

The Importance of People

Dorothy J. Hayes

SHOULD TIMMY GRADUATE?

DEAR MARY: You're good to write me in such detail about the things happening in your school. I welcome your letters and digest them eagerly, even though this sharing of educational experiences keeps me thinking way into the night and may be responsible for my vehemently bursting forth at 6:30 AM (when my sleeping partner is not one whit interested in educational problems) with such statements as "I don't believe in tenure, do you?"

I've been thinking about Timmy and hope you'll write me what his teachers finally decide to do about him. You say they are thinking of not letting him graduate from elementary school because they think "it will not be fair to him" to let him go to high school not having acquired the academic background they think will be expected of him in the next unit of the educational ladder. Are they afraid for *Timmy*? Are they sure he is doomed for failure in the high school and cannot bear to let him try to meet the failure? Or are they just a little worried that they, Timmy's teachers, may be judged as having done an inadequate job of teaching?

You say you feel the secondary school hasn't gone as far as the elementary school in working out a program geared to the real life needs of its citizens? I can almost see your clenched fist and hear you pounding on the table when you say, "Why, oh, why doesn't somebody do something about the secondary school?"

Perhaps you're right, Mary, in seeing the secondary school as the "bottle-neck" that keeps us from developing a total educational program that "accepts the individual where he is," that provides a flexible program that meets individual differences and encourages growth for all rather than uniform progress. But I wonder whether it is

intellectually honest to make such a generalization about *all* secondary schools? What about that high school we attended in Milwaukee? Some of the best preparation for living the rest of my life and in developing interest in learning to understand the importance of people seems to stem from my high school experiences. There were high schools, then, and there are those today which seem to do a better job of meeting individual differences than the elementary schools in the same educational system.

I once sat in on a meeting where the school guidance counselor was pleading with two eighth grade teachers to allow a girl to graduate. Their only reason for wanting to hold her back seemed to be that they thought she couldn't possibly do successful high school work, and they couldn't dissuade her from wanting to go to high school.

"But has she not done satisfactory work in your school?" I asked.

"Well, not *really* satisfactory," they said. "We've passed her along year after year because she seemed to be trying so hard, and there were many reasons why we didn't want to discourage her by letting her sense what a failure she was. But she's not equipped to do high school work and we can't convince either her or her mother that she shouldn't try to do further school work. We'd be willing to let her graduate if we could be sure she wouldn't try to go to high school!"

It didn't seem possible that Nancy's elementary school had really met her special needs, even though she had been "passed along year after year," but at least she had stayed with boys and girls her own age. Her teachers finally agreed that she could graduate with her class.

"But what will happen to her in high school we simply don't know, but we'll try not to worry," they said.

I made the comment that I would try to keep in touch with Nancy while she was in high school.

"Through her first year in high school," the elementary school teachers said, "because surely they won't keep her longer than the first year!"

But Nancy did stay past her first year, and her second and third years. In fact, she graduated and spent two years in a junior college. Today she's what people call a "self-respecting citizen."

I've often wondered whether Nancy's teachers learned from her experiences. I've wondered whether they learned to trust the secondary school to carry on where the elementary left off? There were other boys and girls with needs like Nancy's and needs different from Nancy's who went to that same high school, and I saw it proved over and over again that students could be accepted "where they were" and experiences could be provided that kept them interested and motivated to learn the things that helped them develop into functionally useful citizens. What more could we ask of any school?

I hope your colleagues will not make a hasty decision in Timmy's case. As important as Timmy's life is, other important outcomes are dependent on the decision. The fiery discussion may be a first step toward coordination between Timmy's elementary and secondary schools. I hope you will find ways of getting at the philosophy of the school Timmy will next attend, and of working with that school. Dare I even hope that perhaps some day soon your teachers will be requesting a co-operative workshop program composed of both high school and elementary school teachers to study the common problems in relation to the goal we today set for all children. You know as well as I that only by working together, instead of fighting each other, can the schools the Timmys and Nancys of the world attend give them and the world what is due them.

Dorothy

*Springboard for
group discussion*

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