

Critique of Self-Education

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An apparently new educational vogue under the name "*self-education*" (or sometimes "*challenge education*") is gaining momentum in parts of Canada and the United States; it purports to solve such major and perennial problems as student apathy, motivation to learn, and "*educational relevance*." A critical look at the movement reveals that many of the underlying ideas are re-emerging notions from so-called "progressive" and "radical" education. Some new practices and techniques, however, are advocated. The movement's scope allows for discussion under three broad interpretations of self-education. When viewed as education *of* the self, self-education is a conceptual truth about all education from which few, if any, conclusions for practice can be drawn. Viewed as education *about* the self, self-education is a positive stride forward in helping students adjust to adult society and the world of work, though as such it is not centrally concerned with *education*. Viewed as education *by* the self, self-education advances techniques such as *self-teaching*, *self-direction*, "*walkabout*," and *contract learning*, all of which are inappropriate practices for purposes of general education. They are inappropriate because the notions themselves are conceptually confused, because the practices are recommended on the basis of false empirical assumptions and an inadequate conception of education, and because the radical impact these practices may have on school and society has not been, and likely cannot be, justified.

Une nouvelle tendance en éducation appelée "auto-éducation" (self education) (et parfois "challenge education") gagne en popularité dans certaines régions du Canada et des États-Unis. L'auto-éducation prétend résoudre des problèmes à la fois sérieux et perpétuels tels que l'apathie chez les étudiants, le manque de motivation à apprendre et la pertinence des matières étudiées. Si l'on examine cette tendance de façon critique, on constate que les concepts qui la sous-tendent sont des notions empruntées à l'enseignement "progressif" et "radical" qui sont remises en évidence. Cependant, on préconise également des techniques et des concepts nouveaux. Cette nouvelle approche considère trois définitions de l'auto-éducation. Lorsqu'elle est considérée comme l'éducation *de* la personne, l'auto-éducation est définie comme une vérité inhérente à tous les systèmes d'éducation et qu'on ne peut tirer de conclusions (ou très peu) qui soient en faveur de leur utilisation. Lorsqu'elle est considérée comme l'éducation concernant – ayant trait à – la personne, elle est vue comme un pas en avant sur le plan de l'aide que l'on apporte aux étudiants afin de leur permettre de s'adapter à la société adulte, au marché du travail, bien que ces domaines ne soient pas directement reliés à l'éducation *par* la personne, elle préconise des techniques telles que l'auto-formation, l'initiative personnelle, l'exploration et le contrat d'apprentissage qui ne sont généralement pas indiqués dans l'enseignement traditionnel. Car des techniques ne sont pas clairement définies, qu'elles sont recommandées à partir de fausses hypothèses purement empiriques et à partir d'une conception erronée de l'éducation et enfin parce que l'impact que ces techniques pourraient avoir sur l'école et la société n'est pas encore, et ne peut probablement pas être justifié.

There is much to be admired in a "self-made" or "self-taught" man. We admire him for his devotion, endurance, dedication, and intense labour. He has, after all, achieved success as an artist, inventor, business man, or whatever, without the help of criticism, advice, direction, and stimulus of a teacher or master tradesman. But that is

also why our admiration might well be tinged with a sense of pity. We pity him for having so little help and having had to overcome such great odds, "... for having been the devoted pupil only of that solitary and untrained teacher, himself" (Ryle, 1967, p. 105). It is therefore puzzling that suggestions of self-teaching, self-learning, self-direction, and other activities characteristically engaged in by the self-made man, usually (but not exclusively) under the rubric of "self-education," should be hailed as a novel and remedial measure to correct the ills of the modern school.

Yet self-education is being advanced as an important recent educational development. Research into self-education is being conducted; courses on the subject are being offered; a growing literature on the topic is appearing. At Simon Fraser University, faculty time and effort as well as Faculty of Education space have been devoted to the study of self-education. Out of such studies there has emerged a private enterprise for the continued study and dissemination of self-education ideas, known as "Challenge Education Associates."¹ The Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University is also offering for credit experimental courses in self-education. Apparently there has been an enthusiastic reception of the notion by practitioners. This may be because of the extraordinary promise it is said to have. Gibbons and Phillips, for example, claim that "with a single, bold stroke" teachers and administrators will be able to solve the many problems facing secondary schools, problems ranging from fatalism and apathy to vandalism and drug abuse (Gibbons and Phillips, 1980, p. 1-4). What is more, this movement in self-education (challenge education) is reported to be uniquely distinguished as a trend-reverser by being a major Canadian educational idea having an impact on educational thought and practice in the United States. The driving force behind the movement is Maurice Gibbons of Simon Fraser University. He and his associates are also major contributors to the more recent literature on self-education and related notions (Gibbons, et al., 1970 to 1980).

Many of the themes discussed under the topic of self-education are not unfamiliar to students of education. Indeed, most of them can be found in one form or another in the so-called "progressive" and even "radical" educational movements dating back to Rousseau. The emphases on natural growth, freedom from constraint, individualization, practical and palpable utility, self-direction and self-teaching, minimization of instruction and institutional authority, self-actualization, and self-discovery are themes familiar to those who have read Rousseau, Dewey, Neill, Goodman, Reimer, and Illich. Self-education proponents lean heavily also on the works of psychologists such as Rogers, Maslow, and Perls in their theory and practice for helping students gain self-control, confidence, decisiveness (Gibbons, "Toward a Theory of Self-Directed Learning," 1978). What is new in the recent literature is an attempt to tie together these many themes into a coherent theory. This includes a series of

techniques such as individualized instruction, the “walkabout,” and contract learning for implementing self-education. Interesting claims are made about motivation to learn, ego development, and educational worth. But it is not readily apparent what is meant by many of the claims, what support they have in fact, and what justification there is for the values on which they are predicated. This paper is, therefore, an attempt to clarify what is (or could be) meant by the term “self-education,” to ascertain the status of the claims related to it in the hope of showing what kind of support and evidence they require, and to determine what is new and valuable about them.

What will be argued is, first, that self-education, when viewed as education *of* the self, is a conceptual truth about all education and that therefore the new movement is neither novel nor interesting nor the radical new pedagogy warranted on that account. Second, when “self-education” is viewed as education *about* the self, the movement does make good sense and has merit, but is not centrally concerned with *education*. The initial plausibility of it rests on a false assumption about human nature, growth, and development. Third, when self-education is viewed as education *by* the self, the new movement draws false conclusions for practice from conceptual confusions in the language of self-education, reveals a lack of clear vision of the nature of education, and makes unwarranted empirical and value assumptions. This analysis raises more questions than it answers, but the attempt may serve to invite others to join the debate before another vogue in education is established and publicly embraced only to be discarded again with the swing of the pendulum because it was poorly conceived and prematurely put into practice.

Since there is no generally accepted usage for the term “self-education,” the meaning attached to it must be derived from commonly understood meanings associated with “self” and “education” and from themes prominent in the emerging literature. Various and diverse interpretations can be expected.

SELF-EDUCATION AS EDUCATION OF THE SELF

At least one interpretation of self-education is that education is by its very nature a process of developing a “self,” a “person.” Though the average layman would probably not have any such idea in mind when reference is made to “self-education,” it nevertheless could occur (and has occurred) to reflective educational specialists that one sense of the term is centrally concerned with the development of a person’s awareness. The key to understanding such an interpretation of self-education is understanding what constitutes a person. A person, on this view, is someone who has developed, or is developing, a mind; the hallmark of mind is consciousness or awareness. That which distinguishes things with minds (such as

persons) from things without minds (such as machines, plants, and stones) is the fact that the former are aware (have consciousness) while the latter are not aware. Now the peculiar observation about consciousness is that to be conscious is to be conscious of, or about, something. One cannot be conscious of or about nothing. Even to be self-conscious is only to be aware about what one is conscious of. Things about which one can be conscious have to have an identity, a limitation, a parameter, distinguishing them from the pre-cognitive web of experience. What, then, enables us to select objects of consciousness? Concepts and propositions made up of concepts. The very possibility of consciously experiencing anything is our conceptualization of something. This conceptualization is not a private affair. It is the central feature of acquiring a public language which is the central notion of education. "The ideas and expectations of an individual centre of consciousness ... do not develop as deposits out of an atomic individual experience ... On the contrary, they are the product of initiation of an individual into public traditions enshrined in the language, concepts, beliefs, and rules of a society" (Peters, 1966, p. 48). The process whereby a child is guided to an understanding of a public language which marks out objects of consciousness in a public world is the process of education. The process of education is thus tantamount to the development of mind which is tantamount to the development of persons. This conception of self-education thus turns out to be a tautology. Education, by virtue of its meaning, could not be other than education of the self.

From this logical truth proponents of self-education draw at least two false conclusions. One is that mastery of curriculum content, based on public forms of knowledge and experience, must be relinquished as an educational goal. In the new pedagogy "teaching implies the assumption that content, sequence of learning, structure of knowledge and learning style are, or should be, individual and personal, and therefore cannot be presented" (Gibbons, 1970, p. 36). The pursuit of personal goals is encouraged and mastery of educational content discouraged. "Self-education can only truly occur when people are not compelled to learn and others are not obliged to teach them – especially not to teach them a particular subject-matter curriculum" (Gibbons and Phillips, 1980, p. 4). Why this recommendation? Because of two assumptions they make: (1) that personal and private knowledge is possible; and (2) that the acquisition of public knowledge militates against the development of selves. Both of these assumptions are false. As has already been alluded to above, private language and hence private personal knowledge are for logical reasons impossible, as Wittgenstein showed in *Philosophical Investigations*. Hamlyn similarly argues that, "the objectivity of a concept is bound up with the idea that it must be inter-subjective, inter-personal, just as knowledge is ... It is impossible to think of education and learning at all

except from a social point of view" (Hamlyn, 1967, pp. 39, 40). And for the same reason the second assumption is false. Not only does public knowledge not militate against development of the self; it is the only way for a rational conscious person to develop. Peters notes that "all the different options open to individuals are inescapably social in character ... The plea for the development of selves is always to be understood within a framework of shared valuations" (Peters, 1969, p. 7, 8).

The other false conclusion proponents of self-education draw because of the conceptual link between education and the development of the self is that teaching becomes largely unnecessary and undesirable. This follows from their assumption about the nature of knowledge. But if that assumption is false, then it is at least an open empirical question whether or not teaching should be abandoned. It certainly does not follow from the fact that all education is self-education (in the above sense) that children should be self-directed, self-taught, and learn without the benefit of teaching. To think so is falsely to conclude that an empirical generalization follows from a conceptual truth. As interpreted above, self-education is perfectly compatible with teachers teaching and children learning, even in a very conventional manner.

Tautologies, however, need not necessarily be trivial. Frequently they serve as important reminders about the genuine nature of a thing and cause us to reflect on it. If the expression "self-education" serves to remind teachers that their business is centrally that of developing awareness in children through conceptual growth and understanding, then the term serves a useful function. It points to the deleterious effects of conditioning, manipulation, indoctrination, meaningless memorization, and other forms of miseducation. It may be this emphasis that underlies recommendations by Gattegno (1976) and others for teachers to proceed the "silent way" or to "subject teaching to learning," suggesting that there is little educational significance in teaching activities which do not engage the conscious mind of the child. The term has another valuable function – to remind us that the long-term goal of all formal education is to encourage children and young people to acquire sufficient mastery of educationally valuable subject matter and to acquire interest and pleasure in its pursuit in order to continue that pursuit unassisted once they leave the formal school setting. One of the most important characteristics of the educated person is that he pursues worthwhile activities by himself without being required by others to do so. We can say then that the making of the "self-educating" person is the goal of all formal education. But, of course, it does not follow that with this goal for formal schooling children should become directors of their own education. There is, strictly speaking, nothing startling or novel in "self-education" when viewed as development of the self. Rather more, however, is at stake on our second interpretation.

SELF-EDUCATION AS EDUCATION ABOUT THE SELF

On this interpretation (again a rather unusual one for the average layman) the object of learning is the "self." The emphasis is on self-knowledge. Such investigation into the self has a two-fold purpose. The first is to discover something about the natural self for guidance in self-education, ensuring that self-directed choices will be in accord with one's true nature. The second purpose is to learn about the developed self to enhance wisdom in career and life-style choices.

Now it should be readily apparent that if one accepts the view that education is essentially the development of a person (Interpretation I), then learning about the self (Interpretation II) is logically impossible to achieve before I, because II presupposes I. One cannot learn about the self if there is as yet no self to learn about. But following upon I, II does have significance. To this we shall return shortly.

If one, however, does not accept I then self-education on the II interpretation is either implicitly or explicitly based on some theory of human nature, perhaps even a theory of a unique nature for each human being. That there is such appeal to human nature theories is apparent in the literature. Gibbons, for example, claims that the "model of self-education ... draws on the natural forces of human development" (Gibbons, 1978, p. 7). Elsewhere he refers to "activity which grow[s] out of their [children's] lives," "clarification of our own inner directives," "inner-directed act[s] of will," "the will [which] must mature," and "the process of self-education grow[ing] directly out of their [self-educated people's] lives" (Gibbons, 1978). These phrases in themselves do not articulate a clear view of human nature, but they do point to an unexpressed reliance on the unique qualities of individuals to account for their unique development. It is as though there is a force in each child which guides its development along predetermined (almost genetic) bends, inclinations, directions, fulfillments, and realizations. But the point is not so much that self-education theories do in fact rely on an unambiguous human nature theory as evident in the literature, but that they *must* rely on it if they do not accept the theory of education as the development of the self under interpretation I (or at minimum a combination of I and II). If education is not the development of self through the development of mind, then one must posit the self in advance of the process of education, in which case the process of education is the process of bringing to fruition what is already predetermined by nature. The latter is, of course, the familiar growth model of education, so fraught with difficulty precisely because it relies on unwarranted assumptions about human nature.

The problems with relying on human nature doctrines in education are manifold and manifest. What we know about human nature is next to nothing, unless it is that human nature is a potential only, a potential to

learn to choose to develop in infinitely various ways. Perhaps the only useful thing we can learn from the study of human nature is something about the extent and limitations of that potential, indicating the ranges within which we can choose to become what we want to become. There is, of course, some point in knowing what that range of potential is, since what we want to become and ought to become we should be capable of becoming. As Kant once noted, "The 'ought' implies the 'can'." But the suggestion that there are specific characteristic qualities, states, conditions, and achievements, toward which a human being (external social influences aside) will naturally develop, and that an individual has a unique set of such settled potentialities waiting to flower into a unique natural personality, character, even career, is highly suspicious, if not false. Indeed, it appears that what is *human* about human beings is not "natural" at all, but rather something that is superimposed on our natural state. Michael Oakeshott notes that, "A human life is composed of performances, and each performance is a disclosure of a man's beliefs about himself and the world and an exploit in self-enactment. He is what he becomes; he has a history but no 'nature'" (Oakeshott, 1971, p. 44). Clearly then education is not a matter of simply realizing our potential, but it is the realization of a particular potential approximating the best of human achievements. It is the understanding of our history, through social experience and learning (usually by being taught by those who know the history), that enables us to evaluate and choose what sort of human beings we ought to become and what type of nature to strive toward. The crucial decisions concern the direction of growth and the normative ends of development (Scheffler, 1960, *passim*). All of us have the potential to become a St Francis or a Hitler, but never both simultaneously since they are mutually exclusive. All of this points to the ineluctably normative nature of education. Human nature doctrines can be relied on only in a very minimal sense as grounds for educational judgment.

But as already noted, proponents of self-education need not be caught in this problem. They might very well accept that education is initially and fundamentally the development *of* self, according to interpretation I, and then argue that study *about* the self has merit after I has been achieved. They could argue cogently that learning about the unique features of oneself (unique because every individual has a unique combination of social experiences and a unique history) through self-analysis or by inference from systematic observation of one's own persisting interests, and proclivities is a practice which could contribute to self-knowledge and the planning of a satisfactory life-style within the bounds of social acceptability. This might even include psychiatric investigation and forms of therapy and practices such as self-renewal.² The question is whether these practices are central to education as the development of mind (which shall henceforth be called "general education," and the

pursuit of which it is assumed is the public school's main function) or whether they are worthwhile adjuncts to public schooling. This is a question of school and social policy. With respect to the latter (practices of psychotherapy), this would depend on its established need and on the ability and expertise of school teachers to engage in it, both balanced against the still urgent task of providing general education. With respect to the former (assisting young people in choosing careers and life-styles), this would depend on age-level, previous success in achieving general education, and again on professional expertise. This might indeed be an area where the youngster is the sole or main authority. The only question here is whether we need schools for this at all. It is not unreasonable to try to assist young people in this regard under the auspices of the school. With increased general knowledge of history, literature, and the social sciences, increased flexibility in family and social arrangements, and increased technology and occupational possibilities, there is a concomitant increase in the potential for life goal options. Young people have, as a result of this "future shock," an enormously difficult problem in deciding what sort of life goals they should adopt, and the schools might profitably assist them in acquiring information about themselves and their suitability for certain life-styles and careers (Hamm & Daniels, 1979). But this is expression of preference in social policy and school policy, not an argument about what constitutes education. It could be viewed as an additional charge to the public school, provided that schools are not already overloaded and that their main function of providing general education is not thwarted. Certainly one would hesitate to regard this as sufficient reason to compel young people by law to attend school. But given that we already have compulsory school attendance, justified in terms of the overriding importance of general education, it could be a reasonable extra burden to place on the schools. Perhaps, as Gibbons and Phillips suggest, an educational institution has the responsibility to assist young people in the transition from the protected environment of the school to the world outside it; it might be a good idea "for students to take responsibility for their last term or semester" (Gibbons and Phillips, 1978, p. 300). It would seem to be a good idea under such conditions: (1) if the requirements of minimum general education have been achieved; (2) if certain students have reached the level of their ability even if the desired minimum has not been achieved; (3) if for various reasons (including inept teaching, lack of insight into the importance of general education, administrators' confusion about the goals of public schools), the school is not functioning as an educational institution;³ and (4) if conditions obtain where a large majority of students need therapy of some sort. But such, (one is tempted to say, peripheral) objectives and such techniques for social adjustment and career preparation should not be confused with education. A remedy to ease the pain of parturition does not constitute the mainstay of educational nourishment.

But to construe self-education as this form of “education” *about* the self is possibly still to miss the main concern of its proponents. Indeed, the key terms in the literature shift away from *self-education* to *self-direction*, *self-learning*, and *self-choosing* in the educational program generally. The emphasis is on the student choosing the matter and the manner of education for himself. Accordingly, we will now take a closer look at self-education conceived of as education *by* the self.

SELF-EDUCATION AS EDUCATION BY THE SELF

With this interpretation we confront the core recommendations of the “self-educator.” It is also an interpretation that most accurately reflects ordinary usage. The emphasis is on the freedom of the student to choose his own educational program. Superficially it appears that self-education proponents have addressed and resolved some of the fundamental and perennial problems in education concerning motivation to learn, the relationship of teaching and learning, the paradox of freedom and authority, and the balancing of individual and social demands. However, a closer look at some of the main themes in the self-education literature reveals that it is not at all clear what some of the terminology means, or if clear, what consequences for education certain practices have, or what reasons and evidence underlie the prescriptions. If self-education conceived of as education *by* the self is to become a coherent and viable public educational policy it will need to untangle some serious conceptual difficulties, to answer some basic questions about the nature of education, and to justify its prescriptions insofar as they affect social concerns. A clearer understanding of what self-education means and what it implies for educational policy can be obtained from a closer examination of some logical, educational, and social and moral considerations.

Some logical considerations

A number of the key terms in the language of self-education literally do not make sense. Their analysis reveals that they are used to make some rather simple, but also highly questionable, claims.

Self-teaching

Proponents of self-education make much of the notion of self-teaching. But is this logically possible? One cannot teach if one is not able in some way to display the subject matter to be learnt. If one does not know that subject matter, then one is unable to teach oneself. If one does know the subject matter, then it is not only pointless to teach oneself, but it becomes impossible to do so because one cannot learn what one already knows. If one does not know the subject matter, it is still possible to learn it, say from experience or trial and error, but that is not teaching unless one mistakenly equates teaching with learning. But why then would propo-

nents of self-education recommend self-teaching if it is logically impossible? One can only assume that they believe it to be desirable that children should not have subject matter displayed to them. And why should this be so? Several answers consistent with self-education theory suggests themselves. One is that teaching requires choice of subject matter to be taught. That is, teachers must perforce make a judgment about what is to be taught. And this means that teachers must make value judgments about what is good for children to learn. Proponents of self-education want to escape making this value judgment. But, as we shall see below, it is impossible to escape making this most difficult of all education judgments. Another possible answer is that children will more effectively and reliably learn subject matter when the subject matter is not displayed to them. One is reminded here of the “learning to learn” and “learning by discovery” slogans. The alleged effectiveness and reliability of such methods still need to be demonstrated on empirical grounds. It is highly doubtful that the claims can be supported (Dearden, 1976, pp. 69–83). So what the self-teaching notion boils down to is the simple unsupported recommendation that children should not be taught.

Self-direction

Another key term favoured by proponents of self-education is “self-direction.” The problems with this notion are similar to self-teaching. For self-direction to be logically possible it is necessary for the individual to have knowledge of the direction (goal or objective) together with the wisdom to select the appropriate direction. If an individual has this knowledge and wisdom he does not need to be (cannot benefit from) direction. If such knowledge and wisdom are absent, then it is impossible to give good guidance and direction. So what then is being recommended by proponents of self-direction? Simply that children should not be directed. Why not? Perhaps, as before, there is unwillingness or inability to make rational judgments about what are suitable directions for children and young people. This might make a fair amount of sense with respect to directing young people in pursuit of leisure activities or career goals. But is that to be extended to judgments about educational goals? Are proponents of self-direction really that bankrupt with respect to educational vision? It seems fair to say that that is precisely so, as will be argued below. Or perhaps the claim that children should not be directed is meant to solve the motivational question in education such that if children choose a direction to follow they will be motivated to follow it through. If so, then a caution is warranted. The solution to the motivation problem in education is not allowing children to choose what they want to do. Being motivated to do what one wants is either a tautology or not a problem. Instilling in children the desire to pursue what is in their interest to pursue when they lack that interest initially is the motivational problem in education.

Self-learning

Another emphasis in self-education is self-learning, or learning on one's own⁴. This notion is, as we shall see, very similar to the recommendation that children should not be taught, discussed under "self-teaching." Two obvious questions must be asked in this connection. *Can* one learn on one's own? If one can, *should* one? The answer to the first question is puzzling since, on the one hand, it seems obvious that one *must* learn on one's own. This follows from the truism that *I* learn what *I* learn; no one can ever learn for anyone else. Learning is always done by the agent involved. In this sense the phrase "on my own" is strictly speaking redundant. On the other hand, it seems obvious that I could never learn on my own without external stimuli of some sort. It is doubtful that any learning could take place without assistance from something or someone in the environment.⁵ So it seems inevitable that one learn on one's own as well as with external assistance. It would appear that proponents of self-education see a contradiction in this, as though there is a contradiction in the learner learning on his own, on the one hand, and the learner being taught by a teacher on the other. Caught in this dilemma they opt for the learner learning on his own. There is, however, no contradiction. The puzzle results from a confused notion of teaching and learning. Learning is, at least, absorbing things into the mind; it is more than merely parroting words and formulae. Real learning no teacher can ever do for students. Students must do it on their own. It is both surprising and dismaying to observe many otherwise well-informed teachers and teachers of teachers drawing false conclusions from this simple truth. They err in assuming that if it is the student who learns (acquires the belief, the skill, the critical attitude, etc.) then the teacher can do little, if anything, to bring that learning about. Or if the teacher is successful in teaching, then it somehow follows that students could not actually have learned with understanding. It is almost as if they cannot or will not accept that teaching can result in learning that contributes to the student's understanding. Yet a teacher can say things or manipulate the environment to make it highly likely that the student will learn what the teacher intends. Learning on one's own is perfectly compatible (Ryle, 1967, p. 105–119) with teaching of various kinds. So if there is no paradox, why then is learning on one's own recommended? The phrase seems a plea for genuine and thorough learning, and no one would wish to quarrel with that. This, however, is neither new nor fraught with any implication that children choose the content to be learned and learn it without the help of a teacher.

This takes us to the consideration of the second question, if one can learn on one's own, *should* one? We have seen that one can, that one must, and that this is compatible with good teaching. In light of the above, the question does not concern the presence of assistance in learning, but its quantity; it does not concern the existence of a learning environment, but

the kind of environment – a planned and manipulated one or an unplanned and random one? Planned by whom? For what purpose? With what justification? Is it suggested that only that content chosen by the child is worthwhile for him to learn? How does one justify that? We have seen that there can be no influence-free learning or child rearing. Human beings just are not hermetically sealed off from their environment. Is it assumed that random exposure to the environment based on children's whims and short-term interests as influenced by peers, parents, business, or television is superior to the planned exposure by thoughtful concerned teachers? If indeed this informal environment is richer in experiences and sources of learning motivation than the formal school, then one might well be advised to let the child plan his own curriculum or at least let noneducationists take charge. But if that is so, it may amount to the strongest indictment yet of our school teachers and curriculum planners.

Self-choosing

Another logical consideration pertains to the notion of choosing. The specific question is this: if children are to choose both the manner and matter, means and ends of education, can they do this? Is education not presupposed by choice? If choosing is to be taken as something more than opting, as in the case of throwing dice or pulling a card, then the information describing the alternatives and the criteria for intelligent selection are presupposed (Hamm, 1971). Simply put, the dilemma is this: how does a student choose to learn *X* rather than *Y* unless he has knowledge of *X* and *Y* and some reason to select one over the other. If one has knowledge of *X* and *Y* and the reason to select one over the other, then one does not need to (cannot) learn about *X* or *Y* since one already knows them. But if one does not have the knowledge, then the decision is not of genuine choice, but mere option. The recommendation that children choose independently, then, almost amounts to the suggestion that children opt rather than rationally choose. Almost, but not quite. Children, depending on their age and experience, will be able to make better or worse choices according to their partial knowledge and insight. And it seems reasonable that they should not be prohibited from making free choices in many aspects of their lives, even if they choose unwisely. There is much to be said for children learning about their own power of choice and their own effectiveness in making an imprint on the world, even if it means learning from their mistakes. This is particularly true in helping them to take responsibility (in the moral sense of that term) for their actions. But that is a very risky stance to take with respect to children choosing their own curriculum. It might be argued that even though a child does not fully know the *X* and *Y* about what he should learn he still has some vague idea and curiosity concerning them. But is a vague impression sufficient grounds to make important judgments about educational value? One must again ask why curiosity aroused by television

advertisement, business and peer pressure, or random social experience is to be preferred over curiosity aroused by parents and teachers with the long-range interest of the child in mind.

Responsibility for action

Proponents of self-education also recommend that students take responsibility for their education. And indeed, why not? But acceptance of this principle does not imply policies of self-direction and learning without teaching. Such policy recommendations trade on the ambiguity of the term "responsible." It can mean causal responsibility in Aristotle's sense of "efficient cause" as when one initiates action and takes courage to perform. Or it can mean upright and morally wise, with connotations of bringing to bear knowledge, thoughtfulness, and intelligence. Responsible choice in the former sense does not imply responsible choice in the latter. Even though a person might take full responsibility in the former sense for the courageous action of quitting school at age thirteen, it does not follow that the choice is responsible in the second sense. Thus a student who does his homework dutifully until he has mastered the minimum requirements of general education, according to parental and teacher advice, could be deemed more responsible (in both senses) than the quitter.

Nevertheless, we do, apparently meaningfully, use such terms as "self-taught," "self-directed," "learning on one's own," "being responsible for one's learning." Why? Precisely to indicate that we are not being instructed, guided, directed, or compelled by a professional teacher. We are, in a peripheral and metaphorical sense, being "taught by the environment," by others with whom we communicate, by books and films, etc., all of which are of our own choosing. But intelligence and wisdom in our choosing presupposes knowledge, wisdom, and experience. The question is: how much knowledge and experience? This is the classical problem of freedom versus authority in education. Given that educators by and large accept the moral principle that one should not interfere unwarrantedly with another human being doing what he wants, the problem in education is determining what is warranted given that children and young people (depending on age and sophistication) lack the knowledge and experience necessary for civilized social life. Clearly the two extremes of absolute freedom and absolute imposition are unwarranted. No one in his right mind would suggest leaving an infant in a crib to fend for itself on the grounds that interference is morally prohibited. Nor could one rationally support the view that adults ought permanently to remain under the tutelage and authority of any other adult. This issue is one of degree. Self-education proponents clearly are opting for a reduction in the level of sophistication required before young people are given the freedom to determine their futures. But why? Is it because they have, correctly, observed that schools are not doing an

adequate job of education? Because children are bored? Because administrators are confused? Because good teachers are hard to come by? And if that is so, is the solution not to do a better job of education? Or is it because they do not know what “better” means? That they lack a clear understanding of the nature and value of education. Probably so. That is why it is important to remind ourselves of what education is all about.

Some educational considerations

In the present context it is not possible to do more than sketch a brief outline of the major criteria for education in order to show what education is not. Despite the fact that unreflective people still fail to distinguish between education and going to school, between education and general child rearing, between education and socialization, between education and career training, it is becoming apparent to those whose business it is to reflect on the nature of education that something more specific and more important is represented by the term “education.” It represents, first, the initiation of new-born members of a society into those elements of the society’s culture that are deemed most valuable. Education, then, is a normative concept. If that is so, it will by no means be possible for self-education advocates to escape the task of making value judgments for children. Given that children are born ignorant and dependent, nature has left us no alternative to some form of paternalism. Even to allow children in schools – wisely or unwisely – to pursue their whims and interests is to make a value judgment, the judgment that those whims and interests are of equal worth to whatever a teacher has to offer. But, as might be expected, “self-educators” do not (because they cannot) follow through with their theory. Thus they define the self-educated person as one who has “become expert in any *socially accepted* field of human activity” (Gibbons, et al., 1980, p. 5). If they had explored further why some activities are not only “socially accepted” but “socially acceptable,” then identified whatever principles would guide students to make rational choices, they would have revealed some understanding of education’s implications. But with no criteria for success in education, they have no way of distinguishing between those who are successfully educated and those who are merely successful in some walk of life though not necessarily educated. The models of the successfully “self-educated” chosen by “self-educators” for study include H. L. Mencken and Eric Hoffer as well as Will Rogers and Muhammed Ali (Gibbons, et al., 1980). But if the proponents of self-education carried through with their insistence to not make value judgments, they would have no reason to exclude as models of self-education such achievers as Hitler, Charles Manson, and Jim Jones of Jonestown.

But genuine education represents more than the value judgment to transmit what is the most worthwhile in our culture. It represents, also, an understanding of the principles of rational thought. There is an internal

logical connection between education and rationality and between both of these and knowledge. This is not the occasion to explore this in detail; it will have to suffice for now to note that education necessarily requires mastery of a great deal of knowledge – not merely isolated bits of free-floating inert knowledge, but knowledge in a breadth and depth, with understanding and corresponding attitudes and sensitivities together with a sense of their distinctiveness and inter-relatedness. As such it represents a mastery of extant conceptual schemes around which experience and knowledge are structured as well as mastery of various ways of testing for knowledge and of organizing facts. These modes of knowledge and experience – logic and mathematics, physical sciences, history and the social sciences, aesthetics, morality, and possibly others – are the fundamentals of man's cultural achievement. They are embedded in our language, our traditions, our institutions; they are public in character, and represent the ingredients for the development of mind (Peters, 1966). This is also not the occasion for presenting an argument for the value of such rational pursuits. But it should be observed that education thus conceived is consistent with and necessary for rational autonomous agency, an ideal that few would disavow and probably none could rationally argue against. It is also important to note that from such a conception of the ultimate aims of education very little is implied for detailed curriculum planning and teaching methodology. That is why it does not easily fit into the untenable "liberal versus conservative" or "progressive versus traditional" dichotomies. Hirst and Peters observe that "... if we examine carefully the character of the central objectives sought by progressives, we find that they, as much as those sought by traditionalists, are necessarily related to the acquisition of certain fundamental forms of what we have loosely called public modes of experience, understanding, and knowledge" (Hirst and Peters, 1970, p. 60).

Now the question to be faced regarding the issue of freedom in education is this: how much of this tradition shall children be initiated into, with compulsion if necessary, before we allow or encourage them to choose for themselves? How much is necessary if they are to choose wisely? Clearly if our intention is merely for them to cope as useful members of society and stay out of trouble we would ask for much less than if we wished for their full participation in the richest aspects of our cultural achievement – not only to participate with style, humour, sensitivity, and imagination, but also to criticize and correct its weaknesses and build upon its strengths. Perhaps the better way to pose the question is: how much of this cultural inheritance can children rightfully demand in virtue of their human potential for fully developed minds?

The key issue is how much of and which elements of the cultural heritage should children acquire before striking out on their own. "What shall we teach our children?" is the single most important question in education. Yet on this important question proponents of self-education

are peculiarly noncommittal. They emphasize “process” instead of “content” and advocate letting children themselves decide the issue. It seems that a significant increase in children’s freedom is the most important recommendation of self-education proponents, freedom not only how to learn but what to learn. But they are strangely silent concerning the grounds for this recommendation. Is the recommendation based on the assumed empirical truth that learning increases and social behaviour improves as a result of acquiring a sense of determining one’s destiny by being allowed to choose for oneself? If the claim is true, it could be an important finding in enhancement of school performance. But it also raises some moral problems. Children can easily be led to believe they have made free choices when in fact they have been manipulated by skilful teachers or clever advertisers or persuasive peers. Is such deception justified? And is there not a deception in the suggestion that teachers “set expectations,” “help students to explore alternative activities,” “provide a general program structure,” “setting realistic goals and deadlines” (Gibbons & Phillips, 1978, p. 298) and so on, while letting students think they are making the important decisions? Is this more than merely an aura of freedom? If one is not by those techniques attempting to convey the sense of freedom without actually granting the freedom, there is little difference between it and conventional teaching. If it is genuine granting of freedom of choice to children then the question of justification looms large again. The suggestion that self-education teachers should teach children to be self-directed and to choose wisely, it would appear, cannot function as a justification either. Of course it is not being argued that we should not teach children to choose wisely. What is being argued is that to teach children to choose wisely is precisely to initiate students into the public concepts, knowledge, rules, traditions, in terms of which alternatives are recognized and wisdom is articulated. And is this not precisely what teacher-directed education attempts to do? Even if it doesn’t, shouldn’t it? It may very well be that the route to freedom, independence, and autonomy is constraint, dependence, and heteronomy. This apparent contradiction, this paradox of all education, is not simply resolved by assuming without warrant that the route to autonomy is free choice. Indeed it might be said that self-education errs by mistaking the means for the end as neo-progressivists so often do – making “no distinction between the characteristics of an ideal end-product and the characteristics of the process that is supposed to lead to such a product” (Egan, 1980, p. 200).

Social and moral considerations

It must not be thought that self-education is simply an improved, new technique for achieving familiar and recognized educational objectives for the public school. Instruction in educationally valuable subject matter has historically been entrusted to the school as its primary function. Self-education represents a major shift in such objectives. With its

emphasis on adjustment to the community, preparation for occupational skills, limiting instruction, removal of compulsory curriculum, it envisages the school as a multi-functioning institution embracing a host of social problems. In it the student – together with the parent as guide, the teacher as facilitator, and the community as resource – would be encouraged to select randomly from within our culture whatever interests him and is suitable for career and social success. Self-education, in fact, takes huge strides toward the deschooling, or at least the deeducation, of society. But even if self-education proposals for quasi-real encounters with the real world may solve some of the current discontents, such as lowering crime rate, drug abuse, apathy, and wasted time, none of this does what the formalized study in subject matter is supposed to do (Broudy, 1978, p. 22). Broudy argues that such formalized study has many advantages, including providing contexts in which situations and problems in life are made intelligible, encouraging acquisition of transferable and generalizable knowledge, enhancing opportunity to transcend local bias and class culture, and advancing democratic egalitarianism (Broudy, 1978, *passim*). To give up these and other benefits of formalized study through the process of self-education is to modify radically the function of the public school. “Such shifts and gross modification of function are not to be taken lightly and are often opposed because they threaten the social order” (Broudy, 1978, p. 19). Obviously the school as a social institution in a democracy can change its function as times and needs change. But it would seem morally inappropriate for teachers and teachers of teachers, either deliberately or in ignorance, to embark upon such a major shift in objectives for the public school and to implement radical practices resulting in major social change without first engaging in full public discussion of the issues involved and without first gaining public concurrence and assent.

There is, too, the possibility that self-education can become a form of self-deception. As such the practice of self-education is crudely outlined in the following scenario: (1) In the interest of freedom, self-education is desirable. (2) Teacher-directed activities, such as planning a curriculum and instructing, are abandoned in favour of student-directed activities. (3) Because teachers do not teach, the student is bored, restless, suffers from malaise, is socially apathetic or destructive, remains ignorant, feels unduly compelled, lacks a sense of achievement. (4) It is better for such a student to leave school to repair cars (or something else) than to waste time in school. (5) The student’s choice to repair cars (or whatever else he directs himself to do) relieves the boredom and the frustration (resulting from pointless compulsion), improves his self-image, and gives him a sense of worth; he becomes socially useful and adjusted; there is transference from this experience in self-help to other areas of social life. (6) This is proof that self-education works. In this scenario the disease is invented so the favorite remedy can be applied. More often perhaps the malady is the result of teaching ineptitude and curriculum planners’ lack

of good judgment. In any case, one does not need the remedy when the pathology does not exist; with careful reflection on the nature and purpose of education, with sound practical judgment, and with imaginative teaching the pathology need not occur. Self-education most surely addresses a serious contemporary problem in that it helps young people with social and personal adjustment and with career preparation. But these concerns are not centrally *educational* concerns.

CONCLUSION

In the search for the meaning and significance of "self-education," it has been suggested that issues surrounding it can usefully be explored by viewing self-education under three broad interpretations. When self-education is viewed as education *of* the self, the term is a tautology, since education is conceived of as the development of the self. Self-education so conceived has no direct implications for teaching methodology. Indeed, as suggested, it is quite compatible with conventional teaching.

When self-education is conceived of as education *about* the self, reference is made to an individual learning about himself, about his talents, interests, and career potential. Based on the emerging literature on self-education, one must conclude that part of the program involves a recommendation that schools engage in this practice to cure the ills of educationally deprived young people. Reference is usually made to the teenager who has failed in school, suffers from malaise and boredom, is socially troublesome, lacks a wholesome self-image, and is a candidate for unemployment. To acquire a sense of worth and achievement in some socially useful career skill, they are encouraged to follow independent pursuits with the guidance and approval of an adult. This is obviously a worthwhile endeavour. Yet, as has been suggested, it does not amount to an education, though it can become an important adjunct to public schooling. In fact, the problem can be solved by better teaching and less confused administration. That part of the problem which is not attributable to failure in education is the matter of helping young people, including those who achieve success in general education, to adjust from the school world to one of work. This is another worthwhile endeavour self-educators emphasize, yet this is not in fact education *per se* that is central, but an aspect of schooling usually considered counselling.

When self-education is viewed as education *by* the self, we refer to the student himself making the important decisions concerning the content and manner of his education. So viewed it is not merely a new technique for achieving recognized educational objectives, but rather a disguised prescription for general school practice with an altered perspective on educational and social values. Yet it fails to live up to a full-fledged theory of education. It lacks foundational underpinnings. As a theory to determine the objectives of the school as a social institution, it lacks social

and moral justification; as a theory about the worthwhile objectives in general education, it lacks a set of criteria for judging what is educationally worthwhile. As a theory of learning, it fails to spell out just what is to be learned, when, and how; as a theory of motivation, it fails to specify the object of interest. As a theory of ego-development through successful achievement, it fails to spell out the criteria of success. But perhaps this failure to specify clear criteria is antithetical to the whole notion of self-education, since such specification would require teacher-direction and thus undermine its central tenet of student-direction. One could note too, the contradictory nature of some recommended practices of self-education. Should one be compelled by law to withdraw from home and society to attend an institution specifically for learning (presumably), only to be required by that same institution to return to community and society to choose for oneself what and how to learn? Compulsory education without compulsory curriculum surely does not make much sense. Unless these theoretical and practical difficulties are somehow resolved, self-education could quickly end as an outmoded fad and discarded jargon.

Yet there is, on the face of it, a healthy sentiment in the language of self-education, even if its theory and practice are questionable. The impetus to great deeds, successful careers, exploited talent, personal fulfillment springs from the spirits of people who control their own destiny. To seek to unleash such power for achievement in their students has long been the dream and ideal of all true educators. But they differ from self-educators in that their methods seek to minimize the chance involved in such achievement. In gaining the ability to control one's own destiny one must submit to the slow and painstaking process of acquiring knowledge through discipline. To achieve this discipline by chance, as proponents of self-education seem to propose, is also to leave to chance the achievement of the ideal, except perhaps for the few with extraordinary luck and talent.

NOTES

- ¹ The name "challenge education" is sometimes used interchangeably with "self-education", sometimes it refers to a sub-theme within it.
- ² Note how these practices pre-suppose education. A psychiatrist, who "educates" an individual about himself, relies on his client's perception of himself and of the world; "self-renewal" preys upon the vision of a formerly satisfactorily developed "self." There is, too, the additional legal and moral problem of obtaining consent to be psychoanalyzed.
- ³ A better solution would be to remove those inadequacies.
- ⁴ The same could be said in connection with "thinking on my own," "acting on my own," "choosing on my own," etc.
- ⁵ Philosophers making logical connections in an armchair or a Buddhist contemplating self might be exceptions, although even these inner activities are based on prior external stimuli.

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