



Growing Up in America, by Fred M. and Grace Hechinger. McGraw-Hill, New York, 1975, \$15.

Reviewed by Peter Gibbon

I am torn by the Hechingers' book, **Growing Up in America**. It is thorough, learned and capably written. The Hechingers have tried to cover everything: There is a massive amount of information and a number of nice insights. It is also sprawling, unfocused, blurred. Parts do not connect easily, points are not incisively made, purposes are not clear.

Part of the book's shortcomings undoubtedly lies in its ambition. Despite the authors' protests of selectivity and novelty, **Growing Up in America** is in essence a thorough, demanding history of American education. In time, the book runs from Puritanism to the current pessimism and conservatism in education, from Cotton Mather to Christopher Jencks. The Colonial experience, the erratic growth of public schools, the

attempt at Americanization, higher education and the black struggle are each given chapters. There is attention given to political and legal squabbles, intellectual developments and the links between school and society.

Much of this is familiar territory but it is competently done and enlivened with pertinent quotes. The most interesting, original chapters, the real meat of the book, are the chapters "American Childhood: the Utopian Myth," and "Students: Uncertain Vanguard." In the first they connect changes in attitudes towards children, changes in society's treatment of children, and changes in the education of children. In the latter they give a portrait of college students from Colonial days to the present, stressing the recurring nature of many of their complaints and concerns.

In tone, the Hechingers are restrained, balanced and objective. They are good and hopeful liberals, believing many mistakes have been made and that clearly we can do more. They are in favor of egalitarianism, humane treatment of children and better education of the poor. However, if they stay away from Donald Barr they do not embrace Paul Goodman and Ivan Illich. Generally, the tone is moderate and balanced. However, I would have liked a little more sympathy for the difficulties of administrators — they repeatedly talk about rigidity and petty rules — and more attention to the contributions of teachers. Like most education texts, this concentrates on the activities of reformers, thinkers, commissioners and central offices. We need more on the day-to-day struggles of the practitioners.

Regarding the contributions of education to American society, the

Hechingers are cautiously optimistic. Our schools have "kept society fluid and upwardly mobile" and given a "high measure of social and political cohesion to a diverse population." They recognize, however, that schools by themselves have not and cannot transform America and that equal access to education has not been fully achieved.

One of the most astute, valuable and original insights of the Hechingers is that American education has achieved progress and balance by swinging between the "Organizers" and the "Romantics." The Organizers are cautious, hard-headed, practical and rigid. The Romantics are visionary, driving and sentimental. Each group has its virtues and vices. Each has its contribution to make and no monopoly on truth. The recurring tension and competition between these groups promotes balance and prevents orthodoxy. It is in accord with a non-ideological, pragmatic populace. Certainly after reading the book one has a strong sense that in education little is new under the sun, that problems and reforms recur in guises only slightly changed.

Growing Up in America is long and not light. It is judicious, thorough and sprawling. Certainly it becomes more impressive on a second reading as you see some of the Hechingers' goals and sympathize with the largeness of their ambition. We are still waiting, however, for someone on the order of Alan Nevins or the late Samuel Eliot Morison to tackle the history of American education.

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