The Importance of People

Column Editor: Fred T. Wilhelms
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Skeptical Critics—Possible Allies?

A NEIGHBOR of mine down the street has ideas about what he calls educational reform that dismay and baffle me. I should be less baffled if Joe Albright (as I'll call him) had a closed mind or wanted to conserve the tax dollar above all else. Or if he really believed that the common man can have a good life only if it is wrested out and given to him by the uncommon few, and that equality of educational opportunity means identifying and training those who can qualify among the decision-makers.

Undoubtedly there are critics whose view of the schools is based on such convictions. But Joe is not among them. We do harm if we think of Joe and others like him as reactionaries. They are friends of the public schools. Yet we have a special problem of understanding them and being understood by them.

Joe is an accountant by profession and a social critic by disposition. He likes to read history and biography and keeps up with contemporary affairs through liberal magazines. On questions such as racial segregation, industrial strikes, and the United Nations, his opinions are critical and display social vision.

He wants people—the whole people—to have a life of confidence, not of anxiety, and to have a part in deciding their own destiny. He wants a world with a minimum of privileged status. He sets no limits to the possibilities for freeing the human spirit. In the long run he trusts the common man. In these matters he has the same deep commitments as my educationist colleagues whom I think of as progressive and social-minded.

When it comes to school policy, however, the story is different. He is sympathetic to the pronouncements of the Council for Basic Education. He thinks the increased arithmetic homework which fourth graders now have in our town is all to the good. He doubts that children learn to read as well and as early as they should. He is for any proposal for increased emphasis on foreign language at any level. He is skeptical of emphasis on the social studies, especially when projects are involved, and wonders if specialist subject teachers of science, history and geography might not well be used in the elementary school. He sees the high school program almost entirely in terms of college-bound and vocational-preparation courses. He thinks the case is obvious for separate classes by ability grouping, high promotion standards, and accelerated programs for bright youngsters. All of these things, to him, are ways to get trained intelligence.

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by Kenneth H. Hansen, *Director, School of Education, Western State College of Colorado*

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Values We Share

It seems to me that there are many persons who think as Joe does, both in their social vision and in their view of the way the school can serve that vision. Some are articulate in the public press, many others are directly influential in their communities. Because of their social vision they are to be highly valued, especially in the present time. But from the educational measures they recommend, it is evident that they and liberal professional educators are out of communication, likely through distortions and bias on both sides.

We educationists are engaged these days in a good deal of self-examination. As part of this process it seems worth while to try to locate some of the values which are shared by liberal educators and liberal citizens-at-large and search for differences in emphasis and interpretations.

1. *Concern for the common man and confidence in his potentials.* Educationists have been guided by this concern as much as by any other that might be named. We have often said so and we should keep saying so, especially in ways that remind the Joe Albrights that they cherish this value too. We should withstand any pressures to compromise it. However, we may sometimes appear to lack confidence in the potentials of children by not challenging them to do things they can really accomplish.

We have properly been sensitive to the need for acceptance of children and for protecting them from situations where failure is unavoidable. We may have been prone to interpret any appearance of pressure on children as punitiveness. For a teacher the line between encouragement and pressure is a fine line, and we will sometimes over-

step it. Yet perhaps the pace of schoolwork can be stepped up in many situations without getting into impossible drudgery of homework and without forcing children into failure. On the contrary we may help children to discover what they can actually do with real satisfaction to them. We can use every sensitivity as to what particular children can do, with real confidence in their potential to do more than they would have done without the stimulus and resource of the teacher.

2. *Respect for high-quality performance.* In our concern for avoiding competitive pressures and arbitrary standards we educators have emphasized each child's abilities and past performance. We seem often to imply that quality in comparison to what others are doing or have done is of no value or importance. Yet do we really believe this or apply it in evaluating ourselves and other adults?

In school we should be able to recognize and honor performance superior to the average without subjecting children to the climate of a competitive rat-race. One help in doing this will be to continue to insist that there are many varieties of excellence and that intellectual performance is not the only kind to be honored.

3. *Respect for intellectual performance.* On this point we do one of our poorest jobs of communicating with the Joe Albrights. Much of the difficulty comes from our own biases, and Joe's, and both our feelings and his are complicated by the ambivalence toward intellect in our culture. For Joe is an intellectual and knows it. His sense of achievement and self-esteem is bound up with the fact that he has made a career and got recognition through

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brainwork in a society which scoffs at intellect as often as it honors it. His sensitivity on the point may be heightened by feelings that he would have achieved more if his social milieu had respected intellect more. While he opposes social tendencies toward a power elite, he is sympathetic toward the idea of an intellectual elite (whether he uses just this phrase or not), provided the intellectuals neither try to grab for power nor let themselves be used by power interests.

We educationists are perhaps less single-minded in the matter than Joe is. We have often resisted the idea that the function of the school is primarily intellectual. The reasons have been valid: the narrower intellectual emphasis in the past, the variety of abilities, the need of all-round development, the concern for acceptance and success of nonintellectual children, the practical emphasis of American culture, the fear of separating the theoretical from the practical, and the fear of using the schools to develop a social elite of any kind.

Have we perhaps overdone the matter? Can we recognize some validity in Joe's belief that intellectual pursuits and performance can be specifically recognized and honored (as athletics and entertainment are) without fostering a power elite or an objectionable social elite? Educationists are intellectuals too —of a particular kind certainly, but nevertheless people who make their careers with their brains. Our reluctance to take such a position may have something to do with the accusation that the schools are anti-intellectual. We are sure that if the schools are to be more effective they must have more support and teachers must have more status and recognition. Should we not forthrightly recognize the preponderant intellectual orientation that does exist in schools and among schoolmen? We can encourage and recognize intellectual performance without discarding the gains which have been made in providing for all children of whatever abilities. Our ability to encourage and accept freely the potentials of intellectual children is perhaps bound closely to our ability to accept ourselves in our intellectual capacities.

4. *Opposition to tendencies which make for conformity and loss of individuality.* On this value educationists should find no conflict with the Joe Albrights. We do need to recognize the pressures from the organized complexity of society, the sheer mass of children with whom we deal, and the tendencies toward bureaucracy in every large organization, including the schools. Communication with Joe is mostly a matter of emphasizing our concern over these pressures and our interest in countering them.

Concern for individual development has been paramount among American educators and we should keep saying so. We have emphasized group activity as a way the individual can find himself and express himself in a social setting. We need to continue to emphasize this goal at every opportunity, and continually examine and evaluate our group techniques in the light of the goal. Continuous evaluation of group activities is the best insurance against the hazard of their slipping into a cult or a conformity routine.

5. *Determination to take account of changing realities; mistrust of orthodoxies.* Joe is hardheaded; he wants to face the facts whether he likes them or not. He mistrusts the orthodox line because he suspects that it may be used to cover up facts and protect established

interests; he mistrusts starry-eyed optimism and the evangelistic attitude because they may substitute hope for reality. He tries hard to distinguish the factual from the fatuous. In all of this, educationists should have no quarrel with him. The problems of education will require plenty of hardheadedness from all of us as well as devotion to ideals.

The distorted stereotypes of Progressive Education give him cause to wonder whether educationists are realistic or whether they are defenders of a new orthodoxy. There has probably been enough evangelism and hopeful optimism associated with educational progress to provide some basis for his suspicion, especially in the 1920's and 1930's. Yet the antidote to distortion is clear information. If the educationists of the 1960's are a more hardheaded lot they can exhibit the fact by seeing to it that information about the schools is accurate and by avoiding clichés and vagueness. Joe will respect people who state their goals unmistakably and then lay out the difficulties and what they propose to do about them.

Part of our job in making information available is to examine most critically the research evidence on how people learn, what motivates and frustrates their learning in contemporary life, and what has been well established (and what we still do not know) through curriculum studies. It is certain that educational changes will be indicated by new knowledge and new circumstances. Some of the school practices we have thought were most solidly justified will prove to be mistaken or obsolete. Those of us who do not cringe at the thought of being "progressive" can, in principle at least, welcome the prospect of replacing some of our most cherished ideas by new and better ones. Nothing less will serve the present time by serving the children of the time.

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Materials Assist

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the teachers' manuals produced to accompany the student materials.

American education recognizes the great importance of in-service materials in helping teachers to face the problems of the atomic age. It is encouraging to note the increasing use of the newer media in this whole area of in-service training. Research has long demonstrated that the projected picture-and-sound combination is valuable in the learning process. While it is true that the impact of technology has not yet fully been realized in the teaching profession, it is a hopeful sign that school systems are everywhere beginning to produce new tools for in-service training.

The public schools of the United States face a challenge both from the enormous growth in student population and from the expanding body of knowledge in the various subject fields. If teachers are to maintain the accelerated pace set for education, every effort must be made to improve their techniques and the good materials vital to success in in-service education.

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