

Stifling of children deplored

Letters to the editor of The Globe and Mail comment on disturbed children, abortion, spear carriers, a musical and a headline.

If one could accept Marg Csapo's premise that it is important to modify the child's behavior so as to meet the expectations of the teacher, then it would be possible to accept her strong endorsement for employing Skinnerian reward and punishment techniques in the schools (*The Globe* Nov. 10).

Although Skinnerian programs have not been as successful as she suggests, there is little doubt that they are more efficient than what passes for common-sense procedures or overtly punitive techniques in retraining a child's impulses to deviate. Skinnerian control techniques are designed "to make the trains run on time", and for those who view efficiency as the primary objective of education, these techniques certainly are of assistance.

My objections to Skinner's techniques, some of which Loren Lind spelled out in his article on the topic (Nov. 4), is that they are predicated upon an inaccurate and indefensible view that human beings are conditioned automatons. To Skinner the notion that human beings have the capacity to liberate themselves from the constraints of their culture is merely an illusion.

Since it is not possible for human beings to be free, he then goes on to argue that the only logical course of action is for psychologists such as Skinner (who also have no liberty) to design environments that allow humans to function in the most productive manner. (That is to make the world into a well-designed Skinner box.)

Unless one can accept Skinner's hypothesis that human beings cannot be anything other than conditioned automatons, his control techniques are morally indefensible.

Because my own perspective is humanist, I find many of the applications of Skinnerian techniques in the schools repugnant. They are designed to make the authoritarian relationship that presently exists between teachers and students more effective, by manipulating students to meet the demands of teachers.

When the Skinnerian model is functioning properly it involves the relationship between two conditioned automatons. Teachers are conditioned to reward "desirable" behaviors in students and to ignore and if need be punish "undesirable" responses. (Desirable and undesirable are defined by the school system.) No account is taken of human feelings because these are considered to be byproducts of actions. If teachers and students are functioning properly then according to Skinner they are likely to feel satisfied.

Skinnerian control techniques do not

change the teacher-student relationship in any fundamental way, nor do they change the values upon which that relationship is based. The techniques are an attempt to make the teacher into an invisible authority figure so that students will direct their resentment elsewhere.

The desire by teachers to use these methods at this time is quite understandable, because there is a massive rebellion on the part of youth toward adult authority, and teachers are desperately searching for methods to defend themselves. Nevertheless, the use of these techniques is disappointing for those who believe that environments can be created that actualize the human potential for freedom and dignity.

Rather than opting for inhumane control techniques that manipulate students into adjusting to the environment that they are presently rebelling against, it would seem more prudent for teachers to examine the nature of the institution that is causing so much student resentment, and in particular the frustrating relationship into which teachers and students are forced. Using Skinner to stifle the almost irrepressible human desire for liberty is not the answer.

Jack Quarter
Assistant Professor of
Applied Psychology
The Ontario Institute for
Studies in Education
Toronto