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Metopathologies of the Educational Ethnic : A Humanistic Critique

Huge Government investment in education, and the almost universal acceptance of the educational ethic, means that we should be constantly asking what is, to many, a sensitive question: How educational are educational institutions?

Many would say that throughout most of his historic course, homo sapiens has wanted from his children acquiescence, not originality. As Jules Henry (1) observed on the basis of his anthropological studies: 'The function of education has never been to free the mind and the spirit of man, but to blind them; and to the end that the mind and spirit of his children should never escape, homo sapiens has employed praise, ridicule, admonition, accusation, mutilation, and even torture to chain them to the cultural pattern.'

From this perspective, our often expressed confidence in universal education for the whole man, OR even some part of him, may be sadly misplaced. It may lead, in the words of C. Wright Mills, 'To technological idiocy and national provinciality - rather than to informed and independent intelligence.'

In recent years, several controversial works have radically re-examined our 'secular gospel' of education. Ivan Illich (2) Paul Goodman (3) Paulo Freire (4) and Everett Reimer (5) have realized that instead of lifting the level of culture, much schooling merely banalizes what culture we have. A central theme of these writers is that education by the politically timid of those who are likely to remain politically timid is equivalent to a political and power failure at the level of the masses. Illich (1969) for example, observes the essentially educative functions of charismatic South American dissidents like Dom Herder Camara, Camilo Torres and Che Guevara. He goes on to say that 'The schooled mind perceives these processes exclusively as political indoctrination and their educational purpose eludes its grasp . . . And yet it is surprising with what difficulty the school-bred mind perceives the rigor with which schools inculcate their own presumed necessity, and with it the supposed inevitability of the system they sponsor. Schools indoctrinate the child into the acceptance of the political system his teachers represent, despite the claim that teaching is non-political.' In our expanding educational edifices, which emphasize obedience, exams, and accreditation, it is becoming ever more impossible to fulfill the classic objectives of liberal education: i.e., 'To help produce the disciplined and informed mind which cannot be overwhelmed,' and to help man 'Understand his own experience and gauge his own fate, by locating himself in his period.' (C.W. Mills).

Conformism and the Existential Vacuum

The process of socialization or de-education which occurs in schools (at all levels) can

be seen as the retreat of an individual from idiosyncratic individualistic goals, to socially-defined (and approved) goals. (See figure 1.) The socially-approved goals in Western society typically revolve around money and success as measure by prestige, power, and material possessions. The MEANS by which one obtains these goals are commonly de-emphasized and include commercial predation, bitter competition, instrumental interpersonal relations, colonial exploitation and the treatment of humans as means rather than as ends. Society tolerates the whims, spontaneity and iconoclasm of childhood, but extends no such tolerance to the adult. In the process of moving towards socially-defined goals, a person may experience what Viktor Frankl (6) termed 'existential vacuum'; unlike the animal, man is no longer told by his instincts what he must do. And in contrast to former times, he is no longer told by traditions or self-transcendent values what he should do. Now, knowing neither what he must do nor what he should do, he sometimes does not even know what it is that he basically wishes to do. Instead he gets to wish to do what other people do (conformity) or he does what others wish him to do (totalitarianism). In either case, idiosyncratic goals are subverted. The possibility of developing and expressing one's unique potential also becomes smaller, from childhood on. As Abraham Maslow notes, 'The theoretical statement that all human beings in principal seek self-actualization and are capable of it, applies ultimately to newborn babies. This is the same as saying that neurosis, psychopathology, stunting, diminishing, and atrophy of potentials are not primarily inborn but are made.'

The process of assimilation is often accompanied by an obsessive compulsion to analyse and reflect upon oneself, and this is a symptom, according to Frankl, of the existential vacuum: 'Just as the boomerang returns to the hunter who has thrown it, only if it missed its target, man returns to himself, and becomes over-concerned with self-interpretation only when he has missed his mission, and has been frustrated in his search for meaning.' Socially-defined goals, when they are based on dehumanized relations, cannot supply this sense of mission or meaning, and this might be the reason for the mental health crisis of our time. Education could be an antidote to these neuroses if it attempted to maximize the areas of tolerated non-conformity, instead of eliciting submissive obedience. If schooling could foster self-confidence and give some understanding of the social forces to which the person is exposed, a unique set of goals or meanings could more effectively be sought by each individual. I would agree with Frankl when he says that there is no general meaning disembodied from the personal concrete situation of the individual. That is, there is a unique meaning for each person which changes from day to day and from person to person. The standardizing that educational institutions encourage is inimical to the discovery of such unique meanings.

Inauthenticity and Metapathology: Interfaces between Individually-defined, Institutionally-defined, and Socially-defined Educational Goals.

Each staff member and student is typically concerned solely with his own career prospects, and security. The college gives a consideration (certificate/degree) in return for student attendance. This attendance justifies and consolidates the position of the

staff, who participate with the students in the deception, and have the audacity to call the result 'education'. It might be argued that if both sides derive satisfaction from their cynical relationship, why criticize the arrangement; an effective career and prestige-system exists for administrative and academic staff, and students get passports which enable them to enter similar systems, in other organizations, later on. But the sad fact is that the deception is so widely practiced that the parties come to believe in it, to take themselves seriously, and to think that their joint products are more than the waste and pretence they often are. Actors replace men, and no one speaks out against the farce as any revolt appears neurotic and impotent, since it hinders career and status interests. Too much thought about this situation tends to be depressing, so we make the great adjustment, and our raincoat minds shed all critical and unprofitable thoughts.

The danger of this adaptation has been well summed up by Ernest Becker (7) 'When man forfeits his critical powers, and his striving towards larger meanings, he is reduced to a true primate, fondling consumer things and sexual things, each in turn; trying to get the maximum stimulus of meaning out of the narrowest possible area.' Many humanistic psychologists have noted that it is quite possible to be gratified in the basic needs, in this narrow area, but if we are not also committed to the *metaneeds* (needs for authenticity; meaning, values of being) we seem to fall prey to meaninglessness, existential vacuum, anomie, valuelessness, no-ogenic neurosis, etc. Deprivation of truth, beauty, justice, meaning, lead to what Maslow has termed 'metapathologies'. Undoubtedly, many of our hierophantic 'educators' suffer from such metapathologies.

At present, creativity in educational thinking does not have to generate alternatives to our current arrangements, as these have been provided by Illich, Freire and Goodman. What creativity requires is the courage to espouse these alternatives, the ability for one to stick one's neck out, to be able to ignore criticism and ridicule, and the ability to resist the influence of one's culture. In the words of Maslow (8) 'Every one of our great creators . . . has testified to the element of courage that is needed in the lonely moment of creation, affirming something new (contradicting the old). This is a kind of daring, a going out in front all alone, a defiance, a challenge. The moment of fright is quite understandable, but must nevertheless be overcome if creation is to be possible.' A system which is not a parody of education must resuscitate and carefully nurture critical faculties. Basic and hitherto unquestioned assumptions on which our industrial societies are founded should be constantly re-examined - the philosophy of more and more, economic growth and infinite technological progress. But overloaded timetables composed of prefabricated blocks of knowledge, and ledger-account instruction which smothers imagination, imply a mechanistic approach that makes the institution a service-station for the status-quo. The service-station philosophy measures success in quantified numbers of all kinds: more buildings and grounds equals better operation; more students equals 'more' education; better processing off examinations and grades equals better pedagogy; and thirty-hour weekly lecture sessions equals thirty hours of bank-clerk administered 'knowledge', on short-term loan till the examinations; whereupon it is returned, checked, and consigned to the waste-bin. This examination enantiomorph is produced at a usurious rate of interest!

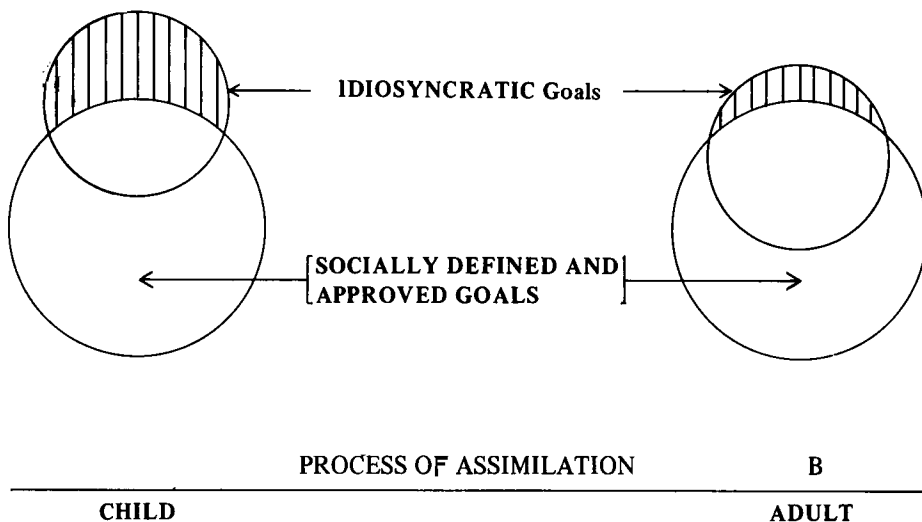


Figure 1

We have all been processed on Procrustean educational beds. Fear of not being able to meet the system's requirements forces people, over and over again, even at the pinnacle of success, to dream not of success, but of failure. As Jules Henry notes, 'To be successful in our culture one must learn to dream of failure.' In other words, socially-approved goals can best be attained by the negative motivation of failure, rather than by a positive urge towards success.

We must conclude that although educational institutions extol individualism and creativity in the abstract, they create in practice circumstances which put a premium on conformity and uniformity. Statements about creativity are largely rhetorical, and it is encouraged only within the limits set by such values as: an appreciation of money, a devotion to work, a respect for people in authority and the desire to emulate them; we want people to be slightly different, but not too different. Henry says, 'If all through school the young were provoked to question the Ten Commandments, the sanctity of revealed religion, the foundations of patriotism, the profit motive, the two party system, monogamy, the laws of incest, and so on,' there would be such creativity that society would not know where to turn. Instead of this fundamental questioning, the student is exhorted to adopt his role in a whole-hearted and conformist way. Society rewards the individual with 'success' if his behavior conforms to the role, and punishes him with 'failure' if he deviates. Thus the pathology of educational institutions derives in large part from the pathology of socially-determined 'success'.

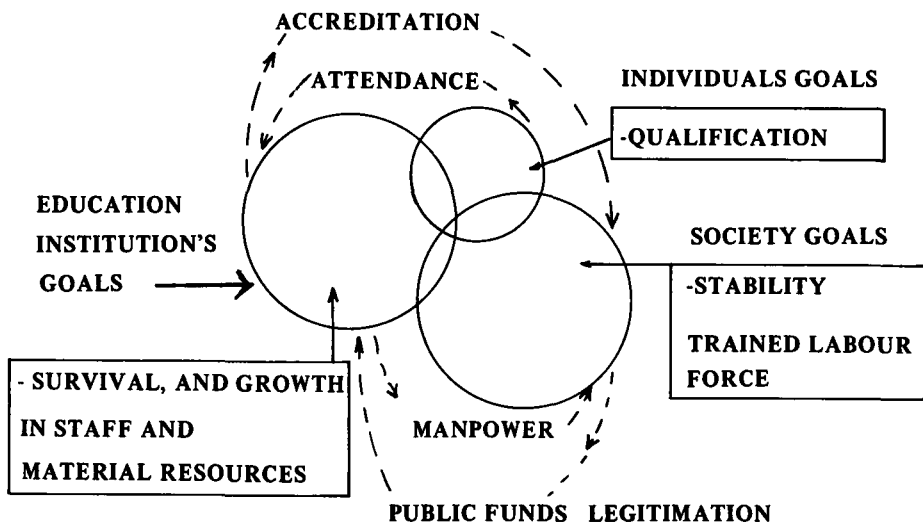


Figure 2

References

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