Richard L. Hart

Must Schools Be Neutral?

TODAY, as perhaps never before in our history, sociological and political pressures are being exerted upon the public schools in most parts of our country. Solutions to all types of problems in which the school finds itself as the key social agency involved are reported daily in the local and national press; yet these solutions are almost invariably offered by persons who represent a company, corporation, bureau or agency other than the school. When the question is raised as to why the school, through its appointed leaders, does not assume a more active role in recommending solutions to the problem, the public is often given the answer that, "The schools must remain neutral."

This type of response poses at least two fundamental questions: "Is it really possible to be *neutral* in our schools?" and "Should educational leaders even attempt to remain as nearly neutral as possible in decisions which affect the educational development of students?"

It is my contention that it is not now possible to be neutral, nor has a policy of neutrality been followed in the past. Decisions which call for value judgments are made almost daily by most administrators and teachers:

Should "modern math" be offered in substitution for the more traditional method of teaching mathematics?

Should economics be included in the course of study as a separate subject, or should certain economic principles be included in an integrated social studies pattern?

Which textbooks should be used throughout the school?

What about the structural linguistics approach to the teaching of grammar?

How many basketball games should be included in the season's schedule?

The concept of absolute neutrality would seem to be destroyed each time a decision is made in regard to questions such as these.

It is true, of course, that these questions are concerned with problems relatively free from sociological implications. However, if we are willing to take positions on questions such as these, should we be less willing to assume the leadership necessary to solve political or sociological problems which probably have even greater educational implications for our students?

Responsibility for Involvement

If we can accept a point of view expressed by John Dewey over a quarter of a century ago, we cannot escape the

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responsibility for involvement: ". . . all social organizations get their significance from their promise to enhance the individual: to guarantee the sacredness of his person, to safeguard his rights, to extend his opportunities." [1]

It is interesting to speculate as to possible solutions Dewey might have suggested to today's critical educational problem of *de facto* segregation—an area in which many school people are suggesting neutrality as the proper position for the schools. This point of view obviously places the school in the position of doing only that which is *required* by law. How refreshing it would be to hear (emanating from the administrative offices of a school system) of a truly constructive and creative suggestion which would employ methods which are *permitted* by law; yet with this type of action we would lose our neutrality!

Thus far we have examined the concept of neutrality from a broad, system-wide point of view. There is an additional aspect of the educational picture which is critically affected by a position of neutrality within our schools, perhaps an even more vital aspect. It is difficult to imagine the type of material which could be presented or discussed in any classroom of the school if the teacher is required to accept the impossible role of intellectual neutral.

It should be pointed out that we are not speaking of objectivity but of neutrality. Objectivity in the classroom is difficult; neutrality is impossible. As John Childs explained in *Education and Morals:*

> The right to inquire and to analyze are basic rights, but candor demands that we point out that all inquiry into a culture has its standards of importance and relevance, and that all analysis necessarily involves emphasis. Indeed, . . . *analysis is emphasis.*
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> . . . Parents must recognize that no educational discussion, either by textbook or teacher, can ever be free from historic and social presuppositions. Whatever objectivity in teaching may mean, it cannot mean the absence of values and a point of view. These are operative in each and every effort to introduce the young to our ways of living.[2]

Which History?

How can we deal with a subject such as United States history from a neutral point of view? Indeed, is it desirable for teachers to strain for neutrality in some areas? How do we deal with the contradictory points of view regarding most major events in American history? We are told to accept the word of the historian; yet which historian's account is the reliable, accurate, neutral account?

A recurring point in "A Conference on the American Heritage" which was held at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee in October 1963, was that even among reputable historians attempting to be objective, there is certain to be great diversity of interpretation. Even the choice of facts to be included in textbooks will vary from writer to writer. Is it not true, then, that a teacher's neutrality is in question when he makes the selection of a textbook or textbooks?

Again, we return to the point that neutrality within the schools is an impossibility; and there are, I hope, few classroom teachers who would see the neutral position as a virtue even if it were possible to attain. Most teachers would agree

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[1] John Dewey. "Education and Social Change." *The Social Frontier,* May 1937, p. 238.

[2] From: *Education and Morals* by John L. Childs. Copyright, 1950, Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Appleton-Century-Crofts.

years of life, so are a responsibility of the home. Yet the school can do much to expand, keep flexible, these guidelines; to enrich, deepen the experiences out of which they were formed and to redirect them by a more cooperative human process. To do this the emphasis in the school must shift from fixed, fragmented pieces of cultural knowledge to a life process of growing, developing, learning.

With deep understanding of the experiments in this area conducted between World Wars I and II, Dr. Crosby has enriched both the earlier basic concepts and their related practices. Teachers and pupils through cooperative interaction plan their program of activities, decide how to put these plans into action and evaluate their learnings. The old dichotomy of subject versus child-centered curricula is avoided, for the focus is on the process of human relations.

To raise the level of human relations in classrooms from an authoritarian, even though frequently benevolent, to a realistic cooperative atmosphere, the whole program of the school must be changed. Not only must there be new rules of the game, there must be teachers who understand, accept and practice these rules. Yet parents and educators want children to learn the so-called expanded 3 R's usually organized as subjects and taught under the old rules. So the book has a section of 200 pages in which teachers are helped to meet these reading, writing and other usual requirements through the need-experiences of children.

This book should be extremely valuable to educators who wish to take both a forward look and some sound steps in that direction. The many illustrations of better practices are sometimes boring since they are descriptive rather than analytical, for they deal too much with what the teacher does and not enough with the underlying meanings and process.

Anyone studying these three books should, it seems to this reviewer, conclude that the present unsettled and unsatisfactory conditions in the world are caused by people who have little empathy, understanding, acceptance of each other in spite of these many centuries of so-called civilization. And only these same people with this ineffective culture within them can make conditions better. A difficult but surmountable task.

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with Bertrand Russell that, "The kind of virtue that can be produced by guarded ignorance is frail and fails at the first touch of reality." [3]

Although it is probable that teachers in every generation have felt that their era represented the most crucial period in civilization, it cannot be disputed that our time is a perilous one and that our hope today is for a clear-thinking world citizenry which respects the rights of mankind. It seems apparent, then, that we should not do violence to the right and responsibility of individuals to examine points of view which are popular or unpopular, accepted by the majority or by only a minority.

Mankind can be rescued from the effects of closed-mindedness by training in open-mindedness.[4]

[3] Bertrand Russell. *Unpopular Essays.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950. p. 120.

[4] Ashley Montagu. *Education and Human Relations.* New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1958. p. 188.