

A GROWTH IN CIVILITY?

This is a period of declining intergroup conflict in the schools of this area, as compared with the recent past.

That conclusion emerges from interviews with administrators, faculty and students at more than 20 intermediate and high schools in more than a half dozen school districts of San Francisco, Marin and the Peninsula. It is obviously not so much a scientific finding as a hypothesis formed on the basis of these wide-ranging interviews. It is a hypothesis to be further tested at this conference; and whose reasons and implications for action are to be explored at this conference.

The names of the schools as well as of the interviewees were promised full confidentiality in order to evoke the most candid responses, but they were about equally divided among the three areas -- San Francisco, Marin and the Peninsula -- and, of course, there were some differences to be noted among the three areas.

Three hallmarks were used to measure, in some objective way, symptoms of intergroup conflict: the existence of graffiti, exchanges of language and physical altercation which had racial, ethnic, religious or other intergroup overtones. Too much emphasis should not be placed on the quantitative results of such a survey -- but, on the face of it, about two thirds of the schools reported some graffiti; a little less than half reported some spoken exchanges; and a little more than a third reported some physical altercations in the past year. The incidence of these phenomena was about twice as high in the inner city schools as in the suburban schools -- for example, the inner city schools reported an average of about 2 of these 3 phenomena per school; while the suburban schools reported an average of about one of these 3 phenomena per school. However, all of the inner city schools and almost two thirds of the suburban schools reported at least one of these phenomena.

In almost no case were these phenomena reported on an epidemic scale, and therefore, although they signalled an ominous potential, they were not considered serious. It might be assumed that all responses erred, if at all, on the conservative side -- but, nevertheless, there was a generally convincing impression by those with some time perspective, that these symptoms of intergroup conflict were indeed not as dense in most schools as they once had been. There was a cautious feeling that the ethnically and racially diverse schools had come out of their most acute period of intergroup conflict, whose epicenter was a decade or so ago. Some who had not experienced the "worst" period might not appreciate the trend, but it seems to be there.

There were several major explanations offered for this possible trend.

One: Students had become more sophisticated about handling intergroup differences. This explanation has two implications, not necessarily compatible. One is that students are no longer in a period of "intergroup shock," as they were when large groups of a different kind were rather suddenly thrust together.

However, this does not necessarily imply that this period of greater contact has directly reduced levels of prejudice. It may only indicate that the groups have become more sophisticated about how to handle each other, as one person put it, or that they have learned how to hide their prejudice, as others put it. For example, it is reported that there is much ethnic joke-telling within groups, but these jokes are not as often flaunted publicly to arouse the groups which are their targets.

The second reason suggested for a possible decrease in overt intergroup conflict has to do with a reported change in the general climate on many school campuses. There is a "tighter ship," most school observers report. In some cases this has apparently resulted from the more deliberate re-imposition of a disciplinary climate on the school scene; less official tolerance for breaches of behavior in general. It has also been reported that there is a more *serious* climate in many of the schools, more general attention to classroom and academic achievement; and a more pervasive interest by the students in getting on with the job. There is an obvious relationship between self-discipline and a successfully imposed external discipline.

Also connected is the report that school administrations have themselves become more sophisticated about crisis control in situations of intergroup conflict. When an incident occurs, there are procedures and practices which are now more quickly and surely invoked than in the period when these incidents first became epidemic.

We begin to sense that what we are seeing are possible signs of the public schools moving past the crisis of that first "intergroup shock" period of integration.

However, while these observations suggest a healthy trend, in historical perspective there are other observations which would caution us against being too elated. One of the reasons for this inquiry was disturbing reports of organized bigotry on school campuses, even of possible outside intervention on school campuses by KKK-like groups.

The reports from the administrators, faculty and students indicate that *this* concern may be overblown. There was no clear evidence of the prevalent existence of formal KKK-like groups on the school campus -- nor of any outside KKK-like group extending its influence directly on the school campus, despite some of the graffiti.

However, there remains the continuing phenomenon of self-ghettoization, in schools where there are sizeable racial or ethnic groups.

Some observers suggested that this self-pooling of groups, sometimes institutionalized as formal campus clubs or associations, continues to engender intergroup hostility, sometimes contained within each group, but often expressed through the graffiti, or the exchange of deprecatory language or even physical altercation.

It was because of this design that some observers expressed uneasiness about the potential of hostility which lies beneath the surface, awaiting some triggering circumstances or events. Several of the evaluations referred in one

way or another to such "flash points." In both suburban areas, for example, reference was made to the fact that trouble had broken out around Iranian students at the time of the hostage crisis.

A couple of other pertinent trends were pointed out. One was the immigration of *new* groups of one kind or another to the inner city schools, and in a less massive way to the suburban schools. New trouble potential seems to surround these new groups.

However, some observers pointed out that the context of some of the new intergroup conflict was not racial, or ethnic or religious, but more generally social in nature. Thus, it was reported that some of the conflicts sprang up between two different groups of Chinese students, or between two different groups of Black students, depending on newcomer status, or socio-economic status rather than on national or racial background.

There may be a significance in *this* change in group conflict from the recent past. Tensions between identifiably different groups may be a permanent part of teen-age society, as an expression of teen-age tensions (although a recent report by the National Institute of Education provides evidence that school violence in general has reached some plateau). However, we have recognized that intergroup conflict based on race, religion and ethnicity are *qualitatively distinct* as dangers to our society. *Such* intergroup conflict has provided a basis for the kind of political extremism which destroys democratic societies. Other kinds of normative conflict among teen-agers can fade away; not so easily, intergroup conflict based on race, religion or ethnicity.

In short, the picture is of a kind of lull in intergroup conflict, as compared with the past, with a good deal of uneasiness about the meaning or durability of that lull, and a recognition that the elements of a problem still exist. There are some interesting and sometimes controversial policy questions raised by the design of these observations.

One issue might be centered around the concept of the school as a therapeutic site. In general, that's an old issue and an old debate. Should the school be concerned only with academic education? Or should the school -- as the only formal institution through which the country's youth passes -- direct itself also, in a major way, to the development of private and social character?

In the preceding period of ferment, there was a great emphasis on using the schools as a social instrument for improving intergroup relations. There were roughly two different ways in which this was to be done. One was by way of integration itself. The contact among groups, as peers, was to be the prime therapeutic experience, in itself. Of course, the evidence, in social psychology, always pointed to intergroup contact as a two-edged sword. Under certain circumstances, such contact creates greater hostility, at least in the short run.

In the school experience, where there have been dramatic shifts of population and massive new intergroup experiences, the short-run effect was apparently to create a good deal of open hostility. That was what was happening in the schools in the recent past. The lull that we are now seeing may indicate that the

intertroupe shock of integration *did* in fact work. Most of the observers seem to suggest that the lull they see, the decrease in hostility, is not so much a matter of love gained as of hostility controlled. The prejudice, they say, still exists beneath the surface, but has become more subtle.

Well, that may be a description of the socialization process at its realistic best. We are interested in a process of *civility*, whereby groups learn to live with each other, to accommodate to each other with a minimum of warfare, whether they like each other or not. In this process, the "liking" may happen increasingly among individuals here and there, with important lasting effects. But the first objective is civility among groups. And what our observers seem to be reporting is a greater civility, especially among the first groups that were thrown together in the schools.

Indeed, that civility may be partly an imposed civility, restricted to school premises, created by a greater sense of discipline projected by school administrations. Some faculty members say they don't know what happens three blocks away from the school. The schools may just be, relatively speaking, *cordons sanitaires* in this respect. But in that sense, are they not, then, therapeutic sites in which -- for whatever reason -- there have been social skills of accommodation and civility learned?

There is another more formal way in which the schools have been conceived as a social instrument for improving intergroup relations: the curricular or more direct programmatic approach, wherein students are more directly addressed on the subject of prejudice.

While there is little evidence that curricular programs directly affect *feelings* of prejudice, there is some evidence that skills and understandings related to civility, short of directly reducing prejudice, can be advanced by cognitive learning experiences in the schools. Programs to advance those accommodation skills and understandings have generally involved curricular and extra-curricular emphases on history, social science and on cross-cultural learning.

If this premise has any validity, our little survey indicates a declining attention to such deliberate programs in the schools. This issue of more formal programming in the schools has also been expressed simplistically in terms of the academic vs. the humanistic approach. We have come out of a period of humanistic emphasis, in that sense. The pendulum is swinging to a more academic emphasis. As one administrator put it: "Let's get on with our job of teaching in a disciplined school setting, and all these other things will take care of themselves." There is also perceived a problem of faculty morale and faculty "burn-out" in the matter of launching special programs in this area.

However, there does seem to be a programmatic opportunity for the schools, at this time in our history when the heterogeneity of the country and its various sections is on the rise. It would be appropriate for the natural experience of living together in a therapeutic school setting, to be buttressed by deliberately designed cognitive programs which would advance the motivation for and understanding of the art of civility.