

# The Genuine Educational Frontiers

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THE ambiguities of a revolutionary era were well described in the opening lines of *A Tale of Two Cities*. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Although children growing up today live in a different era from that of which Dickens spoke, they, too, live in a time of sweeping change. Ours, too, is the best of times and the worst of times. The genuine educational frontiers today grow out of a social setting of promise and threat.

Along with the rest of us, children and youth are living in a time when the conquest of the only limitless frontier has begun. Refusing to be earthbound, man is probing into space. This best of times is marked by personal heroism and gallant adventuring, by prodigious feats of theoretical mathematics and science accompanied by engineering applications.

Yet this is also a time when the threat of extermination hangs heavy over the human race; science has created a Caliban in the form of alphabet bombs and fall-out that menace man with cosmic violence. Space conquest, despite its potential for humanity, can degenerate into a rat race for death control.

Our young live with us in a time when, across the world, a wind has risen. This is the day of the revolution of rising expectations as people of underdeveloped lands restlessly stir toward a better life. Dangling before the majority of mankind in Africa, Asia, and Latin America is the promise inherent in the prosperity of the more mature societies.

Yet, steadily sabotaging the rising expectations of the people of underdeveloped areas are growing population, lack of capital and technology, and insufficient revenue and training for realistic education.

The revolution of rising expectations catches up in its sweep Negro Americans who say "Now," not "With deliberate speed"; who say "All of us, not "Token compliance"; who say "Equality," not "Evasion." In this best of times, we tally our gains in racial, religious, and ethnic understanding and in social arrangements; we see ourselves advancing toward the American dream. But in this worst of times we run desperately with the Queen in *Alice in Wonderland* who said, "Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do to stay in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"

In the United States, this is a time of the affluent society, when science and technology open intriguing vistas for mankind. As problems of production are solved, living standards rise. The doors of cultural opportunity heretofore open only to a self-consciously civilized minority, swing open to the common man of our industrial nation.

Yet this is also a time when the affluent society of the U.S. deprives many children and youth of needed social services, especially adequately supported education. It is the heyday of the Great Hypocrisy--lip worship of education, mouthing of concern,

and pretensions of zeal for excellence, accompanied by too many local school budget defeats and by national atrophy on broad federal aid to public education.

It is a time when what technological development gives with one hand is withheld by the other. For instance, the blessings of automation could fill the home with plenty. But automation also threatens many with unemployment. The new technology sharply reduces manual labor and decreases human drudgery. It also brings economic peril to the ignorant, the less intelligent, and the untrained,

With respect to human behavior, it is the best of times and the worst of times. It is an era when Dag Hammarskjold labored for human dignity to the hour of his death; when John F. Kennedy demonstrated the tremendous scope of his great potential before being untimely cut off; when Albert Schweitzer dedicates his versatility to humble service in the dark interior of the Dark Continent; when Albert Einstein demonstrated the subtleties of abstract thought through predicting celestial improbabilities that held up under the probings of physical experimentation. It is a period when people whose names will never be celebrated serve humanity--unsung members of the Peace Corps, teachers at obscure international outposts and still less recognized classrooms off Main Street, U.S.A., scholars stubbornly searching for truth, citizens defending free inquiry in cases that never become *causes celebres*.

Yet it is also an era of faces livid with hate as howling men and women spit at bewildered children on their way to desegregated schools. In the Northern suburbs it is a time of blind blandness of respectable ladies and gentlemen of prejudice. It is a time of alienation and anomie in which youth empathizes with Holden Caulfield of J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* and the lost children on the island of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. It is a time of the beat generation, the futilitarianism of the theatre of the absurd, and of T. S. Eliot's prophecy in *The Hollow Men*,

This is the way the world ends

Not with a bang, but a whimper.

Amid such ambiguous social realities, the genuine educational frontiers become imperative, yet they are too largely unnoticed and unexplored. They relate to the development of human beings in today's social setting. They involve the education of individuals in interaction with social forces in the best of times and the worst of times. Here are eight urgent educational frontiers:

1. Helping children and youth to come to grips with the international problems of their times.

While the clock ticks on toward midnight, our program of education for international understanding is presently inadequate. Yet stress on international education in the program of the schools has not been urged by leading public spokesmen for changes in the schools.

One of several fields of the curriculum that potentially has a major contribution to make to dealing with international problems is social studies. But the broad field of social studies is forgotten at a time when, thanks to the National Defense Education Act, science, mathematics, and foreign languages are riding high. Congress, which has refused

to authorize comprehensive federal aid to public education, has assumed the role of national curriculum decision-maker by allocating funds for favored fields.

2. Developing democratic human relationships among young people of varied races, religions, nationality backgrounds, and social classes.

Daily events testify to the American dilemma of a nation caught between an official democratic ideology and the frequent practice of discrimination, prejudice, and segregation by its citizenry.

Racial conflicts sharpen as old and outmoded doctrines of racial superiority are adhered to, despite evidence, and as resolves are made that desegregation in jobs, housing, and schools will not take place in "my time," or that people will be kept in "their place." Stubbornness is met by counter measures.

Meanwhile, religious controversies smolder under the surface. Sometimes they break into sharp political fires as in the struggle over federal aid to education, or the bloc voting both for and against John F. Kennedy in 1960.

In the expanding suburbs, the composition of the population is often Caucasian in race, Northern European in origin, Catholic and Protestant in religion, and self-consciously upper middle class in orientation. In such a context, how can we teach the diversity of backgrounds that made the American character?

The need for realistic education that develops democratic human relations among all Americans is imperative. Yet after a promising start following World War II, intercultural and intergroup education is in the doldrums today as the public and profession hesitate faintheartedly before this stormy and emotion-ridden social problem. Tensions build while genteel silence on man's relationships to man prevails too largely in our schools.

3. Teaching young people to participate as intelligent citizens in the great human issues of our times.

It is a platitude that a nation depends on its citizens not merely to be informed men and women but to act intelligently and vigorously on social issues.

But one of the frontiers in education that our feet have scarcely trod is youth participation in community action. Our faith in education today, reinforced by the rejection of youth as employable by labor, industry, and even law, keeps youth in school longer than ever. Yet extended schooling often involves extended civic impotence. Young people read of civics in books; they rarely participate in reasoned, orderly, effective civic action beyond the school walls.

4. Educating young people for a society in which the unskilled and the undereducated are obsolete.

There are uncounted millions of young people for whom the current academic programs of schools make no sense. The content they are taught has no connection that they can perceive to the lives they actually lead. We may rail against or dispassionately analyze their social class backgrounds and the vicious spiral of cultural deprivation that perpetuates their kind. Yet such young people continue to come to our schools only to be rebuffed by the total situation. The academician's prescription of continuance of the same

academic diet, slightly watered down, poisons their schooling and, soon or late, kills their attendance. So they drop out and join the unskilled and under-educated in the unending and often fruitless struggle to evade obsolescence.

Nor is vocational education an easy answer. Vocational education is overdue for a thorough reappraisal. Equipment is often antiquated; too many printshops, for instance, are closer to Gutenberg than to the process that produced the page you now read. When equipment is kept up to date, it is often frighteningly expensive. Most difficult of all, the vocational scene changes swiftly; the level of technical knowledge required for many jobs climbs steadily; the human being finds that automation has made him expendable even though he has learned his routines well in vocational courses.

5. Developing young people who are unique individuals, characterized by individual differences and a variety of needs and interests.

Here is a factor that goes to the heart of the democratic dream. Certainly a salient value of the democratic way of life is respect for the worth and dignity of the individual. Or is this value, too, rendered only lip worship? In too many schools, students are treated as though they were identical members of a vast anonymous mass.

True, the responsibility is partially that of teachers who have failed to see pupils as individuals. But in recent years the greater responsibility for not educating young people as unique individuals lies with American society as a whole and, most specifically, with its intellectual bellwethers. Our vision has gone askew. As John Hersey has pointed out, we have not seen education as directed to the development of each individual, as involving respect for the uniqueness of each personality. In effect, American society asked for the conformist personalities that developed. Then we deplored our own products in such books as David Reisman's *The Lonely Crowd* and William Whyte's *The Organization Man*. Meanwhile, we derided the progressive movement in education that was dedicated early to the importance of the individual personality.

In American society we appropriate insufficient funds for the full development of individuals through schools. To cap the climax, we show very little understanding that our vision is distorted. Instead, we expand the depersonalization of education through abuse of educational technology.

6. Helping each and every boy and girl develop into the best he or she is capable of becoming.

Here the key phrase is "each and every boy and girl." In it lies the frontier.

In American education one or another group is often singled out for emphasis. Today concern for the gifted and talented still rides high; yesterday the handicapped were our special concern. The day before yesterday the drop-out was the forgotten child, and now he is mounting a comeback. Perhaps tomorrow's forgotten child will be the average child.

In a democracy, education has a comprehensive mandate that should always be taken seriously. John Gardner says it well in *Excellence*, "Our kind of society demands the maximum development of individual potentialities at every level of ability; and we would be very foolish indeed if we were to let our renewed interest in the gifted youngsters lead to neglect of everyone else." Those who would foster the education of

one group of human beings while forgetting other groups do a disservice to the mandate of helping each to achieve his best.

7. Encouraging young people to cultivate reflective thought, to use maximally the method of intelligence.

The keystone among the democratic values, it is commonly conceded, is the use of reflective thought, the exercise of man's intelligence. If this is self-evident, where then is the frontier?

It lies partly in confusions as to how reflective thinking is best cultivated. Some confuse thinking with a squirrel's nest of miscellaneous information stored up like acorns against a hard winter by persons possessed of a yet inexplicable capacity, long memory. Thus, some mistake rote recitation for reflective thought.

The most difficult aspect of this frontier is a perennial problem. Are we willing to allow our children and youth to inquire freely and let the chips fall where they may?

For example, a new demand is made today throughout the land: teach children and youth about Communism. Agreed--they need to understand it. But are we really willing that they think hard about it, even to including Communist sources among many references studied, even to learning the case for the Communists as set forth by the Communists as well as vigorous and scholarly demolitions of the Communist case? Instead, do we propose to propagandize for anti-Communism? If so, how are we behaving differently from the Communists?

So the frontier is only partly methodological. It also involves whether Americans will accept the risks along with the reward of free inquiry.

8. Answering the fundamental question as to human knowledge, "Knowledge for what?"

We live in a time of an explosion of knowledge. The specialists inform us of the frightening speed with which knowledge multiplies and the equally frightening speed with which past knowledge dates and becomes invalid. To be a Da Vinci becomes ever more unattainable.

With the explosion of knowledge, the question once raised by sociologist Robert S. Lynd for his fellow scholars, becomes even more central for elementary and secondary education. "Knowledge for what?" In effect, Lynd was raising the question of the foundations upon which a curriculum should be based. How should we select content? What purposes do we have in mind in choosing knowledge to be acquired?

The genuine educational frontiers relate to what Americans want their schools to do for children and youth in the midst of ambiguous social realities.

*Saturday Review*, 1964