

The Importance of People

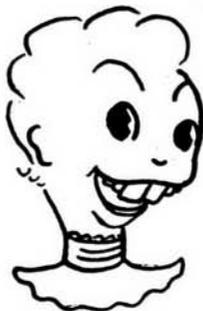
Ruth Cunningham

MISS SQUIRRELY GOZINTA HEAVEN

IT WAS INEVITABLE that she be nicknamed "Miss Squirrely." Her bright eyes shone like shoe buttons, and with her prominent front teeth and chubby pink cheeks, the resemblance was too clear to miss. But Miss Squirrely didn't seem to mind, and she was used to it by now. The name had stuck for forty-odd years while Miss Squirrely (nee Reynolds) taught the third grade in Center City.

There were traditions that went with the nickname. Every year on the first day of school some sweet innocent came to the door and asked, "Is this Miss Squirrely's room?" While the whole group of forty-some youngsters squirmed with nervous glee, Miss Squirrely would make a broad gesture toward the class and chirp, "Why yes. Did you come to see my collection of nuts?" This always brought the house down. Delighted 8-year-olds doubled up with laughter and held their sides in the delicious pain of gasping for breath between giggles and shouts.

Once in a while some former student, gravely dignified now with the responsibility of parenthood, would ask Miss Reynolds if she didn't get tired of the old gag. "Oh, no,"



Miss Squirrely would reply. "Everyone needs a good laugh now and then."

And regularly, some brave young parent would come to Miss Squirrely's room to complain about her teaching methods. Johnny (or Sally or Tim or Sue) wasn't learning his gozintas. Everyone knows that the younger generation is supposed to learn their gozintas in the third grade. Two gozinta two, once; two gozinta four, twice; on up to nine gozinta eighty-one, nine times. But Miss Squirrely, unperturbed, would say, "But Johnny doesn't need his gozintas yet. When he gets ready, he'll learn them." And, usually Johnny did—when he needed them and when he was ready.

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP welcomes as a regular contributor Ruth Cunningham, who will write and illustrate "The Importance of People" department of the journal. Miss Cunningham, former editor of EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP and DSCD executive secretary, is now staff member of the Institute for School Experimentation, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, N. Y.



"Is this Miss Squirrely's room?"

Then there was the matter of marks. Center City mothers held violent indignation meetings over the bridge tables about Miss Squirrely's methods of distributing the ABC's and D's. For example, there was the case of Mrs. Carson's Susan. Susan was bright as a new dime, and never missed a word in spelling, but one month she had a C in spelling on her report card! Mrs. Carson descended on the school with righteous indignation oozing from every pore. She demanded an explanation.

Miss Squirrely was glad to explain. "You see," she said, "Susie—"

"Susan!" corrected Mrs. Carson. "Susie," continued Miss Squirrely calmly, "is getting too smarty. She needed a C to show her that the world isn't all lollypops and ice-cream cones, and that she isn't really any better than anyone else, and that it's a good idea to have to work now and then. But Butch, that's Jim Ball's boy, needed that A—so I gave it to him."



Butch

"But can he spell as well as my Susan?" asked Mrs. Carson.

"No," admitted Miss Squirrely with a sigh. "He can't spell very well I'm afraid, but, you see, Jim—that's his father—has been sick lately and can't work; so Butch couldn't have a model plane like the other boys."

Mrs. Carson began to wonder if Miss Squirrely wasn't a bit too old to teach. Her mind seemed to be wandering these days. She'd better bring her back to firmer ground. "But you just said this boy can't spell. Then why—"

"I'm just explaining," continued Miss Squirrely patiently. "You see, you shouldn't treat children for what they've done but for what they need. Now, Butch is a fine boy and some day he may be a fine citizen for Center City and a good garbage collector like his father. But things haven't been going too well at home so he needed that A."

"She's hopeless," exclaimed Mrs. Carson as she adroitly dealt cards at the bridge party that afternoon. "Absolutely hopeless!"



Mrs. Carson

At that same moment, far from Center City in the halls of a great university, sat one of Miss Squirrely's former students, now a professor. He was struggling with coefficients of correlation, I. Q.'s, vocabulary loads, and such. He was bored. As he gazed out of the window he wondered how he'd ever managed to get educated in Center City, where vocabulary loads were unheard of. Why, if Miss Squirrely ever saw a coefficient of correlation she'd probably burst out in giggles, then explain that everybody needs a good laugh now and then!

He smiled to himself and began to put his papers in neat piles so he could go home and forget them. But he kept on smiling and thinking of Miss Squirrely as he walked home across the campus. "Maybe the old girl has something," he said to himself. "Maybe we do need to know more about needs of kids."

Thus was born a "new" School of Thought. It was not new, really, for Miss Squirrely had known about it for years, but when Ph.D's began writing articles, and learned educators gave papers before distin-

guished audiences, NEEDS took a new and important place in education. Hundreds of teachers, many of whom had understood needs for years and years, began to practice what they'd always known was good sense, and, finally, thousands of youngsters began to have more significant experiences. Things weren't quite the same as in Miss Squirrely's room, to be sure. For example, it was decided that while youngsters' behavior should be evaluated, they didn't need competitive marks; so there weren't ABC's and D's to distribute. But Miss Squirrely's spirit lived in the "new" classrooms.

As word flew about the country that NEEDS were the rage, educators everywhere began making lists and revising curriculums. Miss Kingsley, supervisor of Center City Schools, worn out from long years of writing courses of study, rolled her eyes in despair. Then she hit on a bright idea. She got out her old course of study which had on the first pages, as was the law of the Medes and the Persians, a list of "objectives." She crossed out the word *Objectives* (things I want the children to do and be and feel) and wrote in its place at the top of the list, the word *Needs*. She gave a sigh of relief. It wasn't so difficult after all to keep up with the new trends of thought.

At the next teachers' meeting she announced that hence forth the curriculum was to be built on the *needs* of boys and girls.

Miss Squirrely's old eyes brightened. Had she heard right? Yes, she had! It had come at last. Here was hope for youngsters, for



The former student

teachers, for education. She felt like laughing and shouting as her youngsters did at the "Squirrely's nuts" joke. But she'd better listen carefully. This was important. . . . What was that? There must be some mistake. No, it couldn't be, but it was true. The supervisor was saying just as clear as anything ". . . and of course we all know that every boy and girl *needs* the gozintas in the third grade."

"And then," said Saint Peter as he stood at the Pearly Gates interviewing Miss Squirrely, "did you tell the supervisor where to get off?"

"No," sighed Miss Squirrely. "I guess she just *needs* to know people better, boys and girls especially and maybe when she's ready, she'll learn."

Saint Peter smiled, then shouted for all the Saints to hear:

Miss Squirrely gozinta Heaven!



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