A New Progressive Education?


The teacher can no longer hear himself think above the din, the clamor, the insistence on change. He feels guilty, he feels insecure, he feels pressed, he feels out of date and out of step. Administrators stimulate, admonish, inspire, bemoan; parents question, urge, complain; the press and other media report, analyze, compare, examine.

Everyone is an expert on what is wrong with education. After all, everyone has been through school and what more does it take to be an expert? Got an axe to grind? Grind it on the schools. Got a pet interest? Put it in the curriculum. Feel abused or unsuccessful? Take it out on the teacher or the principal or the superintendent. After all, don't the schools belong to the people? Aren't they supposed to be all things to all people? This is a democracy, isn't it? Isn't everyone free to express himself?

By this time, the reader may be thinking, "Sternig must have had a hard day; what kind of an article is he trying to write?"

Actually the article is supposed to deal with abiding values in changing times—and it will. The introduction has merely tried to convey the tone and mood which seem to surround educational change. It is a combination of obvious need and equally obvious frustration.

We are indeed engaged in change, as persistent and inevitable as the inexorable sequence of birthdays. There is no more point in griping about change than about growing old. The alternative is the grave. What is more useful is to look beyond one's own personal involvement and motivation; to see change in the perspective of our times rather than only its effect upon us.

From this viewpoint, though it too will bring frustrations, we might develop a more impersonal attitude toward change. We might also find the persistent values which must be the warp and woof with which the new patterns are woven.

A Process Approach

Curriculum development these days seems to stress the idea of process. Education is seen as a process of inquiry. The word is sometimes spelled with an "e" to draw special attention to "enquiry."

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as a process of investigation in search of principles. This emphasis represents a conscious effort to depart from the concept of education as the mastery of a fixed body of information. It draws attention to education as a journey rather than a destination, as a dynamic activity by the learner, as a set of actions with many subsets, as an open system, not a closed one.

Does this strategy somehow sound vaguely familiar though clothed in new terms? It ought to, for this “new approach” is a rebirth of the basic values of progressive education. It is the rediscovery by the scholars of what had been discovered and then lost not too long ago. It is truly the “New Progressive Education.”

How did all this movement get started and where will it lead? There is no single starting point. It is certainly not due to spontaneous generation in the mind of any single person or group, though some would like to think so. It is presently associated with the specialists, the scholars, the experts in many fields of knowledge. It came out of an awareness that knowledge grows much faster than it can be assimilated by any individual. It developed as scholars began to analyze the vast bodies of information in an effort to extract essential principles, concepts and generalizations. Curriculum workers welcomed the effort in the hope that it would help solve the problem of more and more content in the same, too short hours of the day.

Sputnik is generally given credit for pulling the trigger, but the gun was loaded and ready before Sputnik went into orbit. The advent of the space age merely added the dimensions of political pressure and national prestige which served to start the process going. The artificial satellites served as an artificial stimulus to turn on the faucet of public funds and top level support. Attention was first focused on mathematics and science which became the center for action as fine minds began to pour forth ideas. The results came much faster than any previous curriculum efforts had achieved before. Less than a decade has passed and already the schools can select from new curricula in mathematics and in science; and the effort is spreading across all other curriculum fields.

Yet more important than new curricula is the educational philosophy which gives them life and a soul. It is these which are the abiding values in times of change. It is to these we must look if we are to avoid frustration and confusion in the presence of the great diversity of current projects and studies. What are these abiding values, these basic purposes which tie the past, present
and the future together? They are the truths about the nature of learners and learning which give us conviction when we hold to them and without which new methods will quickly pass away.

The New “Progressives”

It seems ironic that these values should have been brought back to the attention of teachers by some of the same kind of persons who not long ago derided the efforts of so-called “progressives” to put these values into practice. It is the scholars and specialists in the subject matter fields who now say, in a new setting, what was said, but poorly practiced, in progressive schools. What are they saying?

They recall for us that we must be concerned with the learner and process of learning rather than with the organization and reorganization of recorded information.

They tell us that the learner must be individually part of the process and actively involved in it.

They remind us that discovery resulting from personal investigation holds greater promise of retention than memorized pieces of information.

They question the value of an education which fades as memory fades and which results in so little change in behavior of individuals.

They stress the urgent need for creativity in human beings and question its encouragement by conventional methods of education.

They see little evidence of transfer of the power to learn from one field to another and cite this as evidence that a “unified field theory” for learning is needed.

They remind us that the Educational Policies Commission in 1961 said, “the central purpose of education . . . is the development of the ability to think.”

They chide us that we teachers give lip service to this purpose but actually resist its application in our classes.

They point to our inconsistency in talking about evaluation in behavioral terms but being satisfied with regurgitation of information.

They wonder if we are perhaps more interested in training than we are with education; with the content of subject matter more than with the development of human beings capable of creative thought and action.

We must hasten to say that the “they” referred to are no single person or group. “They” represent a composite of ideas that flow logically from the process approach to learning. As the approach seems currently to be developing, it reveals promising teamwork of subject matter specialists with teachers; each complementing the other. These teams are analyzing both content and method with a view to bringing about a curriculum and a type of instruction more true to the nature of knowledge and the learner. In this lies the hope for finding continuing values while details change. Let us hope this new team effort achieves the purposes it has revived, and which failed before for the wrong reasons. The “failure” of progressive education lay, not in its ideals, but in the limitations of those who either never understood them or were unable to put them into practice.

This limitation exists today and will always exist unless human beings become angels. It remains the big unknown in the process approach to education.