world we face.

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That, ladies and gentlemen, represents the challenge which we face today and which we must meet; the future of our society rests squarely on our shoulders.

Participants' Reactions to  
Presentation by Mr. Ernest O. Melby

It is interesting to note that the reaction to Mr. Melby's speech was a mixed one and that the nature of the reactions were, apparently, highly influenced by the nature of the training and positions held by the participants. However, there was general agreement that the speech was both stimulating and thought-provoking.

Teachers and principals, in particular, were somewhat dismayed (and, perhaps, even disappointed) at the extensive criticism which the speaker leveled at the schools. In many cases this was taken as a personal attack on their ability to effectively accomplish their professional tasks. As reported by the group leaders, the teachers and principals, for the most part, expressed highly defensive behavior. Of importance is the fact that none of the educators, although behaving in a defensive manner, inferred that Mr. Melby's criticisms were not valid.

On the other hand, most of those who worked in supplementary roles within the schools (social workers, counselors, psychologists) and community representatives expressed very favorable reactions to the speech and indicated their opinion that immediate, drastic and far-reaching modifications of school systems were necessary. Since they viewed Mr. Melby's criticisms as being directed toward educators, and not at themselves, they saw little need for defensiveness. Certainly, their training was of a type which made them more aware of the impact exerted on students by extra-school environmental factors and the degree to which such factors were integrally related to in-school problems. At the same time many of the supplementary school personnel had forgotten (or never experienced) the myriad number of problems facing every teacher who must deal with children in groups of thirty or thirty-five at a time with little opportunity for preparation or personal

counseling. Not having had such experiences, or having forgotten the extent to which they often became all-consuming, they felt quite free to criticize teachers for not being "all things to all people."

Nevertheless, all who were in attendance recognized that if the changes proposed by Mr. Melby were to take place there were numerous implications for the schools and all of the components of those systems.

Initially, note was made of the fact that a different kind of teacher education program must be provided if teachers are ever to be truly capable of working with students "as they are" rather than as we "wish they would be;" that the required diagnostic and remediation skills would necessitate the development of more comprehensive and "professional" training programs for future teachers as well as for those currently in-service. Major emphasis was placed on the need for a better understanding of and improved techniques for working with group dynamics as an educational tool.

It was pointed out that, at present, most people associated with school systems, including those responsible for work with parents and community groups, represent symbols of authority to the people of the community and actually discourage involvement on their part. All agreed that the schools must actively seek out people for these roles who will be capable of working effectively with community personnel.

Special emphasis was placed on the fact that, prior to initiating the type of program recommended by Mr. Melby, we must first reexamine the functions of public education within our society. Conversion from our present emphasis on accumulated knowledge to one which takes into account the processes through which learning takes place will necessitate some fundamental changes in our basic conceptual framework. And, the success or failure of any program involving such massive changes within a relatively

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conservative institution will depend largely on the extent to which those who must effect those changes are involved in the planning stages in a meaningful way.