

IV.

"Some Comments On Professor Husen's Paper"

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I regret that it is not possible for Professor Husen to be physically present this morning because I think that, as he has done in all of his work over the past three decades, he has raised a number of important, indeed, provocative issues that go to the heart of the political and educational enterprise. I wish to comment briefly on several of these issues in the hope of triggering a productive discussion among panel participants and the audience.

Lack of Historical Perspective

My major problem with Professor Husen's paper is its lack of historical perspective. This is perhaps to be expected of a reformer for, as Lawrence Cremin has written in The Transformation of the School, "reform movements are notoriously ahistorical in outlook. They look forward rather than back; and when they do need a history they frequently prefer the fashioning of ideal ancestors to the acknowledgement of mortals" (page 8). Certainly, schools today face those problems so vividly described in Professor Husen's paper, but are these problems significantly different than those of, say, fifty or a hundred years ago? Some of the details are clearly quite different, but I suggest that

many of them bear a striking similarity to the concerns of the present.

Restricting his comments essentially to "the secondary school in highly industrialized societies," Husen characterizes the school as being "a troubled institution," suffering from a "malaise," and even undergoing a "crisis." From reading his paper one would have the impression that this a new phenomenon. It is as if our current educational systems were not the children of earlier crises and the responses of educators, politicians, etc. to those long forgotten crises.

Perhaps most disturbing, however, is Husen's use of what he calls "indicators" of this malaise -- absenteeism, vandalism and teacher turnover -- which, he suggests, "have soared in many countries over the last couple of decades." Assuming that this is, indeed, the case (and I am sure that it is), is his use of only the last twenty years an appropriate time frame for his generalizations about the condition of schooling in the industrial world? How do these "high" absentee rates compare with those of fifty years ago? one hundred years ago? Few would, it seems to me, argue with the premise that even if our 1984 rates of absenteeism have "soared . . . over the last couple of decades," there are more young people, especially females and members of minority groups attending school today than ever before. In any event are we sure that the rates of absenteeism are really that much higher than, say, in the 1930's? For one thing, contemporary attendance figures in industrial

societies (to which governmental financial assistance is often tied) are much more accurate than even a relatively short time ago. On balance, is today's higher absenteeism an important trend, or a blip on the time line? It is not as if Husen is wrong about a significant increase in the rate of absenteeism, but his lack of historical context tends to distort the objective reality that we have, indeed, come a long way not only in providing schooling for more young people, but in providing more of it than at any time in human history. This, of course, raises other issues, but that is a different matter.

A similar case can be made relative to vandalism. We all tend to look back on the past, especially our own school days, with rose colored glasses. I am not suggesting that we don't have problems with vandalism, even serious violence, in most societies today, but to fail to place these things in an historic context is misleading at best. We are much more interested in collecting accurate data on all sorts of phenomena today than we were in the past, and many incidents that we consider vandalism today did not become statistics even a quarter-of-a-century ago. When I was a student, not much before the start of Professor Husen's "last two decades," I was part of a group of high school seniors who managed to place a live cow in our principal's office over a long weekend. Fortunately, we were never identified but my point is that our act was considered a schoolboy "prank" rather than vandalism. I am not confident that the same act today would be seen in a benevolent light. Neither is violence against teachers a new phenomenon. Even a cursory reading of Edward Eggleston's

classic work, The Hoosier Schoolmaster, will demonstrate this point. One of the attributes of a successful teacher in the rural mid-west during the nineteenth century was the willingness and the ability to "take on" physical challenges from strapping farm boys. Eugen Weber, in his first rate study of PEASANTS INTO FRENCHMAN: THE MODERNIZATION OF RURAL FRANCE, 1870-1914 (1976), describes schools where the "characters are violent, excitable, and hotheaded, [and] troubles and brawls are frequent." Donald Roden, in his seminal study of Japanese higher school students in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries describes how upper classmen regularly beat freshmen, ritually urinated out of dormitory windows and engaged in brutal "clenched-fist punishments" for those who did not conform to dormitory community mores. "The more things change, the more they remain the same."

The business of teacher turnover is a trickier one to put into historic context. It seems clear that the "burn out" factor in teacher turnover today is both more intense and more widespread than in the past. On the other hand, teachers have more flexibility in responding to it now than in the past. Part of this flexibility is an increasing number of programs to assist teachers by professional organizations and even school districts, but a teacher is no longer bound by circumstances to continue in a bad situation. It is much easier to move from New York City to, say, Bellevue, Washington today than even prior to WW II. Also, there are options for teachers, especially women, that did not exist two decades ago. Indeed the recent Rand Corporation study which predicts a teacher shortage in the near future makes this

very point -- many (if not most) young talented women are heading for law school, medical school and business school in droves. Many other teachers, male and female, are increasingly leaving the profession in favor of more lucrative opportunities. To suggest, as Husen does, that teacher turnover is high is correct, but hardly useful without some explanation of its causes. As the British historian, Hugh Trevor-Roper, has so aptly put it, "History is not merely what happened; it is what appended in the context of what might have happened." Or, in Oscar Handlin's words, "Between the idea and its implementation, the context intervened."

Finally, Husen seems to think that because surveys show that children do not like school today they did like it in the past. I suggest that most children, especially those who didn't do well in school (probably a majority), never much liked school. There is a mass of evidence, including diaries, novels, school board records, even compulsory education laws that suggest getting young people to attend school voluntarily is an ideal that has never been attained. The more things change the more they remain the same.

School and Society

I quite agree with Professor Husen that schools reflect society more than they shape it (although the truth is more complex than this simple statement suggests), and that they are

meritocratic, formalized and bureaucratized. This should not be surprising, however, since industrial society is also meritocratic, formalized and bureaucratized. When Husen argues that if fundamental reform of school can be achieved only through broader societal changes; when these changes occur the school will reflect the societal changes. This leads me to the conclusion that school reforms can help make the existing system work better, but not change it to any appreciable degree.

I also agree with Husen's notion that our expectations of what schools can achieve has exceeded the school's ability to deliver. If, as suggested above, school reforms have limited possibilities, it is (as a Marxist would say) no accident that school reforms have not resulted in social reformation. Should we accept this premise, and there seems to be abundant evidence to support it, a lesson might be that we can either put our energies into broader kinds of reform movements to reform society, or recognize that school reform movements may "improve" individual classrooms or schools, but that broad social change is an unlikely result of such attempts.

If Professor Husen were here today, I would very much like to ask him to elaborate on his comment that "learning to a large extent is motivated by external and not internal rewards." He seems to accept this as a given on page 3 of his paper, but later (page 10) he appears to take the opposite view when he writes that "How is learning going to become appreciated for its intrinsic values if what comes out of it in the final run is

something that essentially determines one's life career?" Is this possible, or even desirable, to strive for in societies which are highly meritocratic? Can one afford to be intrinsically motivated when one's whole future depends on passing examinations, getting into college, etc.? We often break learning into formal and nonformal, vocational and academic, etc.; so it may not be too jarring to suggest that another useful set of categories for learning might be something like "youthful" and "mature" learning. The former being the acquisition of those skills, attitudes and knowledges that enable one to pursue gainful employment which, in turn, provides the context for one to pursue those things which are of intrinsic interest. The first of these categories are similar to vocational interests and the latter "academic" interests. I contend, however, that the latter are much broader than what we traditionally refer to academic because they are much broader in scope, and are not attached to any evaluative criteria which one must meet to be successful.

Some Concrete Proposals

I have reflected for the past several weeks on Husen's "concrete proposals" and I find them fatally flawed. I find it very difficult to see how his proposals would help to solve the problems that he so eloquently identified in the first part of his paper (absenteeism, vandalism, teacher turnover, pupil attitudes toward school, etc.). I am especially skeptical about the school playing a significant role in the transition to work.

The problem, in my judgment, is primarily an economic one over which the school has virtually no influence.

Professor John Myers of Stanford University suggests that unemployment is an inevitable part of all Western industrial societies, but that each society allocates its unemployment to a particular sector of society - youth, the old, women, etc. The Japanese choose to have that burden fall on the old through early retirements, part-time work, etc. while much of the West chooses youth to play that role. This suggests that there is a kind of iron law of employment-- there is only so much to go around and we have to face that "rigid reality".

Husen argues for smaller schools, or units within schools, as a means of bringing real human contact back into the lives of teachers and students. I can only speak for my own state of Hawaii, but some of our best schools are large ones that tend to be private. Rather than size, it seems that the critical variables in our good schools is social and economic class, plus the fact that the private school does not have to keep the unruly and disruptive, and can demand that students work hard or leave. Public schools, of whatever size, do not have that luxury.

There are many other items that I would like to comment on, but I will refrain for the time being so that others can have an opportunity to participate in a dialogue.