

The Dilemma That Will Not Disappear

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Will schools move toward increased regimentation or toward more freedom, flexibility, and the providing of alternatives? This essential dilemma of our time represents a decision that must be faced, whether at local, state, or national level.

PUBLIC education in the last half of the 20th century is moving in divergent directions; divergent to the point that polarization or conflict appears destined to emerge. To understand the crisis, the dilemma must be postulated and the factors or issues contributing to the dilemma must be identified.

Two hypotheses merit examination by the concerned public—parent, taxpayer, legislator, and professional educator. These are as follows:

1. Public education is moving toward a nationally regimented curriculum for all pupils.

2. The increasing complexity of society requires heterogeneity, alternatives, and freedom of choice in the educational enterprise.

While the writer rejects the former and espouses the latter, the purpose of this analysis is to bring to the fore for the reader's evaluation an enumeration of conditions and events providing impetus toward polarizing the issue.

Diversity and Alternatives

Pupil populations in the latter half of the 20th century are markedly different from school populations before World War II. These differences are reflected in variation in racial and ethnic composition, in the mobility of the American family, in the increasing numbers of pupils with special needs, in the recognition that some pupils may be able to perform certain academic skills better than many pupils four or five years their senior, and in the realization that while some pupils accept current educational programs, many pupils are "turned off" by the typical educational diet.

Contributing to pupil and parent attitudes toward education is the fact that an increasingly high percentage of parents have had extensive education, much of it well beyond compulsory education levels. Consequently many adults feel comfortable in challenging current educational systems. These challenges by parents result in demands for education for their children ranging from the Summerhill variety to the regimentation of a military school or the tradition of a Boston Latin School. Since the education profession cannot prove that any single pattern is "correct" (although it is recognized that some pupils respond more effectively to certain patterns than others),

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the education institutions must respond to community pressures to provide alternatives.

Many educational alternatives are being provided. They are stimulated by private foundations and federal grants. They are reflected in the open classroom, team teaching, open campuses, the Parkway School, the storefront educational opportunity, the 12-month school year, or the Skyline Career Development Center. They are reflected in a myriad of new courses, particularly at the secondary level. Many of these are of the mini variety, highly elective, providing opportunity for independent study, relating to the issues of the community, considering the complexity of the family from its physical-psychological-sociological components, or are providing small group seminar experiences for the interchange of ideas and for the development of interdisciplinary perspectives.

To what does this diversity of pupils and alternative programs lead? It leads to definable differences between school systems, definable differences between schools within a school system, and heterogeneity among school programs and instructional techniques.

Research in the area of learning consistently reveals that providing heterogeneity of programs and attempting to adapt programs to individual differences and needs of pupils produce wider ranges of pupil accomplishment for successive age levels, but in so doing generally raise the norm or average for such age groupings. Stating it somewhat differently, attempts to adapt instruction to individual needs expand the range of individual differences, and raise group performance levels.

Consistency, Comparability, and Regimentation

At the same time that trends toward diversity are noted, pressures contributing to consistency and regimentation are also operating. Such trends may be less evident but in their subtlety may be more dangerous.

Frequently, different parent or citizen groups place themselves on somewhat opposite ends of the education philosophy continuum. While freedom and flexibility are

the watchword of some parents, a return to the basics, standardized test performance, and meeting the criterion of entrance into college are the clarion call of others. The evolving confrontations may in the long run be helpful. While few parents or educators can prove the validity of particular viewpoints, they have the right to select and attempt to defend their own positions. While the reader may accept varying philosophies, insidious forces are operating which do not provide for the coexistence of the extremes. These forces are reflected in the ground swell of assessment and accountability activity operating at state and national levels.

Spurred on by the concern for rising costs, and in trying to relate costs to educational quality, the supporters of the importance of test performance in reading, writing, and arithmetic as answers to the evaluation questions are enjoying a heyday. State after state is adopting legislation and providing thousands of dollars to assess the *quality* of its schools on the basis of test scores. California requires its pupils to be tested yearly with results transmitted directly to the legislature. Michigan has identified objectives in reading and mathematics to be accomplished by 100 percent of its first grade pupils, 100 percent of its second grade pupils, and so on throughout the grades. Massachusetts has proposed legislation to test all pupils in every grade, with the intent to rank pupils and schools throughout the entire Commonwealth.

More significant, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), an adjunct of the Educational Commission of the States, is in full gear testing 9-, 13-, and 17-year-old pupils in various curricular areas to determine mastery of objectives identified as important by educational experts. Many states are adopting the National Assessment materials hook, line, and sinker and using these as the basis of their assessment activity. And not too far on the horizon is the intent of National Assessment to conduct research identifying characteristics which contribute to high or low achievement of the objectives, irrespective of the validity of the objectives for local schools and pupils.

National Assessment has made and can continue to make certain valuable contributions if it does not stray from its initially avowed purpose of describing performance status of population samples. Certainly, its focus upon pupil acquisition of concepts and mastery of definable skills is a decided advancement over summation of test item performance by a general number or norm. The latter in no way describes pupil performance.

Yet in spite of its values, in spite of its desire to describe, and in spite of its opportunity to incorporate more than low level objective test items, NAEP is leading us down an increasingly narrow pathway in which the judgments regarding the quality of education will be based upon performance on objectives decided to be important by a chosen few.

In this era of knowledge explosion, in this age of multiplicity in occupational pursuits, in this important period for educational experimentation and the testing of alternatives, the evaluative criteria appear to be couched in constrictive ideas conforming to a hierarchically determined design. Can such a position be justified; should it be supported?

The Dilemma

Two pathways are presented: (a) diversity, alternatives, adaptation to individual needs, and acceptance of philosophical alternatives; or (b) consistency in evaluative criteria, consistency in educational programs, and adoption of a common core or national curriculum. Historians relate the dangers inherent in the latter.

Regrettably the dilemma is not being taken seriously or being examined critically by any sizable or significant group of educators. NAEP is rolling on. Young statisticians are eagerly coveting the assessment monies being provided by the U.S. Office of Education or by state legislatures. State department of education personnel see an opportunity to satisfy their psychological needs for dominance and power, and are being provided a club to wield in place of their leadership responsibility. The U.S. Office of Education

appears convinced that test scores will provide answers to quell the questioning by the funding source—Congress. And no unified efforts appear under way to research the alternatives or examine the values which may be located on many points along the philosophical continuum.

The process of raising this issue is not enough. Action is required which could include:

1. The encouragement of public opposition to any legislation which intends to evaluate education on the basis of limited criteria
2. The continued encouragement of parent demands to provide alternative educational systems to meet varying pupil needs and to reflect various educational philosophies
3. Intensifying efforts to evaluate education in light of varying pupil needs, differentiation in educational programs, and with due recognition of variation in educational goals and philosophies.

Should the citizenry and the educational community be able to work together in this very complex but important process, educational advancement must occur, pupil performance levels would rise, alternatives would be accepted or rejected on the basis of more valid research information, and the dynamics of the American freedoms could be preserved. □

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