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A CRITIQUE OF SCHOOLING

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PROLOGUE

John Dewey (1910), in his essay on "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy", wrote:

"... the conviction persists - though history shows it to be a hallucination - that all the questions that the human mind has asked are questions that can be answered in terms of the alternatives that the questions themselves present. But in fact, intellectual progress usually occurs through sheer abandonment of questions together with both of the alternatives they assume - an abandonment that results from their decreasing vitality and change of urgent interest. We do not solve them: we get over them. Old questions are solved by disappearing, evaporating, while new questions corresponding to the changed attitude of endeavour and preference take their place."

One of the questions which is gaining urgency and interest at the present time is that of the desirability of our current system of schooling. The discussion in the chapters which follow considers some of the criticisms made and glances at change which might escape these. Education, at either a theoretical or a more practical level, is not at a stage where categorical positions can be assumed. There are a vast number of factors which preclude simple answers. As Dewey says, the problems and tentative solutions of today are unlikely to retain pertinence tomorrow. Answers to the questions "why include this or that in schooling?" and "why conduct schooling in this way or that?" are tentative, dynamic, always incomplete. Despite this, a position does need to be assumed, some contents and some systems do need to be adopted. Because of the complexity of justification in a fairly finite situation and the variables that influence it, there are a number of equally justifiable (or equally unjustifiable) ways of reacting. Men construe the universe

differently and construct different structures of schooling in accord with their perspective to meet an objectively (sic) similar situation. Therefore the only fruitful and honest kind of schooling system is one which nurtures heterogeneity.

Theories of schooling are concerned with how a learner is to come to know. They must adopt some definition of what it means "to know", as well as some resolution of questions concerning (1) the relation between knowing and doing and (2) the structure of knowledge. (Hedegard, 1967, p. 4). These are epistemological questions. Thus, theories of schooling presuppose epistemological positions. As this is so, any theory of schooling rests upon the resolution of some metaphysical issues. In particular a theory of schooling must postulate that knowledge of these things is desirable because knowledge of these things is conducive to certain desirable outcomes. The desirability asserted is justifiable on metaphysical, aesthetic, or ethical grounds. Such grounds are debatable and opposite conclusions are possible and supportable. This lack of absolutism leads on logically to a lack of absolutism in schooling. In a highly diverse and complex society metaphysical, aesthetic, and ethical criteria are likewise complex and diverse. It follows that schooling should reflect this. Any system of a monolithic, invariant kind is inappropriate.

One of the ambiguities which must be lived with in education is that we just do not know the answers to many basic questions. How does learning occur? How can learning be facilitated? Are social organisations such as schools related to learning? Do children learn best with or without the help of adults? What might "learn best" mean

anyway? Thus, arguments for (and against) change in education are still hypotheses, are still embedded in belief about metaphysical, aesthetic, ethical, and other subjective choices. It is therefore the case that advocates for or against certain systems of schooling are in fact saying "this or that is different and I prefer them".

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