

"Crisis in the Classroom": A Critique

RODNEY P. SMITH *

CHARLES E. SILBERMAN in *Crisis in the Classroom*¹ has done considerably more than some of his predecessors who have attempted to survey American education. Indeed his work has a much broader scope, a more sonorous tone than, say, three random choice books in this genre, for example Albert Lynd, *Quackery in the Public Schools* (Little, Brown and Company, 1950); Martin Mayer, *The Schools* (Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962); and Leslie Hart, *The Classroom Disaster* (Teachers College Press, 1969). Yet what these latter three authors did not have was the prestigious backing of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Author-Directorship of the Carnegie Study of the Education of Educators—a \$300,000 project; and, as is noted in an unnumbered page of *Crisis in the Classroom*, "this book is the product of that study." It will be a much discussed work.

Perhaps, from such an auspicious occasion, potential readers of *Crisis in the Classroom* who were educators had convinced themselves that a much more solid critique would be forthcoming. *Atlantic Monthly*

had, in the summer of 1970, originally featured Silberman in three monthly journals under the title "Murder in the Schoolroom." By the time the book proper had come to press, *murder* had become *crisis*; and by the time most educators had finished browsing through the book, *crisis* was in danger of becoming *banality*. For there is nothing here entirely new to educators.

Yet one should not so easily fault Mr. Silberman, for of all the critics of education of the past two decades Silberman is far and away the most scholarly, the most knowledgeable, and notably the most current in his own time.

The incompleteness of his work lies in the—one hesitates to call it *naïveté*, for Silberman is both an eminent scholar and journalist—lack of any graspable handle for Silberman to take hold of the vast nonsystem of American education. Too, Silberman is "tied" to certain data which had to be presented to a diverse audience. Thus it was

* Rodney P. Smith, Visiting Fellow and Lecturer, Center for the Study of Education, Institute of Social Science, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut

¹ Charles E. Silberman. *Crisis in the Classroom*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1970. 565 pp.

easy for the author to fall into what one might call the error of extrapolation. Meeting an audience of layman and professional educator alike is not easy, and those in the profession will see a viewpoint slanted toward the layman. What then is Silberman's viewpoint?

Silberman evidences the spirit of the time by calling for sensitivity and action (p. 7) and for a society which gives the highest priority to "morality, honesty, (and) kindness." Thus not only the *what* of intellectual ideas and teaching, but also the *how* of that teaching become doubly important in any attempt at a new approach to the humane, the humanness, and the purpose of this new humanity.

From the start of his book, Silberman chastises teachers, principals, and superintendents for their own mindlessness and admonishes them "to ask why they are doing what they are doing—to think seriously or deeply about the purposes or consequences of education" (p. 11). Silberman further believes that this mindlessness is "diffused" throughout "the entire society" (p. 11). Mindlessness, alone, then may be assumed to be the "central problem"—an inability or an unwillingness to think about purpose and priorities.

In successive order, Silberman asks whether American education has been a success or a failure, and he tries to determine what is really wrong with our schools other than mindlessness. He sounds again the problems of education and equality, touches on the nature of authority and the thwarting of creativity leading to conformity. He delves into the new open classroom techniques of the British primary schools, touches on reformation in the high school, and finally addresses himself to the education of teachers, which latter task had, incidentally, been set as the major goal of the Carnegie Study.

It is only in chapters three, four, and five that Silberman attempts to analyze the schools and education in depth; and from the philosophy of John Dewey to the computers of Patrick Suppes very little is left out. Though to be sure Dewey receives only a few lines, the common school less than a page,

whereas the last decade—particularly the latter years of the 1960's—receives almost a hundred. Thus it is somewhat difficult to seize on any historical perspective, though of course it is not assumed the author wished to maintain one.

Much of the middle of Silberman's book documents the present state of the British primary school. One cannot help but infer that Silberman subscribes almost wholly to the open classroom, the "integrated day," and the inquiry approach of this British innovation.

If the British system offers the direction toward a better way for American primary schools, what then about the American high school? Here again, *mindlessness* is the problem. For "mindlessness affects the high school curriculum every bit as much as the elementary curriculum." Nor does Silberman leave out that other school: "And the junior high school, by almost unanimous agreement, is the wasteland—one is tempted to say cesspool—of American education" (p. 324). Clearly the British infant school cannot be translated upward. Adolescents are different; they have their own strongly shaped interests and they are "far less susceptible to the teacher's influence" (p. 324). Further, "adolescents learn in different and more complex ways than young children." (These latter quotes illustrate, at best, errors of extrapolation. At the worst, they are simplistic statements.)

The solution then must be complex; and Silberman comes close to endorsing a utopian style school somewhere between the Bruners and the Schwabs on one end of a continuum and the Holts and the Friedenbergs on the other. Such a high school would be part comprehensive high school and part teacher training institution. It would be designed along the lines of "The Clinical School" (A Proposal Prepared by the Members of the Clinical School Collaborative, Cambridge, Massachusetts, October 30, 1967, mimeographed) and Schaefer's *The School as a Center of Inquiry* (Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967). There would be remedial help and tutoring in the basic skills, independent study, work experience, academic and vocational electives of

all types, either "the freedom to be conventional" or "the freedom to experiment." Students, for example, would elect letter grades or "credit-no credit." The 1200 or so students would be grouped into "houses" containing 320 students each; a differentiated staff of guidance, administrative, and instructional personnel would work in interdisciplinary teams. In essence, the school would be very like the John Adams High School in Portland, Oregon.

What then of *Crisis in the Classroom*? Does Silberman present comprehensive data? Does he present some new viewpoint?

Certainly it would have been well had Silberman presented data on the procedures of philosophy and goal setting in American education; on the current status of learning theories for furthering these goals (and the controversy of freedom of inquiry this implies); on governance of the school; on tax bases and the economics of public, private, and parochial education; on local, state, and national leadership in education; and of particular interest would have been some broad discussions on the management of education and the tying together of all these parts. At least in this respect, Silberman is incomplete. On the other hand, in some instances, the author is not as brief as he might have been. The countless *items* seem superfluous at times, the format of them comes off as somewhat affected, though the rhetoric and steady drumming format are needed to emphasize the classroom crises.

New Goals for New Times

One cannot help but wonder to what degree these are representative since no scientific control about the gathering of these 200 or so *items* is mentioned—unfortunate in an era so immersed in the behavioral sciences.

However, the strengths of the book are manifold. It is above all an attempt at a comprehensive view of American schools, which, coupled with the two recent Gallup polls on education and with National Assessment, is beginning to give us an overview of education in this country, something we

have not had before. Hopefully, the federal government and other foundations will allow us to look more deeply.

In this respect, one foundation, Carnegie, and one man, Silberman, together with others involved in the Study have clearly begun a job which the separate states and the nation should have begun long ago—a job to discern new goals in education for new times. Though less grandiose than this theme, other sections in the book provide syntheses of the failures and successes of American education, numerous thumbnail sketches of both mindless and mindful American schools, pages on the British infant schools, discussions of the *clinical school*, and a section on teacher education—all of these stand out as excellent reference data, particularly since Silberman has in most cases carefully documented his work.

What of Silberman's theme, his viewpoint? Is education's problem in America one of mindlessness, a seeming inability to think deeply of purposes and consequences? And if this is the problem, does voicing this concern elevate *Crisis in the Classroom* above pedestrian status? Probably so, though what happens next in American education will determine the importance of Silberman's book and the Carnegie Study. Others have been concerned before.

Quite clearly, Silberman voices a concern which we may expect to hear more and more. What is the place of education in a renewal of this society? No, Silberman does not ask this question, though he might have. In this respect, on a careful reading of *Crisis in the Classroom*, one sees that Silberman is not so much the harsh critic of education as he is the Dutch uncle of society in general. Thus, blame for the present crisis in American education is to be shared equally by the educational establishment and the rest of the country. One is led to surmise that only national commitment to the enormity of this crisis seems likely to help. For in many ways the remaking of American education is also the remaking of American society through the reordering of American priorities, and this is no small task—not even to write about. □

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