Carl Bereiter

**MUST WE EDUCATE?**

Mr. Bereiter sees "definite trends suggesting the eventual decline of public education." They may result in paring down the role of schooling to training in basic skills. But all the outcomes are still in doubt. Here is the introductory chapter of a new book in which Bereiter discusses alternatives toward which he thinks we should be working.

For those who know of my earlier work on teaching disadvantaged children, some explanation is needed to relate what I am saying now with what I was saying seven years ago. The academic preschool that Siegfried Engelmann and I ran has been labeled a "pressure-cooker" and a "Marine drill sergeant" approach to teaching. Those are exaggerated characterizations of a program that aimed at giving children lively, direct training in basic academic skills. It is fair, however, to say that our approach represented the very antithesis of the informal child-centered approach so dear to educational liberals and radicals.

I still think that if you want to teach a skill, the direct approach is the way to do it. That is how most training is carried out in the real world, where training works -- in swimming classes, music lessons, and on-the-job training. The indirect approach favored by schools simply cheats kids by putting too much of the burden on their own initiative and ability to figure things out.

What I have never felt good about is making kids over in the interests of an educational program. Undiscriminating readers like Edgar Z. Friedenberg and William Labov saw our approach as imposing middle-class standards on lower-class kids. In fact, our approach does just the opposite -- and that is both its strength and its weakness. It leaves kids alone. It doesn't try to alter their language or behavior in any general way but merely tries to teach skills and behaviors useful in a teaching situation.

Lower-class black kids remain lower-class black kids, except that they become literate. We don't try to condition them in the process to some ideal of middle-class childhood or to some romanticized form of black culture. There may be some value in doing one or the other, but I don't see it as our prerogative or the prerogative of any public school system. The weakness of this hands-off approach is that children don't change in fundamental ways. If direct training ceases and children are left in the sink-or-swim environment of the modern classroom, they tend to sink as other children like them do. They haven't been made over into the kinds of children who fare well in such an environment.

What can we do? The options are fairly clear. Either make kids over or continue direct training or give up and say, "Who needs to read anyway?" The choice is a moral one, not a technical one. It is a moral dilemma that applies to all children, not only to the most needy. I see "making kids over" as another label for "educating the whole child." I'm opposed to it. To me it means forcing on all children the prevailing notions of how people should be. I see it as incompatible with the values of a free society.

**The Right To Make Mistakes**

Someone must educate children. It is sheer romance to imagine that they can grow into adequate adults without some guiding influence. Traditionally this guidance comes from the home, and even with universal compulsory schooling the home still appears to be the main educational influence on children. That is how it should be in a free society. A society that granted individuals the right to live according to their own values but did not grant them the right to raise their children according to those values would not be a free society -- it would only be a society in which individual liberty was strangled slowly instead of abruptly.

How, then, does it happen in democratic societies that the state has assumed the right to educate children? There are fairly obvious reasons why the state should have an interest in how children turn out, but it does not necessarily follow that the state has a right to do anything.

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about it, beyond providing cultural resources and perhaps financial assistance to parents in educating their children. The answer seems to reside in a widespread conviction, shared by government officials and professional "helpers" of all sorts, that people must not be allowed to make mistakes. For parents and children, given the freedom to determine their own lives, will make mistakes. The need to keep people from making mistakes has been used for centuries to justify keeping people in bondage — slaves, women, whole nations. The argument has always proved to have some truth in it. When set free, people have made mistakes. But increasingly it is recognized that they have a right to freedom nevertheless. It would seem that this same recognition must eventually be made of the right of people to make mistakes in educating themselves and their children.

Even if the majority are satisfied to have educational choices made for them, it does not follow that the state should do so. Educational freedom and religious freedom are parallel cases in this regard. State schools and state churches both inevitably undermine freedom, even if they satisfy a large majority of the people. It seems clear that, from the standpoint of human rights, public education is an anachronism. Established at a time when individual liberties were not so clearly recognized and not so jealously defended, public education is grossly out of keeping with modern conceptions of freedom.

The most difficult issue of rights is not the issue of parents versus the state but the issue of parents versus their children. The issue is difficult because the child cannot exercise rights from birth but must somehow at some time in his development accede to rights that were previously held by his parents. There is no neat solution to the problem of transfer of rights. What I suggest is that children should not necessarily acquire all rights of citizenship at the same time, and that they should acquire educational rights at an earlier age than some other rights. It seems that it is around the age of 13 or 14 that children begin to take a conscious interest in their own development, and so it would be reasonable for them to have the right to begin making their own educational decisions at about that time. Parents would still have influence, of course, but they would not have authority supported by law. This is a hard nut to swallow, for most parents too are infected with an unwillingness to let people make mistakes, particularly their own children. But I don't see any other way to give full meaning to the right of people to determine their own course of development, and this is a right without which most other rights become meaningless.

Is Inequality Here To Stay?

The strongest argument against leaving educational decisions in the hands of parents and children is that poorly educated parents will have poorly educated children. Thus, the argument runs, the price of educational freedom will be that the poor get poorer and the rich get richer.

It is difficult to write this argument off by saying that freedom always has its price. If the costs fall mainly on the poor, that is not a good thing. It is true, of course, that the poor come off badly even now under a system of universal compulsory education, but it is still possible that they could come off worse. If, however, we look passionately at why the poor come off badly under the present system, the evidence is clear that they are deficient in a variety of intellectual and motivational characteristics that constitute scholastic aptitude (of which IQ is only one component).

To remedy all of these deficiencies would be to make poor people over into quite different kinds of people. They might then be better equipped to succeed in school, but in the process whole subcultures would have been destroyed. That is an intolerably high price to pay for something that in the end would make at best a modest contribution to equality in the things that really count, such as income. Recent studies such as those of Ivar Berg and Christopher Jencks indicate that education has been greatly overrated as a basis for social success. Our concern with educational equality has produced no tangible gains and has served only to deflect us from more positive social actions in the interests of equality.

A more reasonable goal in the area of education would be to make it possible for all children, regardless of background and regardless of scholastic aptitude, to acquire adequate levels of skill in reading, writing, and practical arithmetic. The means to do this are available, or are becoming available, through careful training. There is no
reason to suppose that if the training opportunities were available poor people would not take advantage of them. Such training would not achieve social equality for poor people, but it could do more than any mild sort of educational treatment could do, and perhaps as much as can be done in any way that respects the right of people to be different.

Institutionalizing Personal Choice

How is one to draw the line between public services and public imposition of goals on individuals? The two cannot be entirely separated, because in providing any public service decisions have to be made that may influence the development and destinies of people. There are some principles, however, that can be applied to minimize the extent to which public institutions take over the lives of people. One principle, stressed by Ivan Illich, is that institutions should not generate needs for their services and other services, thus leading to an ever-increasing dependence on institutions. Illich has proposed radical redesign of institutions, including educational ones, so that they leave people alone, the way public utilities do, instead of absorbing them, the way the welfare system does.

I suggest that the key point is to limit the means by which institutions are able to create needs for their services. Schools make people dependent on schooling through monopoly, compulsory attendance, and by issuing credentials that have become requirements of employment. Other institutions create needs by attaching strings to benefits, as the welfare system does, and by advertising, as private industry does. These methods of generating needs are all, in their various ways, disreputable, and could in all justice be limited by law. That would leave the way open for services to be offered to the public, but they would have to stand on their merits and would no longer be such a threat to individual responsibility and freedom.

At present we are so committed to a belief in public education that a parks commissioner or a welfare director is considered to be operating in the best of faith if he uses his office to advance generally acceptable notions of how people should be. If we looked at it differently, however, if we saw public education as a dangerous intrusion into the lives of individuals, we would kick out public officials who acted that way, as readily as we now kick out those who use their offices for graft. The responsible official would be one who regarded his power to educate in the same way as he regarded his power to make people rich — as a power not to be abused, but to be exercised with as much fairness, impartiality, and restraint as possible.

Schools Without Education

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to fundamental criticism of education is that there are no immediately obvious alternatives except doing nothing. It is hard to imagine a child doing anything worthwhile that is not educational, and hard to imagine an adult relating to a child in any worthwhile way except to educate him. Let us look more carefully, however, at what public services children actually need.

Children need to be taken care of when they are away from their parents and they need training in some basic skills, mainly the three Rs. Elementary schools exist mainly to serve these two needs, but they have subordinated them to an overall objective of educating the child, for which there is no clearly established need. Training in the schools has been poor. Substantial numbers of children have failed to learn the rudimentary skills to an adequate level. The quality of child care has varied. In the days of the birch rod it was abominable. More recently it has been not bad, but its ritualistic form is becoming too evidently absurd to survive. Informal education shows promise of being a superior form of child care, although it does not appear to be any improvement as far as training is concerned.

I suggest that both training and child care can be done better if they are handled separately by different people according to different styles. By unpackaging them, moreover, education as the all-embracing function of schools becomes lost. I do not think it will be missed. The alternative system would find the typical child involved for a couple of hours a day in lively sessions of training in basic skills, carried out by people who did not fancy themselves to be educators but capable imitators of competence. For the rest of the time the child would be in the care of people similar to camp counselors who would help children avail themselves of opportunities inside and outside of school for activities that were worthwhile in their own right rather than for some supposed educational effect.

A Better Life for Children

What are activities for children that are worthwhile in their own right? They are not merely activities that are fun. I suggest as a criterion that child care should be concerned with increasing the quality of children's immediate experience. By whose standard? Inevitably, by the standard of the people who have control. These will be mainly adults, although children can enter into the process of proposing and judging alternatives.

What I am proposing, thus, is not a neutral or value-free treatment of children, which would be impossible in any event. I am proposing that the cultural life of children should be treated like the cultural life of adults, as something that should have quality, meaning, and moral value in the here and now rather than in some future state of development. Cultural facilities and activities should be designed to enable children to make fuller use of the human qualities they already have rather than to develop new qualities. It might be argued that this is simply education under a different guise, but I think the intention is fundamentally different.

Some specific suggestions: Provide intellectual recreation in place of schooling; make it easier for children to do things rather than merely watch; provide quiet places without prescribed activities; encourage age intermixing; and provide resources.
that can be used in a variety of unprogrammed ways so as to balance the resources that program the user. There is room for a great deal of creative thinking in planning cultural resources for children, once it is recognized that the talents of the educator are not the main talents to be employed.

Optional Adolescence

As children grow into adolescence, their needs diverge. Some are ready to move directly into adult jobs and marriage. Others need an extended period of career training, but want little else in the way of education. Then there are others—the most conspicuous, but actually a minority—who value a lengthy period of freedom from work in order to pursue their own development and to do any of a variety of nonvocational things. If we define adolescence as this in-between period of freedom from vocational responsibility, then it is obvious that some want it and others do not.

At the present time the choice is not a free one. If you want to be an adolescent you have to be a student, and vice versa. Consequently, our high schools and colleges are glutted with young people who don’t particularly want schooling but who want the kind of adolescent life and the kinds of future careers that schooling makes possible. The U.S. Supreme Court has already judged that competence, not schooling, should be the criterion for employment. If this judgment were applied fully, it would relieve one of the bonds that young people are in. But to make adolescence truly optional it should also be possible for young people to enjoy their freedom without having to go to school. I suggest unrestricted grants for this purpose, to be repaid through a surtax on income in later years.

Other options to meet other needs are university-type schooling for the minority seriously interested in studying academic disciplines, a service corps to provide socially meaningful work, and opportunities for vocational training and on-the-job training. This set of options may raise fears of the emergence of a caste system, but such fears I think are realistic only under a system where academic education is the sole route to social status. When that is not the case, optional adolescence would make it possible for more people with nonacademic inclinations to experience the period of adolescent development that so sharply separates the social classes in contemporary society.

To permit young people to be adolescents without going to school would be to turn them loose on a world that is afraid of them. But it appears that the world is going to have to come to terms with adolescents as a subcultural group anyway. Society could stand to benefit from what adolescents have to offer instead of fighting a losing battle to keep them in check.

Education and Society’s Needs

What education does for the individual is one thing; what it does for society is another. We look to education to solve social problems by changing people. It does not work very well, and in general problems of human behavior are better dealt with by changing the incentives according to which people act. There are times when a whole population might need to be changed—for instance, to make people less inclined toward violence. Such changes, however, would require a great deal more than schooling. They would require overhauling virtually every aspect of societal functioning. It is unlikely that a free society would ever take such a change upon itself. To support public education as a partial measure is simply to feed an expensive illusion.

We also look to education to provide a productive workforce. What has happened, however, is that educational processing has taken the place of competence. If the emphasis were shifted back to demonstrated ability, with opportunities available for training and testing, the likely result would be a general increase in competence.

Finally, education has often been looked to as a means of keeping the classical heritage alive. What is at issue here is not only preservation of the old but infusion of the present with wisdom and appropriate values. To many people, giving up on the effort to educate means consigning modern society to mediocrity, materialism, and short-sightedness. I sense this danger very strongly, but it seems to me that mass education has not been and cannot possibly be the answer. Its effect is to dilute the classical tradition to the point where it is ineffec
tual. I would rather put my faith in serious humanistic study for the few who want it and, for society as a whole, to trust that high ideals will ultimately prove more attractive than low ones.

That is a slim hope, but I do not see that we have any other.

Will Anything Happen?

What will happen to education is anybody’s guess, but there are definite trends suggesting eventual decline of public education. Rising costs, together with a declining public concern for education as knowledge becomes less of a scarce commodity, may lead to schooling’s being pared down to training in basic skills. High schools may become more like colleges and other options may have to be established as more rapidly maturing adolescents insist on their rights. If the trend toward more experimentation in life-styles continues, we will have a new kind of cultural pluralism that will make mass education less acceptable. Many of the new life-styles stress values of life in the here and now, values that run counter to educational values. Finally, as more powerful techniques for changing people develop, education is likely to be seen as dangerous rather than as the benign, unobjectionable thing it is now. These trends suggest changes in the directions of ones I have proposed, but all outcomes are in doubt. Therefore it is worth giving some serious thought to whether we want the lives of our children to be dominated by education in the future and to whether there are alternatives that we should be working toward.