

# The Importance of People

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## Sweeping with the Wind

MY first school was the typical little red schoolhouse at the top of a hill—18 children, first grade through eighth. I was 18 and not a bit daunted at the prospect. Hadn't I, fresh out of high school, made a grade of 96 on the Theory and Practice of Education test on the state examinations? (That 96 was responsible for my getting a first-class certificate. It redeemed the disgrace of a 65 in geography.)

At the end of my first month, I was still sure of myself, but I had learned my first lesson: I needed help. Help came through a little story, almost a space-filler, at the foot of a column after an article in the educational journal put out at that time by our State Department of Instruction. The article had meant very little to me, but to that five-line story I can attribute much of the joy and satisfaction of my many years of teaching. This was the story as it was published 50 years ago:

"Never forget, dearie," said the gray-haired teacher to a young woman about to face her first class, "always to sweep with the wind." That lesson *took* with me.

Sometimes it was the real wind which tempered the direction of the day's teaching. When it was the wrong way of the wind making us brittle and restless,

I remembered not to clamp down too hard on classroom rules and regulations (they were almost sacrosanct in those days) and to hope that the County Superintendent wouldn't choose that day to visit.

On the days when the real wind seemed to be keeping us sunny-tempered and fairly calm, I would make the most of every minute with the children pulling with me. When the first snow of the season hit us during arithmetic lesson, I would remember not to say, "Sit down in your seats. You have seen snow before." Instead, we would all go to the windows, maybe open them a bit, feel the excitement of the fresh, damp air, and exult in the size of the snowflakes we caught on our sleeves. In those days, after the first of October, sleeves came down to our wrists.

Then there was the emotional wind whose direction needed to be considered: maybe it was a local celebration or tragedy, a circus coming or the county fair, or a holiday, those delightful always-to-be-counted-on, red-letter days of the year—Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Valentine's Day, Easter. Those were the days when we really savored the joy of music and art and poems and stories. Oh, we made time for grammar and arithmetic, of course, but

we didn't start on irregular verbs or multiplication of fractions when we were about to trim our Christmas tree or make a valentine box.

Many months of tempering the wind to the captive children brought me to a big city school system, to summer school classes, to a wealth of educational literature. Now came a challenge to sweep with the wind professionally—this time with *methods*, one wind after another: the importance of the assignment, the bright hope of motivation, the machinery of the socialized recitation, and at last the project method, the activity program, the unit-of-work approach. Wholeheartedly and joyfully I did my duty by each current educational wind to the profit and satisfaction of group after group of children. I worshipped at the feet of John Dewey, Kilpatrick, and all the other good voices in the wilderness of those days.

As one new method or theory replaced another, I learned a new lesson. It did not matter so much to which current school of thought I gave my allegiance. What mattered was that I should teach children by this method or that method every day as if my very life depended on it—as if what I was teaching was the most important thing in the world. That kind of wind blowing in the classroom can bring the children along at a brisk pace. Sweep with the wind—teach with your whole heart and soul!

Then came the next great lesson, The Importance of People. (I had recognized this before my favorite *Educational Leadership* had thought it up for a column.) I found that parents are people who can become the teacher's greatest allies if she will remember that every Johnny is the apple of his mother's eye, and that first of all she must show her interest in Johnny and her understanding

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of him before she begins to concentrate on his problems.

Then principals and supervisors! They are people too. With their wide experience they enriched my life as they responded to my call for help when I wanted to launch a new unit of work or to do some experimenting on my own. There was a bit of bonus in this too. People are bound to look more kindly on an undertaking in which they have had a part. My best friends in my teaching career have been the people who have helped me.

Then came my turn to work with teachers through summer school and supervisory work, and I kept on learning. Every teacher had something individual as a basis to build on. I looked for that first. What was it that made this person important? Sometimes it was a special ability or a personality trait. Sometimes it was a great need for recog-

dition or a feeling of inadequacy that made a person important to the one who was trying to help.

### A New Situation

Then I faced a new situation and a further opportunity to put all that I had learned to the test. I retired from a large public school system one week and the next became a teaching principal in a school which at first seemed to be only a small concrete bit of evidence of its founders' dream come true. It was a Hebrew day school where, that first year, 10 kindergartners and 18 six-year-olds were to prove that they could follow through the years two paths of learning at the same time. The first was a program of Hebrew: reading, speaking and writing the language as well as learning the history, traditions and basic principles of Judaism. The second was a program of English patterned on the public school system of the city. Half a day for six-year-olds to learn to read and write and spell and figure—to sing and play and build and paint? It couldn't be done, but I said I would try it. I was sweeping with the wind of my own desire to keep on working with children.

My first surprise was in seeing how easily the six-year-olds learned to read that classic, *Tip and Mitten*, from left to right in the morning, and learned to read their Hebrew primer from right to left in the afternoon with their Jewish teacher. Today, those six-year-olds are eighth graders. They and the 180 children who are following them amaze us, their Hebrew and Gentile teachers, eight of each. They can read everything, science, poetry, history and fiction in both English and Hebrew. They know their own religious heritage. They have made gratifying scores in all subjects on standardized tests. They have not lost out on

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physical education, music, and art. How have they done it? Have they been pressured? Do they show the strain of their schedule? Sometimes I wish they did—it might calm their high spirits.

The children from kindergarten to eighth grade are certain that their school is the best in the world. They pour in every morning as if to a celebration—and how about their teacher? How have I adapted myself to a school situation wholly new in concept? To a group of parents bound together in a religion not my own? To a program that compresses the public school curriculum into half-time? To a school year in which we celebrate Channukah instead of Christmas, Passover instead of Easter?

First of all, I have discovered that the Jewish parents with whom I work are remarkably important people, in their interest in their children, their outspoken affection and appreciation of their children's teachers, their generosity and their zest for work. My own experience has been deepened and broadened by

the knowledge and understanding I have gained of their great religion and history. Just think what it means to one who has always rejoiced in holidays to celebrate now Rosh Hashana, Succoth, Channukah, Purim at school, as well as Christmas and Easter at home. Each of the Jewish holidays, new to me just a few years ago, has brought me its meaning, its special songs and forms of greeting, its traditions, symbols and ceremonies.

And so, I have kept on sweeping with the wind and appreciating the importance of people. I have also, each day, tried to teach as if my very life depended upon it. I have kept on learning, too—learning that theories and testing programs are necessary, but that there are many enticements to learning. Blithe spirits, driving purpose, difficult goals and zest for hard work under the guidance of understanding teachers are leading these Jewish children with their double load steadfastly and happily on their way.

Have I forgotten to say that I think children are the most important people in the world?

—ELSIE W. ADAMS, *Principal, English Division, Hillel Academy, Denver, Col.*

### **Practice Teaching Program**

*(Continued from page 212)*

What we learned was that good lesson planning was the major bridge to teaching for the well-prepared, able graduate of a liberal arts college. As a person managed that art, he became a good teacher. So our major tasks in teacher preparation, during the past summer, were to teach our candidates to respect the minds and hearts of children, and to learn how to present these children with exciting, worthwhile problems to be solved.

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