Chapter 11

DOING AND TALKING
Schools, Complexity, and Conversation

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1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter is an attempt to use the category of conversation for analysis of schools as complex social systems.

2. SCHOOLS AS SYSTEMS

The Russian version of Educational Systems Theory began in the mid-80-s by a group of Moscow scholars lead by Dr. Liudmila Novikova. This was an extension of a long-standing theoretical tradition known as the educational collective theory. The notion of the collective has acquired somewhat derogatory meaning in the West, mainly because its association with totalitarian Communism of the Soviet Union. The Cold war sealed the negative connotation of the word, and Star Trek the movie with its semi-robotic faceless members of the Collective finished the job. However, the Russian theory and practice of the collective draws its roots clearly from American and European Progressivism and social psychology of the early 20-s century. This is not a good place to tell the full story of the educational collective. I only would like to point out that its basic theoretical premise made a lot of sense.

The fundamental fact of schooling is that one adult teaches and supervises many students. The early school was nothing but a form of division of labor: while most of adults worked, some were charged with minding the children and teaching them some skills. This essential configuration changed very little throughout human history. Teaching still involves facing of a multitude of children. Early Soviet practitioners of collective education correctly reasoned that meaningful teaching requires personal relationships, but it is difficult for one teacher to influence many
children at once. It is difficult not only because of the difference in numbers, but also because children and especially adolescents tend to resist adult influences. However, children and adolescents are very likely to be influenced by peers. Therefore, educators must try to create a modified peer group called the collective. This peer group will generally support the educational influences, and limit negative behaviors. In other words, the collective education is simply use of peer group relations for educational purposes. This line of reasoning is not entirely unknown in the West. Some recent examples could include various peer mediation efforts, the Just Communities experiments by L. Kohlberg and his associates (Power, Higgins, Kohlberg, 1989), and the experiences of many volunteer youth organizations (see, for instance, McLaughlin et.al, 1994). However, Western equivalents of collective education have never entered the mainstream educational practices. Consequently, Western, especially English-speaking educational theory never tried to understand how peer groups can be modified for educational purposes.

The Russian collective education from the very beginning had two schools of thought, one authoritarian and one democratic. Anton Makarenko, the founder of the collective theory and practice, believed that the collective development goes through two stages. During the first stage, the collective is the goal of teacher’s efforts. The second stage turns the collective into a tool for educational purposes oriented toward an individual student. The authoritarian school of thought emphasized the first stage and viewed the collective as an excellent instrument of behavioral control. The democratic school was looking for the forms of communal life that would enrich individual development. Sometimes no more than difference in emphasis, sometimes a bitter political issue, this basic division survived to this day in Russia.

Liudmila Novikova, who in the 70-s has become an unofficial dean of the democratic wing of the collective theory, by the mid-80-s realized that the language of the traditional educational theory is no longer adequate to describe the new realities of Russian education. I do not think she ever stated explicitly her reasoning, but here is my interpretation based on many conversations with her. Novikova always made it a point to keep very close ties with several excellent schools throughout Russia, both to conduct research, and to try out her ideas in schools. At some point she and people around her realized that good schools have become too different from one another. As educational experiments diversified, it became more and more difficult to say that certain things work in all schools. The traditional language of the collective education was very sophisticated and highly nuanced to analyze peer relations and student-teacher relational dynamics (Novikova, 1978). However, it was structured so that a theorist could recommend specific strategies for teachers (which is how American educational theory is unfortunately structured, too). As the real-life educational collectives were becoming more and more diverse,