

The Changing World

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THE ATTACK ON THE THREE R's

FROM MANY SOURCES the schools are being severely criticized for failure to teach the fundamentals. The business man complains that his stenographer can't spell as well as she should. The merchant criticizes the young clerk for making costly errors in adding sales. The telegraph official points a scornful finger at some of his employees who can't read accurately the messages they must deliver over the telephone.

A general impression is abroad that the schools are not delivering their human merchandise to the public in any too perfect a condition as far as the skill subjects are concerned. It is not the first time that such displeasure has been voiced; in fact, in every critical period in our national history education has been seriously questioned. But we now face criticism probably more widespread than at any previous time.

The layman usually blames this shortage in fundamentals on the methods currently used in our schools. He has been told that revolutionary changes in school methods have taken place since his school days. If the results today are inferior to the past, then it would seem reasonable to him to suspect the current methods as being inferior to those used a generation ago. Therefore, the typical layman's proposal for improvement of the schools calls for a return to the methods used

in the teaching of the three R's in the cherished little red schoolhouse of our childhood years.

It is time for educators who know the evidence on this issue to speak out clearly and try to stop the educational retreat. In the first place, it is *not* true, as is generally supposed by the public, that children and youth do less well today in the skills than they did a generation or two ago. This issue has been settled by the objective evidence many times. (See, for instance, Leonard and Eurich: *An Evaluation of Modern Education*.) The examination results show modern children doing as well and better than their ancestors did.

In the second place, it is true that changes have taken place in methods during this century. We have studied the psychological mechanisms for reading, spelling, writing, computation, etc. We know conclusively that the older A-B-C method of teaching reading materially retards the rate and comprehension of reading. We know through scores of laboratory experiments that drill in arithmetic before the child is aware of the need for and meaning of numbers leads to definite blockage of accurate use of arithmetic in later life. We know much more about the learning processes involved in spelling than we did formerly.

Changes in school methods growing

out of scientific researches of the past forty years are significant; and when these newer methods have been compared with the older methods under carefully controlled experimentation, the results have shown the equality or superiority of the modern scientifically rooted methods. (The reader is referred again to such studies as those by Eurich and Leonard, Wrightstone, and the researchers in the Eight Year Study.)

But it must be noted that these newer methods have not been universally adopted by schools and that most of those schools that have adopted them have only recently made any marked changes in teaching the fundamentals. The truth is that the shortcomings in skills stressed by the critics were for the most part the shortcomings of schools which were still using the older methods when our young people now taking jobs were in grade school.

The danger in the proposal to revert to the older methods should be clear. We must bring to the attention of the layman evidence that shows the superior results of newer methods when these methods have been used and give the layman working knowledge by which he can salvage for his children those gains made in educational methods during this century. Unless we share the evidence with the layman, we stand a good chance of having him write off the gains and force the educational profession back to the days when

scientific research had not yet been used as a tool for the improvement of educational methods.

But there is a far more important issue than the argument over the relative merits of older and newer methods. That issue is concerned with how we can get the degree of mastery in the fundamentals that is required by modern life. No educator and no layman is satisfied with the achievement levels of children taught in either the older or the newer schools. In both types of schools we are far short of giving the facility or adequacy in the use of the traditional three R's; and there are many new skills that are demanded by a technological age that must be added to the curriculum. What we are all seeking is a much greater level of mastery. Research tells us that the road is not backward to yesterday. We have some evidence that the road we have traveled in a scientific attack on the learning process has been in the right direction, but we have *not* reached the promised land.

All of us—no matter whether “essentialist” or “progressive”—would contribute to an improvement of education if we redirected our energy from trying to prove the superiority of one method over another toward all *together* working to state better objectives and devise better methods for meeting the higher level of skill achievement demanded by the conditions of our age.

It was in making education not only common to all, but in some sense compulsory on all, that the destiny of the free republics of America was practically settled.—James Russell Lowell, *New England Two Centuries Ago*.

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