

[ CHAPTER SEVENTEEN ]

## Child-Development School Successes



**A**s you organize child-development schools to propel the United States to a new, better glory, turn again to history for lessons and guidelines.

Plato was one of the earliest Western thinkers who detailed the child-rearing methods that would achieve the goals he thought important. He recognized that what a child sees and hears early in life is as much a part of his education as is any formalized process; he knew that early experiences involving the interpretation of the moral beliefs of adults who are significant to the child influence the child's attitudes as an adult. Though taken out of the full context of the earliest utopia ever proposed in European literature, Plato's *Republic*, these excerpts present the flavor of his ideas on education.

What is this education to be, then? Perhaps we shall hardly invent a system better than the one which long experience has worked out, with its two branches for the cultivation of the mind and of the body. And I suppose we shall begin with the mind, before we start physical training.

Don't you understand, . . . that we begin by telling children stories, which, taken as a whole, are fiction, though they contain some truth? Such story-telling begins at an earlier age than

physical training; that is why I said we should start with the mind.

And the beginning, as you know, is always the most important part, especially in dealing with anything young and tender. That is the time when the character is being moulded and easily takes any impress one may wish to stamp on it.

So far, then, as religion is concerned, we have settled what sorts of stories about the gods may, or may not, be told to children who are to hold heaven and their parents in reverence and to value good relations with one another.

Nor again must these men of ours be lovers of money, or ready to take bribes. . . .

Next, the upbringing of our young men must include physical training; and this must be no less carefully regulated throughout life from childhood onwards. In my view, which I should like you to consider, it is not true that a sound and healthy body is enough to produce a sound mind; while, on the contrary, the sound mind has power in itself to make the bodily condition as perfect as it can be. . . .

Plato maintained that both mind and body must be developed and disciplined, and that moral integrity can be instilled through religious training. He believed an effective educational system benefits a country and prevents the growth of lawlessness. Once an educational system proves its effectiveness and superiority in developing students to their greatest capacity, Plato asserted, the system must remain unchanging. He recognized that knowledge will continue growing and changing but believed that once a system demonstrates its practicality, it would be foolish to alter a proven process for the sake of change or variety. Plato designed his program for a group he termed the Guardians.

The rulers of the Ottoman Empire developed an educational system strikingly similar to that which Plato proposed for the education of the Guardians. No concrete proof exists that the Ottomans borrowed their ideas from him, but there is evidence that their rulers had great respect for Plato and his teachings. Plato divided the Guardians into Rulers (legislative) and Auxiliaries (executive);

the Ottomans differentiated between public officials and an elite military force.

The Ottoman system evolved some 1,700 years after Plato, around the time of the reign of Murad I (1360–1389). A new name surfaced in armed warfare, *Yeni Ceri* (new troops), or Janissaries, as the Europeans called them. Since Holy Law forbade the enslavement of fellow Muslims, Christian boys and young men were captured, converted to Islam, and made the sultan's slaves. They were extensively trained to serve the sultan. When a lull in the Ottomans' European conquests ended the flow of young Christian captives, a new source for recruits was found: the *devsirme* or levy of boys.

Every four or five years as needed, one thousand to three thousand boys were collected from the poor rural Christian sections of the sultan's regional possessions. Though it sounds cruel, many families welcomed this opportunity of advancement for a child. (Other Christians preferred converting to Islam rather than facing the sentimental and financial loss of a son.) Children were taken from near-poverty on drab farms and elevated to life in the palace, undergoing training to become public officials or members of the elite Janissary Corps. Strict measures were taken to keep out undesirables; those selected were judged for physical and mental aptitude, good moral fiber, and physical attractiveness. They came from the provinces, not the sophisticated cities; the idea was to obtain raw material that could be molded.

Although slaves, the children were educated in the sultan's palace schools (which were far superior to the Ottoman public schools) in Istanbul, Bursa, Edirne, and Galata. Mehmed II (the Conqueror) and Suleyman (the Magnificent) are credited with elevating the palace schools to remarkable heights as institutions for training superior military and administrative minds.

The students studied liberal arts as well as the arts and sciences of war and government, and they received rigorous physical training. Courses included calligraphy, music, architecture, painting, sculpture, history, mathematics, horsemanship, and weaponry. Pupils also learned a craft or trade. Future sultans underwent the same training.

Discipline and competition were intense. Those who excelled physically joined the Janissaries; those who showed superior mental capabilities continued training for civil and political careers. After years of schooling, the graduate was theoretically a scholar-athlete-gentleman and, most importantly, a sincere Muslim and devoted servant of the sultan.

No stigma was attached to royal slavery; the sultan himself had a slave mother. The *devsirme* system based promotion on merit alone. Each step on the way to power and success was earned. The captives were often treated as the sultan's adopted sons and brothers; they were his companions. These sons of ignorant farmers and herders formed a huge slave family and became rulers of an immense, powerful, and prosperous empire. They were allowed to own property, had many individual rights, and received lavish rewards for outstanding service. The rigid discipline and rich educational curriculum motivated them to achieve, and many made outstanding contributions to the Ottoman Empire. During the same period, their biological Christian brothers who remained with their parents followed and perpetuated the family's drab existence.

Initially, only men born into leading Muslim families held high positions such as grand vizier. By the time of the conquest of Istanbul, the *devsirme* had taken control; until the Empire's decline, the palace schools provided almost every court official, provincial governor, and military officer. Those in the highest positions were proud, not ashamed, of their humble beginnings. They believed the ability to succeed had nothing to do with birth; education and success were God's gifts to reward their zeal and hard work.

The Ottoman Empire began to decline after it reached its Age of Affluence; the end of the Age overlapped the Empire's Age of Decadence. Beginning with Suleyman, Turks with outside interests gained admittance to the Janissaries. The Janissaries married and enrolled their sons in the Corps, neither of which had previously been allowed. The levy of boys ceased, and the Janissaries deteriorated from a tightly disciplined, elite force of fifteen thousand to a self-perpetuating, pampered, and unruly guard of more than two hundred thousand.

Israel's kibbutz educational system also reflects the educational

program Plato outlined in *The Republic*. The adult achievements of its students correspond with the adult successes of Ottoman palace students.

Zionist immigrants to Palestine founded the first kibbutz in 1909 at Degania on the Sea of Galilee. The movement's basic principle, then as now, is that set forth by Karl Marx: from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs. Its structure is based on equality in all areas: work, housing, and child care. Even though the kibbutz embraces socialistic principles, it seems to function essentially as a democratic institution.

An estimated 270 kibbutzim contain about 3 percent of the country's population. By the mid-1980s, some one hundred thousand kibbutzniks were cultivating 42 percent of the available land and producing 50 percent of the country's agricultural output. Today high technology is replacing agriculture at many kibbutzim. Kibbutzim make half of Israel's industrial robots, produce solar-energy collectors used to heat Israeli homes, and even run hotels to take advantage of the tourist trade.

The kibbutz movement creates no waiting list for enrollment; quite the contrary. Even in the early days of the movement, the socialistic principles and communal existence proved too harsh for most. In 1921 a splinter group formed the moshav, a less-demanding experiment in collective living, in which homes and land are privately owned and farmers receive the profits from their labors. By the early 1980s, the moshavim had increased to about 350 with approximately 130 thousand members.

Contributions to Israel by individuals from the kibbutzim movement far exceed their small 3 percent population ratio. Of Israel's first six prime ministers, three came from the movement. About a third of all cabinet members between 1949 and 1967 were kibbutz members. During the Six Day War, 22 percent of the country's army officers and 30 percent of its air force pilots came from kibbutzim. Individuals from the kibbutzim are an elite. They enjoy good living conditions and can expect to secure the best jobs.

Perhaps the individual successes of kibbutzim members, disproportionately large in comparison to their small numbers and percentage of the population, lie in the dominance levels and child-rearing practices of the movement. The dominant members

of the kibbutz share child care responsibilities along with equal sharing of all other tasks, thus influencing their young charges for dominance.

The kibbutz educational system was begun for practical and economic reasons, but over time ideology and education gained importance. The system was based on four major formulations. Kibbutzim allowed equality of the sexes. The kibbutz movement stood its best chance of self-perpetuation by educating children in special children's houses. Collective schooling was more scientific than leaving education in the hands of children's parents; children would be reared and trained by expert nurses and teachers, away from any family tensions. Lastly, a collective education would be more democratic than a traditional family education.

The system appears to have been strongly influenced by Sigmund Freud's ideas. It focuses on child management and discipline, the use of rewards and punishments, and a particular attitude toward the child's impulses and bodily desires and the attempt to sublimate them. No religious instruction is given.

The kibbutz takes responsibility for child rearing. Since kibbutzniks are not concerned with individual job remuneration, they can select child care personnel from among those best qualified to supervise, instruct, and discipline the children (corporal punishment is not used).