

overloading the educational circuit

I heard someone say the other day that if you are under twenty and not liberal you must not have a heart, and if you are over forty and not conservative, you must not have a brain. Well, I am somewhere in between and am not quite sure how to classify my views. I like to think that my situation in life has provided me with both a heart and a brain, although admittedly the evidence does not always bear me out on this.

However it be explained, my inability to stereotype my views is unquestionably a good thing. At the very least I can avoid the distortions and false associations that invariably follow the categorization of opinion. And when it comes to education, emotional as the issues usually are, my inability to classify my views is undoubtedly a gift of the gods.

With this I want to say that our present-day educational establishment looks to me pretty much like an ineffective giant. And the reason is not simply that schools are trying to do so much, but that they are unsuited for so much of what they are trying to do. Given their tasks, failure and frustration are in the cards from the start. The eventual manifestations of disappointment and criticism are in reality preordained.

It used to be that the formal phase of education was limited to intellectual training and character development. Even the early progressives seemed to accept these restraints. They focused on the emerging capabilities of the child, not on cultural heritage or social reform. They believed that proper schooling would foster the capacity to think. "One must learn how to learn," they would say. While they recognized the importance of teaching basic information and insisted on promoting certain values, they did not expect the schools to do the work of government, church or family.

In our own time we seem to heap every social, political and economic problem that comes our way onto the back of the school. If others cannot or do not want to deal with an issue, and if some one group must face up to the matter, it may as well be educators; or so we say. Schooling is now supposed to be an answer, if not the only answer, to the problems of poverty, unemployment, racial segregation, drug addiction, sexual promiscuity, vandalism, hooliganism, personal unhappiness, family conflict, and social discontent. Under the banners of justice and human concern we have added one program after another to the school's curriculum, usually with the best of stated intentions, but almost always without much success.

One way to look at this situation is to say that today we expect too much of our schools. But I think this view is naive. I can only conclude that we really do not want these issues resolved. If we did, we would have used some more appropriate agency to resolve them. Surely, we would not have chosen the schools. If I were under some pressure to face up to unsettling conditions but really wanted things to remain the same, I would insist on introducing a new program into the curriculum. By so doing I could satisfy my conscience and protect my public image, while at the same time hardly doing anything. Can the schools do it all? Only in the eyes of the gullible, those with a tendency to give way to delusions of grandeur.

I want the educational establishment in America to be a giant, but I also want it to be effective. In order to be so it must concentrate on what it can do, not on what has been shown to be impossible. For political as well as moral reasons we must be careful not to overload the educational circuit. Otherwise, instead of doing good, education will be done in by hostile forces and our dream of effective universal schooling will self-destruct. If schools assume intellectual and humanistic values and proceed to function as an agency for individual development, rather than as an agency for cultural transmission or social reform, they will no longer need to spend so much of their resources trying to justify their very existence. Instead they will be better situated to bring about the goods within their grasp.

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