

THE GOALS OF EDUCATION FOR
A CHANGING WORLD.

Being a Summarized statement to the Provincial
Committee on the Aims and Objectives of Educa-
tion in Ontario. By:

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An education system tries to develop in the young those talents or abilities which the elders think are important. So it is important that the elders think deeply enough. Different systems, at different times, have concentrated on talents for hunting or warfare, on courage or responsibility, on rhetoric or sophistic argument, and so on. These days the "knowledge explosion" has resulted in so much attention being paid to academic ability, and training the "intellect", that our system is unbalanced in a new direction and is contributing to the delinquency, mental unhealth and social stress which it should be helping to eliminate.

The goals and aims of our educational system, I suggest should be: 1. To help society as a whole, and its individual members to face up to and to handle the problems of change constructively. Our present system is actually creating unnecessary stresses. We encourage the ability to innovate and to accept innovation in technology, but we do not encourage, (or we actually discourage) the ability to innovate, or to accept innovations in other areas. As the industrial revolution showed, the technical innovations of print, steam and steel resulted in the complementary changes of public education, income tax, trade unions, police forces, extension of the vote, the growth of the "Protestant Ethic" etc. Our difficulties in handling the "problems" (or blessings?) of automation, anti-biotics, contraceptives, nuclear power etc., are at least in part due to the difficulty the public has in re-examining in greater depth, and "unlearning" and re-learning old lessons in ethics, philosophy, economics, etc.

This difficulty is at least in part due to the way in which these were taught or rather assimilated uncritically.

2. To help individuals develop their full potential. At present we concentrate upon analytical and literary ability, and the ability to manipulate symbols within a logical framework. As far as helping to foster those abilities valuable in the handling of change (e.g. social and psychological maturity, initiative and ingenuity) our methods have a negative effect (even in those areas thought of as "the humanities") which ought to be counteracted (especially as methods exist for doing so).

In our system we reduce our children's ability to handle change by: a) insisting on the conformity, (or its counterpart - rebelliousness) which we deplore: we create a situation in which, whatever the syllabus, and from Kindergarten through University, the child learns that official approval and success comes from (1) using its initiative only in directions which the teacher (or authority figure) will approve. (2) finding out, not necessarily the right or the best answer, but the one the teacher wants; i.e. learning, not the subject, but how to pass exams.

b) reducing the child's native ability to engage in "original learning" (i.e. to tolerate "uncertainty and to react to it usefully and constructively). The original learning situation starts with uncertainty, leading to active experimentation or "probing" of the environment, feed-back on results and the recognition and memorizing of a "pattern". Instead of allowing this full and somewhat slow and "inefficient" process to occur, we cut out the first part and merely present the "pattern" (or facts, or theories) to be remembered. We then have to provide other motivating devices to "make" them remember it.

It is sensible that children should learn that one way of dealing with uncertainty is to "look for the person (or book) who knows". It is less sensible to leave them with the impression that this is the only thing to do.

3. To provide people with the knowledge and skills needed by society now and in the future. At present we do a fair job at this, to the extent that they are marketable, but usually in the form of "instruction" and at the expense of "education". If we thought out what abilities of the mind would be valuable to foster, methods of doing so, have been, and are being developed whereby we could make a good attempt at giving someone an "education", no matter whether the subject he was studying was philosophy, electronics, or carpentry. The changes would probably be more in the "process" or method of teaching parts of the syllabus. The curriculum would probably only begin to be affected to the extent that we begin to look more carefully at what is really required in a good manager, or engineer, or sociologist, apart from the ability to pass exams.

Two requirements for implementing these policies would be: 1. Study and research into what abilities would be useful for man now and in the future (regardless of how teachable or feasible they might seem to be). 2. Study and research into methods of teaching or acquiring the abilities which seem useful or necessary; also consideration of time, resources, and teacher training.

The mistake that we make now, is that we tend to teach what we know we can teach, rather than to think of what would be valuable, and then to try to devise ways of helping people to learn it. The result of this is that even philosophy has become "instruction" rather than "education".

A brief outline of suggestions for potentially valuable abilities, and methods of acquiring them, is given in the appendix.

APPENDIX.

Some identifiable abilities which would be potentially valuable in a changing world (for some of which "teaching methods" have already been developed)

(a) Ability to perceive the "invisible structure"

or the "rules behind the rules", which bind us so effectively because we are not aware that they are there.

(b) Ability in "original learning"; turning the stress of uncertainty into useful experimentation.

(c) Ability to distinguish between "observation" and "inference", carried over into the ability to detect one's own prejudices objectively.

(d) Ability to learn in such a way that one can also re-examine, unlearn and relearn; when this is possible not only in technical material, but also in attitudes, beliefs, and habits, it forms the basis of psychological health; humour, flexibility and determination.

(e) Ability to generate trust and to resolve conflicts constructively (i.e. so that everyone is better off, instead of suppressing or avoiding conflict like parents or children, or fighting it out like adolescents, or bargaining like merchants); psycho-social maturity.

(f) Abilities to visualize, to memorize, to concentrate, to have total recall, to do high speed problem solving, or rapid reading? Some of these we seem to assume are valuable, but do nothing to help children learn how to do them (beyond giving them practice). Are they valuable? If so, should we try to teach them?

Most of the "abilities" mentioned cannot be "taught" in the sense that we are accustomed to think about teaching. Consequently in our present system, we either ignore them, or merely "give knowledge about" them. However, methods of creating a situation in which members of a group may begin to develop these qualities for themselves (to the extent that they are latent) have been and are being devised. Some of them are already suitable for use within the framework of a modern educational institution (provided teachers with suitable personalities and training are available); others would need further experimental development.

Sources of Information on some of these are:

1. "The Anatomy of Judgment" (Hutchinson) by Dr. Abercrombie describing how she used group discussion