

# HISTORY:

## Stargazing into the Past

**"We need to have history remind us that the battle is not yet finished nor is the outcome assured." Teachers, "through what results from their educational efforts, still hold some trump cards over fate."**

**I**N WHAT WAYS can history serve education? Can such an outmoded area of human study provide any pertinent answers for the present? Some even question the inclusion of history as one of the social or behavioral sciences. The grounds for these claims are threefold: they include the belief that history is essentially one of the humanities, primarily concerned with the art of telling a good literary story; the objectivity of history is questioned because it is written by men who cannot escape their own times and in spite of themselves allow their personal biases to slip into their interpretations; the "scientificness" of history is suspect because so much of the record is incomplete or forever lost and can never be repeated and observed.

### Guide Chart for the Future

It is true that history cannot be looked upon as "scientific" in the manner that the natural sciences can control their experiments and state their principles. (It may not be amiss to mention here, however, that with recent leaps in knowledge the physical scientists admit they are sure of less

each day!) Who is to say that all other areas interested in the study of man must conform to the research techniques and organizational patterns of the natural sciences? It is a great mistake that many social scientists have attempted to so masquerade in the desire to develop an aura of respectability for their less entrenched fields of endeavor. It is a fact that any area of human study or any disciplinary field of learning needs to have some of its own inherent contributions. If the boast cannot be made, "Here is what this field has to offer to further man's knowledge of himself and this cannot be attained as satisfactorily in any other field of learning," then there is no reason for the continued separate existence of that field as a branch of knowledge. History does have several such prime contributions. It holds as well some very fruitful views and approaches in common with the other social sciences. These, it seems to this writer, are essential to the continued progress of education.

History influences to a great degree our planning for the future, since we usually tend to act in terms of our ex-

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perience and history is a summation of that past experience. Actually we can never leave this mirror of our past, which is ever intertwined into our present, and it is folly to attempt to do so. This is true because the collective memory and conscience which we label "history" are among the major factors which separate man from the lower animals.

Thus we arrive at the most commonly cited contribution of history—it tells us how and why our world has come to be what it is—and this is also most important for tomorrow. Although we know history never repeats itself, under similar conditions which do reappear on many occasions in the widespread tapestry of human affairs, *homo sapiens* has revealed that he tends to act along recurring and often predictable lines. Therefore, a knowledge of history serves as a reliable guide when we are faced with resolving the problems of the present.

Of course, each current educational crisis has its own immediate history. A thorough understanding of the factors back of public resistance to a school bond issue, faculty "coolness" toward a proposed curriculum improvement program, or school board reluctance to establish a democratic policy on the handling of controversial issues can do much to help the administrator map a successful campaign to alter these conditions. In any new educational situation we inherit a history. How much more satisfactorily can the homeroom mentor handle a guidance problem, the new instructor step into

the shoes of a very popular predecessor, or the supervisor aid a floundering teacher when he has rather full access to the record of the events leading up to these situations. Much of this we take for granted; but how many ousted administrators, sidetracked "core" programs, and deflated trials in community-centered education might have been saved if only the personnel involved had moved more intelligently following a careful look at the immediate and long-term roots of these conditions? Often plain ignorance is the basis of fear in instances like these. Mere background information may serve to smooth the way for needed educational progress.

Prudent actions will not result from a knowledge of history alone. When the view of history is combined with, let us say, the views of psychology and sociology, we may attain a sort of interdisciplinary insight and thereby evolve a most effective plan for problem solution. This very probably would not have resulted from the knowledge and procedures of any one of these areas by itself. However, while all the behavioral sciences are dependent upon one another, it may be well to point out at this time that seldom is a successful study ventured, a worthy educational dissertation written, or a school project carried to conclusion without a consideration of the historical setting. To be effective in education, the attendance officer, the school psychiatrist, the curriculum coordinator, indeed all involved in this professional field, must so use history. Unhappy circumstances have too often revealed that we cannot escape history even should we desire to do so.

## Method of History

In addition to serving as a road map of yesterday and as a guide chart for the morrow, history makes its second major contribution to education through its method. There is not space in this article to go into the details of the historical method of truth seeking; but this key procedure has been adequately described at a popular level in a number of readable volumes.<sup>1</sup> Carl Becker, in his entertaining essay, *Everyman His Own Historian*, indicated clearly how each of us uses history and the historical approach in arriving at facts and conclusions as we meet our everyday problems. Research in numerous instances is based upon historical findings and the historian's techniques of collecting, sifting and criticizing data are necessary competencies for those who would complete studies in the field of education. It is particularly in the careful and objective application of its method that history earns its place as one of the social sciences.

Unfortunately there are comparatively few recent studies in history which are of an educational nature. At the same time too few current educational studies are of an historical nature. When historians have concerned themselves with educational topics, they have indeed concluded valuable appraisals—witness, Merle Curti's *The Social Ideas of American Educators* and Howard Beale's *A History of Freedom of Teaching in American Schools*. More historians need to be so stimulated. Countless historical problems in education remain to be probed; for ex-

ample, we are not even in agreement as to just how, when and where the junior high school movement emerged in the United States. The life contributions of a number of leading educators, for example W. W. Charters or C. H. Judd, still need to be written. If these needed studies are ever completed, they will for the most part have to be carried out by educators who can use the historical method.

One can select certain volumes concerned with current educational issues and he may be surprised at the proportion of space devoted to historical aspects. Yet this is necessary. One of the most valuable features of Harry Ashmore's book, *The Negro and the Schools*, is the historical basis and the perspective he develops in helping the reader understand the many distressing facets of the integration problem in the South.

Johnson has recently described how many of the leading American educators of the first half of the Twentieth Century were vitally concerned with history and provided a number of valuable historical studies in education. He inquires, "To what extent was their work in other areas stimulated, guided, and improved by their interest in history? It is suggested that this relationship was more than coincidental and that the perusal of historical studies enriched their other efforts to a considerable degree."<sup>2</sup> At present how many young workers in education are being stimulated to carry out historical studies? The writer was shocked recently while talking with a transfer student

<sup>1</sup>Two particularly helpful books are: Allan Nevins, *The Gateway to History*, and Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History*.

<sup>2</sup>Leighton H. Johnson, "Education Needs Historical Studies," *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 1955, p. 158.

at the Ph.D. level. He stated that he had left one of the well known schools of education in this country because he had been discouraged in completing a purely historical study. In the eyes of his advisors this project was not of a "scientific" enough quality for modern education! Although historical studies in education can use I.B.M. machines and complex formulae, the above case reflects the manner in which some narrow and shallowly informed persons conceive of the minor role of history in education.

### History's Role in Schools

Now in what other ways can history serve education? Recognizing history as a synthesis of all aspects of human life and realizing that it is a central source of the pattern of social understandings which society desires for its youth, those interested in general education and curriculum renovation might give full attention to the possible role of history in the school program. This is no plea for more history. Perhaps history already has more than its fair share in the time allotted to social education; but we need better history teaching, more intelligent selection, and a more functional use of history than is displayed in many classrooms. Common learnings or social living programs have to pursue a good deal of history. The non-college-preparatory student in high school is just as dependent for the historically ingrained competencies of evidence seeking, logical thinking, and the willingness to trade emotionalism for objectivity as are his more fortunate or more gifted fellows. Naturally a reasoned love of country is still sought for all

and the dedicated drama of American history should be a major source of such inspiration. So much for the direct role of history in the school curriculum.

Most workers in education need to be more familiar with representative educational thinkers, their key ideas, and with the evolution of teaching practices and the growth of school programs. Some of the reasons for this were presented previously, for the history of education is important in bringing educators the perspective on forces and trends which can aid them in making the most effective decisions. Reviewing the life and work of a great teaching personality who loved children and who was vitally interested in education—such as DaFeltre, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Seguin, or Montessori—does much to help the harassed schoolman of today to take heart. Such readings renew his purpose and pride in carrying on one of mankind's noblest endeavors; they further inspire him to contribute his best efforts to the slow moving stream of educational betterment.

Familiarity with history breeds many worthy attitudes. In view of space limitation we will discuss but one which is particularly important to educationists—patience. When one views the long trend in the evolution of pedagogical ideas, he tends to be more satisfied with his own limited progress. He is reminded that in working with humans and their institutions, as was pointed up by Maeterlinck many years ago, each progressive spirit is opposed by a thousand men who guard the past. The history of education also reveals that in testing innovations where the human

factor is involved, we are bound to produce many more setbacks than may plague, let us say, research developments in chemistry or mechanics. The researcher further discovers that one hundred per cent success and even rich rewards with the majority of pupils usually cannot be expected, but that these are not reasons for abandoning educational experimentation. Too often when a new approach fails at the first trial, teachers tend to give up at that point and return to former channels of methodology. The patience evolving from history brings a willingness to persevere. This is essential in educational research, for, while some have claimed a good educational theory is one hundred years in finding acceptance, numerous examples can be listed where the stretch of resistance has reached well over five hundred years. Despite this lag, all of us can easily observe our schools, and in the light of history take real hope, as certainly we have made great improvement in schools and schooling. Especially inspiring is the public school movement in the United States. Here we find evidence of the comparative rapidity possible when man really desires to move ahead educationally.

A knowledge of the history of his own profession will also aid the instructor in assessing popular innovations and "new" approaches in the light of like, past experiences. One of the author's students recently completed a paper on the rise of the progressive education movement (how speedily "current" questions are swept into the limbo of history!). She exclaimed, "Well, I have learned to never again say conclusively that this is new or that

this is the first time such a thing happened." Fads or worthwhile developments can be judged much more adequately by the teacher who has a grasp of the factors which have conditioned the background of his own vocation.

To view the American scene and education in the United States in their world setting is also very practical. Certain developments of our own age have parallels only in the distant past. How far back must we go to find large numbers of people living under limited nationalistic conditions? Or, when was the known world last dominated by just two great powers? Do the cooperative efforts of medieval man hold any meaning today? Does the fall of Athens have, as George C. Marshall has claimed, the greatest lesson for America and the West? Or, at a pedagogical level, what happened when Basedow tried Rousseau's progressive and individualistic educational principles in an actual school situation? Why have the educational contributions of the Brethren of the Common Life or of De la Salle been largely overlooked for centuries? What are the implications of the western world's "greatest educational experiment" when formalized education was once abandoned?<sup>3</sup> Be the queries political, religious, economic or educational, the answers tend to bring a sense of validity to our efforts and a warm realization of the unity in man's experience. While American education and American history are unique, neither can be understood provincially or can afford to be narrowly self-centered. Two historians have clev-

<sup>3</sup> August C. Krey, "The World's Greatest Educational Experiment," *Social Education*, October 1938.

erly described the ways in which the history of the world pervades all aspects of our daily life. It would behoove many teachers and students to read these essays.<sup>4</sup>

In an age of security seeking and proper conformity, history helps renew our faith in the self-directing individual that some sociologists fear may soon be lost. It is true that history reminds us of the fallacy of seeking constants; it echoes the fact that we can never be safe under one dogma or under the leadership of one man. As a photo album of our childhood, it impresses us with the relentless change that marks all human affairs. Yet in all of this the message of history rings out with an amazing record, amassed by free-willed individuals, in overcoming the distressing factors which have characterized all ages of the past. True, history provides no inexorable laws; much of import seems to have resulted from but chance and the inconsequential. In spite of the fatalistic determinism and

<sup>4</sup> See "History in a Back Yard" and "Main Street" in Lucy M. Salmon's *Historical Material*, and August C. Krey's "What Is American History?" in his *History and the Social Web*. See also, H. B. Muller's provocative volume, *Uses of the Past*.

the pessimism engendered by historians, such as Spengler, Sorokin, and the limited chance left us by Toynbee, the educator might do well to consider the four sentences which Charles A. Beard claimed as summaries of the "lessons" of history. These were: (a) Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad with power. (b) The mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceedingly small. (c) The bee fertilizes the flower it robs. (d) When it is dark enough you can see the stars.

Beard's fourth point, above, is particularly consequential for teachers, who are so intimately involved in the rush between civilization and catastrophe. We have been counseled before but we need to have history remind us that the battle is not yet finished nor is the outcome assured. The many, many thousands of teachers, in free world and slave, through what results from their educational efforts, still hold some trump cards over fate. They give promise to continue to help generate the light and energy by which mankind may not only see the stars but may some day still reach out and touch them.

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