

# *The Challenge to Social Education*

ERNEST O. MELBY

An education for human freedom, exemplified in each community with zeal and compelling power, is portrayed as the greatest need of our day by Dean Ernest O. Melby, School of Education, New York University.

A NEW AND POWERFUL DYNAMIC must be found for education if democracy and freedom are to survive. If the international crisis has done nothing else, it should have shocked the teaching profession from coast to coast in high-lighting the ineffectiveness and inadequacy of present and past social education in our and other free societies. For one thing, the West has failed to commend its way of life to the hundreds of millions of people in the depressed areas of the globe. In part this is a failure in education and propaganda—in convincing argument—but more deeply it is a failure to demonstrate in our daily living that we really are concerned about social justice for the downtrodden masses and that at home the human brotherhood we preach is really practiced.

Therefore, as teachers we may as well face the reality that we have not successfully taught either the theory or the practice of democracy. As a people we do not know our way of life well enough to commend it to others in clear and exciting language. We do not feel strongly enough about this way of life to present it in dramatic form. What is worst of all, we have not practiced our way of freedom and human brotherhood with sufficient thoroughness and dedication so that other men are convinced we mean what we say.

Talk American freedom to the Chinese or the Russian and he in turn is very likely to ask you about our treatment of Negroes.

## **A New Devotion Needed**

I am well aware of all the glib answers offered in response to such an appraisal, such as our high standard of living, our widespread education and our progress even on racial question. These we can readily grant. We can go even further and argue that American civilization has released human talents to a greater degree than has been done by any other society. We can point to our amazing productivity, our wide distribution of labor-saving and other technological devices.

I yield to no one in my admiration for the near miracles of America. But now they are not enough. Unless we can do even better both in the practice of freedom and in its interpretation abroad we shall not only fail to bring freedom to the masses of the oppressed but we shall most certainly lose even that freedom which is now ours. Unless education can give our boys and girls and men and women greater understanding of freedom, a more intense devotion to it, and greater effectiveness in its practice in home, school and community, education will fail freedom in its hour of greatest need.

## EDUCATION FOR HUMAN FREEDOM

The task of presenting the above view to one's professional colleagues is not too pleasant. As a teacher you may ask, "Have we not given wholeheartedly of ourselves? Have we not struggled against almost insuperable odds—big classes, poor buildings, political interference, low salaries, apathetic communities and indifferent homes? Have we not struggled with new curricula, guidance programs and vitalized methods of teaching?" The answer is yes, and again I yield to no one in my admiration for the altruism of the teaching profession. But again the answer is, it is not enough. A program with effectiveness far beyond past standards is demanded.

The average teacher will ask, "What's wrong; where have we failed?" In my judgment our failures are at three points. *We have depended too heavily on mere knowledge. We have neglected motivational zeal, and we have been too much inclined to stay inside the schoolhouse with the result that we have accordingly failed to mobilize our community resources in their totality.* Let us examine each of these failures in turn and see what we can do to overcome them and in the process build a social education that will see human freedom through to triumphant victory.

### Knowledge Fails Without Practice

The great illusion of teachers and teaching is that "knowledge is power." It is the assumption that if people *know the facts* they will act on the basis of them. If this had been a sound assumption, most social problems and evils would long ago have been solved

or eliminated. Western civilization *knows* what is right action but *is not disposed to act* in accordance with its knowledge. It furthermore lacks the effectiveness to carry through in practice even what it is disposed and willing to undertake.

For example, when we undertook the occupation of Germany we knew it was the most important spot in the world. We knew (if we knew anything at all) that we must win there if the peace was to be won. But we spent only one-half of one per cent of our occupation budget on education. We know here at home that we spend far too little on education, but we can't discipline ourselves to act on the knowledge. We want our money for other purposes. We are acting in Germany much as we have acted at home. We know education is our only hope, but we act as if it were a side issue.

The central problem of western society is thus moral and spiritual. It is concerned with the hearts of men even more than with their minds. The central problems in social education are moral and spiritual; and, oddly enough, this is where our heritage—our tradition—is strong. But our practice again falls so far short of our heritage that anyone who holds tenaciously to our values is often branded an impractical idealist. Thus there were many who felt nothing could be done with the Germans anyway and they would have vigorously opposed spending more on German re-education. Oddly enough, though we are extremely critical of the Russians, charging them with materialism, it is really from materialism that we ourselves suffer and are weakened.

The answer seems clear. Materialism cannot be defeated by another materialism. It can be defeated only by taking people into the sunlight of freedom and human brotherhood, giving them a chance to experience the true meaning of our faith. This means an education that lives and breathes human values. We shall teach the child the wonders of freedom by permitting him to experience them now. We shall also teach him the responsibilities of freedom by letting him assume some of them now rather than wait until adulthood.

As a teacher you will say this is an old story, you have heard it over and over again. Of course you have *heard* it. But what, exactly, have we *done* about it? Democracy means respect for personality, but the personalities of millions of children are not yet respected. It means respect for truth but we are not really truthful with children. It means human brotherhood, but the children know that in many places Negro children cannot be educated with white children, or if they are in the same room they still suffer from inferior status. We must know by now that human brotherhood cannot be taught in segregated schools or through second-class citizenship, but we go on practicing what we know is bad education.

Even in the administrative treatment of teachers and pupils we have signally failed to practice the true meaning of our way of life. How can teachers whose own personalities are not respected by supervisors turn around and educate children in freedom and respect for the worth and dignity of each person?

Separation of church and state must not be used as an alibi for failure to

teach the *importance of people, all people*—the sacredness of each person. On this sacredness all our major religious faiths agree and the principle is central in our whole democratic tradition.

### Schools Need Zeal for Freedom

But it is not only what we teach, but how we teach it. Our ideological opponents are spreading "isms" with a fiery zeal. In the United Nations, for example, Malik is really not talking to Austin and Jebb, he is talking to the depressed millions of Asia and Africa. We are not talking to these same depressed hundreds of millions, or when we do, what we say sounds more like a catalog description than a convincing portrayal of the power of freedom. Never again should we apologize for teaching democracy and the power of freedom by every appropriate means at our disposal. We must show our enthusiasm for freedom not only by the power of our words but by our actions. No teacher who fails to exhibit a zeal for freedom and democracy is really doing his or her duty. We expect our soldiers to fight with zeal and self-sacrifice, and that is the way our soldiers fight and die. The least we can do is to equal their fighting spirit in our daily lives with children and adults.

Often when this view is presented there is fear of indoctrination. This fear is justified only when we as teachers misunderstand the meaning of democracy. When we understand it and teach it, our teaching in effect is "indoctrination" against indoctrination. For if we really teach democracy, we teach people to respect the opinions of others, to make up their minds on the basis of

evidence and to examine all evidence critically. But we can show our zeal for freedom best by organizing and administering education on a thoroughly democratic basis.

No one can view the present plight of free nations without realizing that only by total mobilization and all-out effort can freedom be saved. Saving freedom is a spiritual and moral task and it cannot be accomplished by military action alone. Nor can mere propaganda, important as it is, save us. Freedom will live when it works. And when it works our propaganda will have a story of compelling power. And the truth is freedom is not working as it should, particularly at the community level. In fact unless we can vitalize democracy at the grass roots, freedom will go down in defeat.

### **Schools Must Rediscover the Community**

The "walling off" of education from the community is one of the major threats to freedom in America today. This traditional isolation of education has debilitated the profession to the point that we find ourselves confused and to a large degree helpless in the face of present crises. Recently I attended a conference of the leadership in educational administration. Most of the time, the discussions had their locale inside the schoolhouse and school system. If the community was mentioned, it was usually in the vein of community relations, a sort of diplomatic relations process with the community.

This attitude is completely passé for the handling of 1950 problems—probably it always has been. The lay public wants to participate in the determina-

tion of educational policies and programs. It *must* participate if education is to play its proper role *now*. Our lay leaders understand this and are looking toward educational leaders to come forward with an attitude of partnership seeking the help of all so that a new and dynamic power may evolve from community concern.

This concern of the community is evidenced today in a critical attitude toward public education. As educators we are irritated and harassed. If we have vision and imagination, we will take advantage of this critical interest and convert it into constructive channels so that for the first time education becomes the most vital, the most thought-about and acted-upon enterprise in the community. We will work so closely with the community that for the first time education will break out of its four confining walls and will overflow into every activity of community life. Too often we see the public as a critic to be appeased. We should view it as a resource to be utilized.

### **The Community As An Educational Enterprise**

As teachers we have been working under the illusion that we can so influence children that they will change the community. We should know by now the process works in reverse. It is the community that changes the boys and girls and men and women. So we feel disappointed and puzzled when our efforts appear ineffective. They will always be ineffective until we convert the entire community into an educational enterprise.

This means a total mobilization of agencies and resources. And the re-

sources are enormous. In Montana, and in Connecticut, I have had opportunities to see these resources in action. As educators we are just beginning to sense how rich and varied these resources are. We must make working teams of educators and lay citizens. We must enlist the cooperation of all. We must ourselves be humble and realize schools are only part of the community resources for education. We must learn how to study a community and its needs, taking inventory of both its problems and its resources for solutions.

When schools and teachers become an integral part of a total community effort in education, teachers will not be as lonely as they now are. It will not be as easy to charge them with Communism, nor will they be as vulnerable to

pressure groups seeking this or that advantage. But most important of all, a total mobilization of the community will for the first time give education a new power, a new dynamic.

If the present crisis does not move us to develop a really dynamic education, no military victory (important as such a victory is) can save freedom. If the present crisis dramatizes the plight of freedom so teachers and other citizens will be moved to stop their reliance on mere knowledge, if it moves them to teach freedom and democracy with zeal and compelling power, and to take steps to make every community in the totality of its functioning an educational enterprise, we stand a chance to save freedom for ourselves and a chance to commend it to oppressed humanity.

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## *Second Graders Find Security and Acceptance*

LUCY KISSELL and MAYME A. SWEET

Lucy Kissell and Mayme A. Sweet, of the Denver, Colorado, Public Schools, tell how books prepared by teachers helped children gain a new sense of security and acceptance in home, school and community.

CONCERNED ABOUT THE STEREOTYPES of family life which are described in many primary textbooks, two second-grade teachers determined to write their own books. The stories, they decided, would be about the children in their classrooms and the houses in which these children lived. Not only would the books be descriptive of home life in the community, but they would

give to children the status and approval that personal recognition and acceptance can give.

*Roof-tops* and *Top-knots* are the titles of their books. They belong to the second graders in the Wyatt school in a very real way. Here are three of the stories selected from the books about the houses of Mary Ann, Anna, and Rosalie:

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