

POLITICAL POWER and the HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULUM

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"POLITICAL Power" is of concern to curriculum workers in at least three related ways. First, the effort to influence curriculum decisions is an exercise in political power. Such decisions are made, not on the basis of direct inference from definitive scholarly findings, but rather on the basis of a complex interaction of forces representing different interests, values, beliefs, and knowledge systems.

Second, since "Political Power" is a ubiquitous fact of societal existence, and since a democracy depends for its vigor and justness upon equitable distribution of power, it is proper that the citizens' schools offer extensive opportunities for learning about how political power operates.

Third, there are growing numbers of students who find our schools oppressive, inane, misconceived, and mismanaged, and who consequently are interested and involved in developing the political power they require to bring about very substantial improvements. Their efforts are increasingly a dominant component of the high school environment, and thus willy-nilly have become an important "unplanned" part of the curriculum.

I will here try to describe one way of interpreting these three concerns in relation to one another and then briefly mention an approach to exploiting the potential in this regard. My approach is not eclectic. It re-

fects very strong partisan commitments about curriculum and politics. I shall try to make these commitments quite clear.

Dissident Views

I will begin with the dissident student and his dissatisfactions. He seems to the outsider to be in protest against everything established, and to see everything he opposes as essentially similar to everything else he opposes. Opposition to the draft, it would seem, is essentially the same thing as opposition to a silly dress code or an inadequate curriculum.

The rebellious student experiences each of these as immediate and direct oppression. And ending the war in Vietnam by expanding it into Cambodia and Laos reflects the same mentality that is involved in educating students to live in a democracy by denying them the most fundamental, as well as the most trivial, rights accorded citizens by our Constitution. From the students' point of view, education is not participation in a rigged and manipulated so-called "teaching-learning process," but rather a natural human consequence of and exercise in the uses of freedom. Our curriculum is manipulatory, mechanical, and inhuman, they assert, in precisely the

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same way that our approach to the problems of Indochina is manipulatory, mechanical, and inhuman.

A fundamental difference in worldview is reflected here, and it is by virtue of this difference that the various protests blend into one. But this blending ought not to obscure what I believe is a matter of fact: that the center of gravity of student protest is nausea and rage over the way they are treated in school in the name of education. Nor is this fact mitigated by another equally apparent fact—that what passes for education is a consequence of very much the same forces as is what passes for foreign policy. Protesting students are engaged in a struggle against many forms of oppression; but they are willing to put a good deal of their considerable energy and talent to work in the struggle against the oppression most immediate to their own experience, and that is the oppression of schooling.

Exploring Uses of Freedom

One way for me to make my partisanship in these matters clear is to state that I find this student view essentially correct. From it I draw certain conclusions which establish the relation of the third concern of the curriculum worker to the other two that I have mentioned.

The first conclusion I draw is this: the most pressing task before the contemporary curriculum worker is to revitalize the exploration of the uses of freedom in education. In the late 30's some real progress was being made on the problem of rigorously operationalizing the progressive conceptions of interest, choice, and learner-centered structuring of educational programs. In the intervening three decades we have lost what little art we were beginning to have in this difficult task, and we are now back to debates at the very crude level of "structured" vs. "nonstructured" educational programs. We must rediscover and expand our grasp of the art of building educative programs around the act of choosing.

One of the recurrent problems we have with this notion of choosing derives from the

fact that many of its interpreters have been rooted in a highly individualistic liberal tradition which did not adequately handle the problem of interests or rights in conflict. The classroom behavior which reflects this inadequacy and which for many teachers defines the limiting factor in their ability to handle "choice" is the statement I have heard so often: "But if I let you do that, *everyone* will want to do it."

Choice in the context of school, like choice in the context of a broader democratic society, cannot entirely be a matter of each individual's doing his thing. Choices of individuals interact in very complex ways with choices of collectivities; such choices are a social and a political as well as an individual process, and bear upon both the conduct of life in school and the conduct of life in society. The second conclusion I draw, then, is that both the practice and the study of the social-political process of the exercise of choice is a crucial part of the educative experience. And as I have argued in another paper,¹ choice is power in motion.

A Massive Political Effort

There are curriculum specialists who, steeped in the "progressive" conception of education, will be in basic agreement with my views both of the centrality of choice in a sound pedagogy and of the close interaction between social-political and educative processes. Yet they and I too often have been content to substitute vacuous rhetoric about "humanizing education" for action; and when we have acted, too often the action has been a futile sort of patchwork affair, piecing little tidbits of humanism onto a thoroughly manipulative, impersonal, mechanical sort of curriculum.

We have had, it seems to me, a naïve belief that if we would only display our humanism often enough, everyone would buy it. The third conclusion I draw is that reconstruction of our nation's schools along peda-

¹ John S. Mann. "The Curriculum Worker: A View of His Training and His Tasks." *Educational Comment* 1970. Toledo, Ohio: University of Toledo, 1970.

gogically progressive and politically democratic lines requires a massive and strident political effort.

These three conclusions establish the relations among the three concerns with which I began. Students are demanding drastic revision of both political and educational outlook and behavior. Their vision of the process by which education is to proceed is a synecdoche for their vision of the political process, so that the exercise of one is both a part of and a preparation for the other. And the current efforts among students to organize themselves into a coherent political force have the potential for drastically altering the balance of powers that now shapes school policy.

Alliance with Students

Given this outlook, the widespread tendency to respond to student movements with repressive measures appears to be either folly or malice. The dissident students have fundamental commitments in common with many of us who are professional educators; this includes professors, teachers, and curriculum and administrative personnel. They offer us the most viable course to fulfilling our commitment that has come along in many years. That course in its simple essence is alliance with them in a struggle against those individuals and institutions that stand for oppressive "educative" practices we have come to recognize as "dehumanizing." The form the struggle is to take is an open question. It is quite clear that the students have made mistakes about political tactics and have made errors in analyzing educational issues. It is also clear that we have been irresponsible in failing to think seriously about political tactics at all and in failing to lend our skill to their analytic efforts.

Yet if one believes, as I do, that the thrust of their protest is both right and urgent, then the proper course of action would seem to be to support and strengthen their movement—to help make it a better movement.

There are at least three kinds of activity

that the typical idealistic young radical is involved in that could be substantially supported by teachers and curriculum workers. First, he is engaged in criticizing and analyzing current school practices and formulating alternatives to these practices. Second, he is involved in learning (a) about his own political and legal powers and rights, (b) about the distribution of and legal constraints upon power in and around his school system, and (c) about other powers, such as groupings of teachers within the teachers union, with which a convergence of interests might lead to joining forces. Third, the dissident student is engaged in direct political action over specific issues, some of which are educational and some of which are more broadly political. "Action" here includes such things as leafleting, holding public meetings, soliciting support from other groups, picketing, parading—all the legal things that constitute participation in the democratic political process.

Mutual Benefit

In each of these three activities the dissident student has much to gain from the support and assistance of professional educators. And the professional educator who shares the commitments I have expressed in this paper also has much to gain. For in the restlessness of these highly committed and strongly motivated students he has an unprecedented opportunity simultaneously to build a prototypically progressive educational program, to cultivate the kind of understanding of political power that is required of citizens in a democracy, and to contribute to the growth and internal education of a political movement in opposition to current school practices that he finds destructive, oppressive, and as thoroughly misguided as they are firmly entrenched.

What I envision, but what I cannot spell out here in detail, is a movement to design a progressive curriculum specifically for these angry radical students, in which thorough study of educational policy formulation and of the politics of schools would converge in and be reinforced, corrected, refined, and

deepened in the practical experience of actually formulating educational policy and struggling to enact it. It would make perfect sense, I think, for this experience itself to constitute the major portion of the dissident student's curriculum for a semester or two in his junior or senior year.

This sort of curricular innovation will not be widely accepted by school systems, because it expresses a genuinely opposition point of view.² Its pedagogy, its political strategy, and its underlying assumptions diverge markedly from those of current school practices. I believe, though, that such an innovation provides a point of departure for curriculum planning which is responsive to the interests and world-views of many high school students.

This approach will strike a responsive chord, too, in a large number of teachers who entered the profession with ideals they have

² Remember the point Charles Beard, among others, has made, that in a democratic society schools must be left free to criticize the society that sponsors them. The same relation obtains between a particular program and a school system that sponsors it. See: Charles Beard, *The Unique Function of Education in American Democracy*. Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1937.

long since learned out of necessity to keep buried away.

We can do much more than merely talk about ways to "humanize education." We can help the students with the kind of curriculum I have hinted at in spite of opposition, which may mean doing it before, after, and around instead of in school. We can seek out and bring together like-minded teachers and cultivate support in related professional and paraprofessional groupings. We can seek proper bases for coalitions between our professional groups and dissident student groups. We can become more aware, ourselves, of our own historical roots and of the deep interlocks between current school practice and other aspects of our national life.

These are some of the things educators can do to move beyond the rhetoric of "humanizing education." I would expect that the progressive paradigm is as good for us as it is for the students. If so, then our efforts to understand the relations between education and freedom will themselves be refreshed, corrected, and deepened as we move into a more direct and more active expression of our beliefs and commitments. □

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