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## *The School Experience*

*Where attainable knowledge could have changed the issue,  
ignorance has the guilt of vice.*

(A. N. Whitehead.)

*And nature has no use for the plea that one "did not know."  
Not knowing acts like guilt.*

(C. G. Jung.)

When we make laws which compel our children to go to school we assume collectively an awesome responsibility. For a period of some ten years, with minor variations from country to country, the children are conscripts; and their youth does nothing to alter the seriousness of this fact. Nor is it altered by the intention, however genuine, that the school experience should be "for their good."

I am not among those who advocate what has come to be known as "deschooling society." I believe that we need schools—and never more than now. But the justification of a long enforced period of national service is not something we can treat lightly. The question that must be asked, and considered seriously, and reconsidered as knowledge and circumstances change, is whether the school experience really is

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good for our children—as good as we could make it. And this, of course, amounts to the same thing as asking whether it really is good for the society that will come into being when the present one is gone.

We are faced now with something of a puzzle. In the first few years at school all appears to go very well. The children seem eager, lively, happy. There is commonly an atmosphere of spontaneity in which they are encouraged to explore and discover and create. There is much concern, on the part of the teachers, with high educational ideals. These things tend to be true even in parts of the community which are far from being socially privileged in other ways. However, when we consider what has happened by the time the children reach adolescence, we are forced to recognize that the promise of the early years frequently remains unfulfilled. Large numbers leave school with the bitter taste of defeat in them, not having mastered even moderately well those basic skills which society demands, much less having become people who rejoice in the exercise of creative intelligence.

The problem then is to understand how something that begins so well can often end so badly. And inevitably, faced with this problem, people turn to wondering whether schooling really does begin as well as it seems to do or whether the brightness of the early years carries within itself the shadow of the darkness that is to come.

Thus there is now strong pressure, from the public and from many educators, for change at the lower end of the system. A demand that education should go "back to basics" is being widely made, and there is real danger that the pressure might lead to change that would be gravely retrogressive.

We must not go back, for we have nothing good enough to go back to. The old ways of teaching "the basics" are certainly not practices to which we should return, and in trying to restore them we would merely be throwing away what we have

gained. Yet the "back to basics" motto expresses a justified sense that in certain crucial respects we are still not doing well enough. For the central problem remains. There is no denying that, in spite of the enlightened concern of many of our primary schools with happiness, schooling somehow or other still turns into a distinctly unhappy experience for many of our children. From it large numbers of them emerge ill-equipped for life in our society and inescapably aware of it. So then either they regard themselves as stupid for failing or else, in an understandable effort to defend against this admission, they regard the activities at which they have failed as stupid. In either event they want no more of these things. How can we justify a long period of national service which ends like that?

For the teachers of unhappy children the school experience is generally unhappy too. For them, however, it is the decision that the pupils are stupid which is the defensive one. They hardly have the option of deciding that the things they teach are stupid, for how then could they justify teaching them? And the only other possibility may seem to be the decision that *they* are the failures.

For society as a whole—or at least that part of society which controls the setting and maintaining of the educational objectives—there are two possible defensive conclusions that may be drawn: either that large numbers of children are indeed irredeemably stupid and must just be written off, or that large numbers of teachers are not doing their jobs properly.

Where does the truth of the matter lie?

The first thing to recognize, in this generally uncomfortable situation, is the extreme difficulty—and in the context of human evolution the extreme novelty—of the educational enterprise which modern Western cultures have taken upon themselves. We need not be too defensive about not yet having managed it well. I shall be arguing later in this book that some

of the skills which we value most highly in our educational system are thoroughly alien to the spontaneous modes of functioning of the human mind. And I shall be arguing that the real nature of the problem of developing these skills has not been understood well enough and widely enough.

Defensive postures are usually the enemies of effective action—but so of course is the complacency which can easily replace them if they are abandoned. In the present situation, complacency is disastrous. If we are going to persist in our educational enterprise it is urgent that we learn to do it better. Whatever progress we have made, the present levels of human distress and wasted effort are still too high to bear.

The solution of a problem—any problem—consists in discovering how to transform an existing state of affairs into a desired one that has not yet come into being. Now in order to do this effectively one clearly needs not only a good idea of the desired end state but a good understanding of the features of the starting point. Thus teachers need to be clear not only about what they would like children to become under their guidance but about what children are actually like when the process is begun.

During the past few years, research has yielded much new evidence about the basic skills of thought and language which children already possess when they come to school. It is time for us to reconsider some widely held beliefs, and to ask what the revision of them implies.