

# *Educational Confusion in a Dangerous Era*

JAMES MARSHALL

What are the basic aims of education today? Why and how do pressure groups attempt to emphasize some of these aims at the expense of others? A former school board president explains the board's responsibility in mediating between the educator and those who would restrict or silence him.

**WE ASK** at least four things of education today: First, we wish it to preserve our cultural heritage and to instruct our children in their past;

Secondly, we want it to train them to live successfully and effectively in the world today, and this I presume must include the courage to face an uncertain and dangerous future;

Thirdly, we want them to be able to work for the improvement not only of their own lot but of their country and the world; and,

Finally, we want to train young people to be able to create wholesome relationships with others and to behave in a humane manner.

We each may put a different emphasis on these different functions of education and we each might suggest a different method to accomplish this education. Out of these differing views as to emphasis and method come some of the most bitter battles over education. It is around these that pressure groups form.

Pressure groups are not in themselves bad. In a complex society they are the only way perhaps in which we can democratically express our views and obtain our ends. It is when pressure groups in the field of education forget the child, think only of their selfish in-

terests, are arbitrary and uncharitable towards those who differ and those who must administer an educational program, that pressure groups become evil and dangerous to a free education.

For myself, I believe that all four educational aims are important to education in a democracy and in a troubled time. For myself, I would put the greatest emphasis on the creation of good attitudes and relationships. This seems to me to be the best approach to instruction in the application of the Golden Rule and to the development of behavior which is social and moral.

Perhaps we can use a shorthand expression and say that what we want in education is to develop wisdom, which has been defined as "experience and knowledge together with the power of applying them." Thus said Torres Bodet, the recent Director General of UNESCO, "It must be the purpose of

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... education to combine new knowledge with old experience into a design for better living." The power to apply experience and knowledge, the need for education to lead to the capacity to act, are too often forgotten. That is why education must be fashioned not only to instruct in know-how and skills but to develop the capacity to act. It is not enough for a child to grow up knowing facts correctly and what the right action may be at the right time. The aim of modern education is not and ought not be to create good kibitzers. Good citizenship demands far more than that. We can say, then, that in essence the dominant pattern of American education today can be put into the formula: experience plus knowledge plus the power to apply them equals wisdom.

That our schools are not entirely successful, that they fail many times to achieve this formula is obvious. But our ignorance of human psychology and the processes of learning is great in spite of all the progress of the last half century. And we know, our teachers are not perfect teachers either and our children don't live in a vacuum. They are in a world of imperfect adults.

We are living in a time in which family ties have weakened and the family circle has contracted; a time, too, in which loyalties which formerly were centered on family and neighborhood have been greatly diffused. Religion has lost much of its stabilizing value. As a result the system of rewards and punishments on which our civilization is built has become weakened as the family and religion, the neighborhood and the old economic relationships and emphases have changed. This affects

social organization, government, industry and education. And if we appear to be floundering in our schools and our children seem undisciplined, it is because we are more inclined to bear witness to their lack of discipline and the failure of the traditional rewards and punishments in their upbringing than we are to admit the same lacks in ourselves and the same failures in our adult institutions. For when the child is impudent or disorganized or fails to do his school work, don't we accuse him promptly of lack of discipline? But when we adults are impudent or disorganized or fail to do our work, are we not equally prompt to justify ourselves in the name of social equality ("I'll tell him just what I think"), freedom ("I'll do as I please") and independence ("I can get a job any time")?

There is scarcely a pocket of population in the world today which is not fermenting slowly or violently because of the impact of science, technology and industry. There are no longer static societies, if there ever were any. For science, technology and industry, which have given greater security against plagues and famines, have given us also greater insecurity in our private lives, greater threats to our civil rights and greater power to destroy ourselves and our civilization.

### **Impact of Words**

The ferment caused by science, technology and industry has been vastly accelerated by the impact of words, which have become more powerful weapons at the service of addicts to aggressive ideologies. We are able now as never before to raise nostrums, how-

ever untested, to worldwide passions, to worldwide hopes and hatreds with the aid of electronics. And the echoes and reflections of a lie can be multiplied and dispersed more broadly and rapidly than truth validated by the experience and faith of centuries.

True, the psychological sciences have given us better understandings of human behavior and greater knowledge of how to improve human relations. We have scarcely tapped their possibilities in these respects. Some of the more recently graduated teachers understand these discoveries—more can use the lingo—but little of this knowledge has affected school administration or the greater educational forces of the mass media. But we have used those aspects of the psychological sciences which have increased the power to mislead, to communicate hatred and to intimidate.

This civilization in which our children grow up is not only disturbed by the change in family and other relationships and the change in our value system of rewards and punishments. It is confused in many ways; and it must be particularly confusing to children when time and again the *precepts* of the adult world conflict with its *examples*.

We teach our children about the world beyond our national borders. We must, for the everyday news, the economics of our country, the careers of our boys who join the armed forces, the movies, magazines, radio and television constantly bring children in contact with foreign lands, foreign customs, foreign thoughts. In our schools we try to bring some order out of the information to which they are subjected. We try to show that the basic needs of people are the same although

their attempts to satisfy those needs have innumerable variations. Inadequately today, rather fearfully, we try to show how our system differs from its principal contender.

Surely we would not advocate teaching our youngsters to regard all foreign peoples with hatred and suspicion, as the Russians teach the children in their schools. It has never been the prevailing attitude of our country to hate or distrust the people of other lands. Our nation was built on the sweat of foreigners and preserved by their blood. You will recall that Lincoln said:

"From the first appearance of man upon the earth down to very recent times, the words 'stranger' and 'enemy' were quite or almost synonymous. Even yet, this has not totally disappeared. The man of the highest moral cultivation, in spite of all which abstract principle can do, likes him whom he does know much better than him whom he does not know. To correct the evils, great and small, which spring from want of sympathy and from positive enmity among strangers, as nations or as individuals, is one of the highest functions of civilization."

Nevertheless, our youngsters read and hear prominent people who are consumed with hatred and suspicion. They are confronted by the fact of legislation which discriminates between would-be immigrants of different origins and which treats with scant dignity those admitted to our soil.

Fair play has been an ethic taught in our schools, and the belief that it was wrong for a boy or girl to inform on his classmates has been deeply implanted within us. It is not merely a matter of good sportsmanship—though that is

nothing to be looked down on. It has an honorable and moral base in the proverb: "Reveal not the secret of another." This is important, because a democracy can only survive on mutual faith. What conflict must be aroused, then, in our children, when to the minds of some of our leaders only a public and televised revelation of former associates will be regarded as evidence of a purged belief and a contrite heart. This procedure is far removed in substance and spirit from the dignity of the Anglo-American grand jury system.

What conflict, too, must be created in youngsters when some of their teachers—and other well-meaning "liberals"—have claimed it to be a breach of academic freedom to insist that teachers shall not conceal their allegiances and shall not owe devotion to a cause which would sacrifice to party discipline truth and honesty in research and teaching?

### **Guilt by Association**

Another contradiction which must severely affect the child today is the growing acceptance of the doctrine of guilt by association. To anyone trained in the history of American constitutional principles this is a horrifying development. Unfortunately, I believe our children and most of our adult population have not been sufficiently grounded in the meaning and wisdom of these constitutional principles. For more than a generation we have failed to give the spirit and feeling of these principles to our school and college students. But they have been taught to resent the doctrine of guilt by association which was the foundation of Nazi racism and is the foundation of the Soviet police state. Is guilt by association to be

deemed bad in others and good in Americans? It has been our American doctrine that a person is innocent until he is proven guilty—not just until he is accused of guilt or declared guilty by some witness immune from a libel suit and with access to the headlines of thousands of publications. Even more fundamental than the presumption of innocence, we have taught our children the Judeo-Christian faith in personal responsibility and individual salvation.

Ezekiel declared, "What mean you by quoting this proverb in the Land of Israel 'The fathers eat sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge'? As I live . . . you shall have no more occasion to quote this proverb. . . . He who sins shall die; the son shall not bear the consequences of the father's iniquity or the father bear the consequences of the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous shall be put to his own account, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be put to his."

This doctrine not only put an end to an immoral principle of primitive peoples; it set a sign of immorality on the doctrine of guilt by association for all time. How are our children to reconcile Ezekiel with some of the current Congressional investigations and newspaper headlines and columns?

Do we really want our children to grow up convinced of the virtue of wisdom and the value of statesmanship? If so, what kind of example do we adults set? Or when we speak of citizenship education, do we only want them to take their places in the ranks of partisans—that is, of course, partisans who will upset no applecarts?

We expect integrity and courage in our scholars and scientists. Our chil-

dren have the right to expect honesty and forthrightness in their teachers. But do parents always want this? Does the public want teachers to have the high standards of the scholar and the scientist? I am afraid that if teachers were always honest and forthright, if children were really to be taught to think for themselves, if they learned to call the turn on the contradictions in our society, schools and teachers would be under even heavier attack than they are today. I believe we want teachers and children to pull their punches.

Then we should face this fact and the resultant, which is that education can never be satisfactory when a part of the culture which we transmit is that honest inquiry and honest expression can go only so far. Even today when teachers are often confused—and usually timid in the bargain—they are condemned when they do not gild the platitude. If teachers in self-protection are not to deceive themselves and their pupils, if they are to train free citizens for a free society, they will need strong and convinced support of a public which will think it important that children grow up to face facts and follow reason even though it hurts. Frustration, anxiety, hostility and war will be the inevitable results of a society which places scholars and scientists in one category of intellectual integrity and teachers in another.

Teachers are only human, and if they believe it to be dangerous to think and teach facts and reason, they will retreat into precepts of the trite. If teachers and their pupils find that rewards go to pretty words and pleasant dreams and punishment follows the challenge

of contradictory behavior and the test of reason, will they not tend to subdue their thought and yoke it to the socially acceptable half-truths?

### **Public Opinion Must Mediate**

The heritage of the apeman with his destructive impulses—which in us have been refined by our civilization to neurotic compulsions—is so strong that we can scarcely expect that mankind will in stress act reasonably and sensibly or that our children will be educated to do so. But if this be so, then let us not condemn education and educators. Educators are playing their part in a game of semi-make-believe of the adult world. If we adults are not willing to accept an education which is fearless and honest, let us at least recognize the fact and help teachers to play the role we have allotted to them. Frankly, I do not see that we can expect completely fearless and honest education. That would be asking a lot, for it would cause immediate strain on our culture, our belief systems and our institutions. Its result would be as fatal as have been the attempts to follow any other doctrinaire approach. But it is at this very point of how far we can afford honest and fearless education, it is where education treads on toes, that disputations arise and pressure groups begin to throw their weight and epithets about.

It is here that public opinion must mediate between the educator and those who would restrict or silence him. In theory this is the task of the board of education, and generally boards of education meet the call. But often the pressures are too great for them, for their members are officeholders who

quite naturally desire re-election or reappointment. In those crucial situations the public must mediate, and in our American society, organized as it is, that means the mediation of groups such as are here represented.

I would like to see on every state level and certainly in all but the smallest one- or two-schoolhouse districts of the country, organizations which might be described as public school consultation commissions. These should be composed generally of representatives of local organizations, or in the case of a national commission, national organizations, who have an interest in and good will towards public education. I would have the chambers of commerce, labor, the churches, women's groups, farm organizations in rural districts, service clubs, parents' associations and perhaps others represented. Such commissions should meet with the superintendent of schools, teachers, the board of education to discuss proposals for important changes in the schools or criticisms of the schools. They should meet in consultation and not to force a point.

I believe that such a system would give the schools a better opportunity of explaining themselves to the community and the community a better chance to get the kind of schools it wants. I have some hesitation in even suggesting a consultation commission on a national scale. I am afraid that this might be turned into a national board of education. That would be most unhappy, for a national board of education would feel under pressure to try to administer something nationally and this might be a fatal step on the road to centralization of education in this country.

Happily we have not fallen into that error common in most of the world. Our teaching and our children have benefited by our decentralized form of education.

While the family has lost its central position as an economic unit and as the principal educational and cultural source in our civilization, it remains the most important area in which the child learns to respond to others and adjust to society. I believe we must accept and build upon the fact that in the growth of the child, his home and his school constitute one continuum. There should be no contradiction in the child between his home and his school. He should not have to feel that the home is against the school or the school against the home. For this reason I have urged the necessity of encouraging parents, particularly mothers of little children, to visit in the schools and to learn there about their children and to teach the teachers about their children. I believe that the Winona, Minnesota, plan of paid time off for working parents to visit the classes of their children should be greatly enlarged and that the welfare of children, the improvement of schools and the stability of society can all be forwarded if it is made possible for working parents—mothers in particular whether or not they work—to make periodic visits to the classrooms of their children. Annual school week is no more than a foot in the schoolroom door.

Life is so complicated today and, as I have mentioned, the whole position of the family and family life is so different from what it was, so precarious in our America today, that more and

more parents need help. For this reason I believe the schools and other groups in the community, including the churches and the women's clubs, should offer more courses in homemaking and child-rearing. Furthermore, every high school in the country which has girl students should have a nursery school class to be used as part of a training program for the future mothers of America. Surely all this would cost more money, but what's the use of talking about saving the superstructure of our civilization—our economic system, our classics, our beliefs—if we let the family, the foundation of our civilization, slip away?

We have discussed education in a dangerous era. When we talk of a dangerous era I suppose we are inclined to think of weapons of destruction and the fierce cold wars of ideologies. But why are nuclear fission and fusion, guided missiles and bacteria, propaganda and truculence so dangerous? I submit it is because we will not recognize, will not keep before us the dangerous fact of our apeman heritage, the fact that the cruel and unscrupulous and unthinking animal who was our ancestor still lurks in all of us and perhaps too frequently in those in power. We veil this heritage in the pretty conceit that we are little lower

than the angels and we teach our children this at the very moment that we shrink in terror and shout in rage at the thought of the gruesome weapons in the hands of our subspecies of angel.

All eras can become dangerous until we face and tame the apeman. In our particular dangerous era I would think that there are two things necessary for education: first, it must face ugly truths; second, it must afford children consistent, loving security, if not the consistent security of truth in all things. To accomplish these things the schools require in the first place a much more solid tie with the home; and in addition they need the support of a public which, while critical, is understanding and sympathetic and ready to protect schoolmen from selfish and pathological assaults.

Educators need this support if they are to use their intelligence to train the young in turn to use theirs. The call for the creation of situations in which intelligence can be used is clear. Let us say as Shaw's Don Juan said:

"What made this brain of mine, do you think? Not the need to move my limbs; for a rat with half my brains moves as well as I. Not merely the need to do, but the need to know what I do, lest in my half blind efforts to live I should be slaying myself."

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