

# The Importance of People

Column Editor: Prudence Bostwick

## Teaching Is Responsiveness

THERE is very little research evidence of a convincing nature to support the notion that men and women enter the teaching profession because they care about children, are more altruistic than others, or wish to enter a career of social service. Instead, studies of occupational preference as measured by such instruments as the Kuder Preference Record and the Strong Interest Inventory seem to indicate that in influencing people to teach "teaching per se is not as important as what is taught."<sup>1</sup> Except for men teaching social studies and men working in school administration, all those teachers who responded to the Kuder Preference Record scored considerably below the seventy-fifth percentile in interest in social service, a score considered necessary to show significant interest in helping others.<sup>2</sup>

As I look back on my own career in teaching, I am confident that it was my desire to share my enthusiasm for poetry and life science that was the deciding factor. It was not my concern for adolescents—I knew almost none—nor my desire to do good in the world that sent me down one August morning after my

June graduation from a liberal arts college to apply for high school teaching in my home town. I had had no professional education. In my college days the scientific study of child and adolescent growth and development and of the nature of learning was in its infancy. I would teach as I had been taught. I would be the purveyor of knowledge. I would keep alive in myself and stimulate in my students a love for the literature and botany in which I had majored in college.

I began with zest. But in spite of all my efforts, lyric poetry (Tennyson, Browning, Wordsworth, Masefield, Frost, Millay) did not become the central passion of my teenagers. Instead they were swept off their feet by the "Shooting of Dan McGrew" and "The Highwayman." My tendency was to find consolation for this disappointment in the response of those few youngsters with "high ability" and "adequate backgrounds" who spoke my language. As I read to the class (I insisted on their listening to the melody of the lines and the imagery of simile and metaphor), I found a few answering eyes. But as for the rest, in my resentment and ignorance I was inclined to think that I, too, was casting pearls.

In a study of teacher-pupil relationships under the sponsorship of the Commission on Teacher Education of the

<sup>1</sup> Myron Lieberman. *Education as a Profession*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1956. p. 220.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

American Council on Education, Robert Bush made an interesting discovery. He found that, generally speaking, a teacher who knows most about his pupils and is concerned about their individual needs and interests has effective relationships with a larger number of pupils than do teachers whose purpose is primarily teaching subject matter.<sup>3</sup>

I am very sure that the relationship between me and the football boys who studied botany with me in my first year of teaching was not built on any sharing of purpose that grew out of their interests. Mine was to teach them to recognize the leaf, twig, and bark of 40 trees within walking distance of the school

<sup>3</sup> For a thoroughly delightful account of Robert Bush's study of teacher-pupil relationships see p. 255-76 in Maurice Troyer and C. Robert Pace's *Evaluation in Teacher Education*, prepared for the Commission on Teacher Education, American Council on Education, Washington, D. C., 1944.

(the city had a nursery six blocks away) . . . *quercus alba*, *quercus rubra*, *populus deltoides*, *pinus ponderosa-variety scopulorum*—I remember them nostalgically to this day. The purpose of the boys, on the other hand, was to give out as little energy as possible either in class or on the field trips, to sink exhausted on the curbstone during the observation of trees, and in the end to disappear down a back alley that led to the drugstore. In spite of warnings such as this, I persisted in a thoroughgoing curriculum which included in the spring semester a study of the succession of gametophytic and sporophytic generations in plants.

As I think now, years later, of the poetry and botany which I sought to share with my students, I am keenly aware of how differently I would teach today. If we think that we have made small progress in 30 years, think how changed for the better are the selection

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As far as I know, no one in any grade in the public school is forced to learn the

Latin names of trees nowadays. Instead, energy is directed to thinking about problems of community health, about biological processes that are common to all living things, and about the basic structure of living cells and the nature of the fundamental stuff of which life is made. Content is close to human life and its needs. Method is concerned with student participation in demonstrations, special studies, and simple research.

### A Changing Role

Even more significant than the improvement in selection and organization of subject matter and learning experiences is the changing role of the teacher. Since he is still one of the chief sources of knowledge, he must keep his passion for learning and he must grow in competence in whatever subject fields he has chosen for his prime academic in-

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terests. In addition, he is a student of curriculum building so that he may select content and method wisely. He is a student of human behavior so that he may relate himself intelligently to students, parents, fellow teachers and administrators. His role is both intellectual and social. His greatest concern is the response of boys and girls to the learning environment which he prepares for and with them.

The quality of the student's response depends with few exceptions upon the teacher's attitude toward him as a person and toward his questions and his needs. In her recent study of the assessment of the quality of teaching, Marie Hughes identifies personal response as one of the seven categories of teacher functions and considers it so important as to say that its quality is the measure of good teaching.<sup>4</sup> This responsiveness of the teacher to the student is one of the determining factors in their relationship, whether that responsiveness is "supportive and positive in its affectivity" or "defensive and characterized by negative acts of sarcasm and threat."<sup>5</sup>

As I think of the concern which good teachers have for the developing and growing youngster, a concern that is neither sentimental, nor exploitive, nor possessive, but supportive and based on respect for individual personality, I am reminded once more of the young teacher who cared more about trees and poetry than about boys and girls. She is symbolic of those who go into teaching primarily because they love a subject field, because they want to preserve their daily contact with ideas that give them

<sup>4</sup> Marie M. Hughes and Associates. *A Research Report. Development of the Means for the Assessment of the Quality of Teaching in Elementary Schools.* Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah, 1959. p. 215.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* Adapted from page 221.

joy. Soon they may discover that many children or young people do not usually share their academic interests gladly. They tend then to become disillusioned with teaching, resentful of the pupils who reject their subjects as "uninteresting" and "a waste of time," appreciative only of those boys and girls who have the background and the academic maturity to cherish the subject fields which the teachers also enjoy.

But all this changes if the neophyte learns that teaching is responsiveness to students, that it is concerned primarily with the development of persons and not just the sharing of enthusiasms. It is then that the teacher sees subject matter as a resource for children's growing. He uses from the disciplines that he has loved whatever content will most adequately serve the group concerned. He selects at the same time other materials that will nourish the mind and heart of special individuals in the class. He sees clearly the reasons for caring for differences among the students in his English

class by having resources of varying quality and purpose, by including poetry of humor, adventure and nonsense as well as poetry of introspection and philosophy. He discovers through his study of the social, psychological and philosophical foundations of education and through his study of curriculum building and teaching method that teaching is more than a matter of altruism, or social service, or even helping others.

Teaching is concerned as is no other profession with growing, developing human nature in whatever form it is manifest: male or female, young or old, rich or poor, white or colored, religious or nonreligious, bright or dull, mature or immature. As Robert Bush says at the close of his study, "The fundamental domain of the individual teacher (is) the teaching-learning relationship with boys and girls."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

### Age-Graded

(Continued from page 78)

and encourage sound attitudes. Children love to sing. At Bancroft School singing time is a gay time. Often the piano is rolled out in the corridor and the strains of "Sing Together, Merrily Sing" are played. All the children in the school come singing as they gather around the piano. Patriotic, popular, folk and partner songs are favorites. One observes and hears five-year-olds singing a melody while perhaps the ten-year-olds produce a lovely descant. Children are unaware that they are singing three-part music as they sing rounds. Sometimes the resonator bells or autoharp furnish the accompaniment. The song, "Sing Together, Merrily Sing," echoes through

the building as the children go singing back to their classrooms. The following offer additional opportunities for school-wide grouping: assemblies, children's committees or student councils, library, safety, lunch room, audio-visual, playground, television programs and festivals.

Under the impact of public criticism, the school sometimes feels an urgent need to change. Nevertheless, educators must not be panicked into indefensible patterns of organization and procedure. The solid gains of the past must not be tossed aside, but should be revised, expanded and altered to fit new situations. As testing becomes more inclusive and research more applicable better plans for grouping undoubtedly will emerge.

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