Educational Institutions as a "Guidable" System*

Amitai Etzioni
Centre for Policy Research Columbia University

This essay attempts to apply a general theoretical form to the study of educational institutions. The theory’s core assumption is that in conceptualizing and analyzing social dynamics one must carefully separate “change” from “guided change.” (In the past, stress was often put on contrasting change with stasis. The reason for this is that if we seek to link analysis with policy making, the link must occur at the point that we separate changes which just occur, whether we desire them or not, from those we bring about deliberately. Above all, we must ask: where are the levers? how can we guide change?

But let us back step for a moment, to outline the condition we will examine. We see before us educational institutions, especially schools charged with curricular and structural rigidities, with inability to adjust to the rapidly changing needs of the contemporary society. They are depicted as attempting to perpetuate lower-middle values, those closest to the hearts of teachers and small businessmen, to yesterday’s America. Educational institutions are said to be unresponsive to the needs of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds as well as alienating to upper-middle class youths, who are no longer interested in hard work, or in adding to their affluence but who seek a more hedonistic, reflective, cultural, or politically active life. Educational institutions are said to be slow to introduce the innovations necessary to keep the country at the forefront in scientific creativity and technological developments. Some critics go so far as to suggest doing away with education in schools and colleges, preferring the spontaneity of the streets and colleges “without walls” to contemporary “bureaucratic” education. Somewhat less extreme critics favor the establishment of a second layer of educational systems to circumvent the existing one, which is viewed as hopelessly obsolescent, “immune” to innovation.

Without attempting to determine the extent to which American educational institutions have ossified, I will briefly indicate the factors which make for rigidity and the conditions under which the educational system may “loosen up.” In doing so, I shall focus on those factors which are relatively movable; other factors need to be studied to gain a complete understanding of the educational world, but for policy makers and active citizens, the movable factors are of more interest.¹ Limiting ourselves to these factors is possible because the movable factors are not linked to the other factors so closely as to

*An earlier and substantially different version of this paper was published as “Schools as a ‘Guidable’ System” in Vernon Haubrich’s Freedom, Bureaucracy & Schooling (Washington, D. C: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, N.E.A., 1971) pp. 29-45.

¹For more on this, see Amitai Etzioni, “Policy Research,” The American Sociologist, 6, Supplementary Issue (6, 1971) pp. 8-12.
prevent far-reaching and encompassing changes without first unearthing, dismantling, and resettling the foundations. Actually, such reforms may be the best way to get at the "deeper" forces.

**TOWARD A THEORY OF "SOCIETAL GUIDANCE"**

In the attempt to relieve the sources of educational system rigidities and to prescribe for increased transformability, I draw on a theory of societal guidance I developed. The central question the theory attempts to answer is the following: under what conditions can a process be guided, a system be changed, in line with goals set by its members? The social science literature offers two approaches to the subject. The first is voluntaristic, in which the will (or commitment), brain power (or staff work), and skill (or political astuteness) of the leadership is expected to account for the difference between successful and unsuccessful social programs and institutions. (In the popular press, voluntaristic interpretations tend to focus on the President and his personal attributes to explain why America does or does not reduce crime, integrate the races, and so on.) Closely related are administrative theories which imply that if communication lines were set up properly, if labor were divided correctly, etc., the system could effectively accomplish its mission.

The second approach focuses on the factors which, for example, resist facts. This view implies that under most circumstances, it is not possible to anticipate or overcome all the numerous and intricate resistances to change; zigzagging and muddling through are a result of human nature, not the failing of this or that organization.

The theory applied here draws on both approaches. It asks about the qualities of the controlling overlay which attempts to direct and redirect the system, and the attributes of the social underlay which receives, rejects, or modifies the signals of the overlay, and emits some signals of its own to the overlay. Above all, it seeks to understand the interplay between these two layers, which we see as determining the extent to which a system will move, ossify, or change.

To determine the elements necessary for an effective overlay, the theory draws on cybernetics. Cybernetics is the study of steering, of communication and control. Originally, it was mainly concerned with the ways in which groups of machines are guided to work jointly to realize goals that the cybernetic overlayer sets. Such an overlayer includes: (a) one or more centres transmitting signals to the units that carry out the work (there are some subunits in these centers which specialize in absorbing and analyzing incoming information and other subunits which specialized in making decisions); (b) communication lines leading from the centers to the working units, carrying specific instructions; and (c) feedback lines, carrying information and responses from the working units to the centers. Though many cybernetic models omit power lines, I consider these to be of major importance. If the steering units cannot back up their signals with rewards for those elements of the system that comply with the communications signals, and penalties for those who do not, many signals will be disregarded.

---

When all the elements described briefly here are available and function effectively, the result is an effective control system. Some engineers and managers maintain that a social system can be similarly directed. It is my position, however, that when a cybernetic model is applied to a social system, the model must take into account that, for both ethical and practical reasons, the working units cannot be coerced to follow "signals" unless these signals are responsive, at least in some measure, to the members' values and interests. In other words, the "downward" flow of control signals must be accompanied by "upward" and "lateral" (intermember) flows which shape what the members demand, desire, and are willing to do. Petitions to the government, and doorbell ringing during elections are cases in point. In more technical language, these upward and lateral flows are referred to as consensus building.

The combination of control and consensus building—the mechanisms of societal cybernetics—is termed societal guidance.

THE ELEMENTS OF SOCIETAL GUIDANCE AND THEIR STATUS IN AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

The differences between active and passive social systems, between those more able and those less able to realize their goals, are best studied by examining one cybernetic factor at a time, although effective guidance requires that they be combined.

Knowledge: Limited and Difficult to Absorb

When one examines the amount of funds, the size of the manpower force, and the capability of the experts assigned to collect and process knowledge in one specific area (such as education) in comparison with the resources devoted to other activities (for example, defense), one can gain a rough idea how "knowledgeable" social action in the particular sector is likely to be. It becomes apparent, for instance, that one reason why most societies score poorly in the management of domestic programs is that they spend much more on the knowledge required to handle nature than on how to effect an effective education system.

Whatever knowledge is "produced" must be communicated to the decision makers before it becomes useful to societal guidance. Even in corporations, research and development units face difficulties when they seek to gain the ear of top management. In less rational organizations, the distance between the experts and the decision makers is often enormous. It is not only that the knowledge available does not reach the decision makers, but that which they wish to know is not known to the knowledge makers.

Kenneth Boulding distinguished between folk knowledge and scientific knowledge. "Folk knowledge is the process by which we acquire knowledge in the ordinary business of life, and in ordinary relationships in the family, among friends and in the peer group, and so on." Scientific knowledge entails the "constant revision of images of the world under the impact of refined observation and testing." The introduction of new, highly efficient, and effective techniques in most areas of our life, from industry to medicine,
involves the transition from heavy reliance on folk to scientific knowledge. One of the reasons why contemporary schools are basically no different from the way they were in the beginning of the 19th century is that their management relies much more on folk than on scientific knowledge. Although we are unaware that there is scientific evidence to support our hunch, we would expect that those school systems which use more scientific knowledge are more efficient and more effective.

Most decision making in meetings of boards of education, offices of superintendents, or offices of school principals, or in colleges, proceeds without the benefit of staff work or research which would characterize a similar decision in terms of magnitude in industry, the military, or the space agency. The point is not that the educational decision makers mix their knowledge with value judgement; this is natural, unavoidable, and basically desirable. The issues at hand—for example, should there be sex education in elementary schools?—are not just informational matters but also involve moral and political considerations. Therefore, it is to be expected that such issues will be colored by nonrational considerations.

Yet the same issues frequently also have an information content. To stay with the example at hand, the statements that teachers are qualified to teach sex education after X weeks of training; that the parents can provide better sex education than teachers; that teaching the course at all, or in a specific way, will lead to earlier sexual experimentation by the pupil, are testable. On these issues, the educational decision makers are not ignorant, but they tend to draw on the folk knowledge they acquired in their own years of teaching, on discussion of the issues with teachers, and on personal observations. These are relevant, but they are inferior ways of knowing as compared to scientific knowledge. However, educational decision makers—it seems to us—are less inclined to draw upon scientific knowledge than are many other decision makers.

The most elementary reason for the less frequent use of scientific knowledge in the guidance of educational systems as compared to industry is that less education-relevant knowledge is produced and is available. Hence, even the most open-minded, rational decision maker in education will frequently have to fall back on his folk knowledge because this is the only way of knowing he has. While some matters are by now rather carefully covered by research (for example, the efficiency of TV for instructional purposes as compared to preschool teaching), most relevant questions are not. Basically, we still do not know how to effectively help children from disadvantaged backgrounds to catch up and stay up; we do not know what the best way of teaching reading is; and, to stay with our example of sex education; most of the questions we have characterized above as researchable have not, as far as we can establish, actually been answered by research.

Investment in educational research is much smaller than in lunar visits, not to mention weapons or atomic energy. In 1969-70, the research budget of most programs of the U.S. Office of Education and other HEW agencies was reduced. Other sources of support for educational research are far from sufficient.

---


Unfortunately, much of the educational research that is conducted is low in quality.7

Most of the research done on instructional television (ITV) for example, a field that has been intensely explored,8 has dealt with small scale, relatively limited experimental situations set up to compare the academic achievement of students differentially exposed to televised instruction and ordinary instruction. Much data too, has come from reports of fairly large scale use of instructional television. Many of the comparative studies were not carefully designed and subsequently their methodology has been criticized on a number of grounds. Many comparative studies failed to exclude or account for causal factors other than the utilization of television, or failed to establish rigorous control groups.

Educational research suffers from the low prestige in which teachers colleges and schools of education have been held in academia until recently, a factor which tended not to attract the best minds to research in education. Some improvement in the status of educational research can be expected as the increased concern with societal issues attracts more social scientists and economists to study education; some of the stigma is now being removed. As better research, and more of it, is carried out in this area, more and better minds are attracted to it.

Academicians tend to prefer basic rather than applied research and have helped to perpetuate the myth that the best way to gain knowledge is through individual work in the vineyards to basic research. While such preparation of the ground is needed, the link between basic and applied science is weak. Much of the basic research has no application, and much of the applied knowledge is not born out of basic research but is the result of applied work per se. Hence, in order to have applied psychology affect educational research needs, investment must be made in psychology as well as basic psychological research. In non-social science areas, this point has long been recognized. Medicine is not merely the teaching of biology and psychology, but also the teaching of the findings of medical research, traditions, skills; it has a core of knowledge of its own. Natural sciences also need systematic studies of technology and engineering. Studies of the relation of technology to basic sciences have taught us that information and stimulation are not all a one-way flow from science to technology (and hence to application), but a two-way flow, with at least as many findings flowing from technology to science as the other way around.


the social science area, which is the science that education draws on most, this is less fully realized. Attempts are being made to move directly from the findings of basic research to action programs.

Important for the growth of applied education is the establishment of educational laboratories whose missions include precisely the development of the applied and technological aspects of knowledge needed for improved educational programs. Hence, the conception of these laboratories seems to us to be fine and valid. The reason that these laboratories have answered only part of the need for applied research lies not in the concept, but in the way it was implemented. The difficulties encountered deserve a major study. Briefly, they lie in an untrained or poorly trained staff; fascination with esoteric, expensive technology, rather than with techniques for mass use; technological reductionism, which leads to the search for causes and cures in the personality (or in interpersonal relations), while the leverages for change rest in the societal structure and processes; and, above all, disassociation of the laboratories from their “clientele.”

These are only a few of the ineffectual communication links between the knowledge and the decision makers. Knowledge makers are not sufficiently “sensitized” to the constraints under which the decision makers operate, and the decision makers are not adequately “prepared” for the findings of research. Both sides act as if a good will and an open mind are all that is necessary. However, institutionalization of interaction is required. As a result, reports and recommendations of the knowledge makers are often ignored, because the “clients” (school boards, for instance) did not participate in “ordering” the product, nor did they prepare for its innovative implications.

Even given effective educational R and D centers and laboratories serving the various school systems, there would still be a need for a wider perspective in matters of educational policy. In other words, the knowledge makers should not overly concern themselves with the thousand smaller decisions—for example: should we use instructional TV? What is the best classroom size for a given kind of student? What reading techniques are most effective? Should slum children be taught first in their English or in standard English? Instead, the knowledge makers should look to the long-range questions—for example: Should high school education be more humanistic or more technical in orientation in view of the changing needs of society? Is dropping out to be discouraged, or should avenues for ready return from a year or more of “leave” be provided for?

Recognizing the need to base longer-run policy on systematic input of knowledge, the U.S. Office of Education set up two institutes for policy research—one in Syracuse, New York, and the other in Stanford, California. Neither has so far fulfilled this function, as both were so remote from policy making that they focused on exploring Utopian futures, in abstract and general ways, with very little informational content, under the disguise of studying the year 2000. It might be of interest to note that the opposite

---


imbalance seems to have occurred in the Institute for the Study of Poverty, set up by the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity in Madison, Wisconsin. This one seems to have become too closely guided by the patron agency to allow for full-fledged autonomous critical research. The Rand Corporation, in its work for the U.S. Air Force, provides a closer approximation of the kind of “think tank” needed by school systems, state departments of education, and the U.S. Office of Education. The newly established National Institute of Education may be able to fulfill this role. Created by an act of Congress in mid-1972, NIE is to be the center of educational research and development of the country. Financing both basic and applied studies, developing new technologies and fostering demonstration projects, and disseminating the findings to all who may find them useful. NIE is to take over much of the work which is now being supported by research units of the Office of Education, and cover all the main phases of education, from infancy to higher education, in and out of schools. NIE’s initial budget is a far from trivial $550 million for three years. While 80% or so of these funds will be eaten up in FY 1973 by existing Office of Education programs, increasingly NIE will be able to reshape the national R & D education scene.

This reshaping is urgently needed. So far educationalist researchers have only little research training. An overview of ITV studies found that out of 250 comparisons of televised and face-to-face instruction, only 4% met strict standards, while only 9% of the studies met “relaxed” standards. John Walsh, writing in Science, explained that educational research, carried out often by teachers and administrators, looks the way biomedical research would look if it would be carried out by general practitioners and hospital administrators.

Not only is the research methodology questionable; the fear to guide research toward specific educational needs, under the aegis of supporting basic research and academic freedom, led to hundreds of unrelated and non-accumulating projects; actually, many of the federally funded educational R & D projects produced no results at all. Much of the existing educational research is mis-focused, zeroing in on changes in teaching techniques and curriculum content, disregarding that one of the few findings which are solidly documented in this area is that these changes have few beneficial effects on either schooling or education. Other factors, from nutrition (the effect of malnutrition on studies) to new articulation of school and non-school systems (e.g. through educational referral centers), are rarely systematically studied. Most of the small number of social scientists, natural scientists, and engineers who conduct educational research, tend to “Robin Hood” educational research funds for basic research funds for basic research in their respective disciplines. And when relevant findings are made, it often takes a generation before they are taken in by most practitioners, a point at which they have already become obsolete.


If NIE is to maximize its impact, it will need more power even more badly than more funds. It will have to be able to resist the pressures of the school lobby—both directly and as mediated via the Office of Education—to limit its attention to improve schools; part of the answer to our numerous educational problems lies in de-schooling and greater reliance on educational institutions for a degree of order over the schools. It will have to hold at bay the basic research mafias, so sufficient funds will be invested in applied work where more immediate pay-offs lie. It will have to resist the pressures of hundreds of academic operators, and for-profit educational R & D firms, each seeking a slice of the new pie, in favor of a relatively small number of sizeable projects which could make a difference. It will have to deal less in grants, more in contracts, and find both the supervisory talent and the researchers committed to a new, more humane, more efficient educational system. It will have to withstand the pressures of Congressmen and local school systems, to provide each district in the country with an educational labour "dissemination project", which would make its millions disappear like water in the sand.

The knowledge absorbers of educational systems must be reorganized in order to be able to digest and use even that knowledge which is available now; as more powerful and relevant knowledge becomes available they must learn not only how to utilize it, but how to sort out the usable knowledge from the junk. Typically, research reports are handed in to boards of education or offices of superintendents. If the reports contain information which, even by implication, reflects poorly on a school—for instance, if the report suggests that the school reading program ought to be modified—the tendency is to suppress the report. (In one case, the superintendent offered to pay the full costs of the report on the condition that all copies would be burned.) When there is no direct threatening information, reports are frequently ignored. The basic issue is that exploring the consequences of new information, assessing innovations, deciding that they are to be used, then making the necessary adoptions and seeing to it that they are introduced, all require considerable effort.

By and large, educational systems, schools and colleges, are long on organizational "bodies" and short on "heads"; they have insufficient staff in the headquarters, and little or no organization to deal with incoming knowledge or to help its utilization within the system. School systems should have research units of their own, not so much concerned with conducting research (although some "in-house" evaluation would be very helpful) as with dealing with the translation of findings into programs, and supervising their revisions as implementation is tried. All too often, schools act as if they subscribe to the rationalist model, according to which knowledge flies on its own wings; a new technique or procedure evolves and principals and teachers will pick it up as soon as its merits are explained to them—say, in a stenciled circular, over the intercom, or in a teacher's journal. However, long experience in and out of schools suggests that special organizations and efforts are needed not only for the production of relevant knowledge, but to help its introduction into the system, from seminars for teachers on new techniques, to verification that promised changes were actually made.13

Decision Making: Fragmented

The decision-making strategies the guidance centers explicitly or implicitly follow obviously affect the quality of their efforts. Members of Anglo-Saxon societies are inclined to be pragmatic, to muddle through, making a few limited decisions at a time; they tend to oppose long-run planning. Such an approach is effective when the environment is relatively stable and the existing system is basically sound. But when fundamental changes are required, or when the system has ossified, the difficulties of such decision making mount.

Decision makers in totalitarian societies often err in the opposite direction. They tend to assume a greater capacity to control than they actually possess. Thus, they over-plan and frequently launch major projects, or “Great Leaps,” which they are forced to scale down and recast at great economic and human cost.

It would be tempting to state that the most effective decision-making strategy is a happy medium between muddling through or overplanning. But it seems more precise to suggest that the capacity to plan or to make encompassing and anticipatory decisions increases as the technology of communication, knowledge storing and retrieval, computation, and research improves. Since World War II, and especially during the past 15 years, the technology of communication has developed with great rapidity. Thus, the objective capacity to guide is on the rise; societies that were overplanning three decades ago now may find more of the tools their ambitious approach requires, and societies that muddle through are wasting more of their potential ability to guide than they did in earlier ages. This is not to say that totalistic planning can or will be carried out, but that more planning than was practicable in the past is becoming quite rewarding.

At the same time, each society seems to have roughly the decision-making apparatus suitable to its character. Decision-making strategies are not chosen merely on the basis of the technical capacity to guide; they partially reflect the political structure of the society. Democratic decision making tends toward muddling through because there is no effective central authority that can impose a set of central decisions, especially in domestic affairs. The decisions reached are the outcome of the pulling and pushing of a large variety of private and public interest groups. No consistent pattern is possible. Totalitarian decision making tends to follow a straight line, but it also tends to run roughshod over the feelings and interests of most of the citizens. Thus, the conditions under which a “middling” decision making may evolve—one that would be more encompassing and “deeper” than democratic decision making, and more humane than totalitarian decision making—lie not only in the availability of new technologies but also in a proper power constellation.

A mistake wise administrators avoid is the assumption that they can manage “their” school or college. Typically, most of the alternatives are closed off by forces beyond anyone’s control, such as the nature of the building, for example, immovable walls, the failure of the last three bond votes, or the backlash mood of the public. Schools are probably less manageable than industrial corporations because they are more in the public eye; they deal in precious commodities (children, values); their achievements are difficult to measure; and their staff members have professional aspirations and hence tend to resist
authority. Under what conditions school systems can be made significantly more guidable depends largely on new efforts at consensus building.

A central feature of the American educational system, which distinguishes it from many other systems—for instance, the French and the Israeli—and which reduces its guidability while it increases the system's responsiveness to local needs and value, is its high fragmentation. It is common to refer in this context to decentralization, but this assumes there is a center which delegated its authority, in part, to subcenters. It is a key feature of the American education system that there is no center which can make any significant decisions for the nation's schools or colleges. The closest we come to decision-making centers are the state departments of education, but in most states much of the decision-making power does not reside in this department; it rests with thousands of school and college boards: This in turn means that the process of innovations consists of bargaining and persuasion, and not administrative decrees.

This is not to suggest that federalization of the guidance of education is desirable. Nationalization of education in America may well bring about an education system unresponsive to important local differences which the American people simply would not tolerate. Yet one must also realize the consequences of lack of centralization in assessing the speed with which the American schools can accommodate and the ways in which such accommodation can be brought about. It is by necessity slow and uneven. Thus, it is difficult to answer the question: can schools be recast to be more streamlined following a crisis, or in anticipation of a crisis? Some gain in guidability may be possible, but its significance will be hard to forecast. Actually, one may even argue that, in crises, schools "freeze" rather than innovate; this would seem to fit the situation in New York City.14

In order to achieve greater economy to mobilize non-school resources for educational efforts, and to redistribute those resources available in a more egalitarian manner, a new kind of local arrangement could be instituted that would coordinate educational institutions, communities and parents. This local arrangement is suggested on the following assumptions;

(1) Given the size and diversity of the American education system, the move toward decentralization of government functions, and especially American traditions and values, it is neither desirable nor practical for the system to be directed from one center. Even if there was a United States Department of Education, on the Cabinet level, it would act mainly as a source of information, knowledge, economic resources, ideas persuasion and coordination, but not as a means of control for the entire educational system.

(2) To rely on the public school systems for coordination, mobilization and redistribution of educational resources seems also not a very viable option. Public school systems are at best viewed as one major means to teach children. Other educational resources include private and parochial schools, instructional T. V., specialized facilities such as libraries, apprentice programs, voluntary tutorial schemes, etc. These resources

are quite unlikely to respond to guidance from the public schools. Moreover, the public schools are where much of the ineptness, the resistance to the change, and inequality is lodged.

(3) A new kind of arrangement that would coordinate educational institutions, communities, and parents seems to be needed. To be effective, it should encompass the full range of educational institutions and resources, not just schools, and it should be "neutral" rather than an agent of any of the main existing educational systems.

We shall refer to these as Educational Concertation Centers to show that they, like conductors of concerts, will guide various players, each performing his or her own tune but they will not dictate or control.

(4) Educational Concertation Centers may serve as clearing houses, places of reference, as a means for the coordination of efforts, for the initiation and administration of cross-school and school-community projects.

Each center may have initially no more than one or two educational leaders and a small auxiliary staff. They would: initiate meetings of representatives of educational institutions in their territory (city, down, rural region) who otherwise never meet; explore complimentary needs; set up joint projects; develop new educational resources; provide referrals to pupils and parents to various educational facilities; etc. The existing Health Councils serve such a function in the health services area.

It might be helpful to locate centers in community and junior colleges where individuals have an interest in education. The centers would thus serve the educational system and they would also give added impetus to the colleges in which they are located.

This effort is not to replace experiments of parental or community participation in the guidance of each single school. But it will provide them with access to a city, town, or regionwide facility and coordinating source.

Finally, the Educational Concertation Centers would also be a natural pipe line to carry new programs, ideas, materials, etc. from N.I.E. to the localities, and vice versa.

Power and Consensus Building

All communities (from the national to the local one) are compositions of groupings (economic, ethnic, regional, and so forth) that differ in the share they command of the totality of social resources and power. The distribution of resources and power in a community significantly affects its capacity to treat its problems and to change its ways. It is useful to consider the distribution of power in two respects: (a) between the members of a community and their government, and (b) among the member of the community.

The government may overpower a community. Such a situation arises when the state bureaucracies checkmate all other power centers in the society; an example of this is a take-over by a military junta. On the other hand, the government may be overpowered by the community or some grouping within it; such a situation arises in highly feudal societies and in tribal societies. When the government is overcentralized, societal guidance tends to be unresponsive to the needs and values of most of its members; when government is overpowered, the major societal agencies for planning and acting are neutralized, or are directed to serve those member groupings which have amassed most of the power in the community.
Only a tense balance between society and the state—each one guarding its autonomy—can result in relatively responsive and active guidance. Democracy itself requires such a power constellation. Sufficient government power is needed to prevent violent expression of the conflicts that inevitably arises among the members of the society, and to prevent the overpowering of some members by others. Autonomous "social" power must be held by groupings of members in order to sustain the political give-and-take, the capacity to change those who guide the state if they cease to be responsive to the popularity of its members.

Democracy, it follows, is most fully realized when the distribution of power among the members of a society most closely approximates equality. Since no social grouping has moral superiority, the only way to assure a society responsive to all the membership is to give each member as equal a share as feasible of the society's guidance mechanisms.

Consensus Building: Much Neglected

Schools and colleges are a weak institution; they are much less powerful than most corporations, from industries to armies. Schools and colleges prosper only at the tolerance of the taxpayers, and hence must take into account community pressures to keep up the legitimation of their efforts. When they veer outside the fairly narrow band of alternate courses that the majority of the citizens of a community—its active elite and its politically conscious minorities—find tolerable without first gaining an "approval," the board of education is likely to be challenged in the next election; superintendents are made to resign; education becomes a major political issue in state-wide elections (as in California); school bonds are repeatedly defeated; and, ultimately, whole classes of people move their children out of public schools and cease to view them as "theirs." All this is rather well known, what is less clear is what conclusions follow.

Our theory suggests that public schools and colleges must either rapidly and broadly increase their legitimation relying on old and new consensus-building mechanisms, or else financial shortage, riots, and alienation of citizens parents, and students will severely constrict their very ability to function. Three different matters are involved: substance, procedure, and structure.

Next to the family and the church, the educational institutes, especially schools, are one of the most important normative agents of society in the transmission of moral and ideological values. No wonder there is continuous tension between those who formulate the curriculum for the school and various segments of the society whose values differ from those which guide the curriculum makers. In the past, such major value differences led to the establishment of parallel school systems; first the religious schools, especially Catholic ones, were formed, and recently secular private schools are proliferating,

15A typical illustration of the challenge to the legitimacy of the existing school system is the following statement in the Winter 1967 issue of the Harvard Educational Review. The authors are critical of the great society because "it accepts as given the premises that education is (a) formal schooling operating as (b) a public monopoly, (c) modeled after the organizational structure and utilitarian values of corporate business," See: Fred M. Newmann and Donald W. Oliver. "Education and Community," Harvard Educational Review 37 (1): 73, Winter 1967.

16For more on this, see Orville Brim, Sociology and the Field of Education (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1958, p. 15.)
especially in the bigger cities. Further privatization of schooling would further undermine legitimation and tax base of the public system. The public system is unlikely to collapse, but it will be even more severely hobbled. Moreover, some of the challenges which the public schools have faced are also faced by the private—especially secular—schools. To identify the challenges is to determine what must be respond to.

One challenge is from the minorities, especially the black community. The black community seeks control of schools in its neighbourhoods for a variety of reasons ranging from a desire to control the allocation of jobs, especially those of principals, to a desire to promote a distinct set of values, a black subculture. The public school as now constituted, even in areas in which all students are black, tends not to be an effective vehicle to communicate the black subculture, on the contrary, it is geared to transmit a lower-middle class white culture.

Many persons believe that it is necessary to respond to these demands by minority groups through denying their legitimacy. They would give three main reasons: (a) the black subculture is not rich enough to constitute a body deserving or requiring study; (b) the school should not make room for subcultures; it is to transmit only the dominant culture if national units are to be sustained; and (c) if one subculture is allowed in, all the others will make similar demands.

In reference to the first point, while this cannot be demonstrated here, there is, for example, a body of black literature, song, music, novels, and history which certainly provides adequate teaching material. Moreover, this body is rapidly growing; even if it was not big enough yesterday (when the “clients” were few), it is rapidly maturing. Second, while the school should transmit the prevailing culture, it enriches all students and helps those of a subculture to find their place in the school if it also transmits the values of the subcultures. True, unifying themes must be preserved; children cannot be allowed to learn that their subculture is superior to any other subculture or main theme. Finally, additional subcultures may indeed have to be accommodated; the Irish and the Italians may follow the blacks, Mexicans, and Orientals. This can be achieved without splintering the curriculum by (a) varying it according to the community (for example, in parts of Texas most Mexican and black subcultures will have to be accommodated but not the Oriental one; the Oriental subculture in turn will have to be included in some parts of San Francisco); (b) general courses on the U.S.A. as a pluralistic, multi-ethnic society may provide part of the answer.

The specific curriculum reforms which are needed do not concern us here, nor can they be universal for all parts of the country, from Montana to Harlem. It seems clear, however, (a) that greater attention to the pluralistic nature of the country should be provided in all schools and colleges and (b) that where there is a demand, an opportunity to gain familiarity with one’s subculture should be provided.

However, the student should be taught the subculture not as a substitute for the dominant culture but in such a way that he will better understand the main culture.

A second substantive revision concerns not the minority under-class variant, but the upper-middle class one. Many schools are still most closely tied to the lower-middle

---

Educational Institutions as a "Guidable" System

class and upper working class values, reflecting most accurately the values to which the majority of teachers subscribe. These are the past-oriented values of the numerous small businessmen on the school boards; they are geared to the values of the industrializing society and seek to build up achievement motivation to produce hard working, orderly, students. These are the kinds of values now promoted in underdeveloped countries which seek to industrialize. But with trillion dollar a year GNP, with the income per capita of the upper and middle classes soaring, there is a big and growing class of students who are oriented to the society which will take affluence for granted, and seek to explore ways to use it rather than further expand it. In this class, there is a growing interest in a life of reflection, cultural creativity, active participation in public affairs—and hedonism. The curricula of most schools have only begun to come to grips with these new demands. Thus, schools tend to alienate not only minority lower class students, but also the white sons and daughters of those who are well-off.

It has been frequently pointed out that the school teaches not only in terms of what the teachers say, or what the curriculum offers, but in the way the whole system is set up. Robert Dreeben, in On What is Learned in School, recently provided a careful analysis of the organizational properties of the school, depicting it as the transition belt from the warm family to the cold occupational world. Viewed in this way, the school structure has changed little since schools were originally founded, or at least they have not changed since they began shaping persons to participate in the world of productivity in a response to the needs of industrial structures. Yet recently the productivity structure has changed by requiring even more persons with creative or professional skills, and thus it is necessary, for example, to train them differently in different structures, with more independent study, greater flexibility in the size of teaching units, and in the time span of each unit. Some of what is being tried in this context is unavoidably gimmicky, innovating for innovations sake, quick to gain popularity, soon to be forgotten. Other innovations deserve to be sustained, and out of these—slowly, to be sure—may emerge a new structure of instruction or, most likely, several alternative patterns of instruction, with the student being able to choose among them, perhaps even able to shift back and forth among them. Obviously, such a new school will emerge first in some parts of the country, while others will still sustain more traditional formats, either because they are more resistant to social change or because their clientele is still oriented to the productivity world.

It is not surprising that superintendents, principals, and teachers tend to feel most comfortable when the decision concerning curriculum and structure are left in their hands. They like to see themselves as professionals, and hence free from public scrutiny. They also have self-interests which are best served when the public mind is preoccupied with other matters. For instance, they pay no attention to the ways in which teachers gain their teaching qualifications—that is, by taking what are known as "Mickey Mouse"

 educational “method” courses.  

But with education becoming an ever more central societal ladder for upward mobility, both economically and socially, and with the concern over education being aroused in the general public by activist groups, it is hard to see how the public can be expected to be removed from the arena.

Next to being completely left alone, schools and colleges (like other corporate bodies) prefer to consult the public in ways which allow the schools to help the public, especially the parents and taxpayers, to see things the schools’ way. The PTA and the alumni meeting has become a symbol of manipulated participation, of co-optation. In a different period than the one in front of us, and in parts of the country in which rapid social change has not yet reached, the professional claim for autonomy or the co-optation techniques may still work. But in schools and colleges at the forefront of change, new potency will have to be given to the old participatory mechanisms and new ones will have to be evolved, because unless the public will re-legitimate the schools and colleges, and unless they are willing to learn the reasons the public is withdrawing legitimacy, the educational system—especially the public one—will be severely hampered in carrying out its mission.

To say that the educational system must become more responsive to new demands of various publics is not to suggest a view of the educational institute as a democracy, in which the teachers or professors are elected and instructed by the parents, their students, or a town meeting. The result of such a mechanical application of democratic principles would be an education system which would be unacceptable not only to the teachers who value professionalism, but also to the parents and students who value education. Herbert Kohl, who is quite favourable to radical experimentation, wrote in the October 1969 issue of The New York Review of Books, referring to a freedom school set up in Mississippi: “Many parents, however, wanted a stricter system that they thought would quickly prepare their children to read, do arithmetic, and follow rules, and they didn’t care much for the liberal educational philosophy...” Education, in fact, flows best down a status structure; when the teachers depend on their charges, it does not flow well. And there are many decisions for which professional knowledge is required.

At the same time, teaching is not medicine. Everyone has had a personal experience of good and bad teachers, and the criteria for telling them apart are not half as difficult to fathom as those of medicine. Schools and colleges are given to more public security than hospitals or law firms. Where the balance between professional autonomy and public accountability lies; how the public can be brought into genuine participation in helping reform schools, and students—into that of colleges—without over-controlling—these are complex problems for which we cannot advance solutions here. However, one observation seems safe: unless more and better consensus building—in matters of substance, structure, and procedure—is added to more informed and less fragmented decision making, the schools and colleges—especially the public ones—will be increasingly more out of step with a rapidly changing society and will suffer the battering that ossified institutions take in stormy days.

---