The Importance of People

Column Editor: Richard L. Henderson
Contributor: William J. Gnagey

To those of us who deplore the failure of our college students to be self-winding, this contribution by Bill Gnagey ought to be most welcome. We are not sure that this failure is one of the things in education that “burns Bill up,” but we think he reflects the feeling of many of us who throw the ball to our students, but find no catchers.

Richard Henderson

Freedom from Freedom

THE WORD freedom gets bandied about a lot lately. Some people talk about giving children freedom and others insist that freedom is learned, and can’t really be given away. But the present strong feeling among psychologically oriented parents and teachers is that for one reason or another, freedom is good medicine for children.

Why Freedom?

From time to time sister words spring up, such as permissive or progressive or libertarian. These are used as adjectives to describe what some people think is a new kind of education whether of the home or school variety. Political philosophy seems another basis for the focus upon freedom. Some folks point out that citizens in a democracy need to be people who can make their own decisions, and that homes and schools must foster a freedom of choice or else our country will cease to be a government of the people and by the people.

Protagonists of need-centered curriculums proclaim that real education comes about when teachers begin with the children’s needs and help them to learn the tools and gain the self confidence which they need now and can use later in their continuing task of problem solving throughout life.

Why Not?

Now there has grown up at the same time severe opposition to the aforementioned point of view. People talk about the “good old days” and the “three R’s” and to heck with the fads and frills. These folks are quite sure that adults have lived long enough and are mature enough to pick for children the learning experiences that are valuable and see to it that they have them whether the pill is bitter going down or not. They argue that if you are going to put children in a room and tell them to do what they want to do, there is no reason to have a teacher in the first place. They ask again and again how an immature child can be expected to know what is good for him and accuse “progressive educators” of lying down on the job.

I Won’t Do It!

But the place where I have sensed the most resistance to the idea of a student
centered curriculum is in our colleges and universities. In class after class, regardless of how well they disguised their feelings when "Dear Teacher" was present, the hall echoes with harried comments such as: "I wish he'd quit fooling around and tell us what to do," or "I feel as though I've wasted my money in that class, he hasn't taught us a thing yet." Others will say, "If he'd just make some requirements, I could get to work, but I have so many other things that have to be done, that I can't bring myself to do any work in his class." It is far from uncommon to hear, "Oh I'm taking another one of these silly education courses where you fiddle around for a term, have no assignments, and then everybody gets a B." They usually add, "I'm not kicking, you understand; a snap course gives me time to spend on my other important subjects." And on and on and on.

How Come?

It is not my purpose in this paper to argue the rightness or wrongness of "permissive" teaching, but rather to point out what seems to me to be a constellation of causes for this strong resistance to being allowed to solve one's own problems.

Psychological literature seems to substantiate the fact that primacy of experience is important because of its ability to influence a human being's life. Things that happen in the first few years of life have a deep, lasting, molding effect upon the child's personality. Human animals spend a good part of those first crucial years in a state of extreme dependence upon adults for the fulfilling of their needs. In the beginning, a child's very life depends upon the care of older humans and later on many of his less crucial needs (in terms of survival) would be completely frustrated without adult assistance. Here then begins a pattern of dependence which is certainly not immutable, but nevertheless strongly ingrained early in life.

As the child grows older, he is many times brought into contact with some religious belief. A good number of these, especially in Western culture, include the concept of God as a benevolent dictator, or fatherly figure, who knows all the answers and hands down dictums which we must follow for our own good whether we understand them or not. A "good religious person" is thought to be one who doesn't question his particular church's interpretation of God, but who follows the rules uncompromisingly. He is told that through prayer and reading of the religious literature, he will find the answer to his problems. He is then cautioned that if the answer does not seem to come, he should have faith that somehow God will work things out. Here again is strong training which rewards a dependent role in problem solving and punishes individualism and independence.

Having had these two types of experiences, the child is sent to school. If the teachers have been brought up like the children, they accept their role as parent surrogates or subgods who chart the way, demand obedience, reward submission and punish nonconformist behavior. Here again the dependence pattern is reinforced, or if perhaps a teacher who thinks highly of freedom is in charge, he gets a good stiff taste of resistance even at this level. But because we teach as we were taught, it's not too likely that the school does anything other than more firmly convince a child of the sensibleness of his dependent role.

During preadolescence, children seem to value the opinions of groups even more than those of their parents. But
even if this change were fully accomplished (the parents do their best to see that it isn’t), the dependence hasn’t changed, it has merely centered itself in another object, the gang.

**What Else Can You Expect?**

Now somewhere between 10 and 15, these children begin to react to some strong bio-psychic urges which place them in the much discussed period of adolescence. At this time a complex pattern of factors causes changes which result on the average in a heightened urge for freedom and independence. Now enters the guardian of submission, culture, and declares that our teen agers are too immature for marriage and independence in this complex society. And so the budding adult is pushed back into the calyx of dependence for another extended stay.

Since early helplessness establishes a dependence pattern, and home training, religious training, the schools and the culture have reinforced it, it is no wonder to me that we meet so much resistance to democracy in our college classes. We find our students with very low levels of aspiration where problem-solving is concerned. They know well the feelings of guilt and apprehension brought about by having guessed wrong at what would really please “Dear Teacher.” They dare not launch out on a project without the sanction of the subgods, and great is the feeling of relief when teacher finally hands down his ultimatum. This they can handle; this they have been soaking up since birth. Oh, the delicious feeling of being free of freedom at last!

—William J. Gnagey, assistant professor of education, Manchester College, North Manchester, Indiana.

**Morale**

Morale
Shows itself
As a state of mind
Radiating confidence
In people.
Where each teacher
Feels sure of his own niche,
Stands on his own abilities
And works out his own solutions—
Knowing he is
Part of a team.
Where no person
Feels anxiety
Or fear

Or pressure to be better
Than someone else.
Where there exists
A sharing of ideas.
A freedom to plan.
A sureness of worth.
And a knowledge
That help is available
For the asking.
To the end that
Children may grow and mature—
Warmed by a friendly climate.

—James O. Spoon, principal, Santa Fe Trail School, Overland Park, Kansas.

506

Educational Leadership