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Abstract

Schooling does not equal *education*. School is the major means society uses to pass along the information and the habits of mind that are expected in ordinary life within a society. At its best, schooling is the focal point for a series of years wherein children are expected to develop practices and appetites for establishing a life-long quest for effective knowledge and its real-world applications. The author reflects on the role of schooling, describing its contributions and its limitations. Unpublished paper, 1974.

For more than twenty years I have been engaged in teacher education and curriculum development in many sorts of educational institutions. At its best, the systematic designs and plans for making knowledge interesting and worthwhile so rarely inspire confidence. Meanwhile, learners frequently confront conditions that repress initiative and undermine self-respect. Exploration and discovery are so easily suppressed by a learner's frustration and growing resentment. Nevertheless, school is an asset, not a liability. Without schools, the conditions of society would rapidly deteriorate. For most young people, school becomes the doorway to the world of knowledge and skills. Despite its flaws, school offers hope and a path upward for many.

A winsome teacher can provide lifelong inspiration. But for some learners, such teachers seem out of reach. Schools are too much like factories. They institutionalize and regiment young people whose motivations seem weak or off-course. Too often, schooling seems to make strong learners shine, but to neglect those most in need of help. The life-enriching potentialities of the schooling experience are often lost in the high-structure environment that demands conformity in matters of behavior, social control, and relationships. Those who "float to the surface" are often highly supportive of schooling, ready to accept and even to justify the school whether or not it is clearly repressive.

Characteristically, those students who are able to "get with the program" can develop respect for themselves and for the educational experiences. The problem is this: the positive outcomes are not predictable and not at all assured. For many, there are more problems than solutions. But there are exciting exceptions that warm the educator's heart. I am not discouraged. But I often wonder. Why is the *good* that schooling can bring so often overshadowed by the blights that seem so persistent? Is there truly a basis for the trust that is given to the schooling process as widely practiced around the world? Is schooling gaining ground or falling short on its intended outcomes? Educational expenditures are increasing, yes, but is something missing? Do schools deliver on their promises? Answers to these questions seem elusive. I am neither jaded nor negative, but I will confess holding some suspicion that we may be headed toward a major upheaval. Its harbingers are heard in the emergent industry of educational technology.

At its best, increased technology promises cost savings, one of the most unlikely goals. Historians of education recognize that the Twentieth Century has been marked by one attempt after another to save money (and time) by using a variety of media to educate. Shifting the cost of educating from manpower to mechanical and technological media is recognized as the current motive. At what cost? Anticipating what outcomes? Thousands of teachers have fought a valiant fight, and many tens of thousands of dollars have

been invested in machinery, materials, and electronics. But has it enabled more young people to gain better understanding and sound judgment?

Sadly, the increased expenditures seem not to result in educational experiences that are more sensitive, inviting, and supportive. The value of in-service education and broad-scale professional participation in educational improvement hardly needs to be justified. Obviously, anything that can be done to make poor schools better is worth the effort.

In many situations it is an uphill battle. When the psychological and moral condition of an inherently coercive system molds teachers and students alike into competitive, compulsive neurotics, and when teachers write profound and flowery “truths” in graduate-school night courses and then spend their days harassing children, I feel frustrated and downhearted.

Educators have developed their own folklore about these conditions: “The teachers who will have these kids next year are expecting us to get them ready for this-and-that, so we have to get them ready,” and “The teachers who had them last year messed them up so badly it’s all I can do to salvage even a few of them.”

School itself may be partly at fault. Not long ago, while engaged in a study of the problems that have caused many people in the United States, Great Britain, and around the world to become disillusioned with schools and schooling there emerged a list of twenty characteristics of schooling that can hinder effective learning. After living with the list for several months, it began to make sense: school improvement is continuously necessary because of inherent characteristics in the schooling approach to education. In other words, if the schooling approach is going to continue, it should be understood that certain problems come along in the bargain. These problems, once clearly identified, can be either reduced or eliminated. Weaknesses and defects of the sort that we usually focus on during “school improvement” activities may indeed be predictable and should be expected. Seen in this light, schools are like leaky ships that founder in the tide whenever the bilge pumps get fouled up. That goes a long way toward explaining what we often see! So learning how to fix the pumps is likely more sane than putting the ship in dry dock!

Everett Reimer, in *School Is Dead* (1971, Doubleday) and Ivan Illich in *Deschooling Society* (1970, Harper & Row) may go further than necessary. Their critics assert that they would sell out, or burn out, the whole defective system. It is embarrassing to note the degree of reasonable judgment in their arguments. Many of us are grateful for many of the things schooling has done for us. Especially for certain abstract, conceptual, and highly sequential learning, schooling brings about positive outcomes very well for many learners. But to drag *everyone* through experiences for which they can see no need and thus to create a lifelong disdain for learning seems counterproductive. There must be a better way!

Every educator should take a share of responsibility for the weakness of schooling. Many of us have benefitted from schooling. Thus we have an obligation to help to refine and improve it. Toward this end, the following list of twenty characteristics is proposed as a series of valid tasks for the repair crew. Addressing any of these weaknesses and flaws with worthy corrective action could move toward improvement in education as a social enterprise.

Sources of Weakness in the “Schooling” Approach to Education

1. All learners are assumed to be much alike in terms of needs, interests, and abilities.
2. Conforming behavior is preferred over divergent and nonconforming behavior.

3. Learners are increasingly made more competitive at the price of cooperation.
4. Learners are expected to be receptors of learning rather than producers and communicators.
5. The learner's part in educational decision-making is minimal and tends to be steadily reduced.
6. The responsibility for attitudes and feelings about content and about learning itself is attributed to the student.
7. The content to be learned is justified in terms of *future* needs of the learner.
8. Schooling's major justification is its value as preparation, mostly expressed in terms of eligibility for more schooling.
9. Evaluation is concerned almost exclusively with cognitive knowledge of facts, information, processes, and skills.
10. Learning experiences are designed or selected on the basis of values of the adult and established world.
11. Abstractions of experience in the form of language and symbols are substituted for realities.
12. Rewards are symbolic more than real. Even the satisfactions of seeing oneself develop are subordinated to imposed systems of rewards.
13. Punishment is assumed to increase learning.
14. Punishment is a virtually sovereign right of the teacher.
15. The teacher has ascribed authority, thus creating a hierarchy based on unearned status.
16. The social distance that separates teachers from learners is increased by assigning different sets of rights and expectations to each.
17. Learning experiences are designed and limited to fit time blocks.
18. Learning experiences are designed and limited to fit standard locations and space.
19. Testing provides the criterion of success.
20. Success is the surpassing value.

These twenty characteristics of schools and school-learning relate negatively to effective learning. Increasingly people are searching for alternatives. Some of the "alternative schools" are attempts to create alternatives to the schooling approach; so, indeed, are some of the "extension education" movements. But even here, so often a borrowed offensive flaw from the schooling approach limits what can be accomplished. Sometimes all that happens is a re-labeling of the same old bag of tricks.

In any case, liberation from schooling is a worthy goal. We need to abandon the assumption that schooling is at the very center of any valid concept of education. The mistaken assumption is that learning depends on schooling. Surely, organized formal education is important. Education is a central part of life's

learning experiences, with schooling at the center of the process. The “schooling” frame of mind assumes that that schooling is society’s most effective and efficient means of providing education. The contrasting position is that human existence is a process of learning and development, and that human society can provide many ways to help people to learn.

A liberated viewpoint recognizes schooling, despite its defects, as *one* of many valid ways to educate. This outlook sees learning more openly. The person learns, the society provides *many* ways to help people learn, and new possibilities will continue to emerge!

In the years ahead much more attention will be given to “non-formal education” and “alternative forms.” Don’t panic; these may be the voice of liberation. But don’t jump too soon on the bandwagon, either. There is likely no perfect way to educate.