

1974

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Recommended Citation

Brown, R. (1974). The Educational Challenge. *Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science, Vol. 40 No. 1*, 13-16.

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The Educational Challenge

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Address was followed by slide presentation with two screens
and matching displays of children in school and scenes
illustrating human and environmental problems

With respect to education, I think we are starting from a base of equal ignorance. We must confess how little we know about how children learn, what they learn, and why they learn. I want to address some of those issues. I will start with a series of statements, some conclusions, some observations and some appropriate slides, and conclude on one final issue.

I think that 1985 is much too short a notice for dealing with education. Schools in this country have not changed appreciably in 100 years; not in a very fundamental way. The subject matter has changed, the furniture has changed, the arrangement of the furniture has changed, but in most fundamental respects the teaching is very much as it always has been. Therefore, I am not awfully optimistic that we are going to see widespread institutional change in the near future. I think it is worth noting that in all the professions that one can list, education has to be the most optimistic because it is an affirmation that people can change. And, after all, those who are engaged in trying to civilize the young, much less teaching them to read, have to be accorded their respective optimistic. We know very little about the impact of schools on children; the measures of that impact are minimal. Hardly any cause and effect relationships have been established between what we do in the schools and what happens to children. In this ignorance, I think it is probably worth pointing out that if one wanted to stay healthy without any knowledge of vitamins, one would be best served by eating a great variety of foods; and I suspect in education that is not bad advice, too, that we perhaps need an enormous variety of alternatives.

I think another thing worth pointing out in education is that supervision is minimal, therefore, change is very hard to effect. Educational systems have very meager support mechanisms. I think it's worth pointing out that education is mostly a local matter and cooperation between jurisdictions is oftentimes minimal and that lack of cooperation and sharing is wasteful . . . that the resources of the state and nation are equitably distributed, that the yearly cycle of schooling, not education, is enormously inflexible and wasteful, that teaching, like other professions, has tried to isolate itself. It leads into a notion that one of the important things to consider in education is that the oath of a professional teacher is no longer applicable. It may be that society would best be served if teaching were everyone's responsibility, and that everyone in their lifetime would devote some time to it, but that nobody would devote their entire lifetime to it — I give you that as something to mull over — that schooling has focused primarily on teaching rather than learning. This is beginning to change, but it's going to be slow.

There are a few major things that I would like to announce at this point. First of all, it is just possible that we take schools too seriously. It's just as possible that they are not as important as we like to think they are. It's just possible, too, that master planning is a mistake. I just returned from the West Coast, and I came away convinced that San Francisco could never have happened if it hadn't been planned. I have a suspicion that transportation may be much more central to educational reform than almost anything else we could do, because by opening up mass transports to young people, we open up enormous resources besides the schools from which they can learn. We make it possible for schools to specialize, we make it possible for schools to avoid having to offer everything to everybody. I think if we made it possible for young people to be independent, that they would be so, and would grow up healthier and faster.

Another observation I would like to point out, and it is pertinent because I've heard in our group a good deal of discussion about lifelong learning. It is clearly in the air and everybody's concerned about it — about mid-career changes, retooling for new jobs, etc., but in the most fundamental sense we are talking hot air because we are avoiding major challenge. If, in fact, lifelong learning is something we really believe in, then the natural consequence is to stop teaching everything in twelve years. I think everyone in this room could tick off the things that are essential for children to learn — within the field of social studies and history you could name it, in science, mathematics, foreign languages, etc. Yet that dealing of essentialness grew out of the notion that, in fact, schooling is not a lifelong process. Therefore, you had better give it to them now while you've got them. If we really believe in lifelong schooling, we will do something to focus our attention on these key subjects in the young years rather than trying to make sure that everybody gets a smorgasbord.

First, students must know how to use evidence, ask questions, how to interpret evidence, how to know what they know, how to know what they don't know so that their lives can become rational and manageable, so that they don't think that the answers to serious problems can be had by chanting in the streets.

Second, they must be emotionally secure and be skilled in dealing with people. While we can't guarantee all of that, there are things we know how to do that will help.

Third, they must be able to read and speak and listen and write.

Fourth, they must know how to stay healthy.

I would like to take just one of those and speak a little more about it. And that has to do with the emotional and social development of children. How to develop their self-awareness, self-confidence, and their skills in human relations, because I think that is where society's problems lie.

Clearly the world is going to see an intensification of conflict and tension between individuals and within individuals, much of what young people used to know or do in order to master such conflicts cannot be gotten from books. The school has an important obligation, therefore, to help students learn how to do these things, which means they have to learn how to do them in ways that do not involve reading and writing. I think we have to place the very highest priority on turning out students who feel competent and worthy, for unless all citizens feel so, unless every citizen feels good about himself or herself, he or she cannot be expected to care very much about others. And surely such lack of caring must be at least a partial factor in the deterioration of families, institutions, neighborhoods, and communities. How can we do it? I suggest that schools cannot do it alone, but they can certainly help. Home and family are obviously critical, probably decisive, but there are some things that schools can do.

One — we can reduce our students' fear of failure, and *two*, we can reduce their dependency on authority. One of the things that children learn very early is that it is important for them to be successful. They learn it from us as parents and they learn it from us as teachers; we teach it to them in many devious ways. When they are quite young, we convey that when we inquire rather too solicitously about what reading group they are in in the first grade, and we try to mask it with pleasure that they are with the Robins. But then we ask the tell-tale question, "Are you reading the same book everyone else is?" Very careful about that. Older students know only too well, of course, the scorn that will be heaped on them if they fail to get into college or get a good job. They also learn, unfortunately, that there is a limited amount of success and that if they are going to get their share, they probably have to take it from somebody else. Conversely, if somebody else is successful, it is going to be at their expense. Clearly that is not a value or attitude that is going to be very useful in the kind of world we are facing, where we are really talking about survival. I think we have to take that problem very seriously, much more so than schools and institutions have in the past. We have to create an educational environment that is disciplined, provocative and authoritative, without also being authoritarian. *Three*, school must become a place where parents, students and teachers, adults of all kinds, and young people can celebrate their humanness and explore their potentiality together.

I would like to elaborate on this last point because I think it is essential to useful planning for the future. The first, of course, is how to deal with or redirect the success drive of our society which is almost entirely material in its orientation. And the second is how to create an environment outside of school that is supportive of young people. And here I am talking about things other

than building municipal hockey rinks and little league baseball fields. I am talking about the most elemental needs of children, the care and love of parents who can give freely of their time and attention and the respect of other adults who can introduce them to the ways of adult society in kindly ways. The reason that I emphasize this is that study after study demonstrates how ineffective schools are in dealing with deprived children; I use the word "deprived" to mean children whose elemental needs for adult care and attention are not being met. And as you well know, such deprivation is as common in the homes of the well-to-do where parents are busy being successful and meeting the expectations of the community, as it is in the homes of the poor where parents are too busy surviving to have time or energy to squander on the young. I suggest most strongly that needed educational reform must start in the home with a family that is secure and together and that this is something that leaders in business and government, people in this room, have much to answer for. Remember, now, I am talking about the mental health of children, their feelings of self-confidence, their ability to share, explore, take risks, accept responsibility, and help others. Psychologists say these roots are very deep and that they start very early. It shouldn't be necessary to point out either that these qualities are those that mark us as special, that mark us as human. They are qualities a child learns by emulating someone he loves or admires; they are not learned by spelling words. By sharing in activities with a mother or father who rejoices in the sharing, too, who is not weary or tired or cross, and who values the shared experience . . . The person who has the time and who places a high value on sharing it with the young.

Another point I would like to make is that the major problems in society, those that everyone in this room has been dealing with, from my point of thinking, are not traceable to a lack of knowledge. Therefore, those who would return schools to the sharply focused teaching of basic skills and knowledge are not likely to solve very much. I believe that our problems are essentially political problems. They are problems of the will — of what we want to do, not what we know how to do — and that schools are in an enviable position of exerting real power if they can come to grips with that. It is their one chance to become truly leaders, which is to come to grips with how do you move people to want to do something, because I don't think refining the instruction in algebra is going to do very much at all.

I think another thing we are going to do in education is to take psychic phenomena very seriously. When I see what the fringe is doing right now and what impact it is having on young people, I am enormously impressed and puzzled. I'm talking now about transcendental meditation, yoga and all kinds of things that young people are experimenting with . . . the impact on them is profound and is something that we need to understand and learn a great deal more of in time. I think schools have to take that seriously.

And finally, I would like to point out that in planning, I am thinking about our own organization here, we organize ourselves in systems and subsystems, and those subsystems and our hierarchy clearly demonstrate our adult biases. As I thought about that, I wondered

whether we had the best organization for dealing with planning for the future in Minnesota. I'm reminded of a parallel. If you ask a child to categorize the animal kingdom, he will do so in a very practical way, and in a way that is profoundly different from a professor of biology. The child will separate them in the fierce and the friendly, the big and the small, the soft and the prickly, the edible and inedible, and the ones that you see and don't see. That is a partial list. Now if you apply that to the way in which we are organizing ourselves to face the future, you end up with a rather different list of subsystems — you don't talk transportation, energy, and education. If you ask a child to organize for the future what kinds of planning would be important, he might say — systems relating to getting along with each other, systems to finding your way when you are lost, and systems that relate to fixing things when they are broken. I might suggest that it might be appropriate for us to consider very carefully what kind of system we can use to give direction when we are lost, and what kind of system will help us fix things when they are fouled up because they inevitably are going to be so. And I for one would have a lot more confidence in the future if I knew the repair mechanism was there as well.

Finally, one additional observation about this group that I participated in, and that is that I am struck by the fact that so much of the discussion is in the third person future . . . "they" and "them" in 1985 and beyond and very little about "me" and "us" and "mine". I think that is a mistake in education because education is a profoundly personal adventure. I would like to take a minute now to try to establish that personal point of view because it is important for the next thing I want to say. It is particularly important to take a personal point of view because the world we are facing is essentially a world of changing values and, if you are like me, it is easier to talk about changing values than it is to apply them. I am reminded of a story (those of you not in education can hardly appreciate how far we have come in our educational revolution), and it is epitomized to me in a story of a sixth grader and a seventh and an eighth grader standing at a street corner in the dusk of an evening, looking up at an apartment house where behind the windows were seen two shadows moving. The sixth grader said, "Oh, look at those people fighting." The seventh grader said, "They're not fighting, they're making love." And the eighth grader said, "Yeah, and badly."

I would like to reemphasize the notion that we are designing systems for our children and that they will live more than half their adult lives in the 21st century. How uncomfortable it is to sit for one minute without anything happening, especially in groups, when we expect something to happen. I suggest that that symptom is something that has roots that are worth digging. They relate to our educational system, to our life-styles, and our habits and our biases. This second one is clearly the dominant issue of food and fuel and weight. Clearly you know better than I that what we are seeing in the last few months or years is only the tip of an enormous iceberg. In the case of food, we are facing enormous ethical and moral dilemmas about the redistribution of food worldwide. Whether, in fact, we are going to have the self-discipline to alter our values and life-styles to the point

where we are willing to share with the world. Those are only a couple of the problems. Clearly, others equally serious involve the manipulation of genetic mechanisms, behavior control and, of course, the increases in the technology of destruction. Facing such a world, what kind of schooling makes any sense? What kind of experiences must our children have that are going to live reasonably productive and happy lives over the next forty years? I think several trends are important, and I think there are things we know how to do and things we can say.

First of all, there is certainly going to be an increased demand for well-trained people in management technology and finance. There is going to be a tremendous need for people to be able to cope successfully with tension, stress and strain which accompanies changing jobs, marriage partners and places of residence. There is going to be the need for continued schooling and training and very much the need to be able to understand and adjust to changing values and attitudes and the need to be able to adjust to leisure brought on by unemployment, early retirement, or changes in work patterns. There are four things that schools can do that relate to . . . , that schools, in fact, can have an impact on.

Now, how many in this room, I dare say, will deny the importance of what I have just said, at least publicly, and yet a look at our institutions will show where our priorities and values really lie. Father is expected to move to a new location or a new city, or jeopardize his career. He is expected to work late in the evening or on Saturday for the same reason. So great is our national appetite for material things promoted by the media and commercial interests that father and mother often both hold jobs and sometimes two. Our careers and jobs come first, we are then expected to fulfill our civic and social responsibilities, and if we have some time left, we give it to our children. The 1970 White House Conference on Children addressed this issue; I would like to read you a piece from their report: "And here we confront a fundamentally disturbing fact: children need people in order to become human. The fact is fundamental because it is firmly grounded in scientific research and human experience."

It is disturbing because the isolation of children from adults simultaneously threatens the growth of the individual and the survival of the society. The young cannot pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. It is primarily through observing, working, playing with others, older and younger than himself that a child discovers both what he can do and what he can become. To relegate children to a world of their own, in other words school, is to deprive them of their humanity and ourselves as well. Yet this is what is happening in America today. We are experiencing a breakdown in the process of making human beings human. By isolating our children from the rest of humanity, we abandon them to a world devoid of adults and ruled by the destructive impulses and compelling pressures both of the age-segregated peer group and the aggressive and exploitive television screen. By setting our priorities elsewhere, by claiming one set of values while pursuing

another, we leave our children bereft of standards and support and our own lives impoverished and corrupted.

All institutions in the state should give a high priority to efforts that will promote family stability and mental health of children. Personnel policies need to be examined and the concept of progress as used commercially, the promotion of unnecessary products must be muted; day care centers, promotion policies, leave and vacation schedules, health care, abortion clinics and a host of other possibilities all can contribute. Companies must begin to calculate their profit/loss sheets with an eye to family health. I maintain that substantial progress in these lines will pay large educational and social benefits.

Finally, let me say a few words about how children become adults, or rather ways in which they do not become adults. At the present time, they spend an inordinate amount of time in school, and the only work they see done there other than homework that they do themselves is the work that teachers do. To many that does not seem like work that they should be paid for. The values and skills once learned in apprenticeship at age fourteen are now deferred and deferred and deferred. What students learn in school is alleged to have

importance to them when they become adults, but then we deny them the opportunity to become adults and use that information for much too long . . . Child labor laws and other laws of compulsory education.

It is critical that our older students have early access to your world, not only so will they not be naive and glib about what it takes to run a society, but so they can learn from you what demands are going to be made on them and how they might learn to prepare for those demands. They need to have real work to do, they need to contribute to society and to feel important. It is you that they respect and that they can learn from. Education for 1985 must address itself seriously to this issue, which means that new laws must be enacted, new priorities established in schools and businesses, industries and professions. Do not leave education to the educators, they need the resources you control, their students need the resources you control. Education is no longer something that can be relegated to schools and then forgotten. It is a living process that once tasted will continue for a lifetime. It is a process which renews, invigorates and enlarges; it's something that all of us need and few of us have. Let us join together and see that another generation is not also deprived.