

● Letters to the Editor

Contributors: Daniel Kennedy
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SELF-DIRECTION: WHAT DIRECTION?

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Dear Editor:

This letter is written mainly in response to Combs¹ recent thought-provoking article on fostering self-direction. The article by Combs aroused in the writer some feelings of ambivalence. Foster self-direction? By all means, yes. Combs suggested various reasons for the need for self-direction in the modern world. Another timely example of such need involves the current "death-of-God" issue in religion. The relatively more self-directed person would be expected to cope better, intellectually and emotionally, with this issue—an issue which must be of considerable importance to the basic philosophy of life of many people. On the other hand, is it safe, for purposes of fostering desirable self-direction, to depend upon an inherent tendency of the human organism to move toward self-fulfillment? No. Herein lies the danger that this letter proposes to discuss.

Combs recommends placing greater trust in the human organism, and offers as one reason for doing so the tendency of people to develop toward physical and mental health. This developmental tendency is explicitly stated as being basic, and is presumably also generalized. In regard to mental health, this notion has little practical meaning outside the context of cultural relativity.

Thus, the marked expressions of hostility and suspiciousness of the Dobu Islander are healthy in his culture, but might be taken as signs of paranoid behavior in most of Western Civilization. Also, within any given culture certain environmental conditions (or teaching variables) would appear to foster self-direction toward desirable goals, while other environmental conditions function to foster self-direction toward undesirable goals. There is no reason to believe, for example, that the criminal may not be as self-directed as the law-abiding person. Likewise, the schizophrenic may be as self-directed as the non-schizophrenic, if not more so. The trick would seem to be one of developing (teaching?) self-directed behavior that is directed toward acceptable goals.

The home or school may program a child for either self-directed behavior or for non-self-directed behavior. A primary grade girl of the writer's acquaintance provides an example of the latter. This child, who has shown slower than average

¹ Arthur W. Combs. "Fostering Self-Direction." *Educational Leadership* 23:373-76; February 1966.

mental and physical development since infancy, has by all evidence been seriously over-protected at home. Until recently both teachers and children at school were practically her servants. The children would watch to see that Joan (as we will call her) did not leave her sweater in the art room, or forget her meal ticket at lunch time, etc. One teacher was even reported to have made a practice of feeding the girl her lunch. While Joan's motor coordination is poor, it is nowhere near that poor.

A few weeks ago the school began to make serious efforts to develop greater independent, or self-directed, behavior in this girl. Teachers have gradually been requiring more and more responsibility from Joan in regard to caring for her personal belongings, and her classmates have been instructed to stop helping her so much. Now, a sweater left behind requires a trip to the school "lost and found" box, or a forgotten meal ticket results in less play time during the lunch period.

At the time of this writing the girl is just beginning to show signs of greater independence. In essence, Joan had been taught to lack self-direction, and is now being taught to gain self-direction. The environmental conditions have appeared to be more important in regard to this child's degree of self-direction than any presumed inherent tendency to develop toward self-fulfillment.

Perhaps it would be wise at this point to make a brief comment about the nature of teaching. Combs holds that self-direction must be learned, but does not need to be taught. This paradoxical notion has been the source of considerable confusion in education. There is general agreement that learning is manifested by, and can only be measured in terms of, behavior change. Behavior change is known to result partly from the existing environmental conditions to which an individual is exposed. The systematic arrangement of environmental conditions for the purpose of bringing about certain behavior changes is known as teaching. Since self-directed behavior can be shown to result from the systematic arrangement of environmental conditions (as in the case of Joan above), such behavior may indeed be said to have been *taught*.

As one means of providing children with the opportunity for practicing self-direction, Combs recommends having them take greater part in educational decision-making. Here again a feeling of ambivalence is stimulated. The writer finds himself in sympathy with this recommendation, but fears that some teachers will tend to carry this idea too far. For example, should we practice such nonsense (as some teachers still do) as letting primary grade children decide whether they want to have reading today, or practice manipulating numbers this week, etc.? The need for considerable structure in the early development of basic academic skills for the purpose of later exercising these skills in relatively more self-directed ways seems to be generally accepted.

In stating his case for placing greater trust in the human organism, Combs rejects the Freudian conception of man as a basically evil creature, and implies that man is basically good. Another view, more consistent with the factual data on man, is that man is neither inherently "good" nor "bad." This third view would hold that man is "good" or "bad" only in terms of behavior appropriate or in-

appropriate to societal requirements. This view would further hold that self-directed behavior can be either "good" or "bad," depending upon whether it is appropriate or inappropriate to societal requirements. There is probably some truth to each of these three viewpoints, but the emphasizing of any one of them will have definite implications for educational practice. Thus, if the Freudian view is emphasized, education would have the task of helping people learn to guard against their basic nature. Stress placed on the "man is good because he inherently tends to self-actualize" view would mean that we do not have to bother with teaching, but rather only have to sit passively and watch the good things happen. The more learning-oriented view that man is basically neither good nor evil gives education the *teaching* task of developing behavior consistent with established goals.

This has been a plea to systematically develop self-direction in children, and to arrange the learning conditions (or teach) so that the developed self-direction will be inclined toward desirable goals. To the extent that we are aware of our goals, we will be able to program for self-direction in the direction of these goals. Foster self-direction? Yes. But let us not forget to give attention to the important question: self-direction toward what?

Sincerely,
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SCHOOL-HOME RELATIONS

Southern Illinois University
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Dear Editor:

One of the more important problems facing teachers at all levels is the matter of improving school-home relations. In this connection the practice of sending notes to parents should be reexamined. Unfortunately, the mere arrival of a note usually generates a considerable amount of apprehension.

Granted that teachers have legitimately used this means of calling attention to poor achievement and a variety of misdeeds, they need to explore the other side of the coin—using it to give due credit for tasks well done. Over a period of time this practice can be instrumental in putting school-home relations on a more positive and rewarding footing.

Sincerely,
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