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The crisis of an educating society. Warning hypotheses – valid (?) thirty years of later*

The crisis of education – its essence and root causes

Contemporary school, the fundamental educational institution, faces an intense crisis of its elementary functions. The functions can be labelled as reconstructive, adaptive and emancipatory. The reconstructive function of schooling consists in an organised reproduction of the universal and national/ethnic culture, as well as in the transmission and reproduction of the existing social structure. The adaptive function involves tailoring learners' development to fit them into pre-existing professional/vocational and social roles, and creating a picture of the pre-existing world in a way which leads them into believing that the current system is either good, or necessary and unchangeable. The emancipatory function, in turn, can be described as preparing learners for the task of constant self-improvement which in turn leads into overcoming barriers and restrictions imposed on them and draws them into the process of enhancing the quality of their surroundings, both locally and in a more global sense.

The contemporary Polish school malfunctions in all these three respects. The way it reconstructs culture is deficient and selective, with most students and school-leavers having only very limited access to it. This dysfunction is aggravated by the lack of support for the functions of school from local communities and families. Those who seem to benefit from the reconstructive function of schooling, owe it not to school, but to their environment and to themselves; such learners develop deep suspiciousness about school very early in their lives, particularly about the credibility, reliability, as well as the professional and moral integrity of this state-run institution.

The adaptation of learners to the existing structures and to the existing justifications of those structures is incomplete and damaging. Those who participate in the process of educating do not accept the artificial, stogy world acted out in schools; they rebel against the existing division of social tasks and social statuses which the school

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attempts to instil in them. That, however, is by no means synonymous to developing competence necessary for emancipation – for crossing borders, overcoming barriers, for improving the existing world. The fact that there are people taking up such attitudes of “positive rebellion”, and that elements of the attitude of border-crossing can be traced in great many learners demonstrates the adverse impact of schooling, since such attitudes are effects of the sham and pretence permeating the “ideology” enforced by school curricula and by teachers themselves, seriously clashing with commonly observable facts and practises.

It is fair to ask at this point what the root causes are of the deeply felt crisis of school. To my mind, the causes lie both beyond educational institutions – in social and cultural structures – and within those very institutions, including the people involved in them.

The causes of the crisis of organised education that lie beyond the institutions are essentially twofold. Firstly, it is the legitimisation crisis of the political rule, exemplified by the attitude towards the hitherto existing socio-political order – including the structures and the ideology which represent and support that order – which can be summed up as the lack of motivation to recognise the system as valid, legitimate, and as our own. Secondly, it is the crisis of the system’s identity, characterised by the mass trend of going back to fundamental questions of who we are, where we are, where we are heading, where we are being led, what the origins of the political system were and how it came about, and lastly – what were the reasons behind numerous rebellions and about-turns in the history of the system. The legitimisation crisis and the crisis of the system identity together have demolished the credibility and authority of the bearers of meaning, of the apologists of the dominant ideology, and of its transmitters (of whom teachers and other educational workers are a substantial part). How persistent is the legitimisation crisis? Has the identity crisis, experienced on a mass scale, infected the spheres of normality with pathological distortions and disease?

The internal causes of the school crisis are complex. Bohdan Suchodolski, a senior Polish educationalist, once compared the contemporary world to a ship staffed with drunken fools, with no sails, no compass, and no helmsman on board. The case of Polish education was even worse. Here, there were helmsmen but they were busy hastily disassembling the helm, taking down the sails and disposing of the life boats, while the captain was making arrangements for his getaway, wanting to be the first to leave the ship. That is one of the causes. Another one is the duality of beliefs and the double morality of teachers – the dissociated private and professional moral standards (a legitimate question being whether this duality has been destructive, or whether it has saved learners’ personalities). Educational studies and various pedagogies have become techniques for adaptation – for fitting learners into the pre-existing world; in this sense

they have become blockages obstructing human development. Polish educationalists have been paralysed with a contagious disease of conformity. The disastrous failure of the great reform programme and of the uniform school system in the 1970s was perhaps their most compromising intellectual, political and moral loss of face. The legacy of this ill-conceived and abortive project is the frightful state of the material infrastructure of education, and of the competence, motivation and moral standing of teachers.

Other causes lie in the minds of the people involved, that is – in our minds. Among them are “the hunger for meaningfulness”, and “the hunger for a catechism” of unquestionable values and fulfilled promises. What thinking young people experience is “a noological vacuum”, “an existential neurosis”, social schizophrenia and anomy – a lack of norms and principles or their chaotic confusion as well as the duality of values. To be sure, that they can read and think, they owe – at least partly – to school. Yet, by the same token, they can legitimately blame the school for their state of mind, for it was school that taught them the difference between the official and the private morality, that taught them to deliberately lie or distort the truth, that drilled them in obedience and ritual idolatry of the official cult figures, regardless of whether they privately believed their teachings to be reasonable and valid.

Critical, thoughtful young people will rebel against such drilling – that is, against the roles and structures being inculcated into them. They resist having their lives confined to the family circle, they want a quality life for themselves and others. But they are at a loss as to what the criteria and measures of such valuable life are, and where to look for the signposts to follow. Adults are not in a position to satisfy this hunger for meaningfulness, because they are themselves confused, “sold-out”, and bullied into accepting compromises which they are ashamed of in private; they close their minds and ears to truth and are prepared to lie to others to protect their interests.

The reaction of the young is not hard to predict. It may be a desperate cry of protest; an escape to clownery; drugs and alcohol abuse; mind-splitting rock music; superficial, fleeting contacts with others; emigration and sweated work in richer countries; petty, degenerated dreams about possession; being caught up early in the morass of the television consciousness; resignation; domesticity.

The social context of education

The causes and essence of the crisis of schooling and education charted out above raise a whole plethora of questions about the future developments, about the overt and covert social conflict in the surroundings of education, about the condition of “the educating society”, its potential and its real ability to educate and enculturate. These are questions about conditions of the principal subject of education. Only against the background of these questions can we attempt to deal with the problem of what principles

to follow in searching for an alternative to the hitherto predominant type of education, an alternative which would deserve the name of a rehumanised, humanistic and resocialised education.

Below are a few dozens of questions about the social context of education. They should be of concern to everyone who cares about educating.

- Are we not witnessing a powerful and persistent dual echo of the last war? The war itself has produced authoritarian personalities, with propensity to hatred, violence, revenge and destruction. It has also brought its replica – the psychotic Stalinist doctrine, effectively put to practice in the political, economic, cultural and psychological spheres. Has Stalinism, besides being a source of an almost religious belief, a legend and a powerful myth of great promise for the youth of that time, not brought about the warping of human personalities on a large scale? Has it not produced individuals with an appetite for aggression and destruction aimed not only against the mythical “alien threat” but also against their own folk? Has Stalinism not sanctified its own doctrine, giving it the status of a new Bible whose teachings have to this day been instilled in the members of the political establishment in order to prepare them to act against their own society? (The hypothesis of the redoubled authoritarianism and of the dual echo of war.)
- The generations of war seems to be critical. This is because Polish children have been subconsciously exposed to the home-made breed of nationalism, authoritarianism, etatism and fascism before the war. Then they were witnesses to the Nazi atrocities; before that they experienced the tragedy, humiliation and disillusionment of the lost defensive war of 1939. Then came the tragic, heroic Warsaw Uprising of 1944, furiously crushed by Hitler. Soon after, a bloody civil war was waged between the Soviet-backed communist military and anti-Communist insurgents. Then, there was the police state, the bleakness and the ideological zeal of the 1950s, the poisonous demagoguery of the young communist activists (members of the infamous ZMP organisation) which set generations of Poles against one another. What were the long-term effects of the three large-scale waves of civil unrest among the working class – which goals became more attainable as the result, and which became even more distant? (The hypothesis of the lasting effects of national defeats and tragic social conflicts).
- Is it not fairly reasonable to suggest that the events in the Polish modern history, mentioned above, have had profound and lasting educational effects by producing the following personality traits:
 - 1) individuals who combine social sadism with social masochism, the hatred of aliens and the hatred of certain people from their own group whom they perceive as “enemies” or “hating alien leanings”;

- 2) fundamentalists characterised by extreme cognitive and personal rigidity;
- 3) individuals equipped with a particularly high moral sensitivity (though shaped by the same situational and historical context).
 - Is it not so, then, that the young generation of learners is exposed to and influenced by various teachers who made strikingly different moral and political choices in the past. What are the consequences of this for them? (The hypothesis of socialisation waves and interfering teacher’s generation waves).
 - What are the implications of the above for people’s readiness to cope with changing expectations and the changeable nature of the surrounding world? How can educationalists raise relevant issues for research and forge out principles of action for educational workers if the storehouse of theoretical solutions consists solely of authoritarian ideas about education, including recipes for repression and enslavement – for turning individuals into mere cogs in the machine of social organisation operated by the powerful, the enlightened, by those who have the public property and their disposal. (The hypothesis that the lack of alternative pedagogical and educational ideas and frameworks poses serious threat to development).

What can be done? A call for a radically humanistic education

In outlining the above questions and hypotheses I hoped that there would be people ready to give well-grounded answers. I have deliberately formulated the hypotheses in a way which translates into the most pessimistic and alarming diagnosis of the Polish “educating society”. This is not because I am fond of scaremongering, but because I hope to stimulate studies of social and human development which may disprove those pessimistic hypotheses, and thus offer evidence that there are, after all, opportunities for a humanistic alternative in education.

It seems urgent, then, to call for and bring home to people the need for a radically critical pedagogy and a radically humanistic education, that is the theory, methodology and practice which would consistently – against all the odds – serve to maximise the human potential, to enable that potential to reach beyond established boundaries, existing conventions and roles; which would help people to acquire co-operative and communicative competence as well as the competence to negotiate between divergent interests in the name of the collective, class-related and individual emancipation.

Is it legitimate to use the terms “radical education” and “radical pedagogy” to describe the desiderata formulated above? The desiderata are, in a way, consciously made eclectic, split in two, as if incoherent. Critics might say that they may “look radical” precisely because of their inconsistency. If I were to defend my position against that

criticism, I would point out that the seeming incoherence is in fact quite the reverse – a conscious welding together into a coherent whole of two layers or dimensions. One is educating in order to change the world, to construct a new social formation, for the people and through their own effort. This dimension encompasses an education that cherishes the heroism of the struggle for a better world and of the great personal sacrifices made in the defence of human values and humans themselves. This dimension has been traditionally associated with „radicalism”. Sadly, it has also traditionally turned into hackneyed slogans written on the standards of the past, and routinely equated – in history textbooks – with the historical “threshold of maturity” (which, it has been suggested, is already behind us); it has been dominated by hypocritical appeals for “an education for peace”, issued – ironically – among arsenals stocked with deadly missiles (does peace depend on education, anyway?).

The other dimension involves “soft” actions of the people who actualise their needs by helping others in need. It is through this “healed-up together-ness” of mutually supportive individuals – who refuse to accept the division into those at the top and those at the bottom – that humanity (including the radical reading of the term), and the development potential of an individual are actualised as ultimate values. This kind of radicalism is founded not on heroism but on the resolute adherence to the humanistic perspective. In this perspective, educating means a preparation for and a training in reflective, sound, constant choice; it is a gradual adoption of the orientation towards maximising growth through tasks that transcend SELF, and every such task makes the utopian vision of social brotherhood a shade more real.

This kind of orientation is forged through an ongoing, criteria-governed dialogue. But the term “dialogue” may refer to different types of action. Firstly, it may mean co-operative effort towards a mutual understanding – but then we must ask: who is to understand whom? Is it the ruling elites, and those who aspire to join them, squabbling among themselves, or is it the society itself? Who should be the other party in the dialogue – people who have been elected to the positions of power or people whose rule had to be accepted at gunpoint?

Secondly, dialogue may mean the pattern and tactics of a determined struggle to carry out freedom enclaves during the cyclically recurring phase of the system’s closure – that is, at a time when the freedom of thought and expression are scarce goods. The struggle includes learning the techniques of independent self-education at a time when official education aims at suppressing consciousness; then, it involves learning to look for truth, and to expose the true interests from beneath the layers of ideological slogans.

Finally, dialogue means empathy, reaching out to others, tolerance for difference, cherishing the right to an individual perspective and individual choice.

This kind of education can be regarded as educating in unrest, as a preparation for autonomy which necessitate continual ambivalence. The unrest makes necessary moral choices, and the search for alternatives to the existing evil. It makes us define the terrain of hope and identify our role in fulfilling those hopes. It also means concern about whether our own creative potentials will be used to the fullest, whether we are not going to get trapped in the petty domesticity and in the roles that have been forced on us from the outside.

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Abstract: More than a quarter of a century ago, the author published some hypotheses warning again the fact the Polish school and society may, over an extended period, have an anti-educational effect, in they may be strongly impeding the development of young people towards realizing their full potential, towards humanity civic ownership. Despite the great transformation which have occurred in Poland these hypotheses have unfortunately been proven right. This is due to inextricable combination of dependency, and authoritarianism in Poland's more and less distant as well as the contradictory actions of main actors of the educating society including the alternative between liberal and conservative governments and the political power of the Catholic Church. Creating some opportunities for development would require common strategic action in favour of democratic and emancipatory education, undertaken together by all the actors of the educating society: experts, educational leaders, teachers, parents, local governments, the mass media, and national government. However, chances for such a change in the foreseeable future are slim.

Key words: anti-educational society, hypothesis of entangled blockages to development, opportunities emancipatory education

