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Report on the Workshop on Education

Ramon C. Reyes

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Report on the Workshop on Education

RAMON C. REYES

Structurally, formal education fulfills three or four major functions within the contemporary human society: literacy training, cultural transmission, social criticism and innovation, manpower development. In this brief report, we shall deal mainly with the first and the third function of the educational system within the developing society. As to the others, I would say that the results of our workshop in these areas were quite minimal.

The ability to read and write represents for man a certain power which magnifies a thousand times his potential for symbolic behavior. The written word is the objectivation of human experience, empowering him with mental permutations impossible in a purely oral tradition. It affords him an infinitely broader horizon of communication extending both in space and time. It allows him the possibility of cultural accumulation, growth, and awareness required of a stable, historical community. Literacy is thus an important dimension of development. It is more than just the ability to write one's own name. More than just a linguistic skill, it is a process involving a whole cultural conversion.

Literacy approached in this integral manner is what the concept of *conscientizacian* means. Originally developed by Paulo Freire, formerly a professor of history and philosophy of

education at the University of Recife and now member of the staff of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, *conscientizacion's* basic principle is that literacy cannot be taught with words and concepts that have no existential significance for the student. Thus, the first task then of a literacy program is to study the context in which the illiterate lives in order to identify the central problems of his situation, and subsequently, in order to form an operative vocabulary exegetical and expressive of his world. The basic words selected must include the fundamental phonemes of the language, thus enabling the student to move gradually from simple letters and sounds to more complex formations. On the other hand, with the same words the student must be able to perceive adequately his contextual environment—social, cultural, political.

The second part of Paulo Freire's method is the development of teaching materials, as for example, a set of pictures designed to vivify for the student the words newly learnt as well as stimulate his thinking about the concrete relationships implied in these words. Thus, for example, picture A: that of a peasant carrying an axe, a tree standing in the background. The trainer elicits the meaning of the situation through questions: what is the peasant doing? Who made the axe? What is the difference between the origin of the tree and that of the axe? Thus, the student not only learns to recognize the written words for "axe" and "tree" but also comes to understand the existence of a world of nature as contrasted with a world of culture. He is made to realize that through work, man transforms his natural environment and creates a culture. Picture B: that of a group making music while a couple executes a folk dance. The student thus discovers that man creates not only tools for his material needs but also instruments for artistic expression. He learns to appreciate the vitality and originality of his culture. The man who composes folk music is as much an artist as a world-renowned composer. A key factor in this method is the trainer or coordinator, who is supposed to promote self-discovery through the exploration by the student himself of the various dimensions of the pictures presented. Borrowing from the techniques of group therapy, the method purports to move

the participant-students to move themselves into a deeper, more realistic awareness of themselves and of their contextual world.

After the initial stage of literacy, Freire's method calls for a follow-up phase characterised by a more advanced content of the reading materials. Here are some sample passages taken from a secondary level primer developed in the spirit of Freire's method:

"I live and I struggle. Pedro lives and struggles. The people live and struggle. I, Pedro, and the people struggle. We struggle to live. To live is to struggle.

"Pedro is disturbed and thinks. Why is our life so harsh? Why do so many children die here? Why don't people have housing? Why don't the people learn to read? Why aren't there schools for our children? Why do the people suffer so much injustice?"

One important observation expressed during the workshop was about the non-functionality of the literacy programs in many underdeveloped countries. If we take the case of the Philippines, for example, the reported literacy rate of Filipinos ten years and above is about 72%. We have other data however which show that it is only after high school or some ten years of schooling that the literacy program becomes of some considerable economic significance. On the other hand, we find that the highest rate of unemployment in our country is among college graduates whereas the lowest rate is among those who have had no formal schooling at all. Could the problem perhaps lie in the method we use in our literacy training program? Is there something we could learn from Paulo Freire's approach, for whom literacy, more than just the ability to write one's own name, involves a whole cultural conversion, a *conscientizacian*?

Another function of formal education is that of social criticism and innovation. It was probably the Sophists in the Greece of Antiquity that first started a program of formal schooling. For a fee they would give lessons to groups of young students. And one of their basic teachings was that there was a fundamental distinction between *nomos* and *phusis*, between social

convention and the nature of man. Thus, one of the powers they developed in their disciples was that of social criticism, for the measure of truth and reality was not convention, not law or society, but man. We see thus that even in the beginning of formal education, the function of social criticism was already present. Ultimately, man transcends society, and it is only in proportion as this sense of human transcendence is maintained that society can conserve itself and its capacity for innovation and change.

In this regard, the workshop group on education observed that school systems in underdeveloped countries usually tend to reinforce rather than challenge the basic social ills entrenched in the *status quo*. The group felt that this educational conformism could perhaps be traced back to a type of individualist ethic imparted by the schools.

A quasi-feudal type of community wherein economic activity is centered around the family unit producing what it consumes is bound to engender a type of ethic emphasizing commutative justice and the right of private property. A modern or modernizing society, on the other hand, premised on the principles of rationalized specialization and grand scale economy, is a society of interdependence in its very structure. Centered around the modern firm, in other words, around the concept of concentration of capital, concentration of technological and management skills, as well as the accessibility of a wide spectrum of raw and semi-processed materials on the one hand and a mass market on the other, we find within the modern social organization the emergence of a new phenomenon, that of *socialization*, in other words, a social mode of production, and thus a social mode of sharing the social product.

For the self-sufficient family unit, the sharing of the product posed no considerable problem since they themselves produced mostly what they consumed. In a modern monetarized economy, however, where the mechanism of sharing is bound to be more general and more abstract, coming in the forms of salaries, rents and profits, taxes, purchasing power, prices of commodities, educational opportunity, a school system that

continues to hold sacred traditional values of property and commutative justice and ignores other values of more recent relevance, such as those of efficient management, social responsibility, and social justice, would in effect be an unwitting instrument in the perpetuation of traditional social structures rendered obsolete and humanly oppressive by the changing situation in a developing society.

COMMENTS

DR. LINO Q. ARQUIZA

Education is really a process of transforming our behavior towards desirable ends. This is what most psychologists would say. And the classroom is the controlled environment designed to effect these desired changes. The curriculum constitutes the desired behavior changes (which are our cultural values) to be retained or to be changed, our habits, skills, even our literacy and knowledge and other aids, in other words, the objectives that we would like to achieve. Now, the curriculum is what we want to be transmitted, to be innovated, to be discarded, or to be substituted with something else. The teacher and his methods are the vehicle whereby these curricula are to be achieved within the classrooms. In other words, in the area of education these are the factors: transformation towards desirable ends, the classroom, the curriculum, the teacher, and his methods.

Education however does not take place only in the classroom. Knowledge takes place everywhere: here, at home, in the church, in public parks, even nightclubs, *social* clubs, or even in Rotary, Lions, or anywhere. Sometimes, what is learned in the classroom is negated outside by mass media communications like the movie; there might be radio programs that would negate what the classrooms are trying to propagate. Sometimes there is discontinuity in what is taught in the system, therefore, is only one of the vehicles of the educative process of the person. The system may be efficient but not effective as a transformer of culture. Why? Because it can be negated. I have here a relevant sample. We teach in our classrooms modesty and chastity; at least in the Philippine Christian College we try to help our students enjoy good morals but right across us is a nightclub. And some of our students, I was told, go from the classroom where they learn ethics to this nightclub. In the Philippine setting some external factors not within the control of the educator may negate the effectivity of classroom teaching.