

Clarifying the Role of the School

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Educators will have a clearer concept of purpose when they see the school's distinctive function as that of symbolizing and rationalizing experience. W. B. Featherstone is Professor of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University.

IN THESE complex and confused times it is difficult indeed for a school to keep its distinctive function and purpose clearly in mind and not be led into the untenable position of trying to be all things to all children and youth of the land. The difficulty arises from many sources, three of which merit particular attention.

It has become increasingly difficult for the family to carry on its primary function of child rearing. Today's vest-pocket households, with few exceptions, can provide almost no meaningful work experience, far too little constructive social experience, and not much consistent and sustained moral and ethical guidance. It is increasingly difficult for many families to provide even the basic necessities of adequate food, clothing, shelter and health care without resort to the assistance of public, semi-private and private charitable or welfare agencies. Consequently there is considerable pressure on the schools to take over many of the ordinary responsibilities of the family. What is more natural than to look to the school as the agency to rear and train the young, as well as to educate them? The school is available. It is a creature of the community. It is assumed to be interested in promoting the general welfare. It is also more responsive to the immediate needs and

desires of its clientele than most other agencies professing similar intent and purpose.

Few persons would question the desirability of the school's relating its own program more effectively to the activities and services of other agencies concerned with the welfare and education of children and youth. There would seem to be considerable difference, however, between basing the school's own program on a broad view of the needs of children and youth and simply taking over the child-rearing functions of the family. How to define this difference clearly is a problem that baffles great many schools. Lack of a clear definition is the source of much confusion of purpose and program.

Schools Need Clear Definition of Purpose

The enormous increase in kinds and quantities of mass media of communication in recent years has also made it harder for the school to keep its distinctive function clearly in mind. The increase in amount and kind of such media has by no means been accompanied by an increase in quality or consistency of public information and opinion. Every newspaper and magazine editor, publisher of books, radio broadcaster, motion picture producer

manufacturer, merchant, labor union leader, and every religious, patriotic or pressure group is almost completely free to disseminate a special gospel, dogma, ism, science or other version of truth and wisdom, with the result that young and old alike are bombarded constantly by a bewildering variety of auditory, visual and postural stimuli that defies description or analysis. Small wonder that the schools are frequently urged by alarmed, confused, but perhaps well-meaning persons and groups to step into the arena and give children and youth the "true" truth, the "right" reasons, the "unassailable" answers to the problems of living.

Here again the source of confusion is clear. The school is looked to as the paramount agency to guard and guide the young. It has control of their time for a longer period than anyone else except their parents. It has access to resources that are not available to any other person or agency. If the schools are not to undertake responsibility for teaching the truth, who is? The government? Hardly. The churches? Well, perhaps, even though most of them have but a weak and wavering voice that does not carry far. In dealing with such matters the schools find it hard to distinguish clearly between the purpose and process of educating children and youth and the purpose and process of expounding some authorized version of the truth.

Learning for Use or for Possession

A third factor that confuses the schools is the emphasis on narrow utilitarianism as the central value in education. There is no question that the emphasis on learning for use instead of

learning for mere possession has helped to rid the curriculum of a great deal of dead wood; but too narrow a view of what is useful, meaningful, functional, can easily turn education into a mere process of training young people to perform routinized tasks, the significance of which is clear only to those who assign the tasks.

The extreme emphasis on practicality arises in part no doubt from a conviction that a great many of the young people who throng today's schools are incapable of much more than an animal-training sort of learning. But more important is the tendency to reject uncritically the idea that knowledge is power. The error of such uncritical rejection can be readily demonstrated, even with children and youth who seem, by most standards, not to have much capacity to make practical application of ostensibly academic information. The competence of even quite backward youngsters in such a practical skill as arithmetic computation can be greatly increased by teaching them the "meaning" of the number system. In fact there is considerable evidence that such children never do learn to compute or solve problems with any useful degree of reliability unless they acquire a pretty good insight into the logic of what they are doing.

Functional Nature of Meanings

The same generalization applies to almost all of the activities—social, economic, political, vocational—that make up the daily round of "practical" life. The "best" workers in a factory, *i.e.*, the most reliable, the most contented, the most productive, the most loyal, etc., tend to be those who not only know

their particular skill, but also its place in the whole complex pattern of the manufacturing process in a particular industry. The "best" teachers are those who not only know what they are doing, but also why. The best citizens are those who not only vote, pay their taxes, observe traffic rules, and throw their litter in the trash cans, but also know why they do these things.

The "why and wherefore" kind of knowledge is often the most useful, the most functional, in the long run because such knowledge gives meaning and significance to the particular acts one has already learned to perform. It also provides a foundation for developing new modes of behavior to meet the specific requirements of unforeseen circumstances. If the schools wish to free children and youth from the strait jacket of habit, custom, precedent, and trial-and-error-ism, it is certainly questionable whether general education ought to be allowed to degenerate into mere mediation of current difficulties; or whether vocational or specialized education should be allowed to become mere trade or occupational training.

BUILDING MEANINGS THROUGH EDUCATION

In relating its own program to the complex pattern of forces that inevitably play upon children and youth these days to mold their characters and personalities, the distinctive function or purpose of the school can be discerned only by considering what is required in building up the conscious core of symbolized meanings about which the personality is integrated. Any number of agencies or institutions can "give children experience"—the home, the

movies, the playground, the summer camp, the factory, the farm, and the on-going social, political and economic processes of diffuse community life. But very few agencies and institutions besides the school can intentionally and systematically explain, clarify, enrich and "make meaningful" these experiences because very few have the resources available to the school—control of the time and energy of the learners, access to books and other materials through which the experience and wisdom of the past is made available, and skill in processes of deliberate, intentional and systematic teaching.

Any number of other agencies can provide for the welfare needs of children and youth as well as or better than the schools. If the family is inadequate for this, its central task, day care centers, health clinics, welfare stations, settlement houses, and the like are available or can be provided. A considerable degree of specialized competence, equipment and resources is required for carrying on the work of such agencies successfully. The school has enough to do if it makes wise use of the experience children and youth *do* have in connection with such welfare services, and exploits it for its educational values—its meaning for the individual and its significance in the larger context of community life.

Education for Work

Similarly, any number of agencies can provide work experience as well as or better than the schools. Farms, factories, shops, mines, transportation systems, public and private utilities and service organizations are the normal channels of productive work. There is

no reason for the school to provide work experience on the assumption that children and youth need a kind of work experience different from that which characterizes the actual economic life of communities. The only excuse for the school's going into the business of providing work experience is a purely practical one.

Under today's peculiar theory that as many people as possible should be excluded from work, it is difficult for children and youth to acquire any "real" work experience until they are almost adult in years. Consequently, if children and youth are to acquire any "raw data" of work experience which can be exploited and used for educational purposes, the school is forced willy-nilly to provide that experience in a large number of instances. But while work experience is an absolute requirement if there is to be any effective education for work, the wise policy for the school is to bend its efforts toward opening up opportunities for such experience through the normal channels of economic enterprise, and take the responsibility of providing, on its own initiative, only the absolute minimum of work experience that cannot be obtained in any other way.

It is admittedly difficult, with the prevailing attitudes of employers and labor unions, to find adequate opportunities for work experience in the normal economic enterprises of the typical community. But changing such attitudes would seem to be less difficult in the long run than providing adequate opportunity for work experience for all children and youth on the school's own initiative. Schools that are criticized by their communities for not giving the

young realistic education for work could accomplish a good deal by turning the tables. They ought to reply with the equally tenable criticism: "How can we educate for work when the community provides no opportunity for young people to experience work?" If they hammered insistently on the underlying principle of "no work education without work experience" employers and labor leaders could in time be brought to realize that while education cannot be carried on effectively as an incidental aspect of living, neither can it be carried on in an experiential vacuum.

Education for Civic Participation

Consider also the problem of civic education. Here again, the principle of "no experience, no education" holds. This principle underlies all efforts to provide civic-type experiences *in school*, through teacher-pupil cooperation in curriculum development, extra-curricular activities, pupil self-government and the like. All such efforts are to the good, for the school is a quasi-community, exemplifying in considerable measure many of the processes and functions of the larger community. One must not, however, overlook the fact that the school is to a large extent a sub-culture within a culture, and that many of the skills, attitudes and understandings developed within the context of the sub-culture do not and cannot carry over to the larger culture.

Participation in the democratic process within the narrow and specialized environment of a school is better than none at all, but such participation hardly provides adequate material for furthering the school's distinctive purpose of clari-

fyng, rationalizing and symbolizing civic experience and building up the meaning of democracy. How to provide adequate opportunities for direct, or even good "onlooker" participation in the on-going political and civic affairs of a community is perhaps the hardest problem of all to solve. But it must be solved more effectively than it has been heretofore if there is to be any genuine civic education. For without civic experience, there is nothing to rationalize and symbolize, and teaching and learning degenerate into mere verbalizing, with little or no effect on the civic behavior of young people.

EDUCATION FOR INSIGHT

The foregoing discussion might well be interpreted as a plea primarily for more firsthand experience for children and youth rather than as a plea for more attention to rationalizing and symbolizing of experience as the distinctive function of the school. Such an interpretation would be one-sided, but it would probably do no great harm in the great majority of communities. But while there can be no education without experience, which is the very substance of learning, one should not fall into the error of equating experience and education, and conclude that experience, experience, and more experience will result automatically in more and better insights, understandings, attitudes—more and better meanings.

Experience that is not criticized, illuminated and symbolized may narrow rather than broaden; it may enslave

rather than release. It may make of the individual only a blind follower of habit, custom and tradition rather than one who sees and acts upon principles and laws. Robert Hutchins has said what we need in education is principles, principles and everlasting principles. Many will, of course, dissent from Mr. Hutchins' views as to what principles are valid and how they are to be taught. It is difficult, however, to see tenable grounds for dissent from the basic proposition that the ability to generalize, to formulate principles and laws and afterward to apply them in new situations is what distinguishes the educated from the uneducated person. A school that is content to teach children and youth to *do* whatever is being done, or has been done, is a mere trainer; it becomes an educational institution only as it undertakes to help the young to understand the *reasons why*.

Distinctive Function of the School

Placing the emphasis upon rationalizing and symbolizing of experience as the distinctive function of the school certainly does not make the task of the school any lighter. In some ways it makes the task heavier, or at least more hazardous, because of the ever-present danger of falling into empty verbalizing. But if the schools would keep in mind the dictum stated above—"no experience, no education"—and remember also that almost anybody can provide experience, but that not everybody can educate, the work of the school would be more purposeful, if not easier.

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