

Humanism, Education, and the Future*

Arthur W. Combs

"If education is to meet the current and future needs of our society, humanistic objectives and humanist thought must operate at the very heart of every school and classroom in the nation."

Many people in and out of education regard the humanist movement with varying degrees of acceptance. Some regard it with amused toleration; some see it as a fad, like progressive education, which will soon pass away. Others believe it is dangerous, the product of fuzzy-minded thinking out of touch with reality. Some accord it a modicum of value, but reject humanist ideas as luxuries that we cannot afford. The humanist movement is no frill or fad. It is an absolute necessity for our times. If it did not exist, we would have to invent it.

At least five reasons make the humanist movement in our public schools an absolute essential.

1. *The basic change in human problems.* Since the dawn of history, man's primary problem has been the control of environment—how to wrest from the physical world the means for food, clothing, shelter, and the protection of one's self and those one cared for. The advances of science and industrial know-how have now placed at our command the means to feed, clothe, and house the entire world, only to find ourselves faced with a new problem, the human one. We have created the most complex, interdependent society the world has ever known. Each of us is thoroughly dependent upon thousands of persons we have never seen or heard of for the provision of even the simplest necessities of life. We have become in truth "our brother's keepers." Side by side with this interdependence, we have immensely increased the power for good or evil in the hands of individuals. An Oswald or a terrorist gang can throw our world into chaos. Any driver on the freeway has at his or her fingertips a powerful projectile capable of wreaking havoc and destruction.

The primary problems of human beings are no longer physical, but human ones. In order to solve problems of ecology, starvation, overpopulation, conservation, atom bombs, and nuclear power, responsible citizens are required, persons of goodwill, caring persons willing and able to pull their full share in our complex society. The Humanist Movement came into being very largely in response to this fundamental change in human

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"The self-concept is every person's most precious possession. He or she brings it with him or her wherever he or she goes, including to school." Photo: Michael J. Sexton, Texas A&M University.

problems. If education is to prepare youth to live in this current and future world, our educational system must adopt a humanistic orientation.

2. *The future can no longer be foreseen.* When public education began, it was assumed that schools would teach the skills people must have or know to deal with the future. That goal is now a pipe dream. Two things have done us in: the information explosion and the extraordinary rate of change in modern society. These two have made it impossible any longer to forecast what people will need to know even a few years ahead.

Never again will education be able to offer a curriculum required of everyone. Closed system thinking and attempts to establish educational objectives in precise behavioral terms are no longer enough. Indeed, preoccupation with such systems will practically assure the failure of education to achieve its responsibilities to prepare youth for the future. New goals for education must be holistic and human. Prime goals must be the development of intelligent behavior, the production of self-propelled, autonomous, creative,

problem solving, humane, and caring citizens. Such objectives call for a humanistically oriented educational system.

3. *New concepts of human personality.* For fifty years, we have formulated our thinking about human beings and education from a static concept of human personality. We have defined psychology as the "study of behavior," and focused our attention on ways to control and direct behavior through the manipulation of stimuli or the consequents of behavior. We have regarded motivation, not as a question of what people want or seek, but as a matter of how to get people to do what others wish them to. We have been hung up on too narrow a view of the nature of persons.

Humanism offers a more comprehensive view. It regards behavior only as symptom, the external manifestation of what is going on inside a human being. The humanist believes that effective understanding of persons requires understanding, not only of behavior, but also the nature of an individual's internal life. It holds that the primary causes of behavior lie in people's feel-

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chology. After all, it was all we had. But a broader, more accurate view of persons is now at hand to provide more adequate solutions to traditional problems. Better still, humanistic psychology is expressly designed to achieve the human goals and objectives required for effective living in the new world we are entering.

4. *New concepts of learning.* For several generations we have been preoccupied with concepts of learning concerned with the control and direction of behavior through the manipulation of stimuli or behavioral consequents. Humanism provides a quite different view. It sees learning as an experiential, personal matter, the personal discovery of meaning. The humanist points out that learning always has two aspects: exposure to new information or experience on the one hand, and the personal discovery of the meaning of such experience on the other. Schools are generally expert at the provision of information. They have been far less effective in helping students discover the personal meaning of information for them.

For the humanist, the basic principle of learning is this: *Any information will affect a person's behavior only in the degree to which the learner has discovered the personal meaning of that information for him or her.* Effective learning must be personally relevant. Affect is only an indication of the degree to which any concept, idea, or perception has personal relevance. The closer the event to the self, the greater the degree of emotion or affect. In this sense, education must be affective or else there is none at all!

Learning, understood from the humanistic point of view, calls for concentration on processes more than behaviors. Such processes as facilitation, encouragement, helping, aiding, assisting, providing opportunities, and creating needs to know are essential requirements for effective humanistic learning. This does not require the sacrifice of excellence. I am not a humanist simply because I want to go around being nice to people. I am a humanist because I *know* that the utilization of humanistic principles of learning will result in superior achievement no matter what the subject or skill to be learned.

5. *The importance of the self-concept.* Perhaps the most outstanding contribution of humanistic thought is its concern with the self-

ings, attitudes, beliefs, values, hopes, perceptions, and aspirations. These are the things that make us human and these, say the humanists, are the fundamental dynamics of behavior.

An examination of any good dictionary shows psychology defined in two ways—as the study of mental states and processes, and as the study of human and animal behavior. For the past 50 years American psychology has been almost exclusively concerned with half that definition, the study of behavior. The Humanist Movement calls for a redress of this one-sided balance and proper recognition of the vital role of mental states and processes in human personality. It calls for a new definition of psychology, not simply as the study of behavior, but the *study of persons*, including mental states and processes as well as behavior.

Humanists call themselves by many names—transactionalists, existentialists, self-psychologists, phenomenologists. My personal preference is perceptual psychology. Whatever the name, humanists demand readmission of mental states and processes as necessary concepts for understanding human personality. Once it was enough to base educational thought on behavioral psy-

concept. The self-concept, we now know, is the most important aspect of any human interaction, a major determiner of every behavior. It is a vital determinant of intelligence, human adjustment, and success and self-realization in any aspect of life. It is learned from experience, and, once established, is often self-corroborative.

The self-concept is every person's most precious possession. He or she brings it with him or her wherever he or she goes, including to school. And what happens to the self in the course of schooling may be far more important than whatever else schools think they are teaching. Self-concept is a vital part of the learning process and truly effective education must be humanistically oriented toward student self-concepts or education will defeat its own purposes. Laws of learning cannot be ignored because they are inconvenient. That is like saying, "I know my car needs a carburetor, but I'm going to drive mine without one!"

Ever since the beginning of American public education humanistic objectives have always been included among the goals of education. Such objectives as a healthy mind in a healthy body, good citizenship, responsibility, concern for democratic values, lack of prejudice, worthy home membership, creativity, and intelligent behavior have always been included in objectives for American education right down to the last White House Conference. Unfortunately, such general objectives have usually been ignored in the past as schools have concentrated on subject matter and skills that could be simply and easily measured. Such objectives can no longer be ignored. If education is to meet the current and future needs of our society, humanistic objectives and humanist thought must operate at the very heart of every school and classroom in the nation. ⁴



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ASCD 1977 Yearbook

Feeling, Valuing, and the Art of Growing: Insights into the Affective

This book provides some insights into the affective (the feeling and valuing) dimensions of education. The need for such an exploration, as interpreted by the writers, grows out of several alarming recent trends, such as: undue censorship of educational materials; reluctance of educators to examine any area that might be controversial; and emphasis upon narrowly defined programs that develop a limited range of skills. Such developments tend toward a "safe but bland" curriculum that fails to capture the imagination and feeling of children and young people and does not enlist the allegiance and enthusiasm of teachers and others responsible for instruction.

"Safeness" and "blandness" are the antithesis of the intentions of the writers of this volume. They turn to the affective domain as a strong ally in freeing and extending the curriculum in order to strengthen education.

Writers who contributed to the volume are: Louise M. Berman and Jessie A. Roderick, co-chairpersons and co-editors; Kaoru Yamamoto, Rodman B. Webb, Philip H. Phenix, Madeleine L'Engle, Kenneth R. Beittel, Charles M. Fair, Cecil H. Patterson, Elizabeth Léonie Simpson, William D. Hedges, Marian L. Martinello, and Cathy Pope Smith.

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