

THE PLACE OF ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOL CURRICULUM

John H. Chilcott

In elementary school classrooms across the nation on any morning during the course of a school year, shrill sounds of imitation Indian war cries and the beat of throbbing drums echo down the corridors. Thousands upon thousands of children have "experienced" Indian culture through participation in learning activities such as plays, building teepis, and collecting arrowheads. In terms of nationwide totals, the time spent by public school children studying the American Indian is prodigious. One young adult acquaintance of mine claims to have built four teepis during the course of his public school education. As anthropologists I don't believe we would object to this time being spent on the American Indian, but we may object to the manner in which the American Indian is studied. The purpose of this paper is to examine briefly the manner in which anthropological topics are presented in our public schools and suggest some alternatives which might result in the better utilization of this time.

Not all areas of anthropology are treated as glibly as is the American Indian. Physical anthropology at the present time is included in many general science courses taken during the Junior High School years. This course includes treatment of fossil man and race characteristics. The texts are accurate and the teachers, when informed on these topics, do an excellent job of presentation. Unfortunately the presentation of fossil man is not well received in some communities.

Social studies teachers (from junior high school on) are beginning to move away from a purely historical and geographical approach toward an approach in which the total culture is given consideration. The well-trained social studies teacher today includes customs, values, social structure, material culture and even, in some cases, folk lore when she covers the "history" of a country. In many cases these teachers have taken a course in anthropology and utilize anthropological concepts in their teaching. A limitation here appears to be the unavailability of an introductory anthropology course rather than the reluctance of a prospective teacher to include such a course as part of her general background.

Unfortunately many of our public school teachers, especially at the elementary level do not have the proper training and orientation to teach about indigenous peoples. Television and the movies are not alone at fault in developing the accepted stereotype of an American Indian as a Plains Indian. The public school teacher has contributed to this also. At a curriculum workshop in Oregon a few years ago, one unit of learning which was proudly presented to the group included among other things the following topics: a description of a Hopi village, a description of how the Northwest Coast Indians build their plank houses, and an account of ocean shoreline wave erosion. To an untrained teacher, combining a variety of cultures without respect for cultural differences is perfectly legitimate. Her main objective in doing this is not to develop a

sense of cultural relativity but to stimulate her students' interests. As long as they are interested it makes little difference what happens to the culture. Consequently the children end up studying a hodge-podge of cultures and a conglomeration of various culture traits from a variety of cultures. To confuse the situation further, teachers have a tendency to concentrate on exotic cultures instead of representative cultures.

One concept which anthropologists attempt to get across to their students is that a culture trait should not be examined out of context from the total culture. Fortunately they haven't visited a school classroom lately. Public school teachers have an effusive fondness for material culture, so much so that they hardly mention the non-material culture. Furthermore, they are also very fond of clothing (their womanly instinct). They examine clothing from a wide variety of cultures not to explain why clothing differs from culture to culture but to point out the uniqueness of the clothing.

Before the teacher introduces the child to a foreign culture she should have some general objectives concerning what she wishes to accomplish through this presentation. If the teacher realized that her purpose in introducing foreign cultures was to develop a sense of cultural relativity or tolerance, her presentation might be better organized. If she knew that she was attempting to illustrate the complexity of human behavior, she would select cultures which best illustrate this point.

I suggest the following as one approach to the study of culture: the child would be introduced to a different culture each year, starting in the fourth grade. Each culture would be covered intensively, not several cultures sketchily. At the fourth grade level the culture would be representative of hunters and gatherers. In the fifth grade the culture would be representative of herdsmen and the sixth grade culture studied would be representative of agriculturalists. The selection of specific cultures for presentation during the latter years of the elementary school would be based upon features of land use and types of staple food product.

During the child's first year in junior high school (7th grade) he would be introduced to two literate societies. The eighth graders' attention would be given to the ancient Western civilizations. The civilizations would be studied in terms of change. For example, the student would study the culture of Homeric Greece and then shift to the culture of the Golden Age. The teacher would tie in changes which had taken place by comparing the two cultures, indicating the degree of development along with the degree and sources of acculturation. In this manner the student would follow the growth of Western civilization. He would, in effect, develop a "diffusion chart" indicating the spread of Western culture.

When the student reached his third year in high school he would have an excellent foundation for studying Western civilization in the modern world and the integration of Western cultures. In his final year of high school he would make an intensive study of current American value systems. American culture would be examined in terms of acculturation, diffusion and invention. The influence of the American Indian cultures studied in the elementary school would become more apparent.

In essence what I suggest here is the substitution of an anthropological approach for an historical approach to the development of man. It may surprise you to learn that the anthropological approach is more in accord with modern pedagogical theory than is the purely historical approach. Professional educators have urged teachers for a number of years to integrate related subject fields such as literature and history. Anthropology, more than any of the other social sciences, integrates the diverse topics in the study of man.

You may wish to argue with the curricular pattern suggested above but you cannot argue that the current practices employed in presenting anthropological topics in our public schools need considerable revision. The center of any revision would have to be the teacher. Fortunately schools of education are becoming aware of the contribution which anthropologists can make to the field of education. Two well known schools, Harvard and Stanford, have employed anthropologists as part of their regular teaching staff. We need a course which bridges the gap between anthropology and the classroom teacher. Such a course should include both anthropological content and procedures of presentation. It should dispel common misconceptions such as geographic determinism or that primitive people are less intelligent. It must emphasize the need to study the whole culture, not only the material culture. It should indicate how children can study a foreign culture without deculturating themselves or, at the other extreme, becoming highly ethnocentric. Perhaps the most important contribution which such a course could make is in assisting teachers to teach about change. It has been stated that more change has occurred during the present generation than in all previous history. If this is true then we should be educating our children to accept and live with change.

Aside from the general curriculum there are specialized curricula toward which anthropologists could contribute. One such curriculum is in the area of foreign languages. I am amazed at the small contribution which linguists have made to foreign language teaching. The simple fact that verbal language precedes written language would indicate that the child's first contact with a foreign language should be on the oral not written basis.

Current proposals for the inclusion of anthropology in the public school curriculum do not follow my theory. A review of the literature on the topic discloses that anthropology is suggested as a separate subject in the high school curriculum. There are several accounts of the success of such a course. The current lack of success of similar courses such as sociology, economics, and psychology in the high school curriculum argues against this approach. I feel the separate course approach is too late and too artificial. Children need to be introduced properly to foreign cultures at an earlier age and in a more natural fashion.

The time has arrived for anthropologists to suggest means and topics which can be properly developed as part of the curricular patterns of our American public schools. The time has already been allocated; the method and content need revision.