

The Changing World

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IS EDUCATION DEMOCRATIC?

PRACTICALLY ALL educators acknowledge the importance of education in relation to the solution of present world problems, but there is often a vague generality to the educational proposals that are made. Rarely do we make clear the exact processes whereby education is to contribute to the survival of our democratic values. There seems to be a naive assumption that merely more education will save our freedom. If as teachers we were more discerning, we would realize that much of our educational effort contributes to anti-democratic rather than to democratic objectives, and that one of the most important such anti-democratic influences is the undemocratic character of the educational enterprise itself, particularly as to organization and administration. In fact, it should be crystal clear to all students of the problem, that education will not become a vigorous force for democracy and human values until it democratizes its own internal activities and procedures.

In our large city school systems especially, there is a notable lack of communication between administrators and teachers. A large proportion of teachers feel that there is no way in which they can make their influence felt or in which they can share in a meaningful fashion in the solution of educational problems. The dead weight of the administrative hierarchy is too great to be surmounted. No doubt an exceptionally dynamic teacher makes himself heard occasionally and has real influence on policy determination. But it is too much to expect all teachers to possess the aggressive, dynamic, qualities that are required for such influence. Moreover, some of the finest ideas for educational betterment are in the minds of the more timid and retiring individuals in the group.

As matters now stand these individuals are often ignored and their ideas unused, with consequent loss to the school system and the community, and frustration for the individuals involved. Clearly there is a crying need for a better communication between the various members of the organization. The question is, how can the processes of communication be set in motion.

In a great many cases teachers are definitely afraid to make suggestions to their supervisory officers. They have a feeling that suggestions will be resented or perhaps that their particular suggestion will be viewed in a critical and negative fashion. Moreover, the human relationships prevailing in the enterprise are often such as to discourage teachers from participating too actively in shaping educational policies. There are of course a number of influences which create these difficult personal and professional relationships. One is the wide differences in the compensation of teachers and administrative officers. These wide differences create a sharply competitive organization in which there is a natural tendency to follow line organization and line channels. Another factor is the very crowded daily schedule of administrative officers which makes a leisurely and relaxed relationship with staff members difficult to maintain.

But perhaps the most important single factor in teacher-administration relationships is the feeling on the part of teachers that administrative officers do not represent them, but on the contrary represent the board of education, or the community, or perhaps the big taxpayers in that community. As a result, teachers feel they cannot trust administrative officers, especially where matters of salary, or rank, or other phases of teacher-welfare are in-

volved. Some teachers organizations face this problem by denying membership in their groups to those who hold administrative positions. Whatever the arguments may be for such a policy it is at best a negative effort and in no sense an effective solution to the problem.

Fundamentally the problem of bringing about effective communication between teachers and administrators must be solved in terms of principles of human relationship. No organizational pattern alone will be of much value. Some school systems for example, have elected teachers councils. These will help only when they operate in a spirit of frankness and mutual helpfulness. Lacking this quality they may become mere stereotypes which make a school organization look democratic on paper when in reality it has few democratic characteristics. We see that to be effective, democratic principles of human relationships must have reality in the daily behavior of administrators and teachers. And in this area we as administrators and supervisors have first responsibility. We

must take the first steps. We must be sure we are not ourselves obstacles to creative living in the school. We might well ask ourselves a few pointed questions:

1. Am I kindly and sympathetic in my relation to teachers, children and parents?
2. Do I welcome suggestions and do I try whenever possible to put them into effect?
3. Do I respect the personalities of all those with whom I live and work, regardless of color, creed, or social or economic status?
4. Do I think first of the teachers and children and last of myself in such matters as salaries, teaching loads and tenure?
5. Do I take a vigorous position in defense of human values whenever the issues are raised?

When as administrators and supervisors we can answer *yes* to these questions we shall have taken the first steps in building a truly democratic education and through it a sound foundation for free institutions.

TEXTBOOK NEWS

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