

Wanted: Effective Communication

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The problems that contemporary young people need to study, think about, and act upon are urgent.

For instance, legislation to reduce the energy shortage is blocked by public cynicism and vested interests. Delaying actions result in deferral of environmental programs. On the international scene, relations among the major powers worsen as detente deteriorates. The gap between living standards of the developed and underdeveloped nations widens, and famine waits in the wings for its entrance. Meanwhile, the cost overruns of the military-industrial complex are enormous.

The young observe the marked discrepancies between what many Americans preach about the American Dream and what they practice through their operational values. Throughout the nation, remorseless inflation rewards grasshopper personalities and penalizes those modeled on the busy ant. Perverse welfare, tax, and social security policies encourage broken homes in the ghettos, living together out of marriage, and sitting on the butt after mandatory retirement. In the slums, another generation of youth grow up in welfare families habituated to unemployment. Disillusioned young blacks abandon hopes for equality of opportunity. Yet youth observes the ethically illiterate Watergate conspirators profiting from their books and lectures, and a South Korean spy agency contributing to the coffers of several members of the United States Congress.

American children and youth, as well as Russian dissidents, deserve their human rights. We should have educational programs to meet the needs of American children and youth. Each individual child and youth should be aided in achieving self-fulfillment and in developing a self-actualizing personality. Yet the obstacles are formidable.

True, there are positive aspects on the current social scene. A list of promising developments can readily be assembled. But the human problems are real and persistent. Many grow more complex with every passing day and threaten to engulf us.

Admittedly, education alone cannot meet these human problems. Sustained national and international study and action through social, economic, and governmental institutions will be required. However, realistic recognition of education's limitations does not exempt American educators from participation in the wider effort for human betterment. Educators can play a significant role. Educators cannot plead that know-how is lacking. Gains in our knowledge increase steadily. Illustrations can be drawn from such fields as humanistic psychology, the study of social problems, and value analysis clarification.

Yet what is the current educational scene? Our promising programs are being cut back through budget reductions. A generation of young teachers is being denied employment in schools. Teacher groups zealously guard the hard-won gains of older generations of

teachers. Professors frequently retreat to their departments to mount self-serving defenses. Administrators often avoid rocking their leaky boats. Many schools in the inner cities rot, ignored. Allies of education, such as libraries, social agencies, and museums, reduce their hours and their services, at the grassroots, pessimism spreads. Among educational leaders, the fashionable mood is existential despair.

The social situation urgently requires meeting the needs of learners, illuminating social realities, and fostering humane values. Yet simultaneously the social situation cuts budgets, discourages innovation, and denies funds for research and development.

We might begin the elimination of this paradox by realizing that Americans attempt to spend their incomes for what they value and attempt to avoid spending for what they do not value. If Americans value education, they will support it. If Americans learn to value education that deals with problems, they will support it. But to value it they must understand it. How can Americans judge well the value of problem-oriented education if educators themselves do not communicate with the general public?

In the later 1970s there is a dearth of communication by educators with the general public. When did you last see an outstanding spokesman for better schools on your TV set? When did you last read an effective advocacy of problem-oriented education in your favorite general magazine? Since the media, along with Nature, abhor a vacuum, contemporary journalism has latched onto back-to-basics stories. So far we have been lucky. No charismatic leader has yet emerged to lead us out of the "educational wastelands" and "back to the basics."

The 1977 Gallup poll in this *Kappan* reports that 57% of adults sampled have not heard or read about the back-to-basics movement. Yet of those who are aware of the phrase back-to-basics, 83% favor it. We have failed to communicate the high importance of what a person reads, writes, and calculates about; we have not pointed out that it is dull traditional instruction and inadequate family surroundings and obsession with TV that inhibit learning both the old and the new basics. We have not told the general public that education relevant to the learner and germane to human problems is an essential ingredient in good discipline. We have not described the importance of problem solving through the exercise of intelligence as a road to morality in our democratic society.

Let us stop simply talking to ourselves through our meetings and our journals and our conversations. Let us turn a substantial fraction of the energies of the NEA, the AFT, PDK, et cetera, toward more effective communication on problem-oriented education with the American citizenry. Let us encourage more of our scholars and leaders in education to give a substantial fraction of their time to public understanding through effective communication via the mass media. Let us foster more communication by teachers and administrators to their publics.

If the general public then decides that it prefers the nostalgic approaches, the decision will at least represent an informed choice. If educators do not participate vigorously in

the current discussions that determine what will be supported in education and what will be denied, they will default in the struggle for better education.

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