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The Junior High School TEACHER WE NEED

ONE recent Monday morning, a junior high school block-of-time class was having a current events discussion. Albert Schweitzer had passed away during the preceding weekend and much of the pupils' discussion dealt with Mr. Schweitzer. The teacher asked, "What stands out most in your mind when you think of Albert Schweitzer?"

There was a variety of responses from the class. One young adolescent said, "He was all for unfortunate people. I think he was real human. According to a news article I read, Mr. Schweitzer once said, 'You don't live in a world all your own. Your brothers are here, too.'"

The teacher responded, "What does being human mean? How do we distinguish between someone who acts human and someone who acts inhuman? Can you . . .?"

In one session of a college class in junior high school education, a student asked of the teacher, "Can you help us become more human in our dealings with kids?"

This past session of summer school, the writer attended a one-day conference at New York University. The main focus of the conference was an address centered around humanizing our schools.

The illustrations cited here are only three of many current happenings in which emphasis is on humanness. Concern with this is not limited to educators. We could list numerous projects which are going on in our country and our world which show man's concern for his fellow man.

I, for one, am very pleased with the present emphasis in humanizing education. Never before in the history of American education has the climate been so appropriate for us to declare humanness as an educational goal. Some of us have often been reluctant, for one reason or another, to speak up for qualities which are uniquely human. I get the feeling that today, right now, this is the emphasis we need.

What does all of this talk about "humanizing" have to do with the junior high school teacher we need? To pose an answer to this question, we first need to turn attention to a concept of the purpose of education.

There is nearly unanimous agreement among our citizens that the general aim of education in a democracy is to contribute to the common good through aiding each individual in his process of becoming an intelligent, fully-functioning citizen. Each individual's unique self will determine the degree to which he becomes fully functioning. This is a very human goal.

If we accept this goal as a general aim for education, then what kind of teachers do we need to implement this objective in junior high schools?

Teachers Who Care

Some attributes of teachers who care have been described by a few people. Other perceptions, insights and skills have not been researched and discussed nearly enough. I would like to describe some qualities which, in my opinion, teachers need in order to aid pupils in their becoming process.

We need teachers who care about democracy.

In a country where citizens subscribe to a democratic way of life, we should not find it necessary to plead the case for democracy in school living. Yet, we are continually doing so. In fact, at least one person I know has raised the question—Is democracy indigenous to this country? When we visit schools and classrooms and see authoritarian practices being used, we might well raise such a question.

Teachers who care about democracy will know it and its opposing ideologies well. They will know that democratic living is learned. Their classroom organization will be such that it allows for pupils to engage in democratic practices.

From where I sit, academic freedom is a hot issue. From many states, teachers and lay citizens, we hear much about the subject of a teacher's freedom in the classroom. We need teachers who not only seek academic freedom for themselves but for pupils also.

Psychologists tell us that the most effective learning and personality development take place in democratic settings. To be democratic, we must have faith in others. Adlai Stevenson said so well:

... I would ... emphasize first that any discussion of education cannot be cast in terms of national needs ... For education can serve the ends of democratic society only as it meets those of the individual human being. The essential condition of the system of free choice between conflicting ideas and leaders, which we call democracy, is that it be made up of all different kinds of people—which means that what we demand most of education is the development of informed people who are at the same time unique, different, unpatterned individuals.¹

We need teachers who care about themselves.

In order for people to fully care about and have faith in others, they must view themselves in positive ways. To appreciate and respect the dignity and worth of another individual, a teacher must have looked within himself to know what is there.

We need teachers who care about helping pupils develop healthy self-concepts.

Seven years ago this writer participated in research designed to determine

¹ Adlai E. Stevenson, as quoted from Louise Parrish and Yvonne Waskin. *Teacher-Pupil Planning*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958. p. 155-56.

the relationship which exists between a nondirective drama technique and the development of reading skills and self-concept. This experience provided me with valuable insight. For example: How a person feels about himself ultimately determines his success or failure whether it be in reading, teaching, basketball, or any other endeavor.

Fortunately, we have available to us today some writings dealing with self-concept development. Teachers must continually strive to understand self and behavior. We need educators who take the time to understand their pupils; who will gather extensive information and use the data in the best interests of pupils.

To care about young adolescents one must understand them in their cultural setting. As Eric Hoffer puts it:

The reasonable approach is to assume that the adolescents' behavior is induced largely by his mode of existence, by the situation in which he finds himself. This would imply that adults, too, when placed in a similar situation, would behave more or less like juveniles.²

The young adolescent is essentially a person in search of self in a complex world. He ponders the questions: "Who am I?" "Where am I going?" "What does all of this have to do with me anyway?"

What useful insights teachers can get when they turn directly to the learners themselves! One teacher asked his ninth grade classes the question, "What do you see as being the five biggest problems facing people your age?"

Representative responses were:

² Eric Hoffer. "A Time of Juveniles." *Harper's Magazine*, June 1965, p. 18.

We are being rushed along with the world to grow up and act our age.

We need grades for college.

We are worried over problems of the future.

We worry about dropping out of school.

We need to understand ourselves.

We need more recreational activities.

We live with grownups who think all teenagers are reckless.

We are faced with the shortage of jobs because of automation.

The teachers we need for young adolescents realize that *values* and *self-concept* are almost, if not wholly, inseparable. These teachers cherish differences. They help pupils clarify their own values and respect the values of other persons.

We need teachers who care about making content meaningful in the lives of pupils.

"What is your class studying now Miss Bridges?"

"Oh, we're almost up to the Civil War. You see, it's almost the end of the year and we are supposed to cover American history from exploration to 1865 in the eighth grade."

"Do you mean uncover American history, Miss Bridges?"

"What? Oh, . . . it doesn't really matter. Students must have all of this for citizenship education anyhow."

How often we hear comments similar to these! And we must admit that teachers are not always at fault when they attempt to teach only what is in the book. Yet we know many teachers who use the excuse that a rigid structure is imposed upon them. They do not care whether or not the content has meaning to pupils.

One perceptive pupil, even from a school located in a "culturally deprived" area, said:

My favorite kind of teacher is a scientist. My reason for liking scientists is that they are real intelligent and sensible. They are always discovering things. That's the way I want to be.

This youngster's insight should help some of us to sit up and take notice. In the past few years, teachers have continuously heard that learning by discovery can be most meaningful. Some teachers are so concerned about pouring knowledge into pupils they forget about helping pupils to discover. Teaching procedures might have more promise if we could somehow translate Rachel Carson's ideas into practice. She described experiences she had had with her nephew as they walked on the beach and in the woods of Maine. Mrs. Carson expressed her pleasure in plants and animals which they saw, much as she would share discoveries with an older person. Later, the nephew could easily identify what he and his aunt had seen. "I am sure no amount of drill would have implanted the names so firmly as just going through the woods in the spirit of two friends on an expedition of exciting discovery."³

For content to be meaningful to a pupil, he must see its importance to him. In order for pupils to learn skills most effectively, they must need them to get where they are going.

Pupils' opinions of what they need and their teachers' opinions are not always the same. A few educators propose what seems to be a sensible posi-

tion about content selection. They say that the choice of content is not an either-or proposition; but rather that the learner as well as the world in which he finds himself must be considered in content decisions.

We need teachers who care about teaching in the junior high school.

A safe assumption seems to be that the most effective teachers of young adolescents are those who realize what junior high school education is all about. They are professional educators who understand goals of junior high schools and who work toward implementing these aims.

Because we cherish the dream of providing the best possible educational opportunities for each youth in our contemporary, democratic society, we continually must be involved in experimentation and innovation. The teachers we need have been and continue to be involved in rethinking and reconstructing educational practices for young adolescents.

Teachers who care about being in junior high school are teaching there because they so desire. These teachers are not simply "marking time" until they can be promoted to senior high school teaching. They value the goals of the school. They value the idea of teaching all children whatever their background.

Much needs to be said about changing the junior high school to better meet the educational needs of our young people. We must change the school when it is necessary. To change the school, we must have teachers who are willing to change. To change, we, as teachers, must care.

³ Rachel Carson. "Help Your Child to Wonder." *Woman's Home Companion*, July 1956.

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