

Impact of Change on School and Community: Implication for Survival

THERE has always been change. Never before, though, has change been as rapid or with as many implications for immediate survival as at present. Suddenly man has stepped up the pace so that he does in 100 years or less what it has taken all mankind in its entire past to do. Predictions are that progress in the near future will outstrip the present at fantastic rates. We hear that 70 percent of what we will be using in 1980 has not yet been invented; that in the foreseeable future, longevity will increase to near 100, air travel will be at rates of thousands of miles per hour, Central Africa and Asia will be using atomic power for energy, leisure time will be doubled, the work week will be shortened, and our income tripled.

There are tragic implications for our social institutions, our communities and our nation—which cannot or rather will not accept the challenges involved in this change. Our survival depends on the willing and intelligent acceptance of these challenges.

Survival is a word to which we Americans attach only dictionary meaning. Few of us actually believe our way of life is in the least threatened. We pass the NIKE installations as we pass the local water works, we watch jet bombers streak across the sky, and think of last

summer's air show, we read of riots in South Africa and vaguely wonder how the savage of our geography books could get so far out of character, we laugh at the jolly little man from Russia even when he spells out what he means by "burying" us. When statisticians tell us the world's population will double in the next 50 years we think of the vast farm lands and sparse villages we pass and think, "so what?"

A junior United States senator said recently that the one thing he has discovered in his short term of office is that survival is not inevitable. What did he mean? Was it that sectionalism, party interests, vested interests, and false nationalism blinded our law makers to the seriousness of the job facing them? Was it that our schools had failed in building sound critical thinkers, or was it that our Congress simply reflected the American culture and its assumptions?

Are These Our Assumptions?

Our politicians wrangle over unimportant, our social scientists verbalize but offer little solution to our social problems, our educators seem to find more challenge in whether or not we should have report cards or self-contained classrooms. Are these escapes from reality or

are these things significant to them because they have made the following assumptions?

1. *That there is no significance in the census department report that the non-white population of the United States has increased 50 percent faster than the white since 1950 or that two-thirds of the world is nonwhite and non-Christian.*

Strangely enough the nonwhite world sees little significance in these facts. Could it be that we of the West are getting to be more like these persons who accept people because of individual worth rather than by color or religion? Some would doubt this. It would be easier though to be like this if we would note that most of these people have defied all rules of non-material cultural adaption and accepted the democratic concept when they became free and independent countries—not with complete success at the beginning, for we too had to evolve our present concept, and we are still moving toward a better one. By accepting the concept, though, they are giving credit and paying a compliment to the free Western world.

2. *That Africa and Asia will not achieve their objectives of self-rule.*

Few of us seem to know that practically all of Asia now is self-governing and that after 1960 this will be true of two-thirds of Africa. African leaders like Nkruma of Ghana are saying, "We would rather have independence and danger than servitude and tranquility. . . . Political independence comes first, and all else comes afterwards."

These are not unlike the utterances of our American forefathers. Interestingly enough, most of these nations are accepting the ideology of a democratic free society in preference to totalitarianism. They are admitting that England, France

and America offer more to their citizens than does Russia or any other nation where there is the rule of a few.

3. *That time is not important in the correction of the ills of our democracy.*

It is not surprising that those Americans who grew to maturity in the first 40 years of this century should not feel the urgency of putting our house in order. To them, the changes of the past 12 years in the concept of American democracy have little meaning, because if one is clever enough each of the Supreme Court decisions can be circumvented by a "gentlemen's agreement," a bit of gerrymandering, the loosening of a bigoted rabble rouser who throws a bomb or frightens a school board. They refuse to recognize the pressure of world unrest. They are willing to commit national suicide; to sacrifice present and future for what has been the past.

4. *That our economy is not geared to war.*

More than 50 percent of our national budget is spent on defense. We spend billions and billions on nuclear weapons, missiles, fast bombers, radar systems and other allied interests. What would happen to our economy if suddenly all this were unnecessary? Could we compete successfully in the world market? Would we be willing to channel the same amount of money and energy into peacetime efforts by building schools and staffing them, by assuring good health to the nation, by subsidizing new enterprises geared to comforts and necessities of living? One wonders.

5. *That democracy cannot fail.*

There are some political scientists in our midst who believe we are already in a state of slow decline, that our selfishness will not permit us to see truth. Lawrence M. Gould puts it this way, "I do

Announcement—

Fifth Curriculum Research Institute
(Western Section)

April 30—May 4, 1960

Theme:

Human Variability and Learning

For information:

ASCD, NEA, 1201—16th St., N.W.
Washington 6, D. C.

not believe the greatest threat to our future is from bombs or missiles. I do not think our civilization will die that way. I think it will die when we no longer care—when the spiritual forces that make us wish to be right and noble die in the hearts of men. Toynbee has pointed out that 19 of 21 notable civilizations have died from within and not by conquest from without. There were no bands playing and no flags waving when these civilizations decayed: it happened slowly, in the quiet and dark when no one was aware."¹

6. *That war cannot come.*

We read that fear of one great power with all of its potential for destruction by a similar great power with equal potential is enough to deter war. What assurance do we have that the madman who pushes the button will come from either of the two most powerful nations of our world? He could be from a nation whose hatred is permitted to build up away from the world's council tables and behind walls where power and mistrust are permitted to grow to giant proportions. A war would be quick and devastating, but would not destroy all of man as we once believed. Major nations would surely perish but who would have time

¹ Minnesota Council on Family Life Reporter, May 1959.

to drop bombs on Central Africa, the islands of the Pacific, the deserts of the Middle East, or the jungles of South America?

Implications

If our educational theorists have fallen into the trap of ignoring the above implications, school people cannot. A way of proving we have not is to test ourselves in our knowledge of our community and our school. Are we aware of changing patterns in our neighborhoods? Do we know why change is taking place? Are we adjusting our curriculum to meet changing conditions and still developing every child to his potential? Are we aware of our many publics—interested patrons, selfish pressure groups, believers in "the good old days," or those who want to use the schools as a whipping boy or scapegoat? Are we making use of in-service education to keep our staffs up-to-date and vitalized? Are we carrying on research and utilizing what research has found out about our educational needs? Do we really understand the sociology of our community—its ethnic and class composition? Are human relations a part of our curriculum?

A school that can answer these questions in the affirmative can build citizens who can adjust with the times.

The editor of *Educational Leadership*, Robert R. Leeper, says, "The ability to meet change and the foresight and wisdom to adjust to its impact are qualities that we, as school people, must seek above all else if schools are to survive as effective instruments in a free society."²

—ALVIN D. LOVING, *associate professor of education, The University of Michigan, Flint College, Flint.*

² From a letter to the author of this editorial dated September 15, 1959.

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