
Unlearning the Idea of School

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AMERICA faces today a confrontation between two cultures that threatens increasingly to reach apocalyptic proportions. The vanguard of this confrontation is primarily composed of the most socially conscious youth now in the high schools and colleges of the country. They demand of their elders a choice: *not to be for is to be against*. Kent State, Jackson, the Wall Street beatings all seem to indicate that the elders are not above killing their children when severely threatened by the new values and behavior that constitute an emerging culture.

In the midst of this confrontation, the public school finds itself faced with a historically unprecedented situation. The middle is dropping out of things. No longer is there a cultural consensus to be transmitted to the young. The monolith of a national educational system with a common curriculum undergirding starkly uniform school cultures is cracking. The melting pot cannot handle its brew. The Common School is dead.

Educational Development as Personal Change

The necessary response to this cultural confrontation on the part of society's educational institutions is to confront the culture

of each specific institution. The value systems that determine how each person within the institution views reality need to be examined as the first step toward significant educational development. Institutional roles like student and teacher must be abandoned in this process as person confronts person. In this context the record of educational development in the decade of the sixties is dismal.

Almost all development efforts have remained within present school cultures and result in tinkering, when the imperative is to move toward changing the entire culture of what are now called schools. Programmatic tinkering must give way to development that begins to deal with the value systems that determine how persons involved in the educational process view reality. A plurality of educational cultures must be developed out of the process of confronting the individual value systems present in specific communities.

No givens exist outside of the persons participating in this kind of development; it involves a kind of critique of absolute doubt at everything now being done in schools.

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Anything less than this kind of beginning simply assumes the value of educational practices that were made for a society long since vanished from the scene. It is no longer valid simply to assume the value of a graded curriculum, a teacher, or a classroom; that is, the idea of a school, as it has been known, may no longer be applicable to many communities.

Only this kind of developmental process can begin to deal with the cultural confrontation now occurring. Within this process, adults must begin to view themselves as aliens in a foreign culture; many young people already know this about themselves. Like travelers in a foreign culture, participants in this process must abandon or unfreeze previously formed concepts so that they may perceive truly new disclosures that will result in new directions. The ability to unfreeze one's concepts in order to receive new disclosures is one way of viewing personal growth. From this perspective the focus of educational development becomes personal change, not packages and programs.

Schooling as a Social Phantasy System

The beginning of this type of development is to unlearn the idea of keeping a school. To stay within the confines of schooling is to prevent the process from developing. Schools must begin to be viewed as simply places where people can meet to decide what they need to do to promote the growth of those present. Viewed in this way, schools may be able to cease being prisons for most young people. However, the school idea is so deeply entrenched in the public consciousness that its abandonment will require real personal change. Schooling has become a social phantasy system determining how young and old experience each other.

A clear indication of the power the school has over the public mind can be seen in experiments like those involving performance contracting. Such contracting is a kind of total extension of the school idea: someone else (a professional, an expert) knows what I am to know or be able to do,

at what time, and how much. The someone else can even prove what he is doing to me because he measures it, so accountability can be contracted out to a new class of educational engineers.

Yet there is no public outrage at such contracting, and school systems join the parade. In the middle of the parade there is a float called "The Student." There is a bright shiny tin can, open at the top, emitting through a slot in the bottom achievement scores on national reading tests. Off to the side, however, a group of students holds a counter-demonstration, carrying signs that read in various ways: I am a Person. Strange that signs bearing such a message need to be carried, but the idea of school is such that one must carry a sign in order not to be a tin can. Like all outmoded phantasy systems, schooling must be outgrown if personal experience is to maintain an authentic quality.

One of the central issues of present society from which the educational system is not exempt is whether adults can learn to view the young as persons. As free, intentional subjects creating a new culture, they must be listened to as active cultural agents, not mere receptacles. Behaviorism and its mechanistic models served schools well in their concern with the student as a tin can. The crisis now pressing demands a new set of concepts for thinking about personal development that leaves room for freedom, meaning, religious experience—all those human qualities that are an important part of the emerging new culture.

Unlearning the Need To State Goals

Age no longer carries with it the possibility of wisdom and experience, but the burden of needing to unlearn. Meeting young people as persons rather than as students will hopefully lead to the unlearning demanded of a society at war with its children. Yet in order to take even the first step, the common perception of *student* must be unlearned.

The ASCD Commission on Goals in American Education is a Commission with a

mandate that must likewise be unlearned. The pastoral simplicity of a society where common educational goals could be meaningfully stated has vanished. Any educational situation concerned with more than purely technical matters must begin by asking who and where the persons involved are now, not by telling them where they are to go. To really discover who and where one is requires a good deal of unlearning; if the

Commission on Goals can accomplish this unlearning for itself and share the process, it can offer an exemplar of an unlearning group to American education.

In the beginning is to unlearn. After the debris is cleared, the contours of a new land may offer an invitation to adventure. The coming decade calls for a plurality of educational adventures, if the abyss of massive and violent confrontation is to be avoided. □

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