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## EDITORIAL

A person with whom we are well acquainted and with whom we frequently discuss educational problems, has rather pronounced views upon educational values. Most people have, for that matter. These particular views, however, are unique in that the person referred to formulated them pretty early in life and consistently applied them to the later stages of his own education. He was left fairly free to choose most of his studies, and he deliberately made this choice upon the basis, not of interest, but of distaste. His reasoning was simple: he wished to take advantage of the stimulus of class-work and of the systematic routine of required effort in order (as he states it) to "train" the capacities in which he was obviously weak. His was a naïve educational philosophy in which the doctrine of formal discipline (strongly impregnated with Calvinism) played an important part; but he is morally certain that his philosophy "works."

And very likely it did work and will work within reasonable limits. To give the will some "gratuitous exercise" every day will doubtless have the salutary influence that James ascribed to the practice. The chief difficulty in adopting it as an educational policy lies in making

certain that the exercise is "gratuitous." But the important question just now is whether this type of training represents anything more than the possible development, ideal of mastery over immediate desire and interest. Does it really represent beyond this a training of more specific capacities, and is it wise to train these capacities if they do not have the advantage of innate strength? If I find mathematics so distasteful that I avoid mathematical work whenever possible, will even a gratuitous effort to master mathematics result in an improvement in ability that is proportionate to the time and energy expended, or an improvement that will compensate for the loss of opportunity to spend this time and energy in developing a capacity that shows greater promise?

This problem, we believe, lies at the center of current discussions regarding curriculum-reorganization. It is in part a psychological problem and in part a problem of general educational theory. Psychology must answer the questions, "In how far does distaste mean lack of native ability? In how far can weak native ability be developed by specific training?" General educational theory must answer the question, "Is it worth while to make the attempt?"

There is at present a strong disposition upon the part of school administrators and of an influential group of educational theorists to answer the latter question in the negative. School administrators are feeling more and more keenly the pressure to adjust curriculum materials to varying capacities; the increasing numbers of pupils retained for the high school is continually intensifying this pressure. The type of adjustment that makes the strongest appeal is that which would provide different subjects for individuals and groups of varying capacities. Some of the larger difficulties and dangers involved in an extreme or a premature application of this theory have been pointed out by the present writer, primarily upon the ground that the needs of democracy demand a certain community of culture, and that a reasonable measure of uniformity in curriculum-materials will work toward this end. Others, however, have a somewhat different conception of democracy, and believe that the largest possible latitude for individual development—the most intensive training of the most pronounced native abilities—will serve to realize the democratic ideal much more effectively than will any attempt to secure uniformity in culture.

There is certainly abundant room for argument in connection with this problem, but this is the phase of the question that must be solved

**HOW FAR IS IT PRACTICABLE TO TRAIN WEAK ABILITIES?** by general educational theory rather than by educational psychology.

What educational psychology can do, however, is to lay bare the facts. It can answer the two questions just stated, and there is especial need just now for answering the second of these—"In how far can weak native ability be profitably trained?" There are some high-school pupils for example, who seem to profit in no way by the study of algebra and geometry. Assuming that these subjects furnish the best available means for giving one a conception of what abstract and symbolic thinking means, and some valuable exercise in this type of thinking (an assumption which can be theoretically defended), is this value to be realized in any appreciable measure among those pupils who find these subjects extremely distasteful? It is at least conceivable that the trouble which many pupils experience in connection with these subjects is greatly intensified by the fact that they are continually measuring their weakness against the strength of others. Under such conditions, of course, discouragement and its consequent depression form what might be called an extraneous or factitious handicap. The administrative expedient that at once suggests itself in this case is differentiation of classes on the basis of standards of accomplishment and rate of progress. But the fundamental question is whether any progress that is possible under these conditions is really worth while.

The same question arises not only in connection with every subject for which a disciplinary outcome is primarily assumed, but also in connection with such subjects as history, literature, and the biological sciences all of which are commonly justified upon the basis of informational and appreciative outcomes. (We note with apprehension, for example, that history does not appear in some of the curriculums proposed for junior high schools. Does this mean that pupils are to be trained for "citizenship" with only the simple, biographical history that is taught in the lower grades, and largely because some boys and girls do not "take" to this subject?) But the problem is especially acute in connection with studies that are intrinsically difficult because they demand a relatively high type of conceptualizing ability.

The older view of mental discipline assumed a direct relationship between the difficulty of a subject and its disciplinary value—an assumption that is eminently well adapted to encourage careless teaching—and, on the other hand, an assumption that handicapped the doctrine with an adventitious disadvantage when the day of skepticism dawned. (The lines of greatest resistance are very naturally unpopular.) With the reconstruction of the doctrine, too, the possibility of this direct relationship has been pretty carefully avoided. If, however, "general" training depends primarily upon the possibility of lifting a procedure to the conceptual level, and endowing it with a consciousness of worth, it is possible that the older assumption possesses a measure of truth.

This possibility was suggested in an interesting way by a fact that came to the writer's attention a few days ago. In the College of Agriculture at the University of Illinois, several courses in "stock-judging" are either required or elective in many of the curriculums. In any case, large numbers of students "take" practically all of these courses. There seems to be no requirement regarding the sequence, but the students themselves have "hit upon" a definite order which has, we understand, become a tradition. The course dealing with "sheep-judging" is almost always elected as the first course. When we inquired into the situation, we found that the tradition carried with it a reason that was quite conscious to the students. Sheep-judging is much more difficult than the other courses. Nor did the reasoning stop at this point. The students definitely affirmed that because of this difficulty they were compelled in this course to develop a "method of procedure,"—in other words to "conceptualize" the process; a necessity that did not arise in like degree in the other courses. Once in command of the method, the other courses were "easy."

The situation reminds us of the tradition regarding the strenuous mathematical training that has been associated with the Cambridge degree, and of the answer which a Cambridge man is said to have given when asked what advantage he gained from the severe mathematical discipline when he never used his mathematics afterward. "It was valuable," he said, "because, after that strenuous experience, everything else was easy."

In any case, the relation of difficulty to mental mastery is a significant question—a question that studies of initial distaste and sub-

sequent progress might go a long way toward answering. It is pretty clearly apparent at the present writing that the ideals reflected in the organization and administration of the people's schools have a profound influence upon the progress and destiny of the nation. Present-day ideals and tendencies in American education certainly do not smack of virility and strength, whatever else may be said of them. They may be worthy ideals—but they bear scrutiny.

W. C. B.