

notes on education

No. 4/March 1974

Further Notes

Toward a Theory of Education

By Lawrence A. Cremin

*What are the implications
of a broadened definition of
education—as any deliberate
effort to transmit, evoke, or
acquire knowledge, values, skills,
attitudes, and sensibilities?*

I

Once one defines education as the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit or evoke knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, and sensibilities, one is immediately aware of the multiplicity of institutions that educate—families and churches, schools and colleges, museums and libraries, summer camps and settlement houses. Whether consciously or not, such institutions tend at any given time to relate to one another in what might be called configurations of education. Each of the institutions within a configuration interacts with the others and with the larger society that sustains it and is in turn affected by it. Configurations of education also interact, as configurations, with the larger society that sustains them and is in turn affected by them.



The relationships among the institutions that constitute a configuration of education may be political, pedagogical, and personal. There may be overlapping lines of support and control—one thinks of the hold of Protestant missionary organizations on the families, churches, and schools of Ohio Valley towns during the nineteenth century, or of the interlocking influence of a genteel upper class on the museums, libraries, and scientific societies of eastern seaboard cities during the twentieth. Or, there may be substantial pedagogical influence extending from one institution to another within a configuration—consider, for example, the spread of the revivalist exhortatory style from churches to families, schools, and colleges during the nineteenth century, or of the rapid-fire commercial style from *Sesame Street* to kindergartens and day-care centers during the twentieth. Or, indeed, there may be decisive personal influence deriving from the same people moving as teachers or students through more than one institution—such has always been the case with the configurations of education maintained by small sectarian communities like the Mennonites, the Hasidic Jews, or the Black Muslims.



The relationships among the institutions constituting a configuration of education may be complementary or contradictory, consonant or dissonant. Thus, for example, church and school may be subject to similar sources of control but may end up competing vigorously for funds and programs—one perceives the problem in the effort of present-day Roman Catholic theorists (and budgeters) to distinguish pastoral from educative functions in working out policies regarding parochial schools. Or they may operate in a near-perfect complementarity in which the church deals with values and the school deals with knowledge and each recognizes the role of the other—such was often the case with the Protestant church and the public school in the small towns of trans-Allegheny America during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (one need only compare the publications of the American Tract Society with the McGuffey readers).

This article continues a discussion begun under the title "Notes Toward a Theory of Education" in the June 1973 issue of this publication.

Or, to take another example, family and school may share a mutual concern for the child's intellectual development, but the teacher may be more demanding at the same time as the parent is more sustaining—the tension is at the heart of William Gibson's lovely drama, *The Miracle Worker*, about the education of Helen Keller. Or the teacher may attempt to liberate (by proffering intellectual, moral, or vocational alternatives) at the same time as the parent attempts to constrain—one thinks of countless instances in which parents prefer the immediate earnings of a dependent child to the continuance of a school career that would defer earnings but almost certainly increase them once independence is achieved.

However these relationships develop, they must be ascertained in their particularity rather than assumed in some kind of generality. Institutions do manifest a certain stubborn persistence with respect to their roles and functions, and it is only reasonable to anticipate that families will be concerned with the values of their children, that schools will attempt to stimulate cognitive development, and that libraries will encourage the use of books. Yet there is all too frequently an unexpected gap between what ought to be, logically, and what is, actually: parents have been known to abandon their children; schools have often failed to honor intellect; and there are libraries more interested in possessing books than in permitting anyone to read them.

□

There is an inescapable relationship between the concept of the configuration of education and the concept of the community. Most utopian writers have recognized this, depicting their utopias as perfect configurations of education in which all the constituent agencies and institutions are con-

sonant and complementary in their efforts and effects. In real communities, however, such consonance and complementarity are usually obviated by the presence of alternative configurations of education and by the fact that individual educational institutions are often mediating external (and conflicting) influences.

In *American Education: The Colonial Experience*, I found it fruitful to consider the multiple and changing relationships between families, churches, and schools (and, where present, colleges and printing presses) in a New England town (Dedham, Massachusetts), a southern county (Elizabeth City, Virginia), and two middle-colony market towns (Philadelphia and New York) as paradigmatic colonial configurations of education. For all the characteristic simplicity and localism of the era—and despite efforts in New England actually to construct a utopia—any congruence between configuration and community was at best partial. All four communities were in continuing communication with the cultural centers of Great Britain and the European mainland: families studied a didactic literature prepared and printed in London and Edinburgh; churches and schools employed pedagogical styles that derived variously from Scottish Presbyterianism and Continental Pietism; and amateur scientists exchanged data with their counterparts in a dozen European cities. The point is not to deny the significance of local and indigenous factors; it is merely to argue that even in the earliest phases of colonial development educational institutions were already mediating diverse external influences and communities were not isolated geographical localities. By the eighteenth century all four communities had developed multiple configurations of education that only partly overlapped: one could live one's earliest years amid a

cluster of white families in a Dedham neighborhood dominated by a New Light or Old Light pastor and only later enter into any kind of enduring association with other sorts of children and adults in a district school; one could spend one's childhood amid a cluster of black families in a New York neighborhood and only later enter into what was at best a set of sharply restricted relationships with white families of any kind.

By the nineteenth century, most local communities embraced multiple configurations of education and most configurations of education comprised institutions that were increasingly mediating non-local influences. Families in Indiana read books printed in New England hawked by colporteurs based in Cincinnati; churches and Sunday schools in Tennessee taught liturgies and disciplines developed in Europe and enforced by itinerant or absent diocesan authorities; quarter-communities on Virginia plantations were in touch with liberation movements in the North and in the West Indies; and newspapers in New York printed material transmitted by cable and telegraph to the far corners of the earth.

In the twentieth century, the evolution of new educational institutions and the emergence of metropolitan and transnational communities (facilitated by the revolution in communications, notably network television) simply accelerated both developments, leading to one of the fascinating paradoxes of our own time: Americans have available to them a more bewildering variety of configurations of education than ever; yet they are subject to a greater commonality of educational influences. Plus ça diffère, plus c'est la même chose!

□

Inasmuch as educational institutions and configurations transmit culture

to the young, they have played a time-honored role in maintaining social stability and continuity, though it is important to note that cultural conflict and confusion can be transmitted quite as effectively as cultural consonance and coherence (one need only examine the Lynds' chapter on the Middletown spirit in their classic studies of Muncie, Indiana, to be aware of the problem as it confronted Muncie's families, schools, and churches during the 1920's and 1930's). Moreover, educational institutions and configurations have also played an important role in stimulating and accelerating social change—one thinks of the impact of radical pastors and printers during the era of the American Revolution and of the impact of television news (and commercials) on some of the principal social movements of our own time. With respect to these phenomena, what I have called an ecological approach to education—one that views educational institutions and configurations in relation to one another and to the larger society that sustains them and is in turn affected by them—can prove instructive. In seeking the sources of social stability and change (and especially of social reform and resistance to reform), one must consider the possible contributions of all the institutions that educate, bearing in mind that the decisive factors may frequently lie elsewhere. The precise balance, among educational institutions and between education and other factors, will vary from one historical circumstance to another, so that no easy generalizations—Marxian or otherwise—will suffice. At the very least, however, one will avoid claiming too much for education, which has been an American proclivity ever since the first Puritans built their "city upon a hill," with the "eyes of all people" upon them.

II

Individuals come to educational situations with their own temperaments, histories, and purposes, and different individuals will obviously interact with any given configuration of education in different ways and with different outcomes. Hence, in considering the interactions and the outcomes, it is as necessary to examine individual life histories as it is to examine the configurations themselves. An educational biography is a portrayal of an individual life history focusing on the experience of education—the experience resulting from the deliberate, systematic, and sustained efforts of others to transmit or evoke knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, and sensibilities, as well as the experience involved in the subject's own deliberate, systematic, and sustained efforts to acquire knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, and sensibilities.

□

An educational biography will generally begin with the efforts of others (parents, kin, clergymen, schoolteachers) to nurture certain attitudes and behaviors and to teach certain knowledge and values, and with the subject's response to those efforts, which leads on the one hand to certain selective accommodations and patterns of believing, knowing, and doing, and on the other hand to an inevitable impact on those undertaking the nurturing and teaching. The educational biographer will ordinarily seek to discern in the maturing subject an emerging life style, the core of which might be described using Gordon W. Allport's term "the proprium." One behavioral characteristic of a maturing individual is an increasing measure of appropriate striving, part of which patently takes the form of intentional efforts to develop the self along particular lines, or, alternatively, efforts at self-education. In the Socratic sense,

appropriate striving is to the individual what *paideia* is to the society; the former conceives of education as individual aspiration, the latter, as social aspiration. Both are products of the examined life. Granted this, one must be wary of portraying educational development as any simple, direct, or linear progression moving from mere responsiveness to appropriate striving, or of assuming that in the absence of appropriate striving there is no educational development. And one must always bear in mind that many factors other than education play a role in the making of individuality.¹

□

One key element in any educational life history is the emergence of what my colleague Hope Jensen Leichter has referred to as an educative style, a set of characteristic ways in which an individual engages in, moves through, and combines educational experiences over a lifetime. Presumably, she argues, these modes begin to be learned in early encounters with "educationally significant others," and are then reinforced or modified, confirmed or disconfirmed, in subsequent experience. They become, in their totality, the pattern according to which an individual approaches, undergoes, pursues, and organizes education. Benjamin Franklin lived his whole life as a series of educational projects whereby he constantly tried to shape and reshape his character and sensibilities—at least that is how he preferred to characterize his life in the autobiography. Frederick Douglass reminisced about the ways in which, as a youngster, he systematically used his friendships with white age-mates as opportunities for learning to read. And Margaret Sanger appears to have imbibed a fierce and courageous independence from her father.

1. Gordon W. Allport. *Becoming: Basic Considerations for a Psychology of Personality*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955, pp. 45-51.

which then marked all her subsequent approaches to education (and to everything else). Educative style is itself subject to continued testing and change over a lifetime; yet it does provide an important element of continuity as an individual moves from one institution to another within a configuration and from one configuration to another. Furthermore, while educative style will ordinarily come to include propi-ate striving as an individual matures, educative style is the broader and more comprehensive phenomenon, comprising many components other than propi-ate striving.²

□

An individual with a discernible educative style and a measure of educative autonomy will approach a particular educational institution or configuration of institutions with his own purposes, his own agenda, his own prior experience, and his own habits of learning. The result will surely be a unique interaction, the outcome of which cannot be predicted by looking at either the institution(s) or the individual. Moreover, by intent or happenstance, an individual will develop his own network of "educationally significant others," which may or may not correspond with any established configuration of education. The son of a religiously orthodox family will defy parents, peers, and clergymen to attend a secular college; the daughter of an insis-tently skeptical family will turn her back on parents, peers, and teachers to join a fundamentalist commune; a youngster of uncertain goals and aspirations will happen upon a particular adult and for his own reasons choose that adult as exemplar and teacher. The cases are legion; the point is to distinguish between the "objective" relation-

ships involved in the patterning of educational institutions and the particular experience of individuals.

□

To assert the uniqueness of individual educational experience is in no way to deny the value of grouping educational biographies for purposes of analysis. Thus, my student Roger Sherman has argued persuasively in an educational biography of Elizabeth Blackwell, the first certified female physician in the United States, for the potential historical and sociological value of also studying Antoinette Brown, the first ordained female pastor (Congregationalist), Sarah Bagley, the first female labor leader, and Arabella Mansfield, the first female lawyer formally admitted to the bar, with a view to testing hypotheses about critical factors in overcoming institutionalized barriers to individual educational attainment. Such grouping, of course, is at the heart of the prosopographical (collective biographical) studies that Lawrence Stone is conducting of large numbers of alumni as a method of determining the effects of university education.

□

There is obviously a relationship between the concept of educational biography and the more general concept of biography itself. In fact, given a sufficiently broad definition of education and a subject with a sufficiently well-defined proprium, the two concepts merge. They have also merged in a number of classic autobiographies, notably Benjamin Franklin's and Henry Adams's. In this respect, James Olney's notion of the "metaphors of self," put forward in his recently published theory of autobiography, has proved immensely fruitful. Metaphors, Olney argues, "are something known and of our making, or at least of our choosing, that we put to stand for, and so to help us understand, something unknown and not of our making; they are that by which the

lonely subjective consciousness gives order not only to itself but to as much of the objective reality as it is capable of formalizing and of controlling." Following Olney's formulation, one might ask in an educational biography: What "metaphors of self" does the subject seem to choose or come to believe? How do these metaphors influence the subject's quest for education and response to it? And how in turn are the metaphors confirmed or modified by education?³

III

If the process of education is indeed a transaction between an individual with a particular life history and one or more institutions of education that tend to relate to one another in configurations, one cannot fail to be impressed with the variety of ways in which the process has been portrayed in accounts of American education. Much of the traditional literature, for example, has conceived of the school as the sole educator and the student as some kind of tabula rasa, and has then implied that schoolbooks embody the essence of schooling, so that once the content of the schoolbooks has been ascertained the effects of schooling can be deduced. Mark Sullivan assumed as much in the second volume of *Our Times*, subtitled *America Finding Herself*, where he located the sources of American values on the eve of World War I within the covers of the McGuffey readers. I'm afraid I assumed as much in *The American Common School: An Historic Conception*, where I inferred the essence of a nineteenth-century public school education from readers, spellers, geographies, and arithmetics. And I fear my late

2. Hope Jensen Leichter, "The Concept of Educative Style," *Teachers College Record*, LXXV (1973-74), 239-250.

3. James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972, p. 30.

colleague Richard Hofstadter also assumed as much in his brilliant polemic *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, where he asserted, on the basis of Ruth Miller Elson's study of the content of nineteenth-century school readers, that the schools of the period had actually subverted intellect. It is instructive to compare these three analyses with the much richer and more complex picture given by Barbara Joan Finkelstein in her anthology of nineteenth-century description and reminiscence entitled "Governing the Young."⁴

□

A number of recent historians have attempted to draw upon modern behavioral science theories in developing a more sophisticated understanding of educational transactions, but the theories have too often been imperfectly applied or applied without adequate reference to data, leading to what are at best truncated versions of the educational process. Thus, for example, Stanley Elkins, in his pioneering study of *Slavery*, applied Bruno Bettelheim's psychoanalytical interpretations of concentration camp life in an effort to understand the development of the slave personality during the ante-bellum period, and concluded that the same psychological mechanism that led concentration camp inmates to see themselves as their captors saw them, led nineteenth-century slaves to manifest the child-like behavior symbolized by the Sambo stereotype. The difficulty with Elkins's analysis, however, is that it drew imperfectly on Bettelheim, using only one of the several psychological mechanisms Bettelheim saw operative in the camps, and then went on to assert the applicability of that

mechanism without reference to the evidence in the slave sources. Similarly, Michael Katz, in the imaginative essays he published as *Class, Bureaucracy, and Schools*, relied heavily on the body of social theory addressed to the phenomenon of bureaucracy, a body of theory from which he inferred that the basic structure of an educational situation is a more powerful determinant of educational processes and outcomes than any curriculum the teachers themselves might choose to introduce. Now, the theory of bureaucracy is obviously relevant to education—the structure of an institution will surely influence the ways in which it performs its functions. But what Katz actually did was to trace the bureaucratization of urban schooling in the nineteenth century, assert that bureaucracy in the modern world had been a bourgeois invention representing "a crystallization of bourgeois social attitudes," and then infer from the fact of bureaucratization that the decisive element in public school education over the past hundred years had been, pure and simple, an experience in planned social inequality whereby the bourgeoisie had exerted its control over the working class. Once again, the inference was made without reference to data concerning the educative experience itself.

At least two historians have drawn upon behavioral science theories to provide significant new insights into the character and complexity of educational transactions. Robert F. Berkhofer, in *Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and American Indian Response, 1787-1862*, made skillful use of acculturation theory, viewing education as broadly involving configurations of Protestant institutions on the one hand and configurations of tribal institutions on the other and using Indian as well

as missionary sources in analyzing a wide range of educational processes and outcomes. And John W. Blassingame, in *The Slave Community; Plantation Life in the Ante-Bellum South*, made equally skillful use of role theory, viewing education as broadly involving the entire configuration of nurturing institutions in the ante-bellum quarter-community, drawing freely (though critically) on slave narratives as well as on more traditional source material, and steadfastly resisting the modish temptation to see the plantation as a total institution—indeed, Blassingame's appendix, entitled "Comparative Examination of Total Institutions," should be required reading for any who might think that viewing the school as an asylum or as a factory lends intellectual power without a corresponding intellectual price.

□

The tendency to conceive of educational transactions simplistically has also been marked in recent discussions of educational theory (and policy) growing out of James S. Coleman's report on *Equality of Educational Opportunity*. Coleman's data did indeed suggest that the effects of schooling were less potent and less uniform than had traditionally been assumed. His data did not indicate, however, that the school had no power, but rather that it was educating sequentially and synchronically along with other institutions and that its effect on different individuals was partly dependent on what happened to them in those other institutions. It is not that schooling lacks potency; it is rather that the potency of schooling must be seen in relation to the potency of other experience (some of which is educational in character) that has occurred earlier and is occurring elsewhere. The point has obvious bearing on assessments of the effects of schooling that either ignore other educational factors, or fail to hold

4. Barbara Joan Finkelstein, "Governing the Young: Teacher Behavior in American Primary Schools, 1820-1880; A Documentary History" (unpublished doctoral thesis, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1970).

them constant, or refuse to correct for them.

□

Presumably, it is theories of teaching and learning that will be at the heart of the effort to illumine the nature of educational transactions; and yet it is abundantly clear that acculturation theories and role theories (which are in a sense theories of teaching and learning) hold immense promise, as do a host of other theories stemming from the several behavioral disciplines that would seem at first glance only marginally relevant to education. Such theories are fruitful insofar as they point to the possible significance of certain educational data and provide possible explanations of certain educational phenomena, and they must be exploited to the fullest by those seeking insight into the processes of education. Granted this, the strictures John Dewey advanced almost a half-century ago in *The Sources of a Science of Education* remain as pertinent as ever—and they refer, incidentally, to the entire range of educational phenomena, configurations and life histories as well as transactions. However much educational scholarship must draw upon a wide variety of sciences in the effort to illumine educational phenomena, it must remain alert to the partiality of the insights to be derived from any particular science and aware that in the last analysis it is the educational situation itself that must provide the subject matter to be studied and the arena in which the results of such study are tested and applied. "The sources of educational science," Dewey observed, "are any portions of ascertained knowledge that enter into the heart, head and hands of educators, and which, by entering in, render the performance of the educational function more enlightened, more humane, more truly educational than it was before. But there is no way to discover what is 'more truly educational' except by

the continuation of the educational act itself. The discovery is never made; it is always making."⁵

IV

Perhaps it might be well to acknowledge at this point my awareness that all my observations here, and all my examples, have derived from the American experience. Doubtless different educational institutions relate in different ways to one another and to the society at large in other parts of the world (and in other historical eras); and doubtless there are also differences as well as similarities in the quality of individual educational experience and of educational transactions in general. We need a much fuller understanding of the nature and range of such phenomena before we can approach a truly comprehensive theory of education.

□

Finally, it might also be well to repeat a caveat or two from my earlier notes. In stressing deliberateness in my definition of education, I am well aware that there is frequently a gap between stated intentions and revealed preferences and that there are almost always unintended consequences in any case. And I am equally aware that what is taught is not always what is learned and vice versa, and that a great deal of learning takes place in situations where intentionality is not present. In sum, education is a process more restricted than enculturation or socialization, though obviously inclusive of many of the same phenomena. The restriction, I would insist, is more than a matter of taste; it is intended to enable us to act purposefully as educators, ever hopeful of the possibilities but wholly aware of the limitations and the risks. ■

5. John Dewey, *The Sources of a Science of Education*. New York: Horace Liveright, 1929, pp. 76-77.