

John W. Friesen

Some Thoughts About Critical Thinking as an Objective for Public Schools

Two official documents developed in Canada recently have clearly emphasized the development of individual autonomy and independent thinking as educational goals for the pupils in our schools.¹ Although curriculum guides have for some time paid lip service to these themes, official reports are intended to reinforce what are essentially sound educational practices. One might easily raise questions about the practicality of urging students to develop entirely personal patterns of value and thought, but no one appears to have devoted time to this enterprise. The task is important in light of the fact that students still graduate from public schools to take their places in a society in which norms and laws govern a large portion of human behaviors. This paper is intended to raise some of those related matters.

critical analysis and school curricula

One of the influential manuals advocating the adoption of independent critical thinking was authored in 1966 by Louis E. Raths and colleagues.² Its essential goal was to provide teachers with a theory and a list of techniques designed to turn the average classroom learning situation into a forum for individual inquiry and discussion.³ Raths' assumption supporting his approach includes an explicit belief in the idea that students, regardless of age, are able to think independently, that they *should* think independently, and that they have ample data on hand at any given moment to reflect meaningfully on any item under consideration. This concern is predicated on the observation that too much confusion surrounds decision-making today, people are not really aware of the implications of their beliefs or of statements they make and rarely take time to consider them.⁴ Raths would have

schools occupy themselves with affording students opportunities to do so through the use of techniques which place the onus of noting the implications of a particular statement on the student himself.⁵

The fundamental feature of Raths' methodology consists of an alert teacher's listening for the student's value-laden kinds of expression and immediately following them up, through ordinary conversation or through use of a specific technique to encourage the student to consider the ramifications of his utterance. Examples of the clarifying response include questions such as: "Is this something you prize?" "Are you glad about that?" "Did you consider any alternatives?" "Is that important to you?" In each instance the emphasis is on student consideration and reflection; the teacher simply negotiates three or four rounds of exchange with the student, then breaks off the conversation with some noncommittal but honest phrase such as "Nice talking to you," "I see better what you mean now," or "Got to get to my next class," or "Let's talk about this another time, shall we?"⁶ The teacher does not have to turn the student aside after the brief dialogue, but longer exchanges do not necessarily enhance the objective of the method.

It would not be fair to say that the Raths' approach has been adopted *in toto* by school curriculum framers, although the resemblance of contemporary social studies materials to the value clarification method is significant. The list of studies offered by Raths involving the method at elementary, secondary and college levels is impressive, but other curriculum sources stress the same approach. In one curriculum guide, for example, it is suggested that values should be discussed in class without trying to reach a consensus in order to allow students to think for themselves, and to reflect on the validity of values they have learned in the home, on the playground, or in the wider community.⁷ The teacher sustains and reinforces student interest by acting as a fellow inquirer who has no final and absolute answers to offer. Any discussion of value situations with the objective of identifying a "last frontier" of value existence is irrelevant to the process; the fundamental intent is the process itself.

A recent curriculum guide for Alberta junior high school social studies stresses as goals the attainment of analytic skills and reflective thinking on the part of students but recognizes, as well, the social obligations of group participation. To this end it stresses that students should interpret the feelings and

ideas of others, respond to them in appropriate fashion, express their own feelings and ideas, and cooperate with others, *though not to the extent of compromising with basic values.*⁸ The senior social studies guide for the same Province similarly stresses that students should become aware of values, respond to values, accept values, but conceptualize *their own* values through the autonomous organization of a value system. While it acknowledges that students *will* develop values on their own, it emphasizes that the end result should be the students' own preferences.⁹

existentialism and school values

It seems apparent that such developments as the Progressive Education movement, the freeing of educational systematization, and the application of existential philosophy to educational situations have had a marked effect on bringing into being the current emphases on value clarification, the freedom of the individual, and autonomy in value choosing. George Kneller, for example, postulates that the teacher must make clear in the educational situation that there is no value apart from the action which the child may care to express.¹⁰ It is the obligation of the teacher to instruct the pupil that he is responsible for his own actions; the worst possible course of action is for a person to take his cue from the crowd. Thus the teacher cannot make choices for the individual but he has to indicate to the student that the latter cannot be shielded from the consequences of his own acts. Likewise, "the student must recognize the inevitability of periods of intense frustration and loneliness; he must cultivate self-reliance as a key character trait."¹¹

Van Cleve Morris shows the implications of existentialism applied to education through a discussion of the metaphor of the moral advisor, and makes the point that though an individual may seek advice in regard to particular situations, he is not bound to that advice and, in fact, he *must* weigh its advantages and decide personally to accept or disregard it. The inevitable and only authentic decision is the conclusion that each individual is locked in to himself; he must make his own advice.¹²

Logically, it becomes the responsibility of the school, if it is properly functional as an existentially-oriented institution, to bring the student awareness of the truth of this proposition. Thus the goal of education is two-pronged; the individual is

to be given every opportunity to assess his situation and to formulate a personal set of values, and the school is to create an appropriate environment, yet not interfere in the student's personal decision-making process. Both goals bring into focus the operation of critical thinking in that the student will need constantly to evaluate forces, opinions, and influences around him in order to authenticate his own value system. Even the environment of the school should be under scrutiny of the authenticating student, for to be consistent with its own definition, critical analysis cannot play favorites with subject matter and every facet of the educational milieu thus constitutes a just object for examination, analysis and, perhaps, rejection or acceptance. Existential literature finds its basis in the premise that choosing, analyzing, and autonomous functioning stem from the very nature of man; a discovery of this truth leads the individual to comprehend that he cannot escape being the creator of his own values for, by nature of his existence, he cannot escape the obligation of choosing.¹³

These approaches have found considerable acceptance, and their promotion is not without merit; however, some caution should be taken to keep in mind several basic matters which demand consideration.

three thoughts on critical thinking

First of all, critical thinking as an educational concern seems to derive from a progressivist genealogy, but its stress is less oriented to the promotion of meaningful experiences for students. Instead, its central theme seems to be directing students toward a careful analysis of their own experiences. No attempt is made to furnish particular subject matter content to students; the assumption is made that they will manage to procure a sufficient amount of content on their own. Raths admits that his value clarification method is helpful for the introduction of new materials, but he provides no hint as to what that content might be or where it might be procured. Perhaps the point is that this does not matter because so long as the student is proceeding along clarificatory lines, he will judiciously handle any and all content.¹⁴

But what about the selection of formal content? Has the school no responsibility in at least making available certain kinds of knowledge about the society in which it functions and to which it (the school) may be responsible? Can content be left to the chance experiences of students or entrusted to the

bombardment of opinionated journalists, media programming, or ordinary social interaction and communication? While it cannot be argued that a critical examination of data surrounding one's life-space is without value, it is probably not wise to ignore the issue of content altogether and stress only a process such as analysis. We seem to have run the gamut in education from intricately prepared teacher manuals listing hosts of specific objectives, to no curriculum at all other than a sharing of the playground experiences which students select. If critical thinking should become the singular concern of the educational endeavor, the question of content may be left to other sources to resolve, sources less competent than the school in terms of learning theory, child psychology, and methodology. It is abundantly clear that students need to develop the skills of critical thinking, but it is also evident that they will need something to think about. It would be better to do some critical thinking about that matter now rather than later.

A *second* closely related question has to do with the items to be analyzed and appropriated by students in the classroom. One of the misuses of John Dewey's experimentalism has been an undue emphasis on student experiences as content for classroom deliberation. Some educators have been led to conclude that, since Dewey emphasized the incorporation of individual experiences in the classroom, this implied the exclusion of everything else. The conclusion has been that rigorous research, scholarly writing, and an investigation of "heavy" reading materials have little relevance for the classroom unless they are voluntarily appropriated by students from their own experiential fields of inquiry.¹⁵

The debate between progressivists and perennialists in so far as curriculum content is concerned has filled volumes. The latter group has continually urged accentuation on content and method instead of student experience, perhaps at the expense of student interest and motivation. A revival of classical concerns is not necessarily desirable at the present time, however, concerns of the past may need occasionally to be resurrected. It might prove to be a boon to students to be able to ferret out facts and data which might generate insights on a particular subject under scrutiny rather than be forced to perform the latter on the basis of inadequate conceptions even if these have been personally and experientially derived. The question to be answered by educators then, is what will be the nature of research and scholarly effort in the school, if any,

and what kinds of measures will be undertaken to provide students with the related skills?"⁶

A *third* question, and possibly the most important, has to do with the outcomes of education. Purportedly, the school has a function to fulfill in terms of the roles and responsibilities students will eventually take on as full participants in adult society. Writers of the progressivist variety (notably John Dewey) made much of these responsibilities in relation to the concept of democracy urging that students be given the opportunity to practice democratic forms at school in order that they could participate more fully in society later.

Ernest Bayles notes that "democratic decision-making has to be a genuinely cooperative affair, for otherwise the advantages of thoughtful give-and-take among human minds, all seeking to find out *what* is right rather than to demonstrate *who* is right, are indeed lost."¹⁷ This does not deny independent thinking, for the capacity for independent development of insights is a focal objective of democratic education; it puts into perspective what the end goal of such thinking is — full and meaningful participation in the processes of decision-making concerning problems which affect the whole of society, not merely one individual. The crux of the matter is that if the student is to become an effective citizen of his country he will need to become equipped to handle both kinds of situations, that of forming independent judgements on certain matters, *and* also be able to participate in group decision-making when such is essential. In fact, it may be solely because an individual is capable of assessing problematic situations and formulating independent judgements about their resolution that he will be of advantage to groups. In other words, it is imperative that schools turn out students who *can* and *will* participate effectively in the life of their community as well as nationally and internationally.¹⁸ Merely stressing independent judgement ability without relating that skill to this social imperative constitutes an educational shortcoming.

Most educators today would probably agree with the statement that it is more important to teach people *how* to think rather than *what* to think on the grounds that the latter constitutes a form of indoctrination, violates the rights of the individual, and shortchanges the democratic process by strait-jacketing the development of intellectual contribution an individual might otherwise make.

One might wish to question the sometimes pungent way in

which the responsibilities of democracy can be presented, particularly in terms of restricting individual freedom. The outcome of such inquiry, however, is usually an attempt to formulate an alternative mode for social procedure, a task which is probably as difficult to achieve as it is to appreciate the strange admixture of individualism and group control that democracy has to offer. In any event, the fact that democratic societies are founded on the belief that an educated citizenry can govern itself intelligently and make wise decisions obligates the school to see to it that individuals have the knowledge and skills necessary to make such decisions.¹⁹

To conclude, the basic point of this paper perhaps requires some recapitulation, and it is this. The emphasis on promoting independent critical thought on the part of students, as opposed to regarding the teacher as a disseminator of knowledge, is the result of recent educational theorizing and is a commendable development. However, unless the formation of this skill is accompanied within the context of school and related to his inevitable participation in society, the pendulum of another educational innovation will have swung too far.

references

1. Reference here is to *Living and Learning*, Report of the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario. Ontario Department of Education, 1968, p. 69 and *A Choice of Futures*, Report of the Commission on Educational Planning, Edmonton: Queen's Printer, 1972, pp. 46-48. Evidence of the "critical thinking" syndrome can further be found in a recent study by H. T. Coutts and S. C. T. Clarke, *The Goals of Teacher Education*, Edmonton: The Alberta Teachers Association, 1972. The authors surveyed parents, teachers, trustees, university educators and students as to ranking educational goals for Alberta teacher education. The goal which was ranked first of thirty-six by the groups was, "Teacher education should prepare teachers who can foster in students the ability to inquire, to analyze, to generalize, i.e. to think."
2. Louis E. Rath, Merrill Harmin and Sidney B. Simon, *Values and Teaching: Working with Values in the Classroom*, Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Books, 1966. Other manuals which support this same theme are: Michael Belok, et al. *Approaches to Values in Education*, Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1966; Gail M. Inlow, *Values in Transition: A Handbook*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1972; Abraham H. Maslow (ed.), *New Knowledge in Human Values*, Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1970; and John Martin Rich, *Education and Human Values*, Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1968.
3. Rath's approach varies slightly from that of his colleagues who also urge independent thinking (reflective thinking), e.g. Ernest E. Bayles, *Pragmatism in Education*, New York: Harper and Row,

- 1966; Morris L. Bigge, and Maurice P. Hunt. *Psychological Foundations of Education*, New York: Harper and Row, 1962; and Maurice P. Hunt and Laurence E. Metcalf, *Teaching High School Social Studies*, New York: Harper and Row, 1955. (The latter two books have since been revised.) Unlike these authors, Rath's does not relate the independent thinking process to any end other than immediate clarification of ideas.
4. Rath's, *op cit.*, p. 5.
 5. The favorite method is the "clarifying response" which consists of a teacher's following up on any value utterance made by a student. Each episode is carefully concluded void of any judgemental reaction by the teacher. Other similar methods concocted by Rath's include the value-sheet, role-playing, the contrived lesson, devil's advocate, thought sheets, etc.
 6. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
 7. Edwin Fenton, *Developing a New Curriculum: A Rationale for the Holt Social Studies Curriculum*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967, p. 4.
 8. Province of Alberta, Department of Education, 1971, p. 5. Italics mine.
 9. Province of Alberta, Department of Education, 1970, p. 2. Italics mine.
 10. George F. Kneller, *Existentialism and Education*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1958, pp. 2-3.
 11. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.
 12. Van Cleve Morris, *Existentialism in Education*, New York: Harper and Row, 1966, p. 39.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
 14. Ernest E. Bayles agrees with John Dewey in stressing that if you only let a child indulge himself without guidance, "There is no growth that is more accidental." In other words, you cannot merely depend on "instincts" for curriculum content and procedure. Ernest E. Bayles and Bruce L. Hood, *Growth of American Educational Thought and Practice*, New York: Harper and Row, 1966, p. 222.
 15. A related notion is that curricula ought to be organized around "behavioral objectives" rather than content. See John I. Goodlad and Robert H. Anderson, *The Nongraded Classroom*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963, p. 82.
 16. It is important to note that factual information is not ordinarily obtainable by "thinking"; it has to be gathered. Ernest E. Bayles, *Pragmatism in Education*, p. 105.
 17. Ernest E. Bayles, *Pragmatism in Education*, p. 75.
 18. Frank Simon, *A Reconstructive Approach to Problem Solving in the Social Studies*, Calgary, Alberta: John D. McAra Ltd., 1970, p. 69.
 19. John Martin Rich, *Education and Human Values*, Reading Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1968, pp. 13-14. Italics mine.