

Modern Education: Seven Points In A Student's Bill Of Rights

(EDITOR'S NOTE: In the first part of this three-article series on the basic nature of American education we saw the views of educator Ivan Illich, highly critical of the system. It turns out docile people, he says, and proposes removing the responsibility of education from the schools and returning it to children and parents. In Part II, prepared by two Lake Superior State College educators, we see another view.)

BY HAROLD M. BERGMA
and H.J. PRINCE

Here's an author with a seven-point program for American education.

Charles Silberman, who wrote the greatly touted "Crisis in the Classroom," summarizes what he feels to be those elements in the schools (and colleges) that create "education for docility." Though highly critical of schooling that one could define as "training for tractables," Silberman does attempt to outline ideas (Chapter 4) for changing curricular offerings.

"To be practical," he says, "an education should prepare them for work which does not exist and whose nature can not be imagined." The kinds of education he says students have a right to insist on are:

(1) Practical teaching—instruction in how to go about learning; that is, how to outline, how to synopsise, how to critique, how to write a precis of a larger work, how to study, how to approach a series of complex tasks. (It cannot be assumed that simply by assigning any of the above to students that they will learn how to learn and therefore learn quickly and efficiently.)

(2) An education which provides various types of intellectual disciplines in how to deal with human social problems and ethical moral problems inherent in all "humane" interactions.

(3) An education which fosters creativity and the sense of appreciation of all that is beautiful—more, to provide environmental stimuli that are beautiful—more, to provide environmental stimuli that are beautiful or reflect beauty in music, art, literature, architecture, design and the like.

"We owe to children the freedom to explore the full range of their senses: to appreciate the subtle differences: freedom to be aware of beauty wherever it is found. . .," says Silberman.)

(4) An education which allows each student to be sensitive to life and life systems and their interrelationships. (Recent attempts are being made to structure units or courses dealing with man's ecosystem in elementary schools, high schools, and colleges in fact, some colleges or universities structure the entire curriculum around this concept, e.g., University of Wisconsin at Green Bay.

(5) An education which will deal with the practical problems of learning to be effective in the real world, not just the school world; that is, continuous application of what is learned to the realities of the social and economic system that exists beyond the school, or for that matter, fosters or nourishes the school. Silberman says: "The aim of education, as Alfred North Whitehead has written, is the 'acquisition of the art of the utilization of knowledge. Indeed, a merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God's earth.'"

(6) An educational system which allows every child to live fully and naturally as a child and also to receive the training he needs to meet the problems of later life. "In the grim, repressive, joyless places most schools now are, children are denied both of these rights," says Silberman. Such schooling, to insure that these rights are in fact made a reality for children, will involve the careful planning and care of adults, be they teachers, concerned parents, or legislators. Children often perceive their needs in terms of the fancies of the immediate moment. Children require loving guidance in order to be prepared for the future.

(7) An education which allows for a gradual and meaningful entry into the adult world, one that does not delay participation in personal decision making until the mid-twenties; not

training, but an education that prevents disengagement from the society at large, an opportunity made possible in an era of great affluence.

Having listed the above basic suggestions to prevent education for docility, Silberman also enumerates negative elements in schools that thwart achievement and student participation. He rejects elements of compulsion with penalties that are seldom related to the realities of the actual world.

He is critical of schooling where students are graded A, B, or F for words or deeds rather than evaluated on the basis of abilities and skills which they should possess when they seek employment or become part of the larger world outside the school.

He is concerned about preoccupation with order and control based on a relative position of subordination in the institution called school, rather than responsible, real participation in actual school self-government with adult assistance.

He decries the tyranny of the lesson plan which can emphasize routine for routine's sake.

The Silberman book is well worth reading. It documents in various forms what is occurring

in schools (and colleges). The book has its weaknesses, too. In the February issue of the "Harvard Educational Review," Amitai Etzioni wrote "He is not reluctant to use terms which have normative and emotive connotations or to cue the reader to his general ideological posture which is 'radical liberal.' He believes that the total educational system of America must be transformed through the accumulation of sweeping, peaceful, encompassing changes."

Christopher Lehmann-Haupt wrote in the "New York Times," "Mr. Silberman has sailed up the shallow creek of American education, surveyed the landscape and pronounced it joyless, mindless, and barren. The natives, he says, are pinched and crabbed, and stand before their children mumbling empty incantations; the children stare back silently, hollow-eyed, and pick their scabs."

Modern Education: A Summary Of Reform Views

(EDITOR'S NOTE: In this final article in a three-part series, two Lake Superior State College educators summarize views concerning reforms proposed for America's educational system.)

BY HAROLD M. BERGSMAN AND H. J. PRINCE

Some critics suggest that Illich and Silberman (1) lack sharpness in making specific recommendations for change. (2) need to spell out more clearly why proposed changes will have a projected impact, and (3) need to gather evidence to support the changes envisioned. Philip J. Foster, writing in the October, 1971, issue of "Comparative Education Review" states with strong feeling, "I submit to you that the authors mentioned above simply do not get down to 'brass tacks' issues where real moral dilemmas arise and that they are trapped at a level of rhetoric which makes it difficult for them to think through the full implications of their arguments."

One can quibble with both Illich and Silberman about numerous aspects of their reform proposals, but one can also quibble with those critics of Illich and Silberman who can see no moral issues in the messages of "Deschooling Society" and "Crisis in the Classroom." A likely immediate reaction to these critics of modern schooling is disbelief because of their seemingly absurd contentions that

American schools and society need renewal. Though we have been an advanced industrial society, we are now moving into a post-industrial era, an era in which schooling will need to adapt to the demands of constantly evolving technologies and to the very possible reality that many well-schooled men may not find employment. Schools must train youth not in the traditional fact-centered curriculum but in the powerful skills of inquiry so that they as adults will be able to adapt to accelerated technological changes without suffering "future shock." However, since economic and social evolutionary patterns can rarely be predicted accurately, opportunities for continuing education will be necessary. Illich's suggestion of a life-long voucher system (an educational credit card, if you will), with a certain sum set aside per year by the state, speaks to this problem of retraining and broadening of horizons during successive career stages in one's lifetime.

Silberman and Illich have been joined by many others who have voiced criticisms of modern schooling. In fact, the State of Michigan is now pursuing a "radical" reformation of schooling practices. All schools will be required to write behavior objectives statements of the types and levels of performance that a student should achieve) for all curricula. The state seeks to insure that students will

manifest certain skills during their school careers. In the past, a high school diploma only guaranteed that one had sat a long time. In the future, hopefully, school attendance will mean skill achievement.

One drawback of the behavioral objective approach espoused by the state is that the objectives will not be selected by a conference of teacher and student. Specific objectives selected jointly by teacher and learner would recognize students interests and school capabilities. The proposed state approach ignores a vital aspect of learning: self-motivation of learner.

Other innovations now being introduced by schools include "schools without walls" (students use the entire community as a classroom—for example, museums, factories and banks), "self selection classrooms" (Students select the subject of study and the appropriate materials with the guidance of a teacher who acts as a resource person), and "open area schools" (schools with no internal walls in which students move from one learning center to another during a portion of the school day). Such innovations are designed to take advantage of the unique learning capabilities and interests of each student.

The "open concept" approaches which are being attempted in different forms by at two schools, and by Sault (Mich.) Area Schools, at Finlayson School, require that adults exercise prudent guidance so that students are not allowed to wander aimlessly (or eventually joylessly) as they learn about their world.

The October, 1971 issue of the "Connection," a publication of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE), words it this way:

the creation of "instant" open classrooms.

Both school systems are experimenting with the open concept classrooms. The Canadian model uses the approach of opening the physical structure and intervening walls between classrooms, but retaining a fairly traditional approach to curriculum change. Conversely, the Finlayson school attempts to utilize a traditional physical structure but "opens" the curriculum to allow a great deal of student choice and directive.

To these writers, both attempts at restructuring elementary education are laudable. Both experiments seek to provide situations in which children live "more fully and naturally," and to overcome negative elements often found in traditional classroom cubes with rigid time schedules and with little flexibility for the dull or bright.

Schools in the past seemingly prepared youth for the society of the day, but eras do pass and schools must prepare students for an evolving society. We can ignore Illich, Silberman and other "radical" critics, by we cannot ignore economic and cultural realities that demand school reforms. There is great

bravery in realistically seeking improvement through creative structural change than in defending rigidly and unthinkingly, the "status quo." Hopefully, there are many brave men and women who do recognize the need for school reform and will support it.