

Alternative Educational Programs: Promise or Problems?

Mario Fantini

There is a sense of urgency in considering alternatives at this time. We are close to the proverbial crossroads—one road leading to variety in education, and the other to "one right way." Which road will we follow?

IS THERE a full-fledged alternative schools movement in this country that has the promise of achieving genuine educational reform? Can alternative education accomplish what other reform efforts did not, indeed, could not or is it merely a passing fad? Will alternatives or options, as they are also called, produce desirable change without surrendering the best of what we have, or alienating the professionals who are associated with the existing pattern of public education?

These are some of the questions which alternative schools have triggered in different quarters of the country. Some camps view alternatives as the most constructive trend in decades, others are cautious, still others are pessimistic. Where are we with this recent development? Certainly the theme of alternatives has become popular in professional and public circles. The major professional organizations include this subject in

their publications and as major topics at annual conferences. A Gallup Poll conducted in 1973 reflected support for the idea of alternatives by both the lay public and professionals (62 percent of parents, 80 percent of professional educators indicated that it is a good idea).¹

In order to deal with some of these issues, it may be useful to give a brief overview of alternative education as it has unfolded over the past decade. First, it should be noted that there are differing conceptions of "alternatives" among those who are or have been associated with this activity. One branch views the concept as alternatives to education. In a practical sense, this means alternatives to established public and private schooling. The idea was popularized by Ivan Illich, Everett Reimer, John Holt, and others. Among other things, the notion here is to have each person assume the right to orchestrate his or her own education and that schools as such may actually interfere with real education.

Another arm of the alternatives trend bases its concept on the theories of A. S. Neill and his Summerhill experiment. The assump-

¹ Fifth annual Gallup Poll of public attitude toward education. *Phi Delta Kappan* 55 (1): 43; September 1973.

tion here is that "freedom works" and a "school" or "educational community" should be an environment in which the learner is free to pursue his or her own learning with minimal adult supervision.

Still another wing led by people such as Jonathan Kozol and Herb Kohl views alternatives as an opportunity to incorporate into the educational process political and cultural orientations that differ from established societal norms. The Civil Rights movement with its history of temporary "freedom schools" and the so-called counter-cultural aspirations of the 70's are connected to this view of alternatives.

Alternatives in the Mainstream

Yet another branch is connected with the modification of the standardization within public schools through plural education. This group of which I am a member, composed mostly of persons within the established system of public schools, would legitimize a broad range of options—from open to standard to multicultural to Montessori. This latter group has stimulated many of the public school alternatives and has the most to do with whether options become a serious movement or passing fad. This group deals with the mainstream current of public education. The mainstream parents, students, and teachers are the ones we must reach for they are the political gatekeepers of educational reform within our public schools.

Because of the range of participants in alternatives and in the light of their differing philosophical and political orientations, the tendency for mixing all of these into one overall notion of alternatives has led to confusion—especially for those parents, teachers, students, and administrators who are associated with public schools. Because the mainstream is beginning to consider optional learning environments, it has become crucial on educational, economic, and political grounds for this activity to be handled seriously and sensitively.

We now know that for many middle Americans alternatives conjure up a vision

of a "free" school with its permissiveness and perceived lack of formal structure. To others, alternatives imply a "hippy type" school with its counter-culture flavor. I have been to alternative school conferences in which parents and teachers from the mainstream, seeking more information, were forced to wonder by the climate generated by the most vocal participants at these sessions, whether optional education had anything to do with them—"us straight types."

This perceptual confusion has been fanned also by the widespread use of the term alternative in describing "special" education programs, that is, students who are classified as "atypical" (alternative schools for the emotionally disturbed, retarded, delinquent, dropout, and unwed mother). While this pattern of alternatives is understandable (since there has been a tendency to permit deviations from established practice for those students who do not respond to established practice), it has caused considerable problems with both mainstream parent and professional.

To repeat, it is precisely the mainstream—the middle class parent and professional—who need to be reached if alternatives are to generate into a genuine reform movement. What is being suggested here is crucial. Since our early experience with alternatives is based largely on "fringe" or "atypical" elements of the population, they may have at best few, usually negative, connections with the middle class. If middle class parents, for example, perceive alternative education as something that happens with students who have "special" problems or for students who are "radical" then they as educational consumers, with considerable political clout, are not likely to be attracted to the concept.

Seldom are programs for the "fringe" perceived to be models for the middle class. Moreover, it should be clear to most of us working within established educational institutions, that the *serious* development of alternatives within the public schools will depend a great deal on the acceptability of the idea by mainstream parents, teachers, and administrators.

We now know that for many middle Americans alternatives conjure up a vision of "free" school with its permissiveness and perceived lack of formal structure. To others, alternatives imply a "hippy type" school with its counter-culture flavor.

Problems in the Movement

Consequently, there is at one level a general "image" problem associated with some alternative programs. To counter this, a number of alternative school leaders have emphasized the college-bound nature of many of these programs and the success of the alternative school graduate in entering some of the country's top colleges and universities. Further, there is an attempt to highlight alternatives within so-called "affluent" or "prestigious" school districts such as Newton, Massachusetts; Great Neck, New York; Webster Groves, Missouri; Prince Georges County, Maryland; Beverly Hills, California; and the like. Further, emphasis is given to the reputable aspects of the programs, such as Montessori Schools, Prep Schools and Academies (formerly expensive and exclusive private schools), and British Primary Schools (borrowed from the English experience).

At another level, there are substantive shortcomings associated with certain alternative schools. For example, they promise to do everything, that is, "their" alternative would solve all the problems and be vastly superior to standard education. We have witnessed the rather common occurrence of a small group of dedicated professionals literally working around the clock to keep an alternative program together. This tendency has not only led to a cycle of high expectation, low achievement—resulting in frustration for both the practitioners and the users of alternative schools—but also, in certain cases, has alienated professional and lay

colleagues who happen to prefer standard education.

On this latter point, one of the major weaknesses of the public alternative school trend thus far is that many of those leading the way have "written off" the standard pattern of schooling. That is to say, in order to legitimize new alternative approaches, they have made the existing pattern look bad by comparison. However, standard education is a legitimate option. It is also the one most parents, teachers, and students know best and prefer. To engender such internal antagonism among alternative schools within the public school community swims directly against the cooperative spirit which optional education embraces. This matter can be solved in part by maintaining that standard education is a legitimate option—in fact, it has been the basic pattern of public schooling which has carried the weight of responsibility thus far. With the advent of universal education, this pattern has been overloaded. However, those parents, teachers, and students who prefer this option have the right to it in a system of public schools of choice.²

A brief word about something as routine as the labels used in classifying alternatives may be illustrative of the sensitivity which needs to be considered. At times, in an eagerness to communicate the distinctive flavor of the option being proposed, a label is tagged on which alienates those not associated with the program. For example, a proposal for a "humanistic" alternative elicits strong reaction from other sources who maintain that their approach is also humanistic or that by implication ongoing programs are "de-humanistic." Similarly, the word "open" might trigger the reaction that other programs are therefore "closed."

Another major source of difficulty is procedural and deals with the process of legitimizing options. What constitutes a legitimate option within our public schools? What are the criteria which school districts need to employ in considering options?

² For an expanded discussion of alternatives within public schools see: Mario D. Fantini, *Public Schools of Choice*. New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1974.

What Are the Options?

Many anxieties and concerns which are a natural concomitant of innovation, but which if not relieved can serve to thwart change also accompany alternative school proposals. By considering and agreeing on a set of common ground rules many of these fears can be alleviated among laymen and professionals alike. We now have enough experience and have profited from some of the early alternative school efforts so that we may suggest a set of ground rules for engaging in this new system of educational options.

Alternatives within public schools:

1. Are not superimposed, but a matter of choice for all participants—teachers, parents, and students.

2. Are viewed as another way of providing education alongside the existing pattern, which continues to be legitimate. Alternatives are different from special programs for dropouts, unwed mothers, and the like.

3. Do not practice exclusivity.

4. Do not make exaggerated claims of accomplishments that may be deceptive in the long run.

5. Are aimed at a broad, common set of educational objectives, not just limited objectives. Alternative public schools are responsible to the public for comprehensive cognitive and affective goals that cannot be compromised, including basic skills, learning to learn skills, talent development, socialization of basic societal roles (citizen, consumer, worker), and self-concept development.

6. Do not cost more money than existing per student expenditures.

7. Are evaluated.

It is clear also that sufficient time is necessary for the key participants to engage in planning. Too often, alternatives are mounted "on the backs" of those who are also engaged in carrying the "normal" full-time responsibilities. Teachers especially cannot keep an existing program going while, at the same time, being expected to make

some kind of quantum leap into an educationally sound alternative environment. They need released time for planning, for involving parents and students in the development.

If school boards or school administrators give priority to alternative education, then they need to provide some "seed" money for planning and development purposes. This may mean rearranging the priorities for existing resources. Certainly this does not preclude initiating enabling state legislation which can provide "conversion capital" to other school systems interested in initiating options within public schools.

Perhaps the biggest problem is to foster professional leadership in advancing options and choice in public education. On balance the public seems willing to consider this plan because it appears both reasonable and constructive to them. Most teachers feel it is a good idea because alternatives hold the promise of providing opportunities for them to choose the type of educational environment that supports their style. In one sense alternatives can be a liberating force for teachers and other professionals who may feel victimized by the constraints of the uniform structure of our public schools.

Professional educators—especially administrators and supervisors—have the responsibility for opening a serious dialogue on alternative education in their communities. Most teachers, parents, and students will turn to them for leadership and validation of this new proposal. Leadership is needed which can keep the lines of communication open among the basic interested parties and can assure their participation in planning and development. Leadership must also reveal clearly just how alternatives relate to what is best for the learner: individualizing and personalizing the learning process, providing teachers, students, and parents with more choice among legitimate optional learning environments, utilizing existing resources differently, perhaps more wisely—in short, establishing the educational, political, and economic rationale for alternative education.

Perhaps we all need to remember the life and death cycle which characterized progressive education earlier in this century.

We can "kill" alternatives by having them fall victim to faddism. We can compromise the conception of alternative education to such an extent that implementation will become so watered down as to be a matter of ridicule or a mere relabeling of existing educational practices. Or, we can profit from our past experiences and parlay these lessons into a timely opportunity for genuine school reform, which options in public education have the promise of becoming. Professional educators, after a decade of criticism, need to advance a concept of public education worthy of their noblest values. We need a plan around which people of good will can rally.

While we are calling for professional leadership, it may make good sense also to remind ourselves that while we are trying to come to grips with pluralism in education, another trend is gaining momentum before our very eyes. It is a trend which grows out of public dissatisfaction and a demand for accountability and which stresses a single no-nonsense return to the 3 R's—strict adherence to standardized measures of achievement, ability grouping by IQ, non-promotion policies, lowering the compulsory school attendance age, placing more police guards in schools. In short, this trend calls for a return to the way schools were earlier in this century.

The ability of the public school to deal effectively with such contemporary ideas as universal equality of opportunity and cultural diversity has led to serious student reaction. This has been interpreted by members of the general public as "permissiveness and lack of discipline" in the schools. Their proposal for school improvement is based on what

they know best, what they themselves have experienced as students in such schools. They call for more uniformity supported by a law and order policy within the schools.

In brief, this growing trend, which can swing into a full-fledged movement at any time, would establish more standardization and conformity. It would convey a notion of child growth and development in which there were "winners and losers"—with the latter receiving the verdict that the problem was theirs, not the schools.

It is difficult to see how such a trend will promote the noblest values of human growth. Consequently, there is a sense of urgency in considering alternatives at this time and this is why I have written two books on the subject. This is why the special call is made for professional leadership—including that of our giant teacher organizations. We are close to the proverbial crossroads—one road leading to variety in education and to a concept of growth in which each child is provided an environment that best supports his or her learning style and personal development, in which there are no student failures, only program failures. The other road establishes one right way, with clear norms, with learners competing for the right to be considered "winners," with the losers relegated to an underclass status. Which conception of personal growth and development (the heart and soul of education) will we support?

The former should warrant the full mobilization of our professional energies—as an antidote to the latter.

—MARIO FANTINI, *Dean of Education, State University College, New Paltz, New York.*

Future ASCD Annual Conferences

1975	March 15-19	New Orleans	<i>Rivergate</i>
1976	March 13-17	Miami Beach	<i>Convention Center</i>
1977	March 19-23	Houston	<i>Civic Center</i>
1978	March 4-8	San Francisco	<i>Civic Center</i>

Copyright © 1974 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.