

The Importance of People

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Listening as a Tool in Understanding Others

A TEACHER IS BOMBARDED by endless streams of noise from the outer world—mainly from the world of active busy children going about the business of learning what seems necessary for growth and development. From the limitless stimulus possibilities offered, to what shall she respond? She has no choice but to select certain aspects of the environment about her, and to these she must try to respond in ways which promote learning in children. One dimension of this selective process is listening. Listening is not merely passive reception like that of a recording apparatus. Listening is active participation, involving the whole organism of the teacher. She may attend to words that make her happy, to discordant notes that make her sad. She may selectively “inattend” (to use Sullivan’s apt term), with the result that a child feels neglected. She may only hear voices vaguely but the shuffling and movements of active learners may at one time represent the music of active participation in cooperative learning; at another time the same sounds may symbolize to her undesirable interference with the learning process. Most of the time however she is listening to words given forth as children seek to communicate

—to reach out for others or to themselves—as they struggle with new sounds and learn about power which words seem to possess for influencing others.

“Why talk about listening? I’ve done it all my life. I certainly don’t have to learn to listen, do I?” No doubt about it. You’ve always listened. We listen in terms of our previous learning. Don’t you know someone who seems to be a collector of grievances, a person who can document the feeling that life is a dreary succession of failures and burdens? Don’t you know someone who seems to see and hear the happy sounds of affirmation that life is challenge, growth, self-realization? What’s the difference? Personality, we say. In any event, two people are tuned into the world differently—set to respond differently for complex reasons not here to be analyzed.

The concern here is that a teacher’s way of listening and what she makes of what she hears, are rooted in past experiences and present needs, in the knowledge, skills, habits, values and aspirations which function in some sort of unified way that we label personality. She listens with her personality, so to speak.

Listening then is a tool for a teacher,

one which she uses in conjunction with sight all of the time. It is a vital aspect of communication and this little piece is concerned only with *input*, what she takes in, and with the barriers to her taking in the best possible sample of the communicative efforts of children.

One major barrier to understanding others lies in our learned patterns of responding mainly to the *content* of verbal productions. We hear the words but not the music. We are much less skilled in responding to the music of emotions, which is part of language. Feeling tones are implicit in most verbalizations but are easier to detect when expressed in extreme forms. A strong note of hostility is heard when Johnny says, "I hate you" to an aggressor; happiness is perceived when Jane says "wonderful" on resolving a dilemma. But in the ordinary run of talk we hear mainly the words and deal with the realities represented by these words. It is the thesis here that to better understand the world of meanings of children, the teacher must grow in her capacity to appreciate the concomitant aspects of language by learning to listen to the language of emotions as well as to the language of verbal productions (content).

Another barrier to effective listening—defined here as understanding what the other person means and intends to say—is the inveterate tendency on the part of all of us to jump to premature conclusions, making judgments about meanings and intentions on the basis of inadequate information.

The plain fact is that listening is a most difficult accomplishment for it is

possible only to the degree that we are free from interfering emotions, insistent personal needs, the compulsions of our goals for others. Haven't you been in groups where everyone seemed to be talking past everyone else?—each so concerned to be heard himself, there was no time or freedom to hear another?

One can say and hear its echo in others, "I can't always be listening. I too must be heard." Exactly! One cannot hear others unless in some degree he has been heard and accepted and loved. Here too is the reason why the teacher who sensitively hears a child's need and is free to respond to it, gives much more than words.

Words are powerful. A word may evoke anxiety in us to a degree that we stop listening in order to defend ourselves against our own reactions. They may arouse hostilities or affections, stir uncomfortable memories. We may be so insulated from others, our defenses so impregnable, that the communication efforts of others can't penetrate. If this be our state, we can listen to our own need only. Others are too far away.

How does a teacher improve listening skills? Where do I go from here? To psychoanalysis?—(which by the way, is in large part listening). Who knows? You go from where you are. Next time someone speaks, ask yourself, "What did he say?" If, before you answer, you say to him, "Is this what you mean?" and he says, "That's it—right on the nose!" just stop worrying. You really know how to listen.

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