

The Importance of People

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The author of the following contribution presents observations on the relationship between character education and current attacks on the public schools. He does so with somber gravity yet mordant humor. Former printer, soldier, teacher, presently a graduate student at the University of Michigan, he has probably listened politely to more long-winded statements from J. Abner Peddiwell than any other man in American education; hence perhaps some measure of his conservatism. He knows too much history to follow Peddiwellian heresies far afield, but he has seen too many schools, campaigns, and people to be entirely satisfied with what the historians say.

Harold Benjamin

How Much Rope?

HANGING a prisoner in colonial New England was an educational endeavor. Country men and women, dressed for the meeting house, would travel miles to witness the execution. Although this drama added zest and color to otherwise drab and uneventful living and thus had pronounced recreational values, its most important feature was educational. It was therefore quite respectable for a country boy to take the day off and go down to the gallows with his best girl to see God's justice meted out and maybe get a little courting accomplished at the same time.

The prisoner stood on the gallows, hands tied and halter around his neck. He had to hold this position for three to four hours, or however long it took the preacher to hammer the points of his sermon into the hearts of the congregation. Preachers generally made the most of hangings. Like all teachers they enjoyed having an attentive class, and a condemned man was about the best audio-visual-aid material, so to speak, that an instructor could hope to scrape up to illustrate the wages of sin.

Before the trap door was sprung, the prisoner was given a chance to

speaking his piece. He might stand silent, struck dumb by stage fright on this his most momentous platform appearance; he might repent and beg for divine or even human mercy; or he might drop to eternity an unrepentant sinner, cursing his tormentors to the end. In any event he was held accountable for his actions. His parents had probably done the best for him that they, as God-fearing people, knew how to do. His teacher had undoubtedly sought to discipline his churlish character with a club, and the hanging sermon by his pastor was only the last of a long series of moral exhortations by that worthy that the prisoner had been forced to endure. Clearly the man was bound to burn in hell in spite of the best efforts that had been made to get him to see the true light. He had chosen to sell out to the deluder, and now his immortal soul was bound in Satan's chain.

The lesson of this man's life, as presented by the sermon and concluded by the rope, reinforced the belief in individual responsibility for personal conduct as once ingrained in the fabric of American thought. Conduct was not viewed as a relative proposition but as a definite conformity to a moral code

whose precepts were explained and enforced by duly constituted spiritual and temporal leaders.

The New View of Conduct

The distance between this simple view of responsibility for conduct and that commonly held today may be illustrated by the following hypothetical murder case. A young man goes berserk, slays a policeman, captures a girl and criminally attacks her, and is caught. The press, now one of our chief moral mentors, interprets the culprit's life from a different viewpoint than that of the old-time preacher. It explains to us that this lad is a child of the slums. His working mother had no time to give him the love and attention his personality craved, and his alcoholic father set a poor example for him to follow. By press interview, a psychologist informs us that the youth is immature and that he assaulted the girl in an understandable desire to prove his manhood. Any high school student can now tell us that the boy is mentally ill and that common decency demands that he be sent to a hospital rather than to the execution chamber. The consensus is that he is not really to blame. The only things wrong with him are his heredity and his environment.

The recent enlightenment of the public on the application of the principles of sociology and psychology to such cases has been far-reaching. Editors who howled for the blood of "mad-dog" killers fifteen or twenty years ago now calmly discuss inferiority complexes and slum breeding places of crime with the assurance that their readers are following them.

This enlightened viewpoint is of course correct. It is good to have the press, cinema, and radio interpret behavior causation in modern, scientific

rather than in outworn, superstitious terms. The new interpretation carries with it, however, a clear and present danger which must be recognized and guarded against. This danger arises from the simple and proper desire of the people of the United States that the public school system of the country should give effective character education to its pupils.

A Stick To Beat the Schools

The current unfriendly critics of public education have seen this weak spot in the public school program more readily than have many of its supporters and operators. They exploit popular desire for character education by blanket criticism of the public school pupils and students. Young people today, they tell the public, are rude, crude, and immoral at ever-increasing rates. While the family, poor housing, war and preparation for war, and even the churches sometimes receive a share of the blame, the school, as the local agency under public control, is in number-one position to take the rap. Sanguine teachers, from the best Latin-grammar schools of sixteenth century England to the most advanced schools of the United States in the twentieth century, have helped establish and maintain the doctrine of the school's crucial role in the teaching of morals. For these four hundred years and more they have stoutly implied that the acquisition of desirable personality and character traits went hand in hand with learning the assorted items of information and academic skills that constituted their curricula. Of course they never really knew to what extent, if any, the conjugation of Latin verbs, the ability to recite the general formula for the solution of a quadratic equation, or even the knowledge and skill necessary for the simplest literacy had

any particular positive or negative effect on character. But they kept repeating that Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton and that teachers were twig-benders of the first degree. After awhile, and not a very long while, practically everybody believed that the school was a great character-molding institution.

The Evil Curriculum

Today, therefore, when the layman comes to believe that the conduct of young people is bad, he concludes quite logically that the school is bad. If a child shows that he is misdirected, it seems logical to suppose that his school activities put him on the wrong track. Here is where the unfriendly critic, who is out to "get" the public school on any count, steps in swinging. "You are unhappy with the general behavior of the children and young people," he tells the discontented school patron. "The trouble is with the curriculum. We all know that back in the good old days the schools used to teach a powerful subject matter very thoroughly. That subject matter taught that way made strong and upright men and women; it made moral people; it made character. Now you have visionary and misguided if not actually disloyal educationists, sometimes from New York City, who have monkeyed with the curriculum. They have watered down the tried and tested subjects with the virus of progressive activities. No wonder the moral fiber of our people is being sapped. Give the schools back to the people. Do away with that modern activity claptrap. Give us the old disciplinary subjects and we will be on the right track again."

Such a program has a twofold appeal: first, it is cheaper to operate than

an enriched program for all children and youth, and second, it solves the problem of character education through mastery of prescribed textual material in the approved catechetical manner.

Americans who support the critics of the public school today are no longer the same people who watched the executions on hangman's hill. If they were they would not entirely blame schooling and evil companions as the causes of their children's bad manners. They would give some discredit to the Devil and call for more rope and a swifter running noose. Now they believe the school can and must make character.

The People Will Win

The patrons of public education in this country will continue to demand increasing services of a psychological and sociological nature, no matter by what name they may be called. The unfriendly critics of the public school may delude themselves into thinking that they are going to reverse the course of curricular development, but that will not be the case. If educational history shows anything, it indicates that the American people have made the school system what it is today in spite of the opposition of a majority of schoolmasters as well as critics who view with alarm. The people are now engaged in developing a school program to do a better job in character education. They will need the help of teachers. They will ride over barriers erected by critics. They will succeed on both counts as they have done before.

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