

# The Importance of People

Column Editor: Richard L. Henderson

## A Council at War

IT'S GOOD to be back.

Last year we went on record as supporting the idea that this column ought to be a kind of battleground for divergent points of view. We wanted reader reactions, violent if necessary. We prefer being shouted about to being tolerated, or ignored.

So we opened with a couple of earnest salvos about creativity and about the liberal arts college in America. And we got some reactions. Two, altogether. Professor Dimond of Michigan pleaded for a return of the lighter tone which originally characterized this column, and sent us some pleasant but penetrating verse by Helen Schabbel. So we went along with the idea and presented some casual but solid advice on the teaching of speech and group leadership respectively.

Then Bill Weichert of the Oakland Public Schools took a challenging interest in our opening shots against the liberal arts; so we sized him up as preferring the artillery, and leveled another barrage in the shape of "A Case Reopened."

Now we're back on the old grounds, still with that inexplicable urge to reload the cannon, an urge we find irresistible. So we've asked some of our colleagues a question, and plan to use their replies in this column. The question is, "What in the area of Education burns you up?" If we know our friends, the fireworks will be worth waiting for. Jim Brown, once a staff-mate of ours in Montana, now Pro-

fessor of English at North Texas, State, is one. Jim didn't bother to write his acceptance of our offer to answer the question. He wired. Collect. All of Education burns Jim up.

Arthur Bestor, the historian, is another. Arthur claims us only as friend-in-law, however, and has gotten as far away from us as he could by going to Oxford to lecture on his specialty. And before he left, he underscored the purely legal aspects of our relationship by accepting the presidency of the young but highly opinionated Council for Basic Education. And this prompts us to pluck the lanyard.

The apparent aim of the Council is to combat the insidious growth of the "non-essentials" in Education, to utterly destroy any and all "Educationists," and to persuade the public that the only road to educational salvation is that which leads to the "fundamentals," the three R's, the liberal arts, the classics, to concern with the development of the pure intellect; in short, to anything so long as it's non-Progressive.

The Council doesn't give the slightest hint as to how we are to go about this business. It doesn't face the vital question of whether there are any relationships between "intellectual" development and growth of moral and ethical behavior. It doesn't bother with any of the usual formalities of scholarly attack on its victims, even though it waves vigorously the banner of scholarly (intellectual) pursuits. It simply wants to wipe out "progressive" education, and is hap-

pily and ignorantly lambasting everybody who gets in the way.

Its organ is a monthly *Bulletin* packed with ends and odds about "professional education," out-of-context "proof" of educational atrocities, scathing criticisms of progressive methods, news about off-beat educational activities around the nation, descriptions of "fine" (Basic) programs in action, précis of newspaper and magazine articles supporting the Basic idea, and witty but nihilistic little needlings that touch us to our un-Basic quick. You can become a party to "L'Affaire Basique" by asking the Council for the *Bulletin*. It costs nothing, and is worth much more.

In case you have been in Europe, the Council is a non-profit corporation, underwritten to the melody of \$114,000 by a foundation which pleases to remain anonymous. Its headquarters are in the Union Trust Building in Washington, and its executive secretary is Dr. Harold Clapp, of Grinnell College. Among its directors are Harry Fuller, botanist, of *The Emperor's New Clothes* fame; and the undiminished Mortimer Smith. Knowing how these folks feel about "professional" education, we are vibrant with curiosity over the absence from the list of the names of Robert Hutchins and Albert Lynd, for two. And we are quite frenetic to know the name of the corporation which thinks American education is so un-Basic that it is willing to risk one hundred and fourteen thousand dollars to restore it.

Now Councils like this do not burn us up. They sadden us, and hurt a little. Somehow, we get the feeling that these guys aren't really anxious to do anything about the sad state of Education. We'd like to think that they are, honest Injun, because we need help. But it appears to us that people who want truly to make a

sad state better don't go about their business in the way the Council goes about its business.

For instance, why set up an opposing camp in the form of an anonymously-supported corporation? Why not simply walk, white-flagged and penniless, into the stronghold of the enemy, most of whom are not nearly so stupid, defensive and unwilling to join forces as the Council says they are. Why not come bearing gifts? Cups of coffee, maybe, over which understandings and a common attack on the real enemy can germinate.

Again, if a fellow is serious about improving the aberrant behavior of a co-worker, does he begin by tongue-lashing him? Or by oversimplifying the whole matter? Or by suggesting medication without knowing the nature of his disorder? Or by collecting all the atypical samples of his behavior and presenting them as a description of his normal way of life? And does he distort samples for dramatic effect, believing that the end justifies any means? Is this the way of the healer?

It's the way of the CBE. For example, the editor of the *Bulletin* (July 1957, page 6) has this to say in his review of Michaelis's new edition of *Social Studies for Children in a Democracy*: "Mr. Michaelis surveys and classifies the 'types of programs and approaches' in a way that *makes it possible for him to dismiss textbooks, subject-matter, and 'teacher-directed' activities.*" (The italics are ours.)

Now if you really swallowed what this reviewer says, you'd believe that Michaelis was advocating "dismissing" subject matter and textbooks, wouldn't you? And if this reviewer happened to be a respected member of a highly respected profession, and a whilom mem-

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ber of the academic staff of a highly respected college, you'd be even more inclined to swallow what he says, wouldn't you? All right. Let's look at the book under review, and just for fun *check* what Michaelis is "dismissing."

Michaelis says, on page 37 of his new book, "Although the foregoing approaches are inadequate for *defining the scope* of the social studies, this fact *does not mean that textbooks, purposes, generalizations, and studies of other cultures have no place in the program. They do*, but other approaches for use in *defining the scope* of the program appear to be more useful." (The italics are ours.)

Gentlemen, we consider such a review to be nothing other than a miserable fraud. And we protest.

For another instance: "We have even heard of teachers college courses in which prospective administrators were warned to avoid, if possible, having men on The Board who can find ample time to devote to school matters." (*Bulletin* #11, June 1957, page 4.) Do any of our readers know where such 19th century ideas are advocated today, or the addresses of any idiots who would employ an administrator so taught? This charge is either distorted or an outright fabrication.

And, ". . . vocational training, 'life-adjustment' education, the study of contemporary problems, a concern with immediate everyday experience—these elements, in combination, would constitute an ideal scheme of education *for a static world*." (*Bulletin* #9, April 1957, page 1.) Would they now, really and truly? Have the Council boys never read the findings of 75 years of psychological research on "meaning"? And despising vocational education as they do, how do they feel about their vaunted American

liberal arts college, which even so respectable a Basic as James Bryant Conant calls "vocational," in the sense that the majority of its graduates go either into the learned professions or into the managerial positions in business? Class vocational education, but vocational nonetheless.

One such tactic would be enough, but the *Bulletin* is loaded with them. If the Council boys are really serious, why don't they do some investigating? Why don't they go to the respected psychologist and discover straight from the horse's mouth some of the definitive research on learning upon which educators depend as they develop curriculum content and method? And while they are about it, why not go as well to the sociologist, the anthropologist, the biologist, the physiologist, from all of whom the "educator" takes counsel? Or even to the historian, if he is willing to concede the possibility that some of the children of some of the people might wish to become something other than professional historians. In short, why don't the Council people take off their blinders and see for themselves how much of life has passed them by?

Well, these things sadden us. We know, with the CBE, that there are windbags and frauds in Education, as there are windbags and frauds in every field, including that of Basic Education. We know that there are many teachers poorly equipped personally and professionally for work with children. We know that there are undergraduate and graduate programs in teacher education that need overhauling. We know that there are too many school districts struggling along with incompetent administrators, educationally myopic trustees, inadequate buildings, crowded classrooms, pathetic supplies of teaching

materials and books. We know these things and we are doing our best to remedy them.

We need help to launch a combined attack on these fundamental weaknesses. We need the kind of help that comes from an honest-to-God effort to find out what we're trying to do, what we're faced with, and how we are proposing to go about our job.

So W. W. Brickman, in *School and Society*, cries, "The interest and criticism of Dr. Bestor and his colleagues are welcome. But let it be in a spirit akin to that of the Essentialists. . . . Education needs all the help it can get. To show that it has any reason for existence at all, the Council for Basic Education should go about its function with objectivity, fairness, and understanding. To denounce without adequate discrimination is to throw a monkey-wrench into the educational works."

As educationalists, we are really neither vicious, simple, nor subversive. We do want the best for our children. As "practical" as we may be, we do have valid and basic concepts upon which we are attempting to build a more effective educational program—concepts which we didn't make up out of thin educationist air, either, but concepts which come straight from the scholar. Not from the scholastic, the schoolman, but from the modern social scientist who appears to have a measure of recognition even from the Essentialists.

So we ask again for help, and we ask humbly. But we don't think the Council is going to spare any: It is having too much fun making like Defenders of the Faith against the Barbarian Horde. The Council doesn't really want to help.

—RICHARD L. HENDERSON, *professor of education, Agnes Scott College and Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.*

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