

# The Importance of People

Stephen M. Corey

## TEACHER-PUPIL UNDERSTANDING

MISS BAKER had just about finished her first semester of actual teaching in the Dewey Junior High School. She was a bright young woman who had gone on to her Master's Degree without having more than one or two semesters of practice teaching experience. She was able to talk excellent theories about instruction and child development and teacher-relations and ever so many other important matters, but she had had little opportunity to come to grips with the difficulties that are met when these theories are implemented in actual school operations. Consequently, she had had a rather stormy time with a ninth grade group of bright youngsters in the social studies. Her practices couldn't keep up with her convictions. She had had much the same experience that many enthusiastic and verbally well-trained young teachers have when they come up against the baffling problems of a real school situation.

MR. SMITH, the principal of the Dewey School was a patient and philosophical person who realized that from many points of view the best training curriculum for teachers is the classroom itself. He knew, too, that every beginning teacher has to win some of her battles without much help from the outside.

MISS BAKER: I had hoped that I would be able to see you sometime during the Christmas holidays because I wanted to try to summarize my experiences so far this semester and to tell you that I think the worst is over.

MR. SMITH: I should like to hear about what has happened. I have heard of some of the interesting work you and the children are doing on local history, and I want your ideas about its value. But before we get to that, what has happened to make you feel that "the worst is over"?

MISS BAKER: You may remember when I saw you eight weeks or so ago I said, hoping that you wouldn't take me too seriously, that the 9:30 social studies class was slowly driving me wild. As I look back on it now I'm sure that I should not have said "slowly."

MR. SMITH: Yes, I remember the conversation we had. I actually didn't take you too seriously, but I was concerned about the way you felt about your teaching.

MISS BAKER: So was I! There were times when I would go home having definitely made up my mind that I would resign at the end of the week. Then I would remember how anxious I was to get this job, and I didn't know what to do. For the first time in my life I knew that I had a stomach because it was upside down most of the time.

- MR. SMITH: The very fact that you can talk about it now means that you feel much better, and I'm glad you do. How is Tom working out?
- MISS BAKER: Well, he was the ring leader as you must have heard, and he almost made me lose my mind. He would sit in the back of the class playing with the cords on the window shades, and every expression on his face and every remark that he made meant that he was unfriendly and hostile. As soon as I got in front of that class I would get tense and tight and nervous. Maybe my life had been too easy before, but whenever 9:30 came around I had no confidence whatever in myself. But, to get back to Tom, the climax came one morning late in October when I found him playing solitaire in the back of the room and paying absolutely no attention to what I was saying. I think it was the first time—and I know it was the last—but you undoubtedly heard the rumors that got all around school that the children in my class played cards rather than learning anything.
- MR. SMITH: Yes, I heard the rumor but I didn't bother to talk with you about it. The first time I taught—it was in Norwood, Ohio—I learned that one of the boys in my algebra class had won \$3.63 matching pennies. That means a lot of matching! When I learned about that I blamed myself, too, as you did with Tom. But, to get back to your troubles, I realized during the last of October and the first of November that you weren't too happy about the way things were going. At the staff meeting on December 6th, however, you looked so completely relaxed and entered into the discussion about tenure with so few inhibitions that I inferred things were going along much better. Weren't they?
- MISS BAKER: Yes, they had started to look up then and that's what I want to tell you about in a moment. But I want to say again that before that I was in bad shape. I didn't want to come to you, because—oh, well, you know how it is—every teacher wants her principal to feel that she has the situation well in hand, and even though several of the folks said that I should go to you I was ashamed to do it.
- MR. SMITH: I'm sorry when teachers feel that way. I guess that's what we get for being administrators. If our job is defined so as to give us sole responsibility for employing and discharging teachers, we can't expect them to show the sort of confidence and trust in us that they would if we were not in a position of authority.
- MISS BAKER: I guess that's the explanation. But, anyway, I was so worked up I finally went to Martha Cox and talked with her about the business. She was sympathetic and that helped, but the only advice she could give was, "You must relax. Don't be afraid of the children." That didn't get me very far. I would make up my mind that I wasn't afraid of them but when I got to class I *was*. It seemed that my head was convinced but the rest of me went right on acting as it had.
- MR. SMITH: Even though advice of that sort isn't very helpful it is the sort that most of us give to one another. We tell children to "concentrate" or to "be

good" and expect them to change. Miss Cox, however, is an understanding person, and I am glad that you and she got better acquainted.

MISS BAKER: Yes, she certainly is. The next time we talked we went on and on and began to discuss some of the children. She knew Tom quite well and her whole attitude toward all of the youngsters was one of trying to get at some of the causes back of their behavior. She told me, for example, about Tom's disappointment in football this fall and how he had gotten mad and quit the squad and that she thought that probably this was influencing his behavior throughout the school. Other teachers had been having trouble, too, even Mr. Tuff. Somehow I felt better after that conversation with her. I got to looking at the situation as a problem. It was just about then that I finally did work up enough courage to come in and see you.

MR. SMITH: I remember. You left, I think, before you got around to talking about what you came in to talk about, but you didn't look quite so harried as when we visited early in October. You talked more freely and suggested a number of things you thought you would try out.

MISS BAKER: One thing I liked was that you didn't tell me what I should do. I almost always knew what I *should* do, but somehow or other I couldn't get my feelings about the situation straightened out enough to do it. I felt so much on the spot before those kids that I would make snap judgments which I knew just a few seconds afterwards were bad. For example, when we were planning one of our units and the children seemed to be quite enthusiastic about closing it with a play based on the events that led up to the laying of the cornerstone in the old courthouse at Benton, I made the very foolish remark, "I'm not sure whether we should or not; I'll have to ask Miss Cox." As soon as I said that I knew I shouldn't have. When I talked with Miss Cox, she, too, said that she felt that that was putting the decision on her when as a matter of fact it could have been made in the class by the pupils and me.

MR. SMITH: Yes, as you say, it probably would have been better to have hashed something of that sort out with the class or at least said that you would postpone any decision until you found out what the policy of the school was. But we all learn by experience and the lesson you learned was not one that cost much. I understand the play is to be put on after the holidays.

MISS BAKER: Yes, that's right. But I'd like to get back to this conference that you and I had. I really don't know how it was managed, or whether it was managed at all, but as we talked it seemed that I myself suggested ever so many things that I might do to improve the situation. Together we examined what the implications might be. We talked about having some of the youngsters in the class who were troublesome undertake some special responsibility so that they could get recognition in a desirable way. Of course, I had thought about that and it had come up often in my training at Columbia, but somehow or other I had never disentangled it from Education 367A long enough to apply it to the situation I was in. The next time the class met I asked Tom if he would mind getting fifteen or twenty books from the library and I made it

clear that I was asking him to do this because he was big, and, while he seemed a little skeptical at first, he went and came back and distributed the books and even took part in the class discussion that day. Since then I've had him do ever so many things and he accepts the responsibility unusually well and seems much less disposed to try to get on my nerves.

MR. SMITH: Was there any time with these youngsters when you felt that the improvement in the relations between you and them took place quickly? Or has it been a gradual improvement?

MISS BAKER: There has been gradual improvement, of course, but as I was thinking about it the other evening I concluded that a great deal of improvement took place right after a trip we all made. It was about three weeks ago when the children decided that they would like to visit Cecil James on his farm near Lorenda because he had promised to read some of the poems he had been writing about the pioneers in this county. About twenty-two of us took the trip and partly, I guess, because I was as anxious to see what the farmhouse was like and to hear the poems as they were, I felt in a good humor and at ease. At first the children seemed to be sort of suspicious of me as they were in class, but we went out in the Board of Education bus and on the way we all sang and teased and I think the children got quite a different idea of me. As a matter of fact, I guess I was a different person when I was away from the school. It took us about an hour and a half to get out to the James' place and by the end of that time the youngsters were chattering away and including me in their conversation and asking my advice about this and that. I just had the feeling that some barrier had been broken through.

MR. SMITH: I have had that same feeling a number of times myself in faculty meetings. As if a brick wall had evaporated!

MISS BAKER: That's it exactly! And then at the James' farm things went beautifully. He was kind and interested in the youngsters, and he had read a few of the things some of them had written, which flattered them no end. He took us about the farm and showed us all of the historical relics of local interest he had in his living room. Finally, he and the boys built a big log fire and we all sat around it while he read his poetry for almost an hour and a half. It was really wonderful! Then he and a committee of the girls served tea, and we sang songs. Before we knew it, it was 7:30 and we had to pile into the bus and come back home. On the way we talked about some of the early historical incidents in the county, and the children were friendly and seemed to enjoy one another's company and mine more than they ever had before. The next day things went so well in class I couldn't believe it. We decided to spend the next few weeks studying local history, and the way the children planned some real work just made me feel as if I were walking on air. Since then there have been some days when everything didn't go so well but by and large, as I said a moment ago, the worst is over.

MR. SMITH: What sort of big ideas do you have about what has happened that might be helpful to me so that I can work better with other new teachers?

MISS BAKER: I haven't thought a great deal about it from that point of view, but one thing I'm convinced of is that a new teacher is apt to be so anxious to have the children like her as a person that she tries to win that liking by direct means which I'm afraid are almost doomed to failure.

MR. SMITH: Just what do you mean?

MISS BAKER: I mean that I wanted so much to have these youngsters like me that for the first six or seven weeks I almost completely forgot what my real job was—to help them learn something about the social studies. I spent entirely too much time trying to develop every situation into one where they would find out what a swell person I was and get over some of their hostility. The lesson I think I've learned is that a teacher probably ought to expect to be tested by the youngsters and she doesn't deserve their affection and friendship and respect until she's demonstrated that she's a good teacher, as well as a nice person.

*It is the belief that the techniques of curriculum development are only as effective as the people who operate them that has brought this department of EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP into being. Each month Stephen M. Corey presents scenes from life situations which reflect significant concepts of behavior and which may be counterparts of many of your own experiences. The cases or conversations are based upon actual situations, somewhat disguised for obvious reasons.*



### **A Minister, a Priest, and a Rabbi . . .**

How to play fair in intercultural relations is forcefully summed up in the following nine rules prepared by a minister, a priest, and a rabbi for the National Conference of Christians and Jews:

1. Respect the cultural sincerity and integrity of other groups.
2. Be sensitive to the accumulations of tradition in other groups.
3. Read and appreciate the literature, arts, and philosophy of other groups.
4. Cultivate at least a few deep, personal friendships with members of other groups.
5. Think of other groups in terms of the best individuals they produce.
6. Deal with each individual according to his capacities and graces, not according to a stereotyped label society may have put on his group of faith.
7. Work with people of other cultures, not for them.
8. Make the adventure for truth, beauty, and goodness a mutual enterprise, inclusive of all cultures.
9. Temper your own group-drive with a civilized regard for the rights and liberties of other groups.

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