

Committee IV
Crises in Education in the 1980's:
A Survey of Educational Values and Systems

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THE SCHOOL IN AN ACHIEVEMENT-ORIENTED SOCIETY: CRISIS AND REMEDIES

by

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CRISIS AND REMEDIES

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There seems to be a common recognition that the school--particularly the secondary school in highly industrialized societies--has become a troubled institution. Whether or not we are entitled to speak about a "crisis" (see Husén, 1979) is a matter of taste and judgement.

There are, indeed, certain indicators that objectively and quite unequivocally point at a "malaise." Absenteeism, vandalism and turnover of teaching staff have soared in many countries over the last couple of decades. Attitude surveys, such as the ones conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), (Walker, 1976; Husén, 1979), show that a high proportion of young people in the age range 13-16 tend to dislike school. Part of the "malaise" as perceived by the general public has to do with frustrations about what a reformed and progressively more expensive school designed to serve all of the students was expected to achieve and what it actually has achieved. In many countries the school was expected to contribute to greater equality not only in school but in life in general as well. It was expected to provide educational programs that would equally well serve both the academically and vocationally oriented students. It was expected to make a highly significant contribution to citizenship education in a society where the role of the family gradually has been reduced. But the discrepancy between rhetoric and reality has become strikingly large.

Given the array of troublesome symptoms and the wish to improve the school as an institution, can we arrive at a diagnosis about which we can agree before proceeding to propose some reforms? We have begun to realize that some kind of "incrementalism," that is to say, doing more of the same things--fo

instance, making more funds available--will not improve the situation. In some instances it would even make the situation worse.

It seems to me that any attempt to arrive at a deeper diagnosis of today's malaise has to start from the following two overriding points of view:

1) Schooling has increasingly become the main vehicle for achieving status and making a successful career in working life, that is to say, modern society has increasingly become meritocratic.

2) Schooling, as has been the case in other fields of public administration, has increasingly become bureaucratized and formalized, which reflects a tendency to conceive of it in terms of a product-oriented, manufacturing industry.

It would, indeed, take me too far if I tried here to spell out in detail the symptoms of the "malaise" and how I have arrived at a diagnosis subsumed under the two headings: meritocracy and bureaucratization. I shall therefore confine myself to the more conspicuous symptoms and to how they are interrelated. But before doing so I should like to emphasize that the meritocratic and bureaucratic syndromes are closely connected. Increased credentialism enhances bureaucratic formalism and vice versa. You could also say that both are inimical to an innovative spirit and flexibility, which are basic prerequisites for the genuine purpose of school education, namely, to "train the mind." There are certain tendencies in our modern, highly technological meritocratic society which are at cross-purpose with basic values in education.

Formal Schooling as A Status-Determinant

As formal schooling increasingly has become a status determinant, our modern industrial and highly technological society has gradually become a diploma-ridden, credential-oriented and meritocratic one. Competition for

employment increasingly occurs on the basis of school records: degrees, marks, examinations. The more formal education, the better the chances of being employed in the first place. Jobseekers are lined up according to the amount of formal education they have been able to absorb, or, to use another metaphor, how high up on the educational ladder they have been able to climb. Unemployment rates among young people in the age range 16-24 is highly correlated with amount of formal schooling. Empirical studies have shown that there is a rising tendency in the employment system to use schooling as the first criterion of selection among jobseekers.

This system of sorting and sifting according to schooling has strong repercussions on what goes on in the school. Marks, tests and examinations become the main preoccupation among the majority of students, particularly among those who are more successful. In this scramble for credentials, which begins at an early stage, there are early winners and losers depending upon the background and the support children are able to enlist on the part of the home.

First and foremost, the main repercussion is that learning to a large extent is motivated by external and not by internal rewards. We are all familiar with the brilliant illustration B.F. Skinner has given us of the difference between the two categories of rewards. "An American student, who in flawless French can say, 'Please pass me the salt,' gets an A. A French student saying the same gets the salt."

Secondly, although those who are successful in this race for the very reason of being successful can afford to be motivated by intrinsic rewards, like to learn for its own sake, there are losers from an early stage. They lag more and more behind and tend to give up. I have referred to the latter as the "new educational underclass." They tend to come from culture-poor and/or marginal homes and often have difficulties in meeting what is required from

them in the school right from the beginning. They become poor readers which, of course, affects the whole array of cognitive competences that the school is expected to instill in them. In spite of their poor performances they are often promoted to the upper grades and tend to drop out at the end of mandatory schooling, frequently being more or less gently pushed out of school by despairing pedagogues.

Schooling a "Processing Industry"

Formal schooling has increasingly tended to become a processing industry with the elements of bureaucratization and formalism that go with such an industry. Schooling in this respect seems to develop along the same lines as institutionalized health care. The school was at an early stage an outgrowth and an agent of the immediate community. It supplemented the education provided at home. The teachers, who were in close contact with the community, regarded themselves as working in loco parentis. The school at that stage operated on the principle of a relationship between partners on equal footing, which lent a spirit of closeness and humaneness to its work. But increasingly the school has become an instrument of the State, that is to say, of a corporate actor. The system of schooling in the "asymmetric society" (Coleman) has become a complex, state- or nation-wide enterprise with large districts and big school units with a hierarchy of administration and with a teaching staff selected for and assigned to jobs or positions according to an increasingly elaborate legislation and to rules settled by collective bargaining. The school in the "asymmetric society" is indeed vastly different from the one in the time of the small red school houses.

The size of the system and its units has already been pointed out. In all industrialized countries with migration from rural to urban areas, there has been a strong tendency to increase the size of the separate schools. This applies in particular to secondary schools with their more diversified

curricula which call for diversification of teacher competencies and school facilities. You cannot provide a minimum of programs and curricular offerings without increasing the number of specialized teachers and thereby increase the enrollment of students. The Swedish school reforms of the 1950's and 1960's were accompanied by a radical consolidation of municipalities which were designed to be big enough in order to secure a sufficient enrollment at the secondary level. Thus a reduction of municipalities from 3,000 to less than 300 took place, which meant that there were school districts in the sparsely populated areas the size of one of the small American states.

The sheer size easily leads to a formalization of social contacts and controls in the system. In the small setting where individuals are familiar with each other social control can be exercised in an informal way. Those who break the rules are more easily identified and subjected to social sanctions than in the larger setting. But in the latter an elaborate system of rules and formal proceedings have to replace the informal social control. At the same time size and complexity force the system to become more hierarchical.

Size and formalization of contacts lead to fragmentation of contacts with adults. Instruction is increasingly divided between teachers with specialized competencies. Non-teaching staff, such as nurses, social workers, janitors, cafeteria personnel, and psychologists have appeared on the school scene. Different aspects of the individual child are portioned out to various specialists. This applies also to child care in society at large. Various agencies and specialists, jealously guarding their own turfs, are in a disconnected way dealing with the same child. One only needs to observe how problems of delinquency occurring in the school are handled by the police, the school and the social welfare agencies to realize the seriousness of this fragmentation.

A by-product of the development just sketched is the emergence of what I would refer to as a "client-oriented society." New public institutions, such as day care centers and youth centers, have emerged and a rapidly growing class of publicly employed people is expected to take care of the citizens from the cradle to the grave. Old institutions such as the school have been given greatly widened scope with regard to the tasks they are supposed to achieve and new institutions, particularly those taking care of children of pre-school age and the elderly after retirement, have emerged. As pointed out above, the services provided by professional experts have become increasingly specialized with nobody taking care of the "whole client." There has been an ensuing fragmentation in terms of both kind and continuity between caretakers and clients in these institutions.

The size of the system, as well as its bureaucratization and fragmentation, runs counter to attempts to create a milieu where individuals are educated. At the core of genuine educative efforts is the interaction between the teacher and the pupil, between an adult and a growing person. Teaching is often misconceived as simply being a process of knowledge transmission from the more knowledgeable to the less knowledgeable. But the teacher fulfils the important functions of being a role model and at the same time being the one who motivates the young person to learn something. One of the consequences of a fragmented caretaking with compartmentalized services is a reluctance on the part of the child to "invest" in a particular adult person. In a large setting with a large enrollment, social control is difficult to exercise. Fragmentation of contacts with adults, for instance, compartmentalization between school and home, leads to inconsistencies of norms and difficulties in socialization. The bigger the discrepancy in norms between home and school the more serious problems of discipline.

The "client-oriented society" easily becomes a control-oriented society where the step between what is justified by caretaking duties and self-serving convenience and power can become very short. Tasks performed by the caretakers easily develop into a network of elaborate control regulations and measures.

In trying to diagnose the "malaise" that particularly besets the secondary school in highly industrialized, urbanized and technological societies, I have pointed out the meritocratic and bureaucratization tendencies. A couple of decades ago hopes were running high about what the school as an institution would be able to accomplish in terms of improving conditions of man in a society that already had achieved a high material standard of living and could look forward to further improvements in that respect. Opportunities for prolonged formal education were increased manifold and secondary education was in a short period made universal. Formal equality of opportunity was expected to lead automatically to equalization of life chances. The school was expected to play a dominant role in the social education of young people, making them better citizens who were more cooperative, mutually understanding, tolerant and willing to participate in the political processes of a democratic society.

But rhetoric and reality in education as well as in other fields of public discourses are not always compatible. On the contrary, the discrepancies between expectations and outcomes with regard to school reforms have given rise to frustrations and soulsearching questions. The vastly increased opportunities for furthergoing education have not considerably reduced differences between social classes in participation rates, even though it has narrowed considerably the gap between rural and urban areas in some countries to a large extent, though partly due to urbanization.

It is, of course, almost impossible to establish criteria according to which we would be able to assess over time how tolerant, how cooperative and

how democratically minded students are. The objective indicators we have, such as absenteeism, vandalism, and number of students who are involved in criminal acts, do not seem to indicate improvements in social education. School discipline does not seem to have improved. Youth unemployment, which appears to be endemic in our society, has its backwash effects on what is going on in the schools, particularly on those students who fail at an early stage and whose prospects on the job market are very dark.

We have begun to realize that there are unrecognized but nevertheless built-in goal conflicts which have been overlaid by the sweeping rhetoric of reformists. Before pointing at some of these conflicts it would be in order to point out that the frustrations to a considerable extent depend on unrealistic expectations. In a way, the school has fallen victim to its obvious and highly spectacular successes. In most highly industrialized and affluent countries secondary school enrollment has over a couple of decades multiplied. Children from lower social strata who earlier for economic reasons were almost barred from furthergoing education do now in many countries not have to overcome economic barriers in order to get access to advanced education. Schools are now much better at taking care of the material welfare of the children by means of such conveniences as school lunches and medical services. The school offers a much broader spectrum of learning opportunities both inside and outside the traditional cognitive domain. The school, no doubt, plays an increasingly important role as a babysitting institution in countries where the mothers have gone to work outside the home.

These changes have occurred during a period of rather rapid economic growth when increased provisions in the welfare and educational areas could be accommodated within an expanding economy. The general public got used to the idea of expanding public obligations in these areas and did not find it remarkable that the unit costs, the cost per student per year, over a decade in

many countries went up by 50 to 100 per cent in constant prices. Thus, when the economic squeeze occurred and cutbacks in the order of some 5 to 10 per cent were made, these led to quite a lot of doomsday exhortations and talk about "a catastrophe" for the educational system.

But there was another frustration that resulted from what I prefer to call the "revolution of rising expectations." The widely broadened educational opportunities and the easy access to jobs as well as the realization that advanced education led to high status and well paid jobs strongly boosted the enrollment in further education. Formal education was seen as the important vehicle to good jobs. Both parents and students were well aware of this and that one's place in the line of job seekers was determined mainly by how far up on the educational ladder one had been able to climb. The employment system has increasingly begun to use formal education as the first screening criterion when credentials are scrutinized.

But when jobs which traditionally had been filled by young people began to be scarce and when the economy led to cutbacks of employment of not very productive youngsters, the expectations of many were frustrated, although the employment rate was still by far much higher among those with a formal education beyond the mandatory minimum.

Goal Conflicts

It has been pointed out above that during the euphoric period of economic growth, educational expansion and rising levels of expectations, certain goal conflicts went either unrecognized or were simply glossed over. The objectives stated in school legislation or in the curricular guidelines had in some countries quite a lot to say about education as an instrument of social change, particularly as an instrument of equalization. A Swedish Minister of Education (Olof Palme) talked about education as "spearheading" a better society by

democratizing educational opportunities. Things did not, however, work out according to such expectations, and this for various reasons. In the first place, schools are there to impart competencies and when children enter school there are some whose background makes it easier for them than for others to absorb what the school tries to instill. Therefore as children move through the grades, individual differences in performance increase. It has been suggested that this can be taken care of by individualized teaching, as epitomized in the concept of Mastery Learning developed by my colleague, Benjamin Bloom, and his students. By giving everybody the time he or she needs, the vast differences in learning outcomes can be reduced, and those who otherwise tend to lag behind can be brought up to the level of the more successful students. But this can under favorable circumstances be achieved without certain skills or topics and by mobilizing ample resources in terms of teacher time. What cannot be controlled by master learning techniques relates to factors outside the school, in the first place the home and the amount of support the student can enlist on the part of the parents--if he has any.

The tendency for differences in competence attained to increase as students move through the grades is reinforced by what I have referred to as the meritocratic tendencies in our competence-oriented, highly technological and complex society. The rewards for good achievements in school are not intrinsic but extrinsic: better life chances in terms of better jobs and better pay in a job which enjoys good status. This is the second obvious goal conflict which one tends to sweep under the rug. 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?

A third goal conflict relates to equality versus quality. It permeates formal education and the expanded opportunities for it in all countries and all societies. In the Third World one attempts to make elementary education

universal by enrolling as many as possible without too much consideration to teacher competence and the availability of learning materials and other facilities. Quantity, that is to say, in this case equality, is bought at the price of quality. In more affluent countries secondary education is made universal in the name of equality which then calls for expanded teacher training and individualized programs and teaching strategies. In the most affluent countries this conflict is most acute at the university level, at the stage when elite higher education is changing to mass education. The rather homogeneous and select group which previously entered the universities is now replaced by a highly diversified army of entrants where individuals differ not only in intellectual ability and grounding in the relevant subject areas, but in their interests and motivation as well.

A fourth goal conflict concerns cooperation versus competition. Given the social framework within which the school in modern society operates, students early become aware that they are continuously evaluated in terms of their achievements, expressed as marks or test and examination scores with the purpose of determining who is going to be admitted to the next level in the system and who in the final run is going to be placed at the head or at the tail of the line of job seekers. Curricular guidelines tend to be flourishing in their rhetoric about fostering cooperationn by, for instance, group work and mutual understanding, loyalty and sense of responsibility for those who are not as successful as others. But how can this be achieved in a climate of scrambling for those good marks and examination scores which determine one's career?

How Can We Reform the School?

It is with considerable hesitation that I set out to discuss what kind of changes are called for, even after having tried hard to diagnose what I have

called the "malaise" of the school today. My hesitation derives from two major circumstances. In the first place, the distance is enormous between blueprints for sweeping reforms and the hard, rigid reality. No wonder that many Swedish teachers, when reading the goals set out in the curricular guidelines issued by the government referred to them as "curricular poetry." Secondly, reforms confined to the school as an institution are bound to be of limited value, because so many of the problems identified above that beset the school are in the last run problems that beset our modern society. Some of these problems are unforeseen side-effects of the changes in the material standard of living that have taken place over the last few decades. Others have their roots in changes that have taken place in the school but which in their turn have been initiated by overall changes in society at large.

Thus, reform proposals in order to achieve an impact would have to affect the social fabric as a whole. Tinkering only with reforms that imply changes more or less exclusively within the classroom is often not very helpful. Nevertheless, reforms that I shall hint at here have to be conceived of in the limited sphere of the school as an institution. Some of these proposals were in the late 1970's discussed at a series of international seminars in Europe and the United States, sponsored by the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies. They are spelled out in the last chapter of my book, The School in Question (Oxford University Press, 1979). Since then I have had ample opportunity to discuss them further, particularly in connection with writing up a book on transition to adulthood and the role of the school, a task that I am sharing with my Chicago colleague James S. Coleman.

In discussing possible future changes in the institutional arrangements one should in my view keep the following considerations in mind. Genuine care with full responsibility for the individual has historically been the task of the extended family and the close community. Humane attention could be

expected to be exercised in this small setting. But in the modern welfare society there has over a long time been a tendency to allocate care (in the widest sense of the word) to larger and larger units, particularly in education and health care. This easily leads to discontinuities and sometimes direct conflicts between the family and the close community on the one hand and the welfare society with its increasing bureaucracy of caretakers on the other. There is a goal conflict between on the one hand personal service and humane attention and equality of service and participation and influence of the "client" on the other. The responsibility for the individual child has been split up between various agencies with a heavily reduced responsibility being left with the family. Thus, an overriding problem not only for school policy but for social policy at large in the future is what kind of institutional arrangements can be envisaged so as to take care of the "whole" child. Has the family that tends to wither away to be replaced by some system of boarding schools, where a consistent educative milieu around the clock can be established? The experiences from the experiments with communes in the West and the kibbutzim in Israel seem to indicate that the nuclear family, in spite of the reductions of some of its traditional functions, still is of essential importance for the upbringing of children.

Given the problems that particularly beset the secondary school of today there is ample reason to ask if it is possible for the school as an institution in a credentialling society to serve young people so as to make them reasonably harmonious, well developed, and participating individuals. Can we conceive of alternatives or functional equivalents to the traditional school? To contemplate "de-schooling" alternatives would be more than utopian. What could be conceived are rather institutional changes that would reduce the role of the state and restore the responsibility of the community and the family for what

the school should do. We need to remind ourselves that once schools were established in order to complement the educative role of the family. There were certain competencies that could more easily and readily be instilled by the school than by the family. Thus most of what is proposed in the following could be subsumed under the general heading "de-institutionalization."

Genuine education occurs in small, close communities, such as the family, both the nuclear and the extended one, the neighborhood, the small workplace with its apprentices. In a society with large-scale institutions the life of the individual is from the outset segmented into many roles and influenced by many, often contradictory, forces. Under such circumstances more attention is drawn to superficial qualities, such as the dress, and less to deeper character traits for whose assessment and appreciation continuous close contact is required. This applies not least to the big school units, the "pedagogical factories" which have emerged in modern urban areas. Any attempt to come to grips with the troubled school of today would have to consider the issue of how to establish more self-directed and self-responsible school units with closer ties to the surrounding community.

Some More "Concrete" Proposals

Again, I want to repeat what I said about the gap between sweeping reform proposals and the rigid realities of the school and also to indicate that some of the points made here are spelled out more fully in The School in Question.

First, steps should be taken to establish smaller school units, which appears, to say the least, to be a utopian proposal after a period of school construction when in some industrialized countries urban secondary schools with enrollments of more than 1,000 students is more a rule than an exception. In countries with a comprehensive setup, that is to say, where all the programs and all the students from a catchment area are under the same roof, the size of the school units is more or less a logical outcome of comprehensivization. In

order to provide a real choice between programs and electives and what goes with it in terms of specialized teachers and school facilities, the enrollment has to exceed a certain minimum that already constitutes a rather big school unit. But the drawbacks, not least in terms of social control, can be reduced by trying to establish units within the bigger unit. The "house" system in British comprehensive secondary schools is an example of such efforts. Students enrolled in a certain program or at a certain grade level can form a sub-unit.

Secondly, a re-definition of the role of the teacher is called for. The teacher as a provider of learning opportunities, a motivator and a role model, has traditionally worked at the primary school level with its system of self-contained classrooms where one teacher has been responsible for most of the teaching, although specialists in non-cognitive subjects successively have begun to enter the scene. The problem of fragmentation dealt with above occurs at the secondary school level where due specialization in the cognitive subjects teachers begin to divide the time between themselves. The problem then becomes how to strike a proper balance between on the one hand more continuous and permanent contacts between the student and the teacher and on the other hand competent teaching which cannot be achieved without a certain amount of specialization. As things now stand, students in secondary school often have to deal with a dozen or more teachers during a school week. In the subjects where the teacher has to instill certain competencies in the students he cannot spread himself too thinly. Specialization is required in areas such as mother tongue, science-mathematics, history-social studies, and foreign languages, at any rate in the upper secondary school. At the lower secondary level the teaching spectrum can be somewhat broader, but not very much. It is possible to have two teachers dividing the responsibility for teaching the entire

cognitive field. It is essential that every student has one teacher to whom he or she can relate. Whether or not such a teacher can be referred to as a "home-room teacher" is of secondary importance.

Thirdly, increased parental participation in school matters with increased contacts between teachers and parents within the framework of a given school class is of utmost importance. Good communication between home and school contributes to better understanding and reduced inconsistencies in terms of norms. This relates particularly to students who come from culturally "marginal" families, be they immigrant ones or not. One way of enhancing the cooperation between home and school is to involve the parents in various school affairs, all the way from helping to prepare social gatherings to teaching in the classroom.

Fourthly, a reappraisal of the role of the school in preparing for adult life is called for. The range of tasks that have been assigned to the school has resulted not only in a lot of so called "frills" but has increased the fragmentation of what the school is expected to achieve as well. The "back-to-basics" movement has to be seen as a reaction against the overload of tasks, not least what the school is required to do in terms of social education. The fact that so many young people leave school after some 9-12 years without sufficient mastery of the mother tongue has resulted in demands for a concentration on certain basic skills for all.

Fifthly, the school has to assume a more active role in the transition process from school to work. In most advanced industrial countries vocational guidance has been added to the tasks that the schools are expected to shoulder. Specialized guidance teachers have been added to the school staff. The overall experience is, however, that the guidance has primarily focussed on problems that relate to further education, for instance, going to college or university, whereas less attention has been paid to problems related to transfer from

school to the workplace. Furthermore, schooling is increasingly used as a panacea in trying to cope with the growing youth unemployment. The big problem when it comes to transition from school to work is not the majority of students who by and large can cope with what is required from them and who to a large extent go on to tertiary education, but a minority of some 10-25 per cent who is either dropping out at the age when mandatory school attendance expires or who do not go on to further education once secondary school certification has been achieved. They are at the bottom of the pecking order, or, with another metaphor, at the tail of the line of jobseekers in a society where formal schooling increasingly is the first criterion of selection. This group constitutes largely what I earlier referred to as the "new educational underclass."