

## LIFETIME EDUCATION

## Propositions Toward a General Theory of Education for These Times\*

by

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I. Impasse in Contemporary Educational Effort

The middle of the twentieth century is, it seems apparent, an era of unprecedented concern for and commitment to education. Historical developments involving the broadening of objectives, extensions of the attendance period and the school year, and the expansion of subject matter offerings and school services are being paralleled today by diverse and vigorous endeavors still further to strengthen the educative process. The ungraded school, team teaching and educational television, as efforts aimed at school organization and instructional method, are accompanied by massive revisions in the content of school subjects, generally tending to shape this content more in accordance with the essence of the respective scientific and scholarly disciplines.

Yet, despite these extraordinary expressions of social interest and professional activity, insightful observers are still raising questions about the character and the effectiveness of the American School. Are there not

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\*This article introduces in condensed form certain main themes proposed and argued as a general theory of education in a larger publication now in progress.

limits to the proportion of national resource and product which it is necessary to invest in the school program in order to obtain satisfactory educational results? Can the typical American youngster, already under considerable pressure within school and often without, manage healthily a much greater psychological load than he is now carrying? Further, are there are limits to the growing disproportion between the vast realms of developed knowledge and the amount of information that can be constructively arranged within the school curriculum as now conceived and organized? Are we in sum, despite good conscience and commendable effort, approaching an effective impasse on several fronts in the educational enterprise as now conducted, with additional efforts in like kind destined still to prove inadequate?

In a deliberate quest for new approaches to the problem of educational improvement, one is virtually forced to observe that despite their power, their reasonableness in terms of conventional thought, and their diversity, the odzen or so moves toward curricular reform and school reorganization that have sprung up within the past ten or fifteen years are mainly different in what might be termed tactic as distinct from strategy. They comprise for the most part transformations within but not of established practice and conventional thought. The fact may well be, however, that we simply are not properly engaged with the educational task in the inherent form it poses within the vast social and technological upheaval to which philosophers refer as the "emergent human condition." Perhaps we have directed our efforts toward change at epiphenomena, when we need to address inquiry and imagination to more basic levels of the endeavor - to the fundamental objectives of the school, for instance; to the essential nature of the school curriculum; and even to the very conceptions of human capabilities and what is and is not necessary service by the school to the individual in view of man's potentialities for learning and the newer conditions available in support thereof.

The purpose of the present paper is to propose elements of a general theory of education which, when conceived and implemented in full essence, would appear to provide a more fitting conception of man's potentiality for learning throughout the life span, and to take fairer account of changes within the contemporary human condition which enable and make reasonable a more radical innovation in the task of education than appears presently to be involved.

## II. Key Elements in the Strategy of Lifetime Education

The conceptions around which the proposed changes in school objectives and curricula turn are those concerning the most necessary and advantageous services which the institution can render the learner, and those concerning the nature of knowledge most necessary and advantageous for attainment

during childhood and within the school in order that education can realistically be expected to extend thereafter across the entire life span. Specifically it is proposed:

(1). That all the life span, as distinct from childhood and youth, is the proper period for the process of education;

(2). That all knowledge, as distinct from selected segments thereof, comprises the proper substance of education;

(3). That training and facilitation, preparation for education as distinct from its actualization, is the proper function of the scholastic institution; and within this role the further particulars

(a). that training for self management in all main areas of experiential potentiality should be the institutional objective for childhood and youth, with instructional principles and practices, curricular content and material facilities conceived and directed accordingly; and

(b). that supportive facilitation, required services for the essentially independent pursuit by individual and peer group of any and all knowledge in which intrinsic interest emerges, should be the institutional function during adulthood; and, finally,

(4). That education, as distinct from preparation therefor, is the proper function of the individual among his peers at every age beyond childhood, throughout the life career.

The full development of these propositions and correlative ideas that comprise "Lifetime Education" as a general theory of education demands larger space than can be allocated here. Accordingly, only a brief depiction of rationale with respect to the main elements proposed herein must suffice for the present occasion.

(1) The Concept of Education Through the Life Span. Once isolated from its deeply embedded roots within the conventional system, it is a striking feature of the American school that it attempts to accomplish its mission within the period of childhood and youth. Whether conceived as preparation for life during the mature years or as life itself, attained and realized in fulsome dimensions prior to maturity, education seems to be almost "naturally" conceived as a phenomenon belonging in childhood. The impressive number of adults, upwards of eighteen million by recent count, who are engaged in some form of training or institutional pursuit of an educational nature, can be viewed only

as an adjunctive phenomenon within contemporary culture, the so-called "school" with its organized board, administrative staff and tax support seeming peculiarly divorced from the multitudinous activities of an educational nature in which these millions of adults are engaged. And of course since there is no integrative, undergirding philosophy, and no systematic articulation in terms of institutional provisions beyond the high school or the junior college, the individual's enhancement of mind or pursuit of additional behavioral skills is difficult to come by and often simply so inconvenient as to be in practical effect unavailable.

When one compares the various media within our culture through which man's apparently continuing need for recreation, and his apparent need for spiritual engagement across the mature years can be readily accommodated, it is difficult to avoid the observation that we stand actively deprived of another continuing psychological need - the formal and systematic engagement of intellect with experience. Institutionalized facilitation of continued learning is simply not provided. Both the "terminal" concept and that of "commencement" seem out of joint with psychological reality and social potentiality. Education in short seems to be effectively divorced from culture; and this condition is both unnecessary and undesirable. Therefore, it seems apparent that the concept of childhood education as now maintained must go, and be replaced with theoretical sanction and institutional facilitation such that education remains a continuing pursuit, indeed potentially a medium in the kaleidoscopic world spectrum for the most absorbing of the various cultural institutions that serve to inculcate into man and to sustain his "human nature."

(2) The Concept of All Knowledge. In another of the clearer aspects of defective strategy in the contemporary school, the race to keep the curriculum substantially representative of the world of knowledge has been abjectly lost. In the fact of explosions of knowledge in numerous sciences and the diversity of attainment in arts which seem spontaneously to represent a cultural intensification derivative of mass communication and movement of idea and person across space compacted by technology, the school curriculum becomes increasingly pitiable as a representation of all that is known. Add the obsolescence factor inherent within these advances, and the factor of forgetting from childhood to adulthood, and the state of the citizen in contemporary society despite extended schooling, is principally inadequate for maintaining a responsible role within the emergent and ongoing changes in human ecology. Cases in point of this inadequacy are our very helplessness in the face of crime and war, of equity in access to natural resource, and of the lag between ideal and theory on one hand and the conduct of practical affairs on the other. With cognitive potentiality abrogated, incompletely materialized, man has no choice but to muddle through his problems, only half conscious of their nature and half sound in their solution.

The proposed strategy, however, involving a substantially different kind of knowledge (see below) as curricular substance, makes a drastic alteration in the perspective upon individual learning within the full range of developed knowledge. With a lifetime in which to play the mature mind against the external world of idea, and cultural conditions being such as to support the investment of increasing amounts of the waking day and week to the pursuit of practical knowledge or academic, always in the light of changing personal needs and perspectives upon world affairs, all knowledge in this real - but not literal - sense becomes meaningful as the proper province of Lifetime Education. And with these deliberate aspects of educational strategy accustomed as they can become, the normal individual, while never to be sure knowing all in a concrete sense, can, it appears, and will, it appears likely, acquire a much vaster array of understandings and skills than he does under the present system of being taught what he learns during childhood. The measure of a man's education can thus be against the field of all knowledge, with balance, breadth and depth being subject to the individual's intrinsic psychological potentialities rather than to the external requirements of the scholastic institution.

Though the specific theoretical system must await occasion for full detail, it has to be noted here in the interest of integrity within the proposed educational design that a substantial focus of learning during the period of youth would now become what the author refers to as "knowledge about knowledge." Rather than, as now, instruction in the substantive facts and principles of selected academic disciplines as a direct objective, the school curriculum would instead be composed in main part of appropriately adapted material from Epistemology, that branch of philosophy which considers the various problems involved in knowing anything at all, and the essence and interrelationships among the numerous fields of art and science and practical information which comprise the substance of our knowledge. Always of interest and usefulness to the serious learner, but available to him only through inquiry apart from the school process, appropriate epistemological understandings and a current, functional classification of all knowledge, would now become a central objective of school study for learners within the new framework. Thus, it is suggested, a proper and a necessary service of the school becomes that of rendering the learner a "master of all knowledge" before he undertakes as a lifetime pursuit the effective specific mastery of any given segment thereof.

(3) The Concept of Institutional Training for and Facilitation of Personal Development. The school as it has developed in American society, and mainly across the Western world, strikingly engages most in the least necessary aspects of the learning process, and correlatively fails to engage with those aspects most necessary. The school curriculum whether for ten year olds or fifteen or twenty, indulges principally in the factual substance of whatever discipline that is included. This level of understanding involves the lowest order of cognitive process, immediate perceptivity, for which personal management is most adequate. Those levels of understanding requiring the involvement of higher cognitive functions - those most necessary for institutional objectives

since they lie beyond the unaided grasp of the individual - are engaged, save in schools of exceptional quality, only in inconsequential degree. And, of course, this kind of schooling leads to this kind of utilization of mind in the continuing life experience. Stark though the picture is, the school it thus appears conditions dependency upon external direction for learning, and in so doing leaves the person helpless in the face of the never-ending need for independent learning; and it practices satisfaction in the simpler aspects of knowing, to the neglect of more powerful and serviceable complex engagement with the world of knowledge.

The proposed strategy suggests that the objective of the scholastic institution for childhood be that of training (evocation) human potentiality in all its main dimensions, the affective, the purposive and the cognitive, with curricular content and instructional methodology comprised principally of indirect, abstract substance within which plane of experience training is necessary; and that all this kind of experience be shaped toward the development of the individual and his habituation in the process of independent pursuit of his own personal development in all these dimensions. Institutional training of the individual for self actualization: this is the proper character of education; not the directed actualization of personal potential for the individual by the institution. And for the continuing process of self realization through the life span, the institutional service to person and peer group becomes more nearly that of mere service, facilitation of what the mature individual feels he needs next to accomplish within his lifelong involvement in the process of education. This continuing pursuit is made fascinating and compelling by personal interest, conscious need, and the inter-personal stimulation of peer groups spontaneously formed through these intrinsic affinities.

The realignment of substantive learning for that period of mature adulthood in which it occurs most realistically, at the same time leaves the scholastic institution free to place emphasis in childhood upon those non-intellective aspects of personality and character to which school practice now pays only token respect. Training for emotional fulfillment, transcendent joy and depths of sorrow alike being brought under management through supervised, reflective experience in naturalistic settings within the years of youth; training for character, transcendence of social and ethical ideal over the personal and expedient; and training for the intellectual management of experience at the more elevated planes of cognitive process - all these in contrast to the main and near exclusive pursuit of substantive information per se - come into clear focus. Institutional training thus comprises "preparation for living" in a much more valid sense than that in which stored information supposedly is recalled and applied to ongoing experience throughout life.

(4) The Concept of Education as A Function of the Individual and Peer Group. As has been implicit in certain of the discussion to this point,

instruction in the substantive information comprising the various fields of knowledge has traditionally been conceived as the inherent function of the school. What is known to man becomes what is taught to and what is learned by the person. The fact that initiative and direction on the part of the school, with the learner active or passive in varying degree as the institutional pattern for his education is accomplished, have become so thoroughly ingrained in social habit and expectancy that they seem almost "natural", does not, as a matter of fact, make these features in present educational practice either natural or otherwise desirable. Indeed it is valid psychologically to consider the typical human being active, rather than passive, and interested in knowing what's going on around, positively oriented that is toward knowing and doing. What the school has blocked and distorted is growth of the individual's capacity for self management in entering and pursuing one after another field of classified knowledge. The institution has unwittingly come to do to and for the person, what he is eminently capable for the most part in doing for himself. And in thus denigrating valuable intrinsic resources of the person, the learning process itself has taken on the multitudinous difficulties observed with "school learning" - i.e., half-heartedness, misconception, rapid forgetting and insufficient transfer.

Now the pursuit of understanding remains central in purpose within the proposed strategy, the difference being that the initiative for and the actualization of the process become mainly the responsibility of the individual learner and his peers, and the latter comprised of voluntary group according to age, disposition and specific interest or need. The main thrust toward lifelong enlightenment through experience is thus transferred from teacher to learner, and from the institution to the person.

The parallel processes of training and of education would of course proceed through institutional provisions during childhood as well as through the main portion of the life span. The curriculum as required - what teachers would do to and for in some sense, but in a better sense with the student - would be training. The kind and function of subject matter taught would be instrumental toward education, but not education in the necessary remaining sense. Closer to the classical meaning of the term lies the proposed lifelong pursuit of substantive understandings in whatever direction and to whatever degree individual interests and potentialities make fitting. Beginning say, late in childhood the pursuit of information would be voluntary, accomplished by the individual alone or in voluntary group association. Group dynamics, as is well known, provide a very effective process through which people can be brought into purposeful collective pursuit, and these dynamics can be applied to the service of learning such that the resulting achievement would seem easily to promise a parallel to the typical and less naturalistic present situation in which teachers attempt to instruct learners who typically are "not all there" psychologically. It is submitted further that while the

shape and configuration of normative achievement would unquestionably be different, responding thus to the spontaneous interests of the learner, the present phenomenon of marked forgetting immediately following the termination of school would be happily replaced by an ever ascending curve in the expansion of intellectual horizons beginning in childhood and unmarred by "termination" practices at various segmental levels within the school as now organized.

### III. Generality of Relevance

The economy and simplicity in form of this system of proposals toward a new strategy for American education may lead to its being perceived as innocuous rather than innovative or radical. The apparent simplicity, however, should be allowed neither to disarm nor to deceive, for if the full pattern of interrelated propositions were to be materialized, with the close meanings of key concepts sensed and implemented as intended, the proposed theory would strike fundamentally at established conceptions and practices. Nothing less should be termed strategy, and nothing less is likely to comprise the breakthrough or reform through which the present apparent impasse can be transcended, and a more effective engagement attained with the task of education for and within the contemporary human condition.

The general relevance of the theory, whether it describe education as it should be and always has been for a select few, or whether it is potentially viable within the experience of common man, comes into question in at least two principal dynamic features within the system. Since these are critical to the integrity of the proposed design as general theory they must be acknowledged, though space, once again, in this condensed exposition does not allow for explicit argument relative to either point.

The first question arises from the psychology of learning and human capability therefor: Can the individual whose intellectual abilities fall within or above the broad average or middle range handle his own education across the life span with the training herein called for during youth, and with social expectancies and conditions of life and work during adulthood positively pertaining?

The second question arises from the psychology of motivation: Will the individual who falls within the normal range of personality disposition and strength of purpose pursue learning out of intrinsic interest and need, under his own initiative and the social stimulation of peers similarly disposed at whatever age?



Though no theorist is likely to propose other than what has been tried in the court of his own experience and found whole, the reader as jurist will have his own reaction to these questions and his own judgment as to the efficacy of the system, thus briefly sketched, as general theory. It is good and proper that he should so reflect and judge; and, as is frequently remarked, observations which do no more than invite constructive reflection render in this manner a service. But whether beyond such instrumental purpose this strategy for Lifetime Education in its substance will be convincing, will bear the test of lab and field, and will in fact comprise something in the nature of what is needed by way of education in these extraordinary times, time itself must witness.