

Educational Research and Development as an Agent in Social Change

James B. Macdonald

RESEARCHERS in the field of education have been primarily concerned about discovering basic or applied knowledge relevant to the facilitation of the teaching-learning situation. Changes are noted in the context of the teaching-learning situation primarily with reference to the kind and quality of learning that takes place.

Little note has been paid to two "side effects" of this effort which have important implications for social change. These side effects are: (a) The effect of changes in practice brought about by research findings as these changes affect the development of youngsters and their consequent participation in the broader social framework; and (b) The study of the implementation of new educational practices and its implications for broader social change.

Changes in Youngsters

As new programs are developed, new practices emerge, and new media are integrated into the functioning of the school, the basic social conditions for learning will be dramatically affected. The character and quality of interpersonal relations, the habits and attitudes

of working and solving problems, and the conceptualization of self as a learner and a productive person, to mention a few, will be altered.

The consequences of these changes in youngsters are not clear. There has been considerable negative comment about the depersonalization of learning, the development of passivity and other possible outcomes which, it is believed, will produce ineffectual citizens in a democracy. This may be true, yet the major concern here is to note that society cannot escape some form of change. Youngsters brought up through the "new" schools will expect and demand at least subtle alterations in the form and function of society.

The unfortunate part about these developments is the planless way in which all this takes place. The analogy between innovation brought about in education and the innovation brought about by the appearance of the automobile is noteworthy. Few would dispute the great changes in attitudes of teen-agers which have been facilitated and promoted by the accessibility of a mobile base for operations during the teens. Society has been changed by the advent of technology without benefit of

planning. The situation in education today is similar.

One may, of course, assume that the school merely reflects the larger society. There is no doubt that the school does mirror its context in many ways, yet the school is the only agency within our society that has access to every child for some period of time. It seems highly unlikely that no special effects of this coverage, in light of changing conditions, growing from new research and development, can be credited to the schools. Will innovations in the schools have any effect on the general mental health or functioning citizenship, for example, of society?

However, the important point here is that changing school conditions, as an outgrowth of new research and development, will alter youngsters' patterns and contribute to social change. There apparently would be rich opportunities for

examination and guidance of this process as education continues to change.

Study of Educational Change

It is doubtful that any other major social institution in America has received as much concerted social pressure for change as education has during the past fifteen years. Further, it is doubtful that directed changes in the operations within an institution have ever been as great over so short a time span as those which have taken place in the field of education in recent years. The development of new programs, practices, and media has been and will continue to be a large scale impetus for educational change. The recognition of the need for research in the area of instituting changes in the school has grown apace with the development of new knowledge, programs, practices and media. This represents, in

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a very real sense, an experiment in institutional change within the fabric of our society. Education has become a potential living laboratory for the study of social change.

A moment's conjecture about the shifting status and role structure brought about by innovation underscores the above conclusion. The development of new curricula primarily through the activity of academic scholars is a revealing illustration. The status and role of the scholar have changed markedly. Whereas in the past the scholars' status in public school affairs was minimal and their role peripheral, they are today central figures of high status with clearly defined roles for developing curricular content. Since these status positions and role functions were not grafted on, but represent a "shifting" of status and role, we may assume that the repercussions of these changes have critical meanings for

the educational institution. The status and role of the curriculum specialist and teacher, for example, as a consequence of the growing status and role of the academic scholar have been altered markedly by this new pattern.

Further, the advent of team teaching, programed learning, educational television, computerized information retrieval, etc., may shortly force the teacher to revise his concept of role from an authoritative information giver to some broader concept of function. The teacher's status will undoubtedly change under this impact, both in the eyes of students and within the educational hierarchy. What are the consequences of these changes, for example, on institutional stability, the recruitment of role players, the patterns of relationships, and the achievement of institutional goals?

There is, thus, much that might be learned from a study of change in educa-

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tion which could help to provide greater understanding of the phenomena of social change in our society.

A New Center for Educational Research and Development

In line with growing innovation in education and its implication for social change, the government has formally, if belatedly, symbolized this process with the recent announcement of the establishment of A Center for Educational Research and Development at the University of Wisconsin, Madison campus, with Dean Lindley J. Stiles and Professor Herbert J. Klausmeier of the School of Education as co-directors. The grant involves approximately three and one-half million dollars of federal and university funds spread over a five year period.

The research emphasis will be on learning by children and youth in normal school situations. Learning of concepts and problems in mathematics and other basic subjects will be stressed. After basic research has been conducted studies will be taken into the field for development in the schools, followed by widespread dissemination of findings to schools throughout the land.

This center, a much needed development, would seem to provide in its format for operation an unusual opportunity for the study of the problems and consequences of educational change or innovation. One may hope that such studies are developed in this and other research contexts.

—JAMES B. MACDONALD, *Professor of Education, University of Wisconsin, Madison, and Chairman, ASCD Research Commission.*

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