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ABSTRACT

What makes the English and the Soviet educational accomplishments of recent years worth scrutinizing is their scope: they suggest that a national school system can not only strengthen the relationship between the child and his community but also can take over functions once thought of as the province of the family, which here in America, as elsewhere, frequently are left undone by the family. Systematic change, instituted by European governments concerned with educating millions of children, may now have more to teach us than brilliant individual successes. For these large-scale undertakings offer proof that a nation can undertake major improvements in its schools, and despite bureaucratic hazards and great variations within its population, make these improvements work. In this regard two of the educational systems that have the most to teach us are those of England and the Soviet Union, and we are now at a point where it makes particular sense to take a second look at the changes that have gone on in the school systems of these countries over the last decade. Of the variety of lessons that the English and the Soviet systems have to teach us, overriding them all is the degree to which the education of children, especially at the primary level and earlier, requires schools that do not isolate them from their day-to-day environment or their immediate needs. (Author/JM)

THE LION AND THE BEAR: A CHILDREN'S STORY FOR ADULTS

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American educators have always borrowed from European models, and in this century they have been especially concerned with the innovative in European education. The Montessori schools, now so widely used in the United States in poor as well as middle-class areas, are but one example of the degree to which European educational thinking has been adapted to American educational practice.

In the 1960's the admiration of American educators and the American public for foreign education models rose dramatically, however. Indeed, at times the admiration seemed directly proportionate with the growing disenchantment in this country over the public school system. The new educational heroes were figures like A.S. Neill, Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Paulo Freire--teachers who believed it was possible to reach children whom society said could not learn, teachers who by personal example showed their methods worked. The problem with this new admiration was not that it created the Hollywood category of SUPERTEACHER. That step had already been taken domestically with the publicity accorded teacher-writers like Jonathan Kozol, George Dennison, and John Holt. The problem with the attention accorded Neill, Ashton-Warner, Freire, and others was that it obscured large-scale systematic change going on in foreign education (even in England, the country to which American writers have been most attentive).

Yet it is this systematic change, instituted by governments concerned with educating millions of children, that may now have more to teach us than those brilliant individual successes that constitute the apple of the reporter's and the sociologist's eye. For these large-scale undertakings offer proof that a nation can undertake major improvements in its schools,

and despite bureaucratic hazards and great variations within its population, make these improvements work.

In this regard two of the educational systems that have the most to teach us are those of England and the Soviet Union, and we are now at a point where it makes particular sense to take a second look at the changes that have gone on in the school systems of these countries over the last decade. What is it that the English and the Soviet school systems have to teach us? A variety of lessons to be sure, but overriding them all is the degree to which the education of children, especially at the primary level and earlier, requires schools that do not isolate them from their day-to-day environment or their immediate needs.

By itself such a position is not novel. John Dewey advocated it more than a half-century ago in The School and Society when he wrote, "From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in the school comes from his inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while, on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning in school."[1] In recent years community-control advocates like Charles Hamilton and Preston Wilcox have extended this view even further.[2] But what makes the English and the Soviet educational accomplishments of recent years worth scrutinizing is their scope: they suggest that a national school system can not only strengthen the relationship between the child and his community but also take over functions once thought of as the province of the family, which here in America, as elsewhere, frequently are left undone by the family.

II

In England the changes that were to move so many schools to adopt the "integrated day" or what in America has become known as "informal education" did not gain momentum until after World War II, and it was not until the publication of the Plowden Report to

Parliament in 1967 that the changes gained wide-spread publicity.[3] In America it was not, moreover, the massive two-volume Plowden Report that drew popular attention to the new English schools but a series of comparative education studies published in the early 1970's--Charles Silberman's Crisis in the Classroom, Joseph Featherstone's Schools Where Children Learn, and Lillian Weber's The English Infant School and Informal Education.

But even these carefully written studies were rarely enough to draw popular attention beyond the most visible quality of the new English schools, the freedom they gave their students. Ignored in the rush to praise or condemn the schools was the context in which the freedom took place. There was very little desire to consider how it was possible to create an educational setting in which the student was isolated neither from his world-at-large nor his immediate needs. In a country like America, where the question of community control becomes increasingly crucial, the context out of which the new English schools have emerged is perhaps the most important issue of all, however. Certainly it is the issue that now needs closest scrutiny even if it is in some ways a twice-told tale.

The educational theory on which the new English schools are based is not new, nor is it even English. Its deepest roots lie in the work of the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget and particularly in two Piagetian concepts: 1) Children learn at highly individual rates, although they pass through a series of similar developmental stages. 2) Work and play are not distinguishable activities for children but part of the process by which a youngster assimilates his environment and accommodates himself to a variety of tasks.[4]

The relevance of these Piagetian concepts to the new English schools is two-fold. To begin with, they provide a basis for seeing why the traditional school so often failed. They explain why the emphasis on a whole class doing the same lesson causes so much boredom and

frustration on the part of individual students and how the "attention to business" psychology of schools generates a variety of discipline problems. But it is not primarily as a pedagogic dialectic that explains how traditional schools sow the seeds of their own disorder, that Piagetian theory has proved most useful in the English schools. Its real value has been in pointing to the direction in which the schools might move.

Piagetian theory makes clear that when children are permitted to work at their own pace, to make their day-to-day world part of school, they not only become happier students, they learn more. The child, as Piaget notes, is crippled by an environment that takes away his social world, for "social life affects intelligence." Indeed, even more than the physical environment, society, Piaget argues, teaches the child "to recognize facts" and "presents him with new values."[5]

Thus, those in charge of the new English schools, a primary task was applying Piaget. But the task was by no means easy. As the Plowden Report observes, Piaget's thought "is not easy to understand" and "is almost impossible to express in other than technical terms." Yet as the Plowden Report also shows, the ideas of Piaget were absorbed by numerous English schools and can be stated in convincing fashion for a general audience. Part V of the Plowden Report, for example, has a long section on how the distinction between work and play is false in primary school, and after a discussion of how "all schools reflect the views of society, or some section of society," goes on to insist that the most successful learning takes place when what is done in school hours is related to what is done out of school.[6]

The Piagetian underpinnings of the new English schools are, however, far from the whole story. What brought the schools into being was a historical situation in which Piagetian theory could be applied. That situation was World War II, which in England caused mass

evacuations of city children and threw them and their teachers together for long stretches of time in unfamiliar rural settings. In his Inside the Primary Schools John Blackie notes how the evacuation and bombing not only broke up the old schools but "forced all teachers into a new relationship with their children, jerked everybody out of ruts and made all sorts of improvisations and makeshifts necessary." The result was a new spirit that suited changes in postwar England. "Teachers who had taught the same stuff in the same city classroom for fifteen years found themselves in the fens, or the hills, or the farmlands. . . and they simply had to rethink what they were doing."[7]

In 1944 when Parliament passed the Butler Education Act the need to rebuild much of the English school system thus corresponded with a new sense of what the schools should be like. In this regard there is no better starting point for understanding the context in which the new English schools exist than such "externals" as their location and design. For with the new schools, location and design were really much more than externals. They were vital elements in eliminating the school as an isolating force in children's lives. In the period after World War II there was, for example, a deliberate effort to locate nursery schools near Council Estates, the British equivalent of low-income, high-rise housing. Not only was it felt that the parents who lived in these projects often had a special need for sending their children to nursery school, it was also felt that such projects limited a child's freedom. The nursery schools were put where they were in order to redress this balance.[8]

The concern with school enlarging upon rather than contracting the student's life was not, however, limited to younger children or to urban areas. All the new English primary schools were motivated by a desire to have the child draw sustenance from the world around him. The Plowden Report is filled with recommendations as to how "rural schools can be

overwhelmed by the variety of materials on their doorsteps" and how "teachers in town schools can make use of railways and other transport systems, and the local shops and factories." Supporting these recommendations are a variety of cases in which the new primary schools did everything from make traffic counts to explore an underground sewage system.[9]

Consistent with this expansive sense of the school and the world outside it was the design of many of the newly built English schools and the use of space made in others. Out of the question was the construction of windowless fortress like I.S. 201. The new nursery schools were planned with immediate access to the outdoors in order for play to go on inside and outside simulatenously, and in those schools too old to be changed all space was used. Corridors, for example, became play areas, not silent hallways used at the beginning and end of the day or as a place to send a disruptive child. Most revealing of all, the classroom itself took on a new look. It was no longer a room with anchored desks in rows facing one way. The informal classroom ceased looking like a classroom. It was organized in terms of interest areas so that a class could do a number of activities at the same time. A student could thus go at his own pace and also move between different interests in a very natural way. A math problem could thus be very relevant to a problem with building blocks or a science problem could directly grow from work in a home garden.[10]

Without such an arrangement, it is difficult to imagine students making easy transition between their experiences in and out of school. What comes to mind instead is the artifical practice of show and tell, certainly an attempt at integrating the child's home and school environment but a far cry from the flow of activity Mary Brown and Norman Precious speak of in The Integrated Day in the Primary School when they observe, "As the child explores the real world he relates it to his own inner mental world. . . he is continually building each in

terms of the other . . . . the creative, expressive and imaginative activities cannot really be separated from learning things such as mathematics and reading."[11]

In moving beyond the confines of the traditional school, the new English primary school has above all fostered new kinds of personal relations for the children it reaches. In a far greater degree than most schools, the new English schools make use of parents, nonprofessionals, and nonteaching staff. Adults--not merely adults certified as teachers--are seen as having much to offer children. The Plowden Report speaks of the need for schools to "foster virtuous circles" and in a section entitled, "Home, School, and Neighborhood," discusses the importance of having parents involved in the running of schools. The Report is filled with a variety of instances where schools have involved parents very directly (including one case where parents attend school assembly each Friday and older children often take care of younger children while parents and teachers meet).[12]

The same spirit pervades another section of the Plowden Report, "Adults in the Schools." While the discussion here centers on the role of the teacher, more interesting is the degree to which other staff are given importance. This emphasis is particularly true at the nursery school level, where NNEB's, women who have passed the two-year National Nursery Examination Board training period, are considered an integral part of the school system. But the NNEB's aren't the only adults beside the teacher with such close contact with children in the new English schools. As virtually every observer of these schools has noted, the whole staff seems involved at one time or another with the children. At lunch, for example, the dinner staff sits with the children at the tables, helping with eating, saying grace, sustaining conversation. On other occasions the school keeper will take an active role with the children, often becoming someone they turn to for direct help with a problem.[13]

None of these involvements are seen as an encroachment upon the teacher's role, but as a way of freeing him to spend more time with students. Indeed, the teachers seem not only to welcome help from parents and other adults but often to regard their own role as that of a member of a family. (Interestingly, the English practice of mixed-age grouping is known as family grouping.) The openness of the teachers in the new English school may, of course, say much about their personalities, but at the same time their openness points up the fact that in an educational environment that does not depend on centralized authority that is constantly being challenged, the presence of visitors, parents, teacher-aides, people from the neighborhood ceases to be a threat or a distraction. And here, too, the language of the Plowden Report is most revealing. For in speaking of the changes that have come about in the new English schools, the Report finally emphasizes not the child in class but "the child in the school community." It is an emphasis that focuses attention where it should be: not on specific pedagogical technique but on the web of personal relations and learning experiences that has allowed pedagocial technique to become meaningful in the English schools.[14]

III

Unlike the new English schools, which as a result of the Plowden Report began receiving national and international attention, schools in the Soviet Union have never had to contend with the notoriety of a highly publicized, systematic survey. Yet because of the cold war and the shock of Sputnik, Soviet schools were studied in America far earlier than the new English schools. The difficulty with the attention they received in the 1950's and early 1960's was, however, that it did little to promote a serious understanding of them. The overemphasis given in this country to the "freedom" of the new English schools pales before the obsession with the

ideological nature of Soviet schools.[15] American educators seemed unable to look beyond the political role of Soviet schools and comprehend what they had done to remove illiteracy in a nation that began the century with 76 percent of its population unable to read or how they had dealt with the devastation of a world war that created untold numbers of one-parent families (in 1960 there were still 20 million more women than men in the Soviet Union).[16] As with the new English schools, it was really not until the 1970's that good comparative studies of the Soviet schools, like Urie Bronfenbrenner's Two Worlds of Childhood and Kitty Weaver's Lenin's Grandchildren, began appearing.

In order to understand the context in which the Russian schools exist--specifically the links they have forged between the child, his family, and society-at-large--it is necessary, as with the new English schools, to go back to the pedagogical theory on which they rest. Here, too, there is an interesting parallel. For like the influence of Piaget on the new English schools, the influence of A.S. Makarenko, the most important Soviet educational theorist-practioner, is not new but a half-century old. Makarenko rose to prominence in the 1920's and 1930's after schools he ran for delinquents and youth made homeless by the Revolution proved successful. His writing, especially his Book for Parents, is the source for virtually all contemporary Soviet thinking on school and child rearing.[17]

At the heart of Makarenko's writing lies the assertion that neither the family nor the school in the Soviet Union has purposes that are separable from society as a whole. "Our family is not a closed-in collective body, like the bourgeois family. It is an organic part of Soviet society, and every attempt it makes to build up its own experience independently of the moral demands of society is bound to result in a disproportion, discordant as an alarm-bell," Makarenko warns. He takes the same position with regard to school. Over and over he argues,

"Children should be made to realize that in school work they are fulfilling not only a private but a social function."[18]

What makes Makarenko's thinking so important for the collective-centered system of child rearing in the Soviet Union is that, like Piaget's influence on the new English schools, it constitutes not merely an educational philosophy but a basis for specific action. In his running of the Gorky Colony, where real work (the children did light manufacturing) and collective discipline brought about high moral and successful learning in academic and practical subjects, Makarenko showed his theories could work. What current Soviet education does is apply his ideas with greater sophistication, leaving unchanged his basic proposition that "the educative process takes place not only in the classroom, but literally on every square yard of our land."[19]

In early Soviet education the relationship between school and society is most apparent in the location of schools. Under Soviet law preschool institutions are required in every apartment house complex as well as in factories and collective farms employing women. A parent normally drops his child off on the way to work and picks him up in the evening, but many preschools also have facilities for keeping children on an extended basis. If a parent cannot be with his child during the work week or if an emergency arises, he can always leave him at a preschool and be sure of the care he is receiving. For mothers whose children are very young the location of the nurseries also allows an early return to work. A mother can put her child in the preschool connected with her place of work, then take time off during the day to feed and play with him.[20]

The connection between school and work does not diminish in later years. For example, a factory or an office will often adopt a group of children as their "wards." The workers will

not only visit the children in school but invite the children to their place of work and get to know them individually. The purpose of this work-adoption process is not vocational education but acquainting the children with what work is like in Soviet society.[21] Indeed, the arrangement is best understood as a logical extension of the relationship between work and study that goes on throughout Soviet education. Especially in the primary grades, every effort is made to see that a student enjoys doing work. Work is not used as punishment, nor are meaningless tasks assigned a student in order to keep him busy. As is made clear in the official manual of the Soviet Academy of Pedagogical Sciences on The Program of the Upbringing Work of the School, there are specific jobs for children of every age to do at home and at school. For younger children work may consist of nothing more than helping in the school garden or cleaning up their room. For older children work may extend to their adopting a younger class and helping them adjust to school. In each case what is most important is the attitude toward work and sense of responsibility that is generated. The younger child's job is not looked down upon because it is relatively simple.[22]

In stressing the relationship between work and school, Soviet educational authorities are, of course, concerned with quality of performance. But their first concern is with cooperative endeavor, which they see as the key to Soviet society. This emphasis is apparent at even the youngest levels of Soviet preschool education. Very much in evidence is Makarenko's belief in the importance of play (a belief as intense as Piaget's) as well as his corrollary to that belief, "What a child is in play will largely show itself in work when that child grows up. Therefore it is in play that the future citizen first begins his training." At the preschool level there is a constant emphasis on group games and common ownership of toys. Soviet nursery schools even have special toys that cannot be worked alone but require

the cooperation of two or three children.[23]

As Soviet children get older and emphasis on the cooperative aspects of work becomes more complicated, group competitiveness and collective discipline start to play an increasingly prominent role in education. In both cases the aim is to develop in pupils a willingness to take on responsibility for one another's conduct and learn to see their own endeavors (as in a factory or an office) in terms of a larger struggle to improve Soviet society. Thus, a class will often be divided into links, and the entire line held responsible for the failure of any student in it to do his work properly. Similarly, a whole school may be given a project to do, and it will be up to students at a variety of ages and skills to cooperate with each other.[24]

The final aim of the Soviet school and the Soviet family is thus not to produce the exceptional child who leaves the others behind but, as much as possible, to reflect collective development. The relationship between the family and the school in this regard is constantly stressed. A standard feature of Soviet nurseries and kindergartens, for example, is a Parents Corner, which in addition to news of Parents Committees, will contain references to articles parents are advised to read and other such information. At the preschool level the Parents Committees, which operate under the director of kindergarten, are the main link between home and schools. Parents whose children are having difficulty in school as well as parents whom the school regards as negligent of their children are called before their Parents Committee, and if the parents do not cooperate, they can be "posted"-- that is, have a notice put up at their place of work saying they are not carrying out their duties to their children. The involvement of parents in their children's school does not, moreover, cease as the children get older. The Program of the Upbringing Work of the School lists specific duties for children of every age to perform at home, and it asks parents to submit periodic reports on their children's behavior.[25]

The ties that bind the home and school in Soviet society are, however, to be seen not only in terms of duties and expectations, but also in terms of the immediate care and support they offer. At the preschool level this concern is most apparent in the ways the school makes sure children are properly fed. Menus are posted so that parents can avoid serving what the school does, and most impressive of all are the meals themselves. The menus are not reluctant offerings to hungry children. The American school-lunch syndrome of a carton of milk, a baloney sandwich, and a piece of fruit is out. The food given Soviet children is appetizing and healthful, and it is served at tables in the same fashion a meal is served in home. A parallel situation exists with regard to medical treatment in the schools. Especially at the preschool level, the child is carefully looked after, but at all grades there is real concern with health. A child who needs medical care can be assured of getting it without having to worry about his parents' ability to pay.[26]

For the Soviet teacher, perhaps the most obvious consequence of all this is that he must share his power with other adults--inside and outside the school. The result is not, however, a diminution of his role or a loss of status, any more than it is for the English teacher who under somewhat different circumstances shares his power. Indeed, the fact that the Soviet teacher has the explicit task of helping to relate school to what is going on in adult society puts him at the center of his pupils' lives. He is valuable to them in the same way an educational system is valuable that pays attention to their health and appetites and the kinds of work they will eventually do.

IV

Is there reason to believe that American educators--or anyone else connected with the public school system of this country--is about to take a second look at English and Russian

education? Certainly we have no indication such a step is likely in the immediate future. Most probably difficulties in the public schools will have to get appreciably worse for Americans to pay serious attention to what is going on in English and Russian education. This prediction is not, however, as grim as it sounds. What I am suggesting is that there will be no wide-spread move to view American education comparatively until it becomes apparent that in and of itself pedagogical change cannot alter the course the public schools are on--especially in urban areas. At this point the need for a much harder look at community control, at the relationship between school and society will be required and among the examples before us will be England's and Russia's.

What can be done in the meantime is essentially to argue that we need not wait to learn from English and Russian education, nor need we become more like the English and the Russians to benefit from what their schools have been doing over the last decade. For example, with regard to the location of schools, concern with the whole child, the use of more adults as teachers and models, the English and Russian school systems offer much that is immediately applicable to any state-run educational system.

In this country there is certainly a pressing need to begin locating schools, particularly preschools, in places where they have not been traditionally put: housing projects, factories, downtown offices, apartment-house complexes. In a city like New York it is certainly possible to imagine a business or group of concerns sharing a building being required to provide free space and help construct nursery facilities for their employees' children. When one thinks of a midtown office building, it becomes clear that the beneficiaries would be people from a variety of income groups.

A similar set of observations can be made about the necessity for schools to be concerned

with the whole child. Obviously a child who hasn't had a good lunch or who can't see the blackboard because he doesn't have glasses is not going to be much of a student. But poor children are not the only ones whose parents are pressed to care for them. Medical expenses--to say nothing of the problem of getting a child to the office of a doctor who doesn't make housecalls--affects a wide-range of income groups. The idea of a school having a doctor available at no charge for children whose parents cannot pay for one and on a graduated scale for other children would benefit a cross-section of groups. In a country that can come up with medicare and medicaid plans for its senior citizens, there is no reason why even greater concern should not be shown for the health of children.

Finally, the notion of having children put in contact with a variety of adults during the school day also serves a cross section of interests and groups. On the one hand, it connects the children with a number of cultural and political activities going on around them. On the other hand, it points up many of the jobs and professions that are available. Such adults would not be rivals to the teacher. They would not duplicate his function by teaching reading or writing. But they would supplement what was going on in school and by their relationship to a class make learning at once broader and more practical.

These examples only begin to show the ways the English and the Russian school systems might be made relevant to America. What is most revealing about them is the overriding point they make: namely, schooling soundly designed to meet the needs of disadvantaged children by making the relationship between their education and society a vital one is schooling that works for all. The conditions that spurred the developments in English and Soviet education discussed here were, after all, born out of turmoil that meant the destruction of cities, the breakup of families, the disruption of the normal school day. They are conditions in many ways not so different from those faced in America today by urban schools.

Footnotes

1. John Dewey, The School and Society (New York: McLure, Phillips, and Company, 1900), p. 89.

2. See Nicolaus Mills, "Schools and the Disadvantaged: A Study in Political Strategy," ERIC/IRCD Urban Disadvantaged Series, 24 (August 1971), pp. 21-40.

3. A 1964 survey made for the Plowden Committee indicates about one-third of the English primary schools were "substantially affected" by informal education and another third "somewhat affected." Charles E. Silberman, Crisis in the Classroom (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p. 211.

4. See Frank Jennings, "Jean Piaget: Notes on Learning," Saturday Review, 50 (May 20, 1967), pp. 81-83.

5. Quoted in Silberman, Crisis in the Classroom, p. 217.

6. The Plowden Report, vol. I (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1967), pp. 185-192.

7. John Blackie, Inside the Primary School (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 10.

8. Lillian Weber, The English Infant Schools and Informal Education (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 18.

9. The Plowden Report, vol. I, pp. 199-200.

10. Silberman, Crisis in the Classroom, pp. 221-223.

11. Mary Brown and Norman Precious, The Integrated Day in the Primary School (New York: Agathon Press, 1969), pp. 40-41.

12. The Plowden Report, vol. I, pp. 37-38.

13. Weber, The English Infant Schools, pp. 74-75.

14. The Plowden Report, vol. I, p. 266.

15. See Alex Inkeles and Kent Geiger, Soviet Society: A Book of Readings (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), pp. 546-558.

16. Kitty D. Weaver, Lenin's Grandchildren (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 45. Urie Bronfenbrenner, Two Worlds of Childhood: U.S. and U.S.S.R. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 73.

17. Bronfenbrenner, Two Worlds of Childhood, pp. 48-49.

18. A.S. Makarenko, A Book for Parents (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), p. 53. A.S. Makarenko, His Life and Work (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1963), p. 193.

19. A.S. Makarenko, His Life and Work, p. 273.

20. Weaver, Lenin's Grandchildren, p. 48.

21. Bronfenbrenner, Two Worlds of Childhood, p. xix.

22. Ibid., pp. 28-51.

23. A.S. Makarenko, His Life and Work, P. 184. Bronfenbrenner, Two Worlds of Childhood, p. 23.

24. Bronfenbrenner, Two Worlds of Childhood, pp. 51-53

25. Weaver, Lenin's Grandchildren, pp. 33-55.

26. Ibid., p. 33. Bronfenbrenner, Two Worlds of Childhood, p. x.

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