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ABSTRACT

Public schools in America, because they are obsessed with petty regulations and sterile mediocrity, destroy the natural inquisitive and creative spirits of children. A genuinely humane education must teach aesthetic and moral values as well as subject matter. This educational philosophy demands that learning be centered around the child's interests and experiences, with teachers having the responsibility to structure the learning environment in the best possible way. (RA)

CRISIS IN THE CLASSROOM: A DIAGNOSIS, WITH SUGGESTION FOR REMEDY

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"The most deadly of all possible sins," Erik Erikson has written, "is the mutilation of a child's spirit." It is not possible to spend any prolonged period visiting public school classrooms, as I have done, without being appalled by the mutilation visible everywhere, in the most prosperous suburbs as well as the most poverty-stricken urban and rural slums: mutilation of spontaneity, of joy in learning, of pleasure in creating, of a sense of self. The public schools are the kind of institution one cannot really dislike until one gets to know them well. Because we all take the schools so much for granted, we fail to appreciate what grim, joyless places most American schools are, how oppressive and petty are the rules by which they are governed, and how intellectually sterile and esthetically barren the atmosphere is.

For example:

Obsession with silence and lack of motion.

a) But not the teachers' fault: they learn rapidly that while they won't be called on the carpet or denied tenure if children do not learn, may very well be if children are noisy or moving about.

Obsession with lesson plan:

e.g. John Goodlad story: "The lesson is on crabs"

Coolidge School incident

Petty rules e.g. books in left hand; length of skirts, hair, etc.

Atmosphere of distrust.

The result -- the essence of the crisis is:

1) Kids are turned off from learning; they see it as something distasteful, and fail to develop the capacity to direct their own learning -- essential if they are to make a life in the 21st century.

2) Kids fail to develop the capacity to direct and control their own behavior.

Let me emphasize that I am not attacking teachers; I am attacking the institution in which teachers work, an institution which is as destructive of teachers' spirit as it is of students'. The

great majority of teachers, principals, and superintendents are decent, intelligent, caring people who work hard and long at some of the most difficult and exacting -- and least appreciated -- of jobs. If they appear otherwise, it is because the institution in which they are engulfed demands it of them.

The point is that teachers, no less than students, are defeated and victimized by the way in which schools are presently organized and run. Certainly nothing in the way most schools are built or run suggests respect for teachers as teachers, or as human beings. The shabbiness of the physical environment in which most teachers work is exceeded only by the churlishness of their social environment, a fact which educational critics and reformers tend to ignore, or to acknowledge only in passing. There is the atmosphere of meanness and distrust in which teachers work; they punch time clocks like clerks or factory workers and are rarely, if ever, consulted about the things that concern them most: the content of the curriculum, the selection of textbooks, and the identification of goals. And

there are the conditions of work themselves, in particular teaching loads and schedules that provide no time for reflection or privacy, as well as the incredible array of clerical and menial tasks that occupy their nonteaching time.

It need not be! The public school system can be reformed. What makes change possible is that what is mostly wrong with the schools is due not to venality, or indifference, or stupidity, but to mindlessness -- the fact that it simply never occurs to more than a handful of teachers or administrators -- or parents or government officials or civic leaders -- to ask why they are doing what they are doing, to think seriously or deeply about the purposes or consequences of education. Mindlessness is not the monopoly of the public school; it is diffused evenly throughout the entire educational system, and indeed throughout the entire society. We are all reluctant to question established practice; we are all guilty of the failure to think seriously about educational purpose.

It is fashionable, I know, to disparage talk about educational purpose or educational philosophy. To talk about purpose, however,

is in no way to be abstract or theoretical. On the contrary, educational purpose or philosophy is exemplified and transmitted in the way schools are organized and run. Education is inescapably a moral as well as intellectual and esthetic enterprise. What educators, and the rest of us, must recognize is that how teachers teach, and how they act, may be more important than what they teach; the way we do things, that is to say, shapes values more directly and more effectively than the way we talk about them. Children are taught a host of lessons about values, ethics, morality, character and conduct every day of the week, less by the content of the curriculum than by the way schools are organized, the ways teachers and parents behave, the way they talk to children and to each other, the kinds of behavior they approve or reward and the kinds they disapprove or punish.

What makes change possible, moreover, is that it is already occurring. My studies have demonstrated, beyond any doubt, that schools can be humane and still educate well. They can be genuinely

concerned with gaiety and joy and individual growth and fulfillment without sacrificing concern for intellectual discipline and development. They can be simultaneously child-centered and subject- or knowledge-centered. They can stress aesthetic and moral education without weakening the three R's. They can do all these things if -- but only if -- their structure, content, and objectives are transformed.

These assertions represent a statement of fact, not a mere expression of hope. Schools of this sort exist in the United States on a small but rapidly growing scale. They exist in North Dakota -- in hamlets like Starkweather and Edmore, with populations of 250 and 400, as well as in cities like Grand Forks, Fargo, Minot -- where the University of North Dakota is collaborating with the State Department of Education to revamp completely the way in which schools are organized and run.

Schools of this sort exist here in New York, too -- most notably in the "open corridor" program which Professor Lillian Weber of City College began three years ago, with five classrooms in a single Harlem elementary school, and which this year exists in some

sixty or seventy classrooms in six schools in Harlem and the West Side. There are other examples in Philadelphia, in the black ghettoes and in integrated schools; in Tuscon, Arizona, in schools serving a predominantly Mexican-American population; in the state of Vermont, most notably in and around Montpelier; in Portland, Oregon, in a high school serving a 75 percent white, 25 percent black working class and lower middle-class neighborhood; and in many other parts of the country.

Such schools exist on a much wider scale in England. Their rapid growth there after World War II went largely unnoticed in this country, and to a surprising degree, in England itself, until 1967, when a Parliamentary Commission, in what is now referred to as the Plowden Report, called attention to the new approach and urged its adoption by all English primary schools. The approach has a variety of labels, none of them entirely satisfactory: the "free day", the "integrated day", the "integrated curriculum", the "free school",

the "open classroom", "informal education". The multiplicity of labels reflects the wide range of specific school practices and organization; there is no monolithic system or approach.

Indeed, "informal education", or "the open classroom", to use the term that seems to be catching on, is less a method than a set of shared attitudes and convictions about the nature of childhood, learning, and schooling. Advocates of informal education begin with a conception of childhood as something to be cherished, a conception that leads in turn to a concern with the quality of the school experience in its own right, not merely as preparation for later schooling, or later life. There is, in addition, a conviction that learning is likely to be more effective if it grows out of what interests the learner, rather than what interests the teacher. This is a truism to any adult: we know how rapidly we can learn something that really interests us, and how long it takes to master something which bores us, or for which we have a

positive distaste. Formal schools, whether in England or the United States, tend to ignore the truism; informal schools do not. Hence they generally abandon the rigid timetable which divides the day into a succession of short periods. In its place there are longer periods, during which, at the teacher's discretion and under his supervision, students may be engaged individually or in small groups in a wide variety of activities. In informal schools, classrooms are transformed into workshops, in which "interest areas" -- a reading corner, a math area, a science area, an arts area, and so on -- take the place of the familiar rows of desks and chairs, and in which individualized learning takes the place of what informal English educators now disparagingly call "the talk and chalk" method, whereby the teacher conducts a lesson for all the children simultaneously from her vantage point at the blackboard.

To suggest that learning evolves from the child's interests is not -- let me emphasize the not -- is not to propose an abdication

of adult authority, only a change in the way it is exercised. "With our foolish and pedantic methods," Rousseau wrote, "we are always preventing children from learning what they could learn much better by themselves, while we neglect what we alone can teach them." Teachers in the informal schools I admire try to make this distinction, but they have no doubt about their responsibility to teach. What children are interested in, after all, is a function of their experience and environment as well as of their native endowment. It is the teacher's responsibility, therefore, to structure that environment in the best possible way, and to help it change and grow in response to each child's evolving interests and needs. What chiefly distinguishes the contemporary informal schools from the child-centered progressive schools of the 1920's and '30's, which they resemble in many ways, or from the kind of education that some contemporary romantic critics now advocate is the absolute clarity of this understanding, the hardheaded recognition of and

indeed insistence on the teacher's central role.

Conclusion: Legend has it that Rabbi Schneur Zalman, one of the great Hasidic rabbis of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was imprisoned in St. Petersburg on false charges. While awaiting trial, he was visited by the chief of police, a thoughtful man. Struck by the quiet majesty of the rabbi's appearance and demeanor, the official engaged him in conversation, asking a number of questions that had puzzled him in reading the Scriptures. Their discussion turned to the story of the Garden of Eden. Why was it, the official asked, that a God who was all-knowing had to call out when Adam was hiding and ask him, "Where art thou?"

"You do not understand the meaning of the question," the rabbi answered. "This is a question God asks of every man in every generation. After all your wanderings, after all your efforts, after all your years, O man, where art thou?"

It is a question asked of societies as well as of individuals. One is almost afraid to ask it of this society at this moment in time; the crisis in the classroom is but one aspect of the larger crisis of American society as a whole, a crisis whose resolution is problematical at best. It does no good, however, to throw up our hands at the enormity of the task; we must take hold of it where we can, for the time for failure is long since passed. We will not be able to create and maintain a humane society unless we create and maintain classrooms that are humane. But if we succeed in that endeavor -- if we accomplish the remaking of American education -- we will have gone a long way toward that larger task, toward the creation of a society in which we can answer the question "Where art thou?" with pride rather than with dread.