Correspondent: Beecher H. Harris

The System and the Program

Redding, California

Dear Editor:

May I suggest that your writers—and your readers—in their criticisms of our public elementary schools observe the distinction between the *system* and the *program*. The system is one thing, the program is a different thing. There is no necessary relationship between them. The system does not have to be implemented by any particular kind of program. One might do as well as another. We could have a program totally different from the current program and still maintain the integrity of the system.

Writers could sharpen their own thinking and writing and relieve considerable confusion in the minds of their readers if they would make clear whether they were discussing the system or the program. No writers, to my knowledge, recognize or make the distinction. They seem to identify the system and the program as one and the same thing. Some of them (see, for example, Graham's article, May 1970 [1]), disillusioned with the program and unable to think of an alternative, would discard the "public schools," meaning the system as well as the program.

A school system has to do with the source and kind of support and control and with availability. Our system is a public system—free, tax-supported, state- and locally-controlled, open to all the children of all the people. A school program comprises the curriculum, the organization, the administrative and instructional practices within the system. Our program, at present and historically, is a logical expression of a certain philosophy. This philosophy holds that education in the elementary school consists of academic content, of content compartmentalized into subjects. The subjects are adult-conceived. They have no natural relationship to children's interests or understanding. They are adult-imposed, adult-controlled, and adult-administered. Teachers must teach the subjects and children must learn them.

This concept of education has generated all other aspects of the program past: textbooks, workbooks, grades, marks, report cards, promotions and non-promotions, homework, rewards, punishments, departmentalization, testing, grouping, labeling, rejecting—and present: team teaching, individualization, packages, instructional objectives, inquiry, simulation, contract performance, accountability, early instruction. The concept has always been all-controlling. It is clearly even more so today. No authors of innovation in our history, as far as I am aware, have even questioned the validity of the concept or have even considered the possibility of an alternative. The thought seems not to have entered their minds. None

[1] Grace Graham. "Can the Public School Survive Another Ten Years?" *Educational Leadership* 27 (8): 800-803; May 1970.

have contemplated the abandonment of the concept in any degree. All of them have done nothing more than apply it in a different guise. Some have changed the form. None have changed the substance. Every innovation today seems to me to be even more anti-child than the one before it.

The program seems destined to perpetuity. Over the years and recently in increasing crescendo the program has prompted unanswerable criticism. Yet it goes on and on, immutable, eternal—and it will go on and on until the concept changes. And the results decried by the critics will go on and on.

We *do* need to continue criticizing the program or, more constructively, studying it and trying to relieve its most damaging consequences to children and to society. In the meantime, we must try to develop a different concept and hence a different program.[2] And in the meantime, we must maintain the distinction between the system and the program. We must maintain the distinction not only because we must focus discussion, but also because we must save and strengthen the system. If we lose the system, we lose all.

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[2] I am trying to do this right now. I am describing a different concept and detailing a complete program to implement it. My proposal will be book-length. I hope, not very optimistically, to find a publisher.

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