

The Importance of People

Dorothy J. Hayes

FREEDOM TO GROW

DEAR MARY: I need your help. I'm baffled. I have just been talking with a young teacher who has been evaluating the growth of the six-year-olds in her room. She said, "I've had such fun in my first year of teaching, but I guess I'm not a good teacher."

"Why?" I asked in astonishment, for I had mentally labeled her as a teacher who was very much concerned about meeting children's needs. I felt sure she would strive to provide for each child the opportunities for maximum growth.

"Well, I just don't seem to have contributed much to them," she said.

"Haven't they made progress?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," and her face lighted up. "Each of them has made his particular kind of progress. There's Jimmy, for example. Jimmy isn't reading from books yet, but he no longer just sits and sucks his thumb. His block building shows that he is becoming more interested in the world and people around him; he and three other boys worked together to construct this elaborate replica of the docks!

"And then there's Sally. She's just beginning to show an interest in learning to read, but her greatest growth has come in social development. At first Sally was openly antagonistic. She seemed not to like me; but she resented any attention I gave to the other children.

"And I'm happy about the change in Ronny. At the beginning of the year the other children were always taking advantage of his inability to stand up for his rights. Now he often makes a decision and sticks to it."

She went on and discussed each of the children from the records she's kept, and then said, "Yes, I see growth for each one, but couldn't they have made this growth

without me? I didn't *teach* Jimmy not to suck his thumb; I didn't tell him to become interested in things or show him how to get along with other children. I never once suggested to Sally that the reason children resented her might be because she was antagonistic to them. Lately she has been creating delightful stories, but I didn't teach her how. I spent a lot of time thinking about Ronny; but what did I do to help him learn to stand up for his rights? What have I really contributed as a teacher to these children?"

"What about their music and all those trips into the community?" I asked. "Haven't you been responsible for bringing these important experiences to the children?"

"But that's all been fun," she said. "I play the piano a great deal because the children and I love it. There's been no *teaching* to that. The children have learned so many folk songs because they enjoy them and beg me to play them. The rhythms you saw them doing are the ones they create and they are far lovelier than anything I could have taught them. The trips we have taken each week have been all fun, too. I was as eager to explore the community as the children. After each excursion there was always so much to do that the year has just flown by. When we planned our activities before and after the trips, I could hardly get the ideas written on the board as fast as the children suggested them. They've dramatized and reconstructed with blocks, drawings, paintings, and stories much of what we've seen. They've been so eager to help mix the paints, clean the brushes, and get supplies ready that even in the housekeeping of the classroom my function hasn't been as important as theirs."

"Look at those children over there in the reading corner," I said. "They wouldn't be showing such an interest and independence in reading if there hadn't been some good teaching of reading in this room."

"To be perfectly honest," she said, "even here I can't see that I do very much 'teaching' of reading. I supply the books they beg for and, with relatively little help from me, they read and read. It's the same in writing; we have no 'writing lessons,' but they ask for opportunities to write stories, letters, and the recipes of the things we cook each week."

At first I couldn't believe that she was serious in thinking she might not be a good teacher. I kept wishing the learning experiences of more classrooms could provide fun for the children and the teacher. Where there is fun and acceptance of individuals, children have a chance to work through problems of social relationships and to become better adjusted persons. I thought of the Jimmies who could develop interests and confidence, the Sallys who could find legitimate ways to become acceptable members of their groups, and the Ronnys who would learn to make their own decisions.

Everything the young teacher said to confirm her stand convinced me more and more that she is the kind of teacher I wish for all children. Although she is as yet unable to generalize on what she has accomplished in this first year, it seems to me she has given children *freedom to grow*. What seems so natural to her, what she thinks "anyone can do"—the creation of a flexible, informal classroom atmosphere in which meaningful, concept-building experiences are in abundance, and in which individuality and personalities are respected—are the very things that make her a *teacher*. Doesn't it seem to you that the true guider of children is there when they need her but dares to get out of the way to give children room to grow?

Tell me how I can let this young teacher know what a good job she's doing and to inspire more teachers like her. It seems to me the future of our democratic society depends on our helping the true teachers feel a sense of accomplishment for having provided opportunities for each child to become a confident and competent citizen, and then to have given that child freedom to grow.

And so again, goodbye for this time.

Dorothy

The Changing World

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intimately and pervasively *interdependent*. Another way to put this is to point out that *security*, as a quality of experience, is coming to be seen as a product of deliberately worked for and relied upon interdependencies.

► It is based upon the active, *operationally* developed meanings of the Golden Rule—the twin principles of *interaction*

and *continuity*³: that the way we behave in respect to others tends to call out in them similar ways of behaving in respect to us.

In this emerging conception of morality we see a closure of the long-time dichotomy between the ideal and the practical: that through and in democratic-cooperative relations men are coming to see that they may "huddle together" to keep both themselves and others "warm."

³ Dewey, John, *Experience and Education*, Macmillan Company, 1938. pp. 43-48

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