

The Importance of People

Mary and Harry H. Giles



Us—From Chungking to Cheyenne

HELP WANTED

TEACHERS who feel their own importance in a world where there are endless possibilities for human development. Apply where you are.

The minds of men have developed the means for a war which involves all the peoples of the earth. And the minds of men are developing earth-shaking concepts which can be used in a great mass-war on ignorance, conflict, and destruction. In this latter war, the school man and woman are frontline fighters. From the nursery school teacher

Making their EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP debut this month as an artist-writer team are Mary and Harry H. Giles. They will combine their talents in "The Importance of People" to bring us sketches and articles throughout the year. The Giles live in Chicago, where Mr. Giles, formerly at West Georgia State College, Carrollton, is now working with the American Council on Race Relations and Bureau for Intercultural Education.

to the college president, there is a vocation in human engineering.

The Chinese and the Koreans esteem teachers and poets above other men. The African tribe recognizes the sculptor as a person whose power is superior to the command of the king. But where older cultures conceive of the teacher as belonging to an aristocratic caste, America has taken another stand. Alone, of the great populations of the world, America established universal free education as a principal function and duty of the state.

We are still in process of discovering how really great is the power of education. We are just beginning to realize that all of life is educative and that we now have the tools for studying and constantly improving the scope and effectiveness of that education. The fact that we have those tools and that the process of using them is still in its beginning stages in our life as a nation indicate the combination of power and adventure in the job of the educator.

The production of popular illustrated pamphlets by anthropologists, the talk of economies which are planned, the emphasis

on the "ways of democracy" in educational meetings, are signs of our general concern for more intelligent living. But the abstract word is only a symbol. Back of it, sometimes concealed by it, is the exciting, rigorous, and living reality of human development which good teachers and administrators know.

For example, in a government nursery for workers in a southern cotton mill there was a very young child, admitted because the county welfare worker pled for her. Otherwise she would have been left, locked on the porch of her mother's cabin, for eight, nine, or ten hours each day with such attention as the 9-year-old of the family might give when she thought of it. Thus, already at 18 months a small human being had been taught the meaning of hunger, desertion—the carelessness of a society for its young.

The child had been in the nursery school for five days. When she came, she cried almost continuously and had temper tantrums. At home she had learned that though results came hard these were the means for getting attention.

During our visit she was quiet—so quiet that we did not notice her at first. What called her to our notice—besides her obvious littleness and the single torn flour-sack garment she wore—was what happened when the mid-morning lunch was served.

We were sitting on the sides of the sandbox with a large group of children, talking



The little waif at lunch

and playing together. The cook appeared with a tray holding glasses of milk and a plate of Graham crackers. The little waif came to the group, seated herself on the edge of the sandbox with some difficulty, took a glass of milk without spilling it, and then, still more difficult because of the glass and her balance, took a cracker. As the rest of us sat and ate, she sat and ate. She wanted to belong, but this was the first time she had achieved it. She put her glass back on the tray quite nicely, and only had to be reminded once to make the sound which stood for "Thank you."

The young teacher, just out of college, talked with us. We saw that she had only a little knowledge of textbooks, considerably more of applied psychology (such as when to encourage and when to ignore), and most of all, a belief that "you" (anyone) "can be greater than you are," which gave her insight. Perhaps it is partly because the very young child has not yet learned to conceal much of his real nature that nursery and primary teachers are often so wise.

All that had happened in this instance might have been covered by words like "socialization," "respect for the worth and dignity of the individual," "character building," "health habits," "manual skills." But whatever it is called, it was a demonstration of the enormous power which teachers and parents may wield in the shaping of attitudes which lead to learning.

All of us—children, teachers, administrators, parents—all of us want to belong, and want to use all of our interests and abilities.



The little boy
who
spit and
swore

If there is no constructive way, then there are destructive ways. The third-grade boy who spit and swore at teacher and classmates, the seventh-grade which organized itself into gangs for sly acts of destruction, the boy of good intelligence who failed in medical school when his father forced him there against his will—each of these cases illustrates the importance of human relationships. And in each case a successful teacher brought about a change, not through special equipment or materials of study, or application of a mechanical system of rewards and punishments, but through a desire to understand and meet the need for growth.

Given the desire, ways and means can be found which may be effective at any age.

For example, there is Arthur Black.

When he came to a university extension class in public speaking, he was 47 years old and a frustrated person. All of his working life he had been a member of organized labor. He had tried in every city where he

had worked to make his idealism function in his union. He had been rebuffed and discouraged, he had become suspicious of human motives.

Arthur Black was a cynical, side-line critic of efforts to make the speech class democratic through general participation in planning and criticism. Throughout the first week he kept waiting for the catch in it.

Then came the time for him to make a formal speech and he spoke passionately. Because he deeply felt the need in our country for the protective legislation which he advocated, he launched into a name-calling indictment of all those who might oppose him. When the opposition came, he met it with violent personal denunciation.

The teacher and the class did not, in the analysis, take up questions of Black's faulty outline or his bad grammar. They talked about whether there are ways of holding to a point of view without creating personal antagonisms. How do you get people to listen to you with sympathy? How do you make your point in such a way that it strikes your listeners where they live, ties in with their own experiences?

But while the things that were said by teacher and classmates in this and subsequent discussions no doubt had value to him, the crux of the matter to Arthur Black was in the way he was treated. He said, long after, that he was made to feel that though he was disagreed with he was respected; that the people present cared about him and about what he could accomplish in this world and that this made him want to learn. He did learn. He grew effective as a speaker. He kept on growing, not only as a speaker but as one who could be considerate and understanding with people. In time, he became a government mediator in labor disputes.

So, for every teacher there is a social need and a challenge. It is the need of all the peoples of the earth to learn, to create, to cooperate. It is the challenge of human beings and their development, never twice the same, always waiting for the creative mind, the wisdom, the touch of the artist.



Arthur Black spoke passionately

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