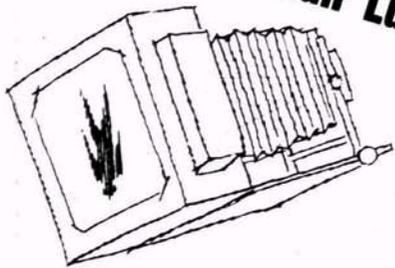


Goals for American Education: The Individual Focus



DWANE RUSSELL *

THE concept of focusing education upon the individual may be considered trite in light of the volume of literature on the subject. Perhaps no other concept has received such widespread attention in educational writing. However, if one takes a close and serious look at current practices in our schools, he cannot escape the conclusion that we are far from implementing this basic concept. The question must arise, therefore, as to whether or not we are really committed to this ideal. Our accomplishments thus far indicate that we are not.

This effort to redefine goals of American education provides us an opportunity and responsibility to come to grips once again with the relationship of education to the individual. For without proper consideration of the individual, any derived or redefined set of goals will lack a firm foundation to promote change and improvement in our schools.

A Tradition of Essentialism

It is the purpose of this paper, therefore, to explore where we are now in American education in respect to the individual and to propose a new focus upon individual potential. Such a focus must be based upon valid assumptions concerning the definition

of education, its role in society, and its relationship with the individual.

The general pattern of American education, its practices and programs, has been founded upon the concept of essentialism. This concept implies that there is a body of knowledge, skills, and values which is essential for every person to learn. The purpose of education, within this framework, is to guarantee that every student masters these "essentials." One becomes educated when he has acquired this proper body of skills, knowledge, values, and behavior characteristics. Curriculum development is based upon the objectives of acquisition; and teaching methods are designed primarily to serve the transmission process.

Supporting this limited pattern of education is the assumption that man must be made into whatever he becomes—that human development is directed by external forces. Thus, in school these "essentials" must be forced upon the learner. Otherwise, he would not learn what he needs to learn. These two basic ideas molded together have brought into our schools a system of rewards

* Dwane Russell, Director, Division of Continuing Education, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas, and Member, ASCD Commission on Goals in American Education

and punishments designed to guarantee the mastery of the required content. Not only are students expected to learn basically the same knowledge, they are expected also to derive the same conclusions from that knowledge.

Thus, the school program to a very high degree has become a system of conditioning which is unmatched outside the laboratory. A student in this system of education has only two ways out. One is to submit himself to the demands of the system and finally complete its requirements; the other way is to drop out of the system.

Over the years there have been numerous attempts to break this lockstep system. The progressive movement during the early half of the century had limited success. In recent years, numerous ungraded or non-graded organizational patterns have emerged. A great deal of attention has been given to individualized instruction. In too many of these cases, however, the major change involves the rate of learning only. The goals and objectives of the school continue to be directed toward the expectation that all children and youth will learn the same essentials although at a different rate. Needless to say, the success of these programs has been limited.

Perhaps it is time that we in the education profession analyze the basic assumptions upon which we operate. If we do so, we might recognize that these traditional assumptions are invalid for modern youth and society. We could then redirect American education upon a set of premises which would emphasize the individual rather than the process or the content.

Education and Human Potential

In looking for a new direction in American education, we must begin by taking a look at what we mean by education. Most certainly, it is more than the limited transmitting and acquiring process discussed above. In terms of human development, education must be defined to include all those endeavors in which a person engages to maintain and improve himself. From this point

of view, education may be defined broadly and individually as *the development of human potential*.

Such a definition makes education truly a human process. Certainly skills are involved, knowledge is necessary, and values are inherent; but education embraces all of these in a coherent "whole" known as human potential. Any other definition which limits the scope of education thereby limits man's ability to develop.

Since a person's potential is unique within himself, education for each individual is unique. Education, therefore, is individualized by nature and by definition. Any attempt to direct all individuals into the same or similar educational tracks limits their potential. Programs which do so should be recognized as non-educational. Thus, for educational programs to be effective in developing the potential of the individual, they must be open processes; they must embrace all his unique experiences, abilities, and aspirations; and they must be based upon a definition of education which encompasses the varied and unique needs of all men. The acceptance of an open definition is the first step in redirecting American education.

A second basic premise required for a new direction in education involves the "natural" learning capabilities and aspirations of the individual. The idea that all people desire to learn is not new. Educators have refused to accept it in practice because quite often learners have not shown much ambition or enthusiasm toward learning what the school has expected of them. However, we must assume that every person desires to improve himself. Otherwise, we have no escape from the "forced in" approach of conditioning.

We should recognize also that every person perceives his improvement in his own way. Thus, a natural conflict may exist between a person's perception of his needs and the way his needs are perceived by the school unless the school accepts the learner's perception as being valid. In this regard much has been taught in our schools about the self-determination of man. Democracy is founded upon it. Yet the American system of

education has refused continuously to accept it in its students. The possibilities which this faith in the learner presents for education are exciting. For this idea is in direct opposition to the predetermined essentialism which has been forced upon students for so long and which has caused the school experience for many persons to be a series of long dreary days, weeks, months, and years.

If it can be trusted that the learner's own natural drives will lead him to satisfy his learning needs, then the doors can be opened to a self-fulfilling educational experience. School becomes a place for living, not preparation for living. Students, teachers, and parents can come together in an exciting learning environment.

Most knowledge which is worth learning today is relatively new knowledge for most people of all ages. Thus, coordinated learning experiences among adults and children are not only possible, they are necessary for the cohesiveness of families and society. No longer should schools be looked upon as places for just children and youth. Schools must become learning centers for all people. All social institutions then become schools in the sense that they are places where learning takes place. Learning is a lifelong process instead of a school experience. Faith in the learner's own initiative and judgment permits such an open program.

In addition to the premises that education is an eternal process of the self, and that man can be trusted to discover his own needs, a redirection in American education must consider the role of education in relation to man and society. The acceptance of the above premises characterizes education as an individualistic endeavor. Education begins and ends within the individual. Thus, it would appear that education must be focused upon the individual in such a manner that the individual can cope with society adequately.

This is not to imply that the schools as educational institutions should ignore social conditions. If they do, their program cannot be open and meaningful to the learner. The distinction is that the school utilizes social factors which are of concern to the learner as means of helping him develop; the school

does not "take on" social issues per se. It is not equipped to do so; this would sap too much of the school's energy; and the school would actually be attempting to condition the learner.

On the other hand, the school as an institution cannot help but reflect a value system. Its outlook on social conditions must be apparent. The school must strive diligently to overcome the effects of those social factors which inhibit the growth and development of the individual; but it must do these things in a manner which reflects its commitment to individual development and its faith in man to manage society. Otherwise the individual focus will be lost in the maze of social conflict, and any redefinition of education will be buried under the avalanche of social change.

Now what does all this imply in regard to goals for American education? The conclusion offered here is that the goals of American education should be focused upon the development of the individual. Whatever goals are selected should reflect a valid, consistent approach to what man is, and what he can become. They should be based upon a definition of education which embraces all of man's potential and aspirations. They should then relate to man and his society in a way which strengthens the individual in his capacity to design his society. The tendency to overemphasize current social conditions must be avoided; for any set of goals based upon today and what can be envisioned for tomorrow will be temporary at most. The chances are excellent that such a set would be out-of-date before its development is complete.

The attainment of goals based upon the individuality of man will require significant changes in the schools. Achievement standards, required mastery of content, teaching procedures, and curriculum structure will have to be modified. A change from a philosophy of essentialism to a philosophy of individualism will be drastic. However, such a change is mandatory if man is to attain his true potential. The universal infinite characteristic of education is man. This is what education is all about. □

Copyright © 1971 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.