

Educating the Children of the “Me” Generation

S T E P H E N T O N S O R

NO DOUBT ALL educators and observers of American society have noted a renewed discussion of the desirability of increased emphasis on scientific and technological education and more and more frequent calls for a new crash program in science education rather like the post “Sputnik” programs. It is argued that America’s decline in technological and scientific leadership and the general decline in innovation in science and technology are not only dangers to national prosperity and security but reflect a basic failure of American education. Such diverse phenomena as declining productivity and even the energy crisis are viewed as the result of the failure of the American school system to produce men and women who can solve these problems.

Given the current mood of self-doubt and cultural pessimism many social and historical analysts have seen these developments in American society and Western society as a whole as irreversible and as portending a radical shift in the development of contemporary culture. Let me illustrate my point by quoting a typical view selected on the basis of chance. Jean Gimpel, medieval historian, wrote in 1975

in his book, *The Medieval Machine: The Industrial Revolution of the Middle Ages*:¹

Our Western civilization has seen the development of two parallel systems of education—that of the mechanical arts for engineers and that of the liberal arts for men of letters. These are the two cultures of C.P. Snow. Historians steeped in the prejudices of the liberal arts have rarely thought it worthwhile to cross the gap in order to study or to write the history of the mechanical arts, the history of technology. Since the Renaissance, whenever Western man has tried to make historical comparisons, he has usually turned to the Roman Empire, not the Middle Ages, in spite of the fact that the medieval industrial revolution is remarkably comparable to the English Industrial Revolution and its subsequent development in America. The creative time span of each of these great technological eras lasted for some two and a half centuries before symptoms of decline became apparent. Our own last two decades demonstrate that today Western technological society is reveal-

ing much the same pattern of history as its medieval predecessor.

We are witnessing a sharp arrest in technological impetus. No more fundamental innovations are likely to be introduced to change the structure of our society. Only improvements in the field of pre-existing innovations are to be expected. Like every previous civilization we have reached a technological plateau....While I hope that the reader of *The Medieval Machine* will want to pursue his own comparisons, I must point out one alarming contrast. The economic depression that struck Europe in the fourteenth century was followed ultimately by economic and technological recovery. But the depression we have moved into will have no end. We can anticipate centuries of decline and exhaustion. There will be no further industrial revolution in the cycles of our Western civilization.

It would be easy to assume, given the widespread character of this discussion and the intensity of debate which it has occasioned, that the most pressing problem in contemporary education is the problem of scientific and technological education in its largest sense. That is to say the most important problem facing contemporary educators is that not only of teaching people how to be scientists and technologists but equally that of sensitizing everyone to the values, the methods, and the promise of science for our society.

It will not surprise you if I say that I think these are very important goals for our contemporary educational system. However, they will not, even if our schools succeed brilliantly in achieving them, solve the cultural difficulties and the social crisis confronting contemporary civilization. Indeed, I do not believe that either the schools or society as a whole will take science seriously until we have dealt with the larger cultural and educational crisis in which we find ourselves.

To see the problem of contemporary education as the problem of equipping the student for life in a scientific-technological

era is to misread the signs of the times. It is important to realize that some of the most important civilizational changes are those which are least visible. It is easy to observe the changes produced by science and technology in the society and the environment in which we live. It is very difficult to perceive those subtle changes in value which have such massive consequences for social behavior.

Let me be explicit. Far more important for its social consequences than the slackening of scientific and technological innovation has been the impact of the roller-coaster demographic waves which have struck Western society as a whole and American society in particular. These waves of population growth and population decline reflect much deeper and more hidden value structures and in the long run they have the most serious implications not only for education but for our society generally.

Let me cast the problem in its crudest and most obvious and visible terms so far as teachers are concerned. The radical decline in the birthrate in Western Europe and America has meant that the students who ten years ago filled the classrooms to overflowing are no longer there. In the course of a decade education has plummeted from growth to a depressed industry. Ten years ago when the zero population movement was getting under way, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then a professor in the School of Education at Harvard, observed to me that many of his students were wearing zero population buttons. "The poor young things," Moynihan said, "do not seem to realize that there is a striking conflict between their social enthusiasms and their vocational objectives."

Just how serious is the decline in population growth? What are its implications for education and what does it reveal about contemporary American values? I believe that this complex of problems is by far the most important one in terms of its implications for educational policy and practice in our society at the present time.

The facts are clear and their implica-

tions were clearly outlined in President Alan Pifer's annual report to the trustees of the Carnegie Corporation of New York.²

Here are the facts as Alan Pifer reports them:

Nowhere has change been more arresting than in the area of demography. Fifteen years of a very low birthrate, following two decades of unusually high fertility, and increased longevity have considerably distorted the age composition of the population. Ours has become an aging society, with relatively few children, a plethora of young adults, and mounting numbers of elderly.

To illustrate the situation more graphically, about 29 percent of today's population is under the age of 18, in contrast to 34 percent in 1970. Just since that year, the number of children under 15 has dropped by 6.4 million or 4.5 percent, while the 25-to-34 year old group has swelled by 7.9 million—a 32 percent gain, and the number of those 65 and older has increased by 3.4 million, a 17 percent gain. Annual births in that time have declined from 4.3 to 3.3 million, and the median age of the population has risen from 27.9 to 29.4 years. In its highest year, 1957, the fertility rate was 3.7; today it has shrunk to 1.799.

The startling fact is that only 38 percent of American households today actually have any children living in them. The overwhelming trend is toward later marriage and childbearing. Two decades ago, 28 percent of women in the 20 to 24 age group were single, as against 45 percent today. In the same period, the average age at which a woman has her first child has risen from 21.8 to 22.7. An increasing number of couples are choosing to have no children at all.³

If we look at European countries, whether on this side of or across the Iron Curtain, we find much the same circumstances. There has been a catastrophic decline in fertility. In Western Germany in the first half of the decade of the '60's the

annual number of births was about 1,000,000. Today the annual number of births is about 500,000 or ½ the number in the early '60's.⁴ West Germany is threatened with becoming, within a generation a gigantic oldfolks' home in which an angry minority of the young will be burdened with the support of a swollen and unproductive population of the old. In America the crisis in the Social Security system is just beginning and will be a chronic major political issue in the next three decades.

It is important to realize that this aging population will be increasingly conservative and its social policies will exaggerate the egoism and selfishness which initially produced these startling declines in fertility. The politics and the public education of the '90's will not be characterized by any high sense of the common good. Politically, in democratic societies, the support and care of the aged will compete directly with the nurturing and education of the young. The conflict between the generations will shift from one based upon psychological and cultural factors to one based on naked material interest.

Moreover, these superannuated societies will be remarkably resistant to change. The experience of the French Third Republic with its lack of economic and social dynamism is in great measure the result of stability in fertility. French social theorists of the 1880's were well aware of this fact but could do little to change it.

Educationally these facts mean in the first instance fewer jobs for teachers, lower status and reduced educational budgets. Of course, it might be argued that as the number of students declines society will spend more money per student and that the quality of education will improve. Anyone who has observed the fate of school bonding proposals or requests for increased school millage will realize how hollow are these hopes. Moreover, because of higher birthrate among minority groups an increasing proportion of the school age population will be members of disadvantaged minority groups. I wish to underline this fact for it has important implications

not only for education but for social peace in the United States.

Alan Pifer writes in summary:

Given the negative or indifferent climate of opinion toward children and youth today, any thought that they are suddenly going to be accorded the priority attention they deserve seems naively optimistic. This is especially true of children of disadvantaged backgrounds. As the conservative mood of the nation deepens, appeals for attention to the needs of young people will no doubt increasingly go unheard, and negative perceptions of them will probably thrive—if for no other reason than that these perceptions serve as a convenient rationalization for failure of conscience and compassion. Young people will probably continue to be seen as economic burdens rather than assets, their problems will go unrecognized or be subordinated to the claims of older groups, they will be given little chance to play a constructive role in the nation, and they will be regarded essentially as a threat to the comfort and security of adults.⁵

What is the fundamental motive for this threatening demographic disaster? The answer is not really hard to seek. It is an incapacity to visualize the future, an inability to postpone gratification, a value structure which emphasizes consumption rather than life; in short, egoism, selfishness, and greed. It is a reflection of the ethos of the "me" generation, that elephantiasis of the ego and the decline of conceptions of the common good which is currently afflicting Western society. The shape of the future in the advanced industrial societies is apt to be influenced less by the impact of science and technology than by the decision to forego consumption and give life to that first, second, third or fourth child. Yes, a "responsible" parenthood is important; a parenthood which takes into account the welfare of the child. It must, however, be responsible to the child and society and not simply to the whim, ease, and comfort of the parents. The return of a responsible

generosity in our society as a whole and not simply with respect to childbearing is one of the imperatives of our time.

The usual reasons offered by Americans for postponement of parenthood strike one as either hollow or rationalizations. In the Western world the catastrophic decline in fertility came not while the world was in the trough of a depression but while it was enjoying unparalleled prosperity and its effects were most marked in a generation which had enjoyed to the point of indulgence every material advantage and pleasure. The argument that births were to be reduced in order to spare ecological damage to an overcrowded world was equally hollow. Those groups and societies most affected were societies whose reproductive rates already constituted no threat. The problem of fertility was the problem of the third world and not that of advanced industrial societies. Moreover, the problem, even if it existed in advanced industrial societies was one which could be dealt with as it was dealt with in the past simply by reducing consumption. It is a striking fact that in the United States we spend more for pet food than the total budget of a number of third world states. No, all too often the reason adults so often reject responsible fertility is that they are fixated on the consumption of trivialities and the indulgence of their empty egos.

To say this is to place the demographic problem in the larger context of the values necessary to the achievement and preservation of the common good. In every society from the primitive tribal entity to the most complex pluralistic state education has served, in the first instance, to inculcate and transmit those values necessary to the continuity of ordered life in the society. There is a minimum consensus which is necessary for the survival of any society. When it is lost and the society is dissolved into a war of all against all, into congeries of warring factions, pressure groups, and value systems, the end is not far off. Pluralism is not incompatible with essential consensus. Civic agreement does not preclude diversity. The current effort in America to provide a value free education is not only

doomed to failure but is socially destructive.

Because values are an essential aspect of education the school must always be related in a fundamental way to community and must reflect the aspirations and ideals of both the particular and the larger community. It is for this reason that schools divorced from community must always prove problematical. Busing and the assault on the neighborhood school have done much to destroy the value orientation of American public education. The participation of the community in the management of the school and the formulation and direction of its educational program is not simply an old-fashioned idea; alongside the franchise and the jury system, it is the basis of our democratic society.

Perhaps the congruence of educational policy, community values, and participation is greatest in the church school. It is no doubt least in those private schools most characteristic of the "me" generation, schools in which the parent buys a totally value free but technically and methodologically sophisticated education for the socially alienated and isolated child. In these schools the school does not act as a bridge to society but as an institution designed to foster social introversion and alienation. These schools serve as convenient dodges which enable the child and the parent to escape the expression of values which include the individual in any entity larger than the ego involved self.

The school has an obligation to communicate and enforce those moral rules without which a society cannot function. The currently asserted notion that values are simply private prejudices is nonsense. Values are the language of social coherence and just as a society based on a multiplicity of private languages is impossible, so a society in which there is no minimum moral consensus cannot exist.

Value oriented education in the present generation is especially difficult precisely because of the shift in our society to an emphasis on individualism, privatism, the direct and immediate satisfaction of all desires and withdrawal from conceptions of the common

good and public obligation. The general decline in civic education in the public schools and the trivialization of history in social studies courses do not, it must be admitted, run counter to the national mood.

While an intelligent pride in ethnic origins is both enriching and historically valuable, Black history or some other variety of ethnic consciousness raising is no substitute for a broad survey of American history. Nor will a patronizing social studies unit on the Navajos of the Southwest serve as an adequate substitute for a systematic exploration of the triumphs and the tragedies of the American experience. The way to begin the exploration of the values held by the American consensus is in the systematic exploration of American history and American literature.

I can recall wondering why, after reading Parkman's *Oregon Trail* when I was 40 years old, I had not been given it to read in a history or literature class when I was in my teens. It did, indeed, contain the stuff of high adventure and it spoke to me directly of the meaning of the American experience. Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* similarly involves the student directly with the American past and the values which permeate that past experience. Finally, though I do not want to labor my argument, I can think of nothing which will take us closer to the bone of the meaning of the American experience than the novels of Willa Cather.

What I am suggesting is that the values which are so important to us as a people enabling us to survive and helping us to fulfill our humanity need not be taught as a cut and dried system, a kind of catechism of the American way. They may be directly and almost unconsciously appropriated from the living experience of the past which continues to speak to us from literature and history. How can we help but be moved and ennobled by reading the novels of Thomas Wolfe, Eugene O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!*, or Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*? It is the great merit of history and literature that in their pages values are concretized and they are always developed in that context of tensions and alternatives, success and failure which enables the student to see them as something other than gray abstractions.

It is important that courses in American history and literature be systematic rather than fragmentary and eclectic. Social studies are, in fact, a way of evading the problem of values by turning social analysis into a value free, non-developmental pastiche. Of course it is difficult to teach serious literature and serious history to students even at the college level. As Bruno Bettelheim has observed, no education is possible which is not purchased with pain. The idea that education must always pander to the student's ill developed notion of delight is simply unrealistic.

There is another and very practical way in which the civic virtues are taught in school. That is in the maintenance of decorum in the school and in athletics. What Rudyard Kipling called the "law of the pack" or "the rules of the game," are easily understood by students both in athletic participation and in the community in miniature which the school is. The popular method of reducing school budgets by cutting the athletic program does not cut frills, it cuts essential aspects of the educational program. In the last half century the psychology and symbolism of play have been thoroughly explored in such works as Jan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*⁶ and the close relationship between play, the athletic contest, the agonistic situation and what we take to be the "real world" is clearly established. Generally speaking, the world of festival is intimately related to the work-a-day world.

It is for this reason that participation in athletics should be made as inclusive as possible. Nonetheless, team sports and individual competition are important. To value the excellence, the grace, the self-discipline which we learn in athletic contests is no mean thing. To play in the fourth quarter, the third act, the seventh inning, the third movement, is, as the sociologist of religion Peter Berger reminds us, to step out of secular time where it is perhaps 7:00 p.m. and to step into the transcendent in which the measurement of secular time has been suspended. The world of value and the world of play are not easily separated. The beginnings of formal education in the Western world can be traced back to the Greek gymnasium and it is not accidental that the term "*Gymnasium*" is the generic

term for the German intermediate school.

But what of the hapless school board looking for areas in which to cut the school budget—surely art and music can safely be eliminated from the curriculum? Are art and music frills or are they an indispensable aspect of education?

The rational ordering of experience and the ability to recombine the elements of that experience into new and meaningful patterns is key to the educational process. But this is exactly what art is about. The imposition of order on the chaotic world of experience, the establishment of relationships and pattern, the identification of a *Gestalt*; this is the first and most fundamental step in creation by the child of a world of orderly relationships. The educational process generally is a quest for order, and the ordering patterns of art while intrinsic to its subject matter are not in fact different from the ordering structures of grammar and mathematics. The ordering of experience, chaotic, dangerous, frightening, which art undertakes, is an important step in the development of the harmonious personality. The history of Western thought clearly reveals the close relationship between the development of art and the development of science. The interesting thing which this history reveals is that the order of art anticipates the order of natural science. To teach students how to see, to teach them how to order their observation; to teach them to see into and beyond their experience; to help them to identify the elements of harmony and tension in that experience and to assist them in the creative act of rearranging the elements of that experience into a new coherent and more satisfactory order is, quite simply, to educate.

The first musical experience of the child is very similar to that of the child's effort at representational art. There is an important difference, however. We discover the order and structure of music as an abstract system; a system into which we are inducted through a music which someone else has created. Initially, except for the very gifted, the abstract beauty of musical relationships is far more inaccessible than those first apprehensions of

beauty in representational art. Still, the basic experience in music is the same experience as that in art and because of this, music, too, provides a most important educational experience.

But beyond this music lends itself as art does not to the exploration of the basis of community in a shared enterprise. To make music together in chorus, band or orchestra surely gives one an insight into the possibilities of reciprocal and cooperative behavior. There is no better symbol of the rational and voluntary organization of human energies and abilities in the performance of a task of infinite complexity than a symphony orchestra. Compared to a performance by a great orchestra such as the Chicago Symphony, most industrial enterprises appear to be child's play and the skill and organizing ability they entail of a rather low order when compared to the performance of an orchestra. Is it too far from the mark to assert that there may be a direct carry-over from the world of music to the world of rational and technological organization?

This discussion of the use of the limited resources available to school boards to finance programs in athletics, art and music raises the whole issue of the adequacy of educational resources in the United States. With welfare expenditures growing almost geometrically from decade to decade, the appeal for increased educational expenditures, particularly at the local level, is apt to fall on either deaf or hostile ears. Gray power is seemingly in favor of limitless expansion of federal expenditures for the old, but in local elections retired citizens are increasingly voting down increased expenditures for education even when these increases do not bring school budgets up to the level of adequacy. I wish to stress once more that the increasing age of a zero-growth population is already playing an important role in the allocation of tax money for education.

I am well aware that education is often an inefficient and wasteful enterprise. Most school boards act conscientiously and according to an informed conscience. It is, nonetheless, very difficult to deal effectively with the educational needs of large groups of young people of varying abilities,

ambitions, and vocational goals. It is for this reason that some form of the voucher system seems to me to be particularly desirable. It is for this reason that private education plays such a large role in the general educational structure in America.

Even so, it is well to remember that all programs of social expenditure are wasteful and that educational programs are perhaps the least wasteful of the whole range of institutions and expenditures in the field of social amelioration. Education alone, of all these programs, seeks to do something about the future rather than repair past mistakes or buy off with a political bribe the poor and the aged. If social expenditures are to be cut in the name of fiscal sanity, surely it is preferable to cut those expenses which represent the past than those expenses which are devoted to the preparation of the future. We Americans must regain the insight we once had that education is the key to national survival and national greatness. When the hand has lost its cunning for a want of proper training and the mind has lost its keenness because we have preferred a materialist consumers' paradise to a nation characterized by intellectual and moral greatness, we shall realize how thoroughly we have short-changed ourselves and our children.

What of curricular content? Is there a special set of courses needed for the decade of the 1980's? Have technological developments such as the pocket computer and the pocket translator made certain courses obsolete? The fact is that the basic skills never become obsolete. Technology is always added on to the basic skills of reading, writing and computation. They are never substitutes or replacements. A decade ago Marshall McLuhan suggested that in the "world village" television would replace reading and the printed word. A decade ago it was confidently asserted that information retrieval systems would replace the book and libraries. Today it is quite clear that such is not now and never will be the case. These electronic utopias are outmoded already although the loose talk and loose thinking to which they gave rise did a good deal of harm.

The most important things which elementary and secondary schools can teach are the

basic skills of reading, writing and computation. It simply is not true that the current generation of entering college students is, as we are so often told, "the brightest and the best prepared generation" ever. Inadequate training characterizes increasing numbers of college freshmen, to say nothing of those who do not go on to college, who do not even complete high school. Perhaps it is this group who are most injured by elementary and secondary education which does not enable them to live and work effectively and in a way which will fulfill their humanity.

In a recent state bar examination in my home state of Michigan, over one third of the examinees who had graduated from Law School of the University of Michigan failed the examination because, as the chairman of the examiners observed, the examinees simply "did not know how to read and write." I hasten to add that examinees from other Michigan Law Schools had even higher rates of failure. The University of Michigan is instituting an elaborate testing and remedial writing program for incoming freshmen. These students are bright but often incompetent. They cannot read well, they cannot write and they often have little or no training in mathematics. They do not go on to careers in science and technology because they do not have the minimal skills necessary to university training in science and engineering.

Nor do we in elementary and secondary education inculcate a habit of rational analysis. We tend to emphasize that the solution to problems is a matter of taste, or feeling, and that sincerity counts as much as or more than verifiable information, the correct answer or a rational analytical method of problem solving. Perhaps the greatest enemy of science education is the growing irrationalism of our society; an irrationalism which is reflected in our educational system. In part this irrationalism is the consequence of the relativization of all values and attitudes. Increasingly large segments of our society, intellectuals among them, have come to believe that every mode of thought from the magical to the scientific, every life style, every dialect no matter how imprecise and incapable it is of expressing nuanced thought, that every attitude no matter how idiosyncratic, is equally

valuable and legitimate so long as it is held with passionate conviction and sincerity. This attitude is a perversion of the democratic ethos; an ethos which demands scrutiny of the supposed facts, rational analysis and testing and a willingness to abandon the false and the failed no matter how passionately we are attached to these ideas. Not only are science and technology at stake in the struggle with the irrationalism of our times but democratic government itself is in danger.

The most important single achievement of elementary and secondary education is a cultivated literacy. To read and to write with ease, discernment and clarity is the greatest achievement an educational system is capable of giving a student. If this ability in the native tongue is a *sine qua non*, the skillful use of a second language is increasingly necessary. How does it happen that in an historical era in which United States obligations have become world wide the ability to meet those obligations through the use of foreign languages has steadily declined? Less than 10% of the current college population now take foreign language courses and the number has been steadily dropping. In fact, in the past eleven years the number of college students taking language courses has dropped by 21%. Foreign language instruction in the decade into which we are moving is a matter of national importance equal to that of instruction in science and mathematics. We cannot afford the insularity of a population which speaks its native language poorly and other languages not at all. It is urgent that we have effective foreign language instruction from the first years of elementary education through high school. It is a matter of great importance that colleges and universities restore the foreign language requirement.

Finally, let me say a few words concerning both the competency and the idealism of teachers. Teachers ought to welcome competency tests. In an athletic contest the idea is to win. Every competition is a kind of competency test. Why do we find the agonistic situation so attractive in athletics and yet are so opposed to it in education?

Licensing tests are quite common in the professions. Shall we insist that a certified public accountant take a competency test and argue that teachers are above such things? We are entrusting lives and the collective future to teachers. Is it not important that we ascertain that teachers are in fact competent in the fields in which they teach?

Teachers, if they are to regain the status and esteem which they once held in American life, must show an increasing amount of idealism and community involvement. The protection of the self-interests of the teacher through unionization is all well and good, but it is not a substitute for

selfless commitment and disinterested service. We all know what I am talking about, for we have all had great and splendid teachers; women and men who gladly and generously taught. Indeed, many of us are teachers because of the influence of such a person. Today most of us have forgotten the specific content of the courses which these men and women taught but we have not forgotten their unselfishness and their nobility of character. It is easy to sentimentalize this difficult matter, but we all ought to realize that the role of the teacher is a privileged role and that all of us teach a great deal more than the specific content of our courses.

¹Jean Gimpel, *The Medieval Machine: The Industrial Revolution of the Middle Ages* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1976), pp. x-xi.
²Alan Pifer, *Perceptions of Childhood and Youth*, Annual Report of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, 437 Madison Avenue, New York 10022, 1978.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 3-4. ⁴Dr. Norbert Walter, "Mit weniger Staat ins nächste Jahrtausend," in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2. Juni, 1979, No. 127, p. 15. ⁵Alan Pifer, *Carnegie Annual Report, 1978*, p. 10. ⁶Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London, 1949).