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ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: THE DEFINITION PROBLEM

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At the closing session of this year's National Alternative Schools Conference, those attending could not agree to endorse a petition to make National Alternative Schools Day a part of National Education Week. The impasse that developed over what might seem a winning proposal for The International Affiliation of Alternative School Associations and Personnel (IAASAP) echoed some lasting difficulties. There are real disagreements within the group over what alternative education is and what it should be. As Bill Snider suggested in his *Education Week* article following last year's conference, an alternative 'affiliation' or network was formalized, but a definition of alternative schools wasn't tackled.¹

The resulting situation is something of an embarrassment, but there are good and probably enduring reasons why agreement remains elusive. The argument over the essence of alternative education is at least as old as the alternative schools movement beginning in the 1960s — and as of today there are further wrinkles making consensus improbable on even more fundamental grounds than earlier. It is only in part a semantic argument about labels. Primarily it is a matter of educational organization and practice, and there are at least three distinctly discernible types of alternative schools.

A Bit of History

There was plenty of disagreement among the alternative educators of the 60s, but in retrospect their differences appear far less fundamental than those of today. They disagreed over whether it was individual freedom or whether it was communitarianism and collective decision making instead, that is the real essence of alternative schooling — or whether action

learning takes precedence over curricular relevance as the more critical defining element.

There were also at least two vying conceptions of the fundamental mission of alternative education: (1) did it intend to institutionalize diversity by providing a mechanism enabling and inviting schools to differ from one another — or (2) was alternative education the vanguard that would point the way, showing what *all* schools ought to be like? (It has been a constant temptation, of course, even among the devotees of diversity, to feel that theirs was really a *better* education than others offered, and therefore something that all should have.) There were also differences among those who saw alternative education as the pathway to more humane schools and those who saw it primarily as the pathway to social and political change.

It is possible to identify schools and thinkers and books and articles from the 60s, and the early 70s, representing and often urging each of these positions as the real crux of alternative education. The differences among them were considerable, but most were at least loosely tied to, or to some extent reflective of, the "counterculture" of the 60s. As such, they were all inclined to be critical of the mass processing conducted by conventional schools and of their bureaucratic organization. This yielded something of a liberation demand, often (but not always) accompanied by an expansive willingness to "let a hundred flowers bloom." Still, the repudiation of the dominant system probably marked the largest single area of agreement among the alternative school educators of that first, 1960s, decade.

Type 1

Some of the orientations and aspirations of those early alternative school people remain alive and well in the current alternative education scene. There are still people trying to design new schools, and they are responsible for what I call Type 1 alternatives: programs designed in answer to the search for an education that will simultaneously prove more humane, more responsive, more challenging, and more compelling for all involved. And although a lot less fanciful, today's thrust for diversity and choice for everyone is not such a long step from "let a hundred flowers bloom."

But there are at least two other groups, with rather different sets of orientations that now *also* count themselves as alternative educators — and they depart notably further from the initial group than its members differed among themselves.

Type 2 Programs

One of these groups consists of the staff assigned to programs explicitly designed for the worst and weakest of students — Type 2 programs. Since

the target population is often explicitly identified in just such terms, it is not surprising that the programs of such schools are often judgmental in posture and punitive in orientation. This is what might be expected from an alternative school whose self-reported distinction lies in removing disruptive youngsters to leave others to study in peace.² Such programs have been called "soft jails," and indeed there is reason for doing so. Their students are assigned to them — often as a last chance proposition just prior to expulsion — and instead of the 'liberation' theme of the early alternative schools, these are likely to be highly structured, tightly regulated and supervised programs that are expected to employ behavior correction strategies, along with firm and aggressive disciplinary policies.

Not surprisingly, in many alternative schools of this type, the punitive component outweighs the instructional, and the ambiance is more openly jail-like than school-like. Yet in other schools of the same genre, however, teachers struggle to provide the more positive environment and humane approaches better calculated to re-educate and rehabilitate than is an overtly punitive setting.

Such teachers often try to borrow techniques and strategies from the Type 1 alternative schools described above. The missions assigned them, however, and the systems in which they work, frequently frustrate such efforts. And they open themselves to pressure and criticism if supervisors and colleagues in other schools conclude they are too soft on kids who need a firm hand and who have actually earned worse.

(Ironically, the first alternative schools also included many that were designed for previously unsuccessful youngsters. 'Street Academies,' for instance, were established in inner cities across the country. But these programs were *ideologically* associated with alternative schools for more fortunate youngsters — with Type 1 alternatives — and bore no resemblance to the later, 'soft jail' or Type 2 approach to alternative education. Instead, they sought to make instruction more interesting and effective, and students more successful.)

Type 3 Programs

Still a third variety of alternative schools has developed, whose guiding metaphor appears to be therapy rather than reform school. They are perhaps today's most rapidly increasing alternative schools, developed in the interests of dropout prevention and responding to the needs of students judged to be at risk. These programs are clearly more humanistic in orientation than Type 2 alternatives, but they share with Type 2 programs at least one critical and very fundamental assumption namely, it is that the cause of the student's troubles lies somewhere within the student. The difficulty is not that the student needs a different *kind* of education, or that there is a bad match between school and youngster; it is that the youngster

is flawed in some important respect. They thus construe their mission as helping to eliminate the flaw — a matter of intensive counseling, or unusual support, or remediation.

Most typically, the focus is on changing behavior or attitudes, and the therapy component dominated the program — with the result that academic instruction often takes a back seat (at least, *on-grade-level* academic instruction) and there is rarely much staff attention given to rethinking instruction or curriculum. 3

These differences in fundamental orientation are reflected in virtually every dimension of the three types of alternative schools. They are clearly visible in the way programs are initiated — i.e., in the charge with which they are launched. The differences in mission also have ramifications for school organization — the size of programs, facilities, student-staff ratios. And they certainly determine program ambiance or climate. Type 1 programs typically seek to establish an exciting, charged and challenging atmosphere; Type 2, an orderly and controlled one; and Type 3, a services-oriented one willing to extend help to those who wish it and who will in return cooperate with service-providers.

Differences

Such contrasts follow quite directly from what these programs are intended to accomplish, and the mission is often quite explicitly specified. As an illustration, see the language of a bill currently pending in California: 4

. . . for purposes of this chapter, 'alternative instructional program' is defined as a separate school, or a separate program within a school, that utilizes one or more alternative methods of providing the curriculum . . . and meets all of the following criteria:

- (1) Is chosen by each pupil, parent or guardian, or both . . .
- (2) Involves pupils, teachers, and parents or guardians in planning and carrying out an educational plan . . .
- (3) Allows flexibility in teaching styles, curriculum, and classroom scheduling . . .
- (4) Pursues the school district's educational goals established for all children, but uses learning techniques that are conducive to each pupil's individual learning style.
- (5) Is designed to be responsive to each pupil's way of learning, rate of learning, and motivation for learning.

This, of course, is a mandate for a Type 1 alternative. Now see the contrast with Oregon's law which has this to say about eligibility for alternative education: 5

School districts shall consider and propose to the pupil prior to expulsion two or more alternative programs that are appropriate and accessible . . .

- (a) Following a second or subsequent occurrence within any three-year period of a severe disciplinary problem . . .
- (b) When . . . a pupil's attendance pattern is so erratic that the pupil is not benefitting from the educational program;
- (c) When a refractory pupil is being expelled; and
- (d) When a pupil's exemption from compulsory attendance is approved.

Clearly this legislation mandates a Type 2 program, which will then be evaluated on the basis of this mission rather than on the sort of grounds a different kind of program might recommend.

Finally, here is an illustration of what we have been calling a Type 3 alternative program. It comes from Florida's 1989 grant incentives program for mini-schools as educational alternatives for the dropout prone. The legislation defined the mini-schools eligible this way: 6

- (a) . . . small, open enrollment . . .
- (b) . . . students, parents, and teachers . . . will be involved in the preplanning, development, and operation of the mini-school
- (c) . . . open to all students by choice . . .
- (d) . . . if located within a currently operating school, will have self-governance as would any free-standing school

One can see in the targeting, and also in the criteria for awards (district dropout, retention, and graduation rates) the assumption that the students to be reached have problems; but there is also the attempt to help them, in contrast simply to containing and controlling them.

The three types of alternatives differ considerably as to the organizational arrangements needed to carry out their programs. Type 1 alternatives need a student population large enough to sustain a full instructional program. This means at least four teachers and thus 100 or so students at the high school level. A Type 1 alternative also needs enough separation from a conventional school to be able to maintain a different climate — typically emphasizing informality, egalitarianism, and individual expression.

The Type 1 alternative school is likely to reflect a mix of ability levels among students — the weaker and the abler, the motivated and the unmotivated. This, say many advocates, is necessary if the weaker are to have the peer models important to helping them become otherwise. Type 2 programs, on the other hand, in effect track students on the basis of their alienation from

school, while Type 3 tracks for assorted weaknesses on their part (emotional or academic).

A Type 2 alternative program doesn't necessarily require much removal from a host school (although the host may prefer it), and it can be as small as a single class. The requirements consist largely in a relatively confined space and student-staff ratios low enough to sustain highly structured instructional and control patterns.

A Type 3 alternative, on the other hand, requires assigning a teacher a very small number of students (ranging from 4 or 5 to 10-12 at most). A single classroom is adequate for operating such a therapeutic community whose goal is to eliminate so far as possible the incapacity handicapping performance in the regular school. Thus the focus is on intensive remediation or counseling or both.

Curricular patterns and instructional arrangements are also likely to differ among the three types of alternatives. Type 1 alternative schools tend to concentrate a fair amount of attention on revitalizing conventional classes and devising innovational teaching strategies. Many of them feature non-traditional arrangements such as interdisciplinary approaches, schools-without-walls, action learning, and independent study. A Type 2 alternative is likely to concentrate as heavily on behavioral change as on academics, and the instructional program is likely to be limited to "the basics" — i.e., to those rudiments of the 3R's that can be memorized, perhaps as supplemented with some vocational instruction.

Although it is not typical, Type 3 alternatives *may* reflect curricular modification or simplification designed to render schools' academic dimensions simpler or more palatable to their students. One model, for instance, converts the high school curriculum into more than 100 separate competencies, each of which can be reached by completing a set of assignments and obtaining a satisfactory score on a test looking only at that single competency.

Perhaps the most critical division among the three main varieties of alternative schools is where they stand in relation to the matter of choice. For the Type 1 variety, voluntary affiliation on the part of all — teachers as well as students — is the key ingredient of school revitalization and educational commitment. For the Type 2 program, the *denial* of choice is equally salient. In the minds of their sponsors, these programs are for youngsters who need shaping up, and no one could be masochistic enough to want to choose them. Type 3 programs are more likely to represent some compromise on the choice question — e.g., many limit eligibility to students deemed at risk or dropout prone, as referred by counselors or teachers, but they permit those eligible to reject the assignment if they so choose.

The three tend to have fairly different success rates, too. The research suggesting extraordinary accomplishment — i.e., the school transformations and the turning around of previously alienated and failing students — is almost all tied to Type 1 programs.⁷ The record of the Type 3 programs is mixed. In many, behavioral improvement and moderate academic progress is evident, but once returned to the environment of the regular high school — a practice observed in many Type 3 programs — a number of students simply revert to their prior behavior and accomplishment patterns.⁸

The findings on Type 2 programs are clearer. In a classic study in Florida, for instance, an evaluation by the Governor's office concluded that the literally thousands of assignments to Type 2 alternatives during the 1978-79 school year had accomplished nothing positive. They had not improved school behavior or attendance, nor decreased suspensions. They changed nothing except, perhaps, to escalate the incidence of punishment for the following year.⁹

Comparisons and Contrasts

Because many of those in Type 3 programs, as well as some in Type 2 alternatives, share the strongly humanistic orientation of the earliest, Type 1, alternative schools, there is perhaps more common ground than the foregoing might suggest. Certainly staff in Type 1 programs often believe they have the best answers for the youngsters enrolled in Type 2 and 3 programs. And many in Type 3 programs respond positively, if a bit wistfully, to the enthusiasm and optimism of Type 1 advocates. It is such commonality that is one major reason why for almost 20 years, annual alternatives conferences have been able to draw educators from all three types of programs. (Yet the differences between Types 1 and 3 on the one hand, and Type 2 on the other, are understandably significant enough that a number of people from Type 2 programs felt that this year's conference offered little that met their needs.)

Under such circumstances, it should come as no surprise that alternative school people cannot agree on a definition of alternative education. Their programs differ according to their missions (providing a more humane and effective education; segregating, containing, and reforming a disruptive population; healing the wounded). They differ as to what to look to and begin working on when education fails (the student's misbehavior, the student's psyche, or the school's environment). They differ according to the functions formally assigned them, and the expectations and demands of those to whom they report (e.g., the assistant principal in charge of discipline, the district special needs populations office, or the associate superintendent in charge of instructional or organizational innovation).

These differences add up to extensively different conceptions of what alternative education is about, what it is for, and how it is best conducted. Given such fundamentally different orientations, it cannot be surprising that people in alternative education do not agree upon a definition. It may be that it makes little sense to try — and most especially, perhaps, at a national convention of alternative school people.

The largest single group at any particular annual conference may consist of people from within the host state, and a substantial proportion of those attending may well be participating in their first National Conference on Alternative Schools.

This year, this expectable group of newcomers from alternative schools in or near the host state was further swelled by a substantial number of school administrators expected to launch one or more alternative schools and coming to find out what they are. A lot of these people were confused by the conflicting advice they got (e.g., on whether an alternative should be a separate school or school within a school, or whether a classroom could suffice; or on whether class sizes need be limited to 6 or 8 or whether they can and should parallel regular classroom enrollments). Many seemed puzzled by the fact that a national assemblage of alternative school educators could not muster enthusiastic support for a National Alternative Schools Day.

Perhaps this analysis will help them understand that to support an alternative schools day is to be lending support to whatever goes by way of alternative education anywhere — and thus, somewhere, to the very sort of wrongheadedness one is committed to replacing! To offer such support not only seems like poor and self-defeating politics, but also wrong in principle. For insofar as a National Alternative Schools Day would celebrate and reinforce whatever goes by the name "alternative" anywhere, that is sure to be arguing against one's own beliefs and commitments.

A Type 2 alternative school, and its arrangements and practices, are an anathema to a Type 1 alternatives advocate. And though a Type 3 program may be well meaning, it typically misses the boat, from the Type 1 perspective. On the other hand, from a Type 2 perspective, the Type 1 operation may appear irrelevant and probably more than a bit utopian. And from the Type 3 perspective, both Type 1 and Type 2 fail to perceive what is wrong with unsuccessful students, and thus aren't in a position to provide the strongest remedies. And this is why a National Alternative Schools Conference may be the last place to reach agreement on what alternative education is!

Endnotes

- 1 William Snider, "Alternative Educators Form National Network for Change," *Education Week*, August 2, 1989.
- 2 This was the response of one of the respondents to a national survey, in reply to the question, "What do you think is the single most outstanding feature of your alternative program?" National Survey of Public Alternative Schools. Project on Alternatives in Education, 1982.
- 3 This seems clear in various ways in the major works dealing with alternative school effects on at risk youngsters — e.g. in Wehlage et al, *Reducing the Risk: Schools As Communities of Support* (London: Falmer Press, 1989) and in Gold and Mann, *Expelled to A Friendlier Place: A Study of Effective Alternative Schools* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984).
- 4 California Senate Bill Number AB 175 as amended May 21, 1990.
- 5 Oregon, 1989 Legislative Session. ORS 339.605, and ORS 339.250(6).
- 6 Addendum to Florida Dropout Prevention Act, 1989 Legislature.
- 7 See, e.g., Mary Anne Raywid, *The Case for Public Schools of Choice*. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa. Fastback No. 283, 1989.
- 8 Gold and Mann, exemplify researchers finding lasting behavioral and academic benefits in the Type 3 programs they examined. *Op. cit.* McCann and Landi describe what I suspect is more typical: modest progress which disappears as youngsters re-enter the conventional school environment. See "Researchers Cite Program Value," *Changing Schools*, Spring/Summer, 1986, pp. 2-5.
- 9 Executive Office of the Governor, Office of Planning and Budgeting. *An Evaluation of the Florida State Alternative Education Program*, June 5, 1981.

