Future Schools, Future Children: The Road to Reform?

"The schooling model is laden with sores, tumors, fat, transplants, grafts, prostheses, shackles, back burdens, adornments, cosmetics, bandages and patches. Its skeleton is warped, its vital organs diseased. It begs to be disconnected from the life-support system that prolongs its agony. But no country has desirable images of future schools, so they try to prolong the past."

Future Schools and How to Get There: A Primer for Evolutionaries
by R.G. Des Dixon. ECW Press, 1992. $16.95.

By Jillian Gustin

As illustrated in the above quotation, R.G. Des Dixon, a well-established Canadian educator and education analyst, sees few redeeming features in current educational practices nor in recent educational reforms. A whole new model, not just facelifts, is needed to avert the demise of contemporary schooling. In *Future Schools*, Dixon puts forth his new blue-print for educational reform. To become truly honorable and worthwhile institutions, schools must accommodate the changing social status of children while simultaneously helping to redefine what childhood means. *Future Schools* is controversial and, in many cases, ends up contradicting itself. Regardless, Dixon's flamboyant writing style and vision of future education appeals not only to emotions but also to rationale.

Dixon's vision for future schools calls for the disposal of what he considers an antiquated model of schooling that has been stagnating since the late nineteenth century. Dixon challenges that the once useful "factory" model of education holds little value in today's context. Under the "factory" model, students are shuttled along an assembly-line of classes in which pieces of raw material, already fully formed, are inputed through rote learning in order to produce finished students—"adults"—with a prescribed body of knowledge. Innovations to adapt and lead schools through an ever-changing society that is less and less production oriented have been few and far between. "School remains," he states, "a puffer-

belly locomotive chugging incongruously through a high-tech landscape, spewing human soot."

A New Understanding of Childhood

At the heart of Dixon's primer lies a re-conceptualization of childhood. Dixon asserts that schools should not only reflect societal values concerning children but should also lead society in the creation of those values. Defining what constitutes childhood has been one area in which Dixon feels schools have failed miserably in their prescribed role of mirror for, and leader of, society.

The notion of childhood, in its most recent (and ideal) form, has come to denote a time of innocence, nurturance and protection. What others call idyllic, however, Dixon calls "protracted helplessness." By keeping childhood static and powerless, children have become mere chattels without human rights. Dixon compares late twentieth century conceptions of childhood to the bound feet of women in nineteenth century China. "Both conventions require constant restriction, retard growth, subjugate a large minority, deform for life, and are thought by the perpetrators to be beautiful."

Moreover, Dixon purports that our concept of childhood is being challenged by a new and different world and no longer fits the actuality of today's child. While children are conceptually kept in a state of protracted helplessness, the trials and responsibilities they face require an independent person. Innocence and nurturance are mere fantasies. Economic

survival and self-sufficiency are, more often than not, their realities. Children confront "adult" responsibilities every day. As Dixon describes: "At this moment, millions of high school students are working 55 hours a week or more when school, home and paid-job hours are totalled, but nobody has bothered to create a complete job description for students that matches the reality of their lives—school, extra-curricular activities, homework, after-hours jobs, household chores, etc."

Yet the older notion of childhood has been fervently entrenched and institutionalized through laws and schools. According to the United Nations, the rights of a child, put simplistically, are to have her needs met. In reality, this translates into the protection of children who society deems are unable to protect themselves. Despite the humanitarian overtones, Dixon argues that, in many cases, children's "rights" have boiled down to a negative institutionalized paternalism. The adult world decides what is in the best interests of a child.

Such paternalism has ranged from deciding the future living arrangements of a child in terms of "custody" disputes to running schools in which students have little or no voice in management and curriculum decisions. Schools, according to Dixon, are a prime example of the institutionalized marginalization of children in our society and the "age-ism" (disempowering discrimination based upon age) that they face in every aspect of their life.

Dixon envisions a new definition of

childhood that would diminish the possibility of "age-ism." He reworks our present conceptions in order to better reflect a child's life and echo her desires and capabilities. All individuals should have complete civil and human rights from birth regardless of age. These rights would be safeguarded by society until that individual makes a conscious choice to exercise them. Thus, society would continue to play a paternalistic role in meeting the needs of a young individual until that individual decided to make choices for herself. For example, a child would be compelled to go to school from an early age but she would never be forced to attend.

Dixon's proposal is both compelling and disturbing in the way it delineates the incongruities between children, society and schools. Obviously, more self-determination for young people is essential to building their self-esteem and teaching them skills needed in today's world. However, according to developmental psychologists, most young children view the world in concrete terms. Abstract thought and reasoning are developed in the latter part of the childhood years. Dixon does not address these developmental levels of children. Even though many children let themselves into their house every day, cook all their own meals, and hold down jobs, do they have the life experiences and developmental abilities to make rational choices about their future?

Dixon's idea of full rights for children is admirable in its respect for children and their capabilities. Nevertheless, since he makes no clear distinction between the parameters of "childhood" and the parameters of "youth," full rights for children, when taken to its extreme, borders on ludicrous. Are children ready to take on full-scale responsibilities attendant with such rights? Can a child of three exercise her rights to self-determination? Would she be able to make a decision in her best interests regarding which parent to live with in lieu of a divorce?

Yet, in the USA, society is already moving in Dixon's direction. Recently, a child was legally allowed to divorce his mother. Perhaps in that particular situation, the right judgement was handed down. However the boundaries of such situations are so hazy that the possibility exists for them to go haywire. What is to stop a child from divorcing a parent for sending them to bed early? What if the majority of children decide school is a waste and we end up with an entirely illiterate generation?

Obviously, these are extreme examples. Nonetheless, they elucidate the consequences of further fracturing children from their childhood. If society was to continue in this vein, children would be tried under adult laws, given adult sentences, have adult responsibilities with little aid. Any sliver left of innocence would be smashed the minute a child decided to exercise any of her rights, regardless of her developmental capabilities to deal with adult life.

Granted, children have to contend with some traditionally "adult" problems. Yet, the question remains, if given the choice with full knowledge of the ramifications, would children choose to take on such responsibilities? Dixon proposes that since the "childhood" contract—no responsibilities, protection as a trade-off for minimal decision-making, reduced rights—has essentially been broken, children deserve the rights and freedoms attendant with their lifestyles and responsibilities.

I wonder about the possibility of making societal changes that would allow children to take back their childhood without necessitating a return to "chattel" stature. Are the childhood years a period in an individual's life that is better to discard than to fight for? Regardless of Dixon's answer to this question, at the very least, he forces us to think about the current state of childhood and the way in which we can respond.
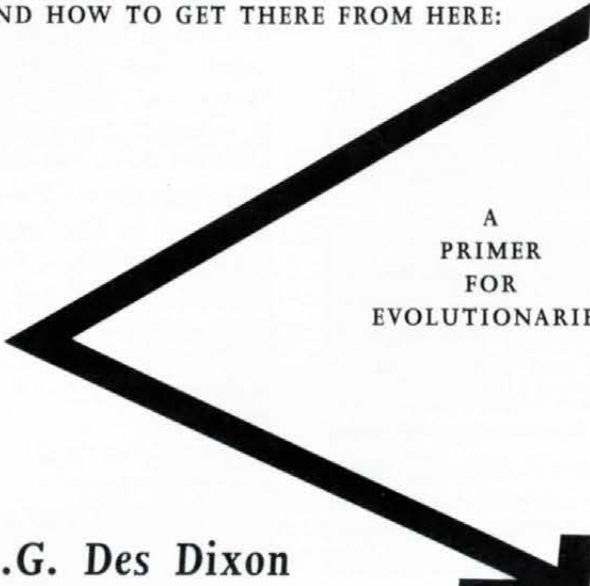
Autonomous Children, Student-Centered Schools

Dixon's future schools would treat children as autonomous individuals in a supervised, supportive and community oriented environment. School would not only give students the skills, knowledge and technical responsibilities to cope throughout their lifetime but also would nourish self-esteem as an essential ingredient to a successful and happy existence.

The school would shift the current curriculum focus from "content" to "process". Students would become "active participants" instead of "passive recipients". In accordance, the school's tenets would be the promotion of "self-propulsion and excellence." Inherent here is a respect for, and encouragement of, each student's capabilities to assess his or her own learning. Along the same lines, Dixon's future school would be entirely student run. This would include organization, management and evaluation of

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school activities ranging from budgetary matters to curriculum design to extra-curricular activities.

The set-up of the school would be structured to foster self-propulsion and autonomy. "Living rooms"—student-centered rooms consisting of couches, tables and computer carrels—in which daily life occurs from doing school work and tests, making presentations, eating lunch, and socializing with peers would be instituted instead of traditional classrooms.

Each living room would have an H.I. (human interactor) and some assistants who would act as mentors/guidance advisors to help monitor a student's progress, give academic advice and set the environment for that living-room. Students would have the freedom to pick their living room as well as their academic schedule. A quick read of Dixon's last chapter—a half day in his future school—gives the reader a clear sense of the self-propulsion inherent in the living room structure as well as the freedom and flexibility fostered in such a school.

The "Three Rs" and Much More: The Right & Responsibility of Every Child

Having elucidated the concepts of self-propulsion and excellence, Dixon moves away from the goal of complete autonomy and emphatically declares the need for basic skills. He states that the ability to read, to do rudimentary arithmetic, to articulate ideas verbally and on paper as well as to listen and critically evaluate information are vital skills needed to survive and thrive in society. He proposes that reading, writing, listening and speaking should be considered essential skills that must be mastered before moving to other subject areas—such as history, geography, chemistry, or calculus. They should continually be evaluated according to past progress and used as prerequisites before enrolling in courses worth graduation credits.

Although the mastery of basic skills is a seemingly logical goal, this proposal contradicts the very essence of student control that he proposes. The criteria to assess mastery of basic skills run the risk of imposing another's standards, smacking of paternalism and setting up some students for imminent failure. Furthermore, the progress and success of a student should be individualized and tailored to reflect the student's capabilities and limitations.

Beyond "basic skills", Dixon pinpoints literacy as the nucleus around which all other subjects should be organized. Literacy, he explains, would include language and literary studies as well as computers, performance arts, audio-visual skills, international issues, health, sex and culture. In creating this core, Dixon predicts that students will have the necessary knowledge and understanding of the workings of the world to peacefully co-exist and contribute to a global society.

Once again, Dixon strays from his previously stated goals not only by defining the curriculum base but by specifically proposing the creation of a "cultural literacy". First, he wants his future school to have a common set of norms ranging from manners to living-room etiquette. Such uniformity in behaviour inhibits the expression of differences prescribed by culture or perhaps by individual make-up.

Second, Dixon openly states that cultural literacy stems from his distaste for the theory and practice of multiculturalism. He argues that common concepts, values and language should supersede all components of what he calls "subcultures." Students should focus on subcultures as parts of a national whole. He states that "there must be a robust, common national culture if there is to be a national identity" and "encouraging people to view their subcultures as alternatives to the national culture instead of parts of it is a disservice to minorities. It is divisive and it blocks minorities form mainstream success."

Such comments beg the question of who decides what constitutes the national culture and who are the so-called "minorities." Whether a national identity is contingent upon a national culture is an important debate that seems critical when considering the political climate of countries such as Canada and the United States. However, to mandate a way of thinking and acting is on the verge despotism. A common set of norms and a defined cultural literacy seem inconsistent with his whole ethos of self-propulsion and autonomy.

Dixon claims that parts of *Future Schools* "were written on all continents in dozens of countries, developed, underdeveloped and communist." He believes that his vision for future schools applies to all countries—an ambitious goal. If

this goal is to be implemented, how would Dixon deal with varying cultures, notions of childhood and differences of bodies of knowledge? Would the basic skills that he proposes all be essential for survival and efficacy around the world? Imposing the same reforms on other societies, especially with the inclusion of "cultural literacy," seems dangerously close to the colonial negation of others' culture. Dixon deceives himself into thinking his views are globally focussed when, in fact, they scream of amerocentric values and could therefore be applied to North American society only.

"Your Children Are Not Your Children"

While *Future Schools* is often inconsistent, poorly substantiated and slightly disturbing at points, Dixon does address an important issue in North America today—what is childhood and how should children fit into contemporary society? His arguments are both salient and evocative. He compels us to rethink how we view children and the institutions, especially educational, that serve them. Kahlil Gibran wrote in *The Prophet* and Dixon whole-heartedly agrees:

> Your children are not your children.
> They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself.
> They come through you but not from you.
> And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.
> You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
> For they have their own thoughts.
> You may house their bodies but not their souls,
> For their souls live in the house of tomorrow,
> Which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
> You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.
> For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

If nothing else, Dixon's *Future Schools* reminds us that society changes and with it, the role of children. Schools can and should be the leaders in addressing those changes to better reflect the lives of children.