

On Families and Schools:

A Conversation with Urie Bronfenbrenner

Urie Bronfenbrenner raised troubling questions about American life when he compared child-rearing practices in the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. in Two Worlds of Childhood (Russell Sage Foundation, 1970). A self-styled "arch alarmist of them all" and outspoken advocate for children, Bronfenbrenner was interviewed by Ron Brandt, Executive Editor of Educational Leadership.

EL: We hear a lot these days about drug use among adolescents, vandalism in schools, and declining test scores. What's your explanation for these problems?

Bronfenbrenner: They reflect the fact that families in our society are not receiving the kind of support they need to function effectively; we are not providing for the normal healthy development of children.

EL: You chaired a committee in 1970 that declared that America was in trouble—"... trouble so deep and pervasive as to threaten the future of the nation. The source is . . . a national neglect of children."¹ In what way do we treat children badly?

Bronfenbrenner: Well, I'm not talking about abuse; I use

"neglect" advisedly. We are busy doing other things. We just don't have time for children. Kids used to work alongside adults, helping to raise food and do other important chores. As we developed sophisticated technology and greater mobility, joint activity between the older and younger generations began to disappear. That doesn't mean that technology is bad; if we put our minds to it we can use technology to build an environment even more effective than the ones that used to occur naturally. But we haven't had that in mind. Nowadays the important thing is for all adults to work fulltime if they possibly can.

EL: Are you objecting to the changing status of women? For example, you've said, "I understand and share their sense of rage, but I fear the conse-

quences of some of the solutions they advocate."²

Bronfenbrenner: I am against women working in the same way I am against men working—if it means that family life has to be sacrificed. We have created a conflict between the two most human activities people engage in. One is working, and the other is raising the new generation. We've pitted those two against one another when they should be complementary. That's what I meant when I said I was afraid of some of the solutions women were advocating. Since I wrote that, though, the picture has become

¹ *Report to the President: White House Conference on Children.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970. p. 252.

² Urie Bronfenbrenner. "The Family Circle: A Study in Fragmentation." *The National Elementary Principal*, May/June 1976. p. 24.

more positive. There was a time when some women were saying, "Anything you can do, we can do better." They were trying to emulate the male lifestyle. There can be nothing more destructive to this nation's kids than for women to adopt men's lifestyles.

EL: But you see some change in that?

Bronfenbrenner: Yes, I do. I think the women's movement has become more concerned with commitment to human values, rather than aping the traditional value system of men, with its emphasis on achievement. One hears about a more humane life for everybody.

EL: Your comments about employment—what's wrong with working?

Bronfenbrenner: Well, the main problem in our society is that people are expected to raise children in their spare time. Work comes first. It never dawns on most employers that they have an obligation to make it easier for employees to spend time with their kids. In some other societies—Sweden, for example—they are beginning to take a different stand. There they are saying that the welfare of children is equally important.

EL: Most of the married couples I know found the time they were raising their children—especially in the teenage years—to be a time of great stress. You're saying . . .

Bronfenbrenner: I'm saying that much of that stress is caused by social conditions and is not an inevitable part of being a parent.

Society and Individuals

EL: You say these are problems of our society. A society is made up of individuals, isn't it?

Bronfenbrenner: Yes, but society determines the conditions in which individuals live. If you are a single parent and you are the only source of income for your family, you're going to be working, and your child is not going to be with you. You have to find somebody to take care of your child. If there isn't somebody there, your child is going to suffer from not being well taken care of. We are the last remaining modern society that does not have a national program of child care available to children of parents who are working. In every other developed society child care is regarded as a necessity. The same holds true for health care; we are the only society that does not guarantee adequate health care for our children.

EL: Some would say the welfare system provides for that.

Bronfenbrenner: The American welfare system defeats its own purposes. In order to get any help you first have to prove ten times over that you have no

money, you can't cope, you're no damn good.

EL: Still, most people would say individuals are responsible for their own lives. For example, polls show that most parents believe that parents are at fault for not doing a better job of disciplining their children.

Bronfenbrenner: Anyone who has worked in other societies—as I have—recognizes that although we Americans are very diverse, we share a strong commitment to one idea. It crosses class, culture, and race. It's the belief that the individual is responsible for his or her own success or failure. Individualism is great; it helped make us what we are; but we are overdoing it.

EL: What explains this passion for individualism?

Bronfenbrenner: I'm sure there are many reasons, but historically we are a nation of renegades. Most immigrants came to this country because they didn't like the system in the countries they left. They wanted to be free. If there is anything to the idea that the family is an important source of values, then that theme of freedom was sure to have been passed down from one generation to the next. And of course the theme of independence and free enterprise is very much alive in our culture.

Needed Changes

EL: What should we be doing differently?

Bronfenbrenner: I've already mentioned changes in employment. The ideal pattern, it seems to me, would be one in which everybody worked three-quarters time. That would give us time to do the other things that are also an essential part of life: raising a family, seeing friends, keeping up the neighborhood.

One way to get the most for our investment would be flex-time. Over 18 percent of West German industry is now on flex-time. For those who say our economy can't stand it, I say, "Just look at West Germany. It seems to work there."

Now, an employer can't just decide to go ahead and change things, because that employer is going to lose money. Society has to make it rewarding for employers to be pro-family. We can do that by providing tax incentives. Employers who don't hold meetings on weekends or don't move their personnel every two or three years, or who make it possible for employees to call their kids anytime during the day, would pay lower taxes.

The point of view that families are of primary importance has to become the norm; it has to be the accepted way of doing things. There is one American institution that could have an enormous effect: television. We have learned a lot about how television makes children more aggressive and all that, and I think that's a serious problem. But television has constructive



power, too. The television industry in their programming could help Americans understand that the circumstances under which families must live is an important influence on how adequate they are.

Curriculum for Caring

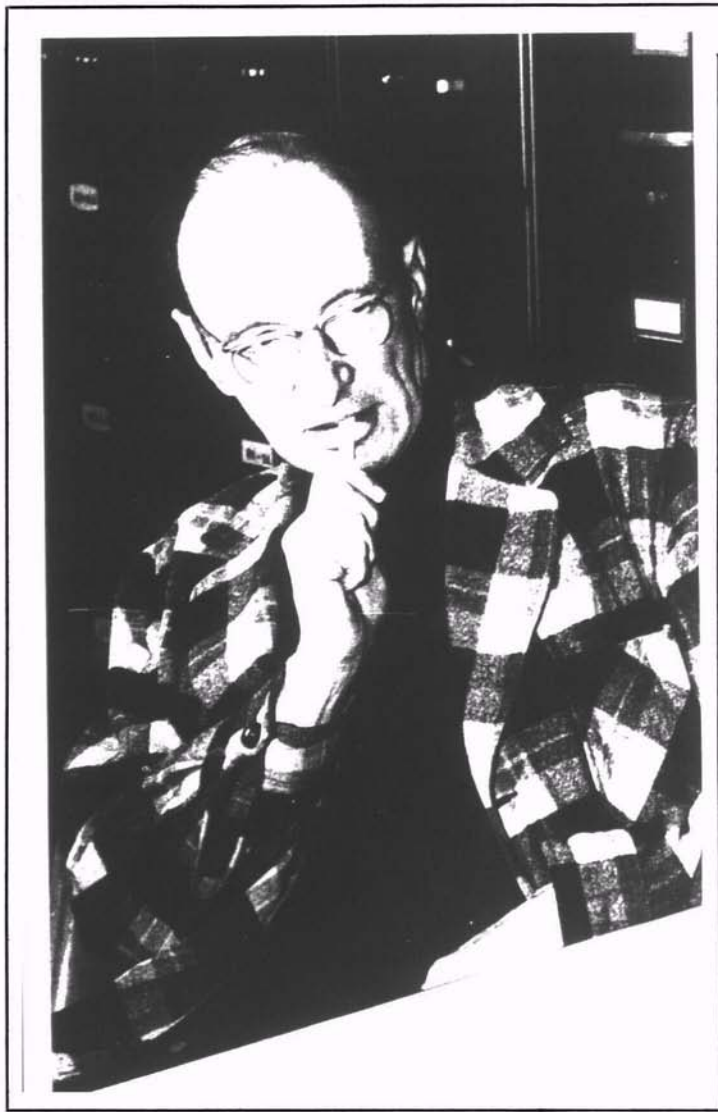
Schools could make a tremendous contribution if they had a "curriculum for caring."³ A regular part of the curriculum beginning in the early elementary grades should be learning about caring by actually giving care under adult supervision. We saw examples of that in China. There, even preschool children have responsibilities. They are expected to be gracious

hosts, to entertain, dance, just make life pleasant for people.

In our country, children should go out of the school to serve the old and lonely, and older kids should care for younger ones. They should get to know them, play with them on the playground, and walk them home from school. If they did that they would meet their parents, see the kinds of places other people live.

There is a secret objective in all this, because obviously teachers could not be the supervisors; they are already overloaded. Schools would have to reach into the community for

³Urie Bronfenbrenner, "Who Needs Parent Education?" *Teachers College Record*, May 1978. pp. 786-87.



other people to be supervisors—people with experience in caring. The result would be that many more adults would become involved in the lives of children. And I am saying that we need to bring adults and children back into each other's lives.

EL: And to create a situa-

tion in which children are really needed; in which others are dependent on them?

Bronfenbrenner: Yes. It's now possible for a young person to graduate from high school without ever having done anything for anyone else, without having cared for a child or an

older person, without having learned the skills and sensitivity required for that kind of activity.

Will We Change?

EL: Well, in light of what you said about our individualism, what are the prospects for our making these changes?

Bronfenbrenner: I'm an optimist about our society, because there is another theme deeply rooted in our culture: we are pragmatists. If something isn't working we don't stick with it. It may take a long while, but we eventually face up to our problems and do something about them. There has been an important change in the last few years. Even five or six years ago, when I said the family was in trouble most people paid no attention. Now, people are concerned about it.

EL: That may be true, but the solutions being proposed seem to be the opposite of what you want. The mood is to make individuals more responsible. We hear calls for lower taxes, less welfare, fewer government services.

Bronfenbrenner: I'm a scholar, not a prophet. I don't know how it's going to come out, but at least people are beginning to recognize there is a problem.

EL: Educators are very concerned, because many of them

feel they are doing their best under trying circumstances, and then they see tax funds slashed. Let's talk about that for a moment. Educators are sensitive these days; they feel that some members of the public have lost confidence in education, and they're naturally defensive when you say things like, "Schools have become one of the most potent breeding grounds of alienation in American society."⁴ What makes you say that?

Bronfenbrenner: Well, it's not the teachers or principals individually; it's where we put our schools and how we treat them. Schools are often on the outskirts of the community; they are huge places with a thousand or more young people. The only adults allowed in are people with master's degrees. There's no public transportation; you get there on a special bus or drive your own car. The school is entirely separate from the community. The community doesn't know what's going on in the school; the kids know very little about the daily life of their own community. They are in age-segregated classrooms, and they have no responsibility other than to be students. That kind of isolated situation is a breeding ground of alienation and aggression. Vandalism and violence are literally the hallmarks of American schools.

Teachers are placed in an impossible situation. No one could carry on effective instruction in that kind of environment.

So you have the phenomenon of skilled, dedicated teachers resigning, because they no longer have the satisfaction of doing their job well. They may be knocking themselves out, but they're not getting any response.

Good Signs

EL: You say students should get into the community. I know of a few instances in which that is done. For example, some high schools give credit to students for volunteer work in community organizations.

Bronfenbrenner: That's a start, but usually only a few students are involved. I believe that a curriculum for caring should be one of the basics.

EL: And some schools place students in the community as part of career education.

Bronfenbrenner: If career education is seen as preparing the individual for employment, I think it misses the point. The main thing is that no complex society can afford to educate a generation that doesn't learn the nature of that society. At the high school level it's not important that a person learns to become an engineer or electrician or whatever, but to understand that there are electricians, what they do, and why.

EL: One last question. The problems you describe are depressing, because educators have to deal with the results. They can't change society single-handedly. What can a teacher, principal, or superintendent do?

Bronfenbrenner: One of the most important things is to recognize that the school cannot work in isolation. School people must build bridges to the rest of the community and to the parents. They must create situations in which more of the community is in the lives of kids in school, and the kids are more a part of the community. Now, some might say, "If kids spend their time in community activities, how are they going to learn to read?" My answer is, "Until they do that, they will not learn to read." Children learn to read not because there is some new gimmick to teach them, but because learning to read is considered an important thing. We saw that in China. They have the deadliest curriculum and the worst teaching methods you can imagine, but we couldn't find one child who didn't know how to read. The reason was that the classrooms were filled with people, old and young, who kept saying, "Reading is important; come read with me."

Beyond that, every person can do his or her part to help others understand the need for changes in our society. One thing we are learning from our community project called "Family Matters" is this: most families are doing the best they can under the circumstances; we need to try to change the circumstances and not the families.

⁴Urie Bronfenbrenner. "The Roots of Alienation." *Journal of the National Association for Women Deans, Administrators, and Counselors*, Fall 1973. p. 13.

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