

Implications: New Conceptions of Relevancy

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THE questions to ask when one considers the implications of new conceptions of relevancy are the following:

1. What is the source of the new conceptions of relevancy?
2. Are those at the source able to carry out these new conceptions?
3. If not—will those in the position to carry out these new conceptions, do so without alteration?
4. If those able to carry out these new conceptions do not fully accept them, what will their reaction be?
 - a. Outright opposition
 - b. Acceptance of that amount necessary
 - c. Cooptation
 - d. A change of definition, while playing the same game.

The first point to realize is that the “new conceptions of relevancy” did not originate, and are not originating, from those in established positions in the field of education. We might even consider that relevancy in education, in America, is quite different for those in power than for those who are powerless. There is clarity about content (some questions about method) when one considers education in terms of natural sciences and technology. When one considers culture, values, psychology, ethics—generally social

education—serious differences are immediately evident.

Education, in a general sense, serves a national purpose. It is a vehicle for acculturation and a measure by which rewards are given or withheld. More important, it is used on a national scale to prepare a people for liberation or pacification. Other uses (many times related to the preceding purposes) have to do with vocation or with education as a status symbol in itself. The national purpose of America must, therefore, be looked at both historically and currently for clues to relevancy and “new” conceptions.

America, from its beginnings, has had different national goals for different peoples. Its purpose for Anglo-Saxons was the opposite of its purpose for Africans and for the indigenous Americans who were here when the Europeans arrived. The shades of differences occurred around those groups from Europe that exchanged their customs, language, etc., for the “privilege” of “melting” and becoming “Americans” on the one hand—and those able to have some distance in definition from the African who had been forced into slavery. This approach is evident not only in domestic relations, but also in

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foreign relations. Jacobs *et al.* in referring to this conclude, "all minority cultures which seemed to block the white man's drive to power were destroyed."¹

The push for "new conceptions of relevancy" is coming from the oppressed groups. Those in power continue to try to maintain the status quo. What appear to be new conceptions must be carefully scrutinized. If we are not vigilant we will have a new package, with a new name, containing the same old product. John Williams, in commenting on some insights gained from the civil rights struggle, observes:

... both black and white have learned—blacks to their impatience and deepening frustration, and whites to their pleasure and relief—that the American sociopolitical system is designed to, and does, absorb a greater number of minority groups' demands than they ever believed possible—absorb them without altering the patterns, pace, or practice of society, without altering the foundations one millimeter.²

Is there any real attitudinal difference between making Mexican American children kneel and ask forgiveness if discovered speaking their native language in school and the description of a new bilingual program by a Massachusetts educator as "we will allow them to speak Spanish until they learn English"? The latter is far from the new conceptions of relevancy that Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans envision when they speak of bilingual and bicultural programs.

There will be no new relevancy without a movement which is more radical than any currently taking place. The movement for community control of schools by the black community came close to this. The fervor with which it was opposed indicates that it was aiming at the heart of the matter—the redistribution of power. Many of the "new conceptions of relevancy" are the diluted and defused versions of some of the implications of that movement. Lerone Bennett observes:

The WASP still rules but he rules increas-

ingly through others. He has been able to buy off the challenge of the white ethnics by cooptation and mystification and communalism. But there is reason to believe that the system no longer permits the large scale purchase of groups. And in the blacks the WASP and his shaky allies are faced for the first time with a group with radical claims and radical chains to break. The situation of white ethnics was not radical enough to push them into total confrontation with the system. The only group so disadvantaged and so inextricably tied up with the soil of "America," tied up with everything, with Jamestown and Monticello and the Civil War and Broadway, the only group prepared to serve as a protagonist of the whole history of "America" is the African-American.³

Time is still being bought, however, to avoid this. The "new concept of relevancy" is a part of the price. The major discussions in education, however, still center around integration, segregation, separation, biculturalism, pluralism, metropolitanism, etc. Many believe that the forms chosen and the definitions being made by those in power are geared more toward keeping things the same, rather than making the only change that will allow for change—that is, a shift in power relationships.

To reach what is needed, however, will not be smooth or necessarily orderly. As mentioned above, the claims are radical, and radical change cannot be made and still maintain the system as it is. There are "experiments," but even these indicate an unwillingness to change. To entitle a school or a system experimental because the school or system is in the hands of Navajos or Mexican Americans is to ignore a statement made on January 25, 1968, by a group concerned about the education of their children being controlled by others. They stated, "Our vision of control by the community is not on a demonstration basis for one or two years, but indefinitely."⁴

Parent advisory committees and use of parents and other community people as em-

¹ Paul Jacobs *et al.* *To Serve the Devil*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1971.

² John Williams. *The King God Didn't Save*. New York: Coward McCann Publishers, 1971.

³ Lerone Bennett, Jr. "Liberation." *Ebony* 25: 36-38+, August 1970.

⁴ Position Statement. Five-State Organizing Committee for Community Control, January 25, 1968.

ployees are a part of Title I, Follow Through, Head Start, and a few other special programs. None, however, really gives the community the kind of power to make meaningful changes. As a matter of fact, some of these practices at local levels are deliberately used to coopt some of the activist community members who would otherwise continue to push for radical change.

There are other things happening. There are many alternative schools developing, some from different frames of reference, but all indicating dissatisfaction with the established system of education. These are developing outside of the system and, at this time, are in no way a threat to it. Some of these schools or ways of presenting education are quite good and seem to meet the test of a new relevancy. All that I know of, however, are either struggling to survive financially or are placed at the mercy of one of the arms of the established system (private foundations, universities, the federal government, or a local educational system).

The advent of a local educational system trying to incorporate the alternate schools is, of course, recent. It appears that those schools which are "acceptable" will be incorporated. It remains to be seen if the "new" schools can really influence the system in any radical fashion. I would suspect that it will be easier for them to be rendered ineffective than to make such an impact.

New approaches to educating children and training teachers are being advanced. Old and new arrangements of buildings or no buildings are proposed. Better use of community resources is suggested. Different uses of the world of work and of vocational preparation are among the changes being practiced or discussed. The most publicized of these is the "open" approach to elementary education as reported in *Crisis in the Classroom* by Charles Silberman. The methods hold great promise of being better for all children. In this country it does not change the concern for who controls the making of policy.

It would be ironic for oppressed people to look to a nation such as Great Britain with its history as a colonizer for a definition as to how to educate their children. In the same

vein, a racist in America may be able to educate his own child in the kind of respectful atmosphere that "open" education demands, but certainly not a child he considers as inferior.

Incorporation of women's rights, students' rights, ecology, into curricula is both necessary and meaningful. To date, however, these areas too are being used to buy time to keep from having the major confrontation previously described.

It may be that integration and metropolitanism are the new ways to avoid making the power shifts that are necessary for real changes (many believe this is the case). The climate in which such change is occurring is reminiscent of other times when members of the largest minority group in America began to question the system and place the blame there rather than upon themselves—when they began to realize that the institutions controlled by the white population would not be used to help liberate the black population. It is at these times, as now, that the universities (one of the arms of the system) produce a body of pseudo-scientific findings to justify the racism that is practiced. For example, we now have, among others, theories about the family, heredity, and "unchangeable" characteristics due to early environmental influences.

Making the school more humane is another "new conception of relevancy." Where have the members of the majority population of America found the will, wisdom, and ability, as a group, to practice this? Their history and their current behavior point in a very different direction. If this ingredient is to be a part of our formal educational offerings, it, too, must come from a source not yet empowered in this country.

The evidence, then, would seem to indicate that there is little to be joyful about when considering current changes in educational practices. Another step has been taken, albeit a forced one. It appears, nevertheless, that the step has not been as large as the educators would have us believe. There is a great deal of activity, a generating of ideas, a set of new terms. What remains to be seen is—will there be different results? □

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