

# People Are Not Things

**Concern for children and youth as persons, rather than as objects for manipulation, has long been a unique quality of American education.**

SOME years ago I sat for several days at a desk in the old U. S. Bureau of Education building in Washington, D. C., while a few feet away in the next room a committee of the National Education Association was engaged in formulating the statement that finally came out as *The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*.

Health was the first fundamental principle the committee presented. All members agreed that this was the first consideration in any educational program for youth. Moreover, they apparently meant that this covered, not just "physical health," but mental and emotional health as well—though it was a little too early to use these words. Then they went on to the other objectives known to everybody who studies education today—*citizenship, worthy home membership, vocation, worthy use of leisure time, ethical character*. At about this point someone suddenly awoke to the fact that they had not yet even mentioned what the public generally thought schools were for—the "fundamentals" of learning in the schools (reading, writing and arithmetic)—so they added "command of the fundamental processes."

It was not, of course, that these representative school people were actually

disregarding the need for mastery of the skills and "intellectual" development. It was simply that, when they sat down in all seriousness to put first things first, they realized that, important as was the school's function for developing the *tools* of learning and "intellectual" development *per se*, there were certain basic needs the schools must hold uppermost if they really were to prepare human beings for living in the modern world. They realized, even though they did not use the actual words, that "people are not things"; that the basic needs of humanity are to learn to live and toil together as human beings in a real world.

## "Man Is Not a Thing"

Erich Fromm's warning in his March 17, 1957, article in the *Saturday Review*, "Man Is Not a Thing," has, therefore, special timeliness. He starts with a recognition of the psychiatrist's concept of human relations as involving "the bonds of affection and concern which must link an analyst to his patient before any analytical theory can work." He holds this as a highly desirable concept. Fromm warns us, however, of another type of "human relations" that threatens us today—one based on the wish to understand and thereby to *manipulate* the em-

ployee. "We have also found," Fromm quotes employers as saying, "that satisfied, happy men work more productively and provide for that smooth operation which is necessary for big enterprise." Man is thereby made into a "thing," Fromm believes, "treated and manipulated like a thing." One may well ask, as Fromm does ask, whether such so-called "human relations" may not actually be the most *inhuman* kind. Some of us in education might well consider, too, whether something analogous to this manipulation of customer and worker through psychology in business may not also be found sometimes in the field of education.

On the positive side for mental health, it is only fair to say that the possibilities of fostering mental health through education go much further back in our own American history than is generally realized. Our ancestors did not use the mental health terms current today, but the concept of positive good mental health goes back for several generations to the earliest days of public schools and teacher preparation. When Cyrus Peirce, head of our first New England normal school (1839), was seeking candidates for his school, he urged the local school committees to send him "persons possessed of good health, a vigorous and buoyant constitution, a fund of lively and cheerful spirits," and, above all, "a love of and sympathy with children." Some years later, explaining to Commissioner of Education Henry Barnard what his efforts were in the development of his normal school, Peirce said his aim was "to make better teachers, teachers who would understand, who would know more of the nature of children, teachers who would substitute for the discipline of the rod higher and purer motives of action, through which children would be

trained in such harmony and proportion as would result in the highest formation of character."

It was no fault of these early pioneers that this fundamental concern for children as people was lost sight of in later years, and that we came to have a disastrous emphasis on "subjects, grades, and promotions," rather than on children as persons. The system of *grades*, in particular, was damaging to any concept that would have come regarding children's growth and development. This system of "grades"—first grade, second grade, third grade, etc.—was vigorously opposed by some of the leaders in the early days, and today the more we try to meet real life needs of children the worse the grade system becomes. The modern measurement movement, for all its real and possible contributions, nevertheless in its early stages concerned itself largely with much less important matters that lent themselves—or seemed to lend themselves—more readily to objective measurement: length of school term, achievement in the skills, progress through the grades, and so on.

It is to the modern mental health movement, in part at least, that we owe much of our increased concern for children and other human beings as *people*, rather than as *things*. Our earliest concern in this area, as it happened, was with extreme variations in behavior—with the mentally ill or "insane." Clifford Beers' pioneering book, as everyone knows, had to do with the need for better care of the mentally ill. But from this specific need of half a century ago there gradually developed a concern for good mental and emotional health that has made real ad-

---

**W. CARSON RYAN is Kenan professor of education emeritus, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.**

---

vances over the years. And at the same time we have significant developments in education—early childhood education especially—that have transformed our concepts and practices in wholesome ways in schools and communities.

But are we certain, really certain, even today that we accept the basic principle that children—in or out of school—are *people*—not “things”? “A child is a mixture of the creative and the conforming,” James L. Hymes said recently. He reminds us that “on the one hand the small child shows a deep, indestructible satisfaction in creating things and words for his own internal pleasures,” but that at the same time this same creative child exhibits a strong “self-assertion,” only partly fostered by our culture. Myra Woodruff has recently emphasized the need for children to learn to get along with all kinds of people—to accept them and be accepted by them. “Then the brightest of the group won’t be isolated when they grow up,” she says. This is the opposite, almost, of the kind of undesirable “human relations” Fromm warns us about.

I was delighted to note that Fromm calls attention to the original meaning of psychology—“knowledge of the soul” (psyche). Possibly the most important single word in Fromm’s article is *love*: “There is another path to knowing man’s secret. This path is not of *thought*, but of *love*. The only way to full knowledge lies in the act of love; this act transcends thought; it transcends words.”

Let me say again that one of the most difficult problems school people have today is to convince parents that children and youth are actually learning if they get pleasure and satisfaction out of the procedure. I am sure many parents—and I’m afraid many teachers—will not accept this concept. Too many parents—

and a good many teachers too—feel that children are not learning anything if they actually are enjoying school.

Are there ways parents can test their own school situation to see whether the schools their children attend are schools where children are people—not just things? Two years ago a statement was presented at the Berlin meeting of the World Federation of Mental Health designed to help parents and others find out something about this through a series of questions. Here are the questions:

1. What is the concept of education that prevails? Is it that of narrow schooling, or all-round development? Are we really concerning ourselves with individual human beings and their need?

2. Does “health” (both mental and physical) actually come first, as it should? Do we think of health, work experiences, music and the fine arts, learning to live with other people, as *fundamentals* in education, or just extras?

3. What kind of emotional climate do we have—in classrooms, in the administrative office, in the shops, on the playground, everywhere in the enterprise? Are teachers and other school and community workers friendly, understanding, human?

4. What is the attitude toward “individual differences?” Are we concerned chiefly with I. Q.’s and “subjects,” or do we think of individual possibilities in all areas—emotional, esthetic, social?

5. Do we understand and act on the principle that “behavior is caused?” Do we explore into conditions that explain what an individual is doing, and help him on this basis to make a better judgment or take a different action?

6. Has the community learned to provide a child guidance clinic, school social

(Continued on page 106)

Finally there is the discipline of *synthesis*. By it wholes are created out of the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsible action, out of desire and thought, and out of thought and action. Its use reports itself in balanced perspective which calls for discrimination among beliefs. Its function is to perpetuate the type and, to the degree possible, to educate beyond the type. These become the leaders. It provides the "growth-point of human experience."

Through it, education persists, even to the extent of one's learning alone. It is manifest in self-control and in the will, the skill, the knowledge and the courage

(Continued from page 74)

workers, and similar services to help youngsters with special problems and to assist educational workers in understanding the individual and social needs of human beings?

7. Is the educational situation "authoritarian," or is it genuinely democratic, with children, teachers, parents and others sharing in planning and carrying out the program?

(Continued from page 96)

Allport, Lawrence K. Frank and M. F. Ashley Montagu, as well as Oppenheimer, Ruesch, Riesman, Turner, Prescott, Havighurst, Davis, Chisholm, Menninger, Sullivan and Rogers. It would also include reports of interdisciplinary teams and groups such as that edited by Parsons and Shils. This is but a brief sampling, to substantiate what has been stated, to instigate initiative in independent study, and to hold the line for further advance.

There is much which can and should

to resist the attrition of everyday experience. It engenders faith in the self. The fullness of its expression is the crown of a truly general education. Its operational presence affirms the wisdom of Emerson's observation that "the only entrance so to know is so to be." Thus character is manifest in conduct.

In the measure that we teach these disciplines and *teach by them* we may devoutly hope that our students will, like the great ones of the earth, act out their dreams instead of merely dream of their action. But if they do, they, and we, their teachers, must believe quite as much in longings as in facts.

8. Do the community and the educational administration understand that "administration" is not something that exists for itself, but is justified only as an agency to facilitate the essentially *human* task involved in education?

9. Is our underlying philosophy such that we have faith in the possibilities of human beings—building on what they can do rather than on what they cannot?

be done without delay to dispel the present confusion and to challenge the hope and faith of those whose dedication to educational leadership is recognized in this statement.

Together we can plan soundly and project long-term programs of action and evaluation with vision and courage. Meanwhile we can and must carry on, for education cannot declare a moratorium on its current obligations. We can even carry on the more responsibly and courageously, as we glimpse fuller vision of what lies ahead.

Copyright © 1958 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.