

Faulty interpretations of the concepts of freedom, helping relationships, and purpose have contributed to misunderstandings about humanism in the schools.

Three Misconceptions About Humanistic Education

Misconceptions about freedom, helping relationships, and purpose account for much of the discrepancy between humanistic education and what sometimes passes for it.

The concept of freedom is central to humanism, but freedom is often misunderstood by educators because they see freedom as something granted to students or earned by them. Teachers may "let" students choose their learning activities. Others may assume, whether they say so or not, that before students are allowed to make choices, they must first accomplish certain required tasks imposed on them by the teacher or the institution. The students earn limited "freedom" by demonstrating their ability to handle it—by performing tasks prescribed by someone else.

In the literature on existentialism, freedom is neither a right nor a gift. While it has clearly defined limits, these limits do not alter the position that freedom is an unavoidable condition of human existence. Individuals

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must make choices because there are no predetermined essences that define their humanness. As part of the process of being human, they must define their own meaning and purpose.

The grounds for this freedom were put succinctly by Sartre (1976) when he asserted that "existence precedes essence." The essence of being human is not found in a predetermined reality or ideal, but is whatever human beings make of it through their choices at each moment. We are "free" in the sense that our choices and actions reflect a concept of what we think we should be.

Another misconception is that empathetically understanding another person's needs and perceptions is a useful tool for guiding that person to appropriate behaviors. This misunderstanding of helping relationships has left humanism with isolated and at times contradictory orientations. A way to clear up the inconsistency is for those involved in helping relationships to recognize and support self-determination as basic to human existence, growth, and meaning.

Basic principles of perceptual psychology support relationships that are noncontrolling, open, and authentic. One such principle is that perceptions

greatly affect subsequent behavior. Each person possesses unique views of personal environments and experiences, and these affect actions (Combs and Snygg, 1959). Another is that individuals choose to think about things particular to themselves. From a field of mass stimuli only those stimuli important to the individual and his or her personal purposes are created, chosen, and processed (Kelley, 1947). Therefore, behavior is in accordance with the purposes of the person and the way things seem to him or her.

Because the person is in charge of what and how he or she perceives, free will is a psychological given. Therefore, support of self-determined choices is a logical purpose of humanistic relationships and humanistic educational environments (Maslow, 1968). Mandating or insisting that students learn one thing or another is psychologically bootless and may in fact stand in the way of meaningful growth.

Maslow suggested that individuals choose what is good for personal growth if environmental conditions support *really* free choices. Individuals who are growing personally are not to be feared. Unfortunately, Maslow's explanations of this theory are grossly misused. Teachers and administrators are often admonished to memorize Maslow's hierarchy of needs so they can control or mani-

pluate subordinates. If the focus of helping is to control or change another person, it is not humanistic. External control and imposed change falsify encounters and prevent those being controlled from portraying their true humanness through self-determined choices and actions.

A third misconception concerns the purpose of humanistic learning environments—"We are only attempting to achieve the same goals as any other classroom, but with different methods." If we take into account the misconceptions of freedom and helping relationships, we must acknowledge that the primary purpose of a humanistic learning environment is significantly different from other types of school settings.

Humanistic theory represents a sharp departure from the philosophy of most schools because it recognizes choosing as basic to human growth and existence. How well people perform according to external standards is irrelevant. Instead of spending time evaluating people externally, humanistic educators encourage individuals to select their own purposes and evaluate themselves according to their internal standards (Kelley, 1947).

To correct these misconceptions, humanistic educators must be courageous and willing to take risks. Acting in accord with our values must become more important to us than appeasing bureaucracies.

Situations often arise when it seems necessary to compromise our belief in self-determination. At such times we should ask ourselves:

— Does the institution own me and the people in it?

— Does anyone know what is best for another person?

— Is it my responsibility to take risks so another can be self-determining?

— How can I share these risks with the people involved?

— Am I aware of the compromise or trade-off? What am I trading off and why?

The beliefs we hold, the way we act on them, and our awareness of both define our humanity and reflect our concept of what human existence and education should be.

Humanistically oriented people must address the issue of how to exist in organizations resistant to change and diversity. One promising strategy—alternatives—comes from humanistic theory itself.

A pitfall of early efforts to use humanistic theory in education was the notion that everyone should use it. As a result, many educators said, and even believed, they were operating humanistically when they weren't, which created nominal humanism and even more confusion about the theory. By providing humanistic environments as alternative choices, we can create attractive and meaningful

surroundings for ourselves and the students selecting that option. In addition, we can escape the trap of trying to "make" people be more humanistic.

To clarify the state of the art, alternative educational environments and alternative leadership styles are needed that are clear and consistent representations of humanistic theory. These environments and leadership behaviors have to be created and practiced by educators who understand and value the theoretical tenets of humanism. The "humanistic" label would be saved for educators trying to use the theory completely.

Practicing humanistic theory means that people are free to make their own choices. Humanistic environments cannot be imposed on people and still be humanistic. ■

References

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