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We Suggest

Eleanor Buelke

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WE SUGGEST

Eleanor Buelke

Nyberg, David

tough and tender learning

Palo Alto, California: National Press Books, 1971, pp. 186.

Essentially, the author of this book is concerned about things that happen, or could happen, to people who inhabit classrooms. It is about the American schoolroom he characterizes as the Black Quincy Shadow Box "which has things going on inside that nobody understands and which is full of people who are afraid of each other but won't admit it." It is about learning to be "human" and "humane." It is about the vital, viable connection between thought and feeling inherent in all true human learning. It is about sham that nurtures sham in American schools; the art of obfuscation that distorts and confuses men's images of themselves, teachers and learners alike; and the craft of clarity that enables individuals to confront and comprehend each other's differences, as well as their commonalities.

In a highly readable style, Dr. Nyberg seems to be carrying on a rational, provocative conversation with his readers, identifying and explaining his concepts of a humanizing learning environment where actively involved members are honest and open with each other. At the same time that he expresses hope for changes and improvements in institutionalized education in this country, he is less than optimistic about the probability of mandating intelligent, compassionate, direct relationships from teachers who have been practicing the opposite kinds of teaching behavior for some time. For him, the best statement of the purpose of school is "to help students want to learn." His definition of learning is "a change in personal behavior of which the person is aware." He combines these ideas in this formula:

Learning = Information + Personal Meaning → Behavioral Change. He believes that no real changes toward improvement of schools can be made unless we examine and act upon the knowledge that:

For the most part, learning is a unique, lonesome personal process, even in a crowded classroom. The number of variances that exist in one human being, let alone among a group of people, is fantastic. These variances in multiple combination account for differences in the ways people learn.

In establishing legitimate bases for purposeful learning, then, teachers must consider these differences.

As one of the bases for developing personal meaning, Dr. Nyberg recommends student choice of alternatives at every juncture of learning, with the student being responsible for the consequences of his choices. He points out, though, that unless the student is allowed to, and does, become actively involved in what is going on around him, such choices become irrelevant. Further, he emphasizes that power for learning resides in the *process of inquiry*, where questions are kept open and the learners search out their own meanings and answers. He cautions about the use of reward or reinforcement systems in which the learner perceives the rewards as *extrinsic* to himself, devoid of any relation to meaning of a personal sort. When teachers direct their reinforcement schedules largely toward informational levels of learning only, striving for a maximum efficiency of student feedback, they run the danger of losing the crucial element of *concern*, of authentic warmth, “the force that raises learning to a personalized level.” *Intrinsic* feedback, knowledge leading to the learner’s own goals, can promote the joy of learning for its own sake. Positive self-respect is also among the essential bases for learning. This can develop only through a climate in which students are afforded dignity, where teachers practice “some fundamental faith in a self which is much more than what the self concept currently depicts, basic respect for the wholeness and potential of human being, and a high regard for life,”¹ where adults and peers believe in the student, so that he may learn to believe in himself, assuming control over his own learning.

In his plea for the pursuit of more basic, heedful, closely cooperative relationships between teachers and students, Nyberg does not exclude entirely all techniques and systems now widely used by educators. He is arguing that none of these will make real sense to learners unless care-filled cooperation precedes and accompanies their use.

To help another in this way, you have to know what the other needs, and the only way to find out what the other needs is for him to tell you. And he won’t tell you unless you will listen to him carefully. And the way to convince him that you will listen to him carefully is to listen to him carefully.

The proof of the teaching is in the learning.

¹ Kaoru Yamamoto, *The Child and His Image*, pp. 7 and 8. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972.