

IS THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM ADJUSTED?

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The thoughts laid down in the following pages are centered around certain ideas which, less than a half-decade ago, began to take definite shape in many minds. These ideas, while as yet somewhat vague, were in the earlier days chaotic indeed. Beginning about the time I have indicated, the student of education could not have failed to notice a certain unrest in matters educational—an unrest voicing and manifesting itself in somewhat different manner and with more positive expression than formerly.

I am likely to be reminded that this unrest took shape fully three decades past, and that a constant change and a steady advancement have been noticeable ever since. Some are perhaps willing to go farther and say that since the times of John Locke and Comenius, of Rousseau and Herbart, of Froebel and Pestalozzi, educational thought and practice have been ever moving toward a higher level. More than this, we should probably all agree that the fundamental principles laid down in Aristotle's *Ethics*, or in Plato's *Republic*, are not transcended at the present day. Granting this, however, we must admit that the past few years have wrought an additional change on the face of educational affairs. True, many will not see this, or, seeing, will not admit. These, however, must eventually do so.

For a long time past it has been the secondary school that has first received the attention of educators, when a new order of things seemed imminent or desirable in the public school. So in England, in Germany, and in America has the secondary condition been discussed. The full force and significance of these discussions are now being felt by what is by far the most important and vital part of the whole educational organization of the present—the elementary public school of America.

Mr. Michael E. Sadler, a thorough English educationalist, has thrown much light upon the problem in his report on "The Unrest in Secondary Education in Germany, and Elsewhere." Other prominent German, English, and French schoolmen have agitated the problem, while with us as exponents of a broader elementary-school curriculum may be mentioned Dr. William T. Harris, Mr. John Fiske, Colonel Francis W. Parker, President Nicholas Murray Butler, President Charles W. Eliot, Dr. G. Stanley Hall, Professor William James, Dr. Frank McMurry, and Professor John Dewey, not to speak of a host of others. These men have, each in his own way, been insistent in demanding in our school work something that shall be real rather than artificial, vital rather than indifferent. They have pleaded for an education such as has been aimed at, but is as yet far short of realization.

Upon certain of the most important and fundamental principles underlying our educational fabric there is and has been an almost unanimous agreement. It is only when we as individuals come to the practice of these principles—only when an application is made—that a serious disagreement is noticeable. Indeed, it is only too frequently the case that no application is attempted. How clearly in the past has the purpose of the school been stated, and how almost universal has been the acceptance of the definition! In actual practice, however, the work has not been in harmony with the stated purpose of the school. There has been little contention as to the function which the child is to serve when he becomes part of the world in which he shall eventually find himself. Our methods as practiced, however, would hardly be recognizable as having any foundation in the thought of future citizenship. Theory and practice are at variance, and as a result violence has been done the child; the past has laid its hand upon the school, and we have held to old courses of study, dusty with layers of tradition or mildewed by decades of bigotry.

In some instances, to be sure, the better in the old education has been displaced by the less valuable in the so-called *new*. Subject has been added to subject, scheme to scheme, creed to creed, until pupils and teachers alike find themselves in an educational

maze from which only the freedom of the outside world can extricate them.

This unrest, then, of which I have been speaking, is felt from the kindergarten through the university. From what at first was a feeling there has developed a conviction that our schools have too long existed for the benefit of the few. The upper grades are administered in the interest of the 6 per cent. who pass from the primary years; high-school courses of study are carried on with the view of meeting the requirements of a fortunate 1 per cent. who come to them, while college and university curricula take into account only a meager number, who, through circumstances or by birth, are enabled to avail themselves of the advantages of a higher education. What our elementary schools should furnish above all else is the elements of such culture- and thought-bearing subjects as shall the better introduce the pupil into the social, the industrial, and the moral life of the day, and of which each is a part. The school of elementary grade today is a long call from squaring with its avowed mission in this regard.

The great mass of boys and girls who early are compelled to take up the problems of actual life should find in the school that which has been prepared expressly for them and which best meets their needs. They find, instead, work better suited to those who, whether they will or not, enter and take advantage of upper-school work. With a proper adjustment of elementary-school courses, all that great mass of pupils who leave below high-school age would go out better prepared to take part in the life before them, and many who now leave school at an early age would continue their work into and beyond the high school.

To reach the great mass of boys and girls, and not only to reach them, but to keep them in school for a somewhat longer period, is then our problem. The tendency of educational thought is toward this end. His tuition in school is much too short for the boy to acquire those elements which make for moral uplift, industrial knowledge, social ideals, and ability of leadership. You appreciate, I am sure, that I have in mind the unnumbered many who progress no farther than the elementary school.

Various are the causes of non-continuance in school. Poverty,

sickness, overcrowding, poor enforcement of attendance laws, inability to keep pace with a given class, indifference, all conspire to lessen the tuition in school. More than all else, however, and deeper and more fundamental than these, is the fact that *the school does not furnish that which is demanded in actual life*, after the pupil enters the latter. The supposition has been that the school is the medium through which the pupil is enabled to determine the line of work, occupation, or profession he is best fitted to enter, after first bestowing upon him a general culture universally essential. Should this be the correct view, which it probably is in part only, the present courses of study would not work to the desired end.

How, then, shall the proper adjustment of the elementary-school curriculum be brought about? The answer, it seems to me, is writ so large that "he who runs may read," although the actual work of adjustment is far from accomplished. It is indeed but begun. The standard of the school has sprung from the belief that knowledge is power; that facts educate; that mental gymnastics produces the man. The standard of the real school must be found in actual life. It must be based upon the natural tendencies of the child; it must grow out of a knowledge of the boy as a social being; it must recognize the home, the community, the factory, the shop, the farm; civil, industrial, social, and moral institutions. Any curriculum worthy a place in our elementary school must be built upon a clear conception that reason stands superior to fact; that expression is of more value than technique; that human sympathy transcends in value the printed pages of a book.

"The works of God are all for naught,
Unless our eyes in seeing
See, underneath the thing, the thought
That animates its being."

To say where the adjustment should begin would be an almost hopeless task. In arithmetic and language, in history, in geography, in reading, and in the more fortunate schools even in nature-study, manual training, and art subjects, the husk is too often mistaken for the kernel. The form rather than the content

is made the chief issue; the symbol is made to stand for the thing. The spirit is lost, the letter is the goal.

In mathematics and language, object-teaching furnished an advanced step over the older methods. But what do we find? In arithmetic, for example, to use a crude illustration, the $2 + 2 = 4$ problem, typical of the abstract, lifeless form of work so long adhered to, was changed to the so-called concrete form, and read, *two apples and two apples are four apples*. A moment's thought, however, will convince us that the latter form of the problem lies nearly or quite as far from the concrete as did the former. Here, too, it grows out of a mere statement of fact and not of the life-interests of the pupil. It should find its application in an immediate need. "A thing is concrete when it is in the midst of its meanings; a word to be concrete must not be disassociated, but in the context, in the midst of its settings."¹

Look at it from whatever side you will, the idea is forced upon you that the curriculum of the elementary school is not calculated to meet the demands of the boy and girl. The child may be able to tell you the least common multiple of 4, 8, and 16, or the greatest common divisor of 3, 6, and 9, but can he tell why in New York city the market price per dozen of oranges is greater than that of apples, or the height of a pile of wood containing two cords if the pile is eight feet long and eight feet wide? And the saddest part of the whole matter is that, after he closes his arithmetic, the boy will probably never have need for the facts he has learned regarding the least common multiple or greatest common divisor.

In language work the child may be able to supply the missing words in the text, but does he contribute a readable paper in the history class, or speak intelligently when making an explanation? In reading, the words may be spoken, but is the selection one having any connection with the child's needs; will it broaden and deepen his sympathies, extend his knowledge of things worth while, and force him to feel, and be, and live his better self? In history, in geography, how often do we find the time put upon vague, indefinite things, or those of little value; facts and

¹ Borrowed from Professor Frank M. McMurry.

figures, dates and places, locations, boundaries, and battles! Each of these has a place, but to the grade pupil so much can be given which is rich and vitalizing, that great care must be exercised in the choosing. It is no longer a question of what is good in education; it is a question rather of what is best.

In his recent article "Experiments upon Children,"² Dr. G. Stanley Hall speaks of the present as a "metamorphic period" in education, and then goes on to say:

A mere list of the fads now in practice in various places would make a long article. Idiotic busy work in the lower grades; learning to read without knowing the alphabet, so that occasionally children old enough to use a dictionary have to make up their arrears of knowledge to do so; blob drawing; typewriting and shorthand in the high school; four foreign languages for girls and boys in the early teens who have almost nothing in their minds to express in the vernacular; Latin and algebra in the grammar school; wood- and iron-work in manual-training courses that are wooden in their intelligence and iron in their inflexibility; sharply demarkated schools and theories of physical training which will not harmonize and give the children the benefit of the best in all; metaphysics of the effete German school for kindergartners, who ought to know something of nursing as now taught to high-school graduates, and to know the child's body which at that age most needs care; interest in the finished product, which is used for show, rather than in educational values; everywhere, and perhaps especially in English, content and substance subordinated to form; method whipped up to a syllabus that suggests some analogy between the graduates of certain normal schools and the mediæval barber's apprentice, who could set up for himself only when he could whip two ounces of soap into barrels of lather; the mechanism of marks and hearing lessons instead of teaching; the college dominating the high school, which is really the people's college, with its excessive entrance examinations; distraction among the multiplicity of different topics—these are some of the dangers, of which some are universal and others dominant in certain places.

While we may not subscribe to all that Dr. Hall says, we should at least be in accord with the spirit of his message. The curriculum has indeed been broadened, while at the same time it has not been made sufficiently deep. In just the degree school work does not furnish the power, does not put the boy in possession of himself, just so far is it failing in its function.

Perhaps no better conception of an elementary curriculum

² In *Good Housekeeping* for October, 1903, p. 338.

can be had than to grasp the idea of a socialized course of study. This means at once a change from present methods. The so-called traditional subjects are thought-subjects mainly. We have said, and truly, that the book lessons did not meet the demands of the developing child, as little expression accompanied the learning process. There was ample impression; there was no expression. In order to get the most from our history, or arithmetic, or science, the motor element must come in. While the introduction of hand-work in school has done much good, we have here swung as far to the opposite side; and while expression is not lacking, the thought-element plays all too small a part in our manual-training courses. Whether with work at the bench, in sewing, in the cooking-room, in the various hand-work processes and in the art subjects, the power to make or construct is not supplemented by the power to think. This last is due in large measure to the fact that for the most part the child is not allowed to put himself into the work. He follows arbitrarily some set of exercises or a fixed curriculum, and performs in a more or less mechanical manner a prescribed course of work; and this without particular reference to its fitness for the individual boy or girl.

It is John Ruskin who says:

You can teach a man to draw a straight line and to cut one, to strike a curved line and to carve it, and to copy and carve any number of given lines with admirable speed and perfect precision, and you find his work perfect of its kind; but if you ask him to think about any of these forms, to consider if he cannot find any better in his own head, he stops; his execution becomes hesitating; he thinks, and, ten to one, he thinks wrong; ten to one, he makes a mistake in the first touch he gives his work as a thinking being. But you have made a man of him for all that. He was only a machine before—an animated tool.

If it is true that a lesson in history is really valuable only when out of the data and lists of facts the pupils draw conclusions and reason from cause to effect or from effect to cause, seeking an explanation of laws and principles in the life of the day, so may we believe that in the manual processes the thought-side must be emphasized by reasoning out the why, and by seeking to develop new or independent methods of procedure.

As Professor Jackman puts it: "The first demand of the mind is for motive."⁸

May not work of a constructive nature, the industrial processes, properly carried on, furnish one of the foundation-stones for the future primary-school curriculum? Dr. Dewey says that the curriculum should be "so selected and organized as to provide the material for affording the child a consciousness of the world in which he has to play a part, and the relations he has to meet." Accepting this, are not the media of the shop, the laboratory, the studio, the garden, best suited to bring about the desired results?

Dr. Dewey does not stand alone in his criticism of the present-day practices in the elementary school nor in his suggestions as to the remedy. In an address before the Department of Superintendence of the National Educational Association at Cincinnati in February, 1903, President Eliot said: "I believe there is as much mental training in manual work as in any book whatsoever;" and again: "I believe there is more value in manual work than in nine-tenths of the arithmetic in the schools."

Dr. Frank McMurry places *thoughtful* hand-work at the very base of elementary-school education, and in his book, *A Broader Elementary Education*, Dr. Gordy points out the function of manual training in the elementary curriculum. *Industrial-Social Education*, by William Baldwin, shows how the school work may be made to group around the industrial processes. Teachers generally seem to be recognizing the fact that in no way can we so well form a school that shall be parallel with, rather than angular to, the actual, every-day life of the child and the adult, as to adjust our programs to the industrial and social forms that go to make up our every-day existence.

Is it not easy to see, then, that we have been making, through our primary-school curricula, a sort of life in the schoolroom different from that actually existing outside of it; a life not at all real and certainly not ideal? The lack of interest has been mainly on account of this. With a program that shall fit the child's needs will come an increased desire to continue in school,

⁸ *Elementary School Teacher*, Vol. V, p. 60.

a live interest in its many problems, an increased student attitude. Then, too, will the child see more clearly his relations to his fellows, his individual duties and responsibilities, and, while recognizing his own worth, will at the same time appreciate the meaning and significance of the community, the society, and the social whole of which he is only one of the units in the composition.

In summing up, I would not be understood as saying that every element in the present-day curriculum of the elementary school should be stricken out. Indeed, I have tried to show that many times the older, more conservative thought stands superior to a modern whim or tendency. But in the main the content of our school courses are not such as best meet the demands laid upon them by the mass of school children. So far different is the atmosphere of the school from that of real life that the pupil does not recognize the school elements as having vital bearing or application outside the school. In the school he works for show, for standing, and, while ready with the facts, loses or never finds their true meaning or application.