

The Importance of People

Column Editor: Richard L. Henderson
Contributor: Ann Ess Morrow

"Get youngsters in front of the class and they can't make a sound. But just listen to them in the hall!" Sound familiar? It does to our May contributor, Mrs. Ann Ess Morrow of Pontiac, Michigan, who has some sesquipedalian comments to make in reply.

Sounding Off on Speech

A WHOLE ARMY of speech teachers falls in for sound-off time. With eyes front, they stand at attention, ready to meet the needs of boys and girls; again, they are at ease—in the field of subject-matter. Armed with techniques which vary like their personalities, they sound off. "One," "Two," "Three," "Four." Down the line they go.

First, of course, there is Mother, one's earliest teacher of talk. If her emotional makeup is such that she throws linguistic discretion to those very breezes which we long for in July, the language to which the infant is first exposed is a strange, intimate affair. How is the "toot 'itto dumplin'" to know that everyone does not so indulge in affectionate disfiguration of the verbal? Being Nature's greatest little imitator, he picks up during the diaper stage this unique type of language communication.

A victim of linguistic folly, he has a frustrating experience when he goes to school. Other children laugh at his odd articulation and at the coined phraseology that calls for interpretation. That which was cute in cradle quarters becomes a verbal handicap in the school-room. And what hurts a mother more than the realization that through her own folly she has led her child into a disas-

trous maze of sound habits which really aren't sound at all and which must all be boldly blasted before the ground work can begin? The older the child grows, and the more adhesive his faulty speech habits are, the more ridiculous becomes the picture—until one thinks with a sorry smile of the husky, musclebound blockbuster who still answers the phone when people ask for Junior.

Then there is the father who heads a grammatically happy home. His child has a leap-frog start on those who come from households in which the principles of good speech and valid expression are truly remote. Those children grow up in a grammatically malodorous atmosphere of consistent *He don'ts* and *Ain't got nuthin's*. Thus they acquire habits not at all conducive to the adequate self-expression that will be so stressed in subsequent schooling.

The Professionals

So much for the homefront teachers. Now for the professionals. Third in line is the speech teacher who affords her children a pretty outlook on the whole situation. Only she's so attractive herself that when they try to speak, they can't. And so they whistle. Especially the older boys.

Next we see the speech teacher who loves prestige and admiration. She sounds off with unbelievable detail—her linguistic triumphs, her publications, her awards, her adventures in the land of the professionally glib. She emanates a self-love glow suggestive of the firefly. At first, the would-be talkers in the group are rapt listeners; then they grow restless, like a pup with a bone that waits. Psychologists would not have us say that the students are inattentive, rather, they become attentive to other stimuli. Yes, self-expression flourishes — on the teacher's part.

Then there is the speech teacher who allows no speech—the formal disciplinarian. She permits no informal discussions at the conclusion of talks, no helpful suggestions, no student evaluation, but cuts off the beneficiaries as completely as an irate uncle's will. Absolute silence she demands unless a quivering victim is vocalizing. She lets it be known that no one talks in speech class—except those on whom she pounces. Many a boy or girl has his heart in his mouth, though few put it into their speech. They do tongue-twisters by the hour; then they stagger out and twist words about in sheer relief.

Now here is another type we recognize—the teacher who is as careless in her ways as in her presentation. She rushes in, informally finishing a sentence to someone outside, and audibly vacillates as to what they'll do today. Let's see now—why not an experience? Aren't their lives just loaded? She didn't toss around on her pillow last night trying to dream up that assignment. That nightmared all by itself. She gives the class no opportunity at all for preparation, yet with all the inconsistency of womanhood she frowns on the extemporaneous. She half-listens, dreaming of week-end fun, and

murmurs, "That's fine, dear." We only wish it were.

But lo, here is the teacher with genuine insight. She knows that boys and girls are easily embarrassed by anything personal. So her criticism of their awkward little mannerisms that are all a part of that gangling growth of adolescence is tactful, rather than annihilating, and is based on the significant, rather than on the obvious. She knows that they may not deliver well, but her kindness and faith keep them trying. When she suggests what is wrong and how to right the situation, she audibly approves that which was right, and the child learns without severe sting. She is well read in her area, is conversant with all types of theories and the reasons for their existence. She realizes that if speech is effective in modifying the behavior of others, the child will find satisfaction in the response his speech brings. She gives the children a needed sense of informational security, instead of a flashing exposure to pedantry. No constant interrupter is she, and she veers from concentrating on one idea that is set like a bank time-clock. When speech growth seems slow, she is not discouraged.

She realizes, too, the opportunities for creative work. She knows that it is better to examine the problem first and to accompany trial and error with thoughtful criticism; that if the youngsters won't expose fallacies of thinking, they must be guided into identifying these; that the child himself must be developed; and that without proper experiences, he will be lacking in adequate words. She does not want him to think of speech training as a platform project, but as part of his normal training for social adjustment.

Through their speech habits she recognizes those children who are aggressive, those who seek attention. The fearful,

The Importance of People

by RUTH CUNNINGHAM (1907-1956)

Price: \$1.00

A group of the author's famous sketches including these intriguing titles:

"Miss Squirrely Gozinta Heaven"

"Flowers in Her Hair"

"A Closed Door Has Two Sides"

"Rob Williams Comes Back"

"Everyone Needs to Belong"

"X Marks the Spot"

"Glass Houses Are Handy"

"The Procrustes of Curricula"

Proceeds from the sale of this booklet to go to the Ruth Cunningham Fellowship Fund at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Discounts available:

10-19 copies—10%; 20 copies and over—20%

Order from:

BUREAU OF PUBLICATIONS

TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

525 WEST 120TH STREET

NEW YORK 27, N. Y.

the antagonistic, the pessimistic—all are known to her, and with the wisdom of a modern Moses she tends to guide them into normalcy through sympathetic speech training. Under her skillful guidance, their reading ability, as well as their restless personalities, tend to improve. Magically she opens to them further apprecia-

tion of related activities, and radio, drama, television, debate become increasingly meaningful. Surely hers is a worthy goal—to broaden lives and to facilitate an ease of speaking that makes for gracious living. Instinctively, we salute her.

—ANN ESS MORROW, *teacher, Pontiac High School, Pontiac, Michigan.*

Copyright © 1957 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.