

# Alternative Schools: Is the Old Order Really Changing?

DONALD W. ROBINSON \*

**I**N A former candy factory in San Francisco, in a rambling ranch house in the hills near Santa Barbara, in a thousand homes and farms and church basements and storefronts, tireless volunteers are at work. These volunteers, convinced that the old order is not changing, are dedicating themselves to the establishment of a new order outside the public school system.

These critics assert that educational change is superficial and insignificant, and some conclude that because our schools are locked into repressive molds they cannot be reformed. Either the schools will be replaced by a totally novel system, or democratic society will be torn apart by the strain of a population not educated to the realities of the society they must operate.

This crisis, it seems to me, is created in the minds of the critics by their own fears and insecurities.

Society has survived far greater irrelevancies than exist today, and some schools are making far more radical adjustments than the critics apparently recognize. Perhaps a degree of crisis psychology is necessary to attract the attention of some conservative school people; and by the same token it may be desirable to warn some literal school people that much of the breast-beating is more rhetoric than factual reporting.

Most moderates would say that the old order *is* changing, conspicuously and radically. But then, nearly everything is changing today, and whether the schools are changing enough, or fast enough, to stay abreast with the new society is quite another question.

Data are plentiful to document either the position that changes in the schools are sufficient or that they are not. Our finding will largely depend upon which schools we examine and which data we select from those schools. The same facts are theoretically available to all, yet we tend to see the facts that support our emotional predilections, our optimism or pessimism, liberalism or conservatism, support of or opposition to the public schools as we know them.

In support of the assertion that the old order is changing, conspicuously and radically, one might cite such schools as John Bremer's Parkway School in Philadelphia, Walt Whitman High School's EFFE Program (Experiment in Free Form Education) in Bethesda, Maryland, the John Adams High School in Portland, Oregon, and dozens more. Widespread evidence of change exists in the increased use in schools throughout the country of such devices as mini-courses, inde-

\* Donald W. Robinson, Acting Editor, *Phi Delta Kappa Publications*, Bloomington, Indiana

pendent study programs, open classrooms with parents invited to participate, and hundreds of variations of sensitivity training.

One major focus of the complaints of the alternative leaders and of the reformers within the system is lack of attention to the education of the student as a feeling person as well as a thinking person. Sometimes this is attempted in a so-called humanities program, sometimes in an interpersonal relations experience. More often this element is not considered at all. Of course one can challenge the effectiveness of these or of any efforts to improve education, but their mere existence provides an answer to the question: Is the old order really changing?

Accelerated change within the establishment is being hastened by the example of certain alternative schools. It is also accelerated by the mounting criticism of public education offered by reformers who have either given up on the public school or are on the verge of doing so. These critics place their hope in "free," "alternative" schools. The word is being passed by such anti-establishment groups as The New Schools Exchange (301 East Perdido, Santa Barbara, California 93101); Vocations for Social Change (Canyon, California 94516); the Bay Area Radical Teachers Organizing Committee (1445 Stockton Street, San Francisco, California 94133); the Teachers Drop-Out Center (School of Education, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts 01002); the Teacher Paper (280 North Pacific Avenue, Monmouth, Oregon 97361); Edvance Combined Motivation Education Systems (6300 River Road, Rosemont, Illinois 60018).

These centers are operated by persons who see the need for a great deal more change than has so far taken place.

The alternative schools that have been established run a wide gamut of quality and success, though a majority appear to be operated by idealists without experience. These schools reportedly have an average existence of 18 months.

Alternative schools may not survive in large numbers, though that will depend in large part on how widely the voucher plan is adopted and how it is administered. Already

they have had tremendous influence comparable to the manner in which minor parties have through the years influenced American social legislation. They have forced the establishment into a greater awareness of the urgency of the need for reform.

That the free alternative schools are influential is attested to by their recognition in the introduction to the 1970 edition of Porter Sargent's *Private Schools*:

... the formation and continued existence of new private schools as an alternative to both public education and the established private schools will undoubtedly continue and increase. These free schools and community schools are going to reflect a flexibility of methodology and attitude which will permit them to survive. Many may never be reported in the pages of this book, but this will only be because of their inaccessibility or their brevity of existence. However, in the long run, in terms of the effect they have on the present generation of students and the generation to follow, their first result will be to force both public and private education to be more competitive on their terms. The second long term effect will be on the increasing numbers of people—parents as well as children—who are changed by the very fact that these schools exist.<sup>1</sup>

Change is being demanded and instituted not alone by rebels who assert that public education is a lost cause, and who have apparently established no less than a thousand independent alternative schools throughout the nation. Change is equally being demanded and instituted within the establishment. The Charles F. Kettering Foundation supports I/D/E/A/ which is essentially a change agent; the Ford Foundation sponsored the report that culminated in *Toward Humanistic Education: A Curriculum of Affect*, edited by Gerald Weinstein and Mario D. Fantini; the Carnegie Corporation supported Charles Silberman's *Crisis in the Classroom*; public school systems, beginning in Philadelphia, are promoting the "school without walls" concept; the federal government is sponsoring such change-stimulating arrangements as the voucher plan.

<sup>1</sup> Porter Sargent. *The Handbook of Private Schools*. Introduction to 51st edition. Boston: Porter Sargent Publisher, 1970.

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## Change for What?

There can be little argument that the old order is changing, despite Silberman's complaints, the evidence presented by John Goodlad in *Behind the Classroom Door*, and the direct evidence we may observe in our own local school. The follow-up question: Is *enough* change being effected? can spark another round of possibly useful controversy, but a reply first is needed to still another question, namely: Enough for what?

One problem, of course, is the resistance of institutions to change; not simply individual conservative administrators, but the whole concept of society, or as today's change people like to label it, the "establishment." Institutions exist to administer a relatively stable program, and to most people the notion of innovation suggests substituting a new, hopefully better, program for the present one. That is not what the present revolution is all about. The real complaint against the establishment today is that it appears unable or unwilling to attempt to administer continuing change. Not a succession of systems, but unending change, so that no set content curriculum or pattern can ever be defined.

All life, and all learning, is change; therefore schools must be geared to growth and change. And if this is not reconcilable with certain existing standards, the existing standards must go. And if some of these statements are not completely consistent or logical, who says that consistency and logic are more important than freedom, change, inquiry, and growth? So long as we maintain

diversity of aims in education, we cannot hope for uniformity of curriculum, methods, or outcome. Nor should we. The major arguments against the National Assessment are based on differing priorities of what the goals of instruction should be. The opposition to various plans for school accountability rests primarily on a similar unwillingness to accept a consensus on goal priorities.

This condition of increasing assertion of individual and special group rights to determine their own priorities in educational goals is almost certain to lead to more splintering of curricula, more diversity of programs, a wider spectrum of alternative schools, and a more general acceptance of the axiom that American education is too many things to be put in the same bag. Education is what happens to a particular student in the set of circumstances he experiences in and out of his classes, which are only remotely related to what happens to another student either in the same town or half a continent away.

Actually, much of the real and the imagined inadequacy of public education today stems directly from the diversity of values, especially where home standards of authority and of the importance of study differ widely from school standards. Psychiatrists have presented persuasive data to the effect that the frustrations resulting from dependence on two conflicting value systems can be seriously damaging to the child's healthy growth.

Some schools have achieved the humanity and flexibility that by reasonable standards mark them as effective schools,

challenging, stimulating, aware of human needs beyond the intellectual, concerned for their students as individuals with widely differing competencies and goals. Probably most schools are not even close to this goal. There probably exists little real need for innovations in the sense of new organizational or curricular arrangements presently undreamed of, although improvements in this area can always be made. What is needed is a massive infusion of talent into the teaching and administrative staffs, the recruitment of far greater numbers of creative, flexible, and humane individuals, constantly growing in several dimensions and capable of helping others to grow also.

Until some genius devises a touchstone to determine whether an individual student will respond better to more freedom or to firmer demands, much of the discussion of educational alternatives will remain academic. Until we achieve firmer consensus than we now seem likely ever to attain on the goals and the roles of the school, answers to the question: Is the old order really changing? will continue to be largely editorial and inconclusive. Meanwhile an optimistic nature and a historical perspective make it just as easy for some to see the bottle half full as a pessimistic nature and a perfectionist orientation make it for others to call the bottle half empty. The facts are the same for both, and both answers are defensible.

Charles Silberman may be justified in calling the schools joyless and repressive and urgently in need of reform, but even he is quick to admit that "from another perspective, the United States educational system appears to be superbly successful—on almost any measure, performing better than it did ten, twenty, fifty, or a hundred years ago."

A clear and persuasive expression of the nature of the cultural revolution of which today's innovations and alternatives are a part appeared back in 1956 in Lynn White's *Frontiers of Knowledge in the Study of Man*. White discusses four basic shifts: from Graeco-Judaic oriented culture to a world view; from reliance on logic and language to a much wider choice of symbols; from faith in rationality to awareness of the authority of

the unconscious; and from a hierarchy of values toward a spectrum of values. Finally he places the revolution in perspective in a summary paragraph which, although it deals with the curriculum *content* rather than with innovative *methods*, still conveys the meaning of educational change.

Finally, since revolution has swept aristocracy into the cracks and corners, does the shift from the canon of the hierarchy of values to the canon of the spectrum of values mean that the values cultivated by the aristocracies of the past are obsolete? No; on the contrary, if we neglect them we are betraying the democratic revolution which was an effort to upgrade the masses and not to downgrade them. Yet in the long perspective of human history our revolution is so new that we do not really know what a high democratic culture would look like, much less what its formal education—that is, its organized plan for cultural transmission—would be.

The task of understanding ourselves and the world we live in is vastly complicated by the democratic necessity of supplementing the well formulated aristocratic values with others, more nebulous at present because never adequately verbalized, which for millennia have been held by the common people to be equally necessary and worthy of respect. In general these latter values have centered not, like those of the aristocrats, in government, religion, and art but in the home, the daily relations of people in community, and the skills of production and craftsmanship. The task is not simply to add these to the traditionally cherished values of the upper classes, but rather to smelt all human values down and to recast them as a unit. Until this is done we shall continue in a state of cultural confusion; but the blast furnace is only now beginning to glow hot.<sup>2</sup>

Yes, the old order is changing, and it will continue to change as more enlightenment and humanity slowly gain the upper hand over tradition, custom, and superstition. Educational structures and patterns must continue to change until they have accommodated to the notion that every living person must continue to change throughout his entire lifetime. □

<sup>2</sup> From the book *Frontiers of Knowledge in the Study of Man* by Lynn White. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, © 1956. By permission.

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