# Society and The Schools

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When I received this generous invitation I was asked to talk about education in the 1980s, and especially the personal opinions of Ernie Boyer. It is, of course, a very risky business to try to predict what will happen in education in the days ahead. It is riskier still, as a matter of public record, to say what should happen.

Several years ago the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies convened a seminar on the topic "What is an Educated Person?" Twenty or so of the world's best thinkers came together to talk about the goals of education, and within five days some of the panelists were hardly speaking to each other. Everyone agreed in principle that education is a splendid thing, but when it got right down to specifics, fierce battles raged because deep feelings were involved.

This intensity of feeling about education is not surprising. After all, the purposes of education are inextricably related to the purposes of life itself. When we're asked to think about what we mean by an educated person, we are forced to think about the meaning of existence.

I simply state the obvious: Our thoughts about education in the future reflect, to a considerable degree, the priorities we assign to living. Jerome Kagan of Harvard University said that when searching for the role of education in society, one has to make decisions about what he

called "the transcendent human qualities"[1] to which we are committed.

In the ancient days, of course, education was what some would pejoratively call elitist. The goal was to prepare the privileged for their "god-given" position in the world. Chaucer's knight, who epitomized this special status, learned not only the use of arms, but he learned music, he learned dancing, he learned drawing, and he learned the acts of speech. The educated "man," to use Chaucer's term, was to live a privileged life and dominate the rest.

In the aristocratic view of education--reflected best in the 18th centruy society in which it flourished--the mind was not just to be trained, it was to be polished. The educated person learned the art of "getting along," not just in public assemblies but in the private clubs and drawing rooms--a process beautifully reflected in Lord Chesterfield's letters, which talked of the educated person with such flourish and such nicety, and in the generous civility of Tom Jones.

A rather different view of education was the civic ideal, the notion that the educated man was a "model citizen," a "servant of the state." This idea of "education for citizenship" appeared first in the Greek polis. It reappeared in Rome, it reappeared again during the Renaissance,

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[1] Jerome Kagan, "Core Competencies," What is an Educated Person?, Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, Praeger Publications, 1980.

and it has remained a prominent strain in modern thought as well. In this view of education, individual talents are subordinated to collective needs or, better said, perhaps, directed toward the common good.

A sharply contrasting view of education focused not on the state but on the perfection of the individual. Plato, for example, urged the wise men of his day to renounce politics and to turn instead to what he called "the city" within themselves. Plato argued education was self-directed.

Seneca urged that public affairs should be avoided, favoring instead studies which will teach you the substance, the will, the environment, and the shape, of God. Education will, Seneca believed, teach you the destiny that awaits your soul.

Curiously, however, it was the Christian influence that shifted the ideal of education away from the self-nurturing, soul-refining process to a more utilitarian, more pragmatic view. In the Christian view, a clear distinction was drawn between the aims of education and the ends of man. Cardinal Newman made this distinction by drawing a clear distinction between knowledge and virtue. Education, Newman argued may help you get along in life, but it would not lead to salvation.

I have indulged myself in this "breathless" jump through education history in order to make one central

point. Education has always reflected the mood and vision of the time. It clearly follows that this afternoon at this dedication conference we cannot talk about education in the 1980s and beyond without trying to discover the emerging values and the social forces that are at work today. Therefore, in the remaining minutes I would like to identify four conditions in the contemporary context which I believe will have a powerful impact on the future of formal education and on the way we run our schools.

First, I suggest that because of the changing population in America, the school will become a very different place. We hear a lot of talk these days about the demographic shift and how we've gone in just ten years from a baby boom to a baby bust. All that is true, of course. The youth cohort did drop by more than 25 percent, and many school districts are now going through the struggles of retrenchment.

I believe, however, that, as you glance across the landscape, there is a much more important, much more crucial, much more dramatic population story to be told. There is not just a shift in numbers, there is a shift in composition, too:

--Today in the United States, 26 percent of all whites are 18 years of age and under, 33 percent of all blacks are in that age group, and 49 percent of all Hispanics are 18 years of age and under.

--Today the immigration pattern in this nation has tilted dramatically away from Europe to Latin America and to the Pacific.

--Today America is the fourth largest Spanish-speaking nation in the world.

--This fall, 50 percent of all children who enroll in kindergarten in Los Angeles County are Hispanic.

The point I make is this: In population centers from East to West, the face of young America is changing. Yet these minorities, which are fast becoming the majority of the population in many schools, are precisely the students who have not been well-served by the educational institutions in the past.

Of the students who leave high school before graduation, among whites it is about 15 percent, among blacks it's about 25 percent, and among Hispanics it's almost 50 percent. This population of chronic failure in the schools increasingly becomes the majority population in the future. A serious problem we have not solved in the past is becoming the dominant educational obligation of the future.

Today we confront a situation somewhat like those encountered during the early immigration periods, times when there were great waves of Irish, Italians, and East Europeans who enrolled in the nation's schools. Only this time there is a great resistance to accept the "melting pot" function of the school.

As I watched the tension surrounding the battle over bilingual education as commissioner, there was no issue that caused the politicians (from the White House on down) to be more engaged in the working of my office. The tragedy was it was not seen as the central symptom that it was. The

issue is not bilingual education, it is the question of whether our institutions can accomodate new cultures that in a manner that does not undermine their integrity.

I do not have an easy answer. I merely say that as I look into the decade of the 1980s, I believe that public education will be asked to confront not just a decline in numbers. They in fact will rise again during the 1990s, but more precisely and more urgently, education also will confront a student body that is culturally much more diverse, where the willingness to be "melted" is less present, and where the inclinations to be unique and to maintain identity will be more persistent. The schools must find ways to become more authentic and more effective institutions for those who, in large numbers, now reject what is offered.

I have a second notion to propose. I suggest that because of changing life styles, the length of education will increase in the future, and the educational structure will become more varied.

Traditionally, the span of human life has been chopped into slices like a great salami, with each section having a special flavor all its own. First, there was a thin slice of early childhood, the time of happy play. Then came a somewhat thicker slice devoted almost exclusively to full-time learning. Next, we had the still thicker chunk of full-time work. Finally, the little nubbin at the

end, characterized by some as "dignified decline." Let me remind you that those chunks represent the pattern around which we've organized our institutions, each stage following inexorably behind the other. In this "traditional" life cycle of the past, the stages of existence were kept rigidly apart, each clanking along behind the other like a string of freight cars behind an engine. We moved from stage to stage, never looking back.*

Today, in most developed countries, this life cycle has begun to change. In the United States, about 40 percent of all boys and girls enroll in preschool programs before they go to kindergarten. Thousands now watch "Sesame Street," and the rigid, brittle line between the so-called play years and the years of school is now completely blurred.

Increasingly, moreover, university students "stop out" or enroll for only part-time study, trying to break out of what seems to them a time of endless incubation. Incidentally, in the United States, over 55 percent of all those enrolled in what we call postsecondary education are part-time students. Clearly, the college-going years are less well defined.

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*Note that for most of human history, there was not a chunk called education. We need to remind ourselves that it is a very recent development that children moved from childhood to education to work. Through most of human history, they moved from early childhood to work and then death. But

To add to the confusion, the neat and tidy adult world is also beginning to break up. Life expectancy has increased from forty-seven years in 1900 to seventy-one years in 1973, and by the year 2000, it is estimated that nearly 30 percent of the American population will be over fifty.

In 1900, the average work week in America was 62 yours long; in 1945 it dropped to 43; and today it's 37½ hours. We have moved from the time when every waking hour for an adult was devoted exclusively to earning bread, to a period in which large chunks of adult living--at least in affluent and developed countries--can be available for continued learning. That's an unprecedented, revolutionary reform in human development. For the first time in history, education may now be viewed not only as a "prework ritual" but also as a process to be pursued form five to eighty-five.

The point I wish to make is this. For years, we've just assumed that life was neatly programmed. There were the early days of freedom, then came formal education, after that, work, then abrupt decline. We built formal education to fit this rigid cycle, serving principally the young and unattached on the assumption that they had nothing else to do.

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today, in most developed countries we have an intervention period we call education. And indeed it might be thought that some of our problems today have arisen because we have an extended period that some have characterized as arrested adolescence. The term adolescence, in fact, is a very new and novel issue, and up until recently cultures did not worry about the so-called restless youth. Youth were tired and fatigued. They were not restless.

This pattern will no longer hold. In the days ahead, education will mean education throughout life, and this will require more flexibility, both in the content and the structure of formal education. In Moby Dick, Ishmael says of himself, "I have an everlasting itch for things remote." It seems quite clear that increasingly education will mean learning how to scratch the everlasting itch.

I believe that in the days ahead we're going to have to confront the inevitability of continued learning, not as a self-indulgent process but as an urgent requirement in a world in which our continued education is rooted directly to our continued survival. When I watched the televised discussions about Three Mile Island and I heard comments about rems and cold-shut-downs, I felt like an idiot. They were talking a language I did not understand. I began to suspect that at this late moment in human history, we may be creating a society in which we become more and more ignorant at a time when we should become more and more knowledgeable. Is is possible that we're moving back to the days of the high priests of knowledge, in which most of us do not understand the terms and the technologies, but must depend on those who filter it and interpret it for us? Unable to trust our own judgement, we must trust the communicators. This is a frightening prospect which only continued learning can reduce.

There is one important footnote to add to this discussion about lifelong education. As we moved toward lifelong learning, I believe the first 12 years of formal education could and should be redesigned. Several years ago, I proposed that the elementary and secondary school be reshaped into three rationally based tiers. There would be basic school, four or five years that dealt clearly with the centrality of language and the tools of learning; then there would be four or five years of what I call the common school, where we begin to think more carefully about the content and core of general learning; and then, perhaps, two or three years of what I call the transition school, a new kind of school where students begin to test their own special skills and develop some degree of independence. There we would begin to confront the fact that 16-, 17-, and 18-year olds are more mature, more restless, and necessarily more engaged in discovering who they are, discovering some connections of the formal learning to the obligations in the outside world.

Unless we try to reorder more carefully the pre-collegiate period and then more systematically the life-time beyond that, wer're going to find education in this country less and less responsive to the needs from five to eighty-five. Not only will the length of education need to increase in the future, but the sequence of

education will require some redesigning as well.

I have a third suggestion to propose as I look across the landscape of the nation. I suggest that because of technologies, because of mass communication, students will increasingly be taught by nontraditional teachers outside the classroom and the school.

When I marched off to school over forty years ago, we had no television. We had no radio. We had a model A Ford that took us 100 miles from home. I was in awe of of Mrs. Rice, my first grade teacher. She was my "walking encyclopedia," and the classroom was my window to the world. There was no competition.

Today in America students watch television 4½ hours every day. That's 6000 hours before they ever go to school. By the time they graduate from secondary school, they will have watched television 16,000 hours, compared to 11,000 spent with their teachers.

Christopher Evans, in his new book, The Micro Millenium, talks about the impact of yet another form of language--the computer. He says that during the 1980s the book will begin "a slow and steady slide into oblivion." Computers will take over, he declares, because they store more information and because their information can be more readily retrieved. Evans says that in the future books will be "tiny silicon chips" which can be slipped into small projectors, and read from viewing screens against the wall, or on the ceiling if you like to read in bed.

My point is not to worship the machine. Rather it is to suggest that we confront a communications revolution. The flow of information has dramatically increased. I beleive that nontraditional "teachers" in our culture will have an impact on students and on our schools in ways we hardly understand.

A recent survey revealed that twenty years ago, in 1960, teenagers in America reported that they were influenced most by their parents, second by their teachers, and third by their peers. Today, in 1980, young people report that they are influenced most by their peers, next by their parents, and third by television, which jumped from eighth to third. Classroom teachers, in turn, dropped from second to fourth place. They have lost both authority and prestige.

In my view the strengths of the traditional and nontraditional teachers in our culture must somehow be combined. Television can take students to the moon and to the bottom of the sea. Calculators can solve problems faster than the human brain. And computers can retrieve instantly millions of information units. But television, calculators, and computers cannot--or will not--make discriminatory judgments. They cannot--or will not--teach the students wisdom.

The challenge of the future is not to fight technology, nor is it to co-opt technology and bring it into the school. Rather, the challenge is to <u>teach</u> <u>about</u> technology and to

build a partnership between traditional and nontraditional education, letting each do what it can do best.

As a footnote, it should be said that the challenge also is make sure that technology does not increase discrimination. Cable television going into New York City, for instance, will have sixty separate channels, but will by-pass Harlem, thereby reinforcing the possibility that as communication sources become more sophisticated, we will, in fact, increase discrimination, While we will have some who are more knowledgeable, a majority will become illiterate in terms of the information and knowledge of our time.

I have explored this matter in some depth to make these points: communication is increasingly the central source of power; and students are being taught by "teachers" far beyond the school. We cannot talk about education in the days ahead without finding better ways to relate traditional and nontraditional education.

Thus far I have spoken of education in the context of the changing face of students, I have suggested that education increasingly will be viewed as a process that never ends, and I have predicted that the "teachers" of tomorrow will be both traditional and nontraditional. But what about the substance? Can education in fact lead to a good and worthwhile life, not just in a societal sense, but in a personal sense as well?

This brings me to my final point. I suspect that in the days ahead there will be renewed interest in the "core curriculum" in the schools. The debate will move beyond the traditional academic subjects, and increasingly the core curriculum will focus on a central integrating purpose. Specifically, I suggest that the core curriculum will be a course of study that helps all students gain perspective and helps students see themselves in relation to other people, other times, and other forms of life.

The harsh truth is that we confront a world where all actions are inextricably interlocked, and yet many students see fragments, not connections. In the surveys and the research that preceded the preparation of Children's Televison Workshop's junior high series, "3-2-1," junior high students in New York were interviewed. I was impressed when I read the report of that research to learn that when asked, "Where does water come from?" 15%-20% of the students said, "The faucet." When they were asked, "Where does light come form?" They said, "The switch," When asked, "Where does garbage go?" they said "Down the chute." Beyond the somewhat humorous aspects of these replies, there is at bottom something very scary. To see our world as having connections only as far as those things we can touch and not see the interrelationship between the switch and the Mideast oil, to not see the relationship between the shelves of bread and the fields

in Iowa, is a frightening blindness that will lead to misjudgments of enormous calculation in the future. However, the truth is that at many institutions we focus on subjects, not on understanding.

Today at many educational institutions the only thing students seem to have in common are their differences. There is no agreement about what it means to be an educated person. Many teachers are more confident about the length of education than they are about its substance. Today the commitment to "individualism" in education is far stronger than the commitment to coherence.

In 1972 a Stanford University faculty committee proposed a core course requirement for all students in education, after having dropped all requirements several years before. In a bitter attack on the faculty proposal, the student newspaper said in a front page editorial that the new requirements proposed "to remove from students the right to choose for themselves. This is not to deny that courses in Western culture are valuable and that most students could benefit from them. To require such a course, however, carries a strong illiberal connotation. It imposes 'uniform standards' on nonuniform people." Frankly, I was startled by that statement. I was startled to discover that one of the nation's most gifted students failed to understand that while we are indeed nonuniform,

we do have a common heritage: a common contemporary agenda and a common future. We simply cannot afford a generation that fails to see or care about connections.

Students are very different people and they should be free to make independent choices on their own. However, students also share some things in common. I suggest that in the core curriculum all students should come to understand that they are not only autonomous, self-centered individuals, but that they are also members of a larger group of living things to which they are accountable and connected. There is of course, no single set of courses by which this notion of shared relationships can be conveyed. However, through the study of our common need for language, through a study of our social institutions, through a study of common activities such as work and leisure, through a study of our prospects for the future, through these specific themes we can convey the larger truth of our connectedness on earth.

Lewis Thomas, at the Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York, wrote on one occasion that these are not the best of times for the human mind.

> All sorts of things seem to be turning out wrong, and the century seems to be slipping through our fingers here at the end, with almost all promises unfilled.
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> I cannot begin to guess at all the causes of our cultural sadness, not even the most important ones, but I can think of one thing that is wrong with us and eats away at us: we do not know enough about ourselves.

> We are ignorant about how we work, about where we fit in, and most of all about the enormous, imponderable system of life in which we are embedded as working parts.

I suggest that in the future the core curriculum should have one, central integrative goal: To help students better understand "the enormous, imponderable system of life in which we are all embedded as working parts."

Mass communication can introduce students vividly to information and ideas. Calculators can solve problems more rapidly than the human brain. Computers can store and retrieve information in ways that would have been judged impossible only a decade or two ago, and travel can help us experience first-hand what our grandparents could only imagine vaguely.

Still this is not enough. I'm convinced that we must have schools where priorities can be set. We must have classrooms where students can experience the joy of group learning. We must have teachers that serve as models and demonstrate first-hand what scholarship is all about.

By keeping alive an institution called the school, we affirm that education is not just a random, individual process. We affirm that education is a value-laden process. We defend our schools and colleges as essential social institutions with an urgent and essential purpose which must be preserved and strengthened.

As I look ahead, I see a richer, more diversified group of students; I see an educational sequence that will become lifelong; I see an increase in the length of formal education; and I see a move to link the curriculum more directly to the agenda of survival and civility we all share. These to me, are some of the issues confronting public education as we move into what Mrs. Thatcher recently called the "dangerous decade" of the 1980s.