

...a school and jail

thread out of learning

Some changes

...just because they have not changed to any great degree over time, and what was good then is not necessarily good now, and what was thought to be good then was not even necessarily good. We are left with some fundamental questions.

...chool?

...ake place through some magical quality of my being in a school building, it could have happened anywhere. I am also fond of saying that most of my teachers were fascists. Yet, if you judge my situation comparatively, it is obvious that I have little to complain of: I was never strapped or picked on by a teacher, it was not a lonely place for me. In the little grades I loved school, I used to carry books home whether I had homework or not. I really liked the idea of school. But it was not all that it could have been. The values of the society that the school system reflects are technological ones, ones geared toward impersonality and progress. Therefore it follows that the school system reflects the same values of impersonality and progress; and in the present methods of schooling the goal is more the production of individuals possessed of a technological ego. But, then, we are not individuals any more, we are mass man. Sheer numbers of students makes it appear feasible to go on educating in the traditional manner; and economically this is probably true. If our goal is the production of X number of educated finished products, we are probably doing so relatively efficiently. A school division gets a certain allotment of funds per child, and it is convenient to think that all needs are being cared for.

I never encountered streaming until I was in the fifth grade. At that time, we moved from a very small town to one slightly larger, one that had more than one class per grade. For the first two days I was in the dumb room, then they put me in the smart room. During those two days I do not recall being asked a question, nor were we given any assignments. Therefore, how could they have known whether I was dumb or smart? They judged by my previous school record. But still, I did not want to be moved because I had made a friend in the other room. But they did not ask me where I wanted to be, I thought it was fate operating, you know, I must be smart so I belong in the other room. It took me until grade nine to get rid of my vanity. How long does it take those kids who are always placed in the dumb room to rid themselves of the feeling that they are stupid or slow. I think that when one is so young that it takes very powerful counter-action on the outside to contradict what one has been told while they are in school. This is because, during early school years, what happens there is very important, school still maintains its mythical quality for most people. And there the damage is done. We are led to believe that school is preparation for life (sic), if we are not standard successes there, what is life going to be like?

In *The Open Classroom*, Kohl begins with a discussion of the authority structure.

Traditionally, and still in most schools, the principal is at the top, the teacher is in the middle, and the students are at the bottom. The number one priority is power and its accompanying discipline. The criterion for judging the worth of most teachers is their ability to control their class. This attitude views children as "a reckless, unpredictable, immoral, and dangerous enemy." Clearly, in this sort of atmosphere the only ones who will learn anything are those who are frightened or those who do not realize what is going on or those who figure the word at the end of the line is worth twelve years of such shit. He talks about a pathology of the classroom, an obsession with the traditional textbooks and standard curriculum, and an obstinate inability to see any other method of teaching as being worthwhile. Little kids learn early to yield to he who wields the big stick. And teachers learn early to obey the orders from their superiors. Students have no power nor rights to question, or make choices concerning their education. Teachers must learn ways of abrogating the authority traditionally implied within their role as a teacher. Holt speaks of a natural authority, an authority gained through greater experience, and this should be given the respect it deserves. But to respect someone because we are told to is not quite the same thing.

The sand box

Open classrooms should not be equated with permissiveness, but they should be atmospheres in which everyone can be themselves, the teacher as well as the students. Three methods of maintaining control in a classroom are routine, the traditional authority of the teacher, and the repetitiveness of the curriculum. Roll call and bathroom parade and other such nonsense routines take up time and serve as rules; I think the very repetitiveness of such procedures bores everyone, everyone is so bored by the whole thing that they no longer question it. The same is true of the curriculum. Teaching the same thing, in the same time slot, day after day, reduces teaching to a mechanical performance. The teacher gives the same lesson, asks the same questions and gets the same answers. Control is no problem, everyone just continues playing their appointed roles.

As long ago as 1927, Huxley put out a book called *Proper Studies*, and in it he discussed the Dalton Plan. He says, "our educational policy is based on two enormous fallacies. The first is that which regards the intellect as a box inhabited by autonomous ideas, whose numbers can be increased by the simple process of opening the lid of the box and introducing new ideas. The second fallacy is, that all minds are alike and can profit by the same system of training. All official systems of education are systems for pumping the same knowledge by the same methods into radically different minds." I cannot see clear evidence where we have changed much since that time. Miss Pankhurst devised the Dalton Plan as a system of individual education that could be applied and carried out for everyone. The first step in

the Daltonization of a school is to eliminate classrooms as such, and institute special rooms, subject laboratories, where the children go to learn a particular subject and to do their work for themselves. Each child can work at his own pace; he is given an assignment covering the whole year, but he can also accelerate and finish in a shorter time or he can take longer. The point is, that there is no division into grades, once the child has mastered the subject matter he is free to move on to something more complex. If he cannot master the subject, he is free to spend more time on it, and to get special help from the instructors. There is made available a lot of resource material, in essence, the child learns where to look for what he wants to know, rather than going through a regimen of memorizing facts.

Windows may help

Paul Goodman talks a lot about how he would like schooling to change. He says that the elementary grades serve the purpose of babysitting, and that the function of grade school is to undo the damage done in grade school, and so on. Does it follow that the function of a job is to undo the damage done in university? I doubt it. It is at this stage that those who have persevered to the degree level really put what they have learned into operation. They can perform quite well eight hours of being still, of doing what they are told, of thinking that what they are doing must be worthwhile because they are being paid well. Goodman also says that any more increases in the Gross National Product are superfluous; that is, government will not use the increase to better the quality of life in any human way, rather, what is being done is increasing super-highways, and giving oil companies tax incentives. Alberta had a one hundred million dollar surplus this year, derived mainly from oil surcharges.

This spring, I applied for a Provincial Government Student Loan. I did so because I had no money. At first they denied me because I had given up my provincial status because I had left the country for over a year. About a month later, after my case had gone before the Appeals Board, they gave me fifty dollars. What they explained to me as their hesitance in giving the money was that I might not pay it back. The implication was that I was a bad risk because I had gone travelling, and before I went, I had quit school.

We all know that that is not a nice thing to do. My parents did not think so either. My father says, quite humorously, that by the time I finish school, I will be getting the old age pension. I laughed when he said it, but he was right in a way. Compared to the world of work, school seems

like a not bad place to be, in terms of the number of hours of your life you spend involved in it. Holt says that it is before children ever enter school that they do their best learning. He says, "children have a style of learning that fits their condition, and which they use naturally and well until we train them out of it." Children approach the unknown without fear, as something about which they lack clear understanding, and if they are interested they will seek their own explanations. Schools think that children have to be coerced into learning, and once they have been coerced into a pattern, there will be rewards, high marks, diplomas, degrees, for those who have done well. It does not really matter what else you have learned, as long as you have done your lessons. Give an examination, and the ones who did poorly must obviously be either dumb or lazy, and those types are not really worth teaching. It would take up too much time to find out what they are really interested in, time that would distract the teacher from his or her fundamental job of priming the 'smart' kids for college.

A Dalton school requires a great deal of written work. The few Dalton schools that got off the ground abolished the unnecessary rule of silence in the classroom. Also gone was the forbidding of the children helping each other (we call it copying). This plan did not completely abolish class teaching. They found that certain subjects, such as arithmetic could be best learned with a combination of individual work and class work. I think things like music and dance work better if they are taught in a similar manner. Subjects like these require the student to obtain an understanding of rudiments and a suitable background understanding. The

continued page 13

