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The Coming Revolution in Education

by GEOFFREY W. ESTY

WE hear much about education for excellence — education for competence. What do we mean by excellence and competence? Excellence in grades, in rote memory, in parroting "correct" answers? Do we mean competence in skills? What do we really mean by skills — skills in manipulating others in order to achieve personal advantage?

What are we going to do with the dropouts, the failures and the misfits? The clue, it seems to me, lies in the nature of the unique individual, and in the understanding and respect for his uniqueness. To the degree that this fact of nature is violated by the family, the school and the community, do we have to contend with the social and behavioral symptoms arising from such violations. There appears to be direct though complicated causal relations between injury to the integrity and worth of the unique individual and his reactive behavior.

Pouring more and more money into already faulty educational practices just produces more of the same—more dropouts and socially disturbed youngsters and delinquents. A revolution in education is imperative on an immense and national scale if society itself is to avoid self-destruction, and if the individual is to be spared the loss of his

freedom and dignity by a submergence into the arms of a paternalistic state.

If the student survives the educational process which seeks to train him or school him, he learns how to manipulate his teachers and others in order to acquire the necessary grades or extracurricular activities to become successful or to get into the college of his parents' choice. Those relatively few who were lucky enough to have experienced warm and caring relationships with a teacher while in high school — one who was supportive and encouraging rather than condemnatory — tend to want to become teachers themselves; while others are apt to think teaching is "for the birds."

It is apparent that this vicious cycle must be broken. We can no longer afford socially or economically to waste our children and our teenagers. Their increasing burden on society may cause our freedom to be seriously curtailed and corrupted.

Fortunately, despite the endless arguments about progressive education versus controlled education, overpermissiveness versus fundamental education, a climate for a revolution in education is forming. We are rediscovering that learning starts at birth; that what's learned is not always taught, and that

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what's taught is not always learned. We are finding that it is not only what the teacher knows which is of such paramount importance, but what the teacher *is*.

In teacher and parent education, increased emphasis will be placed on the importance of enriching experience and on the idea of preciousness of children. Teachers will know and observe how some children have to live and cope with a variety of handicapping environments. They will come to understand that children need to feel an adult's considerate regard or respect for their uniqueness, even though their behavior may not necessarily be approved. Teachers and parents alike will learn that children need to experience success and achievement rather than repeated failure in order to safeguard their self and their worth.

Teachers must do less teaching by talking. They must promote more critical thinking rather than complacent acceptance, more skepticism rather than cynicism. They will learn how to motivate and involve children with a sense of inquiry and the excitement of personal discovery, rather than just telling them. In such ways students will learn that true scholarship is an awareness of relatedness of knowledge and understanding of common basic underlying principles involved.

How are these things to be achieved? What are some of the emerging devices in the education revolution?

Curriculum content and approach will begin with the social-economic and cultural needs. Learning groups will be flexible rather than rigid, heterogeneous rather than homogeneous. Categorization of children will be held to a minimum, for each child possesses varying capacities, some requiring encouragement, others strengthening.

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Grade levels will be grouped together, and groups kept numerically small to permit optimum individual participation. Report cards and marks will either be staggered or eliminated in favor of individually discussed evaluations.

If larger tax funds are to be invested in education, let them be used in safeguarding the sanctity and dignity of the individual. When and to the degree that this is achieved, manipulation and exploitation of man by man will be gradually replaced by mutual concern and responsibility. Apathy will be replaced by compassion; injustice by justice.

As young people begin to think more clearly and evaluate social problems more critically, they will more readily come to appreciate the injustices of the underlying system of monopoly privilege in land, and its relationship to poverty and the formation and continuation of slums. They will be more analytical and more willing to shed doctrinaire myths when they stand in the way of observable facts. They will be able to detect and disarm the many frauds which tend to enslave them and rob them of their health and their substance.

I anticipate the emergence of progressively more informed generations of students who will care about what is happening to individuals over the world, because they will have experienced relationships with adults who have respected them.

Rousseau once said: "Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains." Why? Education is finding the answers.