



Nonformal Education: *A Problem of Rhetoric and Logic of Educational Reform*¹

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Why are so many people talking about “educational alternatives?” What motivations underlie the various arguments? Whose values are being represented in the current rhetoric on educational reform?

The widespread interest in discussions of nonformal education seems to be centered in two dissimilar themes. The broadening base of disaffection for the performance of formal education in reference to national and global needs for human resource development is the root of one of these themes. A second theme arises from the nature of the contemporary educational establishment: a willingness, even eagerness, to embrace whatever technological fad or mechanistic trend captures the public imagination.

Though the shallowness of the second theme suggests philosophical bankruptcy, the willingness to accept the faddish aspects of nonformal education has been pragmatically useful in opening the “establishment” to the superficial consideration of the first issues.

Current eagerness to discuss, adopt, and promulgate nonformal education activities is not confined to those who are deliberately attempting to “de-school society.” Differences in the substance and depth of educational philosophy make wide variations in the meaning and worth of the various arguments about non-formal education.

Consideration of the nonformal education in terms of these two themes is inadequate. It is important to inquire into the motivations that underlie the themes. Though it is rarely confessed, one key motivation in the *disaffection* theme is the desire or intention to further restrict access to schooling. Ever since the Greeks and the Chinese invented the process and the machinery, schooling has been the principle means by which the privileged few within a society can maintain themselves and their kind through an apparently just and unassailable meritocracy. Depending on the degree of freedom in a particular society, schools are more open or more closed to those from various social classes who prove themselves worthy. Thus though formal education may be used as a social ladder, those at the top of the ladder maintain control over access to and the rigor of the ladder, always retaining the “right” to draw it up altogether when the society tends toward overloading at the top. Such a moment is being reached in certain Western nations, exemplified by a glut of underemployed doctoral graduates and an unprecedented oversupply of certificated teachers.

Thus a subtle and as yet unpopular motivation underlying the “de-schooling of society” is the motivation to further restrict accesses to the social “rights” of meritocratic privilege. Perhaps the

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most tragic aspect of this motivation is the relative ease of manipulating the masses into support for a de-schooling of society. Though not for the reasons that underlie Illich's arguments, partial de-schooling could become a reality in response to a coalition of the rich and the poor. Both factions respond eagerly to the argument of saving money by reducing "waste." And it is "wasteful" to try to educate those who have so little to gain through schooling. The rich tend to accept this as a truism; for the poor it is an expression of ultimate disaffection for the establishments of society and perhaps a voice from the well-learned lessons of self-contempt. And not to be overlooked is the widely shared willingness of the poor to join the rich in arguing for lower taxes. Note that the privileged classes are not seriously motivated toward a total de-schooling of society. Indeed one suspects that if this unholy alliance between the rich and the poor were realized, the most predictable outcome would be the most effective, powerful, and exclusive schools ever seen on earth!

A contrasting motivation underlies the second theme (creation of alternative forms): the motivation to increase the variety of educational mechanisms. A strange mixture of people share this motivation. The longstanding concern of western educational planners for making education more effective and for making more education available to more people is expressed in this motivation. In more recent times the emergence of instructional technology has added technicians and their tendency to fixate on the *things* of education; their general motivation to increase the variety of educational mechanisms becomes part of the larger "variety" motive. Also in this mixture of people are those who sincerely believe that a wider variety of educational modes will enhance a society by allowing more people to "find their own level" and pursue their own objectives without being conformed to any one mode of educational approaches. Especially in the rich nations where costs are not yet a fundamental concern, proliferating educational modes allows the establishment to "buy time" and to delay its response to more fundamental challenge. Echoing Marie Antoinette, educational planners provide more and more different kinds of cake with increasingly frothy icing.

Some of the alternatives provided come close to dealing with such basic issues as the relationship between learning and labor, but more often they are more cosmetic than substantive. There are those, also, who are cost-conscious and want to explore alternative forms of educational delivery, wooed by the siren-song of reduced costs. These explorers (sometimes called experimenters) are at least tentatively convinced that mass media, particularly radio and television promise significant cost savings once they are effectively programmed. One other group in this wild mixture merits our attention: those who like to see things changed and different no matter in what ways or toward what ends. These are the new dilettantes who play with lives and destiny as with toys.

The two motivations described above (to further restrict access to schools, and to increase the variety of educational mechanisms), are alike in one vital way: neither motivation is related to fundamental social injustices in the present system of education.

A third motivation can be seen. In one sense it lies between the other two because it rejects even the present restrictiveness of the schools while also rejecting the haphazard proliferation of educational mechanisms. This third motivation is concerned with the relation between education and life; thus it is not *between* the other two but *apart* from them. It begins and ends with a developmental concept of education, not a thing apart to be made selectively available as a

commodity, but as integral with a social structure of justice based on equality and worth of every person. People with this motivation ask not how much does it cost, but rather can we afford not to? They ask: Education for what? *Criterion*: life problems of all people, short and long range. Whom does it benefit? *Criterion*: the whole society. Does it affect employment? *Criterion*: yes, in terms of an economy planned and structured so as to assure economic viability and freedom from poverty.

To give the third motivation a name, it is nothing less than *the intention to reconstitute the relationship between education and life*. The intention is *social* in that it proposes to make education an integral function of the entire society, attuned to the needs of all, the rights of all to participate in the society without oppressions of class and privilege; the intention is *procedural* in that it is developmental and active, striving and contending rather than being static or Utopian; the intention is *political*, implying a political order attuned to social welfare rather than to maintenance of injustices of elitism.

Summary

Discussions of educational alternatives, especially the current interest in nonformal education, attracts many people and for several different reasons. The two major themes are *disaffection with formal education*, as the negative facet, and the *creation of alternatives* as the positive. But underlying these themes are not two but *three* sets of motivations. The de-schooling theme can be co-opted by those who would reduce access to schooling and the alternatives theme can be co-opted by the technological dabblers. The central core motivation must be preserved against such co-option; it is committed to socio-political change, bringing society and education into vital harmonic relation around the commitment to fundamental rights of humankind.

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As I see the “*Summary Conclusions*” of the May 1974 Dar es Salaam Seminar, the identification of problems in the existing structures of education in Africa is strong. The formulation of new objectives and the several recommendations for change seem less thorough and, to some extent, they are flawed for lack of specific relationship to the particular criticisms of the present systems of formal education. But the most disturbing problem is the lack of integration between the case-study illustration (the Botswana Brigades) and the core of the problems. The relevance seems only implicit and the reader must suspect that many of the Dar es Salaam participants failed to recognize the relevance. The definitions and explanations of nonformal education that introduce the brief discussion of the Brigades Programme seem strained, perhaps remote or artificial.

From many similar experiences with educational planners and government-level educators in the majority world, I have learned to recognize this problem as a difficulty of getting free of one's indebtedness to formal education long enough to conceptualize broader concepts of education and learning. Formally educated persons in the majority world are no more able to come easily into this conceptual freedom than are educational leaders in the industrialized nations.

I am professionally engaged in the deliberate process of seizing upon the widespread ferment, dissatisfaction, and willingness to “play” with innovation in order to convert and focus it (subvert

it?) into radical reform keyed to broadly conceived social need. The catchword of this process is nonformal education, and the first motive is to instigate, stimulate, and promulgate a larger concept of education. This larger concept is best seen as embracing formal education, rather than as an alternative to formal education. Once this larger concept of education is available, dialogue can proceed to the fundamental issue: the purposes and worth of education in human development. To fail to give attention to this first motive (the development of a larger concept of education) is to run the serious risk of engaging in dialogue about purpose and worth, while some participants in the dialogue are still referring only to schooling.