

# The Importance of People

Column Editor: Fred T. Wilhelms

## The Importance of Educationists

UP TO a couple of years ago I rebelled emotionally against the term "educationist." The very word had a made-up sound to my ears. And the fact that so much of the time it was (and still is) used as a dirty word didn't help.

So it was with reluctance that I came to see that there really is a need for some such term to designate those who train themselves for a career of applying systematic thought and precise study to the whole matter of educating human beings. Most educationists can be called "teachers," too, or "educators"; their job identification may be as supervisors or administrators or college professors. Yet not all who wear these titles are educationists. For there is something distinctive about the genuine lifelong student of learning and teaching—the scholar whose "discipline" is education.

Somewhere along the line my reluctance disappeared, absorbed in a growing wave of deep professional pride. For anyone who can properly be called an educationist—regardless of the title of his working position—has a right to the proud badge of a wonderful elite. He is one of a handful who, working with meager resources and against fantastic handicaps, have hammered out tremendous gains for the people they serve.

We have made our errors, individually and collectively, and in a field like ours, which greatly affects human lives, mistakes are too costly to be taken lightly,

by ourselves or by others. But what other segment of American society can equal the steadiness of our self-corrective eye, or match the toughness of our self-criticism?

### Our Greatest Task

After thousands of years in which men believed what they wished to believe about teaching and learning, our generations have been the first with the vision and courage to submit our cherished notions to harsh tests. It takes genuine idealism to do that. The results have been enormous. In about three generations our influence has changed the schools radically. To be sure, more than vestiges hang on of dreary old routines, of mechanistic instruction, of false concepts of mind and nature, and of oppressive authoritarian relations with children. But no one at the turn of this century could have dared to predict how far we should have moved toward teaching attuned to the learner, toward content geared to life, and toward a happy, open school society for boys and girls to grow in.

That technical achievement, against all the odds of inertia and resistance, is a service to mankind no one can ever take from us. Yet our work is only beginning. And we in our turn snatch only fleeting glimpses of what schools can become.

Our influence has not been limited to

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life within the schools. We need not claim everything for ourselves, for we have had valued allies. But it has been more than coincidence that as schools have changed, family life has also changed; as old authoritarian shackles fell free in the school, life in the home also opened out to new dimensions of free growth. Look at how the ways of democracy have been permeating all parts of our society, and ask yourself: What other group has contributed so much to bringing the American pioneers' restless intuitions of democracy to their flowering in everyday life?

Perhaps that is precisely why we have taken such a mauling in the past decade. There were and are good reasons for thoughtful men to question our technical adequacy; we have no right to play a leading role in the lives of millions if we are too tender to utilize such criticism. Yet, to this observer, it seems fairly ob-

vious that much of the antagonism against us stems from a yearning for a return to privilege, and from a scarce-hidden contempt for the masses. Much that has been thrown at us is mere scapegoating, a refusal to face our country's problems entire, and a search for the cheap, magical panacea. I am grateful that most of the time we educationists have shown far greater than average personal maturity. Our concern for true educational opportunity for all has had deep enough roots to hold us steady. And our fundamental commitment to all that democracy means has been tough enough to hold against violent, swirling winds of fickle opinion.

In truth, I know of no other group which has held firmer to the old American dream, in its most fundamental meanings. From the beginning, that dream was rooted in a basic faith in the ability of men to rise above themselves if they had a chance. It denied all the cynicisms of a weary old world. If any group have lived closer to that faith than we—if any group have kept freer of the cynicism—I do not know who they are.

Now we are in a world which is threatening to turn its back on the liberal tradition. One nation after another is yielding to the siren promises of the authoritarian way. Pray God that our own land—this last great hope of humanity—will not also yield! It is not uninjected. And so we face our greatest task. In the gathering storm of cynical defeatism, can we keep fresh our naive faith?

Educationists have become important because they have built so well. They will continue to grow in importance in just the degree that they continue to believe in the importance of people.

—FRED T. WILHELMSEN, professor of education, San Francisco State College.

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