
The matter of student rights and responsibilities is not so much a curricular issue as it is a total school commitment to human development as the all-purposive goal of education.

Can Human Rights Survive the Classroom?

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CITIZENS of the United States have been shocked (and if not, they should be alarmed or at least deeply concerned) over the recent dramatic increase in the callous disregard for human life and the human rights of others. Not only is this disregard reflected in an ever increasing rate of crime in all categories, but more specifically in an increase in crimes against people, which are characterized by brutality and senseless destruction of life.

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, once considered inalienable rights, are in such jeopardy that many people fear walking alone and no longer feel secure in their own homes.

People, in general, seem to have become less accepting of deviation and more demanding of conformity in behavior.

It is a time of confusion, uncertainty, suspicion, fear, and anxiety. Explanations of what has brought about such damaging human conditions are not now available and solutions are not clear.

It is, however, clear that we are living in a period of technological change that has outraced our ability to cope with the prob-

lems which such rapid change creates for increasing numbers of people struggling to live together. There is also evidence that a technological and scientific revolution focuses primarily on *processes* and *things* and that *people* thus tend to feel less human, less worthy, and less needed. This is particularly true for young people who find it difficult to understand why the older generation has been so apathetic and callously indifferent to the physical and psychological devastation of the world which they have inherited.

One cannot help but wonder whether or not as a nation we have done what we could toward helping people develop greater respect and concern for human life. It is natural too that we should look to the school which for almost a century we have believed could help develop citizens who would believe that the personal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness depended upon zealously protecting those self-same rights for others.

A more serious effort to overcome the dehumanizing effects of the emphasis upon

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products and processes is imperative. A fundamental issue of these times has become the issue of human and constitutional rights of citizens, and the courts have made it clear that students are citizens with rights.

Proper Use of Human Rights

This issue of *Educational Leadership* again focuses on the urgent problem of helping our maturing younger citizens become more sensitive to human need. A fundamental part of this problem is the question of student rights and responsibilities. This article focuses on the classroom as the primary climate for helping younger people understand "the proper use of student rights."

If schools are really to make a commitment to help students find personal meaning in the concepts of freedom, dignity, rights, and responsibilities, a base is needed for developing programs and processes which have high success probability.

Research provides some fundamental data relative to human functioning that should be tremendously helpful. Much of this research data, however, seems to imply educational practice which is contradictory to past practice.

A review of sources of the research makes this point clear. Only recently have we come to appreciate the significance of past experience as a determiner of meaning in the process of learning. Adelbert Ames, Jr., made great contributions to this understanding through his research in visual perception (4). Ames' work provides sound research evidence to support what teachers have always known intuitively: Past experience is all we have with which to make meaning from our perceptions (all that is selected by our sensory organs for input). What we are able to see, hear, taste, smell, and feel is dependent for its selection and its meaning upon past experience. We reach out from the center of our universe, which is the space we occupy as defined by our skin, and make our external world. The personal meaning we make out of each clue or situation is limited and modified by the experiences we have known and the purposes we have evolved. As we alter,

change, or add to the background of experience, we increase a child's potential for making meaning or learning. The most significant "breakthrough" in learning theory of the past decade is, no doubt, the recognition that intelligence, as human talent, is as alterable as other human talents.

The past decade too has provided us with an abundance of research evidence as to the significance of feelings in human functioning. We know that self-concepts—feelings about one's own worth and dignity—are inextricably related to all aspects of human behavior. We know too that most of significant behavior is more often the outward manifestation of "right feelings" than it is "right reasons." Behavior that is damaging and destructive to people and property is most often seen as outcomes of degraded feelings—feelings of worthlessness, frustration, despair, and anxiety. Positive behavior grows out of positive feelings. A child cannot respect another person unless he has some reason for respecting himself.

Respect for Self and Others

If the child is to understand the issue of rights and responsibilities, he must not only experience respect for his own human and civil rights but he must be helped to understand that these rights exist for him only as they are protected for all others. It is not enough for a child simply to know what his rights are but he must also know what the consequences are when human rights are violated.

Responsibility cannot be learned in the absence of freedom; nor can respect for law and order be learned in the absence of respecting experience. If damaging behavior is the result of inadequate feelings about one's self and one's chances, then the classrooms of American schools must become places where children in their formative years come to know from experience what respect for rights of citizens really means. Teachers must be freed from continuing school and classroom practices which demean, diminish, and/or destroy a child's feelings of worth. Most of the teaching prac-

tices or methods which characterize American classrooms evolved in the pre-scientific days. Much of what we do, we continue to do simply because we always did it that way.

The time has come for us in education to apply the same strict standard to educational practice that the federal government applies to the pharmaceutical industry in terms of knowing the side effects before a drug can be released on the market. Teachers must be free to depart from tradition when that tradition has damaging side effects on a child's growth or it represents unsound practice.

A Canadian teacher in a graduate class, as a result of looking at the side effects of some present day practice, wrote the following:

Reflection on these situations brought back memories of many things that I have done to children during the years of my teaching. My actions were well-intentioned; I had no desire to act toward them in any negative way; I simply did what I did either because I thought it was educationally sound, or because I didn't think at all.

I had long insisted upon a highly disciplined milieu where students spoke to each other only during "appropriate" times, usually through teacher-originated discussion topics, where seat-work activities were conducted on an individual, non-communicative basis, where retention of facts and development of cognitive skills were by far the most important aspects of education, where aesthetics were restricted to those areas of the curriculum, such as art, music, and literature, that provided for them, and where the effective learning, if any, took place without any help from me, during the lunch hours and after-school time.

I have, in the past, either praised or punished students on the basis of how I perceived their behavior. Through my lack of understanding, I praised mindless obedience and thoughtless acquiescence to authority because I perceived it to be "cooperation." I have rewarded factual regurgitations of what I have taught, and criticized creative but different interpretations. I have punished students whom I perceived to be "fighting" when they were actually "playing," "inattentive" or "disruptive" when they were either bored or engaged in some other activity that was more valuable and meaningful to them. I have become frustrated when children did not

learn what I thought I had taught, and I have vented my frustration on their "stupidity" when I was really the one at fault.

These memories fill me with regret, to be sure, but my regret is even greater when I consider the vast number of teachers who have done precisely the same things to generations of children. How I wish that all of us could have had an opportunity, many years ago, to see some of these "educational" practices through the eyes of the students (5)!

There is evidence too that traditional classroom practice almost totally ignores the human and constitutional rights of students. A survey by John Babcock (1) replicating the study reported in the September 1973 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*, "Student Perceptions of Teacher Violations of Human Rights (2)," revealed shocking statistics. Not only were the findings corroborated, but an even greater percentage of students in an urban and suburban high school perceived their own human rights had been violated. Ninety percent felt that their own opinion did not count. An even higher percentage felt that they had not been consulted or had been uninvolved in helping to plan some aspect of class work.

Students' Rights Are Ignored

It is strange, indeed, that young people who are responsible enough to walk a mile to school are not viewed as responsible enough to walk through a school corridor or use the restroom properly. Students report that they are denied the right to question their punishment, feel that they are degraded or treated with disrespect, and report that the school does not tell students of their rights as citizens in a democratic social order. Feelings are real and whether or not we agree with these findings, the fact that thousands upon thousands of students both young and old feel degraded, that their opinions do not count and that their teachers perceive them as unable to be responsible for their own behavior, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Further research, particularly that of Rosenthal and others, indicates that there is a direct relationship between the teacher's expectations and student growth. In the Sep-

tember 1973 issue of *Psychology Today*, Rosenthal offers new evidence to support his theory that "students live up or down to their teacher's expectations of them. Teachers communicate their opinions of students consciously and unconsciously in word, grimace, posture, and gesture." Rosenthal finds four common characteristics of teachers who expect good things from their students and usually get it.

They appear to: "create a warmer social-emotional mood around their 'special' students; give more feedback to these students about their performance; teach more material and more difficult material to their 'special' students; and give their 'special' students more opportunity to respond to questions (6)."

The matter of student rights and responsibilities is not so much a curricular issue as it is a total school commitment to human development as the all-purpose goal of education.

If children are to grow up to understand the personal meanings of rights and respect of others; if they are to understand the meaning of freedom, then they must grow up with people who are themselves free. Students need to be consulted, involved in working out their own destiny, respected as citizens with rights, and perceived as valuable human beings.

Teachers must be freed from the use of degrading and demeaning practices which are destructive to a child's own feeling of worth. The practices of comparative grading,

ability grouping, and standardized achievement testing are examples of traditional practices that have a destructive potential.

We must eliminate the fallacy that has existed for so long in education—the belief that one person teaches, that a teacher transfers his knowledge and his wisdom to his students. No one person ever really teaches another. Every individual teaches himself; he gives himself to learning or he withholds himself from it. Every learner is in complete control of his own learning. Belief in content to be taught (transferred) demands single right responses to questions asked.

It is probable that there is no single teaching practice that does more to destroy interest in learning than does the excessive use of "single right answer questions." The excessive use of such questions is destructive to interest in learning and in feelings of worth, and ultimately results in a hostile rejection of all organized education.

In spite of the apparent damage which can come from this kind of teaching strategy, it still dominates classroom practice throughout the schools of America (3). Teachers must be freed from expectations of this kind.

Children must live with and experience freedom if they are to understand it. Most of the learning we do (all of us) comes from the mistakes we make, but this is only true when it is safe to examine the causes and understand the consequences of mistakes.

Only as we treat students as citizens with rights can they become citizens with responsibility.

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