Book Reviews

The Crisis of Mindlessness

An Essay Review
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Crisis in the Classroom

This is a time of fundamental uncertainty about the future of American society. Richard Hofstadter speaks of "a crisis of the spirit"; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., of "an extreme crisis of confidence." The pervasive malaise, the sense of unease have inevitably affected thinking about the public schools. There are those who would like to see the schools return to the teaching of traditional pieties and become bulwarks against "anarchy," perhaps even against change. There are others who perceive the schools as agents of a manipulative "establishment" and assert that only a system of independent schools can liberate the young to learn for themselves. It has long been assumed that education is somehow related to social change; but, in recent years, there has been little talk about how the schools bring change about or what that change ought to be. In 1937, John Dewey wrote that "the problem is not whether the schools should participate in the production of a future society (since they do anyway) but whether they should do it blindly and irresponsibly, or with the maximum possible of courageous intelligence and responsibility." Now Charles E. Silberman is saying that "mindlessness" accounts for what is wrong with American education. He means "the failure or refusal to think seriously about educational purpose, the reluctance to question established practice"—the very blindness and irresponsibility which concerned John Dewey thirty-three years ago.

Crisis in the Classroom was originally commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation of New York as part of the Carnegie Study of the Education of Educators. In the skilled, professional hands of Charles Silberman (working with an obviously gifted research staff), the book has become a fairly definitive overview of the state of American education today. Following Dewey and Lawrence A. Cremin, he recognizes that 'education' is a more inclusive concept than 'schooling' and devotes considerable space to universities, mass media, libraries, social agencies, the armed forces, and other institutions which educate with varying degrees of deliberateness. His main focus, however, is on the public school; and his primary objective, as we understand it, is to overcome mindlessness by indicating what can be done within the public school by individuals willing to think about what they are doing. If mindlessness is corrected by the kind of thinking which puts the child and his requirements above the demands of scheduling and order, he says, it will become possible to begin educating "for a creative, humane, sensitive life." Education consciously directed to such an end will lead to the emergence of a humane society, or what Dewey used to call a "learning society." The interesting thing about Silberman is that he appears to be convinced this can happen and will happen, cultural crises despite. His book, therefore, is tonic and heuristic. Identifying
specific possibilities of change and renewal, presenting a variety of models, it is clearly intended to stimulate people now working in the public schools to initiate their own reforms.

Silberman is a member of the board of editors of *Fortune* magazine and the author of two widely read books: *The Myths of Automation* and *Crisis in Black and White*. He has taught at Columbia University and City College; but he is neither an academic nor an educationist. His vantage point is that of the informed, interested journalist recently introduced to a challenging new field by such prominent insiders as John Goodlad, Lawrence Cremin, and Kenneth Clark. During the three and a half years in which his book has been in preparation, he and his staff have traveled much, in this country and in England; and they have observed expertly, often with empathy. There are, in consequence, numerous "items," anecdotal reports of what actually happens in classrooms; dreadful incidents of maltreatment and humiliation; examples of "informal education" at its best; instances "of discovery and cognitive learning which are a delight to read. Some of the concreteness and immediacy of Philip W. Jackson's *Life In Classrooms* (an important resource for Silberman) is present in these pages; and there are moments when particular children come to life and steal the scene. Gazella, observed in a Harlem school, is one. She "has been flirting as she works with pencil and paper" and hands the visitor a note saying that she has a new teacher, and "I feel good and not bad." Denise is another: she promises to teach the visitor a new game "another day." Mexican children create a "talking mural" about a citrus grove; one of Arthur Pearl's black freshmen at the University of Oregon tells how "Pearl builds something in you—strength"; self-confident British primary school children weigh and measure in preparation for baking a cake; a little boy in North Dakota, working with a complicated mathematical game, tells the visitor, "Last year we had to work all the time. Now we can play all the time." Somehow, especially in the informal classroom, the sound of vitality is made audible; learning is made visible—interested children learning how to learn.

Spontaneity, activity, joy: these are the great goods for Charles Silberman; and he is convinced they are realizable in every public school. He is capable of the same outrage and indignation the various "romantic" critics express when confronted with sterility in the classroom, tasteless atmospheres, the obsession with order and control. In fact, when selections from his book were published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, they were entitled "Murder in the Schoolroom." But, for all his shocked anger in the face of what Erik Erikson calls the "mutilation" of children's minds, Silberman differentiates himself sharply from critics of education like Edgar Friedenberg, John Holt, Jonathan Kozol, and (to some degree) Paul Goodman. Reading them, he writes, "one might think that the schools are staffed by sadists and clods who are drawn into teaching by the lure of upward mobility and the opportunity to take out their anger ... on their students." He goes on:

This impression is conveyed less by explicit statement than by nuance and tone—a kind of "aristocratic insouciance," as David Riesman calls it, which these writers affect, in turn reflecting the general snobbery of the educated upper middle class toward the white collar, lower middle-class world of teachers, social workers, and policemen. This snobbery has become, in recent years, a nasty and sometimes
spiteful form of bigotry on the part of many self-made intellectuals, who seem to feel the need to demonstrate their moral and cultural superiority to the lower middle class from which they escaped.

Silberman makes the significant point that most teachers are "decent, honest, well-intentioned" people who behave like "the caring, concerned people they would like to be" once they find themselves in an "atmosphere of freedom and trust." Referring to *The School As A Center of Inquiry* (by Teachers College's Dean Robert Schaefer), he reminds the reader of the dreariness, the loneliness, the "blight" characteristic of most teachers' physical and social environments. If set free to open their own classrooms for talk, activity, and engaged learning, teachers might well give up their preoccupation with rules and regulations. All depends on how they are evaluated and on what help is provided. Silberman finds much to admire in the administrative flexibility achieved by British schools and in the functions of the teaching "Head" of each new primary school. Administrators, supervisors, and teachers, he suggests, should collaborate in maximizing occasions for learning and structuring environments which change in response to children's interests and activities. But the teacher should be granted a meaningful autonomy, so that he or she also can be liberated to inquire and (in responding to diverse children) to learn.

It is evident that the thought of John Dewey, or some aspects of his thought, has had a pronounced effect on Silberman; and, unlike certain curriculum reformers of the past decade, he openly acknowledges his debt. This is not to say, however, that *Crisis in the Classroom* is a latter-day argument for "progressive education" as it developed in the '20s and '30s. Silberman speaks several times of the "vulgarization" of Dewey's ideas, of progressive schools which were "perversions of the ideal." He uses Dewey's argument in *Experience And Education* and in a *New Republic* article written in 1930 to emphasize Dewey's own skepticism with respect to progressivism as it developed over time. ("The weakness of existing progressive education," wrote Dewey, "is due to the meager knowledge which anyone has regarding the conditions and laws of continuity which govern the development of mental power.") The main point, of course, was—as Dewey also said—that too many progressive schools lacked "intellectual control through significant subject matter"; and this is part of what contributed to the demise of progressivism after the 1930s. But Silberman lays considerable stress upon the "success" of progressivism in this country in those early days and lists a number of school systems which instituted progressive programs or "aspects of progressive techniques." We find a degree of oversimplification in this, as we do in Silberman's assertion that "The experience of history thus suggests that Americans, no less than Englishmen, are capable of accepting informal education for their children."

The opening chapters of the book, do, however, succeed in defining present situations in which Dewey's relevance is being newly recognized. As a matter of fact, we can think of few current texts which provide such an inclusive and readable overview of recent educational history. Silberman pays proper heed to unrest, disruption, and changing expectations; to the predicaments of higher education; to the troublesome confusion of "authority" with "power"; to the changes in life-style to which the media (mindlessly)
respond. He retraces the immigrant experiences, the development of the "meritocracy," the rise of a "credential" society, the problems of poverty, and the difficulties facing the urban schools.

Not only does he make the issue of disadvantage central; he presents a detailed and enlightening account of the controversies over the Coleman Report on Educational Equality and, most particularly, over the notorious article written by Arthur Jensen for the Harvard Educational Review. Silberman is to be commended for the clear explication he provides for research that has been over-popularized and widely misunderstood. He is to be commended too for his exposure of its loopholes and glaring errors. Without hedging, he says categorically that "Jensen's argument that black-white IQ differences are largely genetic in origin simply does not stand." Jensen's treatment of environment, he adds, is "simplistic almost to the point of caricature"; and he appends a useful discussion (one of the most readable we have seen) of the complex of cultural factors, not necessarily associated with poverty and social class, which inhibit poor children's development. Among these, of course, are the language used, the child-rearing practices, and the values and attitudes transmitted, "all of which may vary substantially from one ethnic, racial, or religious group to another within the same socioeconomic class." Covering Martin Deutsch's research, Basil Bernstein's, and others', Silberman concludes that the failures of the slum schools are mainly due to the peculiar mindlessness which leads people to focus on why disadvantaged children fail instead of turning their attention to the insufficiencies of their schools. Summoning the examples of the dropout street academies and Harlem Prep in New York, talking about the very real achievements of Harlem's John H. Finley School, he shows that when schools are adjusted to fit children, learning (even advances in reading) can begin. When attention is paid to the dangers of self-fulfilling prophecies, when teachers become aware enough to avoid communicating the idea that poor children are "worthless," when something meaningful is done to build self-esteem, disadvantaged children—like all others—begin to respond positively to what is offered in the way of possibility.

None of this is new to readers of journals like The Record or Saturday Review. None of it will come as a surprise to readers of Herbert Kohl, George Dennison, Paul Goodman, or Kenneth Clark. But there is something encouraging about the fact that a reporter with the "clout" of the Carnegie Corporation behind him feels justified in breaking through the endless debates, the prolonged mea cul-pas, and coming up with positive assertions about a humane education for all. Once again, it comes down to planning for the "open classroom," a richly structured environment, self-motivated activity, and the kind of teaching that is geared to the individual rather than to an undifferentiated "grade."

What of the great educational reforms undertaken before and after the Sputnik panic of 1957? What of all the promises made on behalf of computers and programed instruction? What of the curriculum reform movement and the "teacher-proof curricula" prepared by university men for the schools they had so long ignored? There is a certain irony in the tale, as Silberman tells it; and he tells it sketchily but well. We read again about team teaching, nongraded elementary schools, the "new biology," the "new physics," all repeatedly "blunted," Silberman says, "on the classroom door."
There is a great deal of chatter, to be sure, about teaching students the structure of each discipline, about teaching them how to learn, about teaching basic concepts... But if one looks at what actually goes on in the classroom—the kinds of texts students read and the kind of homework they are assigned as well as the nature of classroom discussion and the kinds of tests teachers give—he discovers that the great bulk of students' time is still devoted to detail, most of it trivial, much of it factually incorrect, and almost all of it unrelated to any concept, structure, cognitive strategy, or indeed anything other than the lesson plan.

The reasons for the failure are manifold. For one thing, the reformers were unaware that almost everything they were saying had been said before by John Dewey, Boyd Bode, Harold Rugg, and others, and that almost everything they were doing had been attempted before. For another thing, "they perpetuated the false dichotomy that the schools must be either child-centered or subject-centered"; and they, in opposition to the "vulgarizers" of progressivism, placed all their emphasis on subject matter and neglected children's needs. Just as important: the reformers did not engage classroom teachers in the development of the new curricula, nor did they encourage (or even permit) a spirit of inquiry among the teachers actually concerned. Moreover, they neglected to ask what Silberman believes to be the crucial questions respecting the purposes of education: questions about the kind of human being they expected to see emerge; questions about the worth of various kinds of knowledge; questions about the direction of social change. Returning to Professor Cremin once again, Silberman underlines the observation that "to refuse to look at curricula in their entirety is to relegate to interschool politics a series of decisions that ought to call into play the most fundamental philosophical principles."

Granting the necessity to "do" philosophy with respect to curriculum and methods of teaching, not to speak of the aims of education, we wonder why Silberman has excluded contemporary educational philosophy from his bibliography. Apart from John Dewey, Alfred North Whitehead and Marjorie Grene are the only practicing twentieth century philosophers he refers to in his text. A man so well-informed about the educational scene cannot be wholly innocent of the work done by men like Philip Phenix, Harry Broudy, James R. McClellan, Jr., I. B. Berkson, B. Othanel Smith, Robert Ennis, Philip Smith, and numerous other scholars in the field. He does justice to the work of Jean Piaget, Noam Chomsky, Robert Merton, Robert Nisbet, Lee Cronbach, and other representatives of the behavioral and social sciences. He properly acknowledges the contributions made to "informal education" by such innovative, creative teachers as Lillian Weber, Lore Rasmussen, and Marie Hughes, each of whom (in New York City, Philadelphia, and Tucson respectively) is providing living proof that the "open classroom" is as feasible in slums as it is in suburbs—in black, white, and Mexican-American communities equally. He recognizes the considerable achievement of the New School of Behavioral Studies in Education in North Dakota; the work done in secondary education by John Bremer in Philadelphia's Parkway Program, and the successful experiment being carried on by Robert Schwartz and his Harvard colleagues at John Adams High School in Oregon. It is at least worthy of note that, for all his concern with problems distinctively susceptible to philosophical examination, Silberman acknowledges none of the work now being done in
language philosophy, moral philosophy, social philosophy, aesthetics, existentialism, or phenomenology. "Philosophy," Dewey wrote in *Democracy And Education*, "is thinking what the known demands of us—what responsive attitude it exacts. It is an idea of what is possible, not an accomplished fact." There is a sense in which Charles Silberman enters the philosophic domain as soon as he begins talking of "what the known demands" and, certainly, when he begins stressing the importance of clear "purposes." His book would have benefited from an exposure to ongoing educational philosophy; the teachers who will read him would be far more likely to think about what they are doing if they could be introduced to the special sort of self-consciousness and clarity made possible by engagement with philosophy.

We feel the lack of a philosophic orientation most keenly when we reach the proposals for teacher education with which this fine, flawed book concludes. Whitehead provides the text at this point: only teachers who are free can work to liberate the young. Silberman, still depending on John Dewey and his notion of continuing learning, says eloquently: "To be an educator is to understand something of how to make one's education effective in the real world, of how to apply knowledge to the life one lives and the society in which one lives it—in a word, to know what is relevant—and how to make knowledge relevant." Teaching, he dares to say, is "the ultimate liberal art"; and educating teachers should be a central concern of the college or university. The rich, spontaneous educational experiences described in the course of the book can only be assured when there is a "synergistic relationship between the colleges and universities and the public schools," when the serious study of education and educational purpose becomes the core of the liberal arts curriculum.

Quixotic? Perhaps. Utopian? Maybe so. Nevertheless, we think Charles Silberman has performed a great service, if only because his book may stimulate individuals to effect some changes in their own classrooms. At this moment in our history, that may be enough to expect. The increasing polarization of our nation; the continuing war; the "benign neglect"—not only of black people's needs, but of educational needs—being practiced by the federal government; the threats of repression: all these factors prevent us from sharing Silberman's appealing optimism.

We share his hopes for a humane society. We are pleased and impressed by his Deweyan affirmations. We also believe that free days, open classrooms, and carefully structured learning environments will save the lives of many schoolchildren and help them learn to learn. But we are much afraid that the "mindlessness" so effectively challenged by Charles Silberman is not the only obstacle to a transformation of the schools. There may be an entire civilization to be remade.