

THE
CHILD-CENTERED
SCHOOL

RUGG AND
SHUMAKER

THE CHILD-CENTERED SCHOOL

*AN APPRAISAL OF THE
NEW EDUCATION*

BY

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Primitive men bound the heads of infants to produce flat, cone-shaped, or square craniums, as convention dictated. They also fettered the minds of children with taboos and with a thoroughly standardized course of training. The head-binding, however grotesque, may have been harmless; but the fettering of minds — clan-centered education — caused life to stagnate, and for ten thousand years the shapes of flint implements and the patterns of thought remained the same. Modern peoples do not practice head-binding, but still they are given to the less defensible custom of forcing the minds of the young into prepared molds. Education is no longer clan-centered; but it is nation-centered, and authority is still used in our school systems to further the imagined good of the social group, rather than to meet the particular needs of individuals. All this in spite of the fact that there have long been teachers who insisted that education should be child-centered, who held that more freedom for the individual would bring greater and not less opportunity for progress to society. During the last several decades such teachers have, at one place and another, made the child-centered school a reality. Individualists, their schools are often unique and always contain much that is experimental. To appraise the child-centered schools of today — to consider their limitations and their possibilities — is the purpose of this book.

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FOREWORD

THE SETTING OF THE CHILD-CENTERED SCHOOL

i

THIS book is an attempt to appraise the child-centered schools. It has been written in the confident belief that their development represents one of the two most important movements in the recent history of education. To be clearly understood, however, the child-centered schools should be viewed in their historical and contemporary setting. Their late emergence in Europe and in America is a striking exhibit of the lag of the creative mind behind the exploitive mind. In this book there is insufficient space to portray the three-century-long background of this lag. However, I am taking advantage of the prerogatives of the author's preface to point out its chief characteristics.

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The mass school in America is a replica of the mass mind of America. The latter is the product of three centuries of economic revolution. Its roots lie in Europe. Europe — fortunate in its cyclonic climate, inheriting large stores of coal, iron, and arable land, and located at the center of the hemispheres in a strategic position for world trade — produced the intercontinental régime known as industrial civilization.

This civilization of 500,000,000 people is a totally new entity, both in physical paraphernalia and in dominating attitude of mind. It resulted from the coöperation of three factors: First, the rise of inductive science and objective measurement and their appli-

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cations in the Industrial Revolution; second, the perpetuation of the Puritan attitude of mind; third, the taking over of the control of government by the Puritan leaders — on both sides of the Atlantic. These coöperated to produce the present era of economic exploitation, the world's highest standard of living, and a thoroughgoing acquisitive attitude of mind. Emerson's indictment of the Puritan régime of 1842 holds good, essentially, for the Puritan mind of today: "Things are in the saddle and ride mankind."

By the latter part of the nineteenth century the exploitive and acquisitive tendencies of the Economic Man had rationalized his conduct in a unique philosophy — pragmatism. Studied critically in historical perspective, nothing reveals more clearly the effects of the Occidental consumption of technique. In America three thinking men became the self-conscious exponents of the new industrial civilization: Charles Sanders Peirce — engineer, statistician, logician, inventor of pragmatism as a scientific method of thought; William James, the temperamental interpreter of the scientific study of conduct, and the chief rationalizer of the empirical character of the American mind; John Dewey, devotee of the scientific method and of the evolutionary principle, original-thinking organizer of the instrumental philosophy. These men built the substructure of a thoroughgoing rational philosophy of conduct. After 1900 the littler professors of education seized upon the central principle of evolution — the doctrine of adaptation — and phrased the supreme goal of education as "social efficiency."

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In the meantime the creative artist was well-nigh inarticulate until our own generation. With few
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exceptions — for example, Emerson, Whitman, and Louis Sullivan — men of artistic potential were shunted into technology. Striking exhibits of the warping effect upon creative ability of the new industrialism were revealed in the lives of the young painters turned inventors and applied scientists — Robert Fulton, Samuel Morse, William James.

To comprehend the significance of the child-centered schools, one would need, indeed, to understand the attempts of the creative artist to break through the thick crust of imitation, superficiality, and commercialism which bound the arts almost throughout the first three centuries of industrialism. The occasional emergence in Europe of rare, creative mutants — witness Goethe, Wagner, Cezanne — merely emphasized the stark mediocrity of art throughout that time.

But with the approximate completion of physical exploitation in Europe and America there appeared in the latter decades of the nineteenth century shining examples of creative art. Cezanne and the other French moderns created new art forms in painting and sculpture; Craig, Appia, Copeau, and Reinhardt led the creative revolution in the theater; Ellis was typical of the leaders of the new spirit in intellectual and social criticism. The World War precipitated Romain Rolland and other affirmers of the unity of European and world civilization; these courageous ones denounced the degrading influence of the chauvinism and nationalistic hatreds of the little men of letters, science, education, and the arts. The *Nouvelle Revue Française* group served as a great integrating organ for the French creative spirit, and the *Seven Arts* and *Poetry* achieved the same unifying influence in America.

The concepts of the creative mind contrast sharply with those of the imitative, exploitive mind. Note,

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for example, the concept of creative self-expression, the confident affirmation of the importance of self in place of that of conformity and inferiority; the emphasis upon integration, upon uniqueness, instead of analysis, standardization, and uniformity; the concept of technique as the efficient servant of vision — technique as a means rather than as a masterful end.

As society turned into its twentieth Christian century, the philosophy of self-expression began to evolve in the minds of a very few creative educational leaders, both in Europe and in America. Steadily education was transformed. The emergence of the child-centered schools almost simultaneously in Europe and America served as another indication that the creative mind is catching up with the exploitive; the lag is being taken up. In psychology and in practical pedagogy, as well as in the fine arts, the doctrine of self-expression is assuming a rôle coördinate in importance with that of adaptation. Correspondingly, some educationists are recognizing the inadequacy of social efficiency as the guiding rôle of education.

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The foregoing paragraphs constitute no more than mere captions for a library of critical estimate of the background of contemporary civilization and education in America. Only their vivid expansion could provide an adequate setting for the child-centered schools.¹

The preceding paragraphs merely outline the setting of the current educational revolution which has blazed up in the child-centered schools. In the short space of thirty years students of education have registered

¹In my *American Mind and the Reconstruction of the School* (Harcourt, Brace & Co., New York; in preparation) I have attempted a preface to that library of critical estimate.

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in increasing numbers under the banner of the doctrine of self-expression and maximum child growth. Dynamic articles of faith have been precipitated from the reaction of the new culture of industrialism upon the Puritan scene: not freedom . . . not control . . . but freedom *with* control. The active school instead of the passive, conformist school. Child interest as the orienting center of the new program. Maximum growth of individuality instead of social efficiency alone.

As a result of the transformation which the new theories have already worked, all persons who think much about education now align themselves in two opposing camps. There are, on the one hand, those who center education on adjustment to Society; there are, on the other, the protagonists of self-expression and maximum child growth. The mind of the former group pays chief allegiance to Society, race experience, logical organization of subject matter. Boldly guiding the philosophy of the other group is the concept of Self.

The present educational situation, therefore, confronts us with the age-long conflict: Society? . . . Self? . . . Which shall orient educational reconstruction? . . . If neither one alone, how shall the two be reconciled? . . . Corresponding to these two conflicting concepts of orientation are two others of method . . . Conformity? . . . Self-expression?

Either consciously or naively, all thinking persons commit themselves to one or the other of these philosophies of life and of education. It is my confident judgment that the ninety and nine among us render their real allegiance to the philosophy of adaptation. They are concerned primarily with the social heritage. A militant minority among us, however, concentrate upon the development of personality, individuality.

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The former, the protagonists of the adult-centered school, would impose education from without; the latter, the proponents of the child-centered school, would draw it out from within and remake child experience by the interplay between expression and the social heritage. The adult-centered schools have the support of earlier psychologies and have completely dominated the schools of Europe and America even to the present day. The child-centered schools grew out of the psychologies of our own time and as yet constitute but a corporal's guard as compared with the great regiments of formal schools.

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This book, based upon nine years of residence in one of the child-centered schools and a decade of active participation in the scientific study of education, is an attempt to appraise the practices of which these new articles of faith are exponential. At the end of their third decade the child-centered schools need sympathetic criticism more than all else. Of enthusiastic description they have had enough. Miss Shumaker and I believe in these schools thoroughly; their development constitutes, in our judgment, a movement coördinate in importance with that for the scientific study of education.

It is our firm belief, however, that they need appraisal and reorientation. The movement is young; the child-centered schools are pioneers on new educational frontiers. They have been handicapped by their lack of precedence. In their aversion to the doctrine of "subject-matter-set-out-to-be-learned" they have committed themselves whole-heartedly to the theory of self-expression. In doing this they have

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tended to minimize the other, equally important, goal of education: tolerant understanding of themselves and of the outstanding characteristics of modern civilization.

Tolerant understanding and creative self-expression — the two great aims of the new education. These are the two criteria on which we shall appraise the child-centered schools.

HAROLD RUGG

NEW YORK CITY

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Many other obligations of a less personal nature are indicated by footnotes in the text.

H. R.
A. S.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCING THE NEW SCHOOL

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ONE day in 1896 a young man methodically made the rounds of Chicago's school supply stores. He and his neighbors were starting a new school for their children. Patiently he described his wants: "desks and chairs thoroughly suited from all points of view — artistic, hygienic, and educational — to the needs of little children." An afternoon of uncomprehending argument with salesmen whose vocabulary and understanding were as standardized as the furniture which they sold. And then the dealer with more discernment than salesmanship who said, "I am afraid we have not what you want. You want something at which the children may *work*; these are all for *listening*."

"And that," says John Dewey, "tells the story of the traditional education."

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But John Dewey did start his laboratory school, and out of it came *School and Society*, *The Child and the Curriculum*, *Interest and Effort*, *Democracy and Education*, and his other phrasings of a new philosophy of education. Three decades have passed since he set up his little school. In that time scores of child-centered schools have been started by rebellious laymen and enthusiastic reformers. Almost every city, large or small, now has its new school.

And new indeed are these schools — made for work instead of listening.

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“Why, it doesn’t seem like a school at all!” runs the most frequent comment of visitors, both the delighted and the disturbed.

Is this a schoolhouse, this great, sunlit home? These cheerful rooms — walls colorful with children’s paintings, floors spotted with bright rugs, light, movable tables and comfortable chairs — are these classrooms? Groups of children engaged in animated conversation — are these classes? Is this the assembly room of a school, or is it a children’s theater?

The new school *is* different — different in atmosphere, housing, furniture; different in its basic philosophy and psychology; different in the rôle that it assigns to pupil and teacher initiative.

For the new school is a child’s world in a child’s-size environment. Here he lives in a democracy of youth. His needs, his interests, as well as adult insight concerning his future life, determine what goes on in this school. And if the visitor be one who has not forgotten his own childhood; if he be one who can luff a block boat with the best; who can shop with aplomb in the streets of a play city; who at the mere sight of a fringe of feathers, a skull-’n’-crossbones, or a miniature Conestoga feels within himself the wild life-surge of a Red Indian, a Black Pirate, or a sturdy frontiersman — such a one may well view with delight the whirl of activities unfolding panoramically before him.

There are those, however, who view these changes with disturbed dismay. For the pattern which has meant school to them has called for certain familiar features which are lacking in these new schools. In that pattern children are pigeonholed in long rows of desks, filed in stereotyped classrooms as alike as the cabinets in which the methodical principals preserve their records. Children must sit quietly, study their

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lessons silently, obey the teacher promptly and unquestioningly. Speech is only on permission, in well-mannered, subdued tones; and movement means marching in orderly rows, two abreast, at the signal for dismissal.

The listening school is a place where the chief weapons of education are chalk-talk on a dismal blackboard, a few intensely dull required texts, and a teacher's tired voice in continual strident pursuit of elusive young attention. Here children are sent, and school keeps until four o'clock. That the "kept" should explode from the doors and windows at that hour with a relief that is as prompt as it is deafening, vanishing with an alacrity that leaves the place to its whispering silences as though the sudden brief outburst had been a mistake — that, too, is an accepted part of the traditional pattern.

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Picture, then, children who cannot get to school early enough, and who linger about the shops, laboratories, yards, and libraries until dusk or urgent parents drag them homeward. Observe these busy and hard-working youngsters who seem to play all day, who do not seem to have lessons and recitations, yet who do not wait for teachers to make assignments.

Here is a group of six and seven year olds. They dance; they sing; they play house and build villages; they keep store and take care of pets; they model in clay and sand; they draw and paint, read and write, make up stories and dramatize them; they work in the garden; they churn, and weave, and cook.

A group is inventing dances, which, we are told, are for a pageant. In a darkened room films are being shown. A high school class is teaching the seventh

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grade how to use the library in looking up information on a geography topic. A primary class is getting ready for an excursion on the morrow to a bakery. Another has just returned from a trip to a woolen mill. All about their room are bulletins and pictures depicting the history of clothing. At the end of the hall is a toy shop where industrious members of the Guild ply lathe and saw, pattern and paint, in fashioning marvelous trucks and horses for the first-grade farms and villages. Here is the nature-study laboratory with green things growing. A breathless group is stocking a new aquarium to be sent to the third grade; while over in the corner white rabbits, mice, and guinea pigs — even a turtle — loll in well-attended ease.

In another building we come across a shop where one is wiring a doll house for electric lights and another is making rough-and-ready reflectoscopes. Over all the walls are blueprints, maps, and posters, and models of things made and in the making — ships, steam engines, cars, airplanes, submarines, sets for scenes, and even the swords and bucklers of medieval armor.

What a contrast between this picture of happy, purposeful living and that of the old school! To that the uninitiated child looked forward unsuspectingly, even cheerfully, only to find that behind each classroom door lurked a deceptive Pandora's box of fears, restraints, and long, weary hours of suppression. Think of children sitting with arms folded, eyes front, putting up a hand for a begrudged permission to move, chanting lessons in unison, forty or fifty eyes glued to an identical paragraph while a halting reader at the front of the room limps painfully through sentences already too familiar to be interesting. There *memorize*, *recite*, *pay attention*, are the keynotes. Not "What do you think?" but "What does the book say?" directs
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