

The Death of an Idea

The kid with the tousled hair looked like the silent type. Since I was a visitor to the class, I did not know his name, but I imagined that it was Bruce. "Bruce" had the barest hint of a smile about the edges of his mouth, and he had bright blue eyes. It was the sparkle in those eyes that convinced me Bruce had a lot of creative thought hidden behind his silent manner.

I was not the only visitor in class that day. The teacher - a young, active, highly intelligent new member of the staff - had invited a local scientist to give a guest presentation. The teacher had chosen the right scientist, one who knew how to speak to a class on their own terms without talking down to them, and one who had enthusiasm. Every face was riveted on this spell-binding person before them. She was well prepared, the flow of thought was obvious and her notes were kept almost hidden. There was never an outline obnoxiously demanding "this is point three, you damned-well better write it down." But suddenly things seemed to be going wrong. The scientist was walking away from her carefully prepared diagrams, she was ignoring her neat lecture notes. Her voice trailed off. What was she fumbling for in her briefcase? A few of the students glanced at each other. Then they saw some scribbled hand-written notes.

The scientist explained that just minutes before coming to the lecture, she had completed a risky experiment. She hadn't blown up her lab, but she had some exciting new results she wanted to share with them. There were a few excited "yeahs!" and every face was riveted on her again. It took but a few minutes to explain the new experiment, this was science in the process, they could see science happening before their eyes. There was a spontaneous round of applause. One timid hand went up. There was no need to say "Go ahead with your question." It was understood that everyone was thinking and when there was a point to be made or a question to be asked, it would be done. The scientist finished her sentence and leaned ever so slightly, and expectantly toward the timid hand. The student asked the question. Well, it was a dumb question - though one wouldn't have known it from the scientist's response. Probably, she had rejected such an idea as an irrelevant diversion in numerous past experiments. She smiled and said, "Now that's an idea worth considering." I don't believe this scientist had ever seen a "bad idea" or met a student she didn't like. Another student raised a hand and offered a possible refutation. The original student, having done more thinking in the interim, now clearly stated why the idea didn't apply to this experiment.

I cannot report the details of the scientific argument for, fascinating as it was, it was taking place in the periphery of my consciousness. My attention was on the kid with the tousled hair. Bruce was obviously deep in thought. To my surprise he then raised his hand. The scientist turned her attention to him and the class waited, but Bruce didn't seem ready to respond. With a gentle encouraging "yes" she focused her ears on Bruce, but diverted her gaze downward. After a pause, Bruce explained his idea, stopping sometimes to rephrase a sentence or even to cancel a sentence out completely. The scientist's attention was concentrated. This was a new idea she hadn't ever considered

before. This was an idea she would take back to the laboratory to think about further. This was an idea she would really use. Much of the class's attention seemed to be drifting away. They weren't used to listening to Bruce, the idea was too hard to follow, it didn't go down as easily as a television commercial. A few of them understood though, and the teacher clearly saw the importance of the new idea. This alert teacher had come up with Bruce's idea independently, but was too impatient to wait. The teacher jumped in and said, "Bruce, what a good idea. I see what you mean, you mean . . ." The teacher's explanation was well-worded, it was understandable, the class's attention was coming back. But the scientist was silent, she was still thinking about Bruce's idea, in fact she was still leaning toward him. There were a few other questions, the teacher fielded them. There were the usual polite goodbyes. A few of the students said they wished the scientist would come back and speak to them again. The scientist also thanked the class, she had had fun too. She was obviously learning along with them, though perhaps at a higher level.

The class wrote good papers about the scientist's visit. At the end of the term there were many A's. Bruce's paper about the visit did not mention his idea that had so intrigued the scientist. At the end of the term, Bruce just barely passed the course. I never saw Bruce again, but if I do, I would like to learn his true name and listen to his ideas.

*I have come to a frightening conclusion,
I am the decisive element in the classroom.
It is my personal approach that creates the climate.*
(Ginott, 1972)

INTRODUCTION

The world our children inherit will be different than ours. Problems, new and old, will require answers. Today's children should see these problems as challenges to their imagination and creative impulses. Schools bear much of the responsibility for preparing our children to meet those challenges. Are the schools *really* preparing for the future, or are they content with the status quo?

Nearly everyone would claim to be in favor of creativity, but the sad fact remains that the classroom often inhibits a child's ability to respond in a creative way. The result is a tragic and unnecessary waste of human resources and potential. Conformity and not individuality becomes the norm of behavior.

History reveals people who have been at odds with society and society has dealt harshly with them. Socrates drank hemlock, Galileo, to avoid burning, humiliated himself before Papal authority, Michael Servetus was burned at the stake, Jesus was crucified. Our society has advanced beyond that kind of treatment, yet many of our children are being fitted into neat molds of conformity where creative thoughts, ideas, and solutions are being discouraged and punished.

Author Miller understood this. Willie Loman emerges from the *Death of a Salesman* as a defeated, frustrated man who found it difficult to meet the challenges of a society he neither liked nor understood. The world he knew as a child had not prepared him to live in the world in which he lived as an adult. Are we producing more Willie Lomans? People who are de-

prived of their own sense of individuality are affected negatively by frustration and defeat. One of the purposes of education is to free children to be themselves.

Since before the days of Horace Mann, one of the purposes of education has been to develop the whole person. Education serves democracy by liberating people from their own ignorance and "meanness" and in doing so will benefit the individual and the entire society. The promise of education is as important today as it has been over the centuries. Despite its critics over the years, our educational system has fulfilled much of that promise. Now our system is in danger of failing. The rate of change has accelerated so rapidly it is difficult for schools to keep pace and prepare children for the future.

What our schools need today are not new and expensive programs, nor do we need a return to the "basics." What we do need are teachers who are committed to the premise that their role is to help children discover the world for themselves. No one can discover for someone else, but the teacher can be a part of the process of discovery in which children use their own creative processes to find answers.

CREATIVE THINKING AND CHILDREN

Creative thinking, like a half remembered dream is an elusive idea. Many investigators have attempted to identify, define, test and measure it. Most admit they are just beginning to understand it. Twenty years ago, Torrance (1962, p. 16) tentatively defined it as ". . . a process of sensing gaps or disturbing missing elements; forming ideas or hypotheses concerning them; testing these hypotheses; communicating the results; and possibly modifying and retesting the hypothesis."

Children who think creatively have a tendency to give wild or silly answers (as viewed by peers and teachers), even if the answer is logical; their work and ideas are often "off the beaten path," "outside the mold," or "off the wall"; their work is characterized by humor and playfulness. These children possess the urge to search for answers to puzzling questions. Their behavior is often unpredictable and can cause tension and conflict in the classroom. They are labelled as showoffs and oddballs and often teachers find them disconcerting and frustrating.

It is our belief that the characteristics just mentioned are valuable, and that most children come to school with them. Unfortunately, the school does little to nurture the development of independence and creativity. On the contrary, the classroom becomes more homogenous as the child grows older. The classroom climate and the teachers' actions often inhibit the creative responses of the children.

As children grow, society expects more from them (and rightly so); schools, as reflections of society follow suit; so by the time children reach the beginning of adolescence, most of the fervor and excitement experienced earlier have disappeared. School, for many, becomes a prison where they are no longer individual personalities, but are faceless sponges soaking up information.

Must it be this way? We think not. There are many dedicated, hard working, well trained and sensitive people who work with children. It is the teacher who makes the difference. That difference is the relationship that exists between and among

the teacher and the children. This relationship is often called the classroom climate and it is to that we next address ourselves.

CLASSROOM CLIMATE AND THE TEACHER

Ginott (1972) said that it was the teacher's personal approach that created the climate in the classroom. What does he mean? We believe that a teacher's personal approach includes, but is not limited to, the following: the development of a personal philosophy of life that becomes a "balance wheel" and a reservoir from which to draw strength and sustenance, a positive outlook on life, personal self-esteem, an open, caring attitude about themselves and others, a sensitive and compassionate personality, the ability to see the world through eyes of a child. In their approach teachers must show civility, considerateness and a deep rooted belief in the dignity of children. In addition, teachers must recognize that they are also human and have their own foibles.

One's personal approach depends upon certain knowledge and skills. At a minimum, we believe, that teachers should: 1) understand the development of children, 2) be knowledgeable about the wide variety of teaching strategies, 3) be familiar with the curriculum they teach, 4) understand the dynamics of a classroom, and 5) possess human relation skills that foster an open, democratic environment where all are treated with dignity and respect.

Teaching is a people's profession. It is part science and part art. Successful teachers synthesize their professional preparation, experiences with children, and feeling about life into a teaching style. It is this style that creates the classroom climate. It is this style, to paraphrase Ginott, that makes the *real* difference in a classroom.

CONCLUSION

We do not deny the kinds of things money could do for public education. Higher teachers' salaries, innovative curriculum materials, and better facilities all would be helpful. However important those may be, they would not solve the crucial problem that is the relationship between the teacher and the children. It is that relationship which causes the death of an idea. And it is that relationship which should change.

We have suggested some characteristics that we believe all teachers would want to work upon in order to improve their relationships with children. Perhaps one of the most important of these characteristics and the one that influences all the others is the development of a philosophy of life that becomes a reservoir from which to draw strength and sustenance. Develop your own philosophy of life and remember the words of Charlie Brower:

A new idea is delicate. It can be killed by a sneer or a yawn; it can be stabbed to death by a quip, and worried to death by a frown.

Bruce B. Burnes
Joseph P. Blount

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