CAN YOUR CHILD REALLY READ?

Why Our High Schools Are in Collapse

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Two world wars and a ten-year depression have not sobered educators so much as has the human material with which they work. The difficulties they have in dealing with it have harassed them to distraction and caused them to grasp at any fad that promises relief. When educators write for one another they envelop their statements in a cloak of pedagogic lingo in order that as public servants they may not be charged with lack of faith in democracy. Yet it is common gossip inside the profession that at least a third of the entire secondary school population—grades nine to twelve—are incapable of mastering the stock tools of learning (reading and writing) well enough to profit from textbook instruction.

This is no diatribe against the schools. No method and no brilliance of teaching can improve these youths enough to make any appreciable difference in their literacy. By testing any graduating class or any high school in the country, the skeptic can see for himself what is an old story to teachers: that a third of the high school cannot read on a fifth-grade level or write a coherent paragraph reasonably free of errors. So awkwardly and painfully are the three R's used by these fourteen-to-eighteen-year-olds that "learning" as it is commonly understood cannot take place, because communication of orderly thought cannot proceed between teacher and pupil.

The pupils who compose this lower one-third are not to be confused with the mentally backward (a far smaller group comprising only about five per cent of a school or less). The great majority of them are normal, wholesome, even talented, responsible youth. They are, to put it simply, non-verbal. Of the six and two-thirds million on the high school rolls in 1940, easily two and one-half million belong to this group.

Nor should they be confused with that "one-third of a nation" of New Deal fame—the ill-housed, ill-clothed, ill-fed. This non-verbal group comprises rich and poor alike.

It is difficult to explain to a parent of a boy or girl, who stands not so very far below the school average, that the average itself may have fallen dangerously low; that the many standard objective tests—the stock-in-trade of most schools—are forever creating their own averages. Tests in reading comprehension and word usage, for instance, are given to tens of thousands of youngsters and the average is taken;

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against this average your high school child is measured. If his score is 72 and the average for ten thousand others is 60, your boy is considered "safely" and strongly above average. If the average or "norm" declines to 50, then of course 60 is well above. Under this relativist system—above-average, average, and below-average—any progressive deterioration of our schools could actually hide the intrinsic performance of your boy in language. This is exactly what has happened.

In the decade 1930–40 the high school enrollment increased over fifty per cent (from 4,399,000 to 6,600,444) while the number of boys and girls of high school age was advancing only seven per cent, and this change brought with it into the high schools the most undifferentiated, heterogeneous mass of humanity ever to be assembled for higher education in the history of the world. In 1940, 1,228,246 diplomas were granted, almost twice as many as in 1930. In that interval, since there was little employment available for boys and girls, all that was left for them to do was to stay at school till they graduated. Inevitably the "norms" went scaling downward, so that by now, as every classroom teacher laments, "average" (called age-grade equivalent by schoolmen) in respect to these "standard" tests does not necessarily indicate enough language ability on the part of the pupil to carry on the traditional verbal procedures.

Democracy is thus brought face to face with the cold fact that one-third of our citizens, although literate by census standards and able to read and write well enough to get along, are impervious to book learning, to the detection of the use of words as weapons, and are therefore ever a prey to demagoguery and a potential threat to democracy.

CHANGE the tradition of education for these millions? Nineteenth-century democracy, culture lovers, and the populace as well, cry in horror, "No! Discrimination." The state accepted long ago the principle that all pupils, bright and dull, were entitled to the same education. But the right to learn does not seem to carry with it the ability to learn or the willingness to learn—as school is now constituted. Thus the old concept, liberal education, is helpless and insufficient in dealing with the greatest human experiment of all times, and as a result high school education in America has virtually collapsed.

Ask any teacher. She knows. Then read some authorities, such as the report of the Modern Language Association of America (1940), the Regents' Inquiry of 1938, or even the Carnegie Report issued in 1932 (on conditions before the depression, when high school was twenty-five per cent more selective than it is now). Then read any educator writing for educators, keeping the secret in the family. J. Paul Leonard, one of the experts from Stanford University, writes in *The School Review* in 1945: "Not more than *half* of our youth can profit by such academic study." We principals realize the state of affairs. You parents have not heard of it yet, though the problem is the most discussed one among educators. We read that "46.6 per cent of the ninth grade made scores in rate of reading lower than the normal for the sixth grade." (McCallister, *Remedial and Corrective Instruction*, 1936.) "Why, more than half of the boys and girls in this section have never learned to read," writes a Maryland superintendent about high school sophomores—who have had nine years of schooling! (The May 1945 *Journal of Education.*)

"Remedial reading" has been tried as a remedy (fully a million 15-year-olds being taught reading over again from scratch); "guidance" has been tried; but the problem remains unsolved. It is obvious that for these millions there can be no high school education worthy of the name; but there they are—in high school! Secondary education has been debased by a sentimentalism that would make of the high school a kind of benevolent institution in which everybody will be granted a diploma for his ego's sake, and where youth may go to wait out a depression, or a reconversion after war.

II

ONE standard answer to the problem at the moment is vocational training. Two and two-thirds millions were taking it by 1942. For boys and girls in states

which by law compel children to stay in school it at least fills their time. But it is not the answer to the problem of preparing them for citizenship—or even to the problem of preparing them to find jobs. And in the battle of vocational vs. liberal education which is now raging among the educators—the storm over progressive education having run its course—neither side seems fully aware that the nature of this third of our high school population is the cause of the controversy, as it is the chief cause of nearly all the controversies over low standards and the automatic promotion policy, and of the controversy over whether or not to teach grammar (this lower third cannot learn it). Both the advocates of vocational education and those of liberal education sidestep the real issue.

Not even the recent Harvard Report recognizes the *nature* of this new high school population. The report of course is aware of the radical change in the high school population, with its concomitant mass of less-gifted pupils. It does point out too that "the chief problem is not to discover the right general education for these able young people but for the less gifted . . . for the great majority in other courses, those who are in those courses precisely because of their lower facility with ideas." But in the use of the term "less gifted" it does not recognize, it seems to me, the large extent of this non-verbal group I describe, and particularly how unreceptive it is to anything like the English the report supposedly advocates for all. As I see it, the report has in mind chiefly (1) the great middle group of pupils (50 per cent, maybe); (2) the gifted, college-deserving group (20 per cent roughly). It is the presence of yet another group that has foundered the whole high school—the non-verbal (easily 30 per cent).

Vocational schools arose in great numbers chiefly because they offered the easiest, the quickest, and indeed the only way (as schools were hamstrung by the book tradition) to dispose of millions of young people who after eight years of schooling could not read well, and who threatened to undermine the whole structure of higher education. But, when a boy cannot read or write in fair fashion, why put him through four years of "mastering" a trade that he can learn in a few months outside, as industry has amply demonstrated during the war, especially when these assembly-line jobs are constantly being eliminated or changed throughout a worker's lifetime? No public school could hope to keep up with these vocational fluctuations.

At present, reconversion is dumping the out-of-school teen-agers back upon the high school. The Philadelphia schools may serve as a sign of what is happening in the rest of the country. "Of 30,000 young people in the 16-year-old age group, about 10,000 are working" (or about to lose their jobs!) is the estimate of Dr. Cushman, associate superintendent of schools, according to the Philadelphia *Record* of September 11. Philadelphia educators are enticing these young people back by granting school credit for past war work. Schoolmen justify this baiting because school offers the pupils what is called "related work"—consisting mostly of books that these pupils have trouble reading. The blunt truth is that these pupils left school either because they could not get along or because they instantly saw that they might as well be paid on the outside for a vocation as stay in school *doing the same thing for nothing*.

THE usual non-vocational solution of the problem is to adjust the work of the other two-thirds to meet the capacities of this lower third; that is, the book obstacle is allowed to remain, but the effort to overcome it is eliminated. This has been a natural solution because it is generally recognized that, for most high school pupils, sustained effort (practice and drills) does not seriously modify their handling of language. For instance, in nearly twenty years of teaching English I never had an upper classman in high school who, after having repeated the course a second year, showed perceptible improvement. "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again" surely does not apply to a pupil striving to master the mere tools of learning after eight years of trying in the elementary school and two more in the high school.

Under such circumstances, what is the school principal to say to the parents? In our democracy, being promoted in school has ceased to be a matter of education

alone; it has become social in significance. Even the reading of books has become a fetish out of all proportion to its worth. Failure in school is thereby wrapped in hypocrisy. If your child fails, his teacher or principal usually tells you that he can do the work but just does not apply himself. But nine times out of ten this is a dishonest statement. The truth is, generally, that the child cannot do the work—that he is a member of this slow-reading third. To say that he does not apply himself is an old gag of the ever-appeasing schoolman, and parents never catch on to it because they want very much to believe it.

For most parents regard passing in school as a child's democratic right, irrespective of whether the child is educated or not. Their primary wish is to have their adolescents pushed through in order to secure an entry into the higher positions that mere possession of a diploma is supposed to bring. Unless a teacher wishes to be picked to pieces by parents, she cannot fail a third of her pupils, and so she passes nearly everybody in this lower third for the sake of harmony—and also for the sake of the pupils themselves, who, she well knows, should not be there in the first place. This parental pressure on the teacher and the principal—after all he is a public servant, not a private headmaster—is contributory to the collapse.

III

One way out of the dilemma is to build high school education around a clear-cut fact: ninety-five per cent of the entire school population, whether verbal or not, possess some gift or talent that is above average. It is just as important to uncover this gift for the non-verbal third (along with the others) as to teach reading and writing; maybe it is more important.

For though nature has not democratically handed out intelligence, it has blessed nearly everyone, even this third which is lowest only by verbal measurement, with enough skill in some direction to create inner satisfaction to himself and service to others. The search to "know thyself" (one's talent) should be the prime business of a school. It is not the same thing as specialized vocational training—in courses constantly becoming obsolete—which is the present substitute for this exploration.

There is not so much relation between native intelligence and one's ability to read and write as the objective test faddists suppose. Furthermore, there are many people who are facile in pronouncing words and writing them into sentences but who are not very good at "thinking"; and others who have high IQ's yet who for the life of them cannot master the mechanics of pronouncing and writing words. In fact, it is not yet decided by most psychologists just what the ability to read or the inability to read does represent—to what extent it measures one's power to think. Different tests put different valuations on these two things. We now know that there is a type of thinking with word symbols, involving manual manipulation plus the imagination to project a finished plan in picture form—the kind of intelligence it takes to build a boat from blueprints.

So if your child does not do well in school, it is not necessarily a calamity. It probably means he is just not good at book learning. Since school requires a mastery of the tools of book learning, commonly called the fundamentals, he may seem a misfit there. In school there's not much to try except books. Sixty-six per cent of school is spent on academic subjects suitable for college entrance. (National Survey of Secondary Education, 1932.) In New York the Regent's Inquiry (1938) found the proportion to be seventy-five per cent. But the misfits in life run much fewer than the misfits in school. People try all sorts of things until they get into what they like and can do well. If earning power is your gauge of the value of education—it is with most parents—remember that your child has a chance of being a contractor, or a practical engineer, or a manager of a dress shop—at $5,000 a year or more—even if he never finishes school. These jobs have nothing to do with reading a book or organizing thought into words at page-length. If you prefer a non-financial criterion, be assured that he may become a happy, useful member of society—though probably not as soon as if his school helped him to discover and realize his special potentialities.

The one thing that will be most likely

to detract from his value to the community —that may even make him a menace to it —is that he may be insufficiently grounded in citizenship. Inevitably the American high school is for all youth the training place for citizenship. To millions citizenship must be taught without books or it will not get taught at all.

How our schools can be reshaped to give these non-verbal millions a training in citizenship suited to their capacities we do not yet know. But one thing is known: a lack of vision prevents us from using already available means and services in the way that they should be used for these non-verbal millions. In proportion to the colossal motion picture industry in our midst, films for teaching citizenship are ridiculously scarce. Last summer, in a seminar in the social studies, sponsored by American University, it was brought out that visual aids in this field are almost nonexistent.

In this day of large-scale production there is no reason why a film library for a school should not be as well stocked as the regular library. The radio, too, is used half-heartedly by schools because it is difficult to synchronize school class hours with outstanding commercial programs. Some colleges are planning their own radio stations; in truth, every state-wide school system should have its own radio station for exclusive use for schools. Also, during the past decades the Boy Scout camps, private summer camps, and C.C.C. camps have demonstrated their worth, yet the public schools neglect this method for dealing with non-verbal youth. What incredibly little use is made of the bus by schools, in a country with many more automobiles than the rest of the world put together! A school trip is still an "event."

Besides, the arts—in contrast to vocational training—are simply not being explored for their possibilities in teaching citizenship to "slow" readers: a school that possesses a hundred recordings and transcriptions is extremely rare; the planned use of the theater by high schools is practically unattempted; the schools' utter neglect of the available, splendid, cheap reproductions of paintings of the American social scene amounts to delinquency. For example: one important function of English is to sharpen the awareness of pupils to their everyday surroundings, chiefly by means of sensuous imagery, notably that of poetry. But non-verbal pupils cannot be reached by such abstractions as words. In spite of both these facts, no American high school that I am aware of systematically substitutes for English the numerous stimulating lithographs which are felicitous for the purpose and in which our country, at present, surpasses all other nations. Finally, the community school itself as workshop is only gingerly being tried, for administrative routine of mass education stands in the way.

Here, then, is a sketch of some pioneering that needs to be done. But it will not be done unless we Americans first recognize that because of the pressure of this non-verbal third on an educational system which is helpless to deal with them, precious little education, even for the others, is now going on.