Teacher Attitudes: Subject Matter and Human Beings

LORD ROCHESTER said, "When I was a young man, I had seven theories about bringing up children. Now I have seven children and no theories." The educator faces this situation head on, in the seeming impasse between subject-matter devotees and those who believe that the human child is more important than any body of subject matter.

This writer is increasingly concerned with the latter-day trend toward specialization in the secondary school, particularly in the junior high school. He sees beginning teachers emerging from their preservice preparation with up to 70 and 75 hours in their major areas, from a total of 125 to 130 hours. He watches the same neophytes go away to institutes and workshops, further to sharpen their knowledge and skills within their chosen specialty. He wonders about the wisdom of this much concentration on the subject matter to be taught, and the corresponding paucity of attention devoted to the human subject who is supposed to learn it. Then finally he concludes that much truth resides in one definition of an expert heard long ago: an expert is a man who knows more and more about less and less until finally he knows everything about nothing.

Truly we seem determined to shape our charges into the same narrow images of ourselves. Verily we drum facts, figures, and data ad infinitum into young heads, with little apparent regard for individuals and their inherent differences. Remmers and Radler, in their definition of the American teen-ager, described well his predicament:

A boy or girl whose energies are already sapped by the sheer prowess of physical growth, caught up in a whirl of school work and social activities in and out of school, confronted by decisions that will affect his entire life, confused by the shifting attitudes of parents, teachers, and society in general, all of whom doubt him and his behavior—and bewildered by the complex and rapidly changing civilization into which he must soon fit, assuming all the responsibilities of maturity.

Perhaps the indictment is too strong. Maybe the great majority of secondary school teachers have more concern for the individual pupil than has been credited. Reservations are certainly to exist, though, when it is heard so often: "I have 150 different students every day, for 50 minutes each in groups of 30. I can't possibly get to know each of them as an individual. The best

PHILIP J. HARVEY *

*Philip J. Harvey, Principal, Walnut Junior High School, Grand Island, Nebraska
thing for me to do is teach to the big middle
group”; or, “The ninth-grade English teach-
ers will be very unhappy if we don’t cover all
the material.” The list of examples could be
extended indefinitely, by the reader or the
writer.

It is readily recognized, and thankfully,
that many junior high school teachers do
care about their pupils as individuals. It
appears, however, that a frightening number
are too much subject-oriented, rather than
primarily interested in their students.

Why this should be so presents a kind
of paradox. The individual early adolescent
is a tremendously complex entity, about
whom we can know relatively little. Yet we
can characterize him quite thoroughly, and
without too much difficulty. By nature, he is
inconsistent and unpredictable. He acts like
an adult one day, a child the next. His is a
time of change, especially physical and emo-
tional. It is not his nature to sit quietly for
a long period of time—for anything, let alone
for a math, English, history, or science class.
He may be a boy and a man, she a girl and a
woman. He rebels. He wants discipline, and
at the same time is struggling for freedom.

Care must be observed here. The early
adolescent can be characterized, true, but
those who work with him must look beyond
the descriptive terms. You are an adult. You
can’t be like him and you can’t think like him
(though it helps to remember when!).
Neither can he be like an adult. We tend
naturally to impose adult standards on him.
He tends naturally to resist. There is no such
thing as the “average” adolescent, no such
thing as “normal” behavior. There is
“typically adolescent” behavior, but a
tremendous variation is normal. It is the vitally
important job of the teacher to distinguish
the difference between misbehavior and what
is normal for children at this age. Each is
an individual.

Resistance to Authority

The period from 11 to 15 is an anti-
teacher age. Teachers represent authority,
and these youngsters are trying out their
resistance to authority. In the elementary
school, generally, respect and affection for
the teacher are almost automatic. Junior
high school teachers must earn respect and
be worthy of affection. They are no longer
e x  o f f i c i o. Incidentally, how many first
graders do you know who dislike school?
What is it that we do, or fail to do along the
way, which creates such an aversion for
school among so many young people?

More evidence exists, to indicate the
proper perspective and approach to subject
matter in the junior high school. Heffernan
and Smith reported that the innate complexi-
ties of the early adolescent demand a pro-
gram of education that is fully integrated
and geared to the individual differences of
the students. They cannot grasp the total
venture if instructors make subject matter
the nucleus of the entire program and ignore
all the imperative needs of the individual at
this most critical period. It is fallacious to
assume that education can be “poured into”
a child’s mind, although there has been a
great deal of “pitcher filling in junior high
schools.”

Subject matter, properly presented, with
sincere and sympathetic understanding of
adolescence, will focus all effort on goals and
standards so intrinsic to his needs that each
student will “soak up more basic skills and
fundamental subject matter like a sponge.”
Emphasizing subject matter, increasing the
work load with more and more rigid demands
for homework assignments, and holding in-
tractable attitudes toward the early adoles-
cent and his needs will inevitably eclipse the
basic intent of the junior high school pro-
gram to be progressive and completely satis-
fying for every adolescent and teacher.

Further authoritative opinion was ex-
pressed by Bossing and Cramer, with regard
to differing individual development and the
importance of providing for it in the school
program. They concluded that psychological
development during early adolescence means
a greater variance in available learning abili-
ties than at younger or older ages. Some of
these wide ranges in mental ability are due
to rapid changes in physical, social, and psy-
chological growth; irregular mental growth
beyond 11 or 12 years of age; the fact that
girls mature physically and socially one to two years ahead of boys; constitutional personality traits; and motivational influences from school, home, and community environments.

It is very important that administrators and teachers do not ignore or try to repress the late preadolescent's preparation and approach to early adolescence. The junior high school organization of classes, and especially in grade seven, should emulate that of the elementary school for at least a portion of the school day, but teacher-student planning and group classwork should be emphasized.

Fred T. Wilhelms recently presented a most interesting position. His argument was not really new, the proposition being that we could raise the educational dividends if we changed our educational investments.

The cogent, compelling reasoning behind his proposal merits serious consideration. He contends that a child's ability to do schoolwork can be raised by stimulation; sensory perception sharpening; verbalization; reasoning and logic; warmth, affection, and personal attention. While most such efforts to date have been concentrated on young children and the disadvantaged, Wilhelms suggests that the same tactics would apply to older students and to the "non-disadvantaged." He recommends that secondary schools should "invest boldly in teaching students to be able to learn better."

His summary bears repeating:

By long tradition, schools invest student time, teacher careers, and practically all their money in the business of putting across subject matter. Even when the resistance is stubborn, they fight it out on that line. If some ninth-graders read like third-graders, schools typically mount a massive remedial reading program (making some small gains, but generally winding up with low-mediocre readers after all). If students don't learn to write very well by producing "themes," English teachers press for lower student-faculty ratios so that they can have them write more of the same. Almost always, when there is trouble with subject matter, the instinct is to press harder on the subject matter.

It looks as if that's the wrong place to push. With much less cost or effort we could turn children into the kind of learners for whom reading comes easily. Even a little time spent with an adolescent in enriching his concepts of himself and the life he wants to lead may make good writing part of his personal standard of living—and ease the burden on his composition teacher's weekends. It seems such nonsense to keep pushing harder and harder against the wall of reluctance and disaffection and sheer inability to handle the subject matter when we could do so much more by making our investments in the person.

Having studied the evidence, I am tantalized by the certainty that we could raise both cognitive and personal effectiveness. And, even though we still have a lot to learn, the technical difficulties don't look too bad. What we mostly need is the common sense to drop investments we know don't pay, and the nerve to try some more hopeful ones.

The tragic results abound, in our failure to see pupils as persons. It is apparent in the alarming rate of dropouts (or are they push-outs?). It is obvious in the long failure lists in most schools (have the pupils failed or have we?). It is conclusive in the high incidence of rejection in the armed services for physical, educational, and psychological reasons (who wants to be cannon fodder, anyway?). It is mirrored in the ever-rising rate of juvenile delinquency and adult crime. Most of all, it glares at us in the untold thousands who are left so far short of their potentials: unfulfilled, unhappy, and unable to make their optimum and badly-needed contribution.

**Marilyn: A Case in Point**

One such person was Marilyn. She was a pupil in a school where the writer taught. Her "case" is certainly not typical, but neither is it unique except in the particulars. She serves often as a personal reminder that people are indeed more important than things.

Marilyn was 14 years old, in the eighth grade, was five feet ten inches tall, and weighed about 120 pounds. An older sister, 17, was married during the school year, under unfortunate circumstances. Her father's
paint store had failed that year, and he had been working at a succession of low-salaried jobs during the past several months. A new home under construction for the family burned under strange and suspicious circumstances.

Marilyn had never done very well in school, although she appeared to have "average" intelligence. During this eighth-grade year, her effort and attitude had gone downhill markedly. She was sullen most of the time, and refused to cooperate with her teachers or her classmates. Her classroom behavior ranged from silent non-participation to occasional outbursts of temper. As the year progressed, she became more and more a disrupting influence at school. She seemed to have few, if any, friends. She appeared to like boys, but was not popular with them.

Several weeks before the end of the school year, Marilyn and her parents were informed that she would probably have to repeat the eighth grade. The parents' attitude toward this was largely one of resignation, while Marilyn was strongly opposed to the idea. She was sure that she would do better if permitted to go to the ninth grade. In the school system being discussed, the ninth grade was the first year of senior high school.

Shortly before the year closed, Marilyn's mother came to school, much concerned. She had found a note in Marilyn's room, which read substantially:

Dear Mom and Dad, The teachers still say that I'll have to take the eighth grade over again next year. I have been talking to Jesus about it. I told Jesus that if I am failed, I'll know that He wants me to join Him in Heaven. If they pass me, I'll know that He wants me to stay on earth. I love you very much. s Marilyn

How was this "case" handled, and what was the end result? The principal called together Marilyn's teachers. All of them were aware of her circumstances, and those of her family.

The principal made known to them the contents of her letter, and asked for their opinions and advice. "Just a bid for attention," said one. "She's going the same direction as her sister," offered another. "I can't
lower my standards to the point of passing her,” remarked a third. Other and similar points were made. The principal tried in vain to get the teachers to consider other dimensions than subjects and grades.

At the end of the year, Marilyn received failing marks. She was retained in the eighth grade. She went home, took her father’s shotgun, and literally blew off the top of her head.

A Teacher-Attitude Opinionnaire

Primarily for use among his own teachers, the writer has developed a teacher-attitude opinionnaire. It is crude and, to date, largely untried. In itself, it can do little, if anything, to change the attitude of a teacher. Neither would it be likely to do so, even if very highly refined.

Its purpose will be served if only its use can cause teachers to think more about their pupils first as individuals rather than as receivers/learners of factual subject matter. Hopefully it may act as the springboard to discussion and exchange of opinion.

For whatever it may be worth, it is included here.

Anyone writing with a bias, even prejudice toward a subject, can hardly expect to be regarded as objective. Many of the views presented here reflect such a slanted opinion, and without apology.

Some qualified authority has been offered, and much more exists. A good deal of personal opinion has been included. It is qualified by my 20 years of observation as a teacher and administrator in the public schools, 17 of them in the junior high school.

It is not suggested that we should return to the permissiveness of capital “P” Progressive Education. Neither is it advocated that we espouse anything like the deservedly ill-fated Life Adjustment Education of the late 1940’s and early 1950’s. Nor is it claimed that a lot of subject matter is not good or necessary.

Mine is, in fact, a rather simple plea. Since the pupil is an individual, let us approach his education with as much individuality as is possible. Let us help him to develop maximally as a complete human being. Let subject content take its proper place as a tool for use instead of as an end in itself.

The proverb is old, but true: “As the twig is bent, so the tree is inclined.” compartmentalize him strictly in the confines of subject matter rigidity, and the end product
will almost certainly be a narrowly-developed person.

And the choice is important, for as is indicated in The Education of Henry Adams, "A teacher affects eternity: He can never tell where his influence stops."

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