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Education for Survival

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ABSTRACT This article provides a brief overview of current approaches to education and concludes that none of these is sufficient to meet the challenges that now face the human race. It argues instead for a new concept of education for survival.

Introduction

Environmental education is often identified with saving the planet. Yet the Earth has existed for some four and a half billion years and may well survive for a couple of billion more. In contrast it is the human species, with a history that can be measured in terms of a mere 200,000 years, that is in more immediate danger. Such danger stems from a variety of causes, including nuclear, chemical, biological and other actions, reactions and accidents, as well as global warming. (Rees, 2003, p. 61)

Climate change is nothing new. In some periods the planet was so hot that there was no permanent ice at all; at other times the entire surface was frozen solid. At present we are in a moderate ice age with ten per cent of the Earth's land surface under ice. Some 20,000 years ago it was 30 per cent. What is new is the extent to which today's climate changes are being accelerated by human actions.

One of the leading authorities on climate change, James Lovelock, originator of the Gaia theory which sees the Earth as a living and self-regulating system that has already been so abused by the human race that it will take 200,000 years to right itself, has predicted that it is too late to save our current civilization. He forecasts that within the present century global heating (as he now calls it) will cause a rise in temperature of some 8C (14F). Many parts of the world will become uninhabitable. In consequence millions of people will be displaced; millions more will die. In his *Essay on the Principle of Population*, published in 1798, Thomas Malthus warned of the natural tendency for the population to increase more rapidly than the means of subsistence. That situation has now been reached. In 1987 there were five billion people on the planet. Twenty years later the figure had reached 6.7 billion, an increase of 34 per cent. While each person needs 21.9 hectares to supply her or his needs, the Earth's capacity has been calculated at 15.7 hectares. Lovelock concludes that 'I think we would be wise to aim at a stabilized population of about half to one

billion, and then we would be free to live in many different ways without harming Gaia.' (Lovelock, 2006, p. 141)

What are the educational implications of these threats to the human species? Lovelock has argued that:

> What we need is a book of knowledge written so well as to constitute literature in its own right. Something for anyone interested in the state of the Earth and of us – a manual for living well and for survival. (Lovelock, 2006, p. 157)

Living well and survival are two sides of the same coin. To live well is to ensure the survival of the human race, both by reducing the possibility of catastrophe and by providing the expertise to survive in post-catastrophe situations.

Current Aims of Education

The aims of education have been variously specified. Three current approaches are considered here – education for salvation, education for the state and education for progress.

Education for Salvation

Throughout history, religion – the service and worship of a god, gods or other supernatural beings – has been a major force in the provision of education. Religious education has many aims – for example to promote the worship of a supreme being, to teach a code of ethics based upon divine laws and to ensure salvation. Education for salvation reflects the widespread belief across many centuries and cultures that life on Earth is but a preparation for another existence.

Education for salvation is an essential element in leading a good life as defined by the doctrines of a particular religious faith. Salvation is to be found either in another world or within an individual. For some believers, including Christians and Muslims, a main aim of education on this Earth is to learn how to live in such a way as to merit a life hereafter. Others, including Hindus and Buddhists, seek individual peace and escape from the cycle of rebirth.

Education for survival will certainly need to draw upon many of the qualities that have characterized religious education – humility, respect, reverence and service to others. It will not, however, be advanced by continuing rivalries between and among adherents of different religious faiths. Education for salvation is not compatible with education for survival, moreover, if belief in an afterlife means that the potential demise of the human species can be contemplated with equanimity, or that such an ending can be interpreted as a blessed relief from the cycle of rebirth.

Education for the State

Education has been well described as 'a country's biggest business' (Aguilera, 1999, p. 62). State education takes many forms, both central and local, and employs various instruments, for example compulsory school attendance, national curricula and examinations. State direction of education may have diverse aims – to guarantee childhood to children, to keep children and young people out of the labour market, to ensure a contented citizenry, to provide a ready supply of skilled workers and resolute soldiers.

While education may be a country's biggest business, the first duty of a state is to ensure the survival and safety of its citizens. A prime example of a state educational system devoted to this end was to be found in Sparta, the small polis (city state) that was a dominant power in Greece for some two hundred years from the middle of the sixth century B.C. Life in Sparta was organized along communal lines. In contrast to other Greek poleis, slaves in Sparta, the helots, were state- rather than individually-owned. Even the full citizens of Sparta, the Spartiates, owed more to their state than to their families. Nowhere was this more apparent than in education. Although some details are contested and practice no doubt changed over time, between the ages of seven and 19 boys were subjected to a rigorous barrack-based education. In addition, in contrast to the situation in all other Greek states, Spartan girls were also given some public education. The Spartan system of education reflected the three principles that underpinned the organization of Spartan life in the classical period. These were uniformity, conformity and '*the priority of collective interests* over private ones'. (Hodkinson, 2002, p. 106)

A Spartan model of education may well be adopted by those nations or other groups who believe that subordination of the needs and wishes of the individual to those of the state and especially to those of military might is the surest means of survival. Indeed, some of the dimensions of Spartan education, such as moral courage and the priority of collective over private interests, are equally applicable to education for survival, whether in a national or international context. But military prowess as previously conceived may become irrelevant. For in the twenty-first century the ever-present and common 'enemy', however incongruous the term may seem, is the Earth itself. Of course the Earth has frequently posed problems for its inhabitants. Recent examples include hurricane Katrina which caused the flooding of New Orleans in 2005 and the cyclone and earthquake that struck Burma and China respectively in May 2008. Indeed, these latter two events produced a considerable rise in the numbers of some 75,000 people per year who are normally killed by such disasters. But human-induced atmospheric and climatic changes have dramatically increased the risks of disaster and changed the nature of the contest. As Lovelock has observed, 'In several ways we are unintentionally at war with Gaia, and to survive with our civilization intact we urgently need to make a just peace with Gaia while we are strong enough to negotiate and not a defeated, broken rabble on the way to extinction.' (Lovelock, 2006, p. 153)

Education for Progress

The third example, education for progress, has been chosen to reflect the underlying philosophy of our times. For the last 250 years progress has been the dominant theme of industrializing societies and of modern education.

It is not difficult to chart human progress and achievement in many spheres. The steamship, railway, motor car, aeroplane and space capsule have transformed the means of travel. The telephone, radio, television, internet and e-mail have made for instant communication around the world. In many countries progress may also be measured in terms of improved life expectancy and increased numbers of possessions, labour-saving devices and material comforts. In England, for example, although child poverty has not been eliminated, we no longer expect to see ragged, unshod, underfed children in the streets as was common in the nineteenth century and as still occurs in many parts of the world. These achievements have been accompanied by extended schooling for all. But whether men, women and children have become happier, wiser and better as a result remains open to question. They have certainly not become more peaceful. Technological advances have been used for destructive as well as creative purposes. The doctrines of nationalism, imperialism, communism and fascism, together with those of religion, have been employed to justify the slaughter of millions. Organized violence has been on the increase. As Niall Ferguson has indicated: 'The hundred years after 1900 were without question the bloodiest century in modern history, far more violent in relative as well as absolute terms than any previous era.' (Ferguson, 2006, p. xxxiv)

Progress may be defined as 'forward or onward movement towards a destination'. As with education for salvation and education for the state, it is clear that many aims of education for progress are compatible with education for survival. Other destinations are not.

As Sir Crispin Tickell advised in 2002 in an address at a conference on 'The Earth Our Destiny':

> The ideology of industrial society, driven by notions about economic growth, ever-rising standards of living, and faith in the technological fix, is in the long run unworkable. In changing our ideas, we have to look forward towards the eventual target of a human society in which population, use of resources, disposal of waste, and environment are generally in healthy balance.
>
> Above all we have to look at life with respect and wonder. We need an ethical system in which the natural world has value not just for human welfare but for and in itself.
> (Quoted in Lovelock, 2006, p. 148)

A Blueprint for Survival

The principal aims of education for survival can be briefly stated. The first is that of 'living well' to reduce the incidence of major catastrophes that threaten human and other species. Living well may be defined in terms of human enlightenment – the ability to see the truth, to be free from ignorance and prejudice and to promote the ideals of toleration, peace and harmony. The second aim is to make preparations for survival in the aftermath of any catastrophes. Such aims will not render obsolete all those of education for salvation, the state and progress, but they will necessitate substantial conceptual changes.

The first change is to recognize the concept of Spaceship Earth, a spaceship with an ever-increasing number of passengers who are currently divided into potentially hostile groups and whose life-support systems are running out. We now live in a truly global era and education for survival, including the adoption of policies to promote harmony, limit population and minimize environmental damage, must be global in nature.

A second important conceptual change is that education for survival must be directed at adults as much as at children. Over the last two centuries the inexorable rise of the schooled society has led to education being construed as something principally organized by adults for those younger than themselves. While the young should certainly be educated as to the importance of survival, the danger is too immediate to be postponed to another generation.

The third change is that education for survival will need to draw upon all branches of human knowledge and wisdom. These include traditional education that is now often described as informal and on occasion denigrated as being of little worth. Much is to be learned from the commitment to nurture and preservation that is evident in mothers (and fathers) throughout the world. The survival of the individual family is the best starting point for the survival of the larger families of societies and nations, and of the world. The fragmentation and professionalization of knowledge that occurred during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries must be reversed.

The three changes listed so far are applicable to the world as we currently understand it, but what of preparation for survival in a post-catastrophe situation?

One useful blueprint was provided by Herbert Spencer who in *Education: intellectual, moral, and physical*, a collection of four essays re-published in 1861, identified the function of education as being to 'prepare us for complete living'. Spencer argued that the natural demands of human existence, the survival of the species, suggested the following order of five educational aims:

> That education which prepares for direct self-preservation; that which prepares for indirect self-preservation; that which prepares for parenthood; that which prepares for citizenship; that which prepares for the miscellaneous refinements of life. (Spencer, 1861, p. 9)

Contemporary western examples of communal self-preservation include those who seek to live a self-sufficient life, such as the woodland community established in 1994 at Tinker's Bubble near Yeovil in Somerset. As Roger Deakin found:

> All they wanted was to live the woodland life as simply as possible, working hard and mostly doing without things they couldn't make or grow themselves, or which might be ecologically damaging. But far more important was their practical demonstration that there is another way to live, on terms of greater intimacy with the woods and land – slower, more deliberate and benign ….
> (Deakin, 2007, p. 75)

Conclusion

It is not easy to imagine the future. This article is idiosyncratic, partial and set in a 'western' and predominantly English context. It is couched in general rather than specific terms. Nevertheless, the threats to human existence outlined here are real enough. We need to move beyond current concepts of education, including those of education for salvation, for the state and for progress, and even beyond environmental education, to a new, much broader and more enlightened concept of education for survival.

Note

This is a shortened version of an article first published in the journal, *History of Education.*

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