



Are the teachers' colleges and schools of education mere diploma mills for teachers? The question came home to ALBERT LYND early in his experience as a member of the school board in his home town in Massachusetts. Mr. Lynd took his A.B. and A.M. at Harvard; after a year of further study in Belgium he taught history at Stanford and Harvard; but not until he had been elected to a school board did he appreciate the changes in our public schools and the ironbound and stultifying system which is producing the accredited teachers in the schools today. Mr. Lynd speaks as a parent and an ex-teacher now happily established in business in Boston.

QUACKERY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

by ALBERT LYND

I

NEXT to the minister, the high school principal of thirty years ago was the most learned fellow in town. Today you may find your local high school in charge of a brisk Kiwanian whose "professional" training has been free of the elements of traditional culture. His teaching experience may have had nothing to do with letters or science; it may have been in auto driving or basketball or pattern-making or "guidance"; no matter in any case, because what counts in the advancement of his career is his accumulation of courses in "administration." He may even wear the splendid title of Doctor, earned through researches into the theory and function of a school cafeteria. He may not be able to decipher the Latin date on the cornerstone of his own school building, or to read a single word in any other foreign language, living or dead, or even to write a decently turned paragraph in English, but he can lead an enraptured class discussion in *A Democratic Solution of Our Traffic Problem*.

Who or what is responsible for the change? As a parent required by law to submit your youngster to the ministrations of the local school and to pay taxes for its support, it may occur to you that the question of who gave whom the authority to make all such changes may be even more disturbing than the reforms themselves. It occurred to me after some experience on a suburban school board.

The traditional educational system tried to improve the student's private universe by pumping into him as much as he could hold of objective information. The elementary steps were rigid drillings in reading, writing, and arithmetic; the youngster who could not handle these was pilloried as a dunce. The new dispensation seeks rather to educe "skills" for "socially useful" results, although it is not very clear who the umpires of these results are supposed

to be. The elementary approach is subjective; the student's interest is teased through painless projects appealing to his natural inclinations. The dunce is abolished as psychologically reprehensible.

Wherever the newer rite has strongly prevailed, there have been some parental complaints that children today seem not to be able to read, write, and calculate as well as they once could at the same age. As a parent I have found the explanation contradictory when cleared of the usual pedagogical jargon. I have been assured first that the schools do not really neglect these traditional accomplishments, and next, that when they do so it is in the interest of more socially useful objectives.

It is rather late in the day for the parent-taxpayer to make up his mind on the general case for the new pedagogy, because in some measure it has become established nearly everywhere. In brooding about this, however, a curious citizen may be struck by a conclusion so obvious and so important that he will marvel at its rare mention in all the bales of printed argument about the new education. Although he, the taxpayer, owns the schools, pays the teachers, builds the buildings, buys the equipment, and submits to frequent professional rebuke for not paying, building, and buying more, an educational revolution is being put over within his schools on which he has been neither consulted nor candidly informed.

It is true that our citizen's grandfather was not consulted, either, on the merits of traditional schooling. But good or bad, that system in its day enjoyed the measure of passive acceptance which political scientists call general consent, because it was considered by laymen to be as obvious and inevitable as the procession of the equinoxes.

Whatever the shining merits of the new pedagogy, its measure and content are now determined for the

schools in your town and mine by persons whom the school-owning citizens have neither elected nor approved, directly or indirectly. The local school board, unless it is unusual to an extraordinary degree, fusses over budgets and plumbing and bus routes but merely rubber-stamps the edicts of remote and self-constituted authorities on the proper educational diet for your children. With respect to the inner mysteries of the pedagogical cult, the average board member behaves like a humble lay brother in the presence of an infallible priesthood.

The superprofessionals who determine the kind of education to which your child must submit and for which you must pay taxes are the professors of "education" in the larger universities and teachers' colleges. Some of the most influential of these institutions are privately endowed, but even in the state-owned colleges the decisions of the educational panjandrums are not even remotely subject to the scrutiny of the citizen who picks up the check for the local schools. And these decisions are subject to change whenever the gift of tongues may descend upon a new prophet of pedagogy.

By patient lobbying over many years, the superpedagogues have so influenced state and local laws that their training courses in teaching theory and method are virtually essential to the eligibility of any candidate for a job in your schools. In most states this is accomplished by "certification" laws. These have been obtained from upcountry legislators who are awed by professorial millinery. Eager to show a proper zeal for Our Schools, they have been easily persuaded that an educated teacher is necessarily one who has had a certain amount of head-rubbing by a professor of education.

No matter whether their motives be the highest in the universe, it seems apparent to any observant member of a school board that these boys in the educational back room have traded on the apathy or awe of the laymen in nominal control to build a tight educational bureaucracy, to which every working teacher or administrator must defer if he dares dream of advancement. The average superintendent of schools is usually a man of unquestioned personal integrity, but given his usual training it is almost impossible for him to be in his inner professional heart the executive agent of the local school board. He is rather the ranking local lobbyist and front man for some professional ideology of curriculum, discipline, and teacher status. He has some choice among these, but it is not usually determined by the sentiments of local parents and taxpayers; it is more likely to be guided by the cerebrations of those university professors of education who helped him to get his job by their recommendations to the docile local board. His advancement is not a matter within the control of the board, whose top appointment he already holds; it may depend upon future recommendations of the superprofessionals to the awed laymen of some larger town.

In the same manner down the line, your child's teacher is conditioned to perform according to theories and policies which derive their sanction from neither local parents nor their elected representatives. In many jurisdictions she cannot even get a raise in pay unless she devotes her summers to getting herself still more thoroughly indoctrinated by the distant arbiters of your school methods.

All this you may discover for yourself if you are curious enough and stubborn enough to risk the ruffled dignity, the hurt look, or the patient smile used by pedagogues on a tiresome child who asks too many questions. These you will get if you take too literally the standing invitation to "know your schools" — that is, if you poke around for information less superficial than the hosannas of the P.T.A. The power of the educational bureaucracy over your school system is least if yours is a very large city, because in a great metropolis even these talented strategists find it difficult to compete for authority with the resident school politicians. It is small, too, in remote and "backward" rural schools. But in the white-collar suburb with "good" schools, it flourishes on a scale which may remind you of Lord Acton's classic warning about the corrupting effects of all power.

2

A UNIVERSITY faculty of education is an academician's dream world, when you consider that no faculty of medicine, of law, or of technology anywhere could ever hope to rig a system which controls the livelihoods of its graduates for so much of their careers — and which bribes them with public funds in pay raises to return as paying customers for endless redosings of indoctrination. This policy of keeping working pedagogues in perpetual tutelage is facilitated by another happy advantage enjoyed by the superpedagogues. While scholars in most university departments must study and teach fairly objective bodies of knowledge, these gifted thinkers seem to share with Jehovah the prerogative of creation *ex nihilo*. It is difficult otherwise to explain their virtuosity in the inflation of courses offered by large schools of education.

It is to the catalogues of these schools that the curious freeholder should turn for information on a second question which may follow upon the answer to the first. When he discovers *who* runs his local schools, he may sportingly withhold judgment about this absentee overlordship until he inquires *how well* they are run. How educated are the graduates of schools of education?

I curled up for a few winter evenings with a dozen of these catalogues in an effort to make some sense out of the teachers' salary schedule in our town. Our schedule makes no provision for advancement on ratings for good performance on the job. Instead it provides automatic increases for teachers who earn

certain semester-hours of credit toward and beyond a Master's degree from the superprofessionals.

There is some amazing stuff in these announcements of the schools of education. You must excuse the limited literacy of your local teachers when you discover that their overlords, having nearly abolished Latin, are now on the way to abolishing not only living foreign languages but the English language as well. Consider this: —

Foundations are laid for such specialized and administrative school positions as: Superintendent of schools in *urban cities and towns*. . . . (Italics mine.)

If you don't believe that I have quoted correctly, look it up for yourself at the foot of page 13 of the 1949-1950 Bulletin of the Boston University School of Education. With such examples at the apex of the public school pyramid, you will understand why we hear today such howlers as "mouton lamb" coats and "tricot knit" underwear.

But let's begin at the bottom. For my money that point is reached at another center of learning in the culture-happy Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Here is a course worth three semester-hours of credit toward the Master's degree for teachers in a program sponsored by the State Department of Education at Bridgewater State Teachers College during thirty days in the summer of 1949: —

WORLD LITERATURE. This course will deal with a consideration of the outstanding writings of the world, from ancient times to the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as sketches of the lives and times of the writers. Lectures, the reading of selections in an anthology, and individual research will comprise the course.

The outstanding writings of the whole danged world, plus the "lives and times" of the writers, plus "individual research" — in thirty days! Does this not hint at one possible definition of the kind of teacher being put into the Massachusetts schools today? It suggests one who could with a straight face claim credit toward a "Master's degree" for an eye-dropper dosage of literature which goes from Homer to Henry James in one month.

Here is another thirty-day miracle of scholarship in the same program, worth the same "graduate" credit: —

CURRENT PROBLEMS AND DEVELOPMENTS IN AMERICAN GOVERNMENT. This course will be a *detailed* study of what has been happening in the field of government in this country during the last fifteen or twenty years. Significant topics to be studied are recent developments in the organization and operation of the legislative process in Congress and the state legislatures; new interpretations of the United States Constitution by the Supreme Court of the United States; current trends in public administration, taxation, and popular controls over government; current developments in political processes; an analysis of reforms suggested for better city,

county and local government; recent proposals for a larger welfare state; current trends toward greater centralization in government; and present-day relations of government and business. (Italics mine.)

Who is being fooled by a course which would pretend to offer a "detailed" study of any *one* of these numerous and complex topics in thirty days — the teacher, or the burghers who must raise her pay for this step toward "professional advancement"?

There are many other wonders in the Bridgewater catalogue, including something called "The Psychology and Logic of Correct Thinking." The second half of that title is the best bit of tautology I have seen since that reference to "urban cities." The course description promises that it will be taught so as to meet the needs and desires of students for psychology or logic, graduate or undergraduate credit, all in one thirty-day economy package. It promises also "a detailed study of all the rules established for correct thinking in the daily problems of life," though with no indication of who made all these rules. But don't laugh; you are billed for pay raises for teachers who seek "self-improvement" in courses like this.

The most depressing aspect of this adulterated pap is that for purposes of pay and promotion it is equated with the genuine intellectual efforts of superior teachers who take respectable courses for real self-improvement. For there are of course outstanding teachers in the public schools who are more concerned with their own effective development than with shoddy tokens of "professional advancement." Such good teachers there always will be, no matter how far the currency of job improvement is debased, as long as teaching appeals to generous men and women in whom aptitude and liking for the work are combined with intelligence.

3

WE MAY charitably assume that cultural information is doled out to teachers in these thin drippings because their main concern in job-getting and job-improving is with "professional" courses. Turning to these we find a reverse kind of flummery. Where the cultural courses pretend to include the whole of vast stores of knowledge in purse-size phials, the courses in education spin out the simplest teaching procedures into astonishing lists of redundant offerings, on top of which are piled superredundant courses in the "administration" of these procedures. Thus Teachers College of Columbia offers no fewer than ten separate semester courses in the mysteries of Audio-Visual Education, with an eleventh on "Administering the Use of Audio-Visual Materials." There seems to be a transcendent *mystique* of "administering" anything in the school world more complex than a pencil. It is as though the Harvard Business School offered, say, ten courses in

accounting and an eleventh on the administration of desks and ledger sheets!

This prolific generation of courses by asexual reproduction is characteristic of all the larger schools of education. Teachers College of Columbia, the Vatican of the cult, offers more than seven hundred. There are galaxies of courses in the theory, the practice, and the supervision of teaching every conceivable subject, with the inevitable addenda on "administration." There are courses on practice teaching and on the teaching of practice teaching. There are even a couple which are concerned with the teaching methods of a teachers' college. (I was a little disappointed not to find a course on the giving of courses about teacher-training courses.) "Laboratory" courses abound, with apposite courses in administering the laboratory. One offering at Boston University School of Education includes "laboratory work" in student activities!

The purpose of these vast inventories of courses is not merely that of forming new teachers. They are also rigged to keep the working teacher or administrator returning for more tutoring throughout the years of his professional life in which he may hope for job improvement. Your schools are in safe hands in at least one respect — safe for the livelihoods of huge faculties of education, who spawn courses faster than any teacher could take them in a dozen lives of summer-school hopping. Building this vast stockpile of courses naturally requires some ingenuity. It is not lacking. Thus your daughter, in her high school sewing class, may be getting the benefit of any "enriched" teaching her instructor may have learned from this offering at Teachers College of Columbia: —

SOCIAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC FOUNDATIONS FOR THE ENRICHED TEACHING OF TEXTILES AND CLOTHING. (Clothing 225.)

Or in the gymnasium your child may be getting a more exotic dialectic of muscle-flexing than you suspect if her teacher happened to take this course at Stanford: —

Physical Education 160. HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF DANCE. The origin and nature of dance; its appearance and significance as a product of changing cultures and civilizations. Prerequisites: third-year standing and at least two quarters of contemporary dance or consent of the instructor.

In art and music, too, your youngster in the lower grades may profit by profundities undreamed of by Matisse or Mozart if her instructor consulted this oracle at the usually restrained University of California: —

132. ART AND MUSIC IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL. Functions, organization, instructional planning, and implications of research in child development for teaching and selection of materials, and evaluation of educational outcomes in the art and music curricula in elementary schools.

The Neanderthal English in which most of these announcements are written may be one of the limiting influences on the literacy of the average public school teacher today, because it is safe to assume that the courses are taught in the same strange dialect. There is more disturbing evidence that your children are getting less than adequate development in cultural attainments because their teachers are themselves actually uneducated in them. Take the fundamentals of English literature and composition, which were once thought to be valuable additions to the personality of any high school graduate intelligent enough to read more than a racing form, or to write more than a salesman's expense account. The educational pragmatists tacitly argue that the luxuries of private esthetic development are less important than the new "social orientations." Maybe so, maybe so, *but how would they know?* They have no comparative basis for judgment, because the pedagogical course-hopping now required of an English teacher gives him no time or energy for reading in the substance of English literature.

The experience of the English teacher today with critical studies of actual literature is practically limited to the liberal arts courses in his undergraduate "major." If you think this is adequate for the development of discriminating taste in one who would presume to lead others in this direction, just reflect on the limited literary standards of the average men in your college class who took courses in English. And remember that public school teaching does not attract the brightest of these.

A certain amount of mature and concentrated graduate work in literature would enable the average English teacher to face a high school class with less presumption. But that's not the kind of work a teacher gets if he wants to load up with the degrees which are the currency of pay raises and promotions. Teachers College of Columbia offers more than fifty courses for aspirants in English (not counting over thirty others in "Speech and Dramatics"). Fewer than half a dozen seem designed to deepen a candidate's acquaintance with the substance of the language and its literature, and even these few seem from their descriptions to be at about the sophomore level of a good liberal arts college. (One is in elementary linguistics; two are for "personal enjoyment and cultural growth," and one of these ironically hints at the quality of graduate students of education by offering "an *introduction* to contemporary adult reading.") Virtually all the rest of the fifty-odd courses in the department are concerned with the pedagogy rather than the substance of English.

In truth the superpedagogues are eager to abolish language as an esthetic medium and to concentrate upon its use as a toolbox. In traditional education the second was a common-sense derivative of a disciplined study of the first. But Teachers College of Columbia deliberately conditions the language

teacher with pseudo-academic glorifications of literary hod-carrying. It would be interesting to hear Dr. Johnson's opinion of the style as well as the content of the following description of a course required of all English candidates:—

COMMUNICATION AND THE COMMUNICATION ARTS IN THE MODERN COMMUNITY. Modern concepts of communication developed by workers in various arts and sciences since the first world war; the synthesis of their findings in recent "institutes on communication"; their application and further development in government wartime and post-war services in the interest of democratic communication; their significance for teachers in art, drama, English, foreign languages, journalism, library science, music, speech and related fields; the work of teachers with various media—press, radio, film, discussion, etc.

But if literary discrimination is too effete and too private a luxury to be "socially useful" for children today, let's turn to a real bread-and-butter department: the teaching of business subjects to high school students and others. At Boston University a teacher may prepare herself for these intellectual labors through no fewer than *twenty-one* semester courses. As insurance against your incredulity I reproduce the entire list, though you will miss the full savor of the long description of each course:—

Methods of Teaching Bookkeeping.
Methods of Teaching the Basic Business Subjects.
Methods of Teaching Shorthand, Typewriting and Transcription.
Methods of Teaching Office Practice.
Principles of Business Education.
Methods and Materials in Distributive Education.
Consumer Business Education.
Theories and Practices in Business Education.
Administration and Supervision of Business Education.
Business Education in Collegiate and Special Schools.
Improvement of Instruction in Transcription.
Improvement of Instruction in Typewriting.
Improvement of Instruction in Shorthand.
Curriculum Construction in Business Education.
Test and Measurement in Business Education.
Improvement of Instruction in Office Machines.
Improvement of Instruction in Bookkeeping.
Improvement of Instruction in Junior Business Education.
Improvement of Instruction in Social Business Subjects.
Student Teaching (Business Education).
Seminar in Business Education.

Do you find the benefits of all this reflected in the stenographers and clerks in your office? Or do you find the most competent boys and girls among those who spent a few months after high school in a "business college" where they were rapidly trained by instructors innocent of the professional redundancies offered by schools of education?

Apart from their unbelievable inflation of repetitious trivia, these courses drape in counterfeit

academic vestments activities and procedures (like the "administration of textbooks, supplies, and equipment") far simpler than those which your office manager must master in a single afternoon. It goes without saying that they are incomparably less difficult and infinitely less important for the general welfare than the constant new information which your busy family doctor must master in a night or two of occasional reading. Yet you must provide your teachers with long paid vacations for "studying" this stuff, and you must raise their pay for doing so. That may be the most useful purpose of these endless lists of courses.

4

In their accumulations of chaff disguised as academic disciplines, the professors of education are offering a standing invitation to the murderous wit of some new Carlyle, or of some Erasmus with a *Praise of Folly* more devastating than that which punctured the clerical pomposities of the sixteenth century.

There is an indication of the attraction of this pseudo-scholarship for mental lightweights in the degree-mania which pervades the field. Of all non-medical occupations this is the most thoroughly bedoctored. The yearning of pedagogues for this title exceeds that of corn-curers, chiropractors, and camp-meeting theologians. It is facilitated by a fairly recent device called "Doctor of Education," which by a kind of academic Gresham's Law is driving the older and more difficult Ph.D. out of this low-fenced intellectual arena. (The Ed.D. has no language requirement, whereas the holder of a Ph.D. is supposed to be able to understand the work of fellow scholars anywhere on earth through the common denominators of English, French, and German.) I know of one Ed.D. so proud of the title that he risks night emergency calls by putting "Dr." in front of his name in the telephone book.

The Faculty Club humor which pedagogical degrees provoke among professors of the liberal arts in any respectable university is in pathetic contrast with the prestige of teacher-training faculties in other lands. In France, for example, the diploma of the École Normale Supérieure is the most distinguished in the French university system. The program of the Normale emphasizes intense scholarship in fields of objective knowledge far more than the redundant arts of imparting it. The rigid competition for admission contrasts sadly with the bush-beating of our schools of education to secure new customers in addition to those already signed up more or less for life. At the University of Minnesota the booklet wistfully announces that "students will be admitted to the College of Education without reference to high school pattern, only high school graduation being a requirement." Simple as this seems to be, there is further assurance that "appli-

cants who do not meet fully the stated requirements may be referred to the admissions committee of the College [of Education] for consideration on an individual basis." And Teachers College of Columbia is the only professional school of any reputable university whose announcements I have read which runs snappy advertising copy in its catalogue. There is a full page of it on the inside back cover headlined "Wanted: Educational Leaders."

The faculties who operate these intellectual bargain basements are the men who are quietly running the educational program in *your* school. It is more than a possibility that they are also running intelligent and literate young people right out of public education. Professor Isabel Stephens of Wellesley, writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* for April, 1947, gave several reasons apart from pay scales why promising women undergraduates in a good liberal arts college lack interest in teaching. Among these is their belief that "they must qualify for public school jobs in a way that seems to them absurd. . . . They say there is too much hocus-pocus to qualifying for a teaching certificate." There you have another unintended but tempting definition of the average teacher today: one with a low resistance to hocus-pocus dignified as "education" by a self-anointed Sanhedrin.

Quite apart from a mentality which could take this training seriously in itself, there is something disturbing about the human quality of a teacher who is willing, even eager, to be kept in lifelong leading strings by other teachers. This perpetual childlike dependency of pedagogues upon super-pedagogues has no parallel and would not be tolerated in any other occupational group which insists as shrilly as do the teachers upon "professional" status. The journeymen who do the work in the local schools cannot be expected to rise, in the general average, to a higher level of intelligence and literacy than that of the system which produces them. There are admirable exceptions, of course. But among those I have met, the superior teachers and the most intelligent administrators have usually been mavericks — persons who came into the public schools from the liberal arts or from some other profession with a minimum anointing by professors of education.

5

WHAT can you do about this politically irresponsible control of your local schools? If you are interested you can make your own investigation. You will find that your school system is esteemed "good" by the professionals to the extent that your board gives lamblike assent to their edicts. (For example, to the completely *unqualified* planks IV C-3 and

IV C-4 in the 1949 Platform of the National Education Association: "Lay boards should be guided by the recommendations of professional educators" and "School budgets should be prepared by the school superintendent and adopted by the board of education." In their instinctive professional denial of any lay discretion, these lines could have been written seven centuries ago by old Pope Boniface VIII in his famous *Clericis Laicos!*) But I can simplify your investigation of professional opinion on your schools; it is derived from the equation that more money automatically means better schooling.

If you find, next, that your child cannot read or calculate half as well as you could at his age, you can complain that the older education, whatever its faults, had to prove its achievements by these objective tests. I can spare you this effort, too, by telling you the reply you will get: "In the new education we pay adequate attention to those skills but our aim is upon more important social objectives." They have you there, because you won't live long enough to test them. You cannot put your calipers upon a whole social unit a few generations hence, even if you could discover what you should measure.

Next, you can dedicate yourself to the useful career of a school crank. You can vest the professionals in that salutary hair-shirt that most of us have to wear in other professions and businesses: the objective scrutiny of persons free of our own occupational bias toward self-congratulation.

Finally, you can attempt to cure the frustrations developed in these activities by getting yourself elected to your local school board. There you can make it clear to your colleagues and your professional associates that you are a representative of the children, the parents, and the taxpayers of your town, not of a professional camarilla vis-à-vis the town. This will make a satisfying noise which will have a certain therapeutic effect on your blood pressure. But it will have no other practical effect. When this becomes clear to you, you can do what other worried parents have done: mortgage your house and put your youngster in one of the good private schools, where the best teaching today is being done by high-quality liberal arts graduates for whom the professors of education are only an inspiration for humor in the Masters' Common Room.

Of course you must then contribute to the support of two school establishments. As you do this, you can reflect on the meaning of an educational "democracy" which, by filling the public schools with hocus-pocus, limits the opportunity for the cultivated development of intelligent children to those whose parents can afford private schooling. But you may draw some comfort from the knowledge that the greatness of this nation lies in its infinite capacity for surviving hocus-pocus!

Copyright of Atlantic Magazine Archive is the property of Atlantic Monthly Group LLC and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.