

EDUCATION AND THE QUALITY OF EXPERIENCE*

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Much of our thinking tends to occur in metaphors and analogies. This practice has clearcut dangers. When those of us who are professional educators use terms such as models, delivery systems, products and unit costs, for example, we are applying to our own field analogies borrowed from the world of manufacturing. Let us consider some ways the commercial/industrial aspects of our wider society impinge upon the education and development of young children.

What happens when we apply a manufacturing concept such as unit cost to education? Do we really save money and effort by maintaining larger schools and standardizing both curricula and testing procedures? Because of my own doubts about this matter, I have been trying to formulate a "law of numbers," which goes like this:

- a) As the number of children in an educational setting increases, the number of rules, regulations, norms and role prescriptions also increases
- b) As the number of rules, regulations, etc. increases, the number of children who deviate from them increases
- c) As the number of deviants increases, the number of special programs and procedures increases
- d) As the number of special programs increases, costs of education increase.

According to this "law," by the time we sum up the costs of all the special programs included in our schools we would find them just as expensive -- if not more so -- than the costs of maintaining smaller classes and schools. In smaller classes teachers can know children. When a teacher knows her children well, she has less need of rules and regulations. She can make individual clinical decisions and judgments based on her understanding of each child. When the numbers increase, the use of regulations and standardized procedures is inevitable.

Furthermore, in smaller classes we might make our definition of "normal" more inclusive than it now is, and rechannel much of what we now spend on special programs on efforts to strengthen and increase teachers' clinical skills and insights.

The law of numbers is related to the general principle that the category "children with special needs" is a direct function of how we define what is

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normal. Indeed, the placement of children, somehow defined as nonnormal, into special programs (remedial classes, tutoring programs, etc.) bears some similarity to the recalling of defective automobiles by the automobile industry. Unlike educators, however, manufacturers do not have to worry about the self-concept and aspirations of their defective products.

I believe that if we educators approach our work as cultivators rather than manufacturers, we could more readily accept the fact that significant growth and learning take time; that attitudes, feelings and ideas cannot simply be stamped out in production-line fashion -- they must be gradually developed, refined and nurtured.

Family life is like a hall endowed with the finest acoustical properties. Growing children hear not only their parents' words (and in most cases gradually ignore them), they hear the intentions, the attitudes behind the words. Above all, they learn what their parents really admire, really despise.

Thornton Wilder, The Eighth Day
Popular Library, pp. 261-262