

# Editorial

## Criticism, Skepticism, and Controversy

**T**HIS ISSUE of *Educational Leadership* is devoted to three kinds of considerations in the realm of "issues": (a) the teacher's role in dealing with controversial issues in the classroom; (b) processes by which issues may be resolved intelligently; and (c) analysis of several issues of significance in modern education. During the planning of what follows, the purpose of an issue on issues became a point at issue. Some feared that *Educational Leadership* might serve merely as a forum for debate; that authors would be pitted against one another for the sake of mere argument, perhaps being forced to assume untenable positions to enliven controversy. It was agreed, finally, that such potential dangers could be readily overcome by selecting authors carefully and by wording invitations to them so as to make intent clear. In my judgment, the results are most gratifying.

We appear to be moving at an accelerating pace into a new educational era. Surely we aren't groping for fresh means to titillate jaded senses when we proclaim our conferences with slogans such as "Education Faces a New Age" or "Leadership for a New Era." If we are moving into a new era, then we must be leaving an old one behind. And, as we move from old to new, I am hopeful that a spirit not clearly visible recently in the old will be very much with us in the new. I refer to the need for an enveloping spirit of constructive criticism, wholesome skepticism, and spirited controversy that will accompany, perhaps characterize, efforts to deal with this new era.

My concern grows out of several different kinds of observations, each docu-

mented by my own recent experience and, apparently, by that of several colleagues. First, I am forced to conclude that pressing problems frequently are dealt with on the basis of "don't think about them and they will go away." Some school superintendents who know in their hearts that ways must be found for desegregating public schools carefully but surely just can't bring themselves even to think about what lies ahead. "Move carefully" becomes, in effect, "don't move."

Second, the decision-making process too frequently is conducted in a spirit of compromise instead of in a climate of vigorous intellectual inquiry. We hear the statement, "Our problem is really a semantic one; there are no basic differences between us," when in reality searching analysis of the positions expressed would reveal them to be poles apart. Group processes must permit movement forward from an atmosphere of acceptance. They must be used to create a setting within which real differences are brought to the fore, examined and, if possible, resolved. There is no incompatibility between the creation of such a setting and the preservation of personality structure. In fact, it is unlikely that personality will be reconstructed in any setting that seeks to camouflage divergent points of view.

Third, problems in regard to which we now have evidence frequently are treated as though one's position need be merely a matter of opinion. Recently, a panel member was observed to bring extensive notes covering research on the panel topic. Later, his fellow panel member commented, "Huh, if I had thought someone would bring research findings,

I wouldn't have come!" Perhaps no more need be said.

Fourth, educational techniques proven to have value in certain situations frequently are applied quite uncritically to other situations. One brief example serves to illustrate. Sitting in a circle facilitates discussion in small groups. But, recently, I have seen the technique used with groups of seventy or more and with devastating results. Visualize the circle formed when such a group spreads out around a room. The distance across the circle is so great that one's spoken ideas must remain naked in the center for what appear to be interminable seconds. Only the bold dare unclasp under such exposure.

Fifth, literary criticism in our field is predominantly uncritical. Reviewers too often review as though their own books were next to be reviewed. "No self-respecting educator should be without this compact little volume" and "This book should be on the shelf of every teacher" are sentences I would cheerfully relegate to oblivion. There are books deserving of such commendations but, somehow, the words lose their significance when applied to most everything that comes from the presses. A reviewer need not and should not be vitriolic. But he should at least get behind the author's purpose, comment on attainment of that purpose, and point out where and how the volume would or would not be appropriate for a given audience.

Finally, we need to be much more sensitive to the frontier issues with us and ahead of us. The evidences of our shortcomings here sometimes are quite subtle. A principal comment, at a point where discussion has just broken through to new and exciting ground, "If we do this, we really will be back to where we were thirty years ago." After a visitor has

just described a quite frontier practice developing in his university, a local faculty member comments, "I don't see this as being any different from what we've been doing right along." And, after the speaker has made a most penetrating analysis of a complex topic, a member of the audience comments, "Well, there was nothing new in what he had to say." Admittedly, these comments are at least in part defensive but, too frequently, they demonstrate absence of truly serious thought and study about the subject.

It is hoped that preceding paragraphs have set the stage for critical analysis of what follows. There is no planned relationship between the content of these paragraphs and the content of subsequent articles. But there are some common threads of concern. Metcalf provokes us into visualizing the fate, in fact the death, of education with all controversy removed. Stanley and Schwab point to the rigorous processes of inquiry through which decisions must be reached. Eddy and Keliher bring rationality to an issue that past controversy has helped to clarify. McSwain and McGlothlin provide fresh food for thought in the realm of an issue thought by some to be long settled. Stinnett and Eurich often use the same data in arriving at somewhat different conclusions and quite different emphases in their recommendations.

Interestingly enough, there is no idle argumentation here. The authors have thought critically about these issues, they have convictions, they present them convincingly. In effect, they demonstrate the constructive criticism, wholesome skepticism, and spirited controversy for which I plead.

—JOHN I. GOODLAD, *professor of education, The University of Chicago; chairman, ASCD Publications Committee.*

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