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THE FUTURE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

We know nothing about motivation. All we can do is write books about it.

Peter Drucker

INTRODUCTION

Certainly much has been written about motivation. To this extent Drucker’s observation is correct. But what is less clear – and this is Drucker’s concern – is the nature of our understanding. Although we actually do know a good deal about motivation, our knowledge on closer inspection is quite uneven. We know how to arouse people to greater effort, especially for short periods of time – how, for example, to arrange incentives for factory workers so that production improves and absenteeism falls, and even how to rearrange the social organization of schools so that students are more willing to learn for its own sake. But knowing how to motivate people is not the same as knowing what motivation is. Here Drucker makes his point. Whatever is being aroused by the clever use of rewards and incentives – namely, motivation itself – remains mysterious and elusive. Motivation, like the concept of gravity, is easier to describe (in terms of its outward, observable effects) than it is to define. Of course, this has not stopped people from trying.

The first goal of this book, then, is to introduce the basic principles of human motivation and consider various attempts to define its essential nature. The second goal is to explore how the lessons to be learned from research on motivation can be applied to the task of educational change and reform. In essence, we will ask, If encouraging the will to learn is a major objective of all schooling,
then how can we best restructure the learning experiences of young people to achieve this objective? Put differently, we will arrange the research on achievement motivation in ways that lead to various recommendations for improving the educational experience of millions of schoolchildren today and many millions more tomorrow.

In effect, then, this book is intended, first, as an introduction to the principles of human motivation and, second, as a guide for responsible educational change. But there is more.

We will also deal with the future. Clearly, these two topics – motivation and the future – are closely linked. As Harry Lauder once remarked, “The future is not a gift, it is an achievement,” and, it might be added, an achievement built in equal measure on discipline, realism, and joyful dreaming.

In this first chapter, we begin with a brief exposition of the future and of the desperate need for schools to face constructively the challenges of a changing future will certainly bring. We will then unveil the broad outlines of what it means to undertake a motivational analysis of classroom life.

BUILDING THE FUTURE

My interest is in the future because I am going to spend the rest of my life there.

Charles Kettering

If the future is an achievement, as Harry Lauder argues, then teachers are futurists along with politicians, filmmakers, and journalists – those individuals who, according to J. McClellan (1978), “make other people’s futures more real to them.” Indeed, at its best, education should provide young people with a sense of empowerment that makes their futures “real” by moving beyond merely offering them a few plausible but limited alternatives to indicating how their preferred dreams can actually be attained.

But of what should this future-building legacy consist, especially since no one can know the future, at least in any detail? First, we
can suggest that, in preparing for the future, students develop viable occupational skills. Learning a discipline – whether it means becoming a plumber, a rodeo performer, or a writer – and doing it well provides the foundation for a sense of purpose, security, and confidence in adulthood. It is confidence that propels the future and, conversely, feelings of incompetency that cause us to fall short of what is best in us.

Second, students should prepare for change. Change, to recall a cliché, is the future’s only constant. There is a need to accept with grace the inevitability of change – to be part of the process of change, whether this means facing up to ever shifting personal relationships, accepting change in the prevailing social order, or understanding fluctuating global economics. As we shall see, change is best handled, and even welcomed, when individuals possess a well-developed arsenal of mental skills associated with original, creative, and independent thinking. This suggests that schoolchildren should cultivate the capacity to deal thoughtfully with future circumstances that they and even we, their mentors, cannot fully imagine.

Naturally, of course, change should not be accepted uncritically. It must first be evaluated in the light of both its potential benefits and inevitable costs, an observation that calls to mind the “cliffhanger” theorem: “Each problem solved introduces a new unsolved problem” (O’Brien in Dickson, 1978). Avoiding the pitfalls of change requires careful problem analysis, critical thinking, and the ability to anticipate the results of change.

Third, and above all, the greatest legacy of education is to encourage in our students a will to learn and to continue learning as personal circumstances change – in short, to promote a capacity for resiliency and self-renewal. This point was anticipated over a half century ago when John Dewey (1938/1963) remarked that “the most important attitude that can be formed is that of the desire to go on learning” (p. 48).

These are brave sentiments and some would say hopelessly romantic and unattainable: a sense of commitment, self-confidence, and resiliency in the face of change. No one can be against these values, yet who among us is immodest enough to say precisely how to
achieve them? As a result, these values are often honored more in their absence than by their observance. Today too many students graduate or drop out of school without a single achievement for which they can feel uniquely responsible or justly proud. Moreover, the majority of our students understand neither the history of change nor the forces that shape their individual lives; and their loyalties often run to self-indulgence and near-term gratification.

Little is new about these values (Cuban, 1990). Repeated calls for encouraging them have been matched by a long history of failure to do so, dating back at least as far as Greco-Roman times, when an anonymous observer lamented that “our students have grown lazy and are disrespectful of authority. They slight their tutors, mislead their teachers, and fail to attend to their lessons” (Covington & Beery, 1976, p. 1). These same troubling themes have echoed down through the ages and find their most recent embodiment in American ghetto youngsters who, according to Shelby Steele (1989a), “see studying as a sucker’s game and school itself as a waste of time. One sees in many of these children almost a determination not to learn, a suppression of the natural impulse to understand, that cannot be entirely explained by the determinism of poverty” (p. 506).

But now there is something new, not the values themselves but a fuller understanding of how to shape the educational experience of youngsters in order to encourage self-renewal, self-discipline, and resiliency. But before meddling with the future, we must be convinced that new, alternative visions of education are likely to fare better than “business as usual” or, stated differently, that future prospects are so horrifying that virtually any reasonable change in the current ways of schooling will be welcome. Enough is now known for us to develop plausible scenarios of future events if trends continue unchanged. These trends project a dismal, downward course. If things are going to get worse, how bad are they now?

The Class of 2010

The high school graduating class of the year 2010 just recently entered kindergarten. Like so many other students before them, they,
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too, have approached the future with enthusiasm. Yet unless things change, their enthusiasm, like that of previous generations, will also dwindle and soon evaporate. Kati Haycock and M. Susan Navarro (1988) describe the “process of deterioration” in this way:

For many, this process will begin very early in their school careers. Even in first grade, some youngsters will get the sense that something is wrong with them; that somehow they’re just not doing things right. . . . By the sixth or seventh grade, many will not be proficient in the basic skills. . . . Though still in school, they will have dropped out mentally. Before high school graduation, they, and many of their peers, will drop out altogether. (p. 1)

Indeed, three out of ten students entering the ninth grade today will not graduate from high school, a rate that has doubled since 1970 (Haycock & Navarro, 1988). Moreover, these figures are conservative when we consider Hispanics and blacks, whose comparable dropout rates in California are now close to 50 percent.

For many of those who remain in school, the prospects for learning are equally shocking. For instance, the nationwide reading achievement scores for recent graduating high school seniors reflect a ninth-grade level of proficiency, which likely explains a U.S. Navy report that one-quarter of its recruits could not read well enough to understand basic safety instructions (reported in Wurman, 1989, p. 54). Writing skills fare no better. For example, according to Albert Shanker (1988), former president of the American Federation of Teachers, only 20 percent of those youngsters still in high school can write a minimally acceptable letter applying for a job in a local supermarket. Moreover, the majority of junior high school students can name more brands of whiskey than they can past presidents of the United States. And in a recent survey conducted by the ABC television network, two-thirds of the teenagers interviewed could not identify Chernobyl (one youngster guessed it was Cher’s real name).

Current events may not be their strong suit, yet American schoolchildren show even less aptitude for problem solving, if that seems possible. For example, one group of first-grade and second-grade children blithely solved the following word problem, mostly by
manipulating the integers 10 and 26: “There are 26 sheep and 10 goats on a ship. How old is the captain?” (Reusser, 1987). None of these students saw anything odd about this question. This is an example of students calculating but not thinking, trapped by the mindless rote application of rules that unfold automatically, irrespective of their relevance to the problem.

Overall, this dismal scene can be put in stark relief by a single statistic: thirteen million students – nearly one-half of all school-age youngsters – are at serious risk for failing academically (Bringing Children Out, 1988). Also, more often than not, school failure clusters with delinquency, substance abuse, and teenage pregnancy. One study sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation (Dryfoos, 1990) estimates that at least three million adolescents between the ages of ten and seventeen have fallen prey to all or most of these high-risk behaviors, and that another four million are at substantial risk of destroying their life chances. These seven million youngsters represent one out of every four adolescents in the United States.

These statistics make grim reading. For example, consider the dislocation and waste of talent created by such underachievement. In the technologically sophisticated society of the late twentieth century, the need for unskilled labor has plummeted, and is likely to continue downward at least in the near term. Over the next two decades, the majority of new job openings will require some form of education beyond high school. At present, however, less than 40 percent of our youth enter any form of postsecondary education, including technical trade schools, and far fewer than half of these individuals complete their course of study.

Change is the watchword. For instance, it is estimated that after students in the graduating class of 2010 enter the permanent work force, they will change careers – not just jobs, but careers – an average of five times before they retire. Yet given what can be deduced from all of the statistics just cited, a near majority of our youth will face an unknown world utterly unprepared. Without the capacity to participate in and learn from change, and to weather the occasional upheaval, these youngsters will become crippled,
confused, and overwhelmed by a vastly altered society, one in which they will no longer know how to participate. Such observations take on a special imperative in light of America’s shrinking role as the economic engine and prime mover of the world economy. Clearly, we cannot hope to compete in a technologically advanced world game when many of our players are illiterate or underprepared.

Clearly much is amiss. For many children, growing up in America today has become a perilous, dispiriting business. And unless things change, the overwhelming likelihood is that the situation will worsen. Before we begin rethinking the mission of education, however, several other observations are in order.

Who Is Responsible?

The first of these observations concerns the matter of assigning blame. Who is responsible for the mess? The present crisis in schooling cannot be attributed solely, or even largely, to the failure of any particular educational policy. Many other factors outside the influence of schools are also involved in this decline – poverty, the loosening of public morals, broken homes, and the drug epidemic, to name only a few. In fact, it can be argued that without the steady presence of schools, for all their limitations, things would be even worse.

Be that as it may, finger pointing is of little value because in this maelstrom of abuse, abandonment, and personal failure, what is cause and what is effect become blurred. Take just one example. There can be no doubt that the failure of schools to teach contributes directly to youngsters dropping out of school (Finn, 1989), but then so does becoming pregnant. Teenage pregnancy is a leading cause of leaving school in America. Nationwide, more than one million girls in the class of 1986 became pregnant before high school graduation (Riessman, 1988). Yet even this number underestimates the problem. The babies born to these mere children, often raised in unrelenting poverty and frequently abused, neglected, and drug exposed themselves, may in turn become handicapped in their social,
cognitive, and emotional development, so that yet another generation becomes failure prone (Landrigan & Carlson, 1995; Patterson, 1987; Schorr, 1988). And the deprivation can be elemental. Some children enter kindergarten never having used a pencil, others never having held a fork or spoon.

Not only are the causes of school failure many, but the burden imposed on schools grows daily. Increasingly, schools are expected to act as custodians for a growing assortment of youthful misfits and incorrigibles. Schools also are expected to stem the rising tide of teenage promiscuity through instruction in a secular version of morality training, and to act as the first line of defense against public health dangers of truly catastrophic proportions, including the AIDS epidemic.

It would be foolish to argue that issues of drugs, sex, and violence are not part of growing up educated in America today. Nor can schools easily abandon their responsibilities in these areas. But their resources are limited. To these burdens we can add other responsibilities that in part represent failures of wider social policy or stem from public indifference. These additional demands involve the legitimate need for everyone to succeed — ethnic minorities, the economically disadvantaged, learning-handicapped pupils, and the burgeoning populations of immigrants from non-English-speaking homes (Rumbaut, 1995). The enormity of this challenge is reflected by the fact that at last count some ninety-one non-English languages and dialects are spoken in the Los Angeles County schools. And the experiences in this one county remind us in turn of the pressing need to teach children throughout the United States how to cooperate with peoples of diverse political, cultural, and religious backgrounds, especially in the face of a potentially hostile world whose boundaries shrink daily.

In the waning years of the twentieth century, there is altogether too much evidence that American schools have become a dumping ground for the unwanted and unacceptable and for seemingly unsolvable problems: a place of failed individuals and of failed social policies. It is an enterprise for which too much has been demanded, with too few resources made available. As a consequence, schools
do too few things well; and when they do achieve excellence, too few students benefit. This situation has occurred despite the Her-
culean efforts of many dedicated, hardworking teachers, adminis-
trators, and staff. If energy and devotion alone could solve our edu-
cational problems, then solutions would be far more advanced
than is now the case.

I will argue that teachers can do little to shorten the terrible odds
arrayed against them and their students unless there is a funda-
mental reconsideration of the motivational dynamics of learning,
and of what should be taught as well as how. Actually, I will argue
that teachers are victims, too, ensnared by the same outdated
views of motivation and learning that hold their students hostage.

What Answers Do We Seek?

Now, a few words about the kinds of remedies to be offered in this
book. First, the recommendations will focus on those that follow
uniquely from a motivational perspective. In effect, I will ask if
there is any special contribution that research on achievement mo-
tivation can make to our understanding of the exceedingly complex
phenomena of school learning and school failure.

Second, these recommendations are intended to be compatible,
insofar as possible, with other analyses of the school crisis that
come from quite different starting points: from the business com-

munity, from minority neighborhoods, and from Main Street.

Third, recommendations will be restricted to those considered
eminently practical and capable of implementation by schools and
by individual teachers within a relatively short period of time, say,
within five years. This condition implies that the recommendations
are not particularly new, but are largely untried and in need of more
emphasis. Moreover, they are familiar enough to be implemented
without a massive overhaul of the educational system. Indeed, all
these ingredients for change are well known to educators, but they
are often overlooked and underappreciated.

Fourth, there must be a reasonable prospect that these changes, if
initiated even in modest ways, can influence youngsters here and
now – those who will graduate in the year 2010 – and not be delayed in their impact until some distant, future time. This caveat is not meant to imply that a total reformation can occur within such a brief span, but only that hints of positive payback should emerge soon, portending greater dividends to come. Actually, any changes in schools of the magnitude ultimately needed must be worked out in terms of generations, not just decades, time enough to reshape public beliefs about the mission of schooling and to revitalize teacher training.

Finally, we must remain mindful of the classic predicament of all reform efforts captured in the picturesque lament, “Who can think about draining the swamp when we are up to our asses in alligators?” The answer, it appears, involves a little swimming, then a little draining, and an occasional hop up on the bank to gain the perspective (and safety) of distance. Hopefully, modern views of motivation can provide this perspective.

But does a motivational perspective admit to such possibilities, even in theory? And, seriously, what is the hope for any practical successes, especially given the fact that student indifference, truancy, and poor achievement often go hand in hand with classroom violence, drug dealing in the school yard, and other deplorable forms of abuse and exploitation? Obviously, academic failure is as much, if not more, the result of the inevitable pressures and risks of growing up in a dangerous, unforgiving world as it is the fault of any misguided educational policy (Mushak, 1992; Schaffer, 1994). Perhaps in the end there is little that schools can do to reverse the horrific statistics of failure and despair cited earlier. We must be prepared for the possibility that in the final analysis the massive failure to learn is merely the end result, and not the cause, of a steady accumulation of various social ills. But to abandon the search for school-related solutions now is to admit defeat prematurely. Basically, I will argue that even if schools were drug free, uncompromised by hatred and fear, and not a dumping ground for the rebellious and the unwanted, certain aspects of schooling would still be a threat to the future of our children. It is these dangers – no matter how modest they may be, compared with the larger circle of threat – that will drive our recommendations for educational change.