

Post Industrial Schools

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We are watching, with interest, the debates about school closures and consolidations going on in our district. Changing demographics, we are told, are the problem. Falling school enrollments mean some schools must close. Small schools are not efficient. Small schools cannot offer as many options.

At the same time, maybe it's time to really ask some long overdue questions about education. As summer stretches out before them, students anticipate a wide world of learning opportunities outside of the classroom. "When the world is full of such richness," a child might well ask, "what are schools for, anyway?"

Our present system of mass education has only been with us for about 100 years, give or take half a century. At the end of the 19th century, public schools and mandatory education were seen in large part as a way to address a pressing social problem: how to get the children of the working poor off the streets without locking them up in factories all day. An alternative to child labor and truancy, city schools were very much shaped by industrial thinking and modeled upon the factory system. Just as factories were set up for the mass production of identical products, schools were set up for the mass production of more-or-less identical workers, as interchangeable as cogs for the machine of economic enterprise.

There was some sorting, of course. Coal leaving the mines of the late 20th century moved along a belt, where it was sorted by size and quality into bins, useful for different purposes. Similarly, the Industrial-model school sorted children as they moved along through the grades; some would be suitable for clerical work, others for manual labor, and a few for overseeing and leadership. But the Industrial-model school was not designed to nurture diversity as a resource. Rather, it was very much attuned to standardization; grading was a single method for comparing children on their mastery of a common curriculum. Students may have remained precious individuals in the eyes of their mothers, but at school they learned to compare themselves for fit into a single mold. Report cards made their progress along this project more transparent, but in the absence of letter grades students still meticulously compare themselves against the standard, and against one another. It is a rare second-grader who does not harbor some anxiety about measuring up, and who cannot give a detailed account of where they stand in rank-order among their classmates on academic, social and athletic prowess.

Such sorting and quality-grading was always a harsh and cruel way to treat young humans, and it still is. But until well past the middle of



the 20th century, there was still a place for those who fell off the conveyor belt, so to speak, without advanced literacy and numeracy skills. Those who were not cut out for academics could make their living with their bodies, through manual labor. Some found success in areas that required more experience-based learning, like mechanics or farming, where the best teachers were not books but patient mentors showing a lad how to do or make something with his hands. Girls were even less tied to mastering academics (although they tended to outshine boys in this kind of learning, possibly because they were taught to sit still much earlier); they were expected to eventually settle into domestic work, paid or unpaid, and to give up whatever joy they once took in reading and writing.

One of the biggest changes in schools over the last half-century is that they are now situated in an economy where virtually no one can afford to fall off the conveyor belt of literacy. The Post-Industrial economy is based upon the movement and production of information, not of things or materials. Consequently, there is precious little opportunity to make a living manually in “developed”, knowledge-based economies like Canada. Suited or not, everyone must read, write, and do math in order to successfully move from childhood into productive adulthood. Those who cannot face extreme odds of poverty and alienation.

Yet the basic design of urban mass education has remained unchanged. The conveyor belt is still there, the sorting still happens, and the assumption that everyone who graduates has some standard product of “education” is unchanged. The model is Industrial; the context is Post-Industrial.

We are worried about schools. There is so much that seems to be getting lost there. We’ve heard parents labeled as indifferent, uncaring, and selfish. We’ve heard teachers labeled as incompetent, blind, cruel and burnt-out. We’ve heard children labeled as lazy, oppositional, disordered and disabled. We don’t believe it. We see parents, children and teachers who are very caring, stressed, and desperate to do a good job against the odds. It seems to us that none of these people are really the problem. Rather, we are stuck in an old design that is out-of-date and not working as well as it could.

Here are some assumptions from the Industrial Age that our schools have inherited, and some suggestions for re-thinking.

1. *Standardization is good; deviance is bad. In Industrial thinking, there are clear standards, and progress toward these standards is measurable. To reach the standard is the goal: perfection as a “perfect 10”.*



In a Post-industrial world, we are rediscovering diversity as a resource. The preservation of biodiversity among plants and animals has become a new end in itself, as we learn the lessons of disease epidemics: too much standardization leaves us all vulnerable. Somewhere among the potatoes of Ireland's fields in 1860 was a blight-resistant variety, from which the crop could be rebuilt. Humans, too, carry the assurance of a future not in their sameness, but in their infinite differences. Diversity is our storehouse of survival strategies.

The Post-Industrial School needs to value and nurture diversity. There needs to be a re-working of how we think and talk about children. We need less emphasis on "Disorders" and "Disabilities", and more understanding of individual styles, strengths, and ways of learning. We need to notice and reject the obvious trade-off between individuality and group size: large classes require the suppression of diversity. If we want all of our children to be seen, valued, and allowed to develop as unique individuals, we will need to have smaller class sizes.

2. We can focus on the talented: those who won't or can't fit into the mold for success will eventually go elsewhere.

In the Post-Industrial world, there is no "elsewhere" for the non-academically-inclined to go to. The manual working-class has shrunk to almost non-existence. We have to

learn to value and use our diversity, not just to spare children the harsh experience of failure, but also because we simply cannot afford to throw away any percentage of "non-standard" or "below-average" human. It is no longer acceptable to simply prepare humans to fit in someone else's world. We need schools that help students to create niches for themselves; to create the worlds that fit them.

3. Humans, like cogs, should be interchangeable. The best model for units of the workforce ("human resources") is one that can be moved about to where the work is. Ties to a particular place or to particular relationships are an impediment to efficient production.

In the Post-Industrial world, we are rediscovering what it means to be connected; to a particular place, to particular people. Because we are not standardized but diverse, our relationships are not replaceable. Like jazz improvisations, the interactions between people are not easily reproduced. When we try, the effect is stilted, without spark or life.

We need schools that value the stability and richness of human attachments, to each other and to places. Every time a group of children is re-shuffled into new combinations of classmates and new locations of learning, they lose the connections that they have started growing. Like plants, children can only be expected to grow roots a certain number of times.



One argument for larger schools is that they allow for the development of many different groupings of students by similarities. There is room in a large school for cliques of musical kids, athletic kids, dramatic kids, chess-playing kids, and so on. This is true, and many an elementary school “odd kid” has found a home with similarly “odd kids” in the larger arena of Jr. High or High School. But similarity is not the only basis for relationship building. Stable, smaller and diverse groupings of students can be coached and enabled to develop mutual appreciation for differences as well as for similarities, and the risk of socially vulnerable kids getting lost in the shuffle goes down.

4. The lines between work and play, mind and body, thinking and feeling, educating and taking care of children are clear and thick. Schools can and should attend to educating the working, thinking mind. They are not responsible to take care of the feeling, playful, heart and body of the child: that's what mothers are for.

It is just as silly and blind to say that schools do not care for what's in the heart of a child as it is to say that mothers do not care for what's in the mind. Good teachers and good parents know that education and care-work are not separate. A child who is challenged but does not

feel safe and cared for cannot learn. A child who is kept safe but not challenged is similarly stuck.

Parents are asked these days to step up to the plate of education, taking on all kinds of work from school fund-raising to drilling number facts and phonics at home and reading a story every night. They are expected to get their children to school on time and ready to absorb the knowledge passed out in a timely manner. Similarly, we need schools that step up to the plate of nurturing the whole child. If it takes a village to raise a child, then the school is, for most families, the face of the village. Nutritious meals, after-school child care, peer-relationship and social skills coaching, careful, compassionate playground interventions, and parent resource rooms are all imaginable as ways that schools could become a more supportive asset to family and child life.

All of this would require a truly revolutionary re-thinking of what schools are for in our society. But, why not re-think it?

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