

Can Schools Grow Persons?

Carl R. Rogers

CAN schools grow persons? From my experience, the answer is definitely "No!" I have found that no institution, no carefully planned program or curriculum, can grow persons. Only *persons* can grow persons. So what can we do to ensure that the employed personnel in our schools—those known as administrators, teachers, supervisors, professors, counselors, research workers, budget directors, etc., etc.—are first and foremost *persons* in their own right?

And what do I mean by persons? I think I have never tried to define that exactly, and what follows is certainly not precise. To me, a *person* has several qualities. He is an individual whose locus of evaluation is internal. He is not governed by the "shoulds" and "oughts" of conformity, nor necessarily governed by the rules of his institution, if they conflict too deeply with his own values. And he is a person with values, values which are not simply words or beautiful statements, but values which he *lives*. (This is what makes the younger generation so exciting. Whether you regard them as correct or incorrect in their judgments, they are attempting to avoid hypocrisy and to *live* the values they believe in.)

A person is openly expressive of where he is, who he is. He does not live a façade or a role, hiding behind the convenient front of being a "teacher," a "principal," a "psychol-

ogist." He is real, and the realness shows through. Hence he is unique, and this means that there is enormous diversity in persons—diversity in philosophy, in approach to life, in opinions, in ways of dealing with students. Thus, when there are *persons* in educational institutions they become controversial, difficult, not easily fitted into categories; consequently life is exciting—and even worthwhile.

As I have thought back on my life and what I gained from my "education," I remember very few facts and only a few teachers. There was the second grade teacher with whom I fell in love—gentle, caring, personal. But the two or three others could be characterized as "a scholarly spinster"; "a completely eclectic theologian"; "a genuine person teaching agronomy." (I doubt if you know what that is!) The last was teaching shortly after World War I, and his phrase was taken from war terminology, but I have never forgotten it: "Don't be a damned ammunition wagon. Be a rifle!"

I wish every teacher would mull over that thought, inappropriate as the words are, in the midst of a hated war. Let me see if I can put it into more acceptable, if less colorful terms, and probably adding a bit of my own bias. "Don't be a damned warehouse of information. Be a person—with knowledge, yes—but with impact!" Each of the teachers I remember was alive, absolutely absorbed in

something *himself*, not simply filled with courses in educational method, but excited about something he or she was *learning*.

But I believe this editorial is expected to have a relationship to today's education. I have criticized educational institutions as strongly as I can—even predicting they are following the path of the institutional church, where the monumental buildings and the bureaucracy and the funds remain, but where everything that is vital and real and meaningful is going on outside. I do not wish to harp on that critical theme here. I want to cite some of the things that still give me hope. (I am an eternal optimist.)

To Trust and To Learn

Dr. E (known to her high school students as Miss E) is someone I have come to know well. She teaches in a school which is a cross section of an urban community. I have rarely seen so little pretense or façade. She genuinely likes high school students. Her courses have been labeled as psychology, human relations, and given other titles, but they are always an experience of increased personal responsibility, increased growth in thinking and feeling. Students discuss anything which concerns them—family problems, drugs, sex, pregnancy, contraception, abortion, the draft, the grading system—literally any topic. They have learned to trust her and each other, and the level of honesty and self-disclosure is amazing.

You may ask, "Yes, but do they learn any *content*?" They do indeed. Miss E is a voracious reader who has truly "made friends" with many of the great minds of this and earlier generations. Her enthusiasm for books is contagious. Her students cannot believe that they can read the books they want on the subjects that interest them. And what books they choose! Some of the students are classed as slow readers, but they are reading Buber and Kierkegaard and Fromm and my books and Slater and Reich, *Summerhill*, and John Holt. Teachers tell Miss E that many of these books are far too advanced for high school students and she laughs and says they love to tackle difficult challenges.

Miss E has received the oddest and most flattering compliment a teacher could receive. In her school if a student is found to have any connection with drugs, he is ousted, at least temporarily. But these students have found that if they take a circuitous route they can reach Miss E's room without being observed. They sneak into school to attend her class. They are bootlegging their learning—and yet people say that high school students "just aren't motivated."

This is not an isolated story. I think of the college calculus teacher who not only gave his students full responsibility, but interviewed each student. "For one thing, one gets to know the students personally. Education takes on a new dimension. One cannot help but get involved."

Or there is the high school teacher of French, who let her students choose their own goals. The diversity was incredible. As she says, "They became concerned with learning. But mostly it gave them a real sense of worth."

I vividly recall the red-haired teacher from a team unit in Louisville, Kentucky—where perhaps the most exciting inner city school innovation in the United States is going on. She electrified a tired conference by telling of the way her team was dealing with 50 nonreaders. As she said, "I'm not speaking about poor readers. These children didn't know one letter of the alphabet nor one printed word." The teachers made one promise, and showed one attitude. They said to these youngsters, for whom school was a living torture of day-by-day failure: "We promise never to give you any task you cannot do. If we do so, give it back to us, and we'll tear it up." And the attitude was one of personal caring for these "incorrigible kids." In seven months, more than one-third were reading at third grade level, and it was clear this would soon be exceeded.

To Become Involved

I look at the letter from a college biology teacher who was honest enough to tell his class, "I have recently stumbled onto some very exciting ways to learn things. I would

like to try them out for the remainder of the semester. I apologize for being hypocritical in using methods of teaching as a college professor that I hated as a student." He adds, "At this point you could have heard a pin drop. College seniors are not used to this sort of candor."

I could go on and on with examples of individuals like these who are growing persons in their classrooms. Yet there are risks too. I know teachers who have been fired for being persons. (See the story in *Look* magazine, August 10, 1971: "What Happened to a Teacher Who Touched Kids.") I know administrators who have been dropped because they believed in growth. Many parents and community members are just not ready.

Perhaps today's budget crunch—hitting all of education—can be used constructively. Parents can be enlisted to volunteer in the

classroom, and no matter what their educational philosophy, they become involved as participants, not critics, in helping children to develop.

Most important of all, the lack of funds may lead us to use the most untapped resource in all of education—the ability of students to assist other students to learn. There is nothing so personally stretching—on both sides of the table—as for one student to help another, and for each to grow in the process.

So perhaps it is not a completely vain hope that one day, even in our schools, we will have many *persons* who are helping to grow *persons*.

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