BETTER SCHOOLS

A VALUES PERSPECTIVE

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Better Schools:
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For Paul and Nicholas

Introduction

Schools are of great concern to most of us, whether as parents, ordinary citizens or educators. We are often unsure, however, just what their role is and to what extent they are fulfilling it. We do not know whether to complain about them, or gratefully accept them as they are.

The purpose of this book is (a) to identify the *goals* of schooling, and (b) to suggest what *form* of schooling is needed in order to achieve these goals. While schools are already doing a good job in many ways, lack of clarity about objectives hinders them in their task. As John Goodlad has said recently, unless the goals of schools are clearly set forth, 'the specifics designed to teach concepts, skills, and values become the ends rather than the means, obscuring the larger ends.' (John Goodlad. *A Place Called School,* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984, p. 290.)

The form of schooling, however, must be examined as well as the goals, since the education we aim at and see as 'good' must be feasible. As John Dewey said often, speaking of education and of life in general, our aims must be modified by our experience of reality. The values perspective on schools offered in this book, then, will be concerned with means as well as ends.

A key theme of the book will be the relationship between school and society. Some writers have suggested that reform at the school level is impossible because schools are so strongly influenced by society. It has been said that schools 'reproduce' society, and even that education *is* socialization. While not taking such an extreme position, I will attempt to show that society is one of the major realities that schools must take into account, and that school and societal reform must go hand in hand if significant improvement is to be achieved.

From one point of view, schools deserve much more credit than they currently receive. Their accomplishments are many. They provide a relatively safe, humane and pleasant environment for vast numbers of children. They teach most children to read, write and calculate, and give them an introduction

to our intellectual traditions not otherwise available. They reinforce many of the values learned in the home, and foster new outlooks and behaviour needed in the work place and other public settings of pluralistic societies. They offer a range of artistic, cultural and sporting activities, and initiate children into pastimes which bring them pleasure for the rest of their lives. With a minimum of pomp and corruption (contrast them with business and political institutions), schools manage both to care for our children and to give them a solid social, cultural and intellectual grounding. School teachers and other school personnel have reason to feel proud of what they do.

Paradoxically, however, from another point of view the performance of schools might well be described as scandalous. Some of the shortcomings of schooling will be documented in the chapters that follow. But here we might note the two central scandals: first, schools massively deprive children of intellectual and cultural stimulation, teaching with a scope and efficiency considerably less than what is needed; and secondly, schools enormously distort children's perception of social and political reality and of what is ultimately important in life. The first problem is widely recognized: parents and citizens constantly ask, Why aren't our schools more effective? The second problem is less commonly noted, partly because adults share many of the distorted ideas about society and life which schools transmit.

How can one reconcile these two assessments, that schools have a solid record of achievement of which educators can be proud, and that their performance is scandalous? The answer, I believe, lies largely in the close connection between school and society already alluded to. Schools are doing quite well, *under the circumstances.* The results are indeed scandalous in many ways, as indicated, but the causes are embedded in long-standing social and cultural conditions. The problem is largely a societal one; and a broad societal effort is required, with the school as just one of several players. Thus, schools can be proud of what they are doing in the present societal context, but should be spurred on to work with others in bringing about major improvements.

On what basis do we make value judgments of this kind about the ways in which schools are doing well or badly? By what criteria do we establish goals and standards for schools and arrive at directions for change? The approach to values employed in this book is goal–oriented or 'teleological'. It takes as its starting point basic human values such as survival, happiness, friendship, self-respect, fulfilment, a sense of meaning in life and so forth; or, in a phrase, 'human well being' (or 'the good life'). The central claim, which will be elaborated in Chapter 1, is that the purpose of schooling (and indeed of all human enterprises) is to promote human well being (or basic human values, or 'the good life'). The defence of schools, then, is that they already contribute in major ways to the well being of students and other

members of society; and the criticism is that they do not promote human well being as much as they could, in general and especially for certain racial, ethnic, gender and other sub-groups.

Such an approach to values, of course, is not the only one that has been advocated, in ethics or in education. However, it is broadly representative of one major tradition in moral philosophy, from at least Aristotle's time to the present. And it has the advantage that even people who disagree with it can gain insights from its application. Whether we are 'teleologists' or 'deontologists', it is important to know which kind of schooling will promote human well being and which will undermine it.

The basic 'manifesto' of this book is as follows:

1. School and society are indeed closely linked: only to a limited degree can the school resist the influences of its wider community (and of the global community). If substantial improvement is to be achieved, school and society must work together.

2. As a basis for reform we need a new vision of the goal of school and society, namely, to promote human well being, and promote it as equitably as possible throughout society and around the world.

3. The school can better play its distinctive part in achieving this goal if it greatly increases its emphasis on 'personal and social education'. While not neglecting traditional 'basics' such as literacy, numeracy and scientific knowledge — indeed, programs in these areas should be enriched in certain respects — the school should give much more attention than at present to fields such as values, culture, religion, politics, economics and ecology.

4. In approaching these areas, schools should not adopt a neutral stance, but rather advocate certain outlooks and attitudes. The teaching method, nevertheless, should be interactive, with teachers and students gaining insights from each other (and from other sources) into what constitutes a sound worldview and way of life.

5. The school should 'practice what it preaches'. Its organization and atmosphere should as far as possible embody the approaches to personal and societal life being advocated, thus setting an example to students and also enabling them to learn by doing as well as by study and discussion.

6. Students should study a largely common curriculum in non-selective schools and heterogeneous classes. This is necessary in order to promote the ideal of equality, build a sense of community, and ensure that there is input from students of different backgrounds. It is also

feasible, because in a school which emphasizes personal and social issues, students of different backgrounds can all contribute and benefit.

A book such as this cannot, of course, be fully comprehensive. In Part 1 — 'Getting Our Bearings' — I have focused on just a selection of key goals and pedagogical issues, and four major interest groups, namely, students, teachers, parents and 'society'. In Part 2, which deals with specific problem areas, I have concentrated on issues of compulsion and indoctrination and questions related to religion, race, ethnicity, gender and class. In Part 3, which suggests new priorities for the school curriculum, I have been able to discuss only moral and values education, religious and spiritual education, political education and (all too briefly) global education. It is my hope, however, that this will be sufficient to illustrate and make plausible the central idea — that the aim of schooling is to promote human well being — and set schooling and educational inquiry off in some new, worthwhile directions.

One final word about how to approach the book. Many of the chapters contain a relatively theoretical part and a more practical part. For example, the chapter on ethnic bias discusses the nature and role of ethnicity before going on to talk about multicultural education. The reason for this is that I believe even the most practical problems in schooling cannot be resolved without dealing with fundamental issues. I have tried to make the theoretical sections as accessible as possible, avoiding unnecessary jargon and providing relevant examples. However, readers may sometimes find it useful to begin toward the end of a chapter and then, having taken note of the practical suggestions, proceed to the earlier sections to consider the rationale behind them. This advice applies to the very first chapter, where the section on 'the nature and source of values' might well be read last, at least on the first run through.

Part One
Getting
Our Bearings

Contents

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The Purpose of Schooling

In approaching schooling from a values perspective, our first task is to identify the purpose of schooling. Only then can we evaluate particular aspects of school life and establish directions for improvement.

Some writers have claimed that schooling does not have a purpose: it is simply an end in itself. However, I see this as an over-reaction to attempts to use schools *merely* to serve external ends, ignoring their intrinsic values and everyday quality of life. While the internal values of schools are important, schools which lack broader goals have difficulty discriminating between more and less worthwhile activities, and tend to go on doing the same things simply because they have been done in the past.

As indicated in the Introduction, the position I will take in this book is that the basic values of schooling have their roots in the values of life as a whole. Accordingly, at the outset of our discussion I will outline an approach to values in general.[1]

The nature and source of values

Some people think value questions are impossible to answer because they are too complex, intangible or personal. They say, 'Oh, that's a value issue', implying that to attempt to deal with it rationally would be pointless: at best, values are a matter of opinion or taste. Others believe that the answer to value questions is obvious: we always know what we should do; what we lack is the will to do it. They cannot understand why schools or universities would devote precious time to the study (as distinct from the inculcation) of values.

The view I wish to propose here is an intermediate one. While value questions are indeed complex and subtle, they are not beyond the capacity of ordinary adults and children. In fact, we all solve hundreds — perhaps thousands — of value problems quite successfully every day. For example,

we choose sound ways to nourish our bodies, to travel from A to B, to respond to questions, to make people feel at ease, to fulfil our work obligations and to amuse ourselves. In the school setting, we choose at least moderately appropriate teaching and learning content and methods, and relate to other people — students or teachers — in somewhat satisfactory ways.

Making sound value judgments is rarely an all or nothing thing; rather it is a matter of *degree*. There is seldom just one good alternative in a situation. While this feature of value decisions means that usually our successes are unspectacular and so are easily overlooked, it has its comforting aspect. It means that our task is not to find the correct solution but rather to hit upon as good a solution as possible under the circumstances. If we merely succeed in improving the current situation we are to be congratulated.

But how do we *know* that we have found a sound solution to a value problem, in education or in life in general? What is the criterion of soundness? Indeed, what are values and where do they come from? How do we know that even modest success in value matters is possible?

Values, I wish to suggest, are grounded in 'human well being'. Specific activities of everyday life, including teaching and learning, are good and right (if they are) because they promote well being. We are able to make successful value judgments and decisions only because we have at least some sense of what is ultimately important for people, including the children in our schools.

Human well being, in turn, may be defined in terms of basic values such as survival, health, happiness, friendship, helping others (to an extent), insight, awareness, fulfilment, freedom, a sense of meaning in life and so on. This is an interconnected, open-ended set of values which are largely ends in themselves. They arise out of basic human needs and tendencies: they are inherent in human nature and the human condition. They are what ultimately makes life seem good and worthwhile.

There are obviously many different kinds of values apart from these basic ones: there are spiritual values, moral values, social and political values and a host of intermediate-range and specific values. However, all these values together form a comprehensive *value system* which serves human well being. And within this system, values are constantly weighed against one another. There are no *absolute* values in the sense of values which can never in principle be outweighed by other values. Even the basic human values must be weighed against each other, and are only ends in themselves to a relative degree.

Values, then, may be defined as those things (objects, activities, experiences, etc.) which on balance promote human well being. There is another sense of 'values', namely, those things which humans prize and pursue because they *believe* them to be valuable, whether they are or not. Values in this sense are studied by anthropologists and other social scientists who

attempt to describe in a detached way the things humans prize, regardless of their actual merits. However, most educators, moral philosophers and others in practical fields — and we in this book — are chiefly interested in values in the former sense, those things which really *are* valuable and hence worth pursuing.

Are values in this sense objective; or are they subjective, simply a matter of opinion? From one point of view, values might be described as subjective since they are grounded in what humans basically desire and seek. They are not written in the heavens somewhere, unrelated to human nature and human needs. However, in very important ways *values are objective*. Even at the level of basic values, it is an objective question what humans desire and seek. And at more specific levels it is an objective fact that some social arrangements and patterns of behaviour promote well being more than others. Accordingly, it is possible to carry out systematic, objective inquiry into what is good and right. This does not mean that the same things are valuable for all people and for all time. But individual variations in what is valuable can also be studied objectively, since they depend on variations in people's actual needs and circumstances. They are not random or capricious.

Educational values, then, are objective in this sense, and may be explored in a systematic, objective fashion. What is good and right in schooling is ultimately a function of what promotes the well being of the people affected, most notably the students but also teachers, parents and other members of society; and this well being can be analyzed in terms of basic human values. Of course, it is not easy to work out exactly what the impact of the school is on various people's lives. Educational inquiry is an extremely demanding task. However, in varying degrees we may gain such knowledge. And we have no alternative but to pursue it. For without it, we have no basis for saying what should go on in schools or for claiming that schooling is worthwhile.

'Education for life'

The approach to the values of schools which I have just outlined is sometimes referred to using the phrase 'education for life'. The idea behind this slogan is that schooling is not an end in itself: its purpose is to serve life, both within the school and beyond it.

The concept of 'education for life' is associated with John Dewey and the 'progressive education' movement. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey said:

> There is a standing danger that the material of formal instruction
> will be merely the subject matter of schools, isolated from the subject

matter of life-experience. Thus we reach the ordinary notion of education: the notion which ignores its social necessity and . . . identifies it with imparting information about remote matters . . . .[2]

For Dewey, education had to be tied to life if it was to be effective. And schooling found its justification in serving all areas of life, not simply the narrowly intellectual and cultural.

People often object to this approach, saying that it 'opens the floodgates'. Once we accept that schooling is for life, it becomes the arena for a multitude of pursuits. Sex education, driver education, business education, film studies, folk dancing, ethnic studies, peace studies: any or all of them and others may become major aspects of a school program. And these, it is thought, either are not important enough to take up precious school time or are simply not the sort of thing that schools should be concerned with.

However, while we might well query such activities we should equally raise questions about more traditional school subjects. The mistake those who are opposed to education for life make is to assume that there is some easy way to work out what should be in the curriculum and what should not. Perhaps traditional subjects *are* more important than sex education or peace studies. But whether they are or not must be found out through detailed inquiry with an eye to the short- and long-term well being of all those affected. We cannot just *see* what is more important or deduce it from the meaning of the word 'education'.

Opening up the school in this way to new activities may certainly pose a problem of shortage of time for existing subjects. But to refuse even to consider reducing the time allotted to traditional subjects is to side-step the question of value and purpose completely. Within whatever time we have, we must achieve the best possible *balance* of elements in the curriculum. We cannot arbitrarily rule out one set of activities to leave room for another.

While the attempt to connect schooling to the needs of life as a whole is essential, we must be aware of its pitfalls. In the present century, the problems of seeking 'relevance' in education were seen, for example, in the early disasters of substituting 'social studies' for history and geography and 'environment studies' for science. This experience showed that there is a danger of throwing out the old before we have something better to put in its place. A curriculum must be developed which forges genuine links between the old and the new and preserves as far as possible the best of the old. Teachers must be involved in and prepared for the changes, and learning materials must be created to support the new program.

Another danger of taking 'life' as our source of direction is that of becoming unduly vague and abstract in describing the tasks of schooling. Educators and school authorities notoriously draw up pompous lists of aims

for education without indicating precisely what they mean at the school level. The 'real issues', as Richard Peters puts it, 'are obscured by talk about self-realization, life, happiness, and so on'.[3] While I think it is a mistake to reject the notion of extrinsic aims for schooling, as Peters tends to do, it is clear that a statement of aims alone is not enough and must be accompanied by concrete proposals about content and process.

Yet another danger is that of becoming too preoccupied with external and long-term aims to the neglect of ones close at hand. We may see schooling as *merely* a means to future ends, so that we do not value and enjoy it for its own sake. In literature teaching, for example, the goal of exploring life outlooks for future use may be sought to the neglect of present understanding and enjoyment. This problem was identified early this century by Dewey. In *Democracy and Education* he warned against seeing education as mere *preparation* for life, stating that 'in our search for aims in education, we are not concerned . . . with finding an end outside of the educative process to which education is subordinate.'[4] Peters also comments that the means/end model 'encourages an *instrumental* way of looking at the problem of justification . . . it is assumed that education must be justified by an end which is extrinsic to it.'[5] In similar vein, Alasdair MacIntyre speaks out against society's preoccupation with 'getting on', commenting that 'one goes to primary school in order to get a degree in order to get a job in order to rise in one's profession in order to get a pension.'[6] Our 'utilitarianism', as he calls it, relies on a 'criterion of action, extrinsic to action itself, used to judge effects and consequences'.[7] As a result the activity itself — in this case schooling — is not valued. While I believe these writers have overstated their case, since schooling must *in part* be justified by ends which are extrinsic to it, nevertheless their warning is important. Schooling must also *in part* be valued for its own sake. Many basic human values can be fulfilled in the process of schooling itself; we must try as far as possible to foster *in schools* 'the good life' we would wish for students in later years.

A new social context for schools

The role of the school cannot be derived simply from basic human values. It is also a function of prevailing social conditions. One factor we must take into account today in wealthy industrialized countries is society's greater dependence on schools. More is now expected of schools, and they are central to the way of life of virtually all young people from about age 4 to age 16 to 18.

In previous eras, only a small proportion of the population went to school, or, in the case of working-class children in the early days of mass education, schooling lasted just a few years and was simply to impart basic

literacy and numeracy skills. This situation has changed, however, partly because of a demand for universal access to extensive schooling; partly because the economy no longer needs or wants child and youth labour; and partly because of the need for extended day care, due to increased participation of female parents in work outside the home. As well as being desirable from an educational point of view, schools are now necessary to keep young people out of the home, off the streets and off the unemployment or welfare rolls. And this trend is continuing. With the growing desire of women for equal occupational opportunity and the increasing dependence of families on the income of female parents, early full-time day care and 'pre-schooling' are becoming more common. And with continuing youth unemployment and the decline in the status or availability of apprenticeship programs, adolescents are staying at school longer and more frequently going on to college and university (which, in their earlier years, are becoming more school-like).

What implications does this have for the purpose of schooling? In the first place, obviously, it increases the importance of the child care function of the school. But beyond that, it must modify substantially our conception of the nature and role of school activities. With the extended years and hours of schooling, and the broad range of young people attending school, we must ask: What should people in modern industrialized societies do for the first fifth to a quarter of their lives? We cannot simply 'warehouse' them for such a long period of time. And we cannot fill the whole school day and year with traditional school subjects, which were developed for workers' children who could only afford three or four years of schooling, for young eighteenth-century gentlemen whose station in life was already secured, or for sixteenth-century clerics and lawyers in training.

Some writers have argued that we should resist the trend toward an expanded role for schooling and, on the contrary, reduce school years and hours or even do away with schools completely. Carl Bereiter, for example, in a book significantly titled *Must We Educate*?, maintains that the teaching activities of the school should be restricted to skills training, and many teenagers should avoid the 'adolescence' which schooling encourages and go straight into an adult vocation.[8] And Ivan Illich in *Deschooling Society* recommends that schools be abolished, thus freeing young people to pursue learning on an individualized, voluntary basis. Our vast system of compulsory schooling, he argues, discourages active involvement in learning on the part of young people, and leads us all to mistake certification for learning and schooling for education.[9]

However, while there is some plausibility to these positions, the difficulties are several. In the first place, the child care function of the school is so essential in contemporary industrialized societies that it seems idle to talk of abolishing schools or reducing the time spent in them, at least in