The Importance of People

Column Editor: Peggy Brogan

With this issue, The Importance of People column comes under guidance of a new editor. Peggy Brogan is an experienced teacher and—as will be evident to the reader of the following article—a keen observer and sensitive interpreter of people (who, indeed, are important!).

Mrs. Brogan will be glad to read unsolicited manuscripts which may be suitable for use in this monthly column. Interested contributors should send such material to Mrs. Brogan in care of ASCD headquarters office.

People Are Important

"WE DON'T SPIT in our school," says Walter's kindergarten teacher, confident that her words will carry their message.

"But I do," responds Walter, equally confident in the power of his words.

It is not difficult to imagine the sequel to this episode. In one way or another, kindly or crossly, with or without accompanying action for emphasis, Walter learns whose words carry most weight in his school.

Mollie learns about different sets of words in another way. "Me and Nicky beat him up and boy was Ma hollering ..." said importantly at Show and Tell Time, is just the beginning of a long series of painful experiences in finding out "there's something wrong with how we talk at home."

"He'll never learn to talk if you keep encouraging him in that silly baby talk of his, Sally," fusses Mrs. Hughes, grown-uply unaware of the fact that in this threesome, it is her lack of understanding that blocks communication.

"Vic, you went right out and hit Andy when you promised me you wouldn't start any more fights," is Vic's mother's way of confronting him with what she has just seen from the kitchen window. When Vic answers back (and he invariably does until he learns the futility in trying to explain), "But he made me do it," it becomes a moral issue. Either Vic is lying or looking for a way out or just plain impertinent. How can Vic explain the power of Andy's look as he walked by, the interrelatedness of little boys' fights, when his mother knows that her words are the ones which describe reality?

"Unsatisfactory" Words

Carlos' words, learned in his native Puerto Rico before leaving for the United States and a new home and school, are so "unsatisfactory" that he is deliberately placed in a classroom with a teacher who can neither talk nor understand his language. This seems the quickest way to force him to leave the old and accept the new, leave his and accept ours.

Becky is just learning about conflicts in words, and she is having a difficult time locating herself and her friendly grownups in the scheme of things. "She is very mad," writes Becky beside her drawing of a tall, unbending grownup and a smaller, pleading child. "She doesn't hear good so she thinks I told a lie."

Unwilling to condemn the people who have been friendly to her or to forsake her own feeling of integrity, Becky...
explains the situation of being misunderstood the best way she knows how: "She doesn't hear good."

Professor Haag's words call for action too. They can't be right, saying all those radical things they do. Investigate him. Call him names. Burn his books and have it over with. We can't change him but at least we can keep his words from getting in the way of ours.

Words Are Power

"Love me, love my words," might be an over-simplified way for saying that language is inextricably in human nature. "Lose my words, lose me," might say it another way. "Lose me," in the sense of, "There's something wrong with me," a pattern of thinking which can become a framework for a disappointing life. "Lose me," in the sense of, "All right. If I don't belong with you, I'll take my words and use them where I do belong. You'll feel their power."

Perhaps there are better ways for people to use language in a country pledged to democratic social interaction. Perhaps we could do more of what Sally does so naturally with the baby, talking with him in his language, inviting him into active membership in his first important social group, his family. It just could be that he'll feel so comfortable and secure that after a while he'll want to talk their language too, help make it our language.

Perhaps we could give Mollie a chance to dictate and tell stories about her family with people talking the way real people talk, thus adding importantly to her classroom's common definition for family. Her "reader people," yes-ing and no-ing, coming and going, as they do, in polite correct monotony, might well afford to give way to something more down-to-earth, more exciting. And Mollie, what a different role for her, if instead of being rejected for her language, she could be included because her classroom's important definitions partly belong to her.

Perhaps we could just be nice to Carlos, let him speak his language, try to learn a little of it. He might get to feel so good about his friendly new school and nice new teacher that he'd want to talk their language too, make it his, if he didn't have to cling so hard to his own, to ward off the threat of their early determined move to make him over.

As for Professor Haag, we can't change those early relationships in which his accusers learned their important ways for using language . . . turning back the calendar is impossible. People are important. So are their words. As school gets under way each fall we enter into the living of other people by way of language. In a profession such as ours, where children, administrators, parents, teachers, students, are using words so importantly in human interaction, the chances for "not hearing good" abound. Can we learn to talk each other's language a little better, let living sensitively with one another take the place of persuasive making over, make "hearing good" mean "living good"?

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