

**'The aim of education is the moral wholeness of our nature; its means are practice in striving for wholeness in moral behaviour, feeling and action.'**

## **‘Oh, come on, 4 everything’s relative!’**

One cannot talk about improving quality if one is afraid of making value judgments and demanding higher standards. That requires courage — especially today — and for several reasons.

*Firstly:* Once one starts discussing values, disagreements quickly arise. The philosophical argument revolves round the basic question: are there *objective* values by which we are bound, or are values on the one hand *socially defined* and on the other the result of *subjective* decisions by the individual? Neither of these two viewpoints can actually be proved. Ultimately they are a question of one’s basic outlook. I myself tend towards the first position, without denying the fact that many value concepts are subject to both social change and subjective decisions. I prefer, however, to refer to standards of behaviour that change with society as ‘norms’ and regard them as socially determined realisations of objective values, which are fairly abstract and general, for example truth, goodness, beauty and holiness.

*Secondly:* There has never been agreement as to which values should be regarded as binding on us. Given this, the current attitude is to avoid any value judgments whatsoever. Thus the demand is often made that teaching in school should be value-free. But in the context of education, of teaching and instruction, the demand that we refrain from evaluation is a sheer impossibility; it ties the teacher’s hands and leaves him unsure of himself: the things he ‘feels’ are wrong, could just

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as well be right; what 'seems' ugly to him, might be judged beautiful by another; what he 'regards' as bad, another might accept as good. The best solution appears to be to let the child 'decide' and to accept everything he says as good. But that is no help to the child; at best it leaves him revolving round himself, at worst it abandons him to neglect and indiscipline.

This dilemma is a problem for many teachers, who often find themselves being criticised for their belief in value judgments. My view is that education is only possible if we evaluate what a pupil says and does, and base appropriate demands and goals on that. It follows that the only people who are suited to this task are those who are prepared to make value judgments in their professional activity. People who are thus suited to the profession of teacher will no more be able to justify their values as universally binding than any philosopher, but they will be prepared to demonstrate these values in their own lives, to stand up for them to the children and their parents and not be afraid to risk conflict.

*Thirdly:* One reason why making judgments has fallen into disrepute is that there are situations in which it is unnecessary, indeed counterproductive. It is really tedious when one person insists on passing judgment on all decisions that belong to another's area of authority.

But the solution is not to refrain from value judgments. What is necessary is to draw clear distinctions. In my view there are two situations in which it is necessary to pass judgment: in the first place when one is *responsible* for the matter in question and in the second when *one's own wishes and needs* are affected. In all other cases passing judgment is unnecessary.

Accordingly, the teacher has the right and the duty to judge his pupils' behaviour and work, for there is no doubt that he bears a considerable share of responsibility for them. And his judgment is always called for when a pupil's behaviour affects him directly. He is in no way obliged to put up with any kind of insolence nor must he let disrespect of his work through all the well-known and tiresome disruption techniques pass without comment.

*Fourthly:* Making judgments can sometimes be difficult because one is afraid one might lose the pupil's affection. On school visits I often had the feeling the teacher was torn this way and that between his duty

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to achieve the goals formulated in the syllabus and a constant gnawing fear of alienating the children by making the necessary demands on them. Such teachers tended to accept almost anything from the children. They had become accustomed to responding to every contribution from their pupils with 'good', 'fine' or 'excellent', but often glanced only briefly at what they were being shown. A teacher who reacts to his pupils and their work in this way should not be surprised if his responses are not taken seriously. A relationship can only really be called good when weaknesses and shortcomings can come out into the open and be discussed in a tone that shows the pupil he is accepted.

*Fifthly:* Finally, many teachers find it difficult to confront their pupils with real aims and demands because they believe everything they are to learn and achieve should come from within them: spontaneity, creativity, self-realisation and imagination are highly thought of at the moment. This is quite rightly so, as long as one sees spontaneous impulses from the child as *one* side of the educational process; but we can only talk of real education when the *other side* is given its due. In order to develop fully as a human being, the growing individual needs to be forced to come to terms with social demands and to deal with products of human culture. And neither ability comes from within the child, they are represented in the aims and demands of school. These are laid down in the syllabuses and class attainment targets. As teachers, it is our duty to present these to our pupils and to make the products of human culture accessible to them.

Naturally that brings us into conflict with the current mood of our students. It is quite normal that they should want to find pleasure in what they do and avoid pain. If, however, we make this purely selfish pleasure principle an absolute, we are neglecting and betraying our mission, which is to support young people on their road to full humanity. We ought, rather, to be helping them to base their behaviour on a stable system of values instead of on their momentary need for pleasure. Both living as part of a community, a society, and a truly fulfilled personal life are only possible with this as a basis. And the students should find again and again that their pleasure in realising human values more than compensates them for any sacrifice of an agreeable moment they may have to make.

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After all these considerations my advice is not to try to square the circle. As a teacher one has not merely the right, but also the duty to make demands and set goals. From that point of view, not everything the pupils produce is 'good', 'fine' or 'excellent'. Only once they have become keen to find out whether their work has been judged 'good' or 'slovenly and superficial' will they relate those words to their work and take them seriously, instead of simply trying to engage the teacher's attention. That, however, demands that one really goes into every piece of work the student produces and evaluates it according to what he is capable of producing. Only then can one give him an appropriate response, but it will be one that will have a positive effect on subsequent pieces of work.