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Charles Silberman’s “Crisis in the Classroom, The Remaking of American Education”: A Critical Analysis

In 1970, journalist and scholar Charles Silberman published *Crisis in the Classroom; the Remaking of American Education*. His intended audience was teachers and students, school board members and taxpayers, public officials and civic leaders, newspaper and magazine editors and readers, television directors and viewers, parents and teachers. Silberman’s book was a popular and riveting book for its time.

In great detail, Silberman dealt head-on with the American educational system as compared with other world powers showing the “crisis in the classroom.” His narrative discussion, as common for the day in line with other prominent authors, reveals many flaws in the field of American education. The author’s intention was to cause the reader to rethink and reevaluate America’s ineffective educational system.

A lot of Silberman’s remarks were criticism of teachers and teacher practices. One might believe that Silberman may be too harsh in his criticisms, yet his thoughts does cause an awakening about teachers’ attitudes and teaching practices. Overall, there were three main areas Silberman covered that drives the book forward in analytical thought.

EDUCATION AND THE WHOLE MAN

“What tomorrow needs is not masses of intellectuals, but masses of educated men – men educated to feel and to act as well as to think.” Silberman claims there is a danger of cultivating the intellect alone. “Feeling” is also needed and should be encouraged in the education process.

Due to the previous statement in the above paragraph, Silberman brings “humanism in education” to the forefront of educational thought. This particular movement in the 1970’s advocated what Silberman called “old-fashioned, good values” in which people should live and stand for: honesty, caring, loving, good-will, mutual respect, sharing, concern for others, as well as other human character traits.

Silberman, as well as other theorists and writers of the day, believed schools failed to develop self-discipline and self-respect in their students. Children must feel competent if they are to regard themselves as worthwhile people. He goes on to warn that chronic failure in school makes self-discipline hard to come by and children’s failures often produce behavior problems in the classroom. His theories correlated closely with those of John Holt, a well-known publisher writer of the 1960’s and 1970’s.

The way for a teacher to cultivate a good self-concept in a child is through the application and continuous flow of encouragement. Praise focuses *on the person*, yet on the other hand, encouragement focuses on *the act itself* and on what the individual achieved. Part of developing self-esteem has to do with the manner in which the teacher handles misbehavior. If disruptive behavior is handled gently and positively (employing punitive measures as a last resort), the discouraged student will understand

more clearly that he isn't bad, yet what he did is unacceptable. This type of treatment from teachers will guard against a poor self-concept.

An important responsibility of American schools is in creating and maintaining a humane atmosphere. According to Silberman, there must be mutual respect between students and teachers. Not only must the student recognize teacher's qualities as being a person only human, teachers must realize students' individual qualities and rights also. As the saying goes, "Kids are people too" and should be treated as such -- intelligent individuals capable of responsibility, freedom within limits, and human emotions.

Teachers and administrators are often unable to distinguish between "authority" and "power." Thus, many students aren't permitted to be respectfully honest with teachers and those in authority, as teachers view such openness as disrespect. Those teachers who elicit truthfulness about feelings in the classroom are viewed by most authoritarians as permissive.

America's most pressing educational problem is that education must evoke and cultivate human values. Our concept of education reflects our concept of the good life, the good man, and the good, productive society. "A freer and more humane atmosphere is educationally sound as well as constitutionally necessary."

EDUCATION MUST HAVE PURPOSE

In studying American education, one must study to some extent American society and culture. Education not only is the means of transmitting knowledge, abilities, and skills, but also values of societies, culture, history, and long-standing traditions.

Silberman pointed out the distinction between ideas that education must be purposeful and what the purposes of education should be. He believed that no one curriculum guide should be implemented in all schools; however, adapted curricular methods should provide motivation in getting children hooked on learning.

This strategy is naturally harder to do than it sounds. Theories of learning look great on paper (especially to undergraduate pre-service teachers); however, such techniques are sometimes difficult to practice on children due to the complicated principles of child psychology and development. Silberman maintained that educators could never read too many books or take in too much instruction on understanding what makes a child learn and respond to instruction. The better the teacher understands how children feel, learn, and what goals they operate under, the better prepared he/she is to confront and attempt to meet the varied needs of each student.

Educators, according to Silberman, are forced to ask the question, "What are we doing and why are we doing it?" Silberman described this lack of thought on the part of educators as "mindlessness": the failure to think seriously about educational purpose. Self-evaluation on all levels of the educational system must be continuous, according to Silberman.

"The test of a society as of an institution is not whether it is improving, but whether it is adequate to the needs of the present and of the foreseeable future."

Silberman believed that American schools were failing this test dismally.

One purpose of schooling most educational innovators would agree on is in teaching children how to learn. This can be done by giving them the intellectual "discipline that will able them to apply man's accumulated wisdom to new problems as

they arise, the kind of wisdom that will enable them to recognize new problems as they arise.”

EDUCATIONAL REFORM

One characteristic schools share in common is the preoccupation with order and control. School is too much of a one-sided process where the teacher gives out all knowledge. Schools are structured to make children dependent on teachers. An undemocratic procedure dominates where the teacher makes all rules and decides what children need to know and what will take place in the classroom (when and where). Children are given little opportunity to develop creative ideas on their own about what they should learn. They are expected to learn what the faculty decides and few students are included on curriculum development committees. Children have very little freedom to explore new ideas and test such hypotheses. Learning by discovery is discouraged because of the teacher's misconception that he/she is paid to dispense all important knowledge and wisdom.

Silberman strongly believed that children should have more responsibility for their learning. And how can the child have responsibility unless it is given to him? Children should be encouraged by teachers to self-assess one's strengths, weaknesses, interests, and needs. They should consider alternative goals and ways of achieving them. They should choose a course of action and evaluate progress.

Regarding educational reform, there is no master plan to reform education. The many new forms of instruction are often times disguises of the old forms. So, what seems to be new is not so new after all. The following ideas, as Silberman suggests, may aid in possible educational reform.

- 1) Unless prospective teachers are given alternative pictures of what teaching and learning can be, along with the techniques they need to implement them, they are almost bound to teach in the same way as their teachers taught them.
- 2) Teachers should always be students of learning. Learning should be continuous and sought after.
- 3) The teacher should endeavor to understand how the quality of human relationships in the classroom can encourage learning or prevent it from occurring (group dynamics).

One last thought tends to sum up “Crisis in Education.” Silberman believed that schools should not make education merely a preparation for the next stage of life, *but these years rewarding in their own right.*

Reference

Silberman, C.E. (1971). *Crisis in The Classroom, The Remaking of American Education*. New York: Vintage.