

Harvard Looks at Education

a review by EDGAR B. WESLEY

General Education in a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee with an Introduction by James Bryant Conant. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945. p. XIX + 267, \$2.

WHEN A DOG walks on his hind legs, we praise him, not for doing it well, but for doing it at all. When a committee of college professors of various subjects publishes a report on *education*, we respect their intent and tolerate their product. The reviewer thinks this report was published prematurely. It contains so many errors and confusions and reveals so much prejudice and condescension as to outweigh its merits. The confusion which it introduces into education more than offsets whatever contribution it might make to the topic of general education.

Twelve professors, representing education, history, and other fields, assisted by persons whose names fill three pages, worked two years and spent a goodly sum in preparing this report. It contains a survey of educational trends in the United States, a reasonable delimitation of general education, rather specific proposals for a curriculum therein, and convincing plans for its introduction into the Harvard program.

Those portions of the report which deal directly with general education are worthy of study and respect, even though they are

derived from reading and rumination rather than research. Those portions which deal with the whole field of education, and they constitute more than half the book, deserve a critical examination. Beginning with Chapter V, the report is timely, precise, and persuasive. One wonders why so much that is of lesser merit has to precede the essence of the report. Only Chapter II seems to be necessary to the argument of Chapters V and VI. The reviewer thinks Chapters II, V, and VI should have been mimeographed and circulated for criticisms. In the fullness of time many of the ideas in other chapters might thus have been brought to a maturity which they now lack.

Merits—Major and Minor

Some of the major and minor merits of the report deserve mention. Perhaps the most significant achievement of the whole report is the clear and extensive description, analysis, and identification of general education. Particularly apt statements appear on pages 51, 54, 56, 80, 85, 195, and elsewhere. In view of this committee's delayed interest in the problem, this achievement is notable.

A second major merit of the report is its analysis of the elements which might wisely be selected from English, science, art, foreign languages, and mathematics to constitute a curriculum for general education. The treatment of social studies is less specific; it is wordy and arrives at only vague results.

A third merit, indicated above, is the judicious blending of the proposed program in general education with the existing curriculum at Harvard. To an outsider the plan seems feasible and desirable.

In addition to these major merits the report contains some incisive comments, keen analysis, and apt phrases. The distinction between Jeffersonianism and Jacksonianism is useful (p. 31). The double function of education—to divide and to unite men—is happily expressed (p. 32). The forces working toward unity of purpose are well described (p. 39). The point about the desirability of

Almost everyone is having his say about the Harvard report on general education. But no group has a greater stake in the matters which it discusses than those individuals who work directly with children and youth in our schools. Their reception of the report, therefore, is deserving of serious study by all persons interested in critical analyses of our schools. On these pages, a professor of education—Edgar B. Wesley of the University of Minnesota—gives his considered reactions to the Harvard endeavor. Whether you accept or reject Mr. Wesley's statements, we believe you'll agree they are thought-provoking and will cause you to take your first or another look at the volume.

agreement on performance even though there be disagreement on ultimates (p. 46) is a practical and reasonable philosophy. The necessity of including both tradition and experiment in education (p. 51) is a convincing idea. The effect of family standards upon a student's performance is described in a very effective paragraph (p. 84). The lyrical paragraph about the values of good conversation (p. 69) is timely.

The four objectives, (1) effective thinking, (2) clear communication, (3) making relevant judgments, and (4) discrimination among values (p. 64f) are wisely chosen, well stated, and judiciously defended. The committee stresses intellectual training by the schools, even if the development of personal competence has to be consigned in part to other agencies (p. 170). The reviewer thinks this is a sound position. Most educators will agree with the analysis and condemnation of speed-up programs in peacetime (p. 193). That is an incisive phrase about the need of "self-transcendence" rather than self-expression in the field of art (p. 128). Other praiseworthy features could be cited, but enough has been said to show that the report is worthy of the attention of those who are interested in general education. Now to the debit side.

A Style That Stutters

The report is heavy reading. It is a curious mixture of commonplace idioms and involved structures. The overuse of parentheses and dashes causes the reader to do the work which the authors should have done. Pointless phrases, such as "after all," "so to speak," and "that is to say" show that the authors probably realized their own lack of clarity and directness. Such phrases remind one of stuttering in oral speech.

The frequent use of "if" in contrary-to-fact clauses puts an undesired strain upon the reader. The multitudinous cross references, apparently designed to convince the reader of the logical structure of the report and to persuade him that he is getting somewhere, eventually have just the opposite effects. Several paragraphs begin with conjunctions, pronouns, and pronominal ideas, thus requiring a review of previous paragraphs. In fact, the weary reader may suspect that the style, as well as the supposed difficulty of the ideas, caused President Conant to issue his "solemn warning" to read the whole report.

Meaning or Jargon?

Another major fault, tinged with condescension, is the scornful treatment of educational terminology. The condescension and the scorn could easily be overlooked, however, if the committee had performed effectively its half of the process of communication. But the result is that the book, presumably addressed in part to educators, fails in preciseness and specificity because it disdains the special vocabulary which alone would have assured understanding. The educational meaning of "method" is distorted and an utterly false picture of its place in teacher training results (p. 24). The word "differentiation" is erroneously called a "professional word" (p. 81). It is then used in a sense that seems to mean "individual differences." But on subsequent pages it seems to mean "differentiated courses or curricula." Note the condescension with which the word "personality" is treated (pp. 75, 173). This committee, appointed to study and report on "objectives," proposes to ban the word from education and consign it to the military. President Conant does not deserve this frivolous rebuke. Again and again the committee mentions "instructions," whereas the content shows that they mean "courses," "offerings," or "content." The terms "history," "social studies," and "social sciences" troubled the authors. They never could get them straight, and so the reader cannot either.

Why "schoolteacher" and "schoolteaching"? Inevitably, the wheezy quibble about "training" and "education" had to appear (p. 176). Perhaps the acme of confusion in educational terminology is the use of "characteristics," "aims," and "abilities" as synonyms (p. 64), whereas the content shows that "objectives" is really meant. Thus the educational vocabulary, designed to sharpen meanings and facilitate communication, becomes, in the words of the committee, "esoteric jargon" (p. 68).

Muddled Facts

The report reveals, not only the ostentatious avoidance of educational terminology, but unawareness of some plain facts about American education. The committee thinks that Grade VII belongs in the primary group (p. 156). It uses the word "primary" when the context shows that "elementary" is in-

tended (p. 4). The committee seems unaware of the fact that nearly all teachers colleges throughout most of their history have trained only elementary teachers (p. 23). The idea that the federal government has ever "supported" education is contrary to fact (p. 16). Grants and subsidies for general purposes have not yet led to the appropriation of a single dollar for the schools. Bills to establish a policy, which the committee seems to think has already been established, have been before Congress for nearly fifteen years.

The committee, standing on a constitutional quibble, declares that the founding fathers reserved education to the states (p. 91). Evidently, they have found some evidence to refute Charles A. Beard's well-known analysis of this issue. Such a statement also reflects an unawareness of the movement to establish a national university. Such a belief, were it grounded in fact, would raise an obstacle to federal aid, which the committee seems to endorse.

The report repeats the hackneyed charge that schools of education secured the passage of laws requiring education courses as prerequisites to teaching certificates (p. 24). This obvious anachronism should have troubled the historians of the committee. Besides, it is a compliment to the political sagacity and power of professors of education which they do not deserve.

In a World Apart

The educational isolation of the committee is abundantly demonstrated. The idea that high schools are split "into virtually autonomous groups" by the various curriculums (p. 14) shows that the committee has had little if any experience in high schools. Where did the committee learn that only "larger schools" have power-driven tools in their shops (p. 160)? Even more revealing is the absurd picture of students marching to classes, teachers alert to pounce upon them, policemen at the doors, valuables under lock and key, and materials all planned by others (p. 19). One wonders if the trophies at Harvard, if such there be, are resting on open tables in the hallways.

The blatant pronouncement that the present requirements in education for teachers are "excessive" (p. 25) will confirm the prejudiced but it will scarcely convince the open-minded. The typical four-year program in

the training of teachers devotes about fifteen percent of its time to professional matters. This proportion has not been changed materially for more than twenty years. How can a committee of college professors, who admit their ignorance of infancy and of elementary education (p. 4) and who demonstrate their confusions in secondary education, blandly assert that the practices of a generation are foolish, that education credits should be reduced from eighteen to six or eight? Such a pronouncement raises questions as to the competence and fairness of the committee.

The committee tries to distinguish between the social heritage and social change (p. 47). The same idea has been stated repeatedly and much more clearly and pungently by Harry Elmer Barnes. In fact, most high school textbooks in sociology deal with the idea in a more effective manner. In addition, the curious notion that science is not a part of our heritage accentuates the clumsy profundity of this paragraph. No person now living was born before the age of science began.

The committee recognizes that the principle of general education operates in infancy and during the period of elementary training, but they excuse themselves from a study of the first by the naive remark that "it is doubtful whether a group of professors would show at their best on this subject" (p. 4). What a revelation of the self-consciousness of men on parade, and what a confession of their disregard of the extensive research in this area. And they excuse themselves from the second by the whimsical remark that "we have, moreover, the impression" that elementary education is rather satisfactory. Perhaps "impression" is the correct word. Are the findings concerning high schools based upon more than "impressions"?

The committee believes in the golden-age, that period when only gifted persons attended secondary schools and colleges. The members are apparently unaware that they are making two assumptions—that such was formerly the case, and that now, because a larger percentage of the children are in school, the standards of achievement are inevitably lower. Not a member of the committee can prove either assumption. It should be said, however, that they recognize the release of talent occasioned by the rise of

submerged classes (p. 81). In fact, their faith in the alleged increases in intelligence (p. 90) may be on the optimistic side.

It is discouraging to see a group of teachers subscribing to the confused notion that human nature cannot be changed (p. 31). In another passage, however, human nature is defined as including instincts, sentiments, and intellect (p. 75). So the internal evidence is fairly clear that the committee really does believe in the potential efficacy of their profession.

Confusion Compounded

The committee may render a disservice to general education by attempting to identify it with liberal education (pp. 52-53). In fact, the report would have gained in clarity, vigor, and persuasiveness had it omitted altogether such impedimenta to clear communication as "humanities," "liberal education," *trivium* and *quadrivium*.

When the committee asks that schools provide the "tools" and allow the colleges to dispense the knowledge and make the interpretations, it is flying in the face of the psychological principles of learning. All attempts to divide elementary, secondary, and higher education on any such basis are doomed to failure. While the report is not altogether explicit on this issue, the confusion is half-expressed and rather fully implied.

The nostalgic mood of an older generation is feelingly revealed in the vague statement about the strength of a good school which is located in "a community where everyone goes by his first name" (p. 21).

The logic which the committee recommends, even in choosing a wife (p. 65), seems to have fled from parts of the section on English. The question-begging technique (p. 110) results in "strained" correlation, "over-ambitious" analysis, "content divorced from

design," "superficial reading," and "undesirable duplication." They thus agree with Coolidge's preacher in being against sin, but on the next page the committee takes an advanced step and comes out in favor of "practice," "coherence," "revision," and "interests."

One would suppose that in preparing a report of such broad scope, the committee would have found occasion to refer directly or indirectly to previous studies and reports. Some pages seem to reflect some volumes of the report by the Commission on the Social Studies. The statements about United States history (p. 141) seem to be derived from the report of the Committee on American History in the Schools and Colleges. One wonders if the present committee wants to appear as though its report sprang full-grown from its own brow.

The Report and You

The teacher in the United States will have little reason to cherish this report. The committee laments that teaching has become "an industry" instead of "a calling" (p. 26). While it verbally calls for higher pay, it regards teaching as being "like the kingdom of heaven, . . . a house of many mansions, each different, each honorable." In this house the teacher should have "a spirit of devotion" and value more highly the "quieter rewards and more inward satisfactions" which go with teaching (p. 25). Incidentally, the committee wants school board members to be appointed instead of elected (p. 25).

While the committee gives a verbal blessing to research and experimentation in education and seems to oppose authoritarianism, its own methods demonstrate the opposite philosophy. In spite of the real merits of the sections on general education, the report as a whole raises serious doubts as to whether it is a contribution to American education.

Is Your School at Work on Attitudes?

Your help is needed in gathering material for a proposed DSCD publication on attitudes. A. R. Mead of the University of Florida is already at work on the project and has collected interesting data, but he feels there are many programs to improve attitudes throughout the country which have not come to his attention. He hopes you will let him know of any sources of materials and actual projects dealing with attitudes in the public schools of your community. He would like to have specific information about the nature of the material or project, together with the name and address of persons with whom he might communicate further. Please send material to A. R. Mead, University of Florida, Gainesville, Fla.

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