

# Human Values Take Priority

ELIZABETH GUILFOILE

Verbally, it is the fashion to subscribe to the importance of desirable human relationships in educational programs. In actuality, however, it is often difficult to find cases in point. Therefore, when this article by Elizabeth Guilfoile, principal of the Twelfth District School in Cincinnati, came to the editorial desk, it was most welcome. Miss Guilfoile describes, in very concrete terms, the kind of living that can go on in a school where more than lip service is given to the importance of human values.

"Dear Miss \_\_\_\_\_:

*Can you take Willie on Fifth St. to Jack Spratt's Shoe Store and get him a pair of shoes? Carolyn works for Lock's Ice Cream Company, at 7th and D Streets, and she won't have time. So if it is not too much trouble during lunch hour, take him for me and select a nice pair for him. I am sending five dollars (\$5). Thanking you in advance,*

*His mother  
Margaret Green"*

"WHAT DID YOU DO about it?" asked the principal when the fifth grade teacher displayed this note.

"Do? Why, I went and bought them! Could I betray such faith? Of course, I planned to go home at noon to dress up in my new spring print for that tea at 4:15. But what is a bath as compared to my responsibility for the fit of Willie's shoes? His sister has no time, but a school teacher has nothing to do with her noon hour but go shopping.

"Would my fellow teachers from the other buildings mind my dirty face if they knew that I was trusted with Mrs. Green's five dollars? She knows when I buy shoes for Willie they'll be good shoes!"

## This Is the School

This teacher's school has little in material resources to offer the children

who need so much. It is an old, four-story structure, heated by stoves, ill-lighted, and equipped with outmoded seating. Human resources must be used to the maximum for Willie and his schoolmates if school is to make up to them something of what home and community have denied them. And so the teachers and others who comprise the staff of Willie's elementary school work in a relationship that is both cause and effect.

## These Are the People

They have in their charge five hundred underprivileged children, all of whom come from homes immeasurably poor in both economic and cultural resources. Added to the health problems and the social problems of the people in this overcrowded, disorganized neighborhood, are the problems of seg-

regation. The pupils of Willie's school are all Negroes. The majority of the families have come in recent years from states which offer the most limited educational opportunities.

Working with the children who have so little and who look, with their parents, to the school for so much has proven a challenge to the teachers, the principal, the secretary, the nurse, the home visitor, the lunchroom manager, the custodian, the janitors, and all the adults engaged in this joint enterprise. A look behind the scenes at bits of everyday living tells how the staff attempts to meet this challenge.

#### Children Learn to Play Together

On the playground at recess the primary children are involved in a variety of games. When the bell rings each group of little boys runs to a different fifth grade leader, who gathers up the balls and ropes, helps them to organize a line, walks with them to the doorway, and starts them on their way to their classroom. Today the pupil-leader has helped the slow, encouraged the diffident, checked the overaggressive. "We had a good time," Roy, a first grader, announces to the nurse who is just departing for her field visits.

"They actually play," she comments. "Time was when they just knocked and pushed each other, or stood around and glowered. In this limited playground space so many efforts to interest the children in play have failed. Play is not characteristic of the neighborhood. Unfriendly and anti-social habits among adults reflect themselves in children. Of course children have to do *something*, and in the course of my rounds I have seen boys of ten and

twelve—even of eight—jumping on the back of trucks and snatching bottles of pop. I saw them steal ears of corn one day, not because they wanted it, I'm sure—but because stealing it was fun. In the homes there's no chance to play—limited space, no toys, no stimulus to the imagination. Yet in this play program they really are learning games and having a good time doing it!"

Back of the development of a play program is the leadership of a physical education teacher who could see all the possibilities in a situation and refuse to be daunted by initial failures. Working with her have been teachers who could see the changes in children that came about when a play program was developed to the point where play began to be a part of their daily lives.

#### A "Play Clinic" Evolves

Much planning and much patience have gone into the successive steps of the program. A particularly interesting late step is the "play clinic" which grew out of the "play leader" arrangement. The fifth grade children who act as play leaders met with their physical education teacher once a week to practice the games that the small children play. They also discussed what to do when a child does not want to play, will not take his turn, cannot understand the directions.

Finally, it was agreed to hold "play clinics" in the gym where all the play leaders could work with their small groups at once. Working with them and observing them were the classroom teachers of the small children. In this weekly period the primary children have been helped to acquire the simple skills they need for the games. The ten-

and eleven-year-old leaders have been helped to understand how to interest younger children. The small, crowded playground is now a place for fun and friendly association. The fifth grade group is developing attitudes of responsibility and of concern for small children.

"It isn't that there are no problems," says one of the teachers who has just been giving general oversight to the primary recess. "Anti-social attitudes are still common. Aggressive and withdrawn children we still have with us. Tempers still flare unreasonably when collisions, literal and figurative, occur, but now we can meet the problems. While most of the children are playing happily, the teacher is free to observe and to help in those situations where she is needed."

#### The City Becomes the Neighborhood

"There was a time," comments a fourth grade teacher, "when it was difficult to plan an excursion. One third of the children, at least, stayed at home. Now practically every child brings his carfare and lunch. Parents who did not set much store by trips out of the neighborhood now cooperate. Only occasionally a parent refuses to sign the note of permission. Usually every child is on hand, with face and clothes shining."

A variety of excursions has helped to build up the experience of the children through the use of the parks, airport, museums, railroad station, and any unusual opportunities the area may offer. The children, in a measure, take all the city for their province. Once they and their parents were fearful of the rebuffs they would meet beyond

the confines of their own highly segregated district. Now they go happily, with their white or colored teachers, to a great variety of places.<sup>1</sup> Their outlook is daily broadened. Their interests multiply and they find new things to talk and write about.

#### And This Is Why It Happened

What lies behind these accounts of Willie and the shoes, the learning to play together, the changed feelings about excursions? The story of these changes is one of the day-by-day relationships which make up the program of living and learning together. These relationships may be expressed in a half-dozen generalizations which are not consciously organized objectives but principles simply shaped in the process of group effort and group thinking by the staff.

#### *Children come first*

*The welfare of the children in the school is the essential criterion by which to judge all activities.* Many school practices, even generally accepted ones, are eliminated through the rigorous use of this touchstone. For example, all money-raising projects are omitted, although the proceeds might be used to obtain helpful supplies and equipment. Pennies needed for lunch must not be diverted into any other use. Most "drives" and "weeks" must be ignored as these usually do little to develop permanent interests in the children. They tend to interrupt the program developed by the school through consistent study of children's needs and interests. "Health Week,"

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Guilfoile, "White and Negro Teachers Work and Talk Together." *Elementary English Review* 23: 15-20; January 1946

for instance, is an anomaly in a school which makes of health a major factor in the work and play of every day in the year.

*Leadership belongs to all*

*The major responsibilities of the school, of both permanent and temporary character, are shared by staff members. For leadership in most of these responsibilities, individuals are not selected but discovered.* The steady faith of teachers has created a parent-teacher association. They have believed in the reality of the desire of the parents for an organization despite the parent's obvious limitations. One staff member led the effort to keep the little club alive through the stages in which the inertia, timidity, and vacillation of the mothers were most discouraging. It took extreme tenacity to find ways to meet the unexpressed needs of the parents, and ingenuity to establish every step in the process. But results finally began to follow.

This responsibility attached itself to the teacher-leader because of her driving interest. Her creative thinking expressed itself definitely in this effort.

Working at the detailed tasks of committee activities and program making, teachers and parents find new bonds of interest. Parents gain new self-respect. Teachers gain new insight. The public health nurse has found new avenues for her teachings. Parents have established new relationships with her.

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Several teachers have managed a chain of contacts with the local character-building agencies and organizations. The children typically lack the initiative to find these resources for

themselves or to follow through consistently with a program set up by any agency. Through their personal knowledge of resources, and their daily contact with the children, these staff members have helped to bring the service and the need together.

A young janitor has organized a boys' group which meets under his supervision and encouragement at the branch YMCA. The boys swim, take part in indoor games, and plan projects under his guidance. Although they have so little themselves, these boys secured foods and filled a Christmas basket for a needy family. His zeal to have more pupils take advantage of this recreation program prompted the leader to solicit from each teacher the fees for a membership for some especially needy boy.

Daily in the school this man's influence is felt among the boys. When he says, "You must always report home first after school," they listen, thus building an attitude of lasting value.

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The sense of responsibility for the welfare of the individual child abides in every staff member. The secretary, one evening, began to wonder if the symptoms a child had shown that day might indicate a grave illness. She remembered that the parent, who had been summoned to school, had seemed a little vague about what steps to take. The secretary's telephoning started the wheels moving needed to get the child into the hospital to be examined. Tomorrow might have been too late! She had come to recognize that parents were often helpless in the face of an emergency.

Later check on the situation revealed that the parent thought she was not

entitled to the service of the public hospital because she owed a bill of seven dollars since her own recent confinement. She had spent critical hours in trying to raise money among acquaintances to settle the bill instead of calling an ambulance for the child.

*Projects shaped by many minds*

*All plans and projects of the school are the concern of each staff member—in their formation, as well as in their development.* There is no machinery for staff participation in planning and evaluation other than the usual staff conference. There is just the simple fact that decisions are shared as fully as possible. Things are talked out on every occasion. Each member of the staff has more or less completely developed the habit of thinking through all proposals, developing or criticising them, and contributing practical reactions. Therefore, most policies and practices of the school are the products of many minds. Innovations are proposed most often by staff members.

One of the major premises upon which administrative and supervisory

decisions are made is that an individual's own plan is likely to be the best and most creative one for the accomplishment of his particular task. Advice and help are of most use when related to the originator's own idea. It seems obvious that teachers and others need less direction and more opportunity to talk out and develop their own ideas. The principal is naturally an agent of information and a resource for materials and assistance. Beyond that, she is so far as it is possible, the kind of resource the individual is seeking at the moment—a disinterested judge, a rejoicing participant in a happy experience, or—if something has gone sadly wrong—just a shoulder on which to weep.

*All kinds of information help*

*Complete information is needed to deal with the problems of every child.* Nurse, attendance worker, teachers, non-professional staff members—all contribute their knowledge to the solution of children's problems. While this process centers in the school office, the principal is not necessarily the best-informed person in regard to the child's



*Courtesy North Phoenix (Ariz.) High School*

*Joint concern for children's welfare*

background. The public health nurse, with headquarters in the school, has been in the district for many years. She knows not only of immediate illnesses in the families, but also of income levels, chronic invalids, desperate financial emergencies, sparsely furnished rooms, lack of fuel.

Then, there is the teacher of fifteen year's standing who has had representatives of nearly all families in the district in her room and can supply much information. She is more likely to know the aspirations and achievements of the family than their misfortunes, however. Boys come back to her from the far places of the world upon the completion of their army service. Girls come with their high school diplomas or their new babies. Junior high school children and their parents come seeking advice as to the next steps.

The attendance worker contributes information on family problems and relationships, too. The custodian observes when some difference develops in the manner or conduct of a boy who comes and goes in the basement. The lunchroom manager is quick to see if a child has no appetite or is eating ravenously. Daily these significant items of information find their way to principal or teacher and help in the understanding of and the dealing with the child. The children are happier, and the strain of the teacher's effort grows less. The atmosphere of the school improves in serenity.

*Materials belong to everyone*

*The school facilities and equipment attain their maximum use because they are completely shared.* Sets of readers, reference volumes, supplementary ma-

terials of all kinds, including three types of visual aid projectors, are circulated from the office. All day long children come and go, withdrawing and returning these tools for their classes. The household art room is used by any class that wishes to cook. Maps are shifted from upper grade to primary rooms as needed. Balls and bats, mats and ropes circulate from the gymnasium. Planned and carefully directed lunchroom services are stretched to include a special feeding program, initiated for particularly undernourished groups through private funds.

*No limits on influence*

*The peculiar talents and special contributions of each teacher or other adult of the staff belong to all the children—even to all the adults of the school.* Thus, an individual's influence extends in multiple fashion. The art teacher, an artist in her own right, daily shares her gifts of seeing and creating. Partly through her, colleagues grow in the conviction that children are creative beings and place new value on the smallest effort resulting from genuine self-expression. Rich experience background comes to be recognized as the first essential in the art process. Therefore, new and more ways are sought to bring valuable experiences.

One classroom teacher reveals that drab, unpromising rooms are not without possibilities by bringing order and beauty into her own. In consequence, color and arrangement begin to characterize all rooms.

The genuine interest of another teacher in the field of natural science is expressed through the displays in her classroom, through materials, books, and

specimens she brings into the building, even through her most casual conversation. Scientific curiosity grows.

Kindness and gentleness are so marked in the manner of a first grade teacher that all voices soften, all faces relax, all hands touch more often and with greater kindness the small people in the school.

So truly a member of the school staff is the custodian that in wartime the children's letters followed him overseas and around the world. When he came back with a rich store of new experiences, hours were set aside in various classrooms and teachers and children listened eagerly to his descriptions of life in China, India, Burma. This man, a university graduate, is barred by his color from many vocational opportunities. Although his work is not of his own choice, he daily builds the understanding that character and personality survive menial tasks.

These relationships within a school staff have their expression not only in the ultimate service given to the children. There is an enrichment of life that takes place through daily contacts. Deep and abiding friendships develop out of the sharing of common undertakings. Joy is added to living through the rich and varied interests of very different people. It is these things that

hold able, fine, and highly adaptable teachers and others in a situation which is difficult, exhausting, and often profoundly discouraging.

Frequent tribute is paid to one teacher for her gaiety of spirit. "She creates something with her laugh that just keeps spreading like an ever-widening circle until it enters into the spirits of all of us," says one of her colleagues. That evaluation is something of a symbol of the relationships existing among the adults who work together in this situation.

#### There Need Be No Limits

No limit obtains, apparently, to the effect that a group of people, held together by a deep purpose, can have upon each other. There is no limit to what people can accomplish through their working together. The limitations come only through the slowness of the process of evolving and shaping those relationships.

We have in education, as yet, an imperfect realization of the values in creative group relationships. This story is told merely to suggest that the unique abilities, training, background, talents, energies, points of view, and personal drives of the individuals who work together as a school staff may hold unlimited potentialities.



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