

## WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO HUMANISTIC EDUCATION?

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Beginning about twenty years ago, humanistic education developed as a reaction to the exposure of the detrimental or unhealthy human environment in many of America's classrooms. Education, it was charged, had become a rigid, lockstep impersonal process. Critics include Goodman (1964) Holt (1967), Kozol (1967), Leonard (1968), Glasser (1969), Gross and Gross (1969) and Silberman (1970). These critics were saying that schools (or many schools) were not fit places for human beings. "Many are not even decent places for children to be. They damage, they thwart, they stifle children's natural capacity to learn and grow healthily" (Gross & Gross, 1969, p. 13). All too often they lead to "destruction of the human spirit" (Leonard, 1968, p. 110). They destroy the hearts and minds of children (Kozol, 1968, in subtitle of his book). Holt charged that education retarded rather than facilitated learning, through instilling fear of failure, anxiety, tension, avoidance of trying and being wrong, with shame and embarrassment in front of others.

The criticisms culminated in Silberman's report following a 3 1/2 year study supported by the Carnegie Corporation that included visits to more than a hundred schools. He wrote:

It is not possible to spend any prolonged period visiting public school classrooms without being appalled by the mutilation visible everywhere—mutilation of spontaneity, of joy in learning, of sense of self... Because adults take the schools so much for granted they fail to appreciate what grim joyless places most American schools are . . . what contempt they unconsciously display for children (p. 10). Far from helping students to develop into mature, self-reliant, self-motivated individuals, schools seem to do everything they can to keep youngsters in a state of chronic, almost infantile dependency. The pervasive atmosphere of distrust, together with rules governing the most minute aspects of existence, teach students everyday that they are not people of worth, and certainly not individuals capable of regulating their own behavior (p. 134) ... what is wrong with American education [is] its failure to develop sensitive, autonomous, thinking, humane individuals (p. 196). Our most pressing educational problem ... is how to create and maintain a humane society (p. 203).

### **The Humanistic Education Movement**

These criticisms were followed by attempts to introduce changes into the educational system, resulting in the movement known as humanistic education during the 1970s. Rogers' book "Freedom to Learn" was published in 1969. In 1972 Aspy published "Toward a Technology for Humanizing Education," perhaps a somewhat confusing or

misleading title. In 1973 my book simply titled “Humanistic Education” was published. By 1976 an annotated bibliography of books and articles by Mary Ann Gray (in Simpson, 1976) covered 210 pages. Almost all of the books published focused on techniques for classroom use; my book was (and still is as far as I know) the only one which attempted to provide a theoretical and psychological foundation for the movement. The two major aspects of humanistic education: (a) the psychological conditions for effective learning and (b) affective education were considered. The development of self-actualizing persons was stated as the goal of education. The problems that society faces today require more than intelligence and technical know-how for their solution. They are basically problems of living together, of human relationships, of cooperating in making planet earth a place where people can live in peace. We need people who can understand others, who can accept and respect others as well as themselves, who are honest and responsible—all characteristics of self-actualizing persons (Maslow, 1956). If the schools are society's means of preparing people to live in society and the world, they must be concerned with these objectives. We need to add a fourth R to education—human Relationships.

### **Does Humanistic Education Exist?**

These objectives would appear to be desirable, and unobjectionable. Yet the promise of humanistic education has not materialized. The term survives in a few places, as in the Association for Humanistic Education and Development. But for all practical purposes humanistic education no longer exists as an element in our educational system. In fact, it can be questioned as to whether it ever was incorporated to any significant degree in education.

Why was this so? Why has such an obviously desirable reform in education failed to be implemented? There are several reasons.

1. *Games, Gimmicks and Techniques.* Humanistic education became essentially a matter of introducing structured, teacher directed and controlled—games, exercises and other contrived experiences. The curriculum makers had to be involved, with resulting structured and planned experiences. And no doubt many teachers felt unable to, or insecure in, facing students without a lesson plan, in an unstructured situation. But such an approach is inconsistent with the goals of humanistic education—relating with others in natural situations, spontaneous activities and interactions, open and free discussion, self-directed exploration and learning. Teachers are not prepared for this kind of teaching. (See Chapter 12, *The Preparation of Humanistic Teachers*, in Patterson, 1973).

2. *Back to Basics.* The movement to get back to the basics, to the 3 Rs, has discouraged the humanizing of the classroom. It is widely assumed that concern with affective development and human relationships in the classroom is in conflict with cognitive development. A school superintendent in a University town was forced to leave because his attempts to humanize the schools were perceived by some parents as inimical to the cognitive or academic progress of their children and might affect their chances of admission to elite colleges. The evidence is, however, that a classroom atmosphere

conducive to the affective development of students leads to greater, rather than less, academic progress (Aspy, 1972).

3. *Misguided Values Clarification Programs.* In some places, poor judgment has been used by school personnel in selecting materials for values clarification classes. For example, one exercise involves a girl who has stolen an article from a drug store and, when ordered by her parents to shoot her dog as punishment, shoots herself—a most highly improbable situation. Beyond this, however, is the resistance of some parents to any attempt to introduce discussion of values in the school.

4. *Identification with Secular Humanism.* Those who object to any consideration of values or the personal or affective, emotional development of children in the schools are often affiliated with conservative religious groups, or the religious right. These groups use the term "secular humanism," and view humanistic education as an attempt to infiltrate the schools to undermine ethics, morals and religion. Whether sincerely or not, they inaccurately class all humanists as atheists.

It is interesting to consider these obstacles to humanizing the schools in contrast to the perception of a review of my book "Humanistic Education" in a Russian journal by a Russian educational psychologist. She wrote:

It is evident that reality is touched up a bit and [the author] seeks to show that conditions in contemporary America make for the possibility of a real humanistic education. Patterson doesn't understand that a real humanistic school cannot develop in a state that has a nonhumanistic and antagonistic society, that it would be in complete contradiction to it. The existence of such a school under capitalism would be a utopia... Undoubtedly, the book under review, in which are contained interesting facts and observations from the contemporary life in American schools, displaying the anti-humanistic nature of a capitalistic society, is very interesting. It is remarkable in its organization of the problems of humanistic education as a whole, appearing at the same time as a protest against the existing systems of education and development in the U.S.A., reflecting the severe laws of the capitalistic society, which dehumanize the individuality of the child.

It appears that she was correct in questioning my belief or optimism about the possibility of a humanistic education system, but for the wrong reason. It is not because of a repressive capitalistic society, but because of a democratic system in which (small) organized minority groups can wield great power in opposition to an unorganized majority.

The obstacles to humanistic education, taken singly and especially together, are formidable. They are not likely to be overcome sufficiently to allow for any major reform of the educational system, at least in the near future.

## **The Future of Humanistic Education?**

The future is not entirely bleak, however. It is not necessary to make major reforms in the system to improve the human environment of the classroom, to make them fit places for children to spend a large portion of their lives. It is the teacher who sets the atmosphere of the classroom, and it is the teacher's attitudes and behaviors that form the learning environment of the child. These attitudes and behaviors are well known, although unfortunately they are not accorded recognition in the preparation of teachers. Many teachers are concerned, however, and interested in how they can foster the personal and affective development of their students. I have spoken to a number of groups of such teachers (and some administrators), both in Hong Kong and in this country, in California, in the last year.

A final note. It would appear that the term humanistic education should be abandoned, because of its linking with an atheistic secular humanism. A new term may be difficult to find. However, a program being developed by William Purkey at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, under the term invitational learning, includes many of the ideas and concepts of humanistic education.

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See also **Carl Rogers and Humanistic Education**, Chapter 6, C. H. Patterson, *Foundations for a Theory of Instruction and Educational Psychology*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977. (Also on my website)