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Fostering Creativity, Individualism, and the Imaginative Spirit: Are Collaborative Thinking and Cooperative Learning Overemphasized in Education Today?

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PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHTS:

Are creativity and imaginative thinking impeded by the emphasis that many American schools place on cooperative learning and collaborative thinking today? This paper explores past and present philosophies concerning **individualism** and **creativity** as they relate to education in the USA. A person's ability to individuate is based on the premise that freedom of **personal choice** and opportunity are essential to the development of **self-reason**, **self-interests**, and **self-esteem**. Curriculum and instructional programming that emphasize cooperative group learning and collaboration at the expense of individual ideation may undermine and erode individualism and the **imaginative spirit**. Might this also suggest that a de-emphasis on individual creation, imagination, and production weakens **intrinsic motivation** and **problem-solving and decision-making**, and impedes **personal freedom to be creative**?

How can we foster creativity, individualism, and the imaginative spirit across the lifespan, and at the same time find ways to contribute to self-satisfaction, society and culture?

These ideas will be examined and discussed from a lifespan perspective on educating imaginative minds.

BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

The philosophies described in the next two paragraphs continue to influence American K-12 school systems today.

Beginning in the late 1800's John Dewey began encouraging educators to develop "democratic learning communities." His "progressive education" ideologies coincided with what is often referred to as the Progressive Era, a period from about 1890 to 1920 that included many significant changes in American society. During that period, rapid industrialization and urban development were accompanied by an increase in immigration that created challenges for education and the work force. Schools and educators were suddenly faced with the problem of addressing the diverse needs of learners and creating schools that accommodated the masses. To address the needs of the era, Dewey and other progressivists supported a philosophy of education that was child-centered and emphasized life skills and working with others. Much of current collaborative and cooperative learning

found in American schools today is grounded in this philosophy.

At this same time, other ideologies, such as Edward Thorndike's theory of connectionism, received powerful support. These emphasized the development of work skills, efficiency, and a hierarchy of competition. Schools and programming supported effectiveness in instruction, and encouraged connections between individual talents and skill development. Sometimes this is referred to as a "factory method" of education, with students moving through school by age and grade level. This method of schooling, while highly didactic and based on a teacher-centered philosophy, helped in preparing a work force that more efficiently served industrial needs and a capitalist economy.

From the 1940's to 1970's American public school programming tended to emphasize individualism and competition. The Sputnik Era drove the efforts of many schools to identify students with high abilities especially in the areas of mathematics and science, and to provide programming that encouraged and promoted these talents. Post-WW II educational opportunities allowed the middle class in America to access higher education. The economy was booming. What is now referred to as the Baby Boom generation (those Americans born between 1946 and 1964) began to exert a tremendous influence on American society.

During the 60's, 70's, and 80's, a surge in the promotion of self-interests can be noted in American education. For example, school programs that focused on individual recognition in an effort to foster high self-esteem and positive self-concept were common. Personal creativity, imagination, invention, self-motivation, and risk-taking were encouraged. This was accompanied by a renaissance in the arts – rock n' roll music, architectural modernism, fashion that emphasized boldness of design and color; and in the sciences – medical breakthroughs, landing on the moon and the first photographs of planet earth, computers and artificial intelligence, etc. Concurrently, a movement that promoted equal rights for minority and marginalized groups (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender) began to have a tremendous impact on educational programs. Equality of opportunity became philosophically and legislatively part of American public education. For example, the Educational Opportunity Act of 1964 followed by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 ensured funding for disadvantaged groups.

During the last few decades, public education in the USA has been dominated by standards, accountability, testing and assessment, basic skills learning, emphasis on cooperation, and increased control by state and federal governments. This has led to the Leave No Child Behind Education Act of 2001, and reforms in education that have emphasized performance-based curriculum and instruction.

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES (my personal thoughts and concerns):

I have been studying creativity and giftedness from a lifespan perspective for many years. One of my greatest concerns is the educational short-changing of American youth who are highly creative and highly intelligent. Recently I began to take a closer look at the strengths and limitations of collaborative learning, cooperative grouping, and the development of "learning communities" in the public schools.

When Johnson and Johnson (University of Minnesota) proposed their work on cooperative learning in the 1960's it was met with high positive regard. It was grounded in a progressive approach to education that promoted child-centered learning and instruction, and emphasized a balance of peer collaboration, individual work, and appropriate opportunities for competition.

The five elements David and Roger Johnson define are:

- ☼ Face-to-face interaction (students are close together, not across the room)
- ☼ Positive interdependence (students need each other for support, feedback, guidance)
- ☼ Individual accountability (even though they work together, students must demonstrate their individual contributions and learning)
- ☼ Collaborative skills (all students need opportunities to learn about and practice using the ideas and skills of others)
- ☼ Group processing (students must learn what it takes to work effectively – how to work effectively in promoting an individual idea, for example)

Teachers and schools embraced this research for several reasons: 1) The democratic learning communities that John Dewey had promoted with an emphasis on meaningful, real-life environments and social interaction could become the foundation for classroom learning. 2) Students were actively involved in their learning, self-motivation could be encouraged, and individualism preserved (work could be done individually based on interest and ability, and then those thoughts, visions, strategies could used by the group, as needed). 3) Advocates of a Piagetian perspective were satisfied (Piagetian theory suggests that group situations can create cognitive conflicts that result in disequilbrium, forcing the individual to grow and change). 4) Advocates of Vygotsky's perspective were satisfied (Vygotskian theory suggests that social interaction is important for learning because higher cognitive functioning such as reasoning, comprehension, and critical thinking originate in social interactions and are then internalized by the individual). 5) There was room for appropriate peer competition (group structure could reflect the most effective and efficient use of talent and interest in members – individuals' responsibility in the group was determined based on abilities and strengths).

SO – What happened to what sounds like a highly suitable idea?

"What can go wrong: Misuses of Group Learning" (Woolfolk, 2001, p. 342)

- ☹ Students often value the process or procedures over the learning. Speed and finishing take precedence over thinking
- ☹ Rather than challenging thoughts and issues, students support and reinforce misunderstandings or stereotypes
- ☹ Socializing and interpersonal relationships take precedence over learning and over individual thoughts and contributions
- ☹ Students simply shift dependency from the teacher to the "expert" in their group – learning is still passive
- ☹ Students may learn to be convinced that they are helpless to think and understand without the support of the group

AND even more importantly (as far as I'm concerned) is "What has happened to creativity, imagination, problem-solving and decision-making, individual thought, intrinsic motivation, personal freedom of choice, and self-interests in this process?

Consider the following anecdote:

Animal School

(Author Unknown)

Once upon a time the animals had a school. The curriculum consisted of running, climbing, flying and swimming. All the animals took part in all the subjects.

The duck was good at swimming, and in fact, better than his instructor. He made passing grades in flying, but he was hopelessly lost in running. Because he was low in this subject he was made to stay after school to practice running. He kept this up until he was only average in swimming. But average is acceptable so nobody worried about that, except duck.

The eagle was considered a problem pupil and disciplined severely. He beat all the others to the top of the tree in flying class, but he used his own way of getting there which caused problems with the teacher.

The cheetah started out at the top of the class in running. But he had a nervous breakdown and had to drop out of school on account of so much make-up work in swimming.

The squirrel led the climbing class, but his flying teacher made him start from the ground instead of the top of the tree. He developed charley-horses from over-exertion at takeoff, and began getting C's in climbing and D's in running.

The practical prairie dogs apprenticed their offspring to a badger when the school authorities refused to add digging to the curriculum.

At the end of the year, the quiet eel who could swim fairly well, and run, climb and jump a little was named Student of the Year.

adapted by Paula J. Hillmann, Ph.D.

Are creativity and imaginative thinking impeded by the emphasis that many American

schools place on cooperative learning and collaborative thinking today? This thought paper has briefly pointed out some past and present philosophies concerning individualism and creativity as they relate to education in the USA. A person's ability to individuate is based on the premise that freedom of personal choice and opportunity are essential to the development of self-reason, self-interests, and self-esteem.

Curriculum and instructional programming that emphasize cooperative group learning and collaboration at the expense of individual ideation may undermine and erode individualism and the imaginative spirit. I have suggested here that misuse or an over-emphasis on cooperative learning may contribute to a degeneration of individual creation, imagination, and production; and that this weakens intrinsic motivation, hinders the development of problem-solving and decision-making capabilities, and inhibits personal freedom to be creative.

How Can We Alter or Correct Some of the Problems with Current Misuses of Cooperative Learning?

I believe that it is possible to use cooperative learning methodologies to foster creativity, individualism, and the imaginative spirit. Some thoughts are:

- Re-examine research on cooperative learning and collaborative decision-making; identify key findings and how they translate into effective instructional practices.
- Provide teachers with staff development on the nature and nurture of creativity and imaginative education.
- Ensure advocacy for learning that respects and supports equity in education for all learners based on their needs and learning profiles – their styles, abilities, interests, and readiness.
- Guarantee that classrooms and learning environments provide opportunities that effectively and genuinely foster intrinsic motivation to learn and produce.

END NOTE:

How can we find ways to foster creativity, use imaginative thinking, maintain our individuality, and at the same time contribute to self-satisfaction, society and culture? What can we do to enhance and promote that development from a lifespan perspective?

The work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (University of Chicago) has particular relevance here. In *Flow* he explored states of "optimal experience" – those times when people report feelings of concentration and deep enjoyment. In *The Evolving Self* he suggested that only

the collaborative efforts of individuals willing to bring creative zest to the hard questions will ensure a viable and harmonious future, and envisioned what it will take for us to becomes fulfilled selves in fulfilling societies. A more recent of his publications, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* builds upon his flow theory, and explores why creative people are often perceived as selfish, arrogant, and non-social (even though they are not). In it he suggests how creativity can be cultivated in business, government, education, sciences, and the arts. By studying the creative lives of exceptional people from many professions, he helps bring meaning and understanding to the development of creativity across the lifespan.

All of the respondents who were interviewed for Csikszentmihalyi's study were born prior to 1944. Currently I am studying the "Baby Boom" generation of Americans (those born between the years 1946 and 1964) for a book I am writing entitled *Baby Bloomers*. I am interested in knowing more about the way this generation's creativity develops during midlife, and am looking at data from a lifespan perspective. I have modified the protocol that Csikszentmihalyi used in his study which I hope to use in an effort to tease apart elements that might be unique to that cohort. As mentioned earlier in this paper, that generation of Americans lived through some unique, post-WW II experiences and has made some significant contributions that are unique from generations before and those that followed. I have observed anecdotally how behaviors and attitudes related to creativity, imaginative thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, invention, intrinsic motivation, personal freedom of choice, self-interest, and individual "spirit" have changed (in a negative direction) in so many youth I have worked with. As I continue the research for my book, I hope to find some answers to my own questions, and to identify variables ("protective factors"?) in creative baby boomers (BLOOMERS!) that have helped make them resilient to negative environmental elements.