Many elements of education, representing the coercive and compulsory conditions of the schools, should be viewed as what schools have been, rather than what they might become or what they ought to be.

However well intentioned and benevolently designed, the imposed and compulsory elements of the schools are historical remnants of a philosophy that compelling an individual in a prescribed way was inherently good. Despite the significant role changes in other social agencies and institutions, particularly as evidenced by the modified roles of family units and religious activities, public schools, undaunted and resilient, perpetuate many practices frightfully anachronistic.

Compulsory elements of schools—those functions and practices containing forced, mandatory, and coercive activities—specify many of the types of experiences occurring in schools. Some of these compulsory elements include:

- The desirability of required learnings
- The value of prescriptive and conforming behavior on the part of students, teachers, and administrators
- The requirements of professional responsibility by defining and limiting the types of teachers and the kinds of teaching occurring in the schools
- The legislative requirements and norm expectations on curricular practices and subject matter content
- The traditionally established administrative units, organizational structures, and arrangement of facilities.

One of the most evident lessons being learned by educators is the myriad sources responsible for the facilitation of a child's learning. Media, increased social experience, and real-life living contribute substantially to the learning acquired by a child. Indeed, the school is but one agency assisting in the process of learning within a student. Unfortunately, many have futilely contended that society should be "deschooled" since educa-
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Education is a process infinitely more than just that occurring within a formalized school situation.

Realistically, however, the schools might be considered a source of learning experiences, shared with numerous other agencies. This contrasts markedly with the traditional notion that each child must uniformly run the same gauntlet, jump the same hurdles, and achieve the same rewards. Too many schools still insist upon artificial and conservative learning experiences, uniformly dispensed and rigidly enforced. Such a singular and universal panacea is obviously inadequate in a society where multiple and diverse learning is desired and expected. Instead of enabling and prerequisite capabilities for learning, many prescribed learning requirements have consistently proven to be disabling and inhibiting in relation to learning. Those learnings universally to be achieved by all students must continually be evaluated and appraised when social instability and change are such fundamental characteristics of today's living.

Second, a constant plague upon education has been the notion that compulsory attendance at school is innately good. Ignorant and disrespectful of the individual's qualities, educators have boasted that compelling a child to attend school necessarily mandated a benefit to society. Despite Goodman's (1964) earlier observation that schools frequently have "compulsory miseducation," this practice has continued generally uncontested. Recently a significant legal battle was won on behalf of the Amish people. Regarding the constitutional rights and prerogatives of the individual, the courts concluded that schools may not compel a child to a school experience specifically objectionable to his personal and religious preference.

Wittmer (1972) observed that the legal decision on the Amish concerning a state's right to compel a child to attend school might permit significant new appraisals and perspectives on compulsory education. He ob-

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served that an institution which imprisons “to insure that the participants participate” ought to be reexamined. “It is interesting that in a ‘free’ country most parents allow the coercive dispossession of their children for 12 years of state-sponsored and formulated education without complaining” (Wittmer, p. 52). Similarly Brown contends that “...too many classrooms are loaded with students who have no interest in learning but are there because of either parental or societal pressure. High school students are entitled to an education but should not be forced to acquire one; and it is now clear that time is running out on compulsory education” (Brown, p. 324).

One might contemplate with professional delight the day when schools contain students who, through their own election and desire, are in attendance at school and discipline ceases to be the major source of teacher dissatisfaction. Equally satisfying will be the day when educators permit those students insensitive, incapable, or undesiring of formalized educational experiences to find learning experiences elsewhere. Overburdened institutions, frustrated and distraught teachers preoccupied with discipline problems and rules enforcement, neglected students desiring schooling experiences but stifled because of disruptive and noneducational activities, and administrators totally concerned with policing the schools might receive some significant relief when compulsory attendance is abolished.

Compliance and Conformity

Third, behavior frequently has been designated as the sine qua non of education. That a child behaves in a certain way was valued as a successful indicator of learning and mastery. Obviously, however, the conforming child, the one regimented and controlled, may be least capable of meeting diverse learning and living experiences and most restricted in his creative and adaptive abilities. American culture has prized and promoted, at least rhetorically, the value of diversity and plurality of cultures and attitudes. However, when this same plurality of experience is brought to the classroom, educators attempt to “wash-out” these multiple values by imposing a rigid, uniformly consistent behavioral standard.

Compliance and conformity have incorrectly been equated with educational success achieved by the child. The development of the child, through a display of interpersonal respect and mutual integrity, will significantly be enhanced when externally imposed behavioral standards are minimized and the qualities of uniqueness and creativity are prized as conformity and compliance have been in the past. For as Hentoff (1971) has observed, “students want their constitutional rights” and the artificial and compulsory behavioral standards, arbitrarily imposed, might strongly violate these rights.

The more that teaching and teachers are observed, the more convincing the generalization that teachers with multiple capabilities and personalities cannot identify with one single method or quality of teaching. In the 1960’s the educational vogue was inductive and inquiry strategies. However beneficial these methods are, the success of these programs was professionally prostituted by an over-eager curriculum industry, innovation implementers, and easily persuaded teachers. The attempt to provide one teaching method neglected the teacher incapable or unqualified to utilize this program. Thoughtless enthusiasm negated the effectiveness of much of that which could have been beneficial. A historical perspective on this attempt provided invaluable lessons. No single method might be employed with universal success. Teacher adequacy, personality, and preparation are vital considerations in evaluating any instructional activity. Indeed, when conformity and legislative edicts prescribe who will teach and how they will teach, teaching as a profession has undergone a substantial degradation, reducing its purpose and integrity.

A Compulsory Aura

Fifth, another compulsory element of education has been the prescription by traditional expectation and legislative mandate of
certain curricular and content aspects of the schools. Instead of stagnant, traditional, and rigid activities, the curriculum should be viewed as an emerging, "process" oriented element. Massive social changes, volumes of increased knowledge, and future needs and requirements never known before in man's previous experience dictate the flexibility and adaptability that the curriculum should exhibit.

Dusting off traditional academic relics will not resurrect their vitality and the inclusion of certain subjects does not guarantee their permanence or durability. Unfortunately, unwritten dogmas and assumed necessities remain in the curriculum, usually unevaluated and certainly outdated.

The "watershed" concept of Henry Steele Commager (1950) suggested that, as historical progress occurred, traditional values and attitudes necessarily were rejected. Changing from an agrarian and simple production merchandising life to an urban and complex industrial dependent society, people discarded old values and assimilated new values and patterns of living. Dramatically this ability to adjust and to accommodate to the new will determine the capability of a society to survive. Unless curricular programs are viewed similarly, the school experience will be distantly removed from the social cutting-edge of progress and improvement.

Perhaps the least logical and easiest compulsory school element to modify is the administrative and organizational structure of the schools. However, this has remained amazingly resilient to change despite the need to change. For example, many schools traditionally reflect a nine month school year, fifty minute class periods, four-walled classrooms, and regular grading procedures. Significantly many of these practices are historical antecedents, reflecting unrealistic objectives and needs. Scheduling a school calendar should not be concerned with the ancient, agricultural harvesting schedule. Those organizations, however compulsory and traditionally based, need to be evaluated in terms of the facilitation of the teaching-learning experiences occurring within or outside the school. Unless time and facilities are arranged to serve the learning activities, schools, walls, schedules, and units will serve as liabilities rather than facilitating factors in education.

Many elements in the schools have a compulsory aura about them. These are sacred and traditional cows, surviving as historical appendages, nonfunctional and disabling. These compulsory anachronisms need not be revered or worshipped simply because they have endured. They serve as reminders that the schools have been coercive and compelling toward the students and teachers to learn, to behave, and to achieve uniformly. Education, enabling and individualized, may not proceed unimpeded or unscathed when artificial and tangential objectives and procedures predominate. Certainly in a time when the schools are being asked to reappraise their impact and their importance (for example, Jencks, 1972), educators must not continue their unexamined lives and the perpetuation of practices so obviously disharmonious to today's needs and tomorrow's requirements. Those elements of education, representing the coercive and compulsive conditions of the schools, should be viewed as what schools have been, rather than what they might become or what they ought to be.

References


