

Commitment: A Threat to Autonomy?

EDUCATORS are committed to the ideal of developing the "whole" child in such a way that, commensurate with his capability, he will be able to make the world brighter and freer not only for himself but for society. This commitment has ever intrigued, challenged, baffled and inspired the minds of men and will forever continue to do so whether the child concerned be gifted, average, or mentally slow.

This development is never complete, never fully satisfying, never static. Edith Hamilton, the noted Greek scholar, has said that freedom is "a way." "It cannot be discovered once for all." The same may be said about the educating of a child; it too is a way—uncertain and will-o-the-wisp at times, often spirited, always promising. In its search for the meaning of life, each generation forges its "way" in one direction or another, overthrowing sacred cows of the past and finding new perspectives for eternal truths.

The launching of Sputnik and of its subsequent fellow travelers has precipitated educators—perhaps more than any

other group—into the very path of the social revolution in its wake. To say that many were caught unawares and that in a fling change became the harbinger of a new era is to sound "old hat"; nevertheless, it is still true, and experts tell us that the revolution has scarcely begun.

It goes without saying that one of the difficult tasks of the world is to make people *want* to change. Tradition and adherence to "old, tried and true" ideas are not easily shaken—and this is good even though shaken they eventually must be. History and literature attest time and time again to this resistance to change. Pedro Antonio de Alarcón in the preface of his classic novel, *El Sombrero de Tres Picos* (*The Three-Cornered Hat*), depicts a scene in Spain, circa 1805, which with a few substitutions of time, place and actors could present a timeless and universal picture of the insouciance toward change that characterizes most of mankind. Speaking of Napoleon Bonaparte, he says, in part:

The Soldier of Revolution, . . . the victor in Rivoli, at the Pyramids, in Marengo, and in a hundred other battles . . . had just finished transfiguring all of Europe completely, creating and suppressing nations, erasing boundaries, inventing dynasties, and changing the form, the name, the location,

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and even the fashion of the towns through which he passed like an animated earthquake or like the "Antichrist" that the Powers of the North called him. . . . And yet amidst it all there ruled in Spain the *old regime* in all spheres of public and private life, as if in the midst of such innovations and upsets, the Pyrenees had been converted into another Wall of China.

A latter day Alarcón may have substituted the Maginot Line or the Berlin Wall for the Wall of China!

Tradition vs. Innovation

One wonders if this feeling of trepidation or just plain obstinacy toward change may not be prompted by an inner sense which wants no part of the chain of problems, threats to the *status quo*, questions without answers which change engenders.

In the Albuquerque Public Schools, as in many systems throughout the United States, the impact of change made itself felt early in the area of foreign language instruction. The revolution in this field was abetted by the work of the National Defense Language Institutes, administered by the Language Development Branch of the U.S. Office of Education, under Title VI of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA).

As early as the spring of 1960 in the Albuquerque Public Schools a commitment to a new approach in the instruction of foreign languages—incompatible with the old approach—was given the nod by the School Administration and the Board of Education after careful assessment of the results of a year's study of the foreign language program by a committee of administrators, laymen, and teachers appointed by the superintendent. Furthermore, a foreign language consultant was appointed to help

carry out the skeletal plan for a foreign language program which gave leeway for the incorporation of new materials and methodology being developed in the area of applied linguistics by language scientists, experts and teachers.

It is one thing, however, to have a program on paper and another to lift it from inanimateness and give it life in every—or almost every—classroom, especially when there is already a good, traditional program in full sway. In the process of giving the new commitment substance, the entire gamut of problems in the "tradition versus innovation" contest in the Albuquerque schools came into head-on collision in a struggle which is still going on.

There is a sanctity about the autonomy of the classroom which is inviolable and it should be. How then can a commitment to a new idea be reconciled with a traditional—and in many instances an excellent, time-tested—idea of a successful teacher? How can a professional who has spent years of study preparing himself for teaching be told that there may be a better way than the one he is using? How well nigh impossible, for instance, it is to tell a foreign language teacher that a foreign language should not be translated or decoded in the early stages of learning, that verb conjugations and grammar *per se* are pretty useless, that language is for communication above all, that students should undergo an intensive prereading period during which they should have no textbooks or any old-fashioned homework!

Effects of Commitment

The problem might forever be unresolved if there were not the proverbial other side to the coin. A commitment to a program by a school may be a threat

to a teacher, but in an analogous sense, is it not possible that a commitment by a teacher to a program of his own may be a threat to the autonomy of a whole educational organization—including, most important of all, the star of this whole drama, the student himself?

Arguments about the merits of a new commitment may easily go unheard if dropped without warning on the unsuspecting ears of a busy teacher. Such a teacher's total concern may be in administering to the minds of the deluge of students before him all day long—a restless, active lot to say the least; or in keeping his enthusiasm at a peak, hour after hour; or simply in trying to keep afloat in the whirlpool of psychological and emotional facets which, aside from subject matter, are an integral, if at times subconscious, part of teaching. Exciting as the game of teaching is, it leaves little time for most teachers to do anything else and least of all perhaps for research in a moving world of new ideas waiting to be tested. This is why so many of today's teachers, more than ever before, need outside help when "threats" of new commitments are in the air!

Educational leaders who are given time to study and to attend workshops, conferences, and study groups are duty-bound to keep busy teachers informed of new trends whenever necessary. When change becomes the order of the day, there should be no feeling of threat to anyone's autonomy; rather there should be cooperative participation by administrator and teacher in the charting of the direction of a program which, insofar as possible, will meet the challenge of a changing, complex, plural society such as ours. In the Albuquerque Public Schools the study of the foreign language program by the aforemen-

tioned committee of administrators, teachers, and lay citizens did much to pave the way for needed change.

The quandary of commitment versus autonomy becomes even more pronounced if the new commitment calls for the complete use by all of specific, basic material—even if it has been widely tested in pilot programs in public schools—and for a prescribed methodology. Such has been the case in the new foreign language program—material and methodology which are essential to the success of the first steps of a new program have been provided.

What happens to freedom in a classroom that places emphasis solely upon imitation? What happens to creativity, experimentation, inspiration? If a course of "first things first" is pursued instead of a policy of imitation as an end in itself, the dilemma will soon be dissipated. D. M. Dow, who edited *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, says of Gibbon that he extolled nothing more often than freedom. Yet Gibbon himself has this to say about imitation:

However laudable, the spirit of imitation is of a servile cast. . . . Genius may anticipate the season of maturity; but in the education of a people, as in that of an individual, memory must be exercised before the powers of reason and fancy can be expanded, nor may the artist hope to equal or surpass until he has learned to imitate the works of his predecessors.

There must be a norm from which to deviate! The inexperienced teacher will imitate, because this may be all he can do; the more experienced teacher will imitate too, but he will drop that which does not work and keep and add to that which does. The great teacher will do all these things, but he will forever experiment; it is he who has the power to change the boundaries of any com-

mitment "Lest one good custom should corrupt the world."

From its beginning, the new language program in the Albuquerque Public Schools started a dynamic ball of excitement rolling for almost every foreign language teacher—once initial incredulity gave way to curiosity. For some teachers the period is still one of imitation, of shifting back and forth, of taking and rejecting; for others the period of strict adherence to specific material—except for the purpose of maintaining articulation and sequence—and to prescribed methodology is already over; innovation, experimentation, and delving further into the science of foreign languages by individual teachers are bringing increased creativity to the classroom. A group experiment too—made possible by the new program—is in full progress; it involves a specially devised oral comprehension test for placement of hundreds of students who speak Spanish natively into proper levels of instruction.

At the Conference on the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages, held in Tucson, Arizona, in May, a demonstration was given by a teacher and a group of her culturally deprived junior high school students. The immediate aim of the lesson was vocabulary building in a linguistics-oriented atmosphere and in the use of the words to define clearly directed areas of thought. When the lively lesson was over, the teacher mentioned something which had been evident to the audience from the start—the mutual feeling of deep respect and even of love on the part of the teacher and the students for one another. This feeling permeated the group and tempered even their most spirited disagreements. There was not a dull second, because the students sensed the genuine interest in them by

a teacher with a real "bill of goods" to sell. This was Democracy at work!

Any new commitment could be tossed into a furnace such as this for an honest trial without danger of anyone's autonomy getting scorched! Certainly in the give-and-take battle of ideas in a Democracy there is no room for a Grand Inquisitor to relieve one of one's freedom nor to take on one's sins nor to distinguish for one the difference between right and wrong! All that is needed is the selling of an idea that is worth testing and the subsequent involving of all who are sincerely concerned and who in the end will decide whether it is worth its salt or not!

World of the Individual—Taylor

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third rate value system in its present form, that it badly needs shaking up. Moreover, it is time to stop thinking of America in terms of a tiny segment of the total wealth of cultures which exist in this country. We pay little or no attention to the extraordinary values within our Indian culture, our Negro culture, within the Spanish-American and German-American and Asian-American cultures. We need to look at ourselves as being endowed with a rich variety of cultures, not simply as the prototype of a white suburban society, the one celebrated by our educators as the high point in our educational and social system.

There are other goals of greater value than rising to the upper-middle income brackets, living in Scarsdale with 2.3 children and a wife who smiles and worries about whether her husband is being successful, with two cars in the garage, and at least one child with an IQ of 140, ready to go to Harvard. This I submit, is not the American dream as the founders of this country conceived it.

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