

# Curriculum, Affect, and Humanism

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*Have the society and human aspirations so changed that the old no longer is serviceable or, rather, are we merely in the midst of an ebb and flow cycle in social evolution? Or, even more basically, is it time to redefine what schools are for?*

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**G**OLD and silver, precious metals in themselves, are next to useless when—as a substitute for plastic—they are employed in the wrong ways. So it is with the movements known as affective and humanistic education. Inspired by an enlightened conception of what human fulfillment can mean, rich in potential, embodying psyche and spirit as well as mind, the movements give promise of liberating education from the shackles of too-narrow vision and no-longer viable tradition. Yet, like other valuable inventions, if their benefits are to be captured, they must be harnessed properly, organized, and used with sensitive intelligence.

It would be well, in considering their

potential, to begin with a clarification of terms, for few educational ideas have been as subject to confusion and misinterpretation as have the notions of humanistic and affective teaching. In the sense that I intend them here, affect has to do with emotion and feeling. Affective education, therefore, is concerned with emotional states, with the antecedent conditions giving rise to the feelings these emotional states evoke, and with the consequent behavior the feelings themselves generate. To speak of an affective curriculum, then, is to speak of skills through which people can cope with the inevitable emotional impediments in life, with anger, anxiety, frustration, and the dark moods of despair.

A humanistic curriculum, in contrast, may have affective overtones, or even incorporate a substantial program of affective education, but it nonetheless represents an entirely different curricular philosophy. In the true humanistic school, traditional content is subordinate to the child's nature and interests, the processes of feeling become as

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important as those of thought, personal ethos and private experience are viewed as *the significant subject matter*, and classical values, rather than passed on whole, are to be examined, appraised, interpreted, and altered to fit the individual's purpose and circumstance.

## Humanistic and Affective Differences

The common ground between humanistic and affective education lies in the methods of the humanistic psychologists wherein inner concerns and personal experience serve as the material for improving affective adaptation. Thus, we could, without undue difficulty, add a component of affective education to the conventional curriculum and, if we wished, teach it prescriptively. To fuse the humanistic and the conventional curricula, however, would necessitate considerable com-

promise because the two, at least in a technical sense, are basically antithetical.

Several other points must also be clarified before the case I wish to make can be argued. Psychologists speak of positive (desirable) and negative (undesirable) affect. Satisfaction with a task ably performed, for example, creates positive affect and anxiety over anticipated failure produces negative affect. One acts to *achieve* positive feelings and to *prevent* negative ones. Hence, although, philosophically, pleasure might be defined as the absence of pain, affective education must of necessity be directed toward the mastery of two related but different sets of skills: those aimed at preventing disabling emotion, and those aimed at nurturing the feelings of contentment.

There is, moreover, a special bit of confusion over the distinctions between humanistic education and a humane school. What we mean by a humane school, at bottom, is one in which negative affect regarding the school is minimized. A humane school, in other words, neither bores nor brutalizes; its activities please rather than displease its clients, and the compulsory time spent there is sensed as pleasant rather than unpleasant. A humanistic school, in contrast, is one in which the dominant instructional emphasis is on self rather than on subject. It follows, therefore, that the artist teacher might well teach, say, Babylonian history, in so humane a fashion that positive affect toward school was kindled in the students and, conversely, the bumbling teacher might teach, say, self-awareness, so clumsily that negative affect was induced.

Finally, to touch upon one additional source of communication chaos, the term "feeling," too, poses a problem. For affective educators it tends to function as an adjective, describing emotional states such as sadness or loneliness; for humanistic educators it is more likely to function as a verb, designating a particular way of achieving insight. We can learn through feeling as well as through reasoning. Thus, aesthetic experience, sensing, and the art of feeling itself, humanists contend, have a legitimate place in the curricular galaxy.

***For many people affection and love can be communicated more effectively by touch than in any other way. Its message is one of the most important in the lifetime of any human being: "You are not alone." —Louis Forsdale, Nonverbal Communication.***



I have not meant, in these preliminary remarks, to engage in theoretical quibblings or to pick nits over definitional terms. It would not be dismaying, or even surprising, if some of my professional colleagues saw fit to dispute the meanings I have assigned. My primary purpose has been that of identifying what seem to be the basic thrusts of affective and humanistic education so that the succeeding commentary on instructional legitimacy and teaching method is reasonably clear. It is implication not terminology that concerns us most.

## Cognition, Affect, and Humanism

What then can be said about the virtues, first, of affective education and, second, of humanistic education?

To begin with, the evidence suggests that the largest part of affective education must be cognitive in nature. Emotional responses to situations, whether good or bad, stem from the interplay of (a) our perception of our needs; (b) the circumstances in which we find ourselves, and (c) our attitudes regarding appropriate behavior in these situations. Cognition, in short, provides the connective tissue between stimuli and affective response. Put another way, our perception of a situation is cognitive, our interpretation of its meaning is cognitive, and our choice of responsive action is cognitive. Or, in Piaget's words: "affectivity is nothing without intelligence. Intelligence furnishes affect with its means and clarifies its ends."

Perception, attitude, belief, and choice constitute the cornerstones of affective education. These, therefore, must serve as the nexus of cognitive exercises designed to improve the child's adaptation to emotional crises. It is not stress, but the way we cope with stress, which in the main determines whether or not we will be defeated by our emotional shortcomings. In essence, cognition and affect function in tandem. Cognition (belief and perception) is a dominant force in shaping attitudes, and attitudes—because they, as Allport said "determine for each individual what he will see and hear, what he

will think and what he will do," play a vital role in controlling our emotional responses to our life situations. Attitudes are intimately bound up with affective states precisely because our needs, our expectations, and our desires—as well as the emotions set loose when these are facilitated or impeded, all are heavily influenced by what we value and believe. Our attitudes, in sum, virtually make us what we are.

The relationship between cognition and affect, then, is further deepened by our personal conceptions of our needs. Beyond the fixed primary needs (essential to the maintenance of life), the secondary needs (essential to wholesome self-concept and a feeling of well-being) are influenced by our beliefs. Beliefs (values) and attitudes (predispositions to behave in certain ways) are therefore manifestations of what we consider significant in life. Individuality in emotional education therefore is ordained by the uniqueness of the organism's nature and circumstance.

It is thus plain that authentic affective education cannot consist of artificial efforts to induce one kind of counterfeit feeling or another, or of meaningless charades, or of hopeless searches for never-ending euphoria. It must instead concern itself with the learner's attitudes toward himself, his life, and his purpose; with his perception and interpretation of the social scenes in which he finds himself; and with the tactics he uses to counteract and inhibit unpleasant emotion. And, importantly, it must acknowledge its own limitations: educators are not psychiatrists; long-standing affective habits are not easily altered; and, self-awareness—howsoever useful—does not negate the need for skill in reading and numbers.

## What Are Schools For?

The fundamental issues surrounding humanistic education follow logically. From the standpoint of the curriculum designer the critical question is: shall we abandon the present instructional program and replace it with a humanistic one; reject, out-of-hand, the humanistic philosophy; or work for a

balanced compromise? The dilemma, self-evidently, is more ideological than operational. Have the society and human aspirations so changed that the old no longer is serviceable or, rather, are we merely in the midst of an ebb and flow cycle in social evolution? Or, even more basically, is it time to redefine what schools are for?

One can scarcely deny that the present curriculum is far from adequate. There is little concern for the individual as a person; preoccupation with thought tends to obliterate feeling; the significance of personal ethos, personal knowledge, and personal experience is largely ignored; and, worse, the realization of human potential is left mainly to chance.

Each of us is impelled by a profound

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desire to function successfully—to exploit our talents, to do what we do well, and so to earn esteem among our peers. For if we are not considered worthy by those whose opinions we value; if we do not have a secure sense of belonging to and being accepted by the social groups in which we find ourselves; if we cannot both give and receive affection—it is almost impossible either to think well of ourselves or to be content with our lives. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that when schooling is measured on the yardstick of these needs, the prevailing program of instruction is found wanting.

Learning remains more passive than active, reason drowns feeling, values are passed-on second hand, aesthetic education

is seriously undervalued, and often life in school scars permanently the child's own sense of adequacy and worth. It should not be so.

Hence, the following propositions seem reasonable. *With regard to the school environment:* (a) school experiences may produce disabling emotions; (b) disabling emotions may diminish learning; and (c) teaching can so be organized that negative affect toward school is minimized.

*With regard to affective education:* (d) schools cannot prevent the traumatic events in the out-of-school milieu which spawn emotional difficulties; (e) therapy is the business of therapists, not school people; but (f) vulnerability to emotional problems can be reduced by classroom experiences which: (1) sharpen perceptual accuracy with regard to people and events, (2) familiarize students with constructive responses to emotion-laden situations, and (3) promote the cumulative development of healthy, personally-satisfying attitudes, beliefs, and values; and (g) such experiences can in most instances be integrated with the formal lessons in history, literature, science, language, and virtually everywhere else in the curriculum.

*With respect to humanistic education:* (h) wherever possible the learner must be encouraged to look inward as well as outward; (i) knowledge of self must be seen as important as knowledge of world; (j) the relationship between freedom and responsibility—between autonomy and commitment to the public good—must be made more clear; (k) self-expression must benefit from higher priority; (l) the significance of the self, interacting with others, must be studied more closely; (m) the wisdom buried in the humanities must be brought to bear upon the mounting tide of helplessness, hopelessness, and resignation among the young; (n) values must be reexamined; yet (o) public expectation cannot be slighted; the realities of the social system cannot be disregarded; the benefits of man's hard-won enlightenment cannot be denied; and, importantly, we must remember that—whatever the turmoil afflicting adults—schools are for children. □

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