A NEW LOOK
AT SCHOOLS

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To my colleagues and friends at
Sudbury Valley School
who made it all possible

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INTRODUCTION   *The Continuing Crisis in American Education*

That our schools have been in trouble for over a generation is too well known to require elaboration. Virtually everyone, in and out of the world of education, has become aware that something is amiss. The onset of widespread recognition that the U.S. educational system faces serious problems can be traced to the immediate post-Sputnik era of the late 1950's. From that time on, there has been a ceaseless stream of studies and reports made by private individuals, foundations, think-tanks, and government sponsored missions, for the purpose of achieving insight into the nature of the disorder in the educational system and the remedy to be applied.

Over the years, the full range of expected responses have been made -- responses that, throughout history, have always been trotted out to deal with socio-political unrest; responses that, invariably, have never succeeded:

Tighten up discipline. A number of observers have felt that the root problem with modern American schools is lax enforcement of discipline. Various measures have been proposed, and occasionally instituted, including in some communities the introduction of

armed police within the confines of the school campus. Tougher academic discipline, higher standards, and more difficult coursework are other facets of this approach.

Loosen the reins a bit. An excess of control, mostly deemed unnecessary, has been singled out as the root cause of the failure of schools. Proposals for student participation in school governance, for greater freedom in choosing subjects of study, and for more gentle treatment of students who pose learning or social problems, have received wide attention. A precursor of this trend was the visionary work of A. S. Neill, in his writings and in his school, *Summerhill.*

Improve the quality of leadership. Many suggestions are constantly being made to modify the training of teachers and administrators so as to improve the efficacy of the schools in which they work. The focus here is on the personnel who are given authority over students, rather than on curriculum or structure per se. Although there is little to show by way of concrete achievements for any of the new trends in training, one striking success of this movement has been to gain widespread public acceptance for frequent sizable increases in salaries for school personnel, on the theory that the larger the salaries the better the quality of the work delivered, and the better the quality of the people attracted to the field.

Provide more supervisors. Much has been said on the desirability of increasing the teacher/pupil ratio as a key means of improving education. One school of thought holds that the Mark Hopkins ideal of a one-to-one teacher/pupil ratio is the goal to be approached as closely as possible, if we are to have an

effective school system. The argument is regularly heard that smaller classes mean better schools.

Create new areas of supervision. In the last 30 years, more new job categories have been created in schools than were in existence prior to that time. These new categories include not only new curriculum subjects, but also support categories in guidance, counseling, psychological evaluation and treatment, health- and welfare-related fields, and specialists in groups of curriculum subjects. In addition, several new administrative layers have been added to the system, to coordinate, organize, and supervise additional personnel. After salary increases, growth in the number of school personnel has been the single largest contributor to rising school costs.

Spend more money. That more money must buy a better product is axiomatic in educational circles. Before there is even a clear idea of what is to be bought, the cry is raised to appropriate more funds for schools. Comparisons are regularly published among per pupil expenditures in various regions of the country, and the a priori conclusion is invariably drawn that the regions with lower costs must upgrade their schools by spending more.

Require more reports. These include ever more frequent evaluations of student performance and assessments of students' psychological profiles, all tools in the effort to encourage or force students to exhibit behavior more in line with the expectations of school officials; evaluations of teachers performance in the hope that a key will be found in the teachers' activities to unlock the mystery of school inadequacy; and evaluation of schools and school systems through comparative testing of pupils with the aim of identify-

ing model systems that have succeeded where the majority have failed.

Provide more entertainment. Major curriculum reforms, beginning with the revamping of math and science instruction under the supervision of university professors in the early '60's, have virtually all focussed on stimulating supposedly dormant (but reachable and controllable) student interest through the mechanism of providing a good show laced with striking attention-getting features. Great stress has been placed on novelty, on stylish packaging (for example, expensive and lavishly produced textbooks), on multi-media approaches, on group teaching, on field trips, and on extravagant displays of teacher virtuosity. Much money has been expended on these entertainments by governments at every level and by private foundations, and a great premium has been placed on building -- de novo or through extensive rehabilitation of existing structures -- exotic school facilities designed to entice students into wanting to spend their time within their confines.

Change the agenda. Not only have existing subjects been packaged in repeatedly new forms, but also a host of new subjects and study requirements have been introduced into schools in a vain attempt to devise curricula that will satisfy what are perceived by school authorities to be society's current (and ever-changing, but still identifiable) needs. A comparison of curriculum offerings and requirements in the 1980's with those in the 1940's shows this multiplication of

subjects dramatically[1]. When new fields are added, old ones are rarely removed, as what we are dealing with is not the shifting foci of a small finite group of

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[1] It seems that no subject is too far-fetched to appear worthy of being added to the curriculum. See, for example, Keith Kennedy, *Film Making in Creative Teaching* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1972). The American introduction to this British book, written by James Beveridge, comments on page 12: "...teachers may well consider that film can be used and taught in a way which will genuinely enrich the learning process. The student stands to gain in heightened powers of perception and expression; he adds a useful skill to his repertory; he tends to become a more useful and thoughtful citizen, seeing his own community with new insight. *Perhaps film will become, like language, a basic tool...*" [Italics added]

The difficulties of determining an appropriate secondary-school curriculum are exhibited dramatically in the exercises that make up Part II (pages 71-140, entitled "The Program") of Theodore R. Sizer's *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984). At one point Sizer takes a tentative stab at curriculum reform, seemingly cutting down on the bewildering multitude of subjects that have to be covered (p. 132): "Let me give you the beginnings of one model. I would *organize* a high school into four areas or large departments: 1. Inquiry and expression. 2. Mathematics and Science. 3. Literature and the Arts. 4. Philosophy and History." That would seem to cover just about everything, as it is intended to. But just in case anyone might misconstrue his approach as minimalist, Sizer disabuses us with the examples he gives, albeit sketchily. Thus he tells us (p. 133) that "one often can engage [History] well first through autobiography and then through biography, proceeding finally to the 'biographies' of communities, which make up most conventional history. Things were as they were for reasons, and from these incidents evolve concepts in geography, economics, and sociology." And so forth. Nothing should be left out; the challenge is simply in making sure that *everything* is somehow tied in to whatever titles the curriculum subjects happen to have.

topics, but rather a frenetic attempt to keep up with the explosion of new interests during this period, an attempt doomed to failure, as we shall see.

Invent new slogans. Slogans have always been important tools in the hands of reformers. Slogans are brief, vague, but moving, and they are meant to be stimuli to the emotions of masses of people. Lenin was the first to expound at length on the importance of slogans as instruments of change; but activists have intuited this from early times. The Bible is full of slogans, as were the psychological arsenals of all inspiring national leaders. In education, slogans have provided rallying cries for educational reformers, and have been used with increasing frequency in recent times: "freedom without license," "the right to read," "back to basics," "why Johnny can't read," etc.

Appeal to greed. An education used to be valued for its own sake. The idea that it is a worthwhile human endeavor to improve the mind through learning has long been widely touted. The breakdown of the modern school system has been interpreted by many people as a collapse of virtue, a degeneration of the human ideal of intellectual self-improvement. To bail out the schools, attempts have been made to represent them as a path -- indeed, the only path -- to riches, as the key that unlocks the door to financial success throughout adult life. An unschooled child is seen as confined for life to low-paying, menial jobs, while a schooled child increases his future earnings with every additional year of schooling.

Arouse moral fervor. When all else fails, leaders always try to appeal to some deep-rooted ethical values shared by the population at large. Educators appeal to *parents* and *adults* on the basis of

their obligation to nurture the future generation; educators appeal to *children* on the basis of their duty to elevate themselves above the social level at which they were born. The infusion of moral exhortations into discussions of learning and schooling has increased dramatically in recent times, a clear sign of public desperation in the face of a phenomenon (viz., the failure of schools) that people do not understand and cannot overlook.

None of these techniques, singly or in groups, have changed the picture, nor would recorded human experience lead us to believe that they could do so. It would appear obvious that what has been needed for some time is a completely fresh view of the educational enterprise and its role in the overall cultural setting. However, I know of only one school in existence that has attempted to form itself on the basis of such a thoroughgoing new assessment of the current and future world scene: Sudbury Valley School, founded in 1968, designed from the onset to deal *de novo* with the fundamentals of educational theory.[2] Since its creation, Sudbury Valley has produced a considerable mass of literature dealing with basic concepts and their application to the current socioeconomic reality in the United States.[3]

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[2]   See Daniel Greenberg, *Announcing a New School* (Framingham: Sudbury Valley School Press, 1973), which provides the background and history of the school's establishment.

[3] For a complete list of relevant publications put out by the school's press, see Appendix A.

Now, as the educational crisis reaches its fourth decade, and as the 21st century looms a mere dozen years away, the time seems ripe for a new look at fundamentals, enriched by the experience of the preceding years. This book is written with the intention of re-examining the meaning of education, teaching, learning, and schooling, as these terms apply today and in the coming age. I will single out what I take to be the major themes that must be understood to form a meaningful philosophy, and I will attempt to weave these into a coherent model for the practice of education.

PART I

Value Systems and Education

1   *Culture and Value Systems*

Education is but one of a number of core activities engaged in by any culture and, like all the others, can only be analyzed against the background of the culture's total value system. Although I intend to focus on the situation at present in the United States, I shall, for the purpose of shedding more light on the entire problem, review some of the salient features of other cultures in the present world and at other times.

At this point, and elsewhere in this book as necessary, I shall introduce some definitions which are needed for a proper understanding of what I am trying to say.

By "culture" I mean the shared value system of a group of people, and the immediate manifestations of that value system. This is a sensitive point, and one not sufficiently appreciated by persons in policy-making positions. Cultures are not distinguished by race, by nationality, by language, or by physical location, even though at times separate cultures may chance to be isolated according to one or more of these factors. *Value concepts* are the key building blocks of culture, and their concretizations in everyday life activities constitute the essence of the culture. The nature of

value concepts is only now being elucidated, albeit in a tentative and schematic manner. We are just beginning to understand that value concepts are not logical constructs in the sense of Greek philosophy (as adapted through the ages by Western thought), but are abstract symbols, each of which is chosen to represent a spectrum of attitudes and responses in the context of a large inter-related web of value concepts that constitute an organic whole. The symbols are almost always words, but the words themselves are not value concepts; they are representatives of value concepts that have meaning only in the context of the culture's total value-scheme.

The nature of value concepts and value systems was first grasped with clarity by Max Kadushin, whose many publications expounded on his theories and provided examples of their application, with special emphasis on Rabbinic value concepts[4]. Kadushin's great contribution was in understanding the essence of value concepts and their existence outside traditional Greek philosophical systems. Until his works appeared, ethical philosophers had grappled unsuccessfully with the insoluble problem of embedding values in a Greek-style logical framework. Appendix B contains a summary by Kadushin of the salient points of his classic exposition.

These subtle and elusive points have not yet been adequately explored, nor have they yet entered the mainstream of philosophy, though they are slowly

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[4] See, for example, *Organic Thinking* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1938); *The Rabbinic Mind*, 2nd edition (New York: Blaisdell, 1965).

working their way into it. They are, however, indispensable to understanding not only the nature of each particular culture, but also the nature of cultural interaction. Without an understanding of individual value concepts and their linkage into an organic cultural value scheme, there is no way to appreciate the meaning of a culture or to grasp its goals and its perceived reasons for existence. Nor is it possible to assess the problems one culture has in relating to another, when such inter-cultural relationships are sought or are imposed. Two cultures meeting one another, each with its own system of value-concepts, are *prima facie* as alien to each other as if they spoke different languages (as they often do anyway!) or inhabited different worlds. An enormous effort is required on the part of leaders and members of each of the confronting cultures to understand the other's value schemes. The difficulty of such an undertaking of mutual understanding is staggering, inasmuch as the usual method by which a culture conveys its content to newcomers (children, or adult "immigrants") is through years of experiential absorption, wherein symbols and realities are repeatedly illustrated and linked until the cultural network is finally re-created in each individual member's mind. There is as yet no known short-cut that enables a person from the outside to enter into a culture's value scheme without long immersion and patient application.

Perhaps surprisingly, the difficulty of cross-cultural understanding can be increased if the two cultures share the same language. It is a commonplace that translations from one language to another never really get things "right" -- as much due to cultural differences as to linguistic differences. What is less appreciated is