

Education and the Tyranny of the Converted Idea

To convert, according to Webster's *Collegiate*, is "to transform" or "to divert, to apply to a different use." We all frequently make conversions in dealing with objects, and indeed this sort of conversion may mark the inventor or the truly ingenious individual. Similarly, in dealing with ideas, conversions are frequent, and many of them have provided us with new and important insights. In some cases, however, the result has been less fortunate. For a converted idea is a mutant, and obviously some mutants represent happy accidents while others do not.

A converted idea is one derived directly from another—in contrast to an idea gleaned from observation or experience. In some cases, the conversion undoubtedly grows out of a deliberate manipulation of ideas, a conscious and examined process. All too often, however, we may perform the conversion unawares. Then, without any real weighing of it and decision to adopt it, this brainchild can come to command over us a power akin to tyranny. Sometimes others enthusiastically accept our conversion with the same lack of scrutiny and propel it along with increasing momentum. It is only later that all of us discover something is seriously amiss.

Educational thought seems particularly vulnerable to this sort of thing, and such a series of events seems to provide the history of many ideas now figuring prominently in educational practice. These ideas have not resulted from that deliberate manipulation whereby the logical implications of the parent idea are drawn forth. Rather, many of the

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ideas we use to guide practice seem to come from a much looser sort of mental operation, the yield of which is indeed a mutant in that the new idea differs considerably from its parent, and logically speaking, it is an accident. The events seem to proceed this way: Someone offers the conversion, the mutant; it has surface plausibility because the original was sound and it seems to enjoy some sort of connection with the original—more simply, because we know and like the parent, we accept the child; enthusiasts adopt and sponsor the conversion; and before we know it, without really willing things thus, it is the conversion that is calling the tune. It is in this sense that one can speak of a tyranny of converted ideas and find a number of examples in our thinking about education.

Here is one prominent instance. We speak a great deal of the "needs" of children and of the educational importance of recognizing these needs and trying to deal with them as we teach. Such practice is no more than an impressive array of evidence would substantiate, since we know that human beings do have needs that may serve either to enhance or impede learning. Thus, information about needs is related significantly to educational *means*; it suggests one facet which the effective teacher must bear in mind if she is to

This follow-up did not attempt to consider prediction of success in the classroom once the student had graduated. It would appear that until such longitudinal research is conducted we should be cautious in the use we make of selection programs.

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Developing Creative Talent

Studies into the characteristics of creative scientists and artists suggest that the schools may need to encourage traits not always valued—and sometimes not even tolerated—in the classroom, if an increasingly large proportion of tomorrow's adults are to be capable of molding better cultures for mankind instead of merely adjusting well to existing cultures.

—John I. Goodlad. *Some Propositions in Search of Schools*. National Education Association, Department of Elementary School Principals, 1962

One editor we know makes a habit of collecting education cliches. He's got a fairly large collection, at that, because he also makes a habit of removing them whenever they appear in the manuscripts he reads. For him, and for the rest of us who are looking for other ways to say "culturally deprived," finding the answer usually involves only a little creative thought and a glance through the nearest dictionary or thesaurus of synonyms. Can you find substitutes for: "motivate the child," "quality education," "administrative concerns"?

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accomplish her purposes. We seem to have performed a conversion where needs are concerned, however, converting the notion from means to an end. We have freed "needs" from the category "information related to means," and what was previously associated with means has come to serve as an end; *ergo*, "meeting children's needs" as an aim of education.

In this case, the conversion has to do only with the function of an idea or, more accurately, with a set of related ideas and information. But the change in use has far-reaching consequences, and a radically different education is introduced thereby. Here, the yield or child of needs viewed as related to means is a mutant so different from its parents as to be unrecognizable by them.

Now it may be that the fulfillment of children's needs is a legitimate aim of education, and perhaps it is precisely what our goal should be. But this is a question demanding careful weighing and consideration. Anything so important as just what it is we should be attempting in schools should not be settled when a candidate for adoption slips in by the back door this way.¹ It is not, of course, the back door entrance of the converted idea that is objectionable. It is the risk that the notion gaining this sort of access does not get the careful scrutiny necessary. And once having gained admittance, an unwelcome visitor can tyrannize the entire household.

A similar kind of conversion is involved in the particular emphasis many of us bring to the idea of "individual differences." Once again, the fact that no two human beings are exactly the same is important information as we seek to educate. It signals a warning against the erroneous and inexpedient practice of expecting all children to react in the same way, learn at the same rate, et cetera.

¹ There are many important questions which can and have been raised about making "needs fulfillment" a goal of education. For a contemporary discussion, see Komisar, Paul B. "'Need' and the Needs-Curriculum." *Language and Concepts in Education*. (Edited by B. O. Smith and R. H. Ennis.) Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1961. For an older but very much current article, see Bode, Boyd. "A Critique of the Concept of Pupil Needs." *School and Society*. (Compiled by C. H. Gross, S. P. Wronski, and J. W. Hanson.) Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1962.

But the fact of individual differences has not been left to serve in this "means" capacity alone. In converted form, it crops up again and again as a projected end or goal of education rather than as a factor related to the means. And much educational literature bows to the tyranny of this particular conversion by advancing the "cultivation of the individual's uniqueness" as a central aim of the schools.

Were we all to examine the conversions with the same care we give to the original ideas, we probably would avoid many difficulties. For instance, it should not take much thought to arrive at the conclusion that only some human uniquenesses are really desirable. And further analysis should show that the reasoning involved in this conversion—moving from what is ("people are different") to what ought to be ("differences should be encouraged") is, at best, open to question. Examination of this conversion might also suggest that the teacher who sets out deliberately to cultivate individual differences embarks on an implausible task. In the first place, it is difficult for her to know specifically what she is about. Differences are defined only as relations. An individual difference is clearly not a "thing" with any describable identity or characteristics of its own. At precisely what, then, do we aim? Furthermore, even if our teacher could surmount the obstacle of deciding on her purposes in concrete and specific terms, she must then face the problem of just how to realize them. What do they suggest that she do? The logical course of action, given the aim of "cultivating individual differences," would seem to consist in encouraging disparate and probably conflicting behavior from any group of children. Chaotic as the result might be, it seems to be the operational import when we set out seriously to cultivate uniquenesses.

Perhaps the most prevalent means-to-end conversion is the operation we have performed on "motivation." That the interested youngster is likely to learn more, better, and faster, we have much evidence. It would be almost unthinkable to dispute the efficacy of motivation as a means to educating—as a tool, that is, for accomplishing the teacher's

purposes. But to move from this knowledge to viewing interest and enthusiasm per se as a classroom goal is to invert quite drastically the facts about motivation. And it would seem that this is exactly what a number of us may have done. One teacher of teachers points out the far-reaching consequences of this particular conversion this way: "Getting student interest is no trick. Tell dirty jokes, and a rapt audience is guaranteed." The difference between a teacher and an entertainer, he adds, is that the former seeks to elicit interest to some purpose beyond itself.

One can cite a number of other instances in which means seem to have been transformed to ends in education. In fact, one might almost attribute those weird swings of the pendulum which seem to characterize thought in American education to just this kind of conversion. Certainly this century's most popular movements in educational thought seem to have found their basis in a converting of means to ends. For example, by the twenties we had accumulated a considerable amount of information about children and how they grow, and somehow this information came to be turned around. It became associated with purposes rather than with ways to realize purposes; *ergo*, the "child-centered" movement. Several decades later we had enlarged our knowledge of human personality and emotional stability, and this knowledge was coming to serve us well in our efforts to educate. For some, however, means became ends, the educational process came to be viewed as therapy, and the goal of education became mental health.² Now, perhaps, we are being tempted to perform the same sort of conversion with the new devices of educational technology, with the use of machines as purpose rather than as means to realizing purposes.

But means-to-end conversions are not the only kind which come to tyrannize education. A somewhat different sort occurs in some of the decisions we seem to make on the basis of analogies. Here the conversion is one of

context rather than of function. A sound idea from one realm of experience is transplanted to quite a different one, and sometimes we perform the switch without asking how similar the second realm is to the first.

A recent approach to language teaching seems to be a case in point. Converters noted how an infant comes to know language. If this is the way it happens naturally, they seem to have reasoned, why not fashion foreign language instruction to accord with the natural process? Thus many language classes came to be conducted exclusively in the language to be learned, since infants learn a language after hearing it spoken. An introduction to writing the language was deferred for some time on the grounds that children learn a language long before they can write it. And speech "patterns" were offered in lieu of any consideration of the grammar of the language, since children understand a language and communicate in it long before they can grasp such abstractions as the rules of grammatical construction.

The facts which form the basis of the reasoning—facts about how very young children first come to terms with language—are hard to challenge. But to apply them in a teaching method for teen-agers is to convert these facts, and the conversion is indeed a radical one. A *description* of *infant behavior* comes to function as a *prescription* for dealing with *adolescents*. The double switch—is to *ought* and *babies* to *teen-agers*—has interesting possibilities, but it raises serious questions. Is there evidence that a one-year-old learns in the same way as the adolescent? Is the general pattern of learning a body of knowledge the same when one is totally alien to it as when he already has done some related learning, or does some degree of mastery of one's own language alter the pattern of learning a second language? Does a means which produces results when the learner is confronted with it throughout the day command effectiveness when employed for only forty minutes daily? Are the "natural" sequences of oral communication before written, and communication before grammar, the only sequences or the most efficient ones? These are questions open to empirical investigation,

² For a discussion (and criticism) of the tendency, see Rank, Otto. *Modern Education; A Critique of Its Fundamental Ideas*. (Translated by Mabel E. Moxon.) New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932.

and of course, it is only this sort of investigation that can provide valid answers. But in the interests of effective teaching, such investigations must *precede* wide adoption of the method. And here is where we encounter once again the danger of the converted idea. Because we can vouch for the parent—in this case, the facts about babies' learning language—we tend simply to *presume* that the offspring is acceptable, the proposals for high school language teaching. It is in just this surface credibility of the conversion that its tyrannical power lies.

Having seen two kinds of conversions affecting educational thought and practice, let us look at a slightly different one currently claiming an influential role. This variety consists in a form of tyranny by usurpation: a single idea, or set of ideas, shifts from its position as one part of the landscape to dominate the entire scene and obscure the rest. To transfer the responsibility from the idea to ourselves, the best we might say of the situation is that it represents an extreme case of single-mindedness. In effect, we let one idea blind us to others. Actually, as it has happened in educational thought, this represents one kind of conversion of function wherein we greatly expand the use and application of an idea. A prominent example is the use some of us have made of personality psychology. Our growing understanding of why people behave (or misbehave) as they do seems to have tempted us to focus exclusively on explaining an action. The result has been a failure to distinguish what can be distinguished, and for practical purposes in the classroom, may need to be. We seem prone to substitute explanation for the several questions demanding attention. In our concern to understand why Johnny belted his neighbor, we may overlook such problems as whether his conduct is desirable and how it is likely to affect the group of which he is a part. Without suggesting a return to judging behavior irrespective of and apart from its causes, judgment on some grounds is often important in dealing with the situation. We need to recognize that, when we have looked into Johnny's personality for an explanation, we have not ex-

hausted all that can be said about his action. To explain and to judge are two distinct activities. Neither provides an adequate substitute for the other, and under many circumstances both may be important. Under such circumstances, which arise frequently in a classroom, consistently to neglect the several relevant concerns in favor of just one of them is to be victim to an idea rather than to possess it.

A similar sort of thing has occurred in connection with our efforts to teach world understanding. In fact, it is the above situation writ large and carried to a considerably further extreme. Our single-minded pursuit of one idea has led us not only to the neglect and distortion of others but to a denial of their legitimacy. Many teachers have met with a great deal of success in building an understanding of foreign peoples and their problems. But a concomitant of this understanding seems to have been that sort of tolerance which bestows approval on any conditions and events within these lands. The upshot seems to be that "whatever is" across the seas "is right."

Many of our youngsters can account admirably for the present turmoil in Africa. They can explain it, that is, in good historical and economic and sociological terms. But to this understanding they seem to have tied something else; they are willing to accept ignorance and suppression as *justification* for barbarism. This is going much further than in the preceding case where an explanation of the causes of behavior is permitted to substitute for a judgment of it. For here the causal explanation makes positive judgment—moral approval—mandatory. This is much more serious than a case where single-mindedness has the incidental effect of blinding us to other concerns. It positively and decisively excludes them, with the result that the answer to the question, "*Why* does Liechtenstein act as it does?" must also provide the answer to the very different question, "*How ought* Liechtenstein act?" When it is pointed out to these youngsters that such reasoning must justify the ovens of Dachau, they are uncomfortable about it. But they are too deeply im-

bued with a particular conception of world understanding to surrender this form of "tolerance."³ Here, then, is one more instance where a good idea—facilitating world understanding—has somehow been converted, and the conversion exercises a power akin to tyranny.

Thus we can find within educational thought a number of cases where facts and ideas are converted, with the conversions functioning autonomously and persuasively. As we have seen, such conversions have served as a source of educational aims, of instruc-

³ Evidence of the prevalence of the view described is found in the fact that the word *understanding* has virtually come to include "abstain from judging" in its very meaning. Thus the old saying, "To understand is to forgive," may be rapidly on its way to redundancy in the same way that it is simply repetitious to say, "This magazine has pages bearing words on them," since pages and words are a part of the very definition of *magazine*.

tional methods, of general approaches to handling children, and of conceptions we are to teach. That it is possible to discern such a number and variety of educational ideas come by in this manner suggests the pervasiveness of the practice of converting ideas. That the resulting ideas cited command such wide influence in education testifies to the power of the conversions.

We can speak of the "tyranny" of these conversions only when they consist of ideas that conscious and deliberate consideration would lead us to reject. To play with an idea and manipulate it—deliberately turning it backwards, sideways, and upside down—is a valid first step toward new knowledge and belief. But to confer validity on the result, without checking and weighing it as carefully as any *other* brand new proposal for guiding action, is surely to borrow trouble.

Through the centuries, teachers have gone on giving, and men and women and children who are not teachers have gone on taking, till what we call Knowledge and Thinking and Reasoning (and emerging from them Writing and Art and Science) have come to rank as the peaks of human ambition, achievement and pride.

—"The Invisible Debt". (Editorial) *The Education Quarterly*; September 1962

To assure maximum learning under the most efficient conditions, curriculum guidelines should be developed to expand the horizons for the gifted and should emphasize related ideas rather than a time sequence of subjects. Since the content of the curriculum designed for students in the middle range of abilities is but a narrow sampling from areas of accumulated knowledge, content for the gifted may well include many new and different materials. Such widely diverse areas of human endeavor as the arts, the humanities, social interaction, the natural sciences, languages, mathematics, and manipulative skills offer an almost unlimited number of chances to provide for the gifted new knowledge, new skills, and new opportunities for creative endeavors in keeping with their abilities.

—*Guidelines and Opportunities for Leadership in the Education of Gifted Children and Youth*
Council of Chief State School Officers, Washington, D.C., 1962