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# **The Critical Role of Motive in the American Educational Pattern**

by

Calvin L. Kiah

## **Goals Must Reflect Cultural Values**

Unique goals require unique devices if they are to be adequately achieved.

In the welter of confusion which characterizes present day existence, there is little wonder that our educational efforts should be affected thereby. It is in just such a time as this, however, that cultural organizations need to redouble their resistance to the distractions which invariably flow from the immediate and hew to the persistent fundamental goals which decisions, reached in saner moments, have indicated lead to the most satisfying results when viewed against a backdrop of our most cherished cultural values.

There are few, if any, among us who are unaware of the great conflict presently being waged between East and West. The influence of conflict is discernible in every aspect of our lives, and reaction to it runs the gamut from indifference to panic. Mature thinking, though, would be found at neither extreme. Action taken by the school should be mature action. Action taken by the school should in no way reflect abandonment of the "democratic dream." This, then, is our most fundamental cultural value, our most cherished ideal. Procedure designed for progress should ever propel us in the direction of its realization.

## **Democracy Achieved Democratically**

When one reflects upon the profusion of comments evaluative of the work of the school in our society, a great deal of the comment is found to be negative, holding the school responsible for the present crisis and counseling that we begin immediately an overhauling job, the end result of which would be an institution unrecognizable by present standards.

Now, the school should, of course, be ever alert to the need for change. The plea here is simply that any efforts at change be conceived and executed within the framework of our cultural ideals. Failure to keep such a rationale to the fore can produce a condition which bids fair to do violence to the "dream" rather than promote it. It is even possible that we may achieve our enemy's goals for them without their even setting foot on our shores.

Democratic goals must be achieved by democratic means. Democracy may not be achieved autocratically, any more than autocracy may be achieved democratically. One may succeed in leading humans

through a lip-service kind of instruction about democracy in an autocratic manner. But the goal of democratically oriented humans may not be realized in this fashion.

## **The School's Great Opportunity**

In no other culture is the framework for the achievement of human dignity, which is the essence of the democratic ideal, so magnificently afforded. What a pity it would be if future historians should record that we failed, by default, to cash in on our rich potential.

The present danger as seen from this vantage point lies not in the criticism and denunciation to which the school is subjected. Rather is it our reaction to the critics. For it is we upon whom rests the responsibility for planning the future course of the school.

Many among those who claim dissatisfaction with the school express disapproval with any course of action in the school which is not structured to the pattern which, we are told, produced Sputnik I. They tell us that our system of free, universal, public education, allowing for a maximum of freedom of choice, is a luxury which has always been of dubious value. In a time such as the present it steers a course toward disaster. Opinion of the general public of this nature is understandable when one considers that judgments by persons not intimately familiar with the professional evolution of the school in our culture will tend to be predicated upon a foundation akin to that which characterized their own educational experience.

The history of our educational effort reveals that in its origin the purposes and goals as transplanted to these shores tended to produce a kind of school which supported an authoritarian social system. Action within the school, then, tended to conform to an authoritarian mold. Within the relatively recent past, professional understandings emerged to the effect that, if the school in our culture is to serve its most vital function, attention must be focused upon the creation of a unique framework capable of producing the kind of citizens who can live effectively in the unique kind of society which has evolved here. The present century has witnessed a tremendous growth in professional understandings which, if actively applied, can do much to bring into being a uniquely American school. This school not only will produce the unique citizen for this unique society but its products will compete effectively with their counterpart from other cultural groups within the present world order.

## **Professional and Lay Resistance to Change**

To implement these professional understandings, a variety of techniques and devices have been created and employed in the school during this period. Reaction to these efforts has varied within and without the profession. As noted earlier, the public, oriented by standards of the past, often takes a dim view of changes in traditionally established patterns. Within the profession itself there is also a considerable tendency to distrust deviational procedures and practices.

A summation of dominant opinion as observed by the writer is to the effect that in spite of the denunciation of much of the modern developments in educational procedure, it would be difficult to make a true evaluation of the effectiveness of the modern approach as there has been, as yet, too little actual application of the principles as developed by modern educational research. Where conscientiously employed, however, evidence generally shows favorable results. Of course, a favorable evaluation might require a revision of what one conceives to be the job of the school.

Specific illustrations might serve to further clarify this point. A hue and cry is invariably heard when suggestions are made regarding a change in promotion procedures. In the opinion of a large segment of the public, social promotion has well nigh been relegated to the status of an epithet. This is true both within and without the profession. Yet, when one considers the character of the American school enrollment, social, economic, and general cultural conditions affecting the pupil in the American school, it is difficult to conceive that our traditional promotion patterns can effectively serve in this unique school.

The device of cooperative planning between teacher and pupil likewise is condemned as soft pedagogy, featherbedding, and a watering down of educational standards. The objectors to this approach contend that, since that which is to be learned is not known by the pupil, it is absurd to expect him to be able to plan to learn it. Here again, if the arts and techniques of decision making which inhere in the democratic process are to be developed by the American citizen, it would seem that a wide range of experiences would need to be provided for him to practice realistic decision making.

A final illustration concerns a complex of devices, techniques, approaches, characteristics which have edged their way, in varying degree, into the American education pattern. As a total force, these features account for the general indictment so often heard voiced that there is too little rigor, too much laxity, too many "snap" courses, too much pupil choice in the present American school. These same critics counsel that what we need is to tighten our requirements, desist from our elective system, set up hard and fast curricula, and make sure that pupils coming through our schools meet established, pre-conceived standards before achieving promotion to the next stage. This school of thought looks admiringly at education systems in competing cultures which possess such characteristics and use the seeming immediate, overt, and spectacular successes they achieve as evidence that we are on the wrong track. Such critics, albeit well meaning, are none the less unaware that abandonment of democratic processes is abandonment of democracy itself.

Would it not seem a more rational approach to assess our practices against the backdrop of our national values and to revise present practices in light of our findings? It would seem that we would need to decide first whether what we observe of our own performance is really bad, or, whether the trouble could be that the results which we have expected and which might be excellent in an authoritarian system are actually excellent when evaluated in terms of democratic values.

## Teachers for Democratic Schools

In any event, assessment of performance is of continuing necessity in a democracy. Hence, assessment is strongly urged. Individuals or groups engaging in evaluation or assessment efforts will undoubtedly find a need for strengthening the work of the school. Criticism leveled at the modern American school often labels modern education anti-intellectual. This school of thought sees the changed nature of the school as involving a change in attitude toward and diminished respect for learned activity. This is, of course, a misunderstanding on the part of those who make such an indictment. Advocates of the modern approach to education hold that their motivation springs from a very serious concern for the intellectual. The professional educator conceives that the typical pupil who comes to the typical American school is a new kind of learner. The traditional concept of teacher and learner sees the learner as a seeker for the enlightenment which he can secure only by "sitting at the feet" of the learned professor. Implicit in this arrangement was a learner seeking to learn. Volition on the part of the learner to learn was involved. Under our system, we have come to consider that national interests are involved in an intelligent public. We are so committed to this conviction that we have made it compulsory that all citizens attend the public schools. It is easily seen that compulsory attendance requiring everyone to attend would result in a different type pupil, one in whom existed no desire for what the school offered.

All the more reason, says the authoritarian, to tighten the screws and stand guard upon our educational battlements to make sure our standards are not lowered. The crucial issue at this point, though, is the inescapable fact that maximally desirable learning situations do not exist except as the element of the learner as a seeker of learning is present. This simple, though basic, fact lies at the heart of the modern approach to instruction in the modern American school. In this framework a new dimension is added to the teacher-concept. *The teacher, in the American pattern, has become one who is skilled in the art of stimulating within the learner a desire to learn.* This is added to his traditional image of one who is a master of his subject field.

This new obligation is seen as the cornerstone of the educational structure, the hallmark of the profession in a democratic system. Acquisition of this skill by one who has had extensive exposure to educative experiences distinguishes him from others whose length of exposure may be equivalent in point of years spent in school. A teacher of science, then, becomes one who teaches science, because he possesses high quality skills in begetting learning, not because he did not have the ability to build bridges, or heal the sick; the teacher of the social sciences teaches, because, in addition to having acquired mastery of the content of his field, he has developed a fine facility for organizing instructional experiences so that learners become maximally proficient as social beings in their society. He teaches the social sciences, because its rewards in terms of importance in our social scheme are such as to impress him with the essential importance of teaching as an entity in its own right, not because he was a reject

from the diplomatic service or the legal profession. The teacher's only justification for existence is to beget learning. In our system this means developing skill in stimulating the learner to develop understandings concerning what is to be learned. The surface has hardly been scratched in this area. If the school is to be improved in our system—as it should most certainly be—we must improve in our ability to stimulate learners to engage in intellectual activity. Increased proficiency in this ability will be seen in the increased frequency at which learners are observed to involve themselves in learning activity. It is believed that, far from degenerating into a nation of intellectual poverty, wholehearted acceptance and prosecution of this rationale will result in a far greater wealth of intellectual resources among our population than in the populations whose systems revolve about authoritarian values.

Recognition of this fact has always characterized the performance of excellent teachers. In a system such as ours, it is an indispensable quality. Professional education for teacher preparation should give much attention to developing this skill in pre-service persons. Inservice programs should be devoted to it. There is no substitute for the sensing of a motive by the learner for what is to be learned. Repressive requirements and teacher imposed tasks followed by a meticulous, religious accounting by the pupils for the accuracy of their assignment do not comport with a social system which places supreme value upon individual initiative and freedom of choice. It is folly to declare that ours is a democracy when the procedures employed by our cultural institutions can produce citizens who can perform only in an authoritarian setting. If we are to produce citizens who are able to perform satisfactorily in a democratic social order, we must translate democratic principles into institutional procedure. In the school this means the development of instructors who recognize the critical role of motive in a school which must serve a democratic social order.