To Think, To Learn, To Act

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ONE of the primary goals of education is to help youngsters learn to think, to learn, and to act independently. When youngsters have achieved moderate success in attaining these goals, they have the tools needed to cope with their individual problems and to influence the direction of their personal experiences.

Independence of thought, learning, and action is probably best acquired in a stable family unit that strives to develop these qualities through a series of patterns, practices, and behavior expectations used to initiate youth into and orient them to the culture. As technological advances and shifting social patterns have tended to erode the influence of the family structure, the school is asked to make youth more effective, efficient, and independent thinkers, learners, and doers.

As schools have attempted to help youngsters become more independent, it has become increasingly evident to some observers that the organization and administration of schools and the general practices of teachers actually make the development of independence in thinking, learning, and acting only a remote possibility. As Professor Philip W. Jackson * suggests, "... the settings in which ... [youngsters] perform are highly uniform and ... [youngsters] are there whether they want to be or not." For the most part, the environment of the majority of schools is highly stable and requires a vast degree of conformity. How, then, does a teacher help school youngsters attain the independence that allows them to help themselves presently and in the future? This question holds the key to helping youngsters develop self-direction.

Teachers as Models

When teachers attempt to help pupils cultivate their talents on the basis of a realistic evaluation of themselves, it is crucial that teachers become models of what they are trying to have youngsters emulate. Unfortunately there are few teachers who view their teaching efforts as a form of self-cultivation. Thus these teachers are not acceptable models for children seeking to cultivate themselves for useful participation. Professor

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Harry S. Broudy \(^2\) reflects on this state of affairs among teachers when he relates that:

Ordinary instances of self-cultivation do not acquire enough status to serve as models for the young. Yet such are precisely the models our children need, and the lack of them lames the educative process because one seductive example is worth a thousand homilies.

The roles that the majority of classroom teachers play should be altered to demonstrate that self-cultivation is an appropriate ideal for guiding one's behavior as a thinking and feeling individual. As teachers are made more aware of their need to cultivate themselves as individuals, there is a greater chance that they will become credible examples of the models they hope to develop in youngsters. This condition is probably a prerequisite if teachers expect to help youngsters help themselves.

In order to help youngsters help themselves, a teacher's notions about the nature of motivation must correlate highly with the reality of intrinsic factors that shape and initiate human behavior. Professor J. McV. Hunt \(^3\) gives a thought provoking analysis of some possible misconceptions concerning the experiential sources of motivation that are applicable here. This author concludes that:

Perhaps, the task of developing proper motivation is best seen, at least in nutshell form, as limiting the manipulation of extrinsic factors to that minimum of keeping homeostatic need and exteroceptive drive low, in favor of facilitating basic information—processing to maximize accurate anticipation of reality.

Youngsters who are expected to help themselves must develop skills that will enable them to process information within a pattern that affords the opportunity for selective perception and for choosing viable alternative solutions to personal and intellectual problems. Being able to process information accurately and realistically in relation to the problem is a major function to be learned by youngsters who expect to think, learn, and act independently.

The ability to process information for purposes of developing inner rational focus to a youngster's behavior requires a mastery of a repertoire of factual knowledge and intellectual skills. Professor Hunt \(^4\) observes that a learner tends to operate:

...like an error-actuated, feedback system where the error is derived from discrepancy between receptor-inputs of the present and the residues of past experience which serve as the basis for anticipating the future.

The real task of the teacher is to make sure that youngsters are given the prerequisite experiences which can serve as realistic guideposts to future actions. Evidence suggests that it is unrealistic for teachers to hope to be able to provide youngsters with specific solutions to the multitude of problems they are likely to encounter.

However, it is within the range of every teacher's responsibility to expose youngsters to a wide variety of alternative patterns for dealing with certain kinds of problem areas. As youngsters are exposed to a variety of experiences which place the means, ends, and consequences of their


\(^4\) Ibid.
decisions in a meaningful pattern for adequate understanding, they will have contact with a schema which should aid them in making personal decisions for guiding future action.

If teachers are going to help youngsters to help themselves, teachers must develop techniques for aiding youngsters to draw accurate conclusions about their own abilities, skills, and past experiences. In some circles this area would be classified as an ability to do self-evaluation. Within a limited and well-defined area, youngsters should be taught to undertake evaluational procedures which provide accurate data with regard to the specific knowledge possessed, skills presently held, styles used to deal with information and attitudes held about learning. If youngsters are not taught to evaluate themselves in terms of the aforementioned characteristics, they are denied the foundational blocks that combine to form the base for further self-development.

Within the past few years, there have been several programs (Head Start, Higher Horizons, Project Able, etc.) which purported to help underachieving and/or potentially underachieving youngsters learn to help themselves. In an extensive and exhaustive survey and analysis of some of the possible effects of programs similar to those mentioned here, Professors Edmund W. Gordon and Doxey A. Wilkerson concluded that many problems heretofore unarticulated have combined to keep such programs from achieving the majority of the goals expected in terms of student performance. In the vast majority of instances, special programs to help a defined sample of youngsters learn how to help themselves have met with little or no success. However, the experiences gained in these programs have amplified the importance of getting youngsters to use intrinsic motivation as a basis for self-reliance, self-direction, and self-evaluation as they attempt to find solutions to personal and intellectual problems.

If we consider the possible implications of the effects of the rapid expansion of new technology and of knowledge, it becomes clear that youngsters must be taught to handle data in the future that have little or no resemblance to data used and accepted today. In this sense, Professors Gordon and Wilkerson are justified in their conclusion that:

Only the student who by practice, by utilization of techniques of selection, discrimination, and evaluation has honed techniques which allow him to sort out the worthwhile from the worthless and the significant from the insignificant can escape being inundated in a sea of paper. Those who would succeed tomorrow, must learn not only how to acquire, but how to manage knowledge... successful functioning on an intellectual level consists not in having a headful of facts, but in problem-solving, in knowing how to conceptualize problems, and how to pursue the information which will provide solutions.

Teachers must accept the responsibility for teaching techniques which will help youngsters to help themselves. In a real sense there is little choice in the matter since the quality of life for a large segment of our society may very well be dependent upon our ability to teach the young to make rational decisions and to continue to learn and to adapt to new ways of relating to environmental conditions. This is the real challenge to those who propose to teach the young to be self-directing and independent.

6 Ibid. p. 186.