

Excerpt from *Freedom to Learn For the 80's*. Rogers, C.R. Columbus, OH:Charles Merrill, 1969/1983, pps. 299-307.

Some Reflections

As I look back over what I have written in this book, I fall into a somewhat dreamy, reflective state. I hope you can enter this inner world of mine and enrich it with your own memories, experiences, and thoughts.

The Miracle of Childhood

I get flashes, pictures of the young children I have known and observed, children before they have been exposed to school. Some of these are memories of my children and grandchildren when they were young. Some are recent glimpses of my three great-grandchildren. But there are children of friends, children I have observed on the streets, in homes, and in supermarkets with their parents. There are the youngsters I have seen in China and Japan, in Brazil, in Austria, and in England - children all over the world.

I see a small boy pounding nail after nail into a large wooden box until it is studded with the metal heads. I see a little girl insisting stubbornly that she will wear only the dress *she* has chosen, not the one selected by her mother. I see a child in a supermarket, trying to feel every can, box, bunch of vegetables, stopped only temporarily by a mother's slap on his hands. There is a small girl trying to imitate the big words she had just heard. There is a boy turning over rocks and boards, looking for the harmless snakes he loves to collect. I see a group of children playing with clay, laughing at the forms they create. I see youngsters learning to thwart parental rules, manipulate parental behavior. I hear a small boy asking over and over, "What letter *is that?* And what letter *is that?*" I see the homeless "street children" of Brazil, unloved and unwanted, roaming the streets, stealing, searching for bread in the trash cans, deceiving and manipulating adults, struggling to survive. I see children on the beach, building sand castles, carrying buckets of water to and fro. I see children counting out pennies for a candy bar. I see and hear a small boy kicking an empty can along a city street. I hear the ever-repeated questions, "Why?" "How?" "Why does water run downhill?" "How does the baby get inside the mother?" "Why is he talking so loud?" "How do you make it go?"

The activities are ceaseless, the curiosity endless. Young children are eager to find out, wanting to do, to shape, to create. They are soaking up information through eyes, ears, nose, mouth, fingers. They are moving, restless, spontaneous, determined. They are assimilating knowledge, perceiving patterns, acquiring a language, improving skills.

They are learning, learning, learning - probably at a rate they will never again equal.

And then their "education" begins. Off they go to school. What will they find? The possibilities are almost endless, but I will sketch two of the extremes, recognizing that there are many schools whose methods, attitudes, procedures, would fall between these two extremes.

One Pathway to Education

A small boy enters school, his first day. He is eager to go, because it is a step toward being grown up. He knows that big boys go to school. On the other hand, he is frightened. It is a strange new situation, full of fearsome possibilities. He has heard stories about school - about punishments, about exciting times, about report cards, about teachers, friendly and unfriendly. It

is a scary uncertainty.

He is directed to his room. His teacher is businesslike. Here is his desk and chair, one in a straight row of desks and chairs. Here are his books, and pencils. The teacher greets the group with a smile but it seems forced. Then come the rules. He cannot leave his seat, even to go to the toilet, without first raising his hand and receiving permission. He is not to whisper or talk to his neighbors. He is to speak only when called upon. No one is to make unnecessary noise.

He thinks of yesterday. He was continually on the move, making as much noise as he pleased, shouting to his friends. School is so very different.

Then classes begin - the reading book, letters and words on the board. The teacher talks. One child is called upon and is praised for a correct response. He is called on. He makes a mistake. "Wrong! Who can give Johnny the right answer?" Hands go up, and he is soon corrected. He feels stupid. He leans over to tell his neighbor how he happened to make the mistake. He is reprimanded for talking. The teacher comes and stands by his seat to make clear that she is watching him, that he must abide by the rules.

Recess is fun - much shouting, running, some games - all too short.

Then the ordeal begins again. His body squirms, his mind wanders. Finally lunch. Not until they are all lined up in a perfectly straight row are they permitted to walk, silently, to the lunch room.

His educational career has commenced. He has already learned a great deal, though he could not put it into words.

He has learned that:

- there is no place for his restless physical energy in the school room;
- one conforms or takes the unpleasant consequences;
- submission to rules is very important;
- making a mistake is very bad;
- the punishment for a mistake is humiliation;
- spontaneous interest does not belong in school;
- teacher and disciplinarian are synonymous;
- school is, on the whole, an unpleasant experience.

At the end of the day, he asks his parents, "How long do I have to go?" Gradually, he will learn that he has been sentenced to a very long term.

As the days, months, years roll by he learns other things. He learns that:

- most textbooks are boring;
- it is not safe to differ with a teacher;
- there are many ways to get by without studying;
- it is okay to cheat;
- daydreams and fantasy can make the day pass more quickly;
- to study hard and get good grades is behavior scorned by one's peers;
- most of the learning relevant to his life takes place outside of school;
- original ideas have no place in school;
- exams and grades are the most important aspects of education;
- most teachers are, in class, impersonal and boring.

Small wonder that he looks forward to vacations as being the time when one really lives. Graduation becomes desirable as a release from boredom, constriction, and coercion.

So this is one pathway, one type of school experience. I believe it is a pathway experienced by millions of children and young people. Have I painted it in too gloomy terms? Here is a statement from a letter written by a professor of education in a university. She has taught for many years, been involved in the training of teachers, has kept in close touch with the schools in her large city. After describing some experiences in which students show how frightened they are by the possibility of learning in an academic setting, she bursts out with some strong

feelings. "It seems to me schools not only murder feelings, they also destroy the power of thought and the capacity for learning anything outside of authority-stipulated, to-be-memorized isolated details - if that can be called learning! People are turned into appendages for assembly-line machinery. My heart is pounding as I write this. The poisonousness of the school has never been so glaringly apparent to me before. I have thought the notion of 'deschooling society' a hare-brained one, believing we must transform the school from within. But I wonder now - is it humanly possible? And here I feel like crying, out of sheer frustration and a sense of helplessness, and anger."

I believe this passionate statement expresses the feelings of many as we observe some of the tragic realities: ghetto schools that are literally nothing but prisons, with students held against their will, learning only hatred for everything that passes under the label of education; school administrators who are but political connivers, with no concept of what learning can mean; teachers who are bored and burned out, hanging on only to obtain their pensions. It is not a pretty picture.

A Second Way to Learning

We have seen in the preceding chapters that there is another path, another way. Let me sketch that picture very briefly.

A small girl goes to school for the first time. The atmosphere is friendly and informal. Part of her fear and anxiety disappear as the teacher greets her warmly and introduces her to some of the other children.

When it is time for school to begin, they sit in a circle with the teacher. She asks the children to tell of one thing they are interested in, one thing they like to do. The teacher's interest in each youngster is evident, and the little girl relaxes even more. This may be fun.

There are all kinds of interesting things in the room - books, maps, pictures, building blocks, crayons and paper, some toys - and soon the children are investigating their environment. Our small girl looks at a picture book of children in another country.

When the teacher calls them together again, she asks the girl if she could tell a little story. Our youngster starts to tell about going shopping with her mother. The teacher prints part of the story on the board and points out the words and letters. And so the day has begun.

What has this small girl learned? She has learned that:

- her curiosity is welcomed and prized;
- the teacher is friendly and caring;
- she can learn new things, both on her own and with the teacher's help;
- there is room for spontaneity here;
- she can contribute to the group learning;
- she is valued as a person.

We don't need to follow her school career further because it has all been described in earlier chapters. But in this humanistically oriented school, we will find various elements as she continues through the years.

- She will have a part in choosing what she wishes and needs to learn.
- She will learn reading and mathematics more rapidly than her friends in other schools.
- She will find an outlet for her creativity.
- She will become more expressive of both feelings and thoughts.
- She will develop a confidence in, and a liking for herself.
- She will discover that learning is fun.
- She will look forward to going to school.
- She will like and respect her teachers and be liked and respected in turn.
- She will find a place in school for all of her many and expanding interests.

- She will develop a knowledge of resources, ways of finding out what she wants to know.
- She will read about, think about, and discuss the crucial social issues of her time.
- She will find some things very difficult to learn, requiring effort, concentration and self-discipline.
- She finds such learning very rewarding.
- She learns to attack tasks cooperatively, working with others to achieve a goal.
- She is on the way to becoming an educated person, one who is learning how to learn.

What We Know

We have already discovered, as we have journeyed through this book, the elements that make this second school possible.

We know, with some precision, the attitudes, the ways of being, which create a learning climate.

We have found that prospective teachers can be helped to develop in these ways, as facilitators of learning.

It is also possible to help teachers on the job develop such attitudes and ways, in relatively short intensive experiences.

We have found that these facilitative ways are learned most rapidly in schools where the administrator maintains a facilitative environment for the teachers.

The hard-headed facts show that more learning, more problem-solving, more creativity, is found in classrooms which have such a climate.

We have seen teachers, from elementary classrooms to graduate school seminars, finding ingenious ways to help students to learn and choose and grow.

We have watched students develop in responsibility, in self-discipline, in ability to work.

We know, in short, that it is possible for any teacher to move in the direction of becoming more real, more sensitively understanding, more caring in relation to his or her students. We have learned that it is possible, in such a climate, for students to become reliably self-directing; to choose, and bear the responsibility of the consequences of their choice; to learn more than in the traditional classroom; and to do so with enthusiasm.

So the logical conclusion from this is that every school would wish to become more of a center for freedom to learn, more of a place where human qualities in teacher and student would be prized.

Such is not the case. Great sections of our educational system seem wedded to a traditional mode of education, and incredibly resistant to change. Other institutions in our culture - industry, government, marriage, the family - have all changed greatly in recent decades to meet modern conditions. Schools, by and large, have shown much less change. Why is this?

No Feedback

I believe the main reason for this monolithic opposition to any change can be summed up in two words - "No autopsies!" What I mean by this cryptic phrase is that the school has an almost complete lack of evidence as to the eventual effect of its work. Medicine, too, is resistant to change, but the doctor has his autopsies - objective evidence that his diagnosis, his medication, his surgery may have been mistaken, may have harmed or killed his patient. He is forced to recognize that he has made mistakes. He has an incentive to change and improve. Industry can look at the number of products sold, the profits made or lost. It, too, has a reason for reflecting on its processes and trying to improve them. Education has no such feedback system. To be sure it has its final examinations, but these are judged only by the self-protective inner criteria of the system. It is not known what relationship they have to later success, failure, enrichment of life.

They are like the final inspection of the automobile as it leaves the assembly line. All the bolts are tight, the motor runs, the car can be operated. But this may have little relation to the final verdict, which must come from consumer reports. What education needs, desperately, is feedback from its consumers.

For three years I was consultant to the California Institute of Technology, one of the most prestigious institutions for the education of top level scientists. While I was consulting with an interested group of faculty, we discussed the incredible competition for grades, even in the freshman year. (A 3.73 grade was considered definitely better, by the students, than a 3.72!! Anyone who knows the grading process knows how absurd this is.) As we discussed the matter, the majority of the group concluded that a Pass-Fail system, especially in the freshman year, would permit students to concentrate on learning what they were interested in rather than scheming how to raise their grade by one percent. Some of the group were dubious, and when the faculty as a whole was sounded out, it was evident that a majority opposed any change in their grading system because (they said) that would imply a lowering of their very high standards. Yet, a short time later, they adopted the Pass-Fail system. Why? Because a careful analysis had been made of the students who were dropping out of Caltech. They found that some of those who left simply did not have the ability to pass the courses. But they also found, to their dismay, that the dropouts included a disproportionate number of their brightest, best, most creative students. Clearly, these students did not like the cut-throat competition nor the "Mickey Mouse" of numerical grades carried to two decimal points. If their institution was to retain its highly respected place, the faculty realized they must stop this leakage of their best students. They must create a place where curious, searching, bright students could find a satisfying environment. As one step in this, they changed the grading system. An "autopsy" had shown them that they were making a serious mistake and so they acted to correct it. This is the kind of process that is so rare in schools.

Obtaining Information from the Consumer

It would not be difficult for the schools to obtain consumer feedback, and I believe that study of this information would lead to markedly improved qualities of teaching and administration. The process would not need to be elaborate. Student reactions could be obtained at the end of the elementary, secondary, and college experience, and again three to five years later. A great deal could be learned from a simple, anonymous questionnaire. The items might include such queries as the following:

- Describe two or more ways in which this school experience has met your needs.
- Name two or more ways in which the school has failed to meet your needs.
- List briefly some of the experiences - courses, teachers, students, projects, events - from which you have learned the most.
- What experiences, classes, procedures have you felt were irrelevant or a waste of time?
- To what degree do you find that this school experience has prepared you for the next step in your life? Excellently _ Well _ Moderately _ Poorly _ Very Poorly _ Explain your response.
- Are there any changes you believe would make this school a better place for learning?

These are suggested items only. A school could develop its own instrument. A questionnaire could also be devised for parents. In addition to the questionnaires, an outside interviewer should be employed to ask these same questions of a representative sample of the students and their parents. These interviews would have more depth and would help to uncover areas of satisfaction or dissatisfaction that had not been anticipated. This same person might then be asked, as an objective outsider, to tabulate and summarize all the findings from the questionnaires and the interviews, naming names, courses, and administrators where the frequency of mention justified it. This summary could then be distributed to all the faculty and

administrators and used as data for planning the work of the next year.

I am well aware that such self-analysis would often contain material very painful to contemplate, as well as very rewarding information. I imagine many schools would be frightened at the thought of inaugurating such a process. Yet a refusal would mean that we do not wish to know whether our students are learning in our school, nor what they are learning. Certainly responsible educators would wish to take the risks involved.

The advantages would be enormous. We invest huge amounts of effort and money in the teachers, the textbooks, the equipment, and furnishing of our schools. This would begin to let us know the extent to which this learning environment and its curricular content is being received and integrated into the life of the student. It would also bring the students alive because they would realize that they had some opportunity to participate in shaping the educational process. The cost would be very small in relation to the valuable information obtained.

It is obvious that the student reactions should not be the sole criterion in evaluating the school and its teachers, administrators and curriculum. Nevertheless, it would be a vast improvement over the present situation where we have no idea whether the high school years, for example, have promoted significant and useful learning in an individual student, or whether they have stifled it.

Other Reasons

The absence of feedback is not the only reason for the resistance to change by our educational system. I will mention briefly two more.

THE NEED FOR CONFORMISTS?

Does our society, oriented as it is toward industrial, technological and military goals, need vast numbers of conformists to make it operate successfully? I think you would find few people who would openly argue that this is our need. Yet I believe that at an unconscious or un verbalized level, there is this desire for the products of our schools to be obedient, good followers, willing to be led. Those who are independent, who think for themselves tend to "rock the boat." It is easier to manage an industry or an army with men and women who have learned to conform to the rules.

Actually this is, in our present critical situation, a most short-sighted view. Our industrial production is slowly passing into the hands of less developed countries. Our technology is overreaching itself and is the cause of enormous pollution and waste. Our military, in its attempt to defend, is threatening us all with annihilation. In this situation we are in dire need of critical, independent thinking, creative problem-solving, if we are to remain a viable culture. We need precisely the kind of learners who develop in a person-centered school.

A RELUCTANCE TO SHARE POWER

Another element that makes it difficult for many educators to change is the reluctance of those in power to share that power with the group for which they are responsible. Administrators pull away from sharing power with teachers; teachers are fearful of sharing power with their students. It seems too risky. It is easier to stay with the conventional authority structure - the hierarchical order - which is so prevalent in our society.

At a deeper level this means that we are fearful of adopting a genuinely democratic philosophy. The belief that in the long run the best decisions are made by the people is a concept we rarely utilize in practice. The fact that our country was founded on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to participate in making the decision, is all too easily

forgotten. We do not recognize that a slogan of that time, "No taxation without representation," conveys a meaning which is relevant to every institution in our country. In our schools today it could be crudely translated into such slogans as: "No curriculum without student participation;" "No educational policies without representation of those affected by the policies."

What is represented in this book is the conviction that a democratic way, based on a fundamental trust in persons, is applicable and effective in education.

What this means - as exemplified by the many educators who have presented their experiences in these pages - is that the educator takes the risk of empowering the student to take an active participatory part in his or her own educational process. It is putting a democratic philosophy into action in the classroom. And there is ample evidence that in our society, especially at this time, this is a frightening thing to do.

The Final Issue

Here then is the challenge of this book. What do we, the people, want from our schools? What do we hope for, in the students who emerge? What sort of young citizens do we need and want in our society?

We have shown that very diverse individuals, working at various educational levels, with different intellectual interests, can bring into being a learning environment in which there is responsible freedom. These facilitators of learning create a humane climate in which, being themselves real persons, they also respect the personhood of the student. In this climate there is understanding, caring, stimulation. And we have seen students respond with an avid interest in learning, with a growing confidence in self, with independence, with creative energy.

We have made available the evidence, gleaned from far-reaching research, which shows that more effective learning takes place in such classrooms than in the traditional class. It is also clear that a host of other desirable outcomes - more regular attendance, better morale, less vandalism - follow when the teacher personifies a facilitative approach.

We have endeavored to make it clear that the philosophy underlying such a person-centered approach is one that is consistent with the values, the goals, the ideals that have historically been the spirit of our democracy.

We have set forth openly the risks, the difficulties of adopting such an approach and the obstacles society places in its way. To be fully human, to trust in persons, to grant freedom with responsibility - these are not easy to achieve. The way we have presented is a challenge. It involves change in our thinking, in our way of being, in our relationships with our students. It involves a difficult commitment to a democratic ideal.

It all boils down to the question we must ask, both individually and collectively: Do we dare?