

"... Young people must be helped. . . systematically [to] build their own criteria of value; for otherwise we shall have a citizenry which is condemned to operate inside another's view of reality," says this concerned educator. He spells out the challenge to society and self.

Vietnam and beyond: the challenge to educators

By Richard A. Brosio



Dr. Brosio has been an assistant professor of Secondary Education at Ball State University since 1972, the year he was awarded his Ph.D. by the University of Michigan. He also holds a B.A. in History (1960) and an M.A. in Education (1962) from the University of Michigan. From 1962 to 1969 he taught in the social studies area at two San Diego, California, high schools. Dr. Brosio's responsibilities at Ball State are in participation and the social foundations, and he maintains a strong interest in the concept of—and quest for—community.

In the late nineteen fifties many Americans felt compelled to question some of their underlying assumptions because of the threat posed by the Soviet sputnik. A number of school systems became involved in frenzied activity during the aftermath of Soviet space success, ostensibly to catch up with the Russians in the fields of mathematics and science.

Since 1965 this nation has been involved in a war which has seriously undermined national unity and societal consensus. The fact that a peace treaty was signed in Paris does not affect the gist of what this writer thinks about the Indochina war and its impact on the educative process. It is curious that the Vietnam crisis has not caused a call for school reform: a call to action which is commensurate to the one which occurred in reaction to sputnik. It may well be that we have always known that it is possible to catch up in a quantifiable discipline like rocketry, but not in an area where an individual's values are in need of re-appraisal. Be that as it may, there are serious questions facing the public schools as a result of having been at war for over a decade. There is virtually no one in America who has not had to think through his/her underlying assumptions as a result of the conflict in Asia. This writer thinks that too few Americans were significantly aided by their school experience in attempting to re-evaluate underlying assumptions. One might argue that many school subjects are not intended to help students ask questions concerning values, but the social studies curriculum is ostensibly committed to such a task. Those persons who are responsible for the social studies and language arts curricula cannot act as though the war and consequential soul searching did not occur.

Seventy years ago John Dewey began teaching that we could solve problems rationally and wisely when the citizenry learned to use the experimental method within the social arena itself. According to Dewey, the absence of celestially mandated guidelines necessitated the development of a methodological, common language in order to make societal consensus possible in a democracy. It may be appropriate for educators to explore approaches which speak to Dewey's hopes. We need to develop an effective method which can be taught, and which enables us to deal with our most profound social differences. The public school is in trouble in this last third of the twentieth century, and it will continue to be in crisis until it honestly and intelligently addresses itself to the kind of questions which have been raised by the tragedy in Vietnam.

One of the most serious difficulties confronting Americans during the war years was the systematic attempt by the

executive branch of government to be the sole spokesman in defining foreign policy reality. Those who made the key war decisions took the responsibility for laying down the working models with which to interpret the events occurring in Vietnam. Dean Rusk and other men around Lyndon Johnson took great pains to explain didactically to the American people how the domino theory worked, or how China was using the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong as pawns, and how only those professionals in the State Department had the training to see these threats clearly. These working models or paradigms were predicated upon a simplistic, bi-polar, cold war assumption; still, those who did not subscribe to officially defined reality were questioned about their loyalty to America. The Nixon Administration has not differed significantly in its treatment of critics; in fact, its record is perhaps less good than Johnson's. But in order to be critical of the war it was, and is, necessary to establish one's own working model or paradigm. Once one subscribes to a particular paradigm or methodology, the person is making a value judgement in terms of what results are acceptable or desirable. War critics had to free themselves from the Eisenhower-Rusk definition of the domino theory in order to question effectively America's involvement in Indochina. The ability to posit the existence of alternative models for analytic purposes allows one to break out of the parochial bind of officially imposed paradigms. Did the public school experience of the nineteen sixties encourage students to think through alternative models?

Those who are responsible for the social studies and language arts curricula have a special responsibility for teaching the complex skills needed to analyze the assumptions of officially defined reality. Students must develop competency to subject arbitrarily imposed paradigms and official reality to critical analysis. It is beyond the scope of this statement to study the various methods which would be helpful in realizing the critical ability hoped for; clearly, though, there can be no substitute for the teacher being able to do real analysis so that students could see an adult himself being analytical and critical.

The teacher must provide a model so that students can experience a mature adult who thinks and acts through the many necessary steps involved in the solution of existential problems. One of the problems which has been exacerbated by the war is the use of governmental euphemisms for the description of events which most citizens cannot themselves witness. Those who have fashioned governmental policy in the war theater have systematically manipulated paradigms, concepts, and language usage so that official predicates have come to be the accepted definitions for certain subjects. It may well be the responsibility of teachers in the areas of social studies and the language arts to point out the subtle and multiplex nature of phenomena. In an age of constant media bombardment (often times by a government which is expert at the use of media) it is conceivable that language will become so distorted that it will be an ineffective tool in the historic search for precision, meaning, order, and truth.

There is a long tradition in the western world whose members have refused to acquiesce to a purely descriptive frame of reference, insisting that there must be normative

dimension as well. Teachers in the areas of social studies, language arts, and the humanities are surely familiar with this tradition. There has existed a great refusal to accept the purely descriptive *is* of an unjust status quo, and to refuse it in the name of what *ought* to be. Carl Becker has said of the eighteenth century French *philosophes* that they sought to establish an outside point of reference for themselves which was beyond the parameters of the contemporary status quo. When a particular episode of history is seen in broader perspective, and when one has one's own solid ground from which to evaluate specific happenings, then it is easier to realize that events could have occurred differently than the way they did emerge. Once a student or citizen realizes that history and society are constructs, created by particular men and women who wish to forward their own interests, it is less difficult to understand that not only *could* events have happened differently, but that in some cases they *should* have. The corollary learning experience of that realization may well be that an individual can become historically effective. One may even become convinced that personal and collective action can often influence the course of events.

This writer is convinced that the Vietnam tragedy poses serious challenges to our society and to the public school. The contemporary challenge will not be as easily met as the sputnik crisis of the nineteen fifties. The war experience has clearly shown the need for persons who can get out beyond the latitudes of official, governmentally defined reality so that they can question the very basis of a system with which they disagree. We live in a time when young people must be helped so that they can systematically build their own criteria of values, for otherwise we shall have a citizenry which is condemned to operate inside another's view of reality.

America's difficulty with regard to clearly articulating and facing the issues raised by the war in Indochina is indicative of our schools' failure to date, as well. It has historically been the office of the social studies and language arts to help provide just that kind of intellectual and moral ballast which allows students to think and act critically, analytically, and with the ability to have empathy for those not exactly like themselves. The Indochina War has forced many Americans to ask the tough questions of self and of society: inquiries into what one's underlying assumptions and ultimate concerns really are. It may well be time for the public schools to answer the challenge which the war has issued us, for if educators fail to deal creatively with the questions which the tragedy has raised, individuals will still have to wrestle with the difficulties on their own.

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