

# The Importance of People

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## The Road to Reality

"COULD people make molasses even if we didn't have any factories to make it?" "Do they still make that cheese with the big holes in that country . . . you know . . . country?" These are only two of the questions asked me by my daughter in recent days. Even more than these, her queries on the disposal of wastes, on marriage, and religious ritual let me know that she does not live in my world, really. In her world reality is quite a different thing than it is in mine.

"How do they make green beans?" This one accompanied her attempts to open a package of frozen beans. In her world beans don't grow. In her world food is *made* and *packaged*. In her world babies are brought home from somewhere; they don't get born. In her world people go away and don't come back; they don't die. In her world values come from radio and television; people don't hammer them out through living.

### A Secondhand World

Hers is a secondhand world. In many respects, mine is too, and for both of us it is becoming more so. Decisions are made further and further away from us. We see only the results. Processes are carried on far away in a factory. We see

only the end product. To compound the actual secondhandedness of today's world with the special orbit of childhood creates a tough problem for teachers: how to make classroom learning realistic?

Many teachers are doing interesting and ingenious things designed to solve this problem. In many classrooms plants are grown, mice are born, frogs are cut up, or cupcakes are sold. They go a little way but, somehow, they don't do the trick, the whole trick. These sorts of things are, somehow, not reality to my daughter and her friends. In that they are "things teachers do," they are still abstractions. They don't answer her questions. They don't illuminate the corners where her world rubs up against the world she's trying to understand.

The only thing really real to her is the world as she perceives it. I cannot perceive it the same way. Her teacher cannot perceive it the same way. Somehow, each of us must understand how she perceives it, at least well enough to know when she is dragging in her own *realia* (I believe that is the currently favored term). The point is, the teacher cannot devise these *realia*.

What the teacher *can* do is to let her and her friends introduce the reality

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into the classroom. The teacher can let them talk freely and often about the world as they see it. The teacher can let them make some simple tests of their perception, and report on the results. They can be allowed to "wonder their ways back" to what is real and substantial.

This will, of course, interfere with the usual concept of scope and sequence in curriculum. It is going to have to be done. To base scope on the teacher's knowledge and sequence on the internal logic of a subject is to guarantee that "learning" is going to be remembering, and that internalization is not going to go on. A collection of facts about things is the result. But these facts and these things are simply data. They may point the way to reality, but they are not reality. Reality is, still, the world as the learners perceive it. Scope is going to have to become the outer limits of the learner's present curiosity, and sequence the order in which the learner needs to know things.

Otherwise we compound at an alarming rate the secondhandedness of the world in which our young people live and learn.

For example: To an eight-year-old, the source of money is a mystery. The only reality he knows is that Daddy gets it from the bank, or the grocery store. Offering units on money, or on banks and banking, makes it no easier to understand. Indeed most of the concepts in these areas are abstractions to adults! In the case of money, it is an abstraction anyhow! There needs to be learning about work and the creation of items of value. There need to be opportunities for trading things of value, items or services created by the youngsters and upon which they have placed value. Maybe it's just as simple as one blackboard-eras-

ing is worth three window-adjustings. There will be a time when the youngsters will wonder about storing up credits, and the symbolizing of those credits. After that, banks and banking are a reasonable wonder. At that time, Daddy's source for supply is understandable and real.

Or: Youngsters are forever being told that they have to practice something in order that they can be a good something-or-another when they get to be adults. Now, almost nothing is quite so abstract to a child as that vague day when he'll be grown up. "If you want to be a good scientist you *have* to learn your arithmetic *now*." Surely there's some reason *now* for knowing such arithmetic as he has to know! Why not help him to answer some of his questions, to pursue some of his wonders, by *using* arithmetic *now*? One cannot give any standard "frin-stances"; the teacher needs to be sensitive to the wonder that is brought in, to the reality that the child introduces.

Let's move into the high school.

Young people often are asked to go through mock legislative sessions or scholarly critiques of city council sessions. The assumption is that such exercises introduce the *realia*. For most, they do not. These are still academic exercises, and the point remains abstract and remote. These youngsters need to control the world in which they live, not to *practice* controlling the world in which adults live.

More realistic would be demanding that they make decisions, and live with them, concerning their own behavior in the world of the adolescent. For example: Why should high schools ring bells every fifty-five minutes? Are we being realistic if we do not expect young people to develop their own rationales for getting to places on time, and if we

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do not expect them to live with the results of failing to do so? If they cannot do this, what is so realistic about practicing the making of make-believe laws for the protection of mythical highways? Are we not, indeed, encouraging them to believe that the secondhand data from reading and listening to the teacher are all that is needed for controlling a world in which people live? Would not a person who is responsible for his own actions *now* be more apt to have a *feel* for what legislation could and should accomplish?

Or: Many counselors make decisions for youngsters and then "make them believe that they are their own." This is done, I am told, because the youngster doesn't realize the reality of the situation.

The reality becomes, then, that someone else "knows" and can make the decisions for you. So, we wind up with a

world where the experts decide instead of advise. And, we wonder why, in that world, more people don't "do the right thing." Why can't counselors listen to questions, ask questions, and present data instead of *telling*? This does not preclude the question, "And what is going to happen if you do this?"

If the function of the common school is to aid in the youngster's integration of himself with society, then to seek some learning which will reveal what is really real is essential. This is simply in the nature of a plea to start looking for what is really real to the learner. That is where it has to start. It cannot be found in what the teacher is, or what the teacher knows . . . not for the kids who are still asking, "Daddy, did Indians go to the bathroom?"

—JOE SMITH, *professor of education, San Francisco State College, California.*

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