Sharing in Change

Ned A. Flanders

THE title to this editorial, which is also the theme of this issue, can have many different meanings. The notion of sharing, for example, usually stands for something good. It is a fine middle-class ideal that is taught in the primary grades under carefully controlled conditions so that everyone has something he can share. In the real world, however, sharing has an element of condescension when it is initiated by a person who has more goods and power than anyone else. Sharing, under these circumstances, may be a procedure for enhancing the existing prestige and power of those who are the most well off.

What we mean by change is even less clear. Some of us who have had bad experiences with change are afraid of change. Others who have had good experiences look forward eagerly to change. Some who dislike their present circumstances may feel that any kind of change is better than the status quo. The complete phrase, sharing in change, has many meanings. It may be good or bad, too much or too little, harmful or helpful; in short, it is not always virtuous.

This editorial is written with a strong conviction that sharing in change can refer to constructive actions, actions which lead to more effective relationships among individuals, and which tend to improve the quality of our social institutions. There is a great need for change in education. We appear to be dissatisfied with school organization, the curriculum, the way we supervise teachers, and the way we prepare young people for a career in teaching, to name a few problem areas. How we go about achieving change, deciding how to start, which problems to work on, and the first steps to take, all these issues are a part of the theme for this issue.

The Private Referent

When teachers are confronted with an opportunity to analyze their own classroom interaction, tension increases and some seek acceptable ways to escape. One of the more attractive alternatives is to posit what might be called a "private referent," which is a body of experience known only to the speaker. For example, a teacher says—"I once knew a teacher who . . . ;" " . . . but my pupils are different," "That just wouldn't work in
my school with my principal,” or “I seek goals in my teaching that can’t be measured.”

No matter how justified these statements might be, in a given case, their use refers to personal experiences which have private meanings. A teacher who uses them tends to establish control over what is to be considered relevant. When someone in the group makes a constructive suggestion, for example, a teacher can then say—“That is a good idea, but it won’t work in my case because . . .”

In thinking about sharing in change, we might begin by acknowledging that each participant needs a private referent which can serve as a refuge when the processes of change require deeper involvement. Thus in the case of trying to improve instruction, we might agree that the task is not to demolish these private abstractions by flushing them out into an open exchange, but to create more interpersonal trust so that teachers can voluntarily share the process of testing private meanings with each other. It is by this process that they gain insights into their own teaching behavior.

In my own contact with student activists, something of the same process seems to occur. The activist may want to “tear down the establishment and build a new university,” and the discussion begins by citing faults and then generalizing from these instances to the whole establishment. Progress, in such a discussion, often rests on how many instances the students are prepared to open up to group investigation and analysis. Can an inventory of different perceptions be made and can a thoughtful comparison of different points of view be carried out? This kind of sharing is possible until private meanings are cited as evidence and then protected from further scrutiny—“You just don’t understand. . . .” or “You have to live through this kind of experience before you can see our point of view.” Apparently sharing is OK up to some point—and it is in negotiating these points that the skilled participant is separated from the less skillful.

**Too Little, Too Late**

A teacher is likely to change his classroom behavior when he is at the focal point of potent forces toward change which impinge on him simultaneously. The question is how potent? How many forces? Surely there is an analogy here to a critical mass or perhaps a change environment which achieves a critical density in terms of forces toward change. Creating a potent change environment takes into account how difficult it is for teachers to change their behavior.

Not much is known about how to arrange an effective change environment. As a first approximation we might consider forces which fall into four broad categories: first, personal incentives; second, provision for continuing reinforcement which is free of threat; third, having available various skills for analyzing teaching behavior; and fourth, having access to the time-space-and-equipment that the job requires. Rarely, if ever, do teachers find themselves at the focal point of several constructive forces from each of these four areas. It is my observation that the most frequent error made in designing programs to help teachers change their classroom behavior has been to underestimate the difficulties and to stop far short of creating a critical density in the change environment.
The notion of critical mass or a high density change environment seems to be relevant to the more general problems of educational change. It may be that some failures in our efforts to share in change occur because the forces are too little and too late. The involvement of those who are most concerned may be thinly spread over time, a meeting this week, a talk next week, appointing a committee “to investigate,” and then hearing its report. These activities are not personally involving and can be frustrating because they create optimistic expectations which cannot be realized in a watered down change environment.

Too Much, Wrong Kind

Another observation about sharing is that we now have too much of the wrong kind. The current impact of the mass media means that rioting in Chicago, stepping on the moon, and holding a meeting on a college campus are likely to be portrayed in the living rooms of the nation. The events transmitted are highly selected and often provide impressions which do not accurately represent what actually happened. Nevertheless, what is shown permits a kind of vicarious sharing in which we think “we were there,” but more often, we choose to remember only those events which support our previously held convictions.

The overall impact of mass media, in terms of social change, may well be that we become saturated with the overwhelming presence of change, but feel less and less able to influence change. Two opposing forces may be increasing each day: as we grow older we are less able to participate in change processes; but we also gain the impression that the pressure of social change is gradually increasing and making more and more demands on the individual. In short, the older we become the less we can cope with change. Yet social, technological, and moral changes are occurring at an ever increasing rate. This places older persons on a collision course with social alienation.

When the processes of change get out of hand and provoke violence, many of us—especially older persons—feel in a helpless stationary position while the world swirls in a turmoil around us. In the field of helping teachers change their behavior, this extreme feeling of helplessness in the presence of rapid change results in a few teachers being totally unable to study their own teaching behavior. They cannot bring themselves to study their teaching on magnetic video or even with a voice tape recording. In less extreme cases, a recording can be made, but only with special preparations which ensure that the teacher-pupil interchange becomes completely unnatural, a kind of rehearsed “show” which bears little relationship to daily teaching. These teachers prefer to keep their present perceptions about their own teaching, however autistic these perceptions may be, rather than analyze the process from a more realistic point of view.

Constructive Action

The contributors to this issue will comment on these and other problems associated with change in an effort to point toward constructive action. In trying to help teachers change their teaching behavior, I have become impressed with how difficult sharing in change really is. However,
there are some tentative conclusions which seem to be worthy of further development and testing.

First, some progress toward change is likely to occur when we start by reducing the gap between our intentions and our actions. Most educators have many constructive intentions, but need help in carrying them out. Therefore, I think we can make more progress by studying our present programs, our current conditions, and our daily actions in terms of intentions so that deeds are altered to match our purposes more closely.

Second, I believe that sharing in change means making sure that all those who participate can decide what is relevant, what first steps will be taken, and how to evaluate these first steps in order to design subsequent steps. The social skills necessary for this kind of inquiry will certainly require practice. Perhaps sharing in change means providing a chance to practice the necessary skills and then making sure that pupils, parents, teachers, and administrators can all take advantage of the opportunity.

Finally, I think that any kind of sharing in change is more likely to succeed when the plans for action are modest. When the project is to decide what is wrong with something, there can be endless argument about how to start. However, when the task is to make relatively modest comparisons, say between one way of involving parents versus another way, with this method of asking questions versus that method, with this kind of report card versus another (or not having any), then it seems much easier to get started. Change means that something is different. Making an improvement means to show that one thing is better than another. Even with only two alternatives, sharing in change is complicated and difficult to accomplish.

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