The Humanities:

Is A New Era Possible?

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The theme of this issue of Educational Leadership, "A New Era in the Humanities," has an optimistic ring to it. It suggests that American schools, so long concerned with helping children become competent in the "cognitive" fields, are now beginning to turn their attention to the arts and humanities.

This theme suggests that educators and parents, who once pressed for a heavier dose of the "solids," are now beginning to suspect that something has been missing in this emphasis. Perhaps they are now willing to consider that the study of man's perennial problems as exemplified in the humanities and the education of man's sensibilities as developed through the arts might be a needed counterthrust to the emphasis placed upon the sciences and upon mathematics over the past 15-year period.

One need only be reminded that during the past 10-year period over 100 million dollars has been provided to these latter fields for curriculum development and that about half of those high school students studying physics and mathematics are using programs that have been developed through national projects. In 1963-64, for example, the National Science Foundation provided 38,000 awards for work in the sciences. The NSF offered 39 institutes for elementary school science teachers and 420 institutes for secondary teachers.

It was only in 1965 that the first federally funded summer workshop was offered to teachers in the arts. We have finally begun to recognize an area of neglect; now, it seems, we are going to do something about this neglect. Yet what will it take to bring about "A New Era in the Humanities"? Can this be accomplished at all in American schools? The remainder of this article will identify what I consider to be some of the problems that must be resolved if a new era in the humanities is to become a reality in American schools and not a mere slogan whose ring slowly fades as the bandwagon passes.

Leadership and Support

One problem that must be faced is that of educational leadership. It is one thing to express a commitment to the value of the arts and humanities, to indicate that they have been neglected in American schools, and to urge that greater attention be given to them. It is quite another task to identify what is worth attending to in the humanities, to justify one's selection of humanistic content, and to conceptualize and describe methods of inquiry and discussion that do not do violence to that content.

Who at the local level is to provide such

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leadership? What constitutes humanistic content and for whom? Are the humanities characterized by their method of production or their method of appreciation; or is their defining character the nature of the ideas they express or the emotions they elicit? Who at the local, district, or school level will help teachers, administrators, and parents to understand the nature of the arts and humanities? Who will assume the responsibility of educational leadership in this area?

I fear that educators might be worked up over an idea whose content remains to be defined. If programs are to be developed in the arts and humanities, greater attention will need to be paid to the realities of humanistic goals, content, and method.

Will parents support programs in the humanities if such programs become more than token gestures? There are at least two reasons why general support from parents might not be secured for effective programs in the arts and humanities. First, in general, the goals of the arts and humanities are difficult to articulate in highly concrete terms, and even when this is done as well as can be, parents might not be willing to support a program that takes time, money, and attention away from the "bread and butter" subjects. "Bread and butter," in reference to subjects, is a simile having two significances. It refers to subjects that are considered basic or foundational to schooling; poetry, the artistic encounter with literature, and the visual arts are seldom considered as belonging to this class, and the "bread and butter" subjects are subjects which will enable students to earn their bread and butter.

American public schools, both elementary and secondary, have been viewed more as tools for upward social and economic mobility for children than as means for enabling students to live the good life in qualitative or intellectual terms. Parents correctly perceive the very real demands society—including higher education—places upon their children. Programs which in their view jeopardize mobility up the educational ladder are not likely to find strong parental support. High level competencies in the arts and highly tuned critical sensibilities, for example, find few rewards at the higher levels of schooling.

I recently conducted a study aimed at assessing both teachers’ and parents’ attitudes toward the value of five subject areas—art, music, social studies, foreign languages, and science. This study revealed an interesting ambiguity on the part of teachers and parents in their assessment of these content areas. Both teachers and parents were asked to complete a questionnaire containing 24 questions, among which were the following:

1. Some subject areas make a greater contribution to the good life than others. Please rate the following subject areas from one to five on the extent to which each contributes to the "good life."
   Science ___ Art ___ Foreign Languages ___
   Social Studies ___ Music ___

2. Children usually show more interest and enthusiasm for some subject areas than others. Please rate the following from one to five on the extent to which your child (student) shows interest and enthusiasm for them.
   Social Studies ___ Music ___ Science ___
   Foreign Languages ___ Art ___

3. If more school time could be spent on one subject area, which subject area should it be? Rate the subject areas from one to five.
   Science ___ Art ___ Social Studies ___
   Foreign Languages ___ Music ___

Both parents and teachers of children attending three elementary schools in Southern California rated subject areas in 24 such questions. One of the conclusions of the study—not a surprising one—was that there was virtual unanimity between parents and teachers regarding the way in which these fields were rated. Science was given the highest overall rating, next came social studies, art, music, and finally foreign languages.

What was surprising and revealing, however, was that to questions dealing with the contributions of various subject areas to the good life, to questions dealing with children’s enjoyment of various fields, to questions dealing with the avocational value of certain areas of study, art and music were
consistently ranked first or second in value. At the same time, science, social studies, and foreign languages were ranked third, fourth, and fifth.

Yet when it came to questions such as, “More instructional attention should be given to some subject areas in school than others. Please rate the following to the degree to which more attention should be devoted to them in school,” science and social studies were assigned highest priority, while art, music, and foreign languages were rated lowest on the scale.

While both parents and teachers appear to recognize the contributions of the arts to good living, to enjoyment, and to personal satisfaction, they still apparently believe that in school more attention should be devoted to the “bread and butter” subjects than to others. How do strong programs in the arts and humanities develop if these conclusions are regarded as representative of a wide spectrum of the attitudes of the American public?

A Life Style

A second problem that can emerge from an in-depth study of humanistic content in American schools deals with the consequences the study might have on the values of those who study such content. Will lay citizens support a program which might lead to values which violate their own?

Sometimes humanistic content, especially literature and the visual arts, deals with ideas about personal identity and the way life might be led. In so doing, such content may present ideas in a form that is persuasive and affect laden, the critical and aesthetic study of which may develop beliefs, indeed commitments, to ideas and practices which deviate radically from those held by the community. For example, a study of art may have as its goal more than helping students learn to expire before the Mona Lisa. Insofar as such study is concerned with helping humans live an artful life, and insofar as it succeeds in achieving such a goal, might not the values and behavior displayed by students through such a program fly in the face of the aspirations held for them by their parents?

When one plays marbles for keeps in the arts and humanities one is doing more than developing skills, one is developing a lifestyle. Are artistic or humanistic styles of life compatible with contemporary American values?

If these problems were the only ones that confront educators attempting to make the arts and humanities in American schools a reality, the difficulty would be large indeed. There are other problems, however, which make the difficulty not simply large, but enormous.

Take the problem of personnel in the schools. Are teachers educated in the humanities and arts? Are teachers prepared to lead humanistic modes of inquiry in the school setting? There is of course no guarantee that a humanistic product will be treated humanistically. Those of us who as high school sophomores suffered through Silas Marner will appreciate this fact. The content of the arts is not sufficient to guarantee access to their message.

Between the work and the student there needs to be a teacher who is sensitive to the connotative import of the work. Such a teacher, by virtue of highly developed sensitivities, helps the student uncover the qualities and ideas embedded in the work. If art spoke for itself an instructional problem would not exist. The naive eye sees little. The teacher, like the good critic, educates the student’s eye and mind to the work of art. Do teachers of the young have such critical skills? If not, how can these be developed?

A Common Standard

Take, as another example of the problems the humanities pose for instruction, the problem of appraising or evaluating the work in question. In many fields the problem of appraisal is one of applying a common standard to a product or set of products and of determining through that standard the veracity and hence the value of the product. In fields such as mathematics, to some degree in the sciences, and clearly in learning how to spell, the problem of appraisal is one of
applying a known and clearly defined standard to a product. Given the system, a solution to a problem in mathematics is correct or it is not. If the teacher knows the system, the standard can be easily applied. Indeed, one need not have a human teacher either to teach or to appraise such products. Insofar as they are rule bound, in principle, a non-human device can do the job.

But how is one to discover the insight of a poem, how does one help students uncover the meaning of a couplet such as the following?

I'd rather learn from one bird how to sing
than teach ten thousand stars how not to dance

The appraisal of artistic and humanistic products demands not the application of a standard but the making of a judgment. It requires a sensitivity to nuance, an appreciation for analogue, it demands insight into connotative meaning, it requires a metaphorical eye. What wooden rules can be applied to appraise the work of art?

It is in this sense especially that the arts and the humanities are demanding. They demand a willingness on the part of the teacher to entertain and to seek out implied meanings, meanings revealed not only through symbol but through form. It requires that they know when the work is being sacrificed as a projective device by students and when it is being treated as an object of humanistic or artistic attention. To what extent are teachers prepared to undertake this demanding task?

Not only these problems need to be resolved, if the new era in the humanities is to become a reality in the schools, there are a host of others as well. Space will not permit attention to all of them but I would like to identify one which I believe to be of critical importance.

There is a temptation, in considering educational goals, to think about the content of the instructional program as it relates to such goals. Indeed this way of thinking about educational change has been characteristic of the curriculum reform movement over the past decade. Yet the goals, content, and organization of the curriculum of a school are only one set of factors which affect the way in which the child's educational life is lived. The child learns in school, and learns quickly, that the organization of the school and its regulatory code permit, restrict, and reward certain attitudes, dispositions, and areas of study more than others.

By the time the child leaves the first grade he is well on the road to institutional socialization. This form of socialization conveys not only a linguistic code embedded in the subject areas the child studies, it also conveys a value code. It tells the child what is valued in school and how he shall conduct himself with respect to these values. The organizational structure of the school therefore teaches implicitly but surely as forcefully as does the content of the curriculum. Does the organizational structure of the American school facilitate the development of the sensibilities? Does it honor the private life of the child? Does it respect and reward the qualitative and poetic demands of the moment?

After what model are our schools designed? What metaphor of value is prized? What do our classrooms look like? One will note that the vast majority of curriculum development projects in the sciences and mathematics have demanded no structural change on the part of the institution. These programs, like interchangeable parts, were designed to fit into the existing structure. Can humanities and arts programs succeed in such a structure or will they demand a reconceptualization of how schooling proceeds?

If I have raised more questions than I have answered, it is because I see these questions as genuinely problematic. I do not have the answers. About one thing I feel confident: to achieve "The New Era in the Humanities" of which this issue of Educational Leadership speaks will require some resolution of these questions. What is happening in your school?