

COMMUNICATIONS

Discovering the Individual: Some Perspectives

The intelligent person, young or old, meeting a new situation or problem, opens himself up to it; he tries to take in with his mind and senses everything he can about it . . . He grapples with it boldly, imaginatively, resourcefully . . . He looks without shame or fear at his mistakes and learns from them.¹

Probably everyone concerned with education carries around with him a mental model of the ideally intelligent person, the student every teacher would like to find, or be responsible for creating. Like most ideals, however, the model person does not exist. The teacher must deal instead with numerous assorted personalities, each one different from the next, each responding differently to the environment around him.

In order to deal with such an assortment, we tend to classify or categorize people — stupid, bright, smart-alec, lazy, ambitious, creative — from the small segment of their personality they reveal to us. To accompany our assumptions, we tend to react to people according to how we see them, and to theorize about how to deal with different types of people. Such simplifications are not in themselves bad. The harm begins when we forget that our categories exist only in our minds, drawn from what little we know about human beings, and do not necessarily represent objective reality. Many of the assumptions we make about human nature are incomplete, simplistic, and undemonstrable. When the categories we use become more real than the individual's own complex personality, stereotypes are created, and with them, mechanical responses to human situations.

The traditional classroom situation encourages such generalizations. When a teacher has to deal with groups instead of individuals, certain assumptions have to be made about the nature of the group, in order to deal effectively with it; i.e., to make it behave. Individual differences will be neglected. And, by encouraging individuals to meet group standards, the teacher will tend to judge the child on the basis of a fixed set of goals, or on the child's apparent motivation toward those goals. An alternative to the usual classroom situation is provided by Holt's open classroom, for no set of standards and very few judgments would be necessary. Teachers might know just as little about what actually goes on inside their students' heads, but there would be less risk of using this ignorance to the detriment of the child. Adequate opportunity would be available for the child to evaluate himself, and to behave accordingly.

¹John Holt, *How Children Fail* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1964), p. 205.

No one can, as yet, adequately judge how the child sees himself and his world, or how he should see it; no one can know with certainty how to "improve" the child. Yet, too often, this is what the teacher is called upon to do. The child is then treated as we see him, not as he is.

Not even the most perceptive observers of human behavior are immune to the tendency to categorize people, and to make generalizations about them. Little could be done in the way of expanding educational theory if this were not so. At the same time, it is necessary for us to be aware of the limitations of our knowledge of man, and to decide for ourselves when specific assumptions can help further our understanding. To illustrate this, I would like to discuss a passage from Holt's *How Children Fail* and an essay by Rousseau called "The Child in Nature."

Years of watching and comparing bright children and the not-bright, or less-bright, have shown that they are very different kinds of people. The bright child is curious about life and reality, eager to get in touch with it, embrace it, unite himself with it. There is no wall, no barrier between him and life. The dull child is far less curious, far less interested in what goes on and what is real, more inclined to live in worlds of fantasy . . .²

This passage begins a brief section on the relative differences between bright and dull children. I found myself surprisingly disturbed by Holt's generalizations, and, particularly because I had valued Holt's insights up to that point, I felt compelled to try to analyze this conflict. Holt sets up norms by which the amount of brightness a child has managed to retain can be measured, according to attributes such as curiosity, patience, and trust in the reasonableness of the world. His conception of these different types was developed through "years of watching and comparing . . ." It is easy enough, in the context of the book, to understand the rationale behind his categories. Holt assumes — and correctly, I feel — that all children are born bright, with an innate desire and ability to learn. As Holt states, "Nobody is born stupid." Various pressures, from home, school, and society as a whole, take their toll on each child. Some succumb so completely to this pressure that their interest in learning is weakened, their creativity stifled. Thus, the child Holt portrays is dull: plodding, suspicious, unaroused by the world around him, daydreaming.

Perhaps it is because I lack Holt's experience, or because I do not completely share his mental model of children, but I cannot use his categories as an aid to understanding the students around me. There are too many other factors involved in each personality. I can understand the origin of the criteria he uses; I can agree with his critique of the modern classroom and its detrimental effects upon children, but I cannot discover his bright and dull child in my own experience. I find instead, perhaps, a lively, talkative child who cannot write coherently, or a "successful student" who sits invisibly in his seat, mechanically cranking out material to win him grades. I cannot classify them as bright or dull. They are unique; they are similar in that they are being affected by the

²*Ibid.*, p. 206.

school environment, but beyond that I cannot generalize about them. Unfortunately the terms *bright* and *dull* invite behavioral responses, or preconceived attitudes toward certain children. I am not accusing Holt of such a response; I do think the terms and the criteria he uses might be inviting one. While these few paragraphs from Holt's work may not be essential to an understanding of his theories in general, they cannot be overlooked, because they could mislead an unwary reader.

Several of the criteria which Holt assumes are part of the makeup of the dull child are of doubtful validity; first, that the dull child lives in "worlds of fantasy." If fantasizing is simply a way to escape reality, and to avoid taking on responsibility and decision-making, then it will certainly hinder the child's development. But fantasizing may be just an effort on the part of the child to preserve some "brightness" inside the only wholly private place he has: his mind. Creative imagination may aid him in interpreting the world around him, and in finding new ways to deal with it. When we see the child whose attention is wandering, however, we classify his mental state according to his apathetic appearance. To express disapproval at any sign of mind-wandering, in hopes of stimulating the child to something more "real," may not always be fair. Fantasizing is not the only escape mechanism available to the child, or to anyone. Holt may have meant "worlds of fantasy" to include all such escapism. At any rate, he implies a wandering of attention from the situation at hand, and I think it unwise to prejudge the value or intent of that wandering.

A more important statement, and a more confusing one, is this:

For while the bright child feels that the universe is, on the whole, a sensible, reasonable, and trustworthy place, the dull child feels that it is senseless, unpredictable, and treacherous.³

I think if I came across a person who believed that the universe, as a whole, is a "sensible, reasonable, and trustworthy place," I would have doubts about his perceptions, or about the range of his experience. From other statements of Holt's, we can assume he meant that the bright child has faith in his own ability to handle new and unknown situations rationally, and that the dull child has no such self-confidence. But this is not what Holt says here. A child who has faced hardships, who is handicapped in certain ways, or who has tried unsuccessfully to cope with the irrationality of others may well be more cynical than those who have faced no such disillusionment. To say he is duller because he is slower to react positively to certain situations is unjust. True, his caution may make him appear duller to his teachers and others. But I feel (and this may be an assumption as unfounded as any other) that a person cannot fully develop until he has experienced doubt in himself, in the logic of the world, and even in his perceptions, and learned to cope with his misgivings. Overcoming such doubts may take a long time, but when

³*Ibid.*, p. 207.

it does take place, the person feels he can trust his own rationality to carry him through irrational and unpredictable situations.

Holt, in these passages, uses concepts in ways that cannot always be meaningful to someone trying to understand children. In another situation, Rousseau attempts to create a positive method of education, based on his theories of human nature. When I first discovered Rousseau's "The Child in Nature," I was struck by the similarities between his analysis of the failings of conventional education, and Holt's, partially because education had not seemed to have changed much in two hundred years. Both express faith in the child's natural ability to learn and to develop; both believe that conventional education tends to teach things unrelated to the world of experience.

In any study whatsoever the symbols are of no value without the idea of the thing symbolized. Yet the education of the child is confined to these symbols, while no one ever succeeds in making him understand the thing symbolized. You think you are teaching him what the world is like; you are only teaching him the map.⁴

Rousseau's ideal classroom, however, is far more radical than Holt's. Stressing the importance of keeping the child's "moral nature" unpolluted by social contacts, Rousseau advises leaving the child's mind idle until the age of twelve. Only his physical self, his body and senses, are to be allowed to develop. The child is to be given no orders, and no explanations for anything; when he is refused something, it must be without comment. Rousseau assumes the child will not rebel if the demands are just. No person other than the teacher should be allowed to influence the child.

Therefore the education of the earliest years should be merely negative. It consists, not in teaching virtue or truth, but in preserving the heart from vice and from the spirit of error. If only you could bring your scholar to the age of twelve strong and healthy, but unable to tell his right hand from his left, the eyes of his understanding would be open to reason as soon as you began to teach him.⁵

Rousseau's theories serve as a reminder of how drastically our conception of human nature can change. Rousseau started by trying to overcome the same educational shortcomings as Holt, and by using basically the same approach of "well-regulated liberty" rather than formalized instruction. Yet because Rousseau's vision of man is so different from ours, his solutions today seem incongruous. It seems clear to us that a child isolated from social contact would not remain "open to reason" at age twelve, but instead would have formed numerous mental habits and ways of interpreting his experiences that would take years to unlearn, if the child were then to be made to participate in society.

Had Rousseau's plan been put into effect, its basic fallacies would soon have been discovered; the personal contact allowed by his one-to-one

⁴Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "The Child in Nature," from *The Child*, edited by W. Kessen (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1965) p. 84.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 80.

student/teacher ratio would have allowed any detrimental effects on the student's progress to be revealed. The only student given such personalized attention in the large school is the handicapped or "problem" child, or the gifted student. Those teaching such "exceptional" students find advice and information readily available as to how to cope with specific problems. It is accepted that the few who do not fit into the broad continuum of "average" students are beyond the theories so easily put to use on the majority. Yet every child is special, perhaps even exceptional, in some undefinable way. Each needs to be recognized as an individual who cannot exactly fit into the ideal mold provided for him. The behavior of the exceptional child is watched and measured in relation to himself; the behavior of the average child in relation to the group.

The more a person learns of what goes on in educational thought, the more he realizes how incomplete any one solution or formula is. New theories must be tried and analyzed, without hesitation or fear that they might prove false, but no one approach should be accepted without verification in personal experience. The more fixed our ways of dealing with particular situations, the more we classify children on the basis of what we can see, the less aware we will be of the needs of the individual. If we cannot always serve these needs, we can at least be sympathetic to them. Perhaps the most vital thing we can do in dealing with students is to remain aware of the effects of our actions and words upon them, to help maintain some flexibility in our approach.

How can we know which theories will prove valuable, or which methods will help improve the learning environment? We cannot be sure. We can only act on the basis of what we feel to be true, ready at any moment to change our mode of thinking. There is no perfect educator, just as there is no perfect student. The broadest assumption a teacher must make is that the educational system itself, based on the idea that our culture is useful and worth transmitting, should be preserved. A diversity of ideas and approaches is probably the most redemptive feature an educational system can have; preservation of this diversity, rather than maintenance of a fixed methodology, should be the goal of all participants in the system.

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