

Extremists and the Schools:

A Context for Understanding

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FOR A number of years American school systems have enjoyed a kind of insulation from the demands and activities of protest groups. As a matter of fact, schoolmen have been so authoritarian in their approach to school affairs that, in spite of their claims to the contrary, all threats to the sanctity of their domains have been subtly suppressed. The school has not been the great agent of social change that many might suggest. Rather, the American school often has done more to preserve the status quo than it has to bring about meaningful change.

Historically, the American school system has served as the agent of assimilation. This has meant that the school has romantically accepted the American myth of the "melting pot." By extension, then, educators must reject the extremes of any issue and seek the norms.

Negro Americans have accepted this manner and mode in good faith. Around the walls of the African Methodist Episcopal churches and countless ghetto schools, black teachers have posted pictures of the great Negro Americans of history. The American dream has never vindicated their faith by coming true for the large mass of Negroes.

For them no position is too extreme if it holds out the promise of American life.

For Negro Americans, the John Birch Society or the Minute Men or the Ku Klux Klan or the White Citizens Councils are all clearly extremist groups. Less clear is the Negro's vision of the Revolutionary Action Movement or the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. A recent study surprised much of newspaper-reading white America. This study revealed that a significant percentage of middle-class Negroes generally felt no guilt, resentment, nor even a vague sense of malaise after the riots of recent summers. To them their ghetto brothers did only what was demanded by their plight.

Rejection of White Values

Black America thus has slowly come back to a position that many Negroes have held in earlier decades: that of rejecting

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white American values. In the 1890's, Bishop Henry M. Turner urged his flocks to go back to Africa. "Pop" Singleton asked his black brothers to desert white America for the Indian territory in Oklahoma. Symbolically, Rap Brown and other Negro leaders have no less equivocally rejected the values of white Americans.

The question becomes: Shall the Negro be assimilated into a society that has values antithetical to Negro aspiration?

Ramifications of this issue abound. Negroes demand local control of their own inner-city schools. They insist on proportional representation on school boards. They complain of old racial rhetoric and outworn social clichés that remain embalmed in textbooks. Black students add to the furor with their own demands for representation and black culture.

Can aspiration, so long denied and so persistently argued, be counted as extremism? Rather, one might argue, it demands hearing and satisfaction. Black curriculum demands simply that if the system remains closed, the schools ought at least to reflect that fact and allow the curriculum to be relevant to life in the ghetto. English as a second language, heavy doses of consumer education, straightforward Negro history, music unadorned with romantic notions of classical taste, literature that expresses the universality of the Negro mood, all demand the attention of the curriculum committees.

There is no need for the democratization of school control to result in anarchy. Each new ghetto in the American cities after the 1880's dealt with its educational problems as created on the scene. True, nominal control rested in the professional hierarchy, but individual teachers, facing their Italian or Jewish or Polish clientele, developed unique tools for teaching that the administrators, except for a few visionaries such as John Dewey, would hardly have thought possible.

The Community and School Objectives

The schools in this country are in trouble. There is little hope that the current

revolution will subside until the school makes a more realistic beginning in bringing solutions to problems which have become magnified as a result of years of indifference and neglect. Yet where shall we begin?

The curriculum is as good a place as any, since in the final analysis, the curriculum is all the school is about. School people make a number of wild claims about how they arrive at curriculum emphases and experiences. There are few administrators who would admit that their curriculum is anything other than the end product of a cooperative enterprise embracing administrators, supervisors, curriculum experts, teachers, parents, and the pupils themselves.

This approach to curriculum design and construction has been always more a dream than a reality. It simply does not happen this way. Sharing in the identification of the philosophy, objectives, and program of the school is the very essence of what the so-called extremists now seek. If such sharing were even a theoretical reality in our schools, the task of dealing with extremists would be less threatening and difficult.

Imperatives for Cooperation

It would appear that the first responsibility which schoolmen have in dealing with extremists is to purge ourselves of that traditional propensity to hang labels on people. Since we cannot help but respond to people in terms of the labels we hang on them, to insist on viewing dissenters as extremists is to condition the nature and quality of the communication that must come from any seriously intended vis-à-vis contacts. Whatever we do in dealing with the new and emerging activist groups, we must seek first to effect a relationship that is built on mutual respect, a difficult but not impossible endeavor.

Perhaps the demands of the activists would not appear so unreasonable if professional educators would bring more serious examination to the real ultimate ends of education in America. An examination of such ends might well lead to the conclusion that *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* may be just

as useful in refining reading skills as *Silas Marner*. A study of Harrington's *The Other America* seems to be a much more sincere response to the cry for relevance than the more traditional study of *A Tale of Two Cities*.

In a word, the school must come to appreciate the fact that subject matter is merely a vehicle through which the larger ends of the school are to be met. The sanctity in which we have couched that subject matter may be in large measure the main source of the developing agony which the knowledge custodians are experiencing.

It is not the intent here to suggest that the school should neglect the past or abandon its practice of exposing young people to traditional literature and subjects. Rather, the suggestion is that the school provide youth with a more balanced diet of traditional and contemporary curriculum experiences. With skillful and imaginative teaching, the link between the past and present can be demonstrated so effectively that those who challenge the efficacy of the institutions will at least do so with a perspective which precious few of the more vocal activists appear to have.

Other Areas for Examination

The curriculum of the schools has been the target of attack by the activists probably because of its obvious, if not tangible, characteristics. People know what the curriculum experiences are. They have traveled over the course; their children are doing so now. What is not so obvious, however, are the more subtle mechanisms of the school through which the curriculum is implemented.

Are school people so inert that the need for examining current practices with regard to such matters as grouping and tracking should be ignored? Must there be a storm to dramatize the need for serious study of the imbalance in staff deployment in our school systems? Do we need "outsiders" to tell us of the unhealthy social system which we have

created and sustained in our schools? Are we not as aware as the poor and the disadvantaged that the school has within it elements which militate against full self-realization?

Although protests against the subtle mechanisms of the school have not been articulated as clearly as the rebellion against the curriculum, it would appear that the activists have some real concerns in this area. We must decipher the signs more carefully, avoiding the dangerous practice of not acting before there is a needless confrontation between school and community.

If we are to deal effectively with those who challenge the school system, we may minimize our frustrations if we can honestly demonstrate our involvement in work which is clearly addressed to bringing genuine solutions to our problems. Our inaction, if not our indifference, appears to suggest that, as professional educators, we have no real problems.

The activists are telling us in clarion tones that it is only in the front office that everything is all right. We may not take comfort in our special programs aimed at strengthening basic skills, enriching cultural experiences, developing vocational skills, and so on. Unless we rid the school of the elements of dehumanization which have short-changed so many people, we will not be able to contain those who threaten us. We have no right to expect to do so.

These are uncomfortable times for schoolmen. We have been so consumed in conducting business as usual that we find ourselves totally unprepared to deal with healthy dissent. Whether we will it or not, the activists have something to say, and they have demonstrated their determination to be heard. There is but one way out: recognize the dissenters and prepare to persevere as we cooperatively work out the definitions, goals, and programs which are responsive to the needs of the people the schools are designed to serve and which in the end will give strength and vitality to our social order. □

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