

# Alternative Forms of Schooling

**Ronald C. Doll**

**F**OR the past several years, I have used tape recorders in trying to learn what young people between the ages of 11 and 19 think about a variety of phenomena. Dozens of youngsters have talked informally with me about the pressures they feel, the values they hold (or find lacking), the proximities and distances between themselves and their parents and teachers, and especially their views of what education really is.

As a consequence of engaging in these electronically-recorded discussions, I have come to an altered view of the life space of children and youth. I have also arrived at a different concept of the relevance of schemes and systems of education within this life space.

## **Youngsters' Views of Schooling**

Young people of today do not think of schooling and education as being equivalent or synonymous. They believe education literally fills their entire life space; yet they see schooling as properly occupying only a section of that space. A bright twelfth grader put it this way:

When education is of enough concern to the American people to be given a position at cabinet level, the first Secretary of Education,

and all the people who fill this job later, had better give less attention to schools and colleges than the Commissioner of Education usually gives. Instead, these men and women should think about the contributions to education made by television, paperbacks, radio, clubs, trade unions, businesses, Sunday schools, community programs, and the corners where kids hang out. School doesn't touch a lot of the real education we get.

Though this teen-ager may have been seeing the real situation through a glass darkly, his view is supported in the specific statements of his peers. I asked the question, "What big, important thing have you learned *anywhere* that you've considered worth learning?"

Youngsters provided widely varied answers to this query. Their answers fall within six content categories: the intellectual, the emotional, the personal-social, the aesthetic, the ethical-moral-spiritual, and the physical. Within these categories, the young people want to do two things: (a) acquire meaning and (b) develop competence. They have strong regard for subject matter which is interdisciplinary, filled with opportunities for inquiry, and useful in solving life problems. Above all, they say that most of the learnings they *now* consider important have come to them by way of media and influences outside

institutional settings. If they were more sophisticated in current affairs, they might talk about the effects of youth subcultures, the mass media, and the nature of the corporate state.

Next I have asked the youngsters, "What could schools do to educate you in ways that no other agencies could or should?" They have answered (in paraphrase):

1. Put what we learn in school into a framework or system which will help us understand it better. (Youngsters think disconnected, unassociated content falls into the category of useless baggage.)

2. Teach us "fundamentals." Nowhere except in school are you likely to gain the tools you need for thinking and serving.

3. Give us opportunities and materials in school to help us inquire, discover, and probe meaning. Getting meaning is perhaps the most important thing schools can help us do.

4. Stop attempting to compete with and to destroy what we learn elsewhere. Instead, seek to coordinate what we are taught in school with what we learn outside school.

Another of my questions has been: "What could the schools do to improve themselves?" The commonest answer, stated here in the subsequently-written words of a respondent, is: "The schools should not take themselves so seriously. Time given to the formal work of schools could be reduced, especially if teachers would stop unloading their pet bodies of subject matter."

Some young people suggest that, to open the schools to informal, life-related experiences, it is necessary to make the schools less institutionalized and to put them increasingly in touch with reality. Other youngsters appeal for "real individualization," thereby implying that we teachers have only played at individualizing teaching and learning within tired, old group settings.

While one should recognize that the ultimate worth of a product cannot be gauged by its consumers without the added judgment of its engineers, fabricators, and official evaluators, I have been impressed with the quality of basic thinking about the theme of this issue of *Educational Leadership* which has

been done by the young people I have come to know. If schools are indeed as irrelevant and inflexible as they often seem, they need to be changed in ways which we are only beginning to identify. Some adults are in favor of doing away with the school as it now exists. For instance, Everett Reimer has recently written *School Is Dead*, "an indictment of the system and a strategy of revolution." Other adults are much less sure that sweeping changes in schooling are needed or warranted.

### **Needed: Altered Conceptions of the Educative Function**

At any rate, the time seems to be right for high-level deliberation about the full meaning and conduct of education in the United States. If such deliberation is to amount to anything, it cannot stop with mere reporting of what has been said at a White House Conference or at the meetings of a new commission on education. Such deliberation should result in the making of a flexible master plan which can guide legislative action and influence reorganization of educational agencies of all sorts.

The planners should, I believe, resist the temptation to call for a national curriculum. Rather, their obligations might be to survey the whole educational scene, to note duplications in effort as well as needs for education which have heretofore been neglected, to suggest functions which could be discharged by existing agencies and by those yet to be organized, and to develop models which offer options and alternatives. A few of the major questions the planners might seek to answer are these:

- Within our total social-cultural context, what educational efforts and activities now exist? What other efforts and activities should there be?

- What agencies should have responsibility for making these efforts and conducting these activities?

- What responsibilities belong exclusively to schools?

● How can schools best discharge their responsibilities?

In an era in which setting goals and aims is being emphasized more than it has been for some time, the goals of schooling and the aims of schools need to be reconsidered in the light of a grand set of goals for American education. Presumably the teachers and other persons who reset the goals of schooling within the larger context of education will find that elementary and secondary schools have sometimes accepted responsibility for too much, and have not always performed well the many tasks they have undertaken. When the directions in

which schools may properly and wisely move have been redetermined, questions affecting openness, informality, and freedom of movement within schools can be settled with greater ease.

This issue of *Educational Leadership* presents several points of view about alternatives to schooling. These points of view should be repeated and supplemented during a continuing, great debate about the true significance and the future thrust of American education.

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