

SOME PHILOSOPHIZING ABOUT EDUCATION

By K. A. BAIRD

MANY criticisms of our present educational system have been made by various individuals whose opinions should have some value and whose object seems to be the commendable one of improving the development of the younger generation. Some of these criticisms have been printed and published but a great many more, particularly those made by parents are merely vocal. The following few philosophical considerations about the subject are written in the first person to indicate to you that they are merely the personal opinions of one individual.

I am not being facetious when I suggest that it might be a helpful thing to scrap the word education altogether and substitute "inducation". Of course according to some of the suggestions of writers like Lynd and Bestor we would have to explain to at least some of the present Nabobs of education in the United States the difference in meaning which the change in prefix would make. There is considerable evidence that our educationists in Canada did not follow those in the United States too far in the matter of "cutting the public schools loose from the disciplines of science and scholarship."

I shall not presume to give you a definition of the purposes of education, but it might help if we think about it for a time. In primitive tribes and society education took place in the home or near it. Perhaps some of it was formal in the matter of initiating the adolescent into certain tribal rites, but for the most part the process was just the natural outcome of the desire of the youth to develop to the status of an adult. Two things were required in this process; namely, (1) skills in work and arts and (2) knowledge which had been accumulated by previous generations of (a) facts, some of which were real and some probably only supposed; (b) methods, customs, and traditions which had been developed by the society for its smoother running.

Probably most of the process by which the youth acquired his skills and knowledge was a pleasant one. Some times it involved hard work and probably some times a good deal of discomfort and yet I think that these were all pleasurable for the most part, because of the joy of accomplishment and the feeling of growing up which it gave to the child or youth. As a side issue he was learning a good deal about how to think and how to distinguish—so far as his elders knew—between the

true and therefore the valuable, and the false (and therefore valueless).

Society had not moved very far from the primitive before there was a certain amount of division of labour, and while a youth could learn most of the skills and knowledge which were available to the society in which he was placed there were certain ones of a special nature which were left for the most part to specialists in these fields. Examples of these specialists fields in early society would be those which dealt with the occult or relations with the spirit world. Mixed up with this at a very early stage was whatever knowledge was available concerning the treatment of sickness and injuries. The making of weapons and tools probably also was one of the early skills which was left to a few.

Today we have reached a period where as Alexis Carrel points out: "The complexity of our civilization is immense. No one can master all its mechanisms. However these mechanisms must be mastered."

This process of multiplying skills and knowledge has been proceeding very rapidly during the last generation. When I was a medical student, for example, it was possible for a brilliant man to be outstanding in practically all the branches of the medical arts. When my teacher, Dr. J. G. MacDougall, died in 1950 it was said he had been "a skilled physician, a urologist of great ability, a gynaecologist and a surgeon." Today each of these branches of the medical arts has a few sub-specialities which are quite capable of occupying the full time and attention of a rather brilliant individual.

If the purpose of education is still what it once was, and I think it is, then it is easy to see that at some point in the process there must be today a *choice* both of the work or art in which skill is to be acquired, and of the branch of human knowledge about which the individual plans to learn some facts as well as the accepted patterns of behaviour, both ancient and modern, whereby further knowledge can be acquired.

It is of course no longer possible for all the skills and knowledge to be learned in the home. The custom was gradually developed of having special teachers for certain skills and knowledge to teach the children, either in the home of a wealthy patron, or coming from several homes. In other words schools were developed. At first these were privately supported by those who patronized them. In this country within the memory of my father so many people wanted their children educated that the system of supporting schools by taxation was developed.

These have been rapidly taking on more and more responsibility for types of education which used to be given in the home. Is it possible that this process has been carried to extremes?

Personally I think this is one of the important causes of some of the difficulties which our educationists are having at the present time. They are spreading their efforts too widely! Many of their activities are attempts to do what could be done much better in the home, or by certain voluntary institutions. Of course the answer which is likely to be made to such a statement is to the effect that the homes are not doing it and somebody has to. It seems to me there is an underlying philosophy here which is quite faulty. If the home is the appropriate place and parents the appropriate people to provide certain parts of the total education of children, and if the schools attempt to take this over because it is not being done or being done poorly by the parents in the home, then is it not true that the schools are encouraging the most appropriate persons to neglect what they should do instead of encouraging and stimulating them to do it? Not only does this type of activity encourage and thereby increase neglect of parental duty, but it also wastes the time of teachers who should be spending their whole energy at their proper job. During the time when my own children were attending high school I frequently got the impression that in certain respects many of the teachers broke an important rule. This rule is "don't take *yourself* too seriously." They seemed to think that what they were doing was the *only* contribution to the education of the children, and resented the time the young people spent in such activities as carried on by the Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A., or in studying music and even in taking care of their health,—for example dental appointments, etc. I gather from comments of some parents that there is still a considerable amount of this attitude in the minds of some high school teachers.

How would it be for the schools to stop trying to be substitute parents? What if they limit their activities to being substitutes for the parents in the special fields of youth training for which parents are justified in paying the schools, throwing back to the parents (where they belong) such matters as training in religion and morals, good citizenship and good sportsmanship, development of a healthy body and interesting hobbies. In other words how about expecting teachers to impart the basic skill of writing and certain basic knowledge, as well as some idea of how to think independently, and not to spend any time in formally teaching *other* than intellectual disciplines? Of course

good teachers could not avoid *influencing* their pupils along right lines nor should they.

For many years I have known that most young people suffer from what I called negativism, and except for memorizing facts or formal statements, they can be best taught by the method of indirection. For example, what they see their elders doing and what they hear their elders saying *among themselves* becomes part of their own behaviour and belief far more easily than direct instruction. This idea was suggested in 1953 by Dr. R. C. Wallace speaking at Charlottetown. Having pointed out that judgment, control, and timing (not to mention some moral values) are acquired in games, as well as development of the body, he said about the teaching of morals: "There has not at any time been a clearcut way of dealing with the inculcation of moral principles. There has always been some doubt as to whether the direct approach is the sound way. Children—and grownups—resent moral preachments; or, to be less dogmatic, children beyond the tender years develop a sort of passive resistance to this kind of teaching. It seems to come indirectly. In the football field, or in the projects or enterprises in the classroom, one learns to cooperate by cooperating. Some incident arises that shows how great importance the teacher puts on truth, and the lesson is learned unforgetably. The story of some great man's life makes clear the principles that guided him. Biological literature is effective in inculcating moral principles without seeming to do so. Most effective of all, of course, is the teacher. Actions count much more powerfully than words, and young people are acute observers. A great teacher can mould character, and the greatest do so with the least words. We live life; we do not speak it." In the matter of religious teaching Dr. Wallace suggested, "But here again, as elsewhere, we come back to the teacher, not in words, but in personality. The man or woman who is religious, in the deeper sense of the word, cannot fail to show to others, and most of all to observant young people, that there is a faith that goes out beyond the transitory issues that have to be faced day by day into the eternal verities and the Divine powers that control our comings out and goings in. Fortunate are the institutions that have such men and women in their midst. Doubly fortunate are the young people who are influenced by them."

Please do not think I am not aware of some of the neglect of children in many homes today. I am inclined to agree with Dr. E. P. Searlett, Chancellor of the University of Alberta, who said to a teachers' convention in Calgary that one of the greatest

problems facing schools is the increasing failure of parents to discipline their children; "we can't educate until the home civilizes children."

I agree with Very Rev. Matthew Meehan, Director of St. Mary's Redemptorists College, Brockville, Ontario, when in a radio address on the subject, "Are Canadians Honest in Education?", he began by telling parents they must make decisions for their children and enforce them. Young children must not decide for themselves what their amusements shall be and how they spend their time, without discipline from parents until they have learned to discipline themselves.

Concerning an article in *Time* about the lack of discipline in New York schools—going almost to the point where the youth were running the schools,—a letter to the Editor stated:

"Sir:

The condition of the student morale and morals in the New York public schools is little more than parents today deserve. The strip-film projector is no substitute for mother love, the basketball game for rabbit hunting with Dad. The sooner parents return to the fundamental philosophy of home as the center of family life, the better off the kids will be. . . . Some people acclaim TV as the savior of the family at home. This still avoids the main issue: love and affection for one another.

PRESTON STEDMAN,
Bloomington, Ind."

Do you imagine that courses on ethics and morals, or good citizenship can substitute for what this man suggests is needed from parents? Or is there still some truth in what a man wrote about 1900 years ago, "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life"?

After writing to this point I found that Alexis Carrel has written on the same subject as follows: "Modern society ignores the individual. It only takes account of human beings. It believes in the reality of the Universals and treats men as abstractions. The confusion of the concepts of individuals and of human being has led industrial civilization to a fundamental error, the standardization of men. If we were all identical, we could be reared and made to live and work in great herds, like cattle. But each one has his own personality. He cannot be treated like a symbol. Children should not be placed, at a very early age, in schools where they are educated wholesale. As is well known, most great men have been brought up in com-

parative solitude, or have refused to enter the mould of the school. Of course, schools are indispensable for technical studies. They also fill, in a certain measure, the child's need of contact with other children. But education should be the object of unflinching guidance. Such guidance belongs to the parents. They alone, and more especially the mother, have observed, since their origin, the physiological and mental peculiarities whose orientation is the aim of education. Modern society has committed a serious mistake by entirely substituting the school for the familial training. The mothers abandon their children to the kindergarten in order to attend to their careers, their social ambitions, their sexual pleasures, their literary or artistic fancies, or simply to play bridge, go to the cinema, and waste their time in busy idleness. They are, thus, responsible for the disappearance of the familial group where the child was kept in contact with adults and learned a great deal from them. Young dogs brought up in kennels with others of the same age do not develop as well as puppies free to run about with their parents. It is the same with children living in a crowd of other children, and with those living in the company of intelligent adults. The child easily molds his physiological, affective, and mental activities upon those of his surroundings. He learns little from children of his own age. When he is only a unit in a school he remains incomplete. In order to reach his full strength, the individual requires the relative isolation and the attention of the restricted social group consisting of the family."

One might add that all great civilizations which have endured have been based on the family unit.

Do we then need a completely new approach to Public education, rather than just tinkering? Is the philosophy of many present day educationists false, particularly in their seeming belief that they should hold themselves responsible for doing for the next generation whatever no one else is doing for them? What should be the purpose of public education? Dr. J. W. Reid of Halifax in his presidential address to the Medical Society of Nova Scotia (October, 1953) said "In the light of the truth that a sound and progressive medical service must always rest upon an educated profession, medical teachers have been afraid to drop a line or a lecture from the curriculum lest they be accused of lowering the standards of medical education. The result is an overcrowded course and a driven student. "Education, however, is not to be found in a hurried brain overcrowded with facts and the knowledge of technical skills.

but rather in a mind trained to recognize pertinent facts, to consider them rationally and to act upon them wisely. Man cannot reason without facts, nor can he think with facts alone!"

In the address from which I have already quoted Dr. R. C. Wallace has this paragraph: "The world is full of facts. They accumulate at an alarming rate day by day. They are necessary as background material for thought. There is the constant danger, in this process of intellectual education, that facts become the master instead of the servant. The memory is taxed with facts which the unfortunate student has to learn, to memorize, to reproduce in examination, and forthwith to forget. Looked at from a practical standpoint, only such facts are valuable as are needed in daily life. With that equipment one can get along, provided one has learned how and where to find other facts when the need for them may occasionally arise. I recall an illuminating experiment that I made at a western university many years ago. I took a bound volume of the examination papers that had been set for the final examinations with me to my summer cottage, and selected the subjects which I had studied as a student many years ago. With the exception of my own particular subject, which I no longer taught and in which I would have made passable marks, I would have averaged not more than ten percent in subjects in which as a student I had made good standing. The factual information had gone from memory, and an overwhelming large part of the examination questions was factual. The disturbing thought had to be faced; is it all worth while? Undoubtedly we need facts as the material with which to think. But do we put enough weight on the thinking process. What would be the reaction of any group of students if they were confronted with a series of questions in examination which could not be answered directly from lecture notes, but which demanded the analysing and thinking through the facts which they had written down in order to determine their significance? And yet this is the process with which we are continuously confronted in actual life. We call it analysis, or reflection, or thinking through, or what you will; it is more than knowledge. It is the fruits of knowledge. The intellectual discipline to which we devote so great a part of formal education, fails unless it inculcates the importance of independent thinking. The system of democracy depends for its very security of men and women who can think for themselves and have the courage to act according to their convictions "

If we make a new approach to public education should we

scrap some teaching of facts (real and supposed) in order to teach pupils how and where to find many more if and when they need them? And if necessary should we scrap a few more in order to teach youth to think? What about training and fostering imagination? Do teachers stifle this of necessity in order to prepare pupils to pass examinations about facts, some of which will be "debunked" in a generation?

In schools, as in our general society, is there today too much doing and not enough thinking? F. D. Leamer, Personnel Director, A.T. & T., at N.Y.U. School of Education, said: "Teachers and professors, whether they be in the business school or in the schools of science and engineering, must do more than teach the works of dead men and women. They must somehow learn to teach their students to think creatively. Creative thinking is closely related to imagination. Most children have it when they begin their education but many have lost it by the time they graduate from college. I implore you as teachers to keep this characteristic alive in your students—this ability to think creatively. Imagination, like many other parts of our being, must be used, trained and developed in order for it to grow straight. It grows stronger in use. You can't wear it out. Neglect it, fail to exercise it, forget it. . . . atrophy sets and we lose its power."

Just as in medicine the internist does not attempt surgery or obstetrics, no matter how much the patient requires such services, so would it not be wise for the schools to avoid trying to be substitute homes, or churches? Mind you, the internist does not deny the need for the other specialities, nor vice versa, but each trusts that enough good men will appear in the other fields to care for those in need. Is operation home, done by educators, likely to be curative, or deadly? Or do you think I am stretching the figure too far?