

Are our schools preparing young people for life, or coddling immaturity?

American Education: The Age of Responsibility

ROBERT M. DAVIES

I

IN THE WELTER of recriminations arising from our current national debacle, one fact has been commonly recognized by all: American education must rise to meet the threat to national security from abroad and to national harmony at home.

"How did the Russians beat us?" . . . "How far ahead of us are they?" . . . "Whose fault is it?" . . . "How did we get into this mess?" Such are the questions that have been asked with insistence and near-hysteria in recent months. How, indeed, have these things come about? Whose fault is it? President Eisenhower's? Inter-service rivalry? Congressional turmoil? Public complacency?

Round and round the mulberry bush we have gone, seeking to lay the blame, as though to find in that indictment some balm for the wounded vanity we have suffered and some outlet for the fears and frustrations welling up within.

Yet reflection tells us that what is needed is not the fruitless identification of shortcomings in the past but the fruitful re-

evaluation of our plans and procedures for the present. And such reflection has been engaged in by many thoughtful Americans. In this reflective re-evaluation for the future the resulting harmony is nearly as impressive as the previous cacophony of strident voices seeking to indict some villain for the past.

"Education!" is the chorus. "Education is the hope for the future." We must re-assess our educational goals, our educational procedures, and even the educational components themselves. The very uniformity of that agreement adds substance to its validity. Education is the only possible hope for the future.

At the same time, if education is the path to success for the future, is it not reasonable to suppose that here is the principal area of failure in the past? If better education is to get us out of our predicament in the future, then it seems reasonable to believe that better education in the past might have averted our predicament in the present.

For actually, even before the shocking events of the past year, there were clear

signs that American education was not performing what was required of it.

For several decades now, our industrial leaders have been telling us of an increasing shortage in the fields of engineering. This shortage is variously estimated at from fifteen to thirty thousand men per year, but there can be no doubt that the shortage is a grave one—even in our recession cut-backs—and that it is more than a passing re-adjustment of the labor supply.

Though it is not so well publicized, perhaps, there is reason to believe that the shortage of physicians is at least as acute and may, indeed, be much worse. There are at the present time approximately seven thousand, five hundred vacancies for internes and resident physicians in hospitals throughout the United States. These are the vacancies on hospital staffs largely filled by newly-certified doctors, and because they are the backbone of the practical working force at most hospitals they represent a reliable index to the number of new doctors entering the field of medicine. This indicates a tremendous shortage of young doctors.

We hear as well that we are running into serious shortages of ministers, teachers, and other competently trained leaders of society.

The fact becomes clear, therefore, even apart from military considerations, that for some time our educational system has simply not been turning out enough trained men to take up the slack of retiring men or to fill the gaps in whole new areas of need.

Now what I am endeavoring to say is that if we must name one villain, I think we must be so unchivalrous as to attack one no longer able to defend himself, and to assert that the one man most responsible for our current national failure is John Dewey. For we have now decided that our current educational procedure has produced a crisis, and John Dewey has been known for decades as the "father of American education." Therefore education's failings may reasonably be attributed to the man most responsible for giving it its stamp.

I am not so naive as to assert that John Dewey unaided has brought about our current difficulties, and that by simply repudiating his ideas and practices we can emerge invincible. Indeed, I am not actually certain that Dewey himself is the principal villain in the piece. I suspect he was principally the mouthpiece for a movement crystallizing during his lifetime, and if he had not produced his ideas and theories some other would have done it in his stead. What we are seeing now is the inevitable result of many contributing forces that have produced something like a flood tide to carry us where we do not wish to go.

II

John Dewey lived a long, long life; he wrote voluminously, and very badly. He hovered in the educational heavens like the long day of Joshua, and nowadays he is almost never read. There is some confusion as to what he actually said—for his ideas did change—and it is commonly understood by his admirers that he has become a public whipping-boy for the excesses that developed among his followers.

All of these things admitted, yet it is a fact that for about a quarter of a century or longer—nearly a generation, in fact—the most powerful single leavening influence in American education has been known as progressive education, and it is likewise a fact that John Dewey is identified in the minds of teachers themselves as the guiding light in progressive education.

As early as 1920, for instance, Cubberley's *History of Education*—one of the standard history-of-education texts—spoke of John Dewey as "the foremost American interpreter, in terms of the school, of the vast social and industrial changes which have marked the nineteenth century" because "better perhaps than anyone else he has thought out and stated a new educational philosophy, suited to the changed and changing conditions of human living."¹ Succeeding decades have not much modified this judgment.

This "new educational philosophy" is the one that has been variously damned and praised as "progressive education" or "Deweyism." Its complete definition is certainly controversial, but the central provisions in its creed may be found clearly stated in Dewey's own words. Writing in the *Elementary School Record* in 1900, Dewey set forth three premises (first consciously enunciated by Froebel) that were basic to the new philosophy. They are these:

1. That the primary business of the school is to train in cöoperative and mutually helpful living
2. That the primary root of all educational activity is in the instinctive, impulsive attitudes and activities of the child, and not in the presentation and application of external material.
3. That these individual tendencies and activities are organized and directed through the uses made of them in keeping up the cooperative living . . . taking advantage of them to reproduce, on the child's plane, the typical doings and occupations of the larger, maturer society into which he is finally to go forth; and that it is through production and creative use that valuable knowledge is clinched.²

However well these sound in theory, it is my present contention that a great deal of our present difficulty grows out of the second of these three beliefs: "the primary root of all educational activity is in the instinctive, impulsive attitudes and activities of the child." Dewey himself clearly indicated that the interests of the child were to be channeled by the teacher; but as this premise became implemented in the curriculum and practice of the school system, it developed into the "student-centered curriculum," in contrast to the traditional "content-centered" curriculum.

The conduct of the pupil should be governed by himself according to the social needs of his community, rather than by

arbitrary laws. Full opportunity for initiative and self-expression should be provided, together with an environment rich in interesting material that is available for the free use of every pupil. ("A Statement of the Principles of Progressive Education," 1924)³

This means, "The student is a better judge of what's good for him than anyone else."

As a result, in our recent educational efforts, tremendous emphasis has been placed upon the enjoyment of the school-process. Teachers have been encouraged to challenge their students to like the process, and the students have been led to think that education best which conforms most nearly to their desires.

I know this is an over-simplification of the theory, but, in practice, American education has been saying in effect for several decades to its students: Those of you who desire to take the more difficult work may do so, if you have the inclination. Those of you who desire to take the easier courses may do so. Education is valuable only so long as it produces a student voluntarily and happily expressing himself without duress.

The problem resulting from this attitude is compound. In the first place, it is false education. All education must be for one of two purposes. It must be an education for content or it must be an education for attitudes. Those students who take the more difficult curricula are, in general, trying to master a body of subject-matter. Those students who enter upon the easier curricula are those "training for attitudes toward life." It is not what they know that is of importance; rather, it is their attitude toward life that counts.

Unfortunately, therefore, the fundamental basis of their education is faulty, and the very keystone of the educational arch is missing. For the most important attitude any of us can develop is simply the acceptance of work as man's responsibility and opportunity. In school, the student is

presented with the alternatives of a difficult curriculum and an easier curriculum; that he needn't work unless he wishes to. There is no such alternative in life. For that reason, it is impossible to educate for attitudes without demanding a certain responsibility, for the state cannot counter all of the resultant irresponsibility.

That is precisely where our educational theories—and one facet of Deweyism in particular—have failed. We have said to the student in effect: Choose for yourselves that way of life which pleases you. The responsibility for serious matters may be placed on shoulders more eager to carry the burden.

But now we find, to our consternation, that too few students are reaching for the heavy burden of responsibility, and, in consequence, the responsibility for leadership is falling to the ground. We have told the students that if they did not choose to shoulder the responsibility for a difficult education, others would do the work; society would look out for them. Now, however, we find to our chagrin that, with so many dependent on society, there are not enough left to support society.

In short, progressive education has failed in two major ways. As its critics have been pointing out for several decades, it fails in theory because it teaches a student a false relationship to life. Now the entire public is confronted by its practical failure in a great shortage of the qualified citizens society needs for its own perpetuation.

III

I have entitled my present thoughts "American Education: The Age of Responsibility" because America is now rapidly approaching a critical era when she will retain her recently-won leadership, or when she will unwillingly defer to the leadership of another. However great our anxiety may have been in the recent past, as several of our more sober leaders have pointed out, the real challenge from Russia will come fifteen years from now, as Russia begins to exploit with increasing efficiency her

great natural resources. That will be the real Age of Responsibility for America—for ourselves, our children, our friends around the world. Because we are counting on our educational system to provide leadership and implementation to meet that crisis, we are certainly entering an era of tremendous responsibility for the academic world.

In a narrower sense, however, I have selected this title because I believe our national Age of Responsibility is dependent upon the individual's age of responsibility. This is one of the two theoretical problems most in need of answer. Just when does an individual enter upon the age of responsibility? At some time in the scheme of education, the student must be confronted by the unpleasant fact that he is responsible for his own achievement and for his own actions. However much society may defer to the growing child, the unpleasant truth remains that at a certain point it no longer defers to him. It begins to see him as he is, to reward him for his achievements and to hold him responsible for his mistakes.

For some decades now we have tended to push back the time at which we insistently confront the student with this disturbing fact of life. A considerable part of the problem of juvenile delinquency arises from education's failure to expect responsible performance. New York City has recently been seriously considering the placing of policemen in public schools because the educators have demonstrated to a critical public their failure to impress upon unruly adolescents—generally sixteen or seventeen years of age—the fact that these unruly adolescents are responsible for their own conduct. The college entrance examinations have been mushrooming yearly because the colleges have discovered that high-school grading systems all too frequently have been modified to please students and their parents, rather than to bring home severely to high school juniors or seniors the insufficiency of their achievement.

It is apparent that we must determine the age at which we actually expect a student to act responsibly. Is it ten? Twelve? Fifteen? Eighteen? In short, when is the age of responsibility? Though it may vary from individual to individual, we are considering an educational system for millions of Americans, and we must determine for practical purposes when in that program we are going to present to the student, with some emphasis, the nature of his responsible relationship to life.

As a tentative answer, I choose the age of twelve. This is the age of responsibility for the orthodox Hebrew children among whom delinquency has been noticeably infrequent. It is of some note that most European school systems expect a child to make a responsible choice for his own future education and life's work at about his twelfth year. Is it also significant that the age of twelve occurs just prior to a child's departure from grade school, and his entry into high school. Surely a high school freshman is not too young to be apprised of the responsibility he bears for his own acts.

IV

What I have said above is dependent upon something to which all Americans give lip service, but which actually has departed from our thinking. We mumble the words of Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights"

The difficulty is that in education we have repudiated this. I venture to assert that nine-tenths of the education in America today is controlled by people who no more believe Jefferson's words than they do the assertion that the moon is made of green cheese. For we now say in all gravity, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are born of unequal parents, that they are conditioned by their environment to possess certain inevitable characteristics"

Well, unfortunately, it makes a deal of

difference which Declaration you believe. For if you believe that a man—or a student—has certain inalienable rights, you can expect him to act with certain responsibility. But if you believe that a man has only characteristics, you cannot hold him responsible.

The difference is that *characteristics* is a factual word; *responsibility* is a value word. We determine the characteristics of a man by recognizable criteria. We can reduce some of them to statistics which we can plot on a chart. But we cannot do this with responsibility. This is of man's very essence. It exists, or doesn't exist.

Ultimately, therefore, it makes a great deal of difference in education whether society believes it is dealing with something that has an inviolable sanctity of its own, or whether it is dealing with one of its own creations. After all, society cannot very well expect a student to act responsibly if society believes that the student is somehow one of society's own products. Can you punish a seventeen-year-old high school boy for throwing lye on another boy, if you feel that somehow he is a product of bad social conditions over which he had no control?

Even before we can determine an age of responsibility, then, we must ask ourselves whether we do or do not really believe in the genuine freedom of the individual. One of the clichés dearest to the hearts of the guidance counselors is the affirmation, "To know all, is to forgive all!"

You can know a person's characteristics; you cannot know his inalienable rights. For characteristics are facts of observation; inalienable rights are of the essence itself.

V

Here, finally, we come to the dilemma confronting us. To produce responsible citizens, we must educate for responsibility. To educate for responsibility, we must believe in the freedom of the individual who is being held responsible. But is he really free? Is fifteen-year-old John Jones to be held responsible for his completely

disappointing achievement, his vacillations with the truth, his anti-social attitude, and told sternly to snap out of it? Or is he the product of forces over which he had no control, and therefore not really accountable?

This is a highly complex problem, one which passes from the field of education to those of psychology and philosophy. Put in its simplest form, the question becomes, "Is man a valuational creature?" We have spoken of his freedom and responsibility—concepts of value; we have spoken of characteristics—concepts of facts. So if a man is not in essence a valuational creature, we waste our time talking of his responsibilities and rights. Furthermore, if he is not a valuational creature, we waste our time asserting that he is—or wishing that he were. So the question arises with urgency: Does man have certain inalienable rights? Is he a creature of valuation? This is the second of the two theoretical questions which we must answer. And it is even more important than the first, because it is basic to it.

The people controlling American education and much of American thought are, of course, men in their fifties. This is man's decade of authority and leadership in our society. Such men were in college thirty years ago—in the 1920's—when the psychologists spoke in unequivocal terms of man's nature. There was no dilemma for them. This was the high-watermark of behavioral psychology. Pavlov, in one of the most famous of all scientific experiments, had demonstrated that a dog's salivary glands may be conditioned to stimuli other than food. It quickly became the foundation for much that we have learned of man's reactions, and became basic to an all-embracing psychology.

According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "After 1909 Pavlov's experiment became the stock example of mechanistic theories and supported the doctrine that behavior is never more than a very complex set of conditioned reflexes."⁴ For people who accept this psychology of man, our

dilemma is solved! Question: Is man free or is he controlled by conditioning? Answer: Behavior is never more than a very complex set of conditioned reflexes.

As it entered into and increasingly dominated our educational philosophy, this psychology became doubly corrosive of any effort to maintain individual responsibility. A student could scarcely be disciplined for what would have previously been called bad acts or wrong-doing. These actions were not his fault; they were the result of his conditioning environment. To understand him, we must understand his background. "To know all is to forgive all." So a student was not held accountable for what he was.

Neither was he to be held accountable for what he achieved. For if he were held accountable for failure, he would be conditioned to failure, which would breed resentment, which would breed anti-social response. The purpose of the school is to encourage growth, not anti-social response.

It is psychology therefore, I believe, which must be held finally responsible with Dewey for our current desperate convulsion of re-examination. Actually, Dewey was merely translating into educational procedure what psychology was dogmatically asserting as the nature of man when he wrote: "The teacher . . . is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these influences."⁵

VI

If I am right in what I have been saying, the most pressing general problem in this Age of Responsibility is to re-determine in our educational system the age of responsibility for the students of our school system. This, in turn, requires a substantial re-consideration of our attitude toward man, psychologically speaking.

Fortunately, there is evidence that just as psychology provided the theories which served as such an undesirable support to progressive education, so now psychology

may provide the theories necessary to revitalize our educational concepts. For several decades Gestalt psychology has increasingly insisted that for a human being the sum of experience is greater than its components. A man simply cannot be added up like a column of figures. To know all is impossible, really, because the total human personality is greater than the sum of its recognizable parts. It is almost as though one might assert that in the totality of man's nature he brings to the interpretation of life a unifying principle greater than we might expect him to have from the respective components. You cannot explain him simply by conditioning.

More recently, also, psychology has begun to emphasize the need for greater cooperation between the psychologist and the minister. At a psychological symposium in September 1957, Dr. O. H. Mowrer, former President of the American Psychological Association, is quoted by the *New York Times* as saying, "Psychology doesn't have all the answers; it hasn't even asked all the right questions which lie at the very heart of human experience."⁶ Members of the panel noted that psychology and religion are moving closer together in their attempts to solve their mutual problems of human behavior.

This is very much by way of substantiation of a famous statement made over twenty years ago by Carl Jung, one of our most influential psychologists: "During the past thirty years people from all the civilized countries of the earth have consulted me . . . Among all my patients in the second half of life—that is to say, over thirty-five—there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that every one of them fell ill because he had lost that which the living religions of every age have given to their followers, and none of them has been really healed who did not regain this religious outlook."⁷

Perhaps, after all, man is a creature of value, and we can never hope to understand him psychologically nor educate him ade-

quately until we recognize this fact.

One of the most interesting aspects of the present struggle is the fact that America and Russia have practically changed sides in their approach to education. In America we pay tribute to man's freedom and to the existence of value judgments. We are almost ridiculous in our constant preachments of rights and freedom. But in practice we act very much as though freedom didn't exist. If a man has been a Communist, for example, we say to him, "We do not really hold you responsible for this because we know you were born into a bad background and went through the throes of the depression. You never really had a chance." In Russia, theoretically, concepts of value as we know them do not exist, for the Marxist lives in a materialistic world. But in practice a Russian is held strictly accountable to the bourgeois tradition of a world of freedom and responsibility. "You have become a capitalist; that is unfortunate. You will have twenty years in Siberia to consider your sins against the people's republic."

In his *Public Philosophy*, Mr. Walter Lippmann points out the disturbing fact that Western democracy in 1900 was regarded everywhere as the pattern of the future, but that by 1925 this was no longer so.⁸ Somehow we were already beginning to lose the forward impetus which throughout the world had carried the Statue of Liberty as a symbol of the hope of Western democracy.

It is significant, I think, that in the very document in which Jefferson speaks of inalienable rights, he also speaks of responsibility. "A decent respect," he says, "for the opinions of mankind requires" an explanation of public acts. We are free to act, but compelled to act responsibly.

Several times recently I have seen among other definitions the statement that education is principally concerned with helping people to make the right choice. Now *choice* is a freedom-word. If you believe in an inalienable right to freedom, you can speak of educating a student to

make a choice. Otherwise you can only hope that you will condition him to react properly. Progressive education is still struggling with the words of Dewey, "The teacher . . . is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to those influences."⁹

The fundamental problem confronting us, then, is one of two parts. There is the underlying need for the psychologists, who speak as the high priests of education, to re-assert that mystery at the heart of man, that in totality he transcends the sum of the parts. Is it possible that the sum represents the facts, the conditionings, the characteristics, whereas the ineluctable mystery at the heart is the realm of value, which gives meaning to the whole? Then, having re-asserted this, we must translate it into practical terms in our educational system by defining more specifically the age of responsibility.

Perhaps in this way once again we can pick up our faltering torch of freedom in such a way even our greatly increased

technological performance will not serve to dim the fact that we are worthy to be among the leaders of the world. Then, once again, as defenders of man's right rather than as believers in conditioning might, we will differ in a significant essence rather than in degree from the Communists.

¹Ellwood P. Cubberley, *The History of Education*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1920, pp. 780-781.

²John Dewey, "Froebel's Educational Principles," *The Elementary School Record*, Vol. I, No. 5 (June, 1900), p. 143.

³Article I, "The Principles of Progressive Education," *Progressive Education*, Vol. I, No. I (April, 1924), p. vi.

⁴"Psychology, History of," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1950 Ed., Vol. 18, p. 717.

⁵John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," Article II, 1897. (Frequently reprinted.)

⁶*New York Times*, September 3, 1957, p. 29, col. 4.

⁷C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1936, p. 264.

⁸Walter Lippmann, *Essays in The Public Philosophy*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1955, p. 6.

⁹See footnote 5.