

Coping with the Establishment

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WE APPEAR to have reached a time when some of us in the educational establishment are ready to encourage students to deal with us. How else can we explain an article titled "Coping with the Establishment" in a journal that may be thought to speak for the establishment? There would appear to be just a bit of "Alice in Wonderland" in the situation. In any case, let us cope with the problem.

One could argue that persons in an establishment are hardly the ones to teach younger people about coping with that establishment. The analogy that comes to mind is that of white liberals telling black leaders what to do, a practice that ended when new black leadership asserted itself, determined to chart its own course. By the same token, secondary school and university students are unlikely to accept at face value the advice of establishment figures who suggest ways of getting around the establishment.

The point need not be pursued at length, however, since few students are likely to read articles in *Educational Leadership*. The readership, after all, is made up of persons at various points within the educational establishment. Hence, my thoughts are directed toward those of us who not only want to encourage students to challenge the bureau-

cratic system of education, but also are themselves involved in coping with that system.

I can suggest only one method by which any of us can hope to teach anyone else about coping with the establishment: *by example!* We either exhibit behavior conducive to reform and the democratic ethic or else we engage in rhetoric which brings us good salaries but is hardly productive. While this answer appears simple, it is one that has consistently escaped educators.

As educators, we are convinced that we can create curriculum materials that somehow or other will teach various skills, knowledge, and values. There is no doubt that educational materials do indeed accomplish these goals to a limited degree. Our curricula are mere shadows of life, however. What students truly learn as they move along the treadmill of schooling are appropriate values and behaviors that open the various gateways to educational and occupational mobility.

An illustration of this process is the ubiquitous civics and American government

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courses that have been taught by thousands of well-meaning teachers to millions of bored students for generations. We have assumed that if students learn the fundamentals of city, county, state, and national government, including such fascinating facts as the difference between a circuit court and a court of appeals and the steps by which a bill becomes law, they will thereafter be eager and active participants in the democratic process. What most of us have failed to teach in these courses is that tremendous gaps exist between the textbook descriptions of governmental processes and the real world of politics.

We never seem to learn in civics courses that political behavior demands trade-offs and compromises in decision making. We seldom learn about the corruption, the bribes, the payoffs, or the social-class and racial prejudices evident in law enforcement which are also a part of our governmental processes. Oh yes, we learn that there were evil machines like Tammany Hall—but somehow or other all of those “bad” things were in the past.

We never learn until we are out of school that those same processes are at work today. I am reminded, for example, of Robert Lynd's statement of more than 30 years ago which went something to the effect that America has the finest system of justice in the world, but one had better hire the best lawyer one can afford. Lynd's point underscores the gap between reality and the ideal, a gap that exists in most aspects of our society.¹

Too many of us have attempted to deal with ideals in a genuine hope that the next generation of students will indeed put those ideals to work. What actually happens has been brought to our attention by student activists over the past decade. Namely, we have been hypocritical and dishonest in much of our teaching of history and government. Activist students have also taught us that it is insufficient to mouth ideals unless we practice those ideals in our personal and professional lives.

¹ Robert Lynd, *Knowledge for What?* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1939.

To Deal Honestly

The real question is, how well have we learned that lesson? There is no doubt that some in the educational establishment—and I include teachers, secretaries, administrators, board of education members, etc., in that term—have learned their lesson well and are doing all in their power to open lines of communication in efforts to deal honestly with problems in education and society. These people have learned that there is absolutely no substitute for an openness in which one's ideals are measured against one's behavior. Yet we are also aware of many members of the educational establishment—and here again I mean teachers, secretaries, administrators, board of education members, etc.—who because of fear, because of vested interests, or because of exceptionally conservative political or religious beliefs, do everything possible to thwart any open dialogue or any honest confrontation of the issues that exist in most American schools. We all know principals, for example, who insist that children say the Pledge of Allegiance each morning, but whose own policies are derived from authoritarian principles hardly in keeping with “liberty and justice for all.”

Turning to another aspect of the credibility gap, to what degree have school people become involved in critical social issues? We all can point to that teacher or two per building who have openly attempted to awaken their students to problems of racism, to social class prejudices, to those aspects of our economic system that are inhumane, to ecological problems, to the need for political action, and so on. Yet these teachers have always been the exception to the rule, and I regret to say that is still the case.

The overwhelming bulk of school people have not demonstrated any strong commitment to the amelioration of social ills in this nation. Some of us have organized and have become militant about our working conditions. Yet the number of teachers and other educators who transfer some of this militant action toward issues broader than their own welfare is not large. There is some hope,

however, that as teachers become more organized, a greater number will learn to utilize mechanisms by which social reform can be initiated. Many teachers have learned over the past decade that in organization there is strength and that they need no longer be cowed by their superiors downtown. Some students are also learning this lesson.

Action Can Be Taken

I am suggesting that perhaps what many students have best learned over the past decade is that social action *can* be taken. They have learned this from some of their teachers in the larger cities who have taken part in strikes. They have learned this from the media which described the work of Martin Luther King, Jr., civil rights groups, or Black militants. I have no confidence whatever that they would ever have learned the processes of social action and of challenging the establishment from the textbooks and standardized teaching approaches that dominate most American schools.

If they have learned anything about how school people react to controversial issues, it is that controversial issues by and large should be avoided. They have learned that it is not "proper" to take sides on an issue. They have also learned that most educational administrators want no publicity about their school unless that publicity is positive. Problems are generally defined as not being positive. Ergo, most students have learned that school people will go to any length to avoid publicity about problems and that most principals will do everything in their power not to have a problem kicked upstairs. Students

have not been inspired by most school people when it comes to social action, to taking strong stands on social issues, or to exhibiting behavior based on deep commitment to social justice.

The Cool Indifference

I salute those handfuls of teachers and administrators who have stood for principle and who have suffered the cool indifference of their colleagues. I also will not disparage efforts being made to make our social studies classes far more relevant. Some of the new simulation games, for example, may give students insights into the actual workings of governmental processes. There is no doubt that there are exceptionally fine teachers who do everything within their power to involve their students in firsthand participation in various educational, social, and political issues in their community. I applaud such efforts and do whatever I can to support them.

Yet if we are truly to encourage anyone to cope with the establishment, whether that establishment be in a local school, in state government, or in Washington, D.C., then we all have to become far more deeply involved in efforts to reform the political decision-making processes in this nation. What students need is a great deal more evidence that their teachers are prepared to support the Bill of Rights openly and consistently.

When most school people are vigorously in support of civil rights, students will begin to learn how to cope with establishments. When most teachers actively participate in peace marches, then students will finally begin to learn ways of coping. When most

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school people are vigorous supporters of students' rights . . . when most teachers are actively involved in efforts to curb discrimination and prejudice . . . when most teachers are defenders of free speech for all . . . and on and on. When these types of activities are widespread, in the open, and characteristic of our profession as a whole, then students by and large will learn not only what coping is all about but also will learn what a democracy must always encourage.

I am not opposed to courses titled "Coping with the Establishment." I am not opposed to any efforts made, in which students are given ideas on methods by which they can petition for change, by which they can make presentations to decision-making bodies, by which they can work out compromises, and so on. There are, after all, many strategies appropriate to change and reform efforts. However, the only way that one copes effectively with the establishment of any institution is to deal with it directly around some issue. And the issues around which battles must continue to be fought are still much in evidence.

There is, of course, one other method of coping, and that is simply to ignore the establishment. A number of activists and turned-off students have taken this path in recent years. In point of fact, the term "coping" suggests a passivity. It implies that one can do nothing and perhaps the best response is simply to stay in the background and cope with things as well as one can.

Obviously this is not the sense in which I have been using the term in this brief discussion. "Coping" in my definition suggests approaches by which any of us—whether we be students or members of the establishment—can begin to make some headway as we attempt to solve problems, to open the doors of opportunity, and to combat injustice.

An Honest Lesson

Perhaps that is where the whole matter rests: One need not cope with the establishment or get involved in the strategies of social change and reform unless one is deeply committed to the highest ideals of this nation.

In this regard, I agree with Arthur Pearl when he argues that educators must be *for* something—and that something is a commitment to democracy in its best sense.² I would only underscore my conviction that democratic principles can best be taught by example rather than by precept.

To those who share my conviction, I can only return to my main point: When most of us in school work exhibit in our day-to-day behavior a readiness and an eagerness to confront problems and to work for educational and social reform, we will be teaching the best possible ways by which one copes. However, if most of us are committed to simply keeping school, and to keeping things quiet and to hoping that our school will not be "next," then why even bother talking about coping with the establishment?

Whatever we do, students (I hope) see beyond our rhetoric. This does not mean that students have an edge on an intuitive type of learning. I am only suggesting that, given all of the years in which students sit through classes and watch teachers in action, it does not take them long to learn what teachers stand for. So many of us have stood for the status quo for so long, that many students, by the time they reach the secondary school and certainly the university, have written off all of their teachers as grinds. That is too bad, but that is the way it is and it is a condition with which I am not happy. One reason I was glad to write this article was to encourage others out there in education leadership land who share these concerns to begin meeting with one another and to begin organizing around the issues most pressing in their local situations.

The more deeply we become involved in educational reform, in the confrontation of social issues, and in the cause of social justice, the more we will offer in the way of ideals our students may emulate. If we truly believe that what our democracy preaches must be practiced in our schools, we will be providing an honest lesson on how one copes with any establishment. □

² See: Arthur Pearl. "What's Wrong with the New Informalism in Education?" *Social Policy* 1 (6): 15-23; March-April 1971.

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