

The Changing World

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THE EDUCATORS' WORLD OF MAKE-BELIEVE

I WISH THAT SOMEONE competent to do so would apply the anthropological approach to the study of American education. His findings would probably anger most of us, but I believe the net result of such a study would be all to the good.

I wish this because it seems obvious to me that most of us live in a world of educational make-believe. What, I often wonder, would we see if we could glimpse through the anthropologist's eyes the dramatizations, miracle plays, rituals, ceremonies, incense burnings, and other types of symbolic behavior which constitute our mythology or folklore of education?

It seems that we *do* have a folklore of education in which we are all steeped, to some degree, and by which we are blinded to things as they really are. It is easy for us to identify the magical organization of experience when we consult our anthropology books—when, for example, we read about primitives who assure themselves a bumper crop of corn by the ceremony of the corn dance. We amusedly observe that the primitive has his cause and effect relationships all confused—that he is typifying the magical organization of experience—for we know that bumper crops are raised from the soil by seeds, fertilizers, sunlight, moisture, cultivation, and pest control.

But can we really see ourselves? Could any completely detached observer possibly note what we educators say and write and seem to believe, in contradistinction to what we actually *do* on the job, and fail to conclude that we have not yet transcended the magical organization of experience?

Nowhere is the character of educational magic more clearly portrayed than in the

reams which have been written about, and in the tub-thumping orgies which have been devoted to, educational objectives. These are detailed in a manner sufficiently minute or sufficiently detailed, depending upon the predispositions of the particular cult, to satisfy the cravings of the faithful for a spiritual grounding in "sound principles." The conflict occasioned by the fact that the life and program of the school frequently reflect these objectives very little, if at all (*in many situations objectives directly contrary to those approvingly intoned by the priests in their recital of the creed are actually operative*), is usually covered up by the ritual of a Curriculum Revision Program or, more frequently, by the ceremony of an Educational Conference.

The fact that, in spite of the consequent clouds of incense, actual practices in the classroom go on about as they were prior to the celebration of the ritual or the ceremony seems to escape the attention of the faithful. The psychological need for a well-rounded and logical statement of the articles of faith has been satisfied by the dramatization, however. The educational gods have been propitiated and all is well regardless of what may actually go on in the school. The teacher has been able to escape the Hell of things as they really are by being magically transported to the Heaven of things as they ought to be where he sees himself in a role acceptable to the God of Sound Educational Thinking.

This might be nothing more than a temporary, refreshing, and harmless escape into a delightful world of phantasy were it not for the fact that when one has thus created for himself an acceptable role, he

is compelled to believe that his conduct conforms to that role. He takes this fiction to be a fact because the fiction is so badly needed to give him inner peace.

Thus we frequently find that the administrators who talk longest and loudest about democracy in administration sincerely believe themselves to be democratic in spite of the fact that an objective appraisal of their practices would reveal quite a contrary state of affairs. Similarly, teachers who worship at the shrine of the whole child devoutly believe themselves to be acting in full conformity with this article of faith in spite of factual evidence to the contrary. These persons—and I am convinced that the vast majority of educators (professors of education, especially) are like them—have not yet transcended the magical organization of experience.

This may seem amusing, but it is in fact a very serious matter. Democracy cannot be made to work—much less to endure—unless many much-discussed educational reforms are instituted. These can never be made operational, however, until we as educators learn that such reforms will never come about merely by braying about them. We must, in short, transcend the magical organization of experience. Pious and well-intentioned incantations in which one constantly hears the magic words “functional subject matter,” “core course,” “democratic living,” or “education for one world,” are reverently being intoned today by thousands of college of education, high school, and elementary school faculties. Yet, in perhaps less than one in ten of these institutions is any appreciable change in any of these desirable directions to be noted in the going program of the school.

If, and when, some anthropologist does study us, I suspect that his findings might well be set down under the chapter headings: The Phantasy of the Democratic Lay Control of Education; The Myth of Universal Free Education; The Fertility Magic of Curriculum Revision; The Mysteries of Guidance; The Symbols of School Administration, or Propitiating the Administrative Gods; The Ceremonies of Educa-

tional Research: Symbolic Behavior in Colleges of Education, or the Dance of the Medicine Men; The Mythical Nature of Teachers' Organizations; The Educational Press—Alternately a Wishing Well and a Wailing Wall; Incantation and Orgy at Educational Conventions; and the Deification of Neutrality in Social Education.

There should, I suppose, be two additional chapters. One should be devoted to the plight of the students, and might well be called “The Sacrificial Lambs.” The second should deal with the plight of the society which is so seriously being educationally short-changed by the educators' inability to transcend the magical organization of experience, and might briefly and appropriately be entitled “The Goat.”

The Emerging Role of the Teacher

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6. Are additional special services needed? Are the teachers and community “ready” for them?
7. Is there sufficient interaction with community workers such as recreation specialists, social workers, librarians, public health nurses? For example, do teachers know where to find help for a child with behavior difficulties?

Does this interpretation of the guidance program place additional burdens on the teacher? The transition from the old to the new will make it necessary for many teachers to read, discuss, observe, and invent. In the end, teaching will be not only easier, but more satisfying. Children will be accepted as they are, teaching will be in harmony with the laws of their growth.

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