

Toward Some Agreements at Geneva

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Consider this recipe from the international cookbook.

Take nine philosophers and educators from the Western industrialized countries, the Eastern European socialist area, and the Third World. Season with a half dozen leaders of an international organization. Place them all in a conference room for a week. Instruct them to recommend aims and goals for education. Stir steadily until well mixed. What do you get?

Apparently the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization wanted to find out. In June, 1975 I was invited to Geneva as the American participant in a panel dealing with educational goals and theories.

My fellow panelists were 1) the president of the Commission on International Affairs of the Ministry of Education and Culture of Brazil; 2) the ambassador to Unesco from Togo; 3) the director of the Institute of Advanced Studies from India; 4) the chairman of the Department of Philosophy of the University of Dakar, Senegal; 5) a professor of philosophy from Warsaw, Poland; 6) an internationally known scholar-activist (Paulo Freire, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*); 7) a leader in comparative education from the University of London Institute of Education; and 8) the director of a magazine of ideas, *Esprit*, from France. Since we are categorizing, call me 9) a professor writer from the United States. Our chairman was a philosopher from Lebanon, who is presently the director of the Division of Philosophy of Unesco, which organized the meeting jointly with Unesco's International Bureau of Education. With him were six Unesco specialists who listened, recorded, and facilitated, and who occasionally participated. We were to attempt to clarify our agreements and disagreements on the goals and aims of education, then make recommendations for future studies in educational theory by Unesco--all within a week.

If you are wondering what could possibly emerge from such a heady mix, you are not alone. I doubted, too.

For me, there were some memorable highlights. I shall not soon forget the quiet intensity of the Indian scholar as he argued that the colonial pattern of education was being perpetuated in newly independent Third World countries by a native political elite, mostly Western-educated and Western-oriented. New experimental institutions were being allowed to wither as native educational leaders, though supposedly emancipated, stayed faithful in practice to the tradition of the Oxfords, Cambridges, and Sorbonnes.

Nor shall I soon forget the shock to my stereotypes when the professor from Communist Poland supported resolving the age-old conflict between education for the individual and

education for society. I had anticipated from him an exclusive emphasis on education for society, Marxist version, and a subordination of the role of the individual. But how could I quarrel with a man who believed, as I did, that we live in order to learn; that learning means to retain and develop one's curiosity concerning reality, to widen one's intellectual and emotional horizons, to enrich one's inner life and develop one's creative potential that education must encourage the ability to appreciate the variety of values which life has to offer, must foster involvement, must teach people to express themselves'?

I don't know how the final reports, now being prepared, will read. But the most important final report of any conference is the report you make to yourself. So this is what I heard participants agreeing upon at Geneva:

In today's world, the learner must move away from the passive role characteristic of rigid formal education into an increasingly active role. (But the French participant feared that the teacher's role would be diminished, while the American was confident it would be increased.) The lifelong learning in which we believe should be differentiated from traditional educational practices; it should be related to the improvement of society and the development of individual personalities.

Outdated knowledge must be discarded. Learners should be helped to adapt to change. Educators should work toward unifying knowledge and achieving interdisciplinary learning even while disciplinary knowledge grows.

Schools and schooling should not be discarded (à la Illich) but should be improved in a learning society. Rather than deschool society, we need to "deschool the schools" (a remarkably perceptive phrase), i.e., improve them, reconstruct their programs, and make them serve mankind. Additional social institutions also play a role in developing the education and social participation of people in a learning society; the potential of these institutions should be utilized (which is what the American high school reformers of the mid-70s are saying).

Dichotomies in education--e.g., intellectual versus manual and theory versus practice--are harmful to human personality and the improvement of society (echoes of John Dewey).

It is not enough to refer to society in the abstract. Social structures and distributions of power in specific societies have an important bearing on education. (This was strongly emphasized by the Marxists.)

The individual personality, the improvement of society, the development of values, and the utilization of knowledge are each important in education today (a theme frequently voiced by the American participant).

Differences? Yes--on the value--of memorization, on the nature of authority, on the relation of ideas to action, among others.

Adjournment time grew near. The "philosophers," whatever their ideological or national origins, continued to rejoice in the exchange of philosophic views, phrased abstractly. The "practitioners" itched to state recommendations for Unesco studies, phrased concretely. (The American pragmatist especially itched.) So we broke into committees, including one which made a dozen recommendations for future Unesco studies in educational theory. At meeting's end, we were tired yet exhilarated. We looked at each other with increased mutual respect. We had found that, despite our wide cultural and experiential differences, we could make a beginning on some agreements in education. And in this fragmented and disunited world, that seems to me to be worth calling to your attention.

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