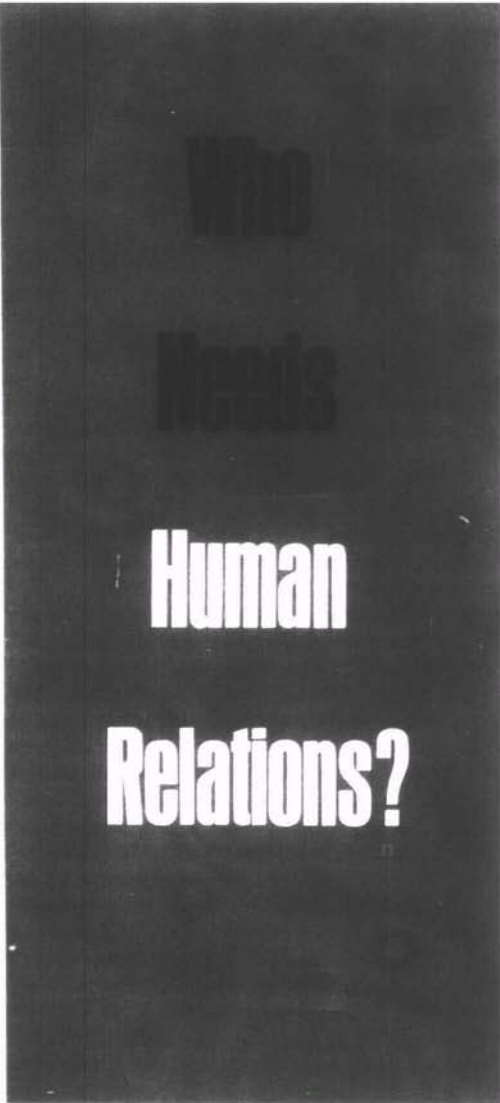

The middle school goes beyond traditional basic skills. One school in the Bronx tries to give human relations equal status with subject matter in heterogeneous groupings.



Human Relations?

JACK LANDMAN*

A MAJOR complaint against the junior high schools is that they are dominated by a philosophy that is too subject centered. School boards, parents, evaluators have demanded evidence of learning based upon subject centered skills. To the extent that these skills have had an impact upon society, we would have to agree that the schools have played their part well. As we look around the community, the city, the nation, we note that the position of the United States with respect to scientific and technological criteria is enviable. Our standard of living is unparalleled in the history of the world and our future, barring disaster, may be filled with even more creature comforts and labor-saving devices. However, in the field of human relations, the picture is less encouraging.

William Alexander, in his report on the middle school, has said that the approach we take must be more child centered. I agree with this wholeheartedly. When a youngster enters our school we know his standardized reading score and his standardized math score, but there is no standardized human relations index. Since the need is obvious at the present time, and since so much effort is now going into reorganizing the education of the middle school years, I would make this suggestion. The clientele best suited to a major thrust aimed at enhancing the curricular status of human relations is the volatile, effervescent, self-discovering, fast-growing, rapidly-changing, transescent middle school student!

In our school we have accepted several approaches. To begin with, our organization has heterogeneity as its top priority. Just as there is no ethnic separation, there is no intellectual stratification. Each class is the same, within narrow limits. Each class is reflective of the school community in ethnicity and in ability as measured by reading scores. This carries through in subject areas as well as homerooms, and in small groups as well as large. This organization is based upon the

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feeling that the best learning situation for a middle school in which human relations are given the same status as subject matter is the heterogeneous group. Socially, the middle school has already paid a very important dividend. When students and parents attend meetings or conferences, or meet accidentally in the laundry rooms, shopping centers, or playing fields, they can talk of school comfortably, knowing there is no difference between social classes in our school.

Using the "Buddy System"

To add substance to the human relations aspects of heterogeneity, it is important that pupils accept a certain responsibility for each other's progress. In our effort to develop this concern, we use a method we call the "buddy system." In its simplest form, it places upon the buddies the responsibility of keeping each other up to date in the event of absence or lost assignments. In extension, it becomes the basis for grouping, pairing, and tutoring in the various subject instructional areas. It is also used for assisting students who are in need of help on the social level. Since these latter assignments are more sensitive in nature, they are based upon a careful assessment of the personalities and needs of the partners. Teachers frequently consult each other and the guidance staff in making these recommendations.

One of the most frequently asked questions is, "Aren't we holding bright children back?" The question arises from the conviction that the best education is that which produces the best readers, the best math students; therefore, if a bright student spends time helping others who are less gifted, it would seem to follow that he would learn more working on his own.

However, there are many educational values in the buddy system. For example, there is enrichment in the act of tutoring, of explaining. In order to tutor and to explain, a student must clarify his own thinking and improve his understanding of the subject matter. From the human standpoint, he is gaining in maturity and responsibility. He is improving his image of himself. He gains in



Photo by Michael J. Sexton

Human relations in the middle school ought to be valued as highly as subject matter.

increased understanding of the nature of cooperation, increased understanding of the learning process, and increased ability to socialize. In short, he is improving his human relations index.

What about the charge that the bright student is losing out in the opportunity to improve his subject centered skills? We are also concerned about his needs for enrichment along these lines, and among the methods we use are honor assignments, independent study contracts, community assignments, and curricular alternatives. Because of our commitment to heterogeneity, however, let me stress that these enriched assignments are open to all students.

It is too early to make claims about the effectiveness of these approaches. Appraisal by the supervisory staff shows that racial incidents in the school are almost nonexistent. Faculty and parental evaluations support this, and it is true that pupils are comfortable with each other. Even our standardized test results show satisfactory gains.

Do we suggest this approach for all middle schools? The answer is that improvement in human relations is certainly needed and the schools must help. If these procedures do not fit each local situation, they are, at the very least, a starting point for finding some that do. □

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