

Harry, Chapter 17

One could hardly dispute that among the primary human activities in education is to search for answers. One could argue that this is an aspect of human nature. In the rich history of mankind, schools and institutions have been organized to accommodate this thirst to know. In those cultures which flourished, education received unabated support by the citizenry. Knowledge became the equivalent to power and strength. The unquestionable value of learning is well rooted.

Equally axiomatic, one can confidently state that our present day schools are far from 'ideal' centers where this search for answers allegedly churns. Perhaps we need to examine again the intended function of schooling at its fundamental level. To say "we go to school to get an education" is meaningless, and leaves one staring into space with only increased impatience. What does this 'education' entail, anyhow? Might it be suggested that schools have become trapped into a role which they can not possibly fulfill? Might it be suggested that the present-day view of a school is to provide answers; a thought which drips with futility? Somehow, the citizens and educational systems alike seemed to have grasped too tightly around the "answers" and have allowed the "search" to flail aimlessly. Might it be suggested that the proper function of a school is to nurture and foster the search, and not simply to attempt to provide the answers.

As an educator, I have been flattered, tempted, and dismayed on many an occasion with the imposed 'expert' status given me by my students. And how often has any teacher experienced this: children racing up to the desk to find out the 'answer'? In a personal experience, a student once asked me what was inside a building visible from our road side stop in Sheridan, Wyoming. Although the student soon realized the frivolity of such a question, it nonetheless illustrates the notion that teachers [and schools, in general] are perceived [subconsciously, perhaps] as THE resources for all answers. I asked the student to go down to the building to find out for us all what was inside. We need to direct our efforts toward encouraging the search, not the answers.

Paul Shipman, an associate professor of cell biology and anatomy and assistant dean of academic affairs at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine stated recently,

"What I see, as a scientist and a teacher of undergraduate and graduate students, is a widespread inability to handle shades of gray. Even bright, well-trained students are disconcerted and uncomfortable with controversies or unsettled issues in science. "Yes," they say, "I understand that this group of scientists thinks this and that thinks that, but what is the real answer?""

The search has been increasingly neglected; the fervor of technology and 'progress' rushes us along to the answers and results only.

In chapter seventeen of *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*, healthy dialogue regarding the prior classroom discussions in Mr. Spence's class crystalize the effective and meaningful essence of education. All are engaged in a search - to understand how we think. The discussions transcend all subjects - English, math, history, as well as science. This

interaction seems to highly motivate the class to search for meaning in their learning. "One could say that imaginative philosophical dialogue is essential to what is meant by 'education'." The children are kindling a community of inquiry; where each other's ideas are being seriously heard and considered, where mutual respect is being fostered, and where issues are being openly scrutinized. Lisa isn't sure of the worth of the discussions, but has difficulty finding the reasons for her uneasiness. The 'community' probes with relevant questions and encourages her ideas and reasons. Throughout the dialogue, underlying assumptions are revealed and consistency in argument is checked. There is real education transpiring in Mr. Spence's classroom. "If the community of inquiry is functioning well, the teacher and the other children should be willing to help the child find reasons for the views that she holds." In the search each member of the class comes to understand him/herself a bit better, and in the process, comes to understand a bit about others and how they think, too.

True, there are facts to be learned in a school, there is knowledge to be assimilated, and there are educational foundations which must be laid. Yet, if this is the focus of our educational process, then our 'products' will be more repetitious and less progressive. Telling [students] what to think about everything, in the long run, is counterproductive. One ends up with a human being who is incapable of giving reasons for what one thinks, applying criteria to one's own judgements and internalizing habits of reflection that constitute personal autonomy. Such people are condemned to a life more analogous to a robot than a person.¹

A major revision of the way in which we think about schools and education is needed. We need to nurture the citizens within a democratic society to be reasonable individuals who think for themselves and actively search for the answers themselves all their lives.

And once a community of inquiry becomes a formally directed goal of the classroom, then perhaps 'a graceful error' - as Lisa read - may enter into the dialogue - swirl about the convolutions of reasonable minds - and continue to 'correct the cave'.²

Paul G. Geise

Footnotes

1. Pat Shipman, commentary in "Education Week". Volume VI, number 4. October 1, 1986, page 24.
2. Ann Margaret Sharp. "Is There an Essence of Education?" reprint obtained from IAPC Institute held in August 1986, page 10.
3. Ibid, page 7.
4. Ibid, page 7.
5. Matthew Lipman. *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*. New Jersey: First Mountain Foundation, 1982, page 95.

Bibliography

- Lipman, M. *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*. New Jersey: First Mountain Foundation. 1982.
- Sharp, A.M. "*Is There an Essence of Education?*" reprint obtained from IAPC Institute held in August 1986.
- Shipman, P, commentary in *Education Week* Volume VI, number 4, October 1, 1986.