

# The School as Center for Human Development

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"TO PROMOTE the dignity and worth of each individual student"—this is a familiar goal of most school philosophies.

Educators who have created the climate for the attainment of this goal are to be commended. Unfortunately, the successful educator in this regard is the exception rather than the rule. Certainly this does not indicate that the vast majority of educators subscribe to actions which degrade students; nevertheless, present conditions in schools do not characterize education as an institution which helps youngsters become better human beings.

At present, there is ample evidence<sup>1</sup> to suggest that schools fall short in creating an atmosphere which aids students in their desire to reach full human potential. Silberman states:

Because adults take the schools so much for granted, they fail to appreciate what grim, joyless places most American schools are, how oppressive and petty are the rules by which they are governed, how intellectually sterile and esthetically barren the atmosphere, what an appalling lack of civility obtains on the part of teachers and principals, what contempt they unconsciously display for children as children.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See: Charles E. Silberman. *Crisis in the Classroom*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1970.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

## An Agency for Sorting Youngsters

Schools all too often serve society as an agency for sorting youngsters into various categories.

We have the gifted, average, and slow youngsters, all of whom receive awards commensurate with their level. The gifted youngster inevitably receives all of the success the school and society can award, while the slow youngster gets the opposite dose of failure and anonymity.

*The message is clear: the purpose of school is to provide the opportunity for those with ability to gain the utmost in materialistic rewards.*

This success syndrome leads to a wide range of activities, many of which are antithetical to acceptable human values. There is a tendency for honest children to become cheaters in order to compete in the system, enthusiastic kindergartners to become disillusioned high schoolers, emotionally sound students to become distraught, creative minds to become inflexible in order to conform to predesigned patterns.

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*The message is clear: the purpose of the school is to meet group standards, not to enhance the development of acceptable human values.*

The instructional technique most often cherished by school staffs is the technique of imparting knowledge. The value of seeking knowledge and developing seeking minds to acquire knowledge is relegated to a lesser priority. Schools have become custodians of knowledge rather than the providers of opportunities to experience the excitement of learning. Learning skills, those vital tools of the scholar, are at best hoped-for outcomes. Pride in mastery of a self-directed learning experience gives way to the achievement of small increments of imparted knowledge. The curiosity engendered in a motivational experience must wait until later to be pursued.

*The message is clear: the purpose of the school is to ensure acceptance of today's topic rather than enthusiasm for knowledge.*

The intent of this writer is not to elaborate on this generally promulgated criticism of American education to the point of redundancy, but rather to attempt to place in perspective those elements which might obviate such conditions.

## **Catalysts for Human Values**

If schools are to be catalysts for appropriate human values to flourish, they must encourage and support the search for knowledge. Certainly there are excellent examples of individual teachers who by method and desire promote human values. There are similarly fine instances of school districts where human values are given top priority. For example, the carefully planned middle school program in Decatur, Alabama, and the Streams elementary learning center program in Upper St. Clair, Pennsylvania, represent such efforts. In order for such a concern for human values to become universal, however, there must be a commitment to the belief that schools are for children.

One point needs to be emphasized, how-

ever. There is a tendency among educators to equate humanism with permissiveness. In other words, the less structure and control, the more humane the school will become. This approach may also lead to the deterioration of human values. The value of responsible action cannot be developed in a milieu which permits nonresponsible action on the part of students.

**T**here must be developed mutually a clear set of guidelines for student responsibility, and students should be expected to adhere to them. For all students, structure is essential to some degree. Goals for each student should be devised, and each student should be expected to strive for their attainment.

The quest for self-directed learning clearly should emphasize the development of self-discipline and acceptable human behavior. We live in a society in which the value of self-discipline is a necessity. A system which replaces group discipline with a vacuum is destroying a vital value.

Program development seems most effective in creating the atmosphere for human values to emerge when it includes every group involved in the educational process, that is, student, staff, and home. When the school excludes students or citizens, the resulting program often leads to a breakdown in communication and understanding.

## **Student Involvement**

Students in recent years have become increasingly active in their desire to make their views known. Ianni states:

The student movement has given birth to a series of astute perceptions and suggestions for the educational process. Repressing those ideas not only postpones and prolongs institutional agony, but deprives educational leaders of an invaluable resource. Much of the student movement is naïve and simplistic, and much of the educational institution is tired and stale. Letting students into their own schools can familiarize them with the intricacies and subtle-

ties of the democratic process, and can simultaneously revive the process itself.<sup>3</sup>

The character of student protest is both threatening and reassuring. It is threatening because it often takes a violent form; conversely, it is reassuring because it is a positive reflection of the basic democratic principle of involvement. Regardless of form, this activity provides educators and society with a golden opportunity to enhance the growth of human values. The value of concern for human life is reflected in the fact that there is an ever increasing number of high school students serving their fellow man in hospitals, in ghetto tutoring programs, and in ecology projects.

Student involvement in school program and decision making is a giant stride forward. An awareness on the part of youth regarding adult values and an understanding by adults of the feelings and desires of youth are indispensable ingredients for a school emphasizing values. School boards across the nation are seeking viable working arrangements with students. A positive example is suggested by the recent adoption of a board policy statement in Plainview, New York. This policy statement was constructed as a result of involvement of students, staff, and citizens. It reads in part:

This policy is designed to insure an orderly process in our educational system and to provide students in our schools with meaningful opportunities to carry out activities and to have experiences similar to those they will have as adults. This policy attempts to establish a desirable relationship between freedom for the individual and the order which is required when a group is involved.<sup>4</sup>

Along with student involvement, the school must find ways to incorporate meaningful citizen attitudes and opinions in the program. Citizen involvement very often becomes necessary only when a bond issue

<sup>3</sup> Francis A. J. Ianni. "Goodbye, Mr. Chips?" In: Richard L. Hart and J. Galen Saylor, editors. *Student Unrest: Threat or Promise?* Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1970. p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> See: Plainview, Old Bethpage, N.Y., *School News*, April 1971.

hangs in the balance or at the monthly PTA meeting. The problems of schools are the problems of the community as well. By working closely with citizen groups, educators find a valuable aid in the development of programs leading to the emergence of value patterns.

## Guidelines for Action

The total involvement of all factions in the school process provides interest in the success of the instructional program. Beyond this vital aspect, schools become living examples of the values inherent in our democratic process.

Values are in reality guidelines for human action. As such, adults in the school setting play a vital role. Adults who exemplify appropriate human value patterns are in a fine position to influence youth. Sweeney cites the characteristics of a person who is able to relate to others. He writes:

The effective adult will be a person who sincerely values and cares about other people. He will be a good listener, i.e., a person who can understand both the verbal and nonverbal communication of the other person. In addition to being a good listener, he is able to communicate that he has understood. This person could be described as open to new or different ideas while still possessing a philosophy of life that guides his behavior without imposing it on others. He is a trusting person, one who is aware that others may not be trustworthy at times, but who is willing to be mistaken until proven otherwise. He has a capacity for helping the other persons to honestly confront matters of relevance to them which are otherwise too threatening or anxiety producing for them to cope with rationally.<sup>5</sup>

Thus the responsive adult is able to establish a relationship with students and adults which enables wholesome values to develop and to be challenged. An adult who must rely on standards of pressure, force, and extrinsic rewards usually will not be able to generate the rapport necessary for the

<sup>5</sup> Thomas J. Sweeney. "Adult Models for the Emerging Adolescent." Paper prepared for the Council on the Emerging Adolescent Learner, Washington, D.C., 1971.

individual student's development of sound values.

The philosophic commitment to develop schools which "promote the dignity and worth of the individual" must be a top priority goal of American education. In order to achieve this goal, however, schools must begin to emphasize the processes necessary for human values to develop.

Campbell places into perspective this aspiration when he writes:

Real education is that which changes a person for life, i.e., his thought patterns, his way of coping with reality. It has very real meaning

for him. He is able to integrate and relate his learning into his total understanding. Education, real education means understanding something completely, in all aspects, how it came to be, how it is related to everything else, what it is, how it functions, what it is likely to do, and to become.<sup>6</sup>

*The message is clear: schools can be centers for human development if schools are willing to accept the challenge of humaneness.* □

<sup>6</sup> David N. Campbell, "Is There a Chance for Your Child? Creative, Open Classrooms." Paper prepared for "Adolescence for Adults" sponsored by Teen Contact and The Wesley Institute Guild, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, May 19, 1971.

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