

*How public schools respond to basic needs and adapt to change will significantly affect America's future . . .*

## **Change for Change's Sake?**

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THE innovator on today's scene is asked daily to justify his work by proof that some proposed rearrangement is significantly better statistically than current structure and practice. This insistence is out of proportion to professional knowledge as well as common sense. Most people know and have known for a long time, especially those in the school enterprise, that we have not been effective in keeping our school program in gear with the needs of youth.

We have talked for a long time about the conditions for learning. Long ago we discovered that effective learning takes place when the circumstances recognize and provide for individual differences, readiness, motivation, interest, creativity, appropriate organizational arrangements, availability of multi-level materials, etc.

At no time previously, in terms of these criteria, were we reaching more than a small segment of our student population. This in itself, from my point of view, is basis enough to sharpen our present efforts to make drastic changes to get the job done. I wish that those people who most frequently ask for scientific evidence of the need for change would apply some of the same criteria which they suggest to existing programs.

There has not been a time in the history of American education when there was as much interest as there now is in innovation and change. There have been many attempts to define innovation and change. A discussion of what this means in a semantical sense appears redundant. The simple fact is that public education has been extremely tardy in making the accommodations required for effective education in this last half of the twentieth century. This tardiness, however, is not peculiar to this generation. It has been true for a long, long time.

### **Impetus for Change**

The present impetus for change has come and is coming from many sources. Within the educational enterprise we have the same thrust we have had for a long time. The difference is that more professionals are aware and committed than

previously. The tremendous expansion and explosion of knowledge has caused many more to be acutely aware that teaching and learning must have a major overhaul simply on the basis of the burgeoning quantity of knowledge, facts, and materials.

Nearly any competent teacher today knows that he cannot cover all the material or that a pupil cannot acquire all the knowledge that is available. The tremendous development of communication as it was dramatically exemplified by "Sputnik" has enabled and indeed caused massive input from segments of the population outside the education enterprise. In a much retarded way the government at all three levels, especially the federal level, has been awakened from its slumber of irresponsibility to add impetus to this movement. Now, more currently, the business enterprise, or educational industry, has gotten into the act. In addition to high-sounding phrases from business executives we have hammering at us the basic thrust of profit making.

Coupled with these factors is the awesome development of our country as it is related to the world-wide cultural evolution. The United States has moved from the sidelines of world affairs into the arena itself. In this struggle for its proper relationship with all mankind, it is suffering the pains of inadequate preparation for the task. Much of this inadequacy can be charged appropriately to a relatively ineffective educational program.

Over and beyond these factors is the widespread desire on the part of man everywhere—Africa and Asia included—to learn. This movement itself may be the most awesome and consequential development of our times. This thirst and need for education caused by the development of science and technology expressed in the improvement of transportation and communication have settled for all time any doubt about the universality of our involvement and responsibility. The African and the Asian will be educated. Nobody can stop them. This development has consequences that we cannot even yet comprehend.

### **Complexity of Public Education**

One main problem related to educational change in the past has been the lack of depth in the effort. There may not be another organization more complex in its nature than the public school system. This concept is deeply embedded in American culture. The organization and processes were not developed on a scientific basis. Perceptions of education, the role of the school, and the roles of the individuals who comprise its working parts "grew like Topsy" out of practices brought across the Atlantic.

Added to this word-of-mouth transmittal was the very structure of public education, which early got its roots planted deeply in the concept of local control and independence. Thousands upon thousands of American neighborhoods, each in its own way, developed sets of attitudes, structural arrangements, and processes based mainly on ideas of those in other enterprises, superstitions, and myths. There was considerable value in this development. On the other hand, we have paid a heavy price in terms of a pseudoscientific approach to the many

facets of public school operation which would lend itself to planned and systematic change.

We have waddled around for many years in a patchwork fashion to mend this or that in our curriculum. This indictment does not deprecate the worthy efforts of many farsighted people who have gone before. Those who have tried to improve content, teaching strategies, different arrangements of human and material resources, for more effective teaching of reading or arithmetic have been encumbered by the inability of the enterprise to look deeply into the total circumstances which could enable significant change.

### **Commitment to Change**

Attention now must be given to the difficult and risky business of changing some of the nature of the educational organization. Perceptions and expectations of the lay public must be altered so that understandings prerequisite to an adjustment of values may be made. This adjustment of values is absolutely necessary for the support, both fiscal and attitudinal, to enable the enterprise to function adequately in these times.

Within the organization itself very painful adjustments must be made on the part of individuals as they see their roles in relationship to adjusted educational goals. Specifically, the teacher, the principal, the superintendent, the board of education, and others within the establishment must have the courage and the maturity to examine expectations and needs in relationship to modern education. This is not easy. The overwhelming evidence in terms of preparation, experience, and cultural influences is that this job cannot, even yet, be done fast enough.

Packaged education must be banished. The universality of education consistent with the needs of the last third of the twentieth century must be reestablished. These oft-stated targets and commitments must become real. If they do become real, they cannot be obtained without considerable risk to the individuals and the organization that make the attempt. If they do become real we must admit that there is no way to make sufficient headway without drastic reorientation, retraining, and not a little bit of courage. The teacher cannot provide for the children meaningful experiences in the inquiry process unless he becomes an inquirer. The youngster is not apt to become self-directed and a more capable decision maker unless those responsible for leadership themselves become mature, self-directed, capable decision makers and draw from what is known in the behavioral sciences about human dynamics, interaction, and genuine cooperative action.

These tasks, more implied than detailed, are monumental. The risks are considerable. More and more school systems must find somewhere within their resources enough courage and commitment to get the job done. The *sole* check on this effort must be the educational safety and welfare of children. All else must be excluded. The degree to which the public school systems respond to the basic need to accommodate this change will affect significantly the future of America.

Change for change's sake—no; change because it is imperative—yes! ☞

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