THE EVILS OF AMERICAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS: ARCHAIC METHODS OF EDUCATION CONDEMNED AND PRACTICAL REMEDIES SUGGESTED: BY PARKER H. SERCOMBE

MODERN civilization is confronted with the alternative of saving the child or preserving the traditional ideals of education still insisted upon by professional educators. While it is freely admitted on every hand that all reforms focus in education, that future diminution in crime, graft, debauchery, divorce, cost of courts and of police, must depend upon implanting wholesome habits and tendencies in the child while of impressionable age, that vital period of life is still sacrificed to the fetish of class-room decorum, theory culture, examinations, etc.

The thought of the professional educator is not based upon cause and effect, upon the development of efficiency in the line of life the pupil will follow, but, as all "examinations" clearly indicate, the aim is to perpetuate the old "institution of learning" in its own image and preserve its traditional ideals intact.

Only a few even of our practical psychologists are fully cognizant of the invariable presence of theory perversion in all those mentalities whose training from eight to sixteen has been unrelated to practice and object lessons—a training that results in the loss of the faculty which would enable them to make use of the knowledge acquired—the training that is responsible for all irrational, impractical, dreamy, mystical and confused thinking that is representative of the inefficient, superstitious and criminal portion of our population.

The so-called reforms that are occupying the minds of so many well-intentioned and philanthropic persons are merely the doctoring of symptoms—merely pulling up weeds implanted by our own wrong procedure; the only cure being education, but essentially the education that places character culture first, commercial qualifications second and book culture third, with the greatest stress where the need is greatest, less where it is less and least where it is least.

With the object of ascertaining the caliber of the Chicago Board of Education (appointed through politics without regard to prepara-
tion or fitness) and with a faint hope that perhaps one or two out of
the twenty-one members might be sufficiently grounded in the art
of educating to profit by my suggestion or at least show some interest
in the matter presented, I recently addressed them the following com-
munication, sending individual copies to each member:

July 7, 1909.

To the Chicago Board of Education, Gentlemen:—

With no other desire than to assist in a general way in bringing "education"
to a higher state of efficiency, I ask the privilege of addressing the Board for
fifteen minutes at an early meeting, and will confine myself to the two following
subjects:

First—the lack of adjustment of the school system and curriculum to the
changing exigencies of city life, with special reference to children who are brought
up in apartment houses and flats, with no chores, no means being supplied in the
schools to develop industry, initiative and a willingness to do—faculties that cannot
be developed from books or in class rooms.

Second—the grave danger and disorganizing effects which must result from
teaching theory in class rooms, separated from or made precedent to, practice and
object lessons. The effect produced under the present system is to start the pupil
out with a wrong viewpoint toward all the affairs of life. Minds so trained are
incapable of bringing the knowledge they obtain into use either for purposes of
thought or action. Such minds are marked for confusion of thought and under
the suggestion or influence of wrong conditions easily drift into criminality,
 mysticism, graft or other forms of perversion. It is only through the inductive
method whereby the child is enabled to develop theory out of practice and object
lessons, the same as Lincoln, McCormick, Grant and Armour did in their child-
hood, that theory perversion can be avoided and the leisure class régime of life be
prevented from fastening itself upon the victim as a persistent, all-pervading
microbe.

The allotment of fifteen minutes of the valuable time of your Board will
enable me to make a demonstration of these two points so self-evident and con-
vincing that if incorporated in your future deliberations will eventually lead to a
reconstruction of what is now called "education."

Yours respectfully,
PARKER H. SERCOMBE.

COULD a more fundamental appeal in the interest of a higher
civilization possibly be made to an educational body? Yet not
the slightest attention was paid to it by a single member, at
least, not an echo came to my ears. Is this not significant of the lack
of vision of those who from childhood have been so drilled and hedged
about with the prevailing régime of the schools as to blind them com-
pletely to the importance of the vital facts presented? But is not this
the history of every advanced idea that has ever been presented to
unprepared minds? No matter how vital or self-evident a new truth
may be, it is not grasped by the average sage in power until it becomes
the fashion to accept it or until its announcement comes from one
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of acknowledged authority—and why? Because the membership
of legislative bodies and school boards is made up of those with
theory-perverted minds, a result of wrong training in childhood.

It is not sufficient to fall back on the old adage, all new ideas
advance slowly, etc. The reason why ideas advance slowly is because
for centuries our method of education has been along the line of theory
perversion—people do not have harmonized minds and bodies, and
hence lack the initiative to put thought into action for its own sake,
but permit the fashion of thinking (public opinion) to gradually
drive them into new mental positions. Theory perversion impels
sluggish minds and bodies into unwillingness to either think or do
beyond what is actually forced upon them, hence the criminal as
well as the dogmatist.

Before proceeding further to trace out the evils lurking in our
present educational system, let us briefly review its growth as an
institution and thereby discover the underlying reasons why an
institution of such vast importance should have come down to us from
the ages in a form so lacking in efficiency, and so entirely separated
from the methods that might insure good character, strong bodies
and high social and civic efficiency in place of the utterly artificial,
unbalanced and perverted mental viewpoint toward life that the
schools continue to impart.

Independent of whether institutions are good or evil (there are
none that are wholly good or wholly evil, not even the church, materia
medica, marriage, slavery) in their struggle for existence they in-
v invariably show the same determination as man, animals and all other
life forms, to perpetuate themselves in their own image. Once an
"institution" is established, whether creed, cult or educational
system, the individuals having its destiny in charge invariably struggle,
plan, and often plot to the death, in order to see to it that those who
take charge during each generation shall cling to the original ideals,
motives and methods.

REALIZING the importance of this principle, I sent the follow-
ing communication to our Chicago School Board on the eve
of their election of a superintendent; not that it was expected
to influence them, but as a matter of record for future purposes, to
know that they were not lacking in information on the subject, even
though it should not be made use of:

To the Chicago Board of Education, Gentlemen:—

The public-school system having continued to follow tradition instead of
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July 14, 1909.

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The public-school system having continued to follow tradition instead of
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a condition which on analysis proves that the prevailing curriculum is artificial, lacks utility, fails to develop efficiency in the pupil; in fact, implants tendencies of mind which lead toward confusion of thought and criminality.

No greater error could be made at this time than to appoint a superintendent of schools from the ranks of professional educators, for all such have been so drilled and hedged around from their earliest childhood training with the prevailing educational ideals as to inhibit their vision in relation to the needs of the hour—they are unable to see the present discrepancies or devise plans for overcoming them.

My communication to your Board is purely with the object of laying this most important fact before each member, and the more it is thought upon the stronger will be the realization that what Chicago now needs is an open-minded superintendent, unhampered by the prevailing ideals which invariably hold the mentalities of professional educators in a vise-like grasp and permit them to do no more than to merely help perpetuate in its own image the ancient educational régime we are now using.

Yours respectfully,

PARKER H. SERCOMBE.

It is unnecessary to go into the reasons why the educational régime now being operated in America has conformed to tradition rather than been subjected to the principle of cause and effect; though it is by the latter plan (profiting by experience) that every material improvement in the world has been obtained.

Unhappily, moral culture and education have respectively been institutionalized in church and school. Entirely independent of the practical trend in human thought in every other field, these two institutions have persisted in following the ideals and régimes of hundreds and even thousands of years ago, long before modern knowledge and devices were dreamed of, before the day of railway, telegraph and telescope, when the average man’s daily and often yearly range of observation did not extend beyond a fifteen-mile radius.

CONFINING ourselves to the institution of education, we find that like dress, it originated more for ornament than use. Even after the classics were translated into all the Continental languages, those fortunate mortals selected for education continued to be taught Greek, Latin and ancient lore; for in the early days of book learning only those who were expected to become members of the leisure class received an education. The one dominant fact stands out that the original scheme of education implied nothing more than a culture given to a small ruling class, made up of the official, military and ecclesiastical satellites of the ruler, and on the other hand there was the very large and always uneducated class, whose function was to remain in ignorance and to obey.
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It is in a degree anticipating what will be stated farther on, to say that down to this very hour in every avenue of human thought and activity, but especially manifest in the field of education, this same association of wealth, church and state with their leisure-class ideals of education are still fanatically struggling to maintain control through the old traditional régimes, and the colossal joke on this country of ours is that we are now preparing our entire population to become members of the leisure class by imparting only a leisure-class scheme of education.

Breaking away from the condition of tyrannical control that has held Russia, Italy and Spain to an average of ninety per cent. illiteracy among their plodding, toiling, subservient masses, we here in America, and to a large extent in England and Germany, have suddenly become a reading and writing race, a scheme never contemplated in the original régime, as is clearly shown where despotism still reigns.

During the Middle Ages education was entirely in the hands of the priesthood, and as a sign that they themselves were immune from work, they initiated the custom of wearing white collars and cuffs, and as all of their pupils were educated to become members of the priesthood or the ruling class, in order to be known by the same sign, they adopted white collars and cuffs also. The learned educators of the Renaissance took up the problem of education where the priests left off, enlarged, differentiated, specialized, but in no instance have the ideals of democracy forged sufficiently to the front to check the impulse that has stimulated the educational idea in every land and in every clime—the idea of gaining the kind of knowledge that would enable the possessor to live without work, the kind of accomplishments that prepares for membership in a ruling class, and thus to live upon the labor of others.

IN THE early history of America, before the modern flat building was invented, when boys and girls were expected to do their part of the chores and general work, both before and after school, the studying of common branches in small schools with large playgrounds did not have any such utterly annihilating effect on human character as our latter-day variation of immense school buildings with small playgrounds; the pupils who attend these institutions living in congested cities with no chores, no garden work, no duties to perform, and the school providing no substitutes to meet the changed conditions.

Education is still involved with the elements of mystery and reverence. Even as the alchemists and astrologers of yore, our
priests, druggists, physicians and lawyers employ Latin and Greek terms in order to astound and overshadow the common people by the depth and vastness of their learning—so the building of palaces and the employment of gaudy trappings have served to inspire awe in the masses by means of glitter, pomp and grandeur.

Our present scheme of education is merely a plan to prepare children to live upon the labor of others without any attempt to implant habits that would insure health, efficiency and long life; whereas a rational régime, through object lessons in shop and garden to implant the elements of industry, calculation and initiative in the pupil’s character, would eliminate four-fifths of the present crime, graft, debauchery, divorce and costs of courts and police, which are all undergoing an alarming percentage of increase.

Independent of creeds and codes, the infant absorbs the morality of its environment and associations in the same way that it absorbs the language or dialect of the family in which it is reared, and this is the true process of all education.

External control, through the medium of commandments, force, punishment, banishment, has proven a failure for thousands of years. Compulsion has invariably succeeded in merely creating a demand for more compulsion; hence the only way to effectively eliminate friction in human society and establish an enduring equilibrium is through development from within, through a system of education that will mold internal character to a voluntary acquiescence to the rational needs of society.

THERE are in Chicago alone thousands of parents who declare that their children are being taught nothing of value; that through their impressionable years, from eight to sixteen, they are being kept five hours a day in close stuffy class rooms; that no means are supplied for developing the qualities of initiative and industry during this period; that theory and book culture are taught to the exclusion of practice and object lessons, thus developing theory-perverted minds and unbalancing the reasoning powers forever after; that leisure-class ideas are taught exclusively, even to children of foreign peasants, thus adding them to our already large army of incompetents. These thinking parents have come to the conclusion that the system which implants the idea of getting something for nothing in the minds of the children and the desire to live upon the labor of others, is the worst form of race suicide.

More than fifty per cent. of all intelligent parents of the middle class are fully aware that there is something fundamentally wrong
with our school system; they know that their children are not being made efficient; they know, too, that they themselves are helpless in the hands of professional educators and that their children under present school treatment grow lazy, anaemic, near-sighted, and naturally drift toward cigarettes, rowdyism and criminality. Business men are well aware that the graduates from our public schools who work in offices and stores are lacking in alertness and often hopelessly inefficient. But most of our business men are too much engrossed to insist that our Mediaeval methods of education should be displaced by a rational system which aims at efficiency and results in the life work for which every boy and girl should undergo preparation.

It requires no great depth of intellect or scholastic training to indicate the reason why even in this age of wonderful achievements in science, mechanics and the arts, we still retain the artificial educational ideals initiated in the Middle Ages. Briefly, education, like dress, originated as an ornament and not for use. In America the public school has become sanctified as an institution, and instead of basing our methods upon experience and results, we have blindly followed tradition until we find in operation from the Atlantic to the Pacific, a school system that is especially adapted to the overthrowing of intelligence, the blighting of initiative, the crushing out of all tendencies to industry, to undermining the natural growth of such habits as would insure health and long life.

The remedy is simple and can be inferred by pointing out three important elements which traditional education entirely overlooks:

First, that such a false motive for obtaining education as at present exists in the public schools, continuing as it does through the impressionable years of life, cannot but result in a corresponding perversity of motive in maturity. Thus if our present scheme is, as it seems, to prepare children to live upon the labor of other people, this will remain their chief stimulus to action in later life.

Second, that there is and must be a reason for the doing of every task. When this fact has been made clear by frequent proof not only would a much needed link between thought and action be established, but reasons will become not mere theories, finding sufficient expression by their verbal statement, but will be definite stimuli to action. The reasons and theories should be made subsequent and subordinate to object lessons and practice; in fact, all theory culture should be worked out by practice in garden and shop, for this is the only manner by which a mind can be drilled to have the right perspective, the right viewpoint toward the facts of life. All children trained exclusively in class rooms are likely to have theory-perturbed
minds, incapable of making use of the knowledge they have acquired.

Third, even as morality cannot be taught as a class study, but is bound to be an incidental absorption from environment and association, so all education, including the "three R's," should be the outgrowth of practice and object lessons, in the same way that an infant learns to speak the language of the family without order, decorum or examinations. Let a child work until he craves the help of books, instead of studying until he forgets the need of work.

Such an education can best be accomplished in buildings designed for forty or fifty pupils. A one- or two-story building should be in the center of a fair-sized garden or small farm, the main structure to be suitably divided into shops for wood-working, metal-working, weaving and sewing, printing and binding, art work, painting and finishing, cooking, etc.

At the front entrance should be the office of the school and a general showroom wherein the products of the shops, garden or farm could be properly displayed for the benefit of visitors and customers, and part of the education of each pupil should be how to approach customers, how to interest them, how to explain the quality of the products, the system employed, the workmanship, etc., and everything produced should as far as possible be salable and have a useful, practical or artistic purpose. The cultivation of flowers, bees, vegetables, berries and fruits should be recognized as a regular part of education.

The class room (no examinations) should be a separate building connected by a passageway, and for class purposes there should be a relief globe and other apparatus designed to give a correct idea of the world we live upon, its formation, its power of production, etc., and with this knowledge as a nucleus the problems of transportation, distribution, together with the economic, social, intellectual and political growth of the various races of the world, should become matters of constant repetition and thorough understanding. Pupils should not spend more than one hour a day in class room, the balance of their time to be employed in objective work in the shops or garden; everything done to be for a useful purpose, either in the filling of orders and contracts taken in the neighborhood, the making of tables, chairs, desks, bookcases, or in making such repairs as the facilities of the shops permit.

Of course, such schools would require from three to five teachers each to supervise the various departments; they should be specially instructed in that most important feature of all in teaching, viz., to assume constantly the right attitude toward the pupil, and every
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school should be brought as near a self-supporting basis as possible.

Although the extra expense for supplying materials, paraphernalia and instruction for such schools would be larger than the present system of education, the general cost might be much reduced through the sale of products; besides, as the present expenditure in America for liquors, tobacco and prostitution is ten times greater than what is spent on the entire cost of education, but a small degree of abstemiousness would be needed to divert a few millions from debauchery toward enlightenment.

Separated from the demands of professional educators and from the whims of incompetent parents imbued with the false ambitions and impotent longings of an artificial age, education should be nothing more than the child’s preparation during its impressionable years for such duties of life and citizenship as it will be called upon to perform after reaching maturity.

THE PRAYER

MY ANSWERED prayer came up to me,
And in the silence thus spake he:
“Oh, you who prayed for me to come,
“Your greeting is but cold and dumb.”

My heart made answer “You are fair,
“But I have prayed too long to care.
“Why came you not when all was new,
“And I had died for joy of you?”

SARA TEASDALE.