Shall we discourage a child's devotion to his hero?

Education by Heroes

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It may be annoying to have little boys tearing around the playground yelling, "Hi-ho, Silver," but almost every youngster has his own personal hero, and there may be good things as well as bad about the devotion of children to their idols. In this article Maurice Troyer, Professor of Education of Syracuse University, discusses the reasons why children have heroes and the kinds of influences such persons—real or imaginary—can exert. He suggests that alert teachers will find ways of using hero worship constructively in their classrooms.

HERO WORSHIP has two immediate consequences. It releases abounding energy and tends to give purpose and, thereby, direction to the expenditure of energy. These are two of the most important factors in any effective learning situation. Release of energy means increased activity. Activity begets learning. The quality of the learning depends largely on the purposes of the worshiper—the values he attaches to the object of his esteem. But, how do heroes come to be? How prevalent are they? What are their possible influences? How can they be useful in the education of our boys and girls? We might well give some attention to these questions at a time when heroes seem to be playing such an important role in our daily lives.

We create or choose our heroes out of the background of our experience, our needs, desires, ambitions, and frustrations. Consequently it is a good guess that the life of everyone is dominated by a hero at some time or other. Parents who minister to the numerous needs of small children are the youngsters' first heroes. Teachers tend to become their idols during the early school years when they are making adjustments to the world outside the home. In middle and later childhood and early adolescence, problems of growth become more complex and diverse. Yearnings for adventure, exploration, and conquest or a conflict with local regulations invite a child's mind to feed on heroes from real life and fiction. The adolescent "crush" is frequently an escape from frustration growing out of heterosexual adjustments. In adult life the hero is likely to be someone who has played an important role in conquering the obstacles to man's ambitions and welfare.

Follow the Leader

A brief examination of the consequences of hero worship will reveal something of the diversity of its influence. The heroes that we know personally have their influence for weal or woe, depending upon the nature of our need and the character of the hero. A successful athletic coach, the idol of many boys in the school, was approached by the mother of an eighth grade boy thus: "Lee is growing rapidly these days and is becoming so round-shouldered. I am sure that if you were to say something to him about it..."
he would straighten up. He thinks what you do or say is just about right.” Sure enough, it worked. The result impressed the coach not only with the opportunities, but also the heavy responsibility, growing out of his status.

Reported by Thrasher is the gang leader with athletic prowess who also had some rigid ideas about morals and training for physical fitness. These ideas tabooed dissipation and vandalism. He influenced the boys in his own gang and they, through victories in athletic contests, influenced other gangs to adopt similar standards of conduct. We must be mindful, however, that most gang heroes derive their following through ability to lead the group in successful combat against the written and unwritten restrictions of the society in which they live. The result is frequently vandalism, thievery, and violence often patterned after the tactics of gangster heroes. Even in these groups the results are by no means all destructive, for psychological weaning takes place. The boys mature and become resourceful in making their own way.

Heroes for Young and Old

Exceedingly problematic is the use of popular hero worship. No less than eight radio news commentators during a four-hour period on last New Year’s Eve used hero worship of our soldiers to influence the attitudes of labor and of people generally toward the strike situation that prevailed at that time. All would agree that labor has a responsibility to support the war effort in such a way as to avoid further jeopardizing the lives of soldiers. But the use of hero worship needs balance, and yet balance seems to be lacking. For example, our soldier heroes—used to sway the public away from labor—were not so much in evidence in efforts to influence popular opinion when the matter of re-negotiation of war contracts came before the nation.

Apparently producers of cereals and other commodities find it profitable to capitalize on tendencies to worship heroes. Many broadcasts in the late afternoon and during the early dinner hour, apparently directed at young children, draw upon the motivations of hero worship through such programs as Dick Tracy, Jack Armstrong, Superman, and Captain Midnite. And those of us living with children at that time of day know the demands they make for the purchase of “Pep” and “Tootsie Rolls.”

Thus, there is evidence on every hand of the potential power of hero worship. But there is no systematic evidence that gives adequate basis for appraising the overall benefits and disadvantages of hero worship. Psychological studies of individuals and sociological studies of gangs provide a basis for appraising the effects in specific cases. As has already been indicated, individuals have personal heroes and the masses have their popular heroes. These two types of heroes present distinct educational opportunities and problems.

An Answer to a Need

There can be no doubt that frustrations and conflicts have been on the increase during the rapidly changing conditions produced by the war. The
intimate heroes who meet the needs of children in a turbulent environment may be teachers, parents, movie stars, athletes, or gangsters. The quality of hero chosen will depend upon the conflicts and frustrations that we condone in the society in which these children are growing up and on whom the children find to satisfy their needs. It follows that one method of directing hero worship toward constructive ends is to develop a school and community program that will reduce conflicts and frustration and another is to identify and play up heroes who will release energies and purposes in desirable directions. This means healthy and understanding teachers, parents, and policemen. In addition to an education geared to needs, it calls for recreational opportunities and wholesome supervision during out-of-school hours by people who are heroes because they can help children.

The assured usefulness of the popular and less personal hero presents a somewhat different type of problem. One constructive use has been toward unity of purpose and is best illustrated in the purchase of war bonds. The use of heroes to divide national unity would seem to be unfortunate. The proselytizing of war heroes to embarrass one group in employment-labor relations is an example. Perhaps the debunking test should be applied to the use of heroes and to heroes themselves excepting, for the present, our soldier heroes. By and large it would seem that the stature of heroes would either grow or shrink during the debunking process, and the worshipers, thereby, would profit accordingly.

It has been impossible in this brief space to give comprehensive consideration to the educational possibilities of hero worship. But, perhaps what has been said will stimulate critical analysis of the tremendous potentialities and hazards of hero worship for education.

During the ten-year period prior to the war there was a tendency among professional educators generally to educate away the emotions. This was done in the belief that the emotions interfere with intelligent behavior. When the war came along, we were again reminded of the tremendous power of the emotions in generating the effort necessary to meet a national emergency. Such a powerful factor in arousing people to action should be useful in gaining constructive and intelligent, as well as destructive, ends. Similarly, we should find ways of employing hero worship constructively.

IN A LIFE and death struggle such as that which today engulfs the world, the battle of education is no less important than military, political, and economic struggles.—Licenciado Jaime Torres Bodet, Minister of Public Education, Mexico.