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EDITORIAL COMMENT



ENLARGING THE PERSPECTIVE: WHOLE TEACHER, WHOLE STUDENT, WHOLE READING

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EDITOR'S NOTE—Dianne Hunter's article, "Enlarging the Perspective: Whole Teacher, Whole Student, Whole Reading," is being highlighted this issue as a guest editorial due to the important message it has for teachers. The author points out that the nature of teaching and the pressures schools are subject to make it easy to forget the axiom that the sum is greater than its parts. Readers will find many cogent reasons in this article for remembering that "Reading is a whole-person enterprise."

"In all the schools I attended I felt as if I were in some way taking part in a theatrical performance in which I had a role to play and had to find actors to take the other parts." (Margaret Mead, *Blackberry Winter*, p. 80.)

Margaret Mead's metaphor of a theatrical performance is a serviceable means of perceiving contemporary school life. Schools and classrooms are the theaters. Instruction and other events which comprise the school day are plots, while teachers and students are the players. For directors, there are teachers and administrators. They share responsibilities for directing the plays—carrying out the curricula and supervising daily routines.

Today, classrooms and schools are settings for plays that are more complex than they were in the period of Margaret Mead's schooling. Teachers and school administrators are not as free to interpret the scripts for their productions. Instead, they must respond to demands from the community, state and federal governments. Those demands are numerous, and they are often conflicting. An example of conflicting requirements is the expectation to "return to the basics." Consensus on what exactly comprises "basics" is lacking; nevertheless, the notion of "returning" remains. "Returning" connotes conservatism, which when combined with "basic," would seem to rule out other sets of concurrent demands which are made of elementary and secondary curricula. Does "basic" exclude instruction which is multicultural, multiethnic, and nonsexist? What are teachers to do? How should they plan (that is, direct) instruction?

It is difficult for teachers to feel confident that they are adequately directing their casts of classes. It is easy for school personnel to lose touch with the whole play and to respond instead to school life as a series of disparate acts.

Stepping Back From the Stage

There are times when it is beneficial to step back from the external demands which are made on teaching and learning at school. It is important for teachers and school administrators to step back from the school-classroom stage and acquire or renew a feeling for the entirety of the play. On such occasions it is appropriate to formulate an inner sense of purpose, of student development at school, of how to make each moment of the school day meaningful to teachers and students. Teachers then can develop their abilities as capable directors of the classroom drama. They can recognize and follow a winding, thematic thread. They can be reminded of the scope of a school year and the breadth of a succession of school years.

Considering the Characters

One aspect of stepping back from the stage is taking another look at the characters. It is abandoning stereotypic notions of the teachers and students and seeking those characters from a more inclusive perspective. Teachers and students are persons. They are members of society, a production which is larger than schooling or institutionalized education. Hence, many dimensions of students and teachers are acknowledged outside the school setting. These dimensions get carried to school, too, although once persons assume their roles of "teachers" and "students," the richness and breadth of the whole person are often overlooked. Whole persons are intellectual, as well as emotional, physical, and spiritual. They are intuitive and rational, imaginative and practical (Roberts and Clark, 1976).

Teacher-directed classroom activities are frequently directed only to intellectual dimensions. The exchanges which occur among students and teachers during school days contribute, either by commission or neglect, to more than one aspect of the person.

A Scenario—Instruction in Reading

Reading is a whole-person enterprise. Reading has affected children's lives even before they receive formal instruction in reading at school (Goodman, 1978). Reading continues to affect their lives outside the school environment in ways that seem very different from phonics drills or exercises on "who, what, where, when, or how." Reading is understanding a scout manual, getting messages from television commercials and shows and following stories in comic books. Likewise, teachers read in order to grow personally. Teachers read for recreation, to pay taxes, to cook meals, and to buy insurance. Most aspects of person—intellectual, emotional, spiritual, intuitive, rational, imaginative and practical—can be affected by messages which are conveyed through print.

How can teachers direct reading at school so that it is whole reading for whole students? How should instruction in reading be perceived in a holistic perspective? Reading should be thought of as a means to an end. We read for recreation or in order to work or in order to solve problems. It should be thought of as getting messages from print—messages which facilitate not only intellectual growth, but also physical, emotional, or spiritual

development. Neither phonics, nor word analysis, nor conventions of written language actually comprise messages. They do comprise systems of instruction but they do not comprise reading.

Sense of Message and the Director

For at least the past decade, teachers of reading have been made aware of a medical model for examining students' reading. According to that model, the teacher, like a physician, looks for signs for poor health—symptoms. The first symptom is mispronounced words during oral reading. According to this model, accurate pronunciation is good, and inaccurate pronunciation is bad. A second category of symptoms is failure of the patient to adequately answer questions based on the content of a passage. When unhealthy readers are identified, they receive prescriptions (lessons) and the illness (mispronunciations and inadequate responses to questions) is cured.

In the context of the perception of reading as a whole-person learning activity, the sickness-health model of reading seems far removed from real multi-dimensional persons who use reading to understand printed messages. The teacher who perceives herself or himself as a whole person interacting with whole, developing students will interpret how effectively students understand messages. Word analysis and sight words will be taught, but they will be differentiated from reading. Comprehension—getting meaning from messages—will be a first priority concern in reading instruction. Reading will not be perceived as a solitary subject. All subject areas will be considered reading lessons as well as instruction in specific content.

The capable teacher-director sees himself or herself as a whole person. He or she is able to weave cohesion from the separate events of the school day. All the parts of the school day, all the acts and parts of acts are meaningful learning experiences for his or her students. The capable teacher-director masterfully creates a setting wherein students and teachers can thrive.

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