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Headmaster pushes enjoyment of learning

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Staff Writer

Donald Barr, who will take over at Hackley School, Tarrytown, as headmaster on July 1, says he didn't come to Westchester to stir up anybody.

"I'm planning to be very quiet and scholarly and I may even take to smoking a pipe," he said with the friendly chuckle frequently interspersed in his conversation.

Despite the disclaimer, Barr, former (and occasionally controversial) headmaster of Dalton School in New York City, gives evidence of having some very positive ideas. An obviously dedicated educator who enjoys and wants others to enjoy the experience of learning, he provided much food for thought in an interview.

SOME of his more pithy observations included:

— "Education is the means by which we transmit civilization from one generation to the next. Without it the human species would not survive."

— "Everybody dabbles in psychology. Some psychologists solve problems that don't exist."

— "Discipline in a classroom is something you accomplish by teaching, not something you do instead of teaching."

— "Teaching in a university is not educating. By the time you get them in college they either acquired a passion for learning or they never will."

— "Adolescence is not something that begins and ends at certain years. If a disturbed or unhappy youngster does not have psychological help in his adolescence he will still have the same problems years later."

IT WAS while serving as assistant dean of engineering and applied science at Columbia University that Barr instituted the problem which eventually led him into what he calls "education" as opposed to college teaching. He started a Saturday course for gifted primary and secondary students who came from almost every community within traveling distance, some a long way off.

"I had in mind about 50 students," he recalls. "It grew and grew and in the end we had hundreds."

His interest and excitement over the program drew him into another

phase of secondary education. He was contacted by Frances Wilson of the New York City Board of Education. "a marvelous woman," who was concerned about the very bright youngsters who were failing in high school.

Barr started a special program for these underachievers and was amazed, shocked and delighted with what he found could be accomplished.

ALL THIS he did in addition to his regular duties at Columbia and he says now, "I worked seven days a week, but I loved it and it was worth it."

It was in the course of following up on the underachievers, 10 years later, that he found those with psychological problems in their teens, still had them.

"And even though they had acquired a lot of education," he said. "Apparently psychological problems do not interfere with learning." He emphasized that the sampling might not have been typical, but the results are certainly interesting and worth pursuing by psychologists, he believes.

Barr is writing a book, which may or may not be completed before he takes over his full time duties at Hackley.

"It is a serious study of the impact on the changes in the study of language arts, which we used to call English," he explained with a wry smile. The teaching methods in many public schools, he said, do not teach students to write a paper. "They don't help students to clarify their thoughts," he added. "They ignore what children need for use in daily living."

THE PROBLEM arises, he believes, through the central buying of large school districts and even whole states, so that every teacher is given the same textbooks and other teaching materials. "The teachers in a public school have relatively little control over the context of their courses," he explained.

On the other hand, in a private school like Hackley,

there is little interference with the artistry and creativity of the teacher.

This is why some teachers choose to work in private schools, despite the fact the

pay is far better in public schools. "It is far more satisfying professionally," said

Barr. "It is one of the imperatives which keep private schools going."



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