

EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

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IN a recent address to a meeting of English headmasters, Dr. John Murray, Principal of University College, Exeter, expresses his fear that English education in the post-war world is menaced by the growing tendency to equalitarianism and bureaucratic control.¹ Because there are wide differences between English and Canadian systems of education, it is interesting to find that we ourselves are stricken by the very plagues that Dr. Murray dreads, although they appear under different forms. Some of the statements in this essay apply only to certain provinces, which may be retarded educationally; nevertheless, the diseases are spread throughout the Dominion, and perhaps can be studied best where the attack is most severe.

We derive our equalitarianism from certain misconceptions of democracy, curiously and inconsistently applied. It is urged that in a democratic society every child should have equal educational opportunities. Such counsel of perfection, however, operates only in the elementary schools. After that, economic circumstances govern education to a very large extent; to an extent, it may be added, unknown either in Britain, the leading capitalist country, or in Russia, the leading socialist country of Europe. Only in our North American isolation is this *laissez faire* attitude maintained.

We thus, undemocratically, allow a large number of our citizens to be automatically excluded from any formal education beyond that of the elementary school. On the other hand, for the pupils in the high school, in the name of democracy we maintain a disastrous equalitarianism. We glory in the absolute uniformity of curricula, text-books, and examinations. More than this; we strive if not to overcome, at least to conceal the irritating irregularities which society admits or nature imposes, by our ingeniously contrived examination system. All high school pupils read the same text-books; all examination questions must be rigidly confined to the very letter of the text. Any effort to introduce into an examination questions stimulating to thought and judgment, even if such questions are based on material in the text, is frowned upon. This is considered "unfair" to pupils and teachers in small schools and remote districts. Why pupils and teachers in country districts should be deemed

¹ See *Misgivings and Hopes for English Education*, by John Murray: BATHURST REVIEW, July 1943.

incapable of reasoning, it is difficult to say. The truth remains that all examinations are confined to mere tests of mechanic memorization, ostensibly on their account. It is true that examinations are but a small part of education, and that the best teachers try to keep them in a subordinate position; but if parents, teachers and school boards regard them as the final test of the success of the educational process, the teachers are shackled. Some of the best ones, naturally, throw off their chains by leaving the profession.

This extraordinary narrowness and rigidity in the treatment of text-books and examinations is seriously defended by educational authorities on the ground that it is the only democratic way. No child must be made to feel "inferior" either because fortune has denied him able instruction, or because nature has denied him reasoning power. All must be on a level, and inevitably, in practice, this is the lowest level. It is interesting, if not cheering, to find that this pathological form of democracy exists in Britain also, symbolized by a demand for "parity of esteem", or "parity of disesteem," as Dr. Murray says it should be called. The effort to keep the backward or slow child from feeling "inferior" and to mitigate the drawbacks of the rural school is admirable, but we are in serious danger of throwing out the baby with the bath. The fact that the slow child cannot reason is no reason for devising an examination system in which the bright child has not opportunity of reasoning. The fact that children and teachers in rural districts may have little opportunity for wide reading is no reason for not encouraging and even insisting upon it where libraries are available.

In certain schools, and particularly the elementary ones, there is a tendency to revolt against a mental discipline so lifeless that it can hardly be called educational. Many public schools, not subjected to a provincial examination system, are adopting what is referred to as "the new education". In this new type of education, class-room and school discipline are largely relaxed in order to permit "activities" and "projects". The general idea is that mental activity can best be stimulated through physical activity; that what is learned gladly and willingly is learned best; and that pupils can adequately prepare for citizenship only by working in the school on some joint project in which all may have a share.

This new education is widely praised in Canadian periodicals, both educational and popular. Teachers and parents are delighted with the interest and enthusiasm of the pupils. Superinten-

dents find that the problem of the dull child is partially solved: "If the class decides to produce a play, not everyone can write an original script nor play a stellar role, but the girl who makes a gilt paper crown for the Queen is making a contribution to the success of the whole enterprise". Psychologists tell us that the shy child is disappearing in the free and easy activity of the new school life.

It would be absurd to deny that increased interest, self-confidence, and happiness in the children are good in themselves; Nevertheless, benefits may be purchased and abuses abolished at too great a cost. Without denying the admirable features of the new education, it is important to point out some serious dangers.

It is true that mental activity can often be stimulated by physical activity, particularly in mediocre or dull minds, hardly capable of abstract thought. On the other hand, many with the quickest imaginations and keenest intellects do not need such stimulation, and often get on better without it. Such children may spend days on constructing a medieval village about which nothing is more certain than that it is very unlike any original. During the same period their imaginations could have been nourished and their minds exercised by reading or hearing read tales from Froissart or Chaucer, which would bring vividly before them the whole medieval scene. Handicrafts are excellent as recreation for all, and as a full-time occupation for many. They become an abuse if able pupils are permitted to make them a substitute for thoughtful reading.

It is true also to a certain extent that children learn best what they learn gladly. There is, however, a danger that the new education may run counter to the best interests of the pupil and of society, by causing a mental confusion between work and play. Under the new system the children are happy, it seems. Happiness is a by-product of healthful mental entertainment and physical activity. It is also, in its purest and rarest form, a by-product of hard, exacting and even bitter labour, when that labour is intelligently undertaken and perseveringly carried through. Setting aside all question of social utility, do we judge it fair, while offering the child an easy and pleasant school life, to neglect the path to the best kind of happiness he can ever know? In other words, why encourage him in supposing that discipline is useless as well as unpleasant, when human experience clearly indicates that, properly employed, it is the only means to the highest values that life has to offer?

Again, no one will question the value of joint undertakings as a training for cooperative citizenship. The danger is that these may trespass on other and even more important aspects of education. In the enthusiasm for joint activity, how easy it is to forget that thinking, if it is done at all, must be done alone! All real mental training is an individual process. There is a common ground on which rational minds can meet, but each must find its own path there. "Thinking", says a contemporary writer "is a difficult and painful process"—and yet on it all the material and moral good of society depends. How disastrous if the attractions of the new education should lead to neglect of this difficult, painful, and solitary process!

One other aspect of the new education is worth attention. The teacher is not to order, but to encourage and guide. He is to "get the lead from the pupils". In order to encourage spontaneity and original activity, text-books are frequently abolished. To anyone familiar with the abuses of the rigid text-book and examination method, this seems a welcome change. In the hands of thoughtless enthusiasts, it too has its dangers. A teacher discussing with her superintendent a certain course of study, remarked that she had found a good reference and meant to use it as a guide. He protested in horror. All set books and programmes were absolutely taboo. The teacher must "get the lead" from the class, without obtruding her own plans.

Although any intelligent teacher will automatically adapt his programme to the apparent interest and comprehension of the pupils, this interpretation of the new methods must lead to the worst consequences. The lead will not come from the whole class, but from the two or three most talkative members. A course on South America began with Trinidad because one child had an uncle who had once been there. Not only is such a hit-and-miss approach objectionable in itself, but it prevents serious study and careful planning by the teacher. Such a preparation is the foundation of all sound instruction even in the simplest of manual arts, and far more so when a large and complicated field must be presented. The suggestion that the teacher should get the lead from the pupils is therefore valid only in a very limited sense. Even if the teacher is a guide only, what guide ever gets the lead from his followers? If the idea is only to let the pupils *think* they give the lead, the whole thing becomes a farce which the pupils would be the first to despise.

It is worth remarking that the popularity of the new education in many quarters depends less on its virtues than on its

vices. The educational leaders of this continent, in the grip of a pseudoscientific mania, take endless delight in measuring educational achievements and photographing educational processes. Class-room projects and activities are easy to measure and photograph, and are therefore in high favour. Seeing is believing. Parents, teachers and children alike can see with their own eyes that education is taking place. Unfortunately, the true educational process is, as has been said, a matter of the individual mind. It cannot be seen with the naked eye, nor with the lens of the camera. Its returns to the individual and to society come in surely, but very slowly.

It is important to notice that the new education, like the system against which it revolts, finds much of its support in certain false notions of democracy. The increase in manual activity itself is, as has been shown, a partial concession to those who cannot think, and therefore may be a detriment to those who can—a dangerous sacrifice to democratic equalitarianism. Again, the insistence on pleasure in learning is a revolt against discipline as undemocratic. There is nothing undemocratic about discipline. No one ever achieved self-discipline without first accepting discipline from others. The stress on group activity represents the truth that democracy requires team work and cooperation; it ignores the equally important truth that democracies live by the achievements of solitary original thinkers. Without these, they are bound to collapse into the mass hysteria that throws up a Hitler. Finally, the notion that the teacher must get the lead from the pupils is an absurd reflection of the absurd belief of the nineteen-thirties that democratic leaders must be pushed from behind. No teacher worth the name would consent to be led by the class or any member of it, any more than Mr. Winston Churchill would consent to take dictation from his back-benchers.

Thus, education in many of our high schools is handicapped by a rigid and lifeless system which instructs but does not educate. In the elementary schools there is a new freedom and vigour, but again there is a danger of forgetting the true meaning of education. In both systems the confusion between equalitarianism and democracy results in a distortion of aim.

It is always easier to point out errors and deficiencies than to remedy them. What is needed above all is a new comprehension of the essentials of a liberal education, and a new interpretation of them in relation to democratic life. This cannot be done by any legislative or administrative reform. It must be

done by the teachers themselves in their class-rooms. They may receive ideas from outside, but they themselves will determine how and when those ideas can be applied. It is safe to say that the soundest approach to educational reform is to raise the standard of the work done by the individual teacher. There are three ways in which this may be done: attract a larger number of highly qualified men and women into the profession; give them freedom to do their work in the best way; make education a national instead of a provincial concern.

Most people would admit that, with certain happy and important exceptions, the teaching profession does not generally attract the best minds. It is a safe profession, with few grave risks and few rewards; adventurous and ambitious minds look elsewhere. It is a profession which exacts a constant, heavy toll on nerves and temper; a brilliant but temperamental teacher cannot stand it, nor can his pupils. On the other hand, the phlegmatic lover of routine can get through, and often does. The professional hazards are grave; those who miss a nervous breakdown drift into stolid complacency, and all face a penurious old age.

We cannot remedy all these evils, but we can make the material conditions of teaching more tolerable. Salaries should be adequate, and promptly paid. Teachers should be allowed to devote themselves to teaching and to preparation therefor; their other social activities should be voluntary, and not thrust upon them by over-enthusiastic school boards and superintendents. Classes should be of a reasonable size; no one can teach a mob of fifty.

Even such simple and obvious reforms would do much to raise the standards of the teaching profession; first, by enabling the many able people now in it to do their best work; and second, by attracting many who have been going into other lines. A more important and fundamental reform, however, is urgently needed. The surest way of attracting the best people into the profession and of giving them a chance to do their best work is to give them freedom from excessive bureaucratic control, the second evil of which Dr. Murray complained. If British education is cramped by it, Canadian education is in danger of strangulation.

In most, if not all, provinces, normal schools are directly under the Department of Education and high schools under local boards. Both are departmentally controlled by a uniform system of text-books and examinations. This means that the institutions

from which many teachers are recruited are deprived of all initiative and freedom to improve and advance. Teaching, it should be repeated, is an individual process. Each individual must develop his own technique, each school staff must lay down, within certain limits, its own policy and programme, or the best possible results will not be achieved.

This does not mean that there should be no universal standards. At set periods students should submit to general examinations, but the examinations should test for understanding and power, not for a parrot-like knowledge of certain prescribed texts. Does it matter what the French class reads, so long as it learns good French? Does it matter whether students of English read Wordsworth or Shelley, Shakespeare or Milton, so long as they know and love good literature?

Surely, granted a broad general unity of aim, a healthy liberty to differ on special objectives and methods is the essence of democracy in education. The secondary schools of Britain, or some of them, have this liberty; until the secondary schools of Canada have it, Canadian education will not be worthy of the ability and money that we devote to it. Given this liberty, active and intelligent experimentation would soon sift the good from the bad in educational systems old and new. When all experiments are imposed on schools as a system from government departments staffed, at best, with teachers long retired, erroneous ideas become unbearable burdens and even sound ones become sterile in their application.

It is urged that departmental control is necessary to "keep up the standards". It serves equally well to keep down the standards. It will never make good teachers out of bad ones. It may easily cramp the good teachers, or drive them from the profession.

Better working conditions, and greater academic freedom, would automatically raise the standards of the teaching profession. One thing more is needed: a national system of education. If education is the key to the world of the future, why should Canadian education, at this crucial period in our national life, not be a matter of national concern? This does not mean that the Dominion should do in the future what the provinces do now. Instead of that, the emancipation of the schools from bureaucratic control should be accompanied by a broad national programme of education, which should maintain standards of achievement, but without any dictation of methods. For developing such a programme, and devising ways of

promoting it, the best minds in the Dominion—and these are not confined to educational experts—should be secured. There need be nothing in such a national programme contrary to religious freedom, but quite the reverse.

At present, education in Canada is in danger of being starved by false ideas of democracy and strangled by bureaucratic interference. What is needed is a new comprehension of democracy, which translates equality not in terms of uniformity, but of liberty in unity; and a new comprehension of education, which translates education not in terms of examinations passed or of "projects" completed, but as the development of all human faculties not excepting the highest of all—the power of creative thought.