

Really Teach?

An increasing amount has been directed at another subject of education.

The main business of education is no longer in the education process itself but by the educator.

The student is making his voice heard in the school, with or without the sanction of his administrators.

In the following article, Ramsey senior Grant Blank discusses what he terms our cultures "personalization ethic," and gives his view of its affect on the high schools.

apathy on the part of the participants. So here, where both students and teachers are looking for interest--for something that's exciting and fun and personal, but no one cares about what is really learned, glamour defines the interest.

At this point I should digress to note that in certain classes many students do learn without glamour or a personal relationship with the teacher. These are classes with students who have an overriding motivation such as college, status with their peers or some other factor that forces them to learn in spite of the atmosphere of the class.

The glamorous teaching style is also a part of the second effect of the educational ethic--the change in school atmosphere.

As the high schools emphasize personal relationships they appear to be creating an atmosphere of planned happiness. In this atmosphere both the student and the teacher work toward planning and carrying out class activities that are fun.

From the student point of view, this provides a reason for coming to school--he comes because he has fun. One Ramsey student said, "(I have) a couple of classes that have teachers who make it fun, but otherwise I don't see why I should come."

The teacher for his part takes the role of an entertainer. He first must know what his students like, so the students are continually asked, "Did you like the movie?" or, "Do you like small groups better than a large group discussion?" etc.

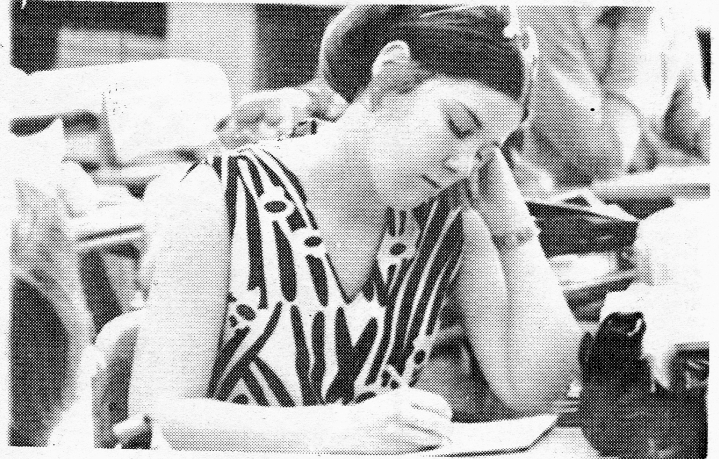
Then the teacher merely proceeds to make school as much fun as possible; he does unusual things in class, his students play simulation games in social studies, he tells lots of jokes, his students do projects, etc.

In this way both students and teachers push toward a school atmosphere that places a premium on being happy, usually to the detriment of any other goals, social, psychological or academic.

The third effect of the increasing personalization of education concerns the role of adult and student authority.

A school oriented toward personal student-teacher relationships does not provide much of a basis for adult authority. As adult control weakens the students' control over each other intensifies.

The student is left with little choice except to follow (the process is usually unconscious) whatever lead his peers set down. And, in American high schools today, the peer-group is in a strong position. It can dictate student attitudes, student



Students come to school for glamour--but, if they don't find it....

values and student behavior without the individual student having anything to say about it. The peer-group is in control even to the extent that dropping out of the peer-group requires its sanction. This works to the students' disadvantage because the peer-group is notorious for its shifting set of values and goals that

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change with every swing of fashion. And it characteristically allows little or no deviation from its norms, while they last. Even when students join an organization, such as Student Council, Drama, Athletics, Pollution or Peace in Vietnam, simply gaining another peer-group with all its characteristic ambiguous goals and shifting norms.

The student, under control of the peer-group, has his individual self-image undercut to the point where his only identity is that of the group or subgroup. He becomes known as a 'Student Council member' or as a 'pollution forum organizer' but not as a distinct person outside of his group.

In other words, the individual becomes important only in relation to the group.

The effects of personalization--glamour, planned happiness, and peer-group control--all seem to serve a single purpose: They give students a reason for coming to school. Students are grasping for a reason that justifies their staying in a school building seven hours a day, five days a week, and they are not finding it in the intellectual side of school.

The only time students find a reason for being in school comes in the glamour, happiness and personal relationships (with teachers and ultimately with their peers) that are present in the web of emotions they are able to weave into the school day.

What is common to all three of these effects of the personalization ethic is that they do not allow the student to fulfill the basic function of adolescence as Edgar Friedenberg defined it.

Friedenberg implies there is a deep-seated psychological need within every person to define exactly who he is. Adolescence, he says, is the time when an individual fills this need.

Evidence of this need can be seen in the need a child feels to separate himself from his parents. A very small child is content to remain as close to his parents as possible. But as the child grows older he seems to progressively sense the fact that he is a separate individual--with his own separate identity. So the child gradually moves away from his parents until the climatic moment when he breaks his dependence on them.

A roughly similar situation takes place between the adolescent and the society as a whole. The adolescent must break his dependence on the rest of his culture and establish his uniqueness as an individual.

As a part of the personalization ethic, the student is searching for a personal relationship. What he finds is either an obviously shallow, vacuous form of glamour and planned happiness or he will simply lapse into the control of a group of his peers. He never has the chance to become a unique individual in his own right. He merely adopts the role given to him by his peers or by the school.

The student, in this situation, is an imitator. His identity has been ready-made for him by his peers and the high schools and he simply 'puts it on.'

Yet, I cannot believe this process leads to any deep lasting feeling of personal identity and uniqueness.

Essentially the process of gaining a identity, through the personalization ethic is one of imitation, yet the process of becoming a unique individual requires that the student assert his own ego as separate from any other.

In high school, the student is not allowed a separate assertion of ego. The school requires that the student submerge his ego with in the larger structure of the peer-group, of group happiness or of glamour, and reject any claim to free choice.

The net result is that the high school provides no means of achieving any sort of real self-definition at all. It never allows the student to master himself and achieve the ego assertion that provides the measure of self-identification.

"The student is an imitator."

As is usually true in these cases it is relatively easy to define what is wrong but it is much harder to find something that will remedy the situation. I do, however, see several tentative paths that the school can take to provide its students with a better opportunity to establish their own identity.

First, the high schools can begin to teach students more about themselves as persons: It will only be when students are able to recognize their own feelings, their own potentials and their own limitations that they can shake themselves loose from the pervasive control of the peer-group and really begin to develop their own sense of uniqueness.

Secondly, the schools must develop a real respect for the competent individual. When a student can show he is competent at a particular task, he has, in effect, constructed a basis on which he can respect himself and he has taken a long stride toward learning "... who he is and what he really feels," to quote Friedenberg.

