

Teacher Attitudes: Subject Matter and Human Beings



PHILIP J. HARVEY *

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 certain 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

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thing for me to do is teach to the big middle group"; or, "The ninth-grade English teachers 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 emotional. 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 *ex officio*. 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 complexities of the early adolescent demand a program 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 intractable attitudes toward the early adolescent and his needs will inevitably eclipse the basic intent of the junior high school program to be progressive and completely satisfying for every adolescent and teacher.

Further authoritative opinion was expressed 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 abilities than at younger or older ages. Some of these wide ranges in mental ability are due to rapid changes in physical, social, and psychological 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

Q. How do you abbreviate "quality"?

A. **We don't know. In our education books quality is never abbreviated.**

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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

Teacher-Attitude Opinionnaire

	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>
1. The textbook is the curriculum.	_____	_____
2. Attitudes are more important than facts.	_____	_____
3. The teacher's primary obligation is to the individual pupil.	_____	_____
4. Ability grouping is an undemocratic procedure.	_____	_____
5. Rote memorization has little value.	_____	_____
6. Mastery of subject matter should be a primary goal in the classroom.	_____	_____
7. Textbook publishers should be more responsive to the wishes of teachers in the field.	_____	_____
8. Knowledge unrelated to goals is indefensible.	_____	_____
9. A nationwide standardized curriculum would be good.	_____	_____
10. Understanding of different points of view is more important than universal agreement.	_____	_____
11. Present teacher education programs encourage the inquiry or problem-solving approach to teaching and learning.	_____	_____
12. Minimum essentials of subject matter mastery are needed.	_____	_____
13. Teachers generally can do a better job when pupils are grouped by ability.	_____	_____
14. Most secondary school teachers are more highly skilled in subject matter skills than in human growth/development.	_____	_____
15. Each pupil as a person should be the paramount consideration of the teacher.	_____	_____
16. Elementary school pupils generally like school better than their secondary school counterparts.	_____	_____

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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