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Abstract

An exploration of the particular opportunities and challenges confronting Christian education. Key underlying values are discussed. Reprinted from Ted Ward. Innovations in Education: What Next? *Church Training* Vol.11 (1) October 1980: 14-15.

Christian education has taken many of its ideas from public education. Because of the enormous amounts invested in research in the public education sector, Christian education will continue to profit from looking over public education's shoulder. But the value system of the Christian community is distinct and, in some matters, at odds with the values of the secular society. Christian education and public education march to different drummers.

Unrest in Public Education

"If it is important to society, let the schools take care of it." Though rarely stated so plainly, this proposition seems to be the basic axiom of American educational policy. In no other nation of the world are the schools given such wide-ranging responsibility for so many needs of such a large percentage of the population. We still reflect Thomas Jefferson's view that democracy cannot succeed apart from a deep national commitment to providing essential education for all the children of all the people.

Fortunately for America, we have held to Jefferson's proposition. But the tensions and most of the pendulum swinging arise out of the difficult question that follows: "How much of what sort of education is essential?" All sorts of answers are available. Just ask anyone. But no two answers are exactly alike. Many assume that the answer lies in lists of important subject matter; others assume that the answer lies in the child's growing-up processes: whatever is necessary to help the youngster become an able and happy human being. Still others find their answer in the demands and challenges confronting society. It is especially from this last position that the current tensions arise. Since one's view of history and one's basic beliefs and values determine how the "needs of society" are understood, it is hardly surprising that there is so little agreement about what education should attempt to accomplish.

No other professional sector of society has been so boldly manipulated by legal and judicial processes. No other sector has been so pushed and pulled by public opinion. The surge of interest in private elementary and secondary schools is explained, in part, by the frustrations that have become common to opinions about public schools.

Should schools lead social change? Can educators be expected to create schools that contradict the general standards of society? One of the most difficult problems confronting the public-school teacher who has strong Christian beliefs is the conflict of values within the general public.

Now that the American society has become self-conscious about pluralism, it is harder than ever to stand for anything important without being criticized. Teachers find complaints awaiting almost any statement of conviction. Not everyone can walk the tightrope across the competing forces.

Conflict among the professional educators is yet another source of unrest. Scarcely twenty years ago the major topic of professional journals was how teachers and administrators could better work together. Despite the rapid expansion of public education (to accommodate the post-war baby boom), the system as a whole was rather harmonious. But as the public schools began to be isolated from the people, tension within the school crumbled what was left of the old human service ethic. Teaching, for many teachers, was now a job—like any other job, except less secure. So tenure was forced into the picture and, hard on its heels, unionization.

Innovation and Technology

Against the bleak background of problems deep within the fabric of public schools, another drama has been unfolding: the entry of communication technology into education. The movement has been accelerated by the hope that technology might provide much needed cures for the besetting ills.

Since World War II, innovation in education has been largely a matter of technology. After long years of chalk and slate, overhead projectors became popular. After centuries of *live* instruction, photographic, broadcasting, and recording technologies have made possible “canned” instruction. Even the old art of printing has been put to new uses: programmed materials in book form are assumed to replace part or all of the need for the teacher. Computers are the latest thing—many see educational uses of computers as the ultimate technological innovation. The computer can be programmed to teach almost anything. Perhaps.

The American attitude toward educational innovation has revealed an addiction of sorts; a little bit leads to more. As with the false teachers of 2 Timothy 4:3, Americans have itching ears to hear of some new technological innovation—some new way to do the teaching job more cheaply, quicker, or better. The faith put in new gadgets is rarely justified.

We have been on a “gadget high” for quite some time. But one thing is certain: many educational leaders are looking in other directions. More basic matters of educational quality are coming to the surface. The gadgets don’t count for as much as the human relationships. So much depends on the sort of relationship established between the teacher and the learner—learners respond best to human beings who care. We need teachers who accept students as valuable human beings, encourage them to put effort into their own development, participate with them in exploring their potentialities, and take satisfaction from seeing them become able to stand on their own feet.

Surely a competent educator can make good use of instructional materials and equipment. It isn’t fair to see technology as all good or all bad. Indeed, children learn more from good *machines* than they do from poor *teachers*.

Perhaps we are still in the earliest and most primitive period of high technology, and in some later period human beings will discover ways to protect themselves from domination by things, equipment, and systems. We can hope so. But for now, many people are running scared. Computers, electronic recording, digitalization, and the impersonal control systems that they provide are not so welcome in the schoolhouse as they were just a few years ago.

Innovation as People

Defenders of instructional technology argue that media systems are hardly to blame; the problem is how they are used. The assumption that a device or material is a neutral factor, good when used correctly and bad if misused, is reasonable—except for one thing. Instructional technology not only *extends* the

teacher or *enhances* the teaching acts, but these very devices and materials can get *between* the teacher and learner. They can alter or even destroy the relationship.

Quite possibly, educational innovation through technology has run its full course. The next generation of “improvements” is already emerging, and it seems to be of a different sort. Partly as a reaction to technological excesses, and partly because of a new emphasis on human values, innovation now seems to be moving in the direction of restoring the emphasis on the learner. Following are several illustrations of this trend.

More attention to moral and spiritual development. The earlier and extensively misused “values clarification” efforts are giving way to more comprehensive efforts to deal with moral and spiritual values in a context of responsible authority. Such programs as *Quest* are spreading even into public schools a new awareness that illicit interpersonal relationships, drug abuse, and alcohol consumption are moral and spiritual problems that can be wisely confronted.

Smaller, more intimate learning environments. Partly because of the inadequacy of mass communication technology in education, there is a trend away from the large-scale schools and educational schemes of just a few years ago. The prestigious Carnegie Council’s new report, *Giving Youth a Better Chance*,¹ calls for smaller junior and senior high schools.

Lifelong education. Especially if the value of secondary schooling should be downplayed, community colleges and other sources of *functional* learning may become much more important. Our complex world requires that a competent person be educated—no doubt about it. But halfhearted exposure to schooling isn’t going to meet the needs. In order to clear the deck so that schools can have one more try to get their house in order, the Carnegie Council is suggesting that vocational education be moved out of high schools altogether and that youngsters be free to leave school at age 16 if they want to, with the option of getting more training in vocational centers and community colleges later when they see the need of it.

The importance of functional learning is being recognized. In the past fifteen years there has been an increased emphasis on adult learning. No longer is it acceptable to talk about “finishing your education.” Education—continuing to learn and develop—is a part of life, for one’s whole lifetime.

Implications for Christian Education

What does this mean for Christian education? First, the church’s educational programs should be geared to lifelong education and particularly to the use of nonformal modes of education. Spiritual development doesn’t depend on classrooms; but it does depend on participation in discipleship experiences in fellowship with others of God’s people under the lordship of Jesus Christ. This means growing and sharing together—lifelong.

¹ *Giving Youth a Better Chance: Options for Education, Work and Service*, by the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1979). The report examines problems faced by America’s youth before entering higher education—problems created by a severe labor market and limited resources allotted for education and vocational training.

Second, the major emphasis should shift from childhood education to adult education. Putting priorities aright again in keeping with biblical teaching, the responsibility for children is upon the parents. The responsibility of the church is to develop and support the parents.

Third, the Christian education sector should boldly establish its leadership in the realm of moral education. The relativistic secular society is, in part, on the verge of looking once again to religion as the source for desperately needed anchorage in a troubled age. Christian education must be ready this time.

Most important, Christian education should be head and shoulders above all other education in terms of the connection between knowing and doing. Biblical Christianity places relatively little value on meaningless ritual and memorized nonsense. The important concern is for spiritual development. Indeed, with such strong emphasis on the relation of knowledge and action, Christian education might very well be in the forefront of the next important era of educational development.