

## Foundations and School Experimentation

*Sharp is the line  
between the supporting of research  
and the promoting of a favored  
solution to an educational problem.*

ONE conservative estimate of total philanthropic giving in the United States for 1959 is \$7.4 billion. Gifts for education will probably constitute some 11 percent of this total or approximately \$800 million. Estimating total expenditures for public and private education—elementary, secondary and higher—at \$17 billion the fraction of that amount contributed by philanthropy might approximate one-twentieth.

So far as foundations are concerned, their gifts are expected to account for about 10 percent of total philanthropy for 1959, an estimated \$700 million, give or take a few million.<sup>1</sup> There are between five and six thousand foundations—"non-governmental, non-profit organizations having a principal fund, managed by trustees or directors, and established to maintain or aid social, educational, charitable, religious or other activities serving the common welfare."<sup>2</sup> Seventy-

seven of the big foundations account for about three-fourths of all foundation giving.

The largest of the general purpose foundations—the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and a few others—are the ones whose influence on public education is best known and most often debated, in a muted fashion. Criticizing the large general foundations active in education does not promise much reward. If either the critic or the institution he is connected with has not received favorable action in his or its applications for grants the rejoinder to the criticisms is a bit too easy. If generous grants have been made the impulse to criticize foundation procedures or aims is weak.

This brief statement preceding a description of a number of specific foundation supported educational activities is intended to be critical. The annual foundation reports should be read by anyone interested primarily in the

<sup>1</sup> These data are from "Giving U.S.A." American Association of Fund-raising Counsel, Inc., New York, N.Y. 1958. 47 p.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

brighter side. These reports are professionally written, expensively printed, comprehensive and almost irresistibly optimistic about accomplishments.

### A Complex Task

Before commenting on the role of foundations in improving education I want to stress the fact that trying to improve education is much more complex and fraught with ideological and other types of controversy than trying to improve health. That small group, if it exists, that does not want to reduce the incidence of syphilis or tuberculosis can safely be neglected by foundation officials. Very few issues in education, however, are so one sided. For a large foundation to use its resources to promote or demonstrate a particular solution to a highly controversial social or educational problem is, I believe, bad foundation policy as well as bad public policy.

We do not yet know enough, for example, to warrant a decision by foundation officials that reading great books is the best road for adults to a general education, or that a fifth year of professional training and internship is the best preparation for teaching, or that Dr. Conant's 21 specific recommendations for the improvement of American high schools are just what the people need or that teacher aides are the solution to the teacher shortage.

The problems to which these presumed solutions apply are complex ones. For foundations to support research and experimentation in relation to them is most desirable. This research and experimentation should, of course, be directed by the widely accepted operational procedures that permit a line to be drawn between research and inquiry, on the

one hand, and propaganda, promotion or demonstration, on the other.

I have a feeling that this point of view is accepted consciously and overtly by most foundation officials but the forces that operate on all of us to make us impatient with the slow progress of research and experimentation in respect to the solution of social problems have proved to be irresistible to some. This seems to me to be especially noticeable in recent years. I have no substantial body of data to support the inference but my impression is that the past decade has brought many indications of a new hunger on the part of large philanthropic foundations for newspaper and popular magazine publicity. This publicity will rarely be forthcoming from the unobtrusive announcement that a certain group of investigators distinguished to their peers but unknown to the general public has been given so many hundreds of thousands of dollars to investigate the relationship between class size and educational outcomes. A foundation official, on the other hand, can have a bang-up press conference to hear him report on an anticipated *solution* to the class size problem as a consequence of a grant to "experiment" with a "teaching by tape" procedure.

If my impression is well founded—my impression that foundations are increasingly confusing "experimentation" and "study" with propaganda and demonstrations—it may suggest a variation of Gresham's law that might be stated somewhat as follows: "The least desirable foundation policies in respect to seeking publicity and making unwar-

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ranted claims and promoting favored 'solutions' to complex educational problems tend to inhibit the practice of policies more clearly in the public interest."

As I have said, for foundations to support research and experimentation in relation to pressing educational problems seems highly desirable as policy. Conducting experimentation to determine the relative effects of different instructional methods or materials or classroom organizations is, however, a difficult and demanding activity. Especially is this the case if substantial generalizations of wide applicability are expected to result. Predicting the results of such experimentation, announcing a "breakthrough" in advance, for example, is completely contrary to the spirit of experimental inquiry. Furthermore, this "calling the shots in advance" approach to investigation puts great pressure upon the investigators to have the predictions materialize. This, I hasten to add, is more closely related to prudence, of a sort, than to dishonesty.

The necessity for careful advance design of pedagogical experimentation is so generally understood by qualified educational researchers as ordinarily to be assumed. A clear and precise statement of the specific changes expected to be brought about by any specific experimental "treatment" is essential for careful inquiry. So is a meticulous description of the new procedures so that whatever different effects are observed can conceivably be related to their "causes."

Arrangements for procuring reliable and valid evidence to determine whether or not the anticipated changes have occurred must be an integral part of the experimental design. To launch some new or renamed or modified program of instructional or training activities or instructional materials with great fanfare and exuberance and later on ask help

from a "panel of experts" to evaluate the program seems to be an odd mixture of zeal for quick results, hunger for publicity, a desire for "breakthrough" credit accompanied by a weak and delayed recognition that someone is asking for genuine evidence of results.

The 206-page and as yet unpublished evaluation of the Arkansas Experiment in Teacher Education is, in my judgment, one of the most careful and objective attempts to dig out data *ex post facto* to determine whether or not a widely publicized and generously financed (more than 3 million dollars) foundation "experiment" accomplished its aims. The problems faced by the evaluation staff because the experiment was not designed as a true experiment, with the procuring of data on effects a built-in part of the design, would have frustrated completely an evaluation group of lesser creativity and ability to improvise and adapt. The directors of this evaluation, Willard B. Spaulding and David R. Krathwohl, make some exceedingly sobering inferences from the evidence they did get. This was in addition to making clear, at least by implication, their bafflement at the task of trying to test inadequately formulated hypotheses with whatever data could be brought to hand months and even years later.

The evaluation staff was especially interested in the consequences when foundation funds and a foundation supported organization try to bring about state-wide changes in an activity as complex as teacher education. The central inference was (p. 178-79) that whenever funds or an organization, in this case a federation of colleges, contribute to *aims already valued and striven for* by individual institutions, change and improvement are facilitated. When this congru-

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## Foundations

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ence does not exist, neither the funds nor the organization can accomplish much.

While the great general purpose foundations certainly are influenced by one another, the variations among them in policy and problem area emphasis are appreciable. The burden of the argument of this short introductory piece is that within these variations, and with special reference to educational practice, the

foundations should try to differentiate sharply between supporting research and experimentation, on the one hand, and promoting a favored solution to an educational problem, on the other. When the foundations do the latter they may not be betraying a public trust, exactly, but they can expect that their carefully developed reputations for objectivity and disinterestedness will be attacked vigorously by men and women with different favored solutions but less money to support them.

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