

To Humanize

IN FAR too many places throughout the nation, students and others see the school as a cold, aloof, negative, punitive, joyless, boring, irrelevant, bureaucratic, petrified institution instead of a warm, friendly, positive, rewarding, happy, vital, relevant, flexible, growing human community.

Many teachers, principals, supervisors, curriculum directors, superintendents, and college and university specialists in education have heard and read proposals to destroy the school here and now. Certain critics seem to feel that the school, like the mythical phoenix, should burn itself on a funeral pyre. The hope is held that a new school would rise from its ashes in the freshness of youth.

Yet this revolutionary—rather than evolutionary—approach would consume all of the amazing achievements along with the tragic mistakes and run the risk that the good and bad ashes would be scattered by the winds of chaos. A more reasonable and practicable approach open to all of us who care about the school and the children and youth who attend it would be to labor in an energetic, dedicated, patient, and persistent manner to make the bad into the good, the good into the better, and the better into the best.

Many persons agree that humanizing education in manifold ways is one of the paramount tasks and challenges we face if we want to save and to substantially improve the school. Much of our educational theory is steeped in a humane tradition. We *know* what we *ought* to do. We have among our

ranks individual teachers and others who are loving, sensitive, empathic, accepting, imaginative, lively, colorful, humorous, thoughtful, generous, candid, charismatic. We are even aware of a few schools, past and present, which can serve as a source of direction and inspiration. What we *must* do is to “put it all together”—to use a contemporary idiom—and to develop *specific* programs, practices, and procedures which will translate our visions of humanized education into realities in the classroom and the school.

Why Not Try This?

The following, therefore, are some specific suggestions for humanizing education which occur to the authors and which the reader might consider and try out. No *a priori* system of ordering has been employed.

- The archaic but pertinacious subject-centered curriculum which still dominates much of education in many places could be abandoned in favor of a program which centers its attention on germane, crucial, appealing personal-social concerns, themes, topics, and projects which encourage reflection, inquiry, discovery, invention, interaction, and cooperation.

- There might be a commitment to gestalt, organismic, or field psychology as opposed to a stimulus-response, behavioristic, or Skinnerian theory of learning. Students could learn in wholes for relatedness instead of in parts for regurgitation. Emergent, personal, significant, contextual, global purposes might be emphasized rather than preordained, imper-

Schooling

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sonal, trivial, isolated, minute behavioral objectives or performance criteria.

- Variety—for its own sake and as a means of touching the life of each learner one way or another—could assume more importance. There might be an elimination of the customary lecture-assign-study-recite-test syndrome in favor of an endless repertory of activities. This would provide abundant opportunities to personalize instruction and effect ever closer relationships among students and teachers.

- Perhaps there should be at least one day per week during which each student would schedule himself into a host of opportunities for experiences, some developed and guided by teachers and others activated and implemented by himself and/or other learners. Every teacher might also block out periods of time, possibly up to a full day during the week, when he would be available to meet with students individually and in small groups about anything concerning them, educational or personal. A day a month could be reserved for parent-teacher conferences or for three-way conferences involving the parent, the student, and the teacher. Where needed and appropriate, home visits during the evening could be arranged. Through extra hours of work, teachers could earn released time to be used in any way that they might desire.

- Another possibility would be a "family-style" lunch one day a week in the school cafeteria during which students could get to know their faculty better. Or there might be an additional break time in the morning or afternoon when all members of the school community would be present and could chat with each other for a variety of reasons.

- Funds might be provided for the entertainment of learners in teachers' homes. Every teacher might also have a little money for emergency aid to needy pupils. And each teacher could have his own budget for educational materials uniquely suited to his classes and to individual students. Laws permitting, teachers might decide as well not to purchase textbooks and then to use those resources for an individualized multimedia approach.

- Preschool retreats could be initiated so that teachers and their students and/or advisees might become more intimately acquainted. A noninstitutional setting might alter relationships, and the school year could begin in a much more relaxed, friendly manner. Face-to-face contacts could be expanded during the school year to include field trips, overnight and weekend campouts with students and their families, and even extensive study tours throughout the United States and to other countries.

- Education for happiness, joy, fun, play, recreation, and relaxation might receive increased attention. Life these days can be hectic, monotonous, enervating, restrictive, and overly task-oriented. A rich program of cocurricular activities might be offered throughout an entire extended school day, and students could have some uncommitted time to follow their own interests or just to unwind.

- The school building might be opened on week nights and Saturdays for credit and

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noncredit academic, vocational, and recreational opportunities for students, parents, teachers, and others. All persons in the school community could feel that the school is really *theirs*. People could be brought together and make new friends. The generation gap might even be narrowed in certain respects.

- The assignments and loads of teachers might be given more scrutiny. Teachers should do what they do best, what they have been prepared to do, what they like to do. It would appear that fewer and smaller classes for each teacher might further humanize education. Devices such as large-group, televised, and programmed instruction may be more "efficient" in some ways, but they seem to depersonalize education. Frequent conversations with native speakers of foreign languages might supplement or replace given activities in language laboratories if humanization is a prime goal.

- Letter grades and percentages might be replaced by extensive written comments and suggestions, conferences, and so forth. The entire perspective of evaluation could be altered and all feedback personalized.

- Follow-up procedures might be introduced so teachers could keep in touch with former students over an extended period of time. Students would thus have further evidence that their teachers really care about them and would be able to offer recommendations for educational improvements.

- There might be a comprehensive study by everyone concerned (parents, students, teachers, guidance counselors, administrators) of those requirements, rules, regulations, bureaucratic procedures, and traditions which may be antithetical to humanized education. Perhaps the kinds of behavior described in books such as Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* could be eliminated, or at least reduced.

By this time, surely other possibilities for humanizing education have occurred to the reader. But the reader is most likely to act if he realizes that he has something important and very personal at stake. Mikhail A. Bakunin, the Russian writer, expressed this insight over a hundred years ago:

... no human individual can recognize his own humanity, or, consequently, realize it in life, except by recognizing it in others and by cooperating in its realization for others. . . .

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