

Our Choice: Revolution or Destruction

*A veteran teacher expresses
a personal viewpoint.*

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IN MY judgment, every teacher, every parent, every person who attempts to measure or control the effectiveness of education ought to have the following quotation written large and hung where, as he works, he cannot miss having its implications impressed anew upon his mind.

Schooling is a rather wasteful business. The ends to be achieved are vaguely stated, and dimly understood. The selection of means is a haphazard, trial and error business. The process is akin to shooting at flies with a shotgun without knowing whether we are supposed to kill flies, snakes or sparrows. Worse, this is what we do so often, too many people have come to assume flies to be the target and a shotgun to be the most effective means to their end.¹

The most frequently stressed goal of education from 3000 B.C. and earlier down to the present time has been the *compulsory* imparting of knowledge to immature minds by instruction. This includes presentation, explanation, study, recitation, examination and marking; also discipline as necessary to secure attention. Learning is primarily memorization. The master measure of success is the ability to give back correctly that which was transmitted.

Only last week (1963), I heard of a college professor in a university who said to her class of graduate students at her first meeting with them: "Now I warn you. I won't stand for any of this modern nonsense in this class. When you go to teachers meetings and conventions, you hear a lot of nice words, but in the last analysis, the test is always, 'How much do your students know?'"

That is, today, after almost a hundred years of measurement and research

¹ John I. Goodlad. *Theory Into Practice*. Vol. 1; No. 4. Columbus: College of Education, Ohio State University. p. 220.

(1875-1963), adventuresome, even radical explorers in the verbal jungles of educational theory and practice tend to report their findings in terms of the conventional goal, *knowledge*. From the time of Bacon, professors of education have taught candidates for the teaching profession that "Knowledge is power." Some believe that Bacon's wisdom (?) came from Plato. Yet perceptive men in every age have done their best to point out that the slogan is, at best, only a half-truth. For instance, Lowell has written, "Simple as it seems, it was a great discovery that the key of knowledge could turn both ways, that it could open, as well as lock, the door of power to the many."

To free one's self from falsehood, revered for ages as truth, is not easy. The educational process is coming to be seen as a natural process. Its results are both unpredictable and uncontrollable because man, as an evolving organism, continually disrupts all static situations by new discoveries. The autocratic imposition of knowledge results in emotional acceptance of the status quo as perfect, not to be changed.

It is very strange that school indoctrination in the "three Rs" is widely esteemed by teachers, parents and statesmen alike. Many of our best citizens give of their money and time to the cause of freedom for enslaved nations, yet do not see conventional education as a mighty force, evilly enslaving the minds of their children, and so increasingly destroying all our democratic institutions—politics, business, labor unions, education and religions. If the ideas expressed in the Mayflower Compact and the Declaration of Independence are to endure, teaching, teachers, and schools of learning must be abolished.

The *need* for education remains, how-

ever, New and revolutionary institutions must be invented and put in place of schools. Mere modification under existing ideals and practices will not do. "Revolution" is also a door that swings both ways, as communism is proving. Our education will not become democratic until the last shred of *teaching* is swept away.

When a few creative thinkers first proclaimed that the earth is round like a ball, and revolves around the sun, how did the average man react? He believed the earth was flat, stationary, and the center of the universe. The announced revolutionary truths seemed preposterous. *No one* could see or feel the earth move, while *everyone* could see the sun travel across the sky and around the earth. If the earth were round, the people on the side directly under our feet would fall off into space. If you had been a sailor on Columbus' caravels, believing the earth was flat and seeing every day the sun apparently sinking below the edge of the ocean so that your boat seemed to be sailing every day straight to the dropping-off place, would you not have been strongly moved to join with others in mutiny?

In that day the announced truths seemed preposterous. Is it not amazing that since 1492 we all accept those strange truths as corresponding to reality? The number of persons who deny the earth is revolving around the sun is very small, consisting mostly of primitive people. The strangest part of all is that to this day the average man does not "see" the movement of the sun among the stars and cannot prove the earth is revolving around the sun. He has been *taught* it, that is all.

So in our time to say that schools and learning must be completely extirpated from our culture calls out in many per-

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sons reactions as violent and groundless as those in the past about the shape and motions of the earth. Witness the response of many Southerners, and some Northerners too, to the concept and practice of racial equality. Why, even the author of the quotation with which this article began, in his concluding sentence says: "Teaching thus becomes disciplined through increased *teacher-insight* into consequences of *instructional* acts." Does that sound as if he would welcome the complete extirpation of schools and teachers from our culture?

The probabilities are that "disciplined teacher insight" will contribute more and more to the abolition of teaching by teachers themselves. The author of this article began to teach in 1898, and has taught ever since. What is more, he is a measurement man and has convincing evidence for those who will consider it, that teaching does not produce learning as the ordinary teacher believes it does. The evidence shows conclusively that learning is a maturation process like growth in height and weight. Is the teacher responsible for the growth of his children in height and weight? No more can he control his children's growth in purposes and power to achieve for the benefit of all. Education must be made free to evolve into more adequate forms and practices.

Such revolutions never come about overnight; yet today, in special schools and classes, on playgrounds and in sum-

mer camps, even in a few standard classrooms in the most traditional schools, the change from teacher-directed to (fragmentary) pupil-initiated, pupil-directed, pupil-appraised activities may be seen. No student in such activities is concerned with the acquisition of knowledge but with personal growth in the richness and satisfactions of living.

Continuous self-directed personal evaluation is the new goal, and self-directed struggling with life problems, the student's life problems, both individual and social, are the new means. How do you evaluate books like *Summerhill*² which are beginning to appear in ever increasing numbers, or reports of experimentation like *The Robbers Cave*?³ The work being done by the University of Wisconsin under the direction of John Guy Fowlkes, known as the Wisconsin Improvement Program,⁴ illustrates how cooperative schools and teachers not only can initiate and measure the effects of innovations, but can contribute to the spread of innovations of proven worth.

The real question is, where do you stand? Are you frankly ready to do your utmost to combat such revolutionary developments; or are you interested, but fearful, so that you do not support in any way the new? Or are you one who has seen the need, and cautiously, a little at a time, learned how to make changes in yourself, and in your relationships to children? Whatever your position, be sure of this: *the revolution is under way*. Teaching and teachers as we know them will in time be abolished.

² A. S. Neill. *Summerhill*. New York: Hart Publishing Co., 1959.

³ *The Robbers Cave Experiment*. Norman, Oklahoma: The Institute of Group Relations, The University of Oklahoma, 1961.

⁴ The Wisconsin Improvement Program. Madison, Wisconsin: School of Education, University of Wisconsin.

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