

# EDUCATING YOUTH IN A REVOLUTIONARY SOCIETY<sup>1</sup>

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SINCE Sputnik, the schools have absorbed more than their share of people's projected tensions. This they have done even as they have sought to respond to revolutions in the major fields of knowledge and in social attitudes and have been forced to adjust to an exploding child population. We, in the United States, have a grave problem of perceiving broadly enough the scope of our revolution and the related sources of conflict and turmoil which surround all of our basic social institutions.

As a nation we have brought this revolution on ourselves. Our people, restless and mobile, energetic and ingenious in technology, have long equated progress with breaking from the ways of the past, particularly in the economic and political spheres. Through progress we seek to verify the perfectibility of man and his works. Our liberal traditions have generated the mass educational system which itself accelerates the growing pace of change.

We came into being as a revolutionary nation with widespread author-

ity problems and with deep convictions that individual freedom, political freedom, and economic freedom plus education plus latitude of action for the individual in all dimensions of life would rapidly enhance and improve life for all people. As we harnessed these ideas and put them to work during the past two hundred years, education has become one of the tremendous motive sources in this society that impels change because the results of education are released and used quickly to build and change society.

### The Knowledge Revolution

The production and use of knowledge has precipitated imbalances within the society. The industrial revolution undergirding the world in which we find ourselves has rapidly shifted from its earlier chief ingredients of land, power, minerals, capital equipment and labor, to what is now being labeled as a "knowledge revolution" in the area of ideas readily harnessed to production. Our institutions, however, have been slow to adapt to this fundamental change in the dynamics of society. For example, education; the basic generator

<sup>1</sup> This article is an adaptation of the Edith B. Merritt Memorial Lecture given in 1964 at San Francisco State College.

of this change, is still widely viewed as a major drain on the resources of the nation.

The "knowledge industry" accounts for nearly one-third of the entire economy and is growing more than twice as fast as the other sectors. Business concerns in the United States spend some seventeen billion dollars yearly to educate personnel, or one-third as much as is spent for the nation's public and private school systems. More than one-fourth of the nation is engaged in being educated and this proportion is increasing. We have about fifty-one million students and two million teachers. Investment in education, according to the Chase Manhattan Bank, has increased the output of the economy and the income of those educated to a return on investment of about ten percent.

A primary task of this nation is to invent ways to divert major portions of our wealth and skilled personnel into health, education and welfare. The needs, viewed in a conventional framework, may appear insatiable. But this is a false perception. For example, in 1929 this nation invested 3.1 percent of its gross national product on education. With the growing implications of the "knowledge revolution," only 5.8 percent was invested during 1963-64, in spite of the relative surge in youth population, costs of education, and the striking rise in gross national product. Many developing nations, despite their poverty, are making far greater relative efforts in the face of much more severe competition for the limited funds available. Instead of shuddering at the "astronomical rise" in educational costs, we might well assess the disposable wealth *left* to this society

after deducting educational investments and make comparisons with the other nations of the world on that basis. Reassurance then should replace panic.

Our emphasis upon science and technology and overuse of highly educated personnel there and in industrial and consumer production reflects another growing imbalance as personnel shortages pile up in social service professions such as nursing, social work, and teaching. Research and development have also lagged in the behavioral sciences for a decade and a half as a direct result of the skewing of the National Science Foundation in the direction of natural sciences. One need not argue for a redress of balance at the expense of favored areas. It is not necessary in a burgeoning economy. The problem is one of advancing selected low priority fields of endeavor in terms of current realities, and of preempting rapidly accruing additional wealth. For example, 1964 produced an increase over the previous year of approximately forty billions of dollars in gross national product.

Knowledge is said to have doubled in the past decade and, in the process, has rendered much previous knowledge questionable or invalid. Ninety percent of the scientists in the world's history are alive and working today. This in itself is one of the driving motive forces of our accumulating revolution. It shakes our institutions, builds cleavages among us, and makes us struggle in efforts to maintain the kind of multigroup and complex multi-institutional society we have become. Unfortunately, while we have moved with dispatch to harness new knowledge to our production and distribution systems, we have been slow

to adapt our social institutions to the knowledge revolution.

If we grasp the deeper implications of the "knowledge revolution," we can readily attain three objectives of revolutionary import: (a) we can spend all of the funds we can sensibly absorb for creative extension of educational services; (b) in so doing, we can also assure ourselves of future increases in wealth hitherto unknown; and (c) at the same time, we can achieve new levels of human development for the entire population.

### **Mobility and Leadership**

Population mobility must be recognized as a revolutionary factor in this society. Clearly the tempo of the times demands institutions attuned to high mobility and unstable membership. In some slum-area classes, the teacher's class list by the end of the school year may show triple the number of names listed in September, though the size of the class may remain relatively stable. We know of middle-class schools in which, each September, at least half the youngsters and a third of the teachers are new to the school.

The shift of personnel in and out of leadership roles also poses difficulties in achieving continuity of leadership. As we seek desperately for bases of continuity—or certainty—plans are often upset by personnel problems. This aspect of change, commonly overlooked, raises grave questions about our capacity for insightful control of revolutionary pressures. Shifts in leadership are often viewed as needed accessories to change, but the extremely rapid migration of leaders in and out of key roles in our institutions provides a random

factor hampering the functions of institutions and curtailing capacity to respond intelligently to change.

### **Civil Rights Struggle**

The explosiveness of this nation's civil rights revolution results from rising aspirations thwarted by unresponsive institutions. That crisis cannot subside without basic revisions of social attitudes and drastic rearrangements affecting our major institutions, especially in education.

The importance of the schools and colleges as agents of change is highlighted by the fact that they were the first among our major institutions to feel the shock of the emerging civil rights struggle a decade ago. Increasingly, problems growing out of rapid change in the larger society are promptly short-circuited into the schools with limited lead-time for planning and with little augmentation of resources. The "war on poverty" comes to mind as the most recent example. Schools and colleges are becoming lightning rods for discharging tensions arising in the society. They are not designed, nor are they yet prepared for this function.

### **An Expanding World**

Developments in transportation and communication join peoples of the world together along with the contagion of their unsolved problems in human relations. On one hand we are told incessantly that the world is getting smaller. In a limited sense this is true. Supersonic transportation and instant global communication coupled with new potentials for rapid cultural diffusion foster an illusion of a shrinking world.

On the other hand, it is crucial that we perceive the world as *expanding* by leaps and bounds as we look out into it and as we interact with it. In the management of human affairs, the world is expanding; problems become more complex and factors governing them have widening sources of origin, the roots of which tend to become, for the individual, more obscure. We live in larger and larger enclaves whether we refer to community, occupation, government, or world affairs. Reconciliation of diversity and the mustering of consensus for action become increasingly complex processes demanding a resiliency difficult for our generation to muster. There is little in present educational theory and less in practice to suggest that today's youth are being helped to cope with this problem.

We should maintain our respect for specialized competence and for educational programs designed for that purpose. However, many such programs are conceived on too limited a base even for the purposes they are expected to serve both as to content and the context in which they are taught. A more serious problem arises in the almost static designs for general and liberal education which pervade the schools and colleges. We have been warned by the psychiatrist, Lawrence Kubie, that specialized erudition without commensurate emotional and social maturity places the tools for destroying civilization in the hands of the erudite immature. Margaret Mead argued, fifteen years ago, that our task is to prepare the young so that they can cope with problems previously unknown and remake themselves in the process. The concept is only currently drawing limited attention.

## Revolution and Ideals

We are considering here a developmental revolution building at progressively more rapid pace through time, generated by a complementary set of factors which force drastic changes in major sectors of our society. The cumulative impact on our institutions, on our patterns of association and habits of mind has the dimensions of revolution, but ours is a *continuing* revolution rather than a one-time staccato affair, hence more of it goes on beneath our level of conscious awareness.

What then do we have as a common ideology or set of social ideals to consolidate our continuing revolution? The democratic creed of the Enlightenment provides the baseline. But those ideals to which most of us subscribe seem to many to represent a priori concepts and notions, often out of step with the revolution as it progresses. A significant minority of our people would jettison the ideals of democracy for various anti-democratic alternatives. Perhaps we have been careless in our efforts to clarify and reinterpret our ideals by underestimating the difficulties in sustaining needed consensus in a multi-group society in transition and under stress. Rejecting the efficacy of indoctrination, we experience difficulty in keeping our ideals—our motive forces of direction, bright and sharp.

## Problem of Counter Revolution

There is another facet of revolutions which we cannot enjoy. Revolutions tend by and large to be brief and violent—giving many people release from frustration and pent-up anger. They are exhausting and their conclusion is followed by a period of consolidation

under the fighting ideals of the revolution, if the revolutionists are successful.

We must, for example, learn to cope with counter revolution *in process* if we are to control our revolution through democratic values and humane goals. While we may have small cause for discouragement, carelessness and non-commitment could spell disaster for an open society. Currently we find counter revolutionaries maneuvering as Minute Men in the deserts of Southern California, the White Citizens' Councils in the South, the Black Muslims in metropolitan ghettos, and the John Birch cadres developing in the suburbs. We find proposals to restrict the level of educational opportunity extended to students of average ability and below-average financial means.

Broad awareness of the meaning and potential of an open society coupled with determined efforts to extend opportunities and freedom to those left behind in the revolution become major antidotes to anti-democratic movements which challenge our persisting ideals.

### Human Costs of Revolution

Revolutions are marked by the unevenness of their impact on different sectors of the population involved. In this respect, our revolution is characteristic. Large ethnic and socioeconomic groups have been left behind, as Harrington<sup>2</sup> and Sexton<sup>3</sup> have pointed out. They lag in economic status, formal

education, citizenship rights and thus suffer severe cultural impoverishment. As a result, large numbers of youth grow up in "cultural pockets" making access to responsible adulthood difficult.

Despite our wealth and increasing investment in education, we permit a third of our young people to leave school before completing high school. Yet unemployment among youthful workers is double that of the working force. Also, we are facing an explosion in the size of our potential work force at a time when manpower needs are shrinking rapidly for the undereducated.

Problems of youth are not confined to the lower socioeconomic and ethnic groups. College-bound students are facing growing problems of gaining admission to and maintaining themselves in colleges and universities. Evidence is accumulating that increasing numbers of promising students are living in anxiety, chronic fatigue, and fear of failure so acute that their health is impaired.

These are the dreary aspects of our revolution and can be viewed as another consequence of it. Large numbers of people suffer grievous impairment of opportunity and health during such periods. Revolutions, once launched, tend to careen out of control. We must learn to manage explosive changes so the fruits of progress are more rapidly and evenly disseminated in improved economic health and educational support for all. We must reexamine more carefully the degree to which our major social institutions actually support the dignity and aspirations of the individuals who comprise them, and whom institutions are designed to serve.

Ours is a society born of dissent and

<sup>2</sup>Michael Harrington. *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*. Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1962.

<sup>3</sup>Patricia C. Sexton. *Education and Income: Inequalities of Opportunities in Our Public Schools*. New York: Viking Press, 1961.

one that, in its building, has looted the natural resources of a continent, poisoned its lakes and streams, and polluted its atmosphere in pursuit of immediate and sometimes narrowly conceived goals. It need not stand aghast at the small minority of youth who express their turbulence through negativism, violence and vandalism. It is axiomatic that youth get out of hand—or appear to their elders to do so—in revolutionary periods.

Education is thus no longer a casual affair. It must be granted top priority as a prime instrument through which we realize the constructive potential of our on-going revolution.

### **A Focus on Needs**

The problems of youth and the schools demand massive resources and talent drawn from many fields for the following educational needs:

1. Analysis of existing knowledge and support of research in the area of human development and learning so that teaching and school management shall be guided by the best that we know

2. Extension of educational programs designed to complement the family and neighborhood environment—especially for early childhood years—thus capitalizing on new evidence of growth potential in both cognitive and affective development

3. Assessment of the social dynamics and human relations within schools in efforts to maximize their supportive potential for personality and character development as well as for effectiveness in more traditional kinds of school learning

4. Development of cultural service and work experience programs designed to lend continuity to youth's experience in and out of school

5. The design of original, experimental curricula with strategies for *unlearning* and *transitional* learning adapted to build self-confidence and improved self-concepts for those impaired by previous experience

6. Reexamination of special fields of knowledge for related integrative concepts functionally related to human development appropriate to a democratic society

7. Reexamination of possibilities for more extensive and creative use of specialized personnel from a broader range of fields

8. Exploration of our on-going revolution for attitudinal and value implications which should shape major objectives of the schools—especially for character and citizenship education

9. Development of patterns of parent participation and in-service education for school personnel aimed at serious involvement in the process of rethinking the role and function of the schools

10. Establishment of research facilities and consultants to work with teachers and specialists in every school district and county in liaison with higher education and state and national agencies.

Such efforts require financial resources and personnel beyond conventional conceptions of educational needs. As a start, we might seriously consider doubling the outlay for education during the next five to ten years. In addition, we might add a modest increment for research and experimentation, broadly conceived. Supposing we were merely to match the existing level of expenditure for research in science, technology, and the development of hardware for war and defense—presently estimated at 22 billions of dollars?

Through such modest efforts, an affluent society might expect to gain greater control of its revolution in service of human values.

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