

Ready for What?

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UNDERLYING the social and scientific revolution of today in all its paradoxes is the conflict between humaneness and brutality. Throughout civilization the battle has been continuous. Yet never has such massive strength been mustered on either side, nor has so much been at stake as in our time. The outcome can be as colossal as the conflict: a liberation of spirit and with it an undreamed of humaneness; or debasement and return to the brutality of the jungle.

The evidence of the struggle is all about us as are the results, both good and evil. They are too obvious to need repeating here. Our concern is with our responsibility as teachers, as to where we are throwing our strength. *Educational Leadership* indicates awareness of the problem in its emphasis for the year: "The importance of making the years of schooling more humane and enriching for every child."

The topic of the current issue, "The Young Child—Today's Pawn?" is terrifying if it implies the existence of exploitation of children. We are interpreting the title of this editorial, "Ready for What?" in the context of the year's emphasis and this issue's topic. We ask if, as teachers, we are ready to work *with* the forces of humaneness and *against* those of brutality.

Practices Affecting Humaneness

Few would question the humaneness of teachers in their personal relations with children and young people. Probably in no other profession is there more of kindness and understanding. Yet there are practices—and the trend is growing—which, while taken separately may not deserve the term *brutal*, in their sum total we say, without hesitancy, are factors in the brutalization of our culture. Among these are: Evaluation by letter or numerical grades; annual promotions with the dictum, "passed," or "failed"; the control over the curriculum exerted by stand-

ard tests; ability grouping; ready-made programmed teaching and its accompanying gadgetry; disregard of the uniqueness of the potential contributions both of individuals and ethnic groups; slavish conformity to traditional standards.

All who have taught have seen the results: Complacency and frustration; feelings of unwarranted superiority and inferiority; the suppression of creativeness and the encouragement of standardization; dependence on others for approval or disapproval and the loss of self-direction; acceptance of competition as a stimulus to achievement and indifference to the finer values of cooperation; the aggrandizement of the ego and the discounting of the satisfaction inherent in service to others. So long as we continue along these lines we cannot credit ourselves with contributing to a more humane world. Instead, we are aiding and abetting the use of children as pawns to satisfy the ambitions and allay the fears of an adult generation.

Can we be ready *now*, instead of meekly yielding to the values of a far-from-happy world, to strike out boldly for what we believe to be a better way? If we are ready, we will: Encourage children to question and help them find satisfying answers; develop with them activities that will start them on the way to becoming cooperative members of their group; abandon the fallacies of grades and annual promotions and, instead, guide children in completion of tasks suitable to their stage of maturity; pay less attention to standard test results of knowledge and skill and redouble the efforts to bring out the potentials of human nature to which we have given too little attention; and, above all, to stop "kidding ourselves" that children are learning just because they are doing our bidding and, instead, welcome their independent efforts to explore for themselves. These are but samples of what we might do; the humane teacher knows many others.

Humaneness Is Not Enough

Suppose in the interest of creating a classroom "more humane and enriching for every child" we say that we are ready to do the above and even more, it still will be far from enough. While the glory of the teacher is his dedication to his pupils, it often happens that the depth of his involvement blinds him to forces outside the school bearing directly on the success or failure of his immediate efforts.

Head Start

A case in point is the recently inaugurated Head Start program. For generations we have known the pitiable waste resulting from the neglect of the early years of childhood. But we, ourselves, did not do enough to convince the public of the need for preschool education. It took a depression, two world wars and now, the Anti-Poverty Program to do something for at least some children—those with the most obvious need—toward a better beginning in life than they would otherwise have. Where were we when Head Start was being planned? Why were we not more widely consulted? Might it not be due in part, at least, to our failure to concern ourselves sufficiently with the world beyond the classroom?

Head Start is definitely a humane project. As such we should be ready to regard it, with all its shortcomings, as an opening wedge by which we can, at long last, secure for all children what it provides only for the economically deprived. We are rightly concerned over the self-image created for a child when his eligibility for the program depends upon a discriminatory title; and, of course, we are fearful that emphasis might be placed on "reading readiness" for formal schooling at the expense of fundamental growth needs. But here is an opportunity which, though not of our initiation, if we embrace and throw into it our strength, can be one of the greatest achievements in the advance, not only of early childhood education, but of all education.

National Assessment

Another government project of utmost concern to all of us is the proposed national assessment of education. There is no question in the complex structure of society today but that we need to take a broad national overview of what we are accomplishing or failing to accomplish. Yet the fact that plans are under way for the use of standard achievement tests in subject matter is cause for alarm. We mentioned in the beginning of this statement the standard test as one of the current school practices inimical to humaneness. If adopted nationally the results will be devastating almost beyond imagination. We need to be ready by all means in our power to make ourselves heard as to the goals to serve as guides to the nature of the assessment, the means to be used, and the personnel involved in both the planning and the administration.

There are other movements which, though not so directly focused on education as the two examples cited, are nevertheless much the business of education. Among the most fundamental of these is the threat of mass unemployment through automation. Vocational education for retraining is, of itself, not the answer; nor is education for leisure. There will not be enough jobs in shop, in office, and on the farm to go around. As the struggle for bread grows fiercer, humaneness will decrease, and brutality will increase. Yet this need not happen, for there is plenty of *work*, if not in the accustomed jobs, for all of us—work that machines can never do, work which can be done only by human beings for human beings.

Automation, instead of becoming a calamity can be a source of liberation by freeing men from the stultifying monotony of noncreative labor. What is needed to make this an outcome of our scientific and social revolution is a *basic change in attitude toward work and human destiny*. That man has the potential for such a change is evidenced by the spirit of many of those who have joined the Peace Corps. It is to the extension of this spirit that education can make its greatest contribution to humaneness.

A humane classroom is the immediate responsibility of education. But we need to see beyond its walls, to be alert to participate in movements whose goal is, as ours, humaneness, and equally ready courageously to withstand the forces of brutality.

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