

Uniting Forces to Improve Education

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With this issue the "Uniting Forces to Improve Education" column comes under editorship of H. Gordon Hullfish, Professor of Education, The Ohio State University, Columbus. Dr. Hullfish is also chairman of ASCD's Commission on Forces Affecting American Education, which has a direct and continuing interest in this column.

Dr. Hullfish states that he will be happy to hear from readers, both as they have ideas they think should be discussed and as they come upon the working of "forces," either good or bad, upon education.

Whose Conspiracy?

FOR SOME YEARS much has been said about the way in which professional educators (usually called "educationists" in order to set them off as a special target) have conspired to take over the schools of the country. And always, of course, accompanying this charge, have been others—children have not been taught the fundamentals, children are not properly disciplined, anti-intellectual purposes are dominant, trivia clutter the curricula, tradition is not properly revered, standards have been tossed aside, and the like. The pattern of charges is now a familiar one and, as it is repeated, it grows increasingly absurd.

If any one thing can be said with certainty about the professional educator it is that his is an independent mind. Indeed, to those who have worked as officers in professional organizations, this determination to be independent often seems to reduce it-

self to simple obstinacy. A policy discussion within a professional organization, for instance, is an invitation to bring ideas to the battle line, with no guarantee given that any will survive. It is not an occasion for the many to bow before the few, nor is it an opportunity for conspirators to enter a smoke-filled room. It is, ours being as yet a free culture, an effort to build a common standing ground, knowing all the while that this will grow in significance as the differences of those who stand together are respected.

What is true within a single organization is equally true when organizations confront the problem of working out a common policy, or of developing a common program. All of this, of course, is obvious enough. What is surprising is that it is not obvious to the critics, especially to those critics who, though they may not welcome the suggestion, are educators, also. They can

hardly believe that the professor whose task it is to consider how public education may best serve a democratic culture has a special set of genes that make him more tractable than other professors. They must know, as Boyd H. Bode used to put it, that the university professor has one failing, that of constantly confusing the university with the universe; and, he might have added, he will be heard, whatever his confusion. Professors are not the stuff of which conspiracies are made.

The charge, in fact, does not make sense. There is no other way to say this. It would be equally nonsensical to charge that Arthur E. Bestor, Mortimer Smith, Albert Lynd, Hilda Neatby and the Reece Committee had conspired to poison the mind of the public against those they castigate. They have not, of course. That they share a point of view on some issues is clear enough, though the Reece Committee gets into this picture only under its free use of the term, conspiracy. But this is a sharing that comes, as does that of the professional educator, from working within a common frame of thought. They are no more conspirators than are those they criticize. They are not even enemies of public education, though they would be in better taste were they to insist upon this point less often.

The simple fact is there is no conspiracy either among educators or their critics, though the way in which some pressure, or hate, groups work in an effort to control education does give the term, as we consider them, a certain appropriateness. Neither the professional educator nor his current critics approve of these groups, nor of

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their tactics, however. And here, if we were but able to stand aside from the problem for the moment in order to see it whole, we might find ourselves a bit ashamed of our excesses in criticism, one of the other, and of some of the methods employed.

We Share a Common Ground

Why not admit what the fact is, that no one has in hand the answer to the complex of problems that are lumped under the heading of "education," public or private? If Bestor is wrong in part, and I think he is, this can be argued without damning him for his effrontery in speaking his mind. He is surely not wrong in wishing that the schools increase the intelligence of citizens generally. If mistakes have been made in the sensitive efforts of school people to adjust young people to life situations which they do face, and will face, this is no warrant for offending an entire profession. They were hardly wrong in planning educative activities designed to release young people into more effective patterns of growing.

The simple truth is that we share a common ground. We shall either respect each other as we clash at the level of ideas or, failing to do so, demonstrate to those whom we wish to educate that we are not worthy of the heritage that has given us the privilege of using our differences to enrich our shared lives. We need to clear this ground.

If we can be but gracious enough to admit that the protection of freedom is a shared concern, since without it our differing views are of no impor-

tance, we may be able to disagree with appropriate vigor at the level of ideas and yet sense an exhilarating togetherness as we fend off those whose thinking was finished at the moment they gave prejudice and dogma control of their lives. In this event, we may then each endeavor in all honesty to gain supporting evidence for the educational ideas we believe to be good; and, having staked the case on evidence, be ready to admit our errors should the other fellow make his case stand up.

We shall fall far short of this goal, if we insist that tradition has already answered our problems or that self-evident propositions relieve us of the responsibility of submitting our ideas to experimental tests.

What I am suggesting, of course, is that each of us try to act in terms that are consistent with the objectivity we say our students should achieve. This may mean that our book titles, to take a case in point, will become more modest, less arrogant, and take their form in the author's study rather than in the publisher's office. It will surely mean the recognition that no one should be denied a hearing simply because his ideas challenge or refute values and practices we prize. This end will not be gained by edict, nor by prayerful resolution. To be different, we shall have to act differently and, with our world in need of all of the tolerance and understanding it is humanly possible to achieve, the time to start is *now*.

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