

# The Importance of People

Column Editor: Richard L. Henderson  
Contributor: Willard Abraham

*The problem of bringing about experimentation and change in classroom content and method provides the subject for this month's column, contributed by Willard Abraham of Arizona State College. What was good for us may not be the best for our children, but what can we do about it?*

## "Limit Not Thy Children . . ."

ONE OF THE basic conflicts we face comes from our inability to see persons, events and situations through the eyes of others. We may find it impossible to understand "their" excitement over Elvis Presley, the snows of *this* winter, and the latest songs of "The Hit Parade," while our thoughts are obscured by misty-eyed recollections of Valentino, the winter of '17, and "Stars Fell on Alabama."

The mellowing which makes incidents and personalities of our youth gleam in retrospect even softens our attitude toward a former teacher whose unimaginative drill methods created a revulsion on our part toward school. The years since she stood as an unbendable force over our every movement have perhaps dimmed our fear and distaste a little bit, enough to make us feel that it all wasn't so bad after all. But the glow of memory should not permit us to force today's children into an educational pattern which we found revolting when we were subjected to it.

Therein lies one of our serious educational dilemmas. Some of us feel strongly that what we were exposed to years ago was the best—but it has taken 20, 30 or 40 years of fading and dimming to make us think so!

We note how Aunt Susan writes with a flourishing hand and reads with "expression," and we compare these skills with Tommy's sloppy handwriting and word-by-word reading, forgetting two significant things: (a) a generation or two of living and practice separates these two persons, and (b) we are comparing isolated cases and drawing generalizations, and perhaps the isolated cases may represent the most capable of "then" with the least capable of "now." This hardly adds up to a sound research technique.

If we really think that all education of our younger era was so inspired and inspiring, then why are many of our newspapers pegged in style and content at such a low level, and why are huge quantities of comic books read by adults? Keep your eyes open on your next street-car ride if you disagree!

There are other reasons why we think today's children do not do as well as we did at their age. Yet we should remember that:

1. Years ago few continued beyond the elementary school, twelve- and thirteen-year-old youngsters going to work instead. Today we want young people to be in school regardless of abilities or aptitudes. There are, of course, many who cannot meet secondary school and college

standards. The rightness of the point of view which keeps them in school can be debated, but the fact that they *are* there cannot be disputed.

2. We have more complete methods of child study than we once had—better methods of testing, interviewing and observing, for example, so we can more easily identify the slow or retarded student.

3. Parents today are better educated than *their* parents were, and consequently are more alert to lapses in knowledge or skills of their offspring.

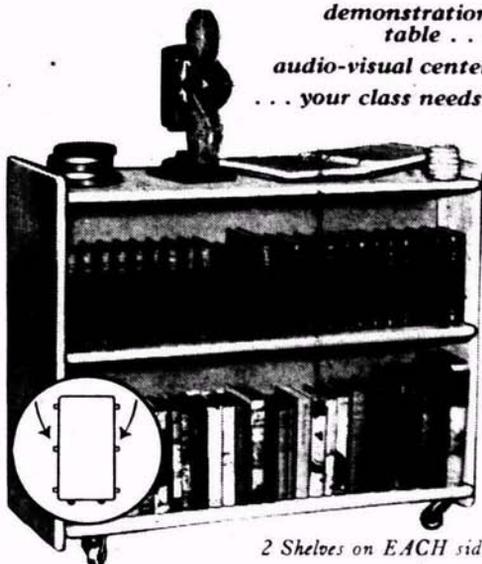
Parents and others who sometimes become self-appointed experts in the field of education may discourage teachers from doing the jobs for which they have prepared and to which they have dedicated full efforts throughout their adult years. Such fields as architecture, geology and medicine are free to develop as fast and as far as their qualified personnel can take them. However, when it comes to those who teach our children—and those who teach the teachers—most of the barriers are down. In this setting, the least informed persons often become the most critical.

Now it is true that the concern of parents for the education of their children should be respected. However, it is equally true that this concern of parents and others must be accompanied by responsibility when it comes to criticism. Haven't you heard statements such as these?

"I memorized the alphabet and multiplication tables, and I just don't see why my children shouldn't be taught in the same way."

"When I went to school we all read when we were in the first grade. Now the teachers talk about such things as readiness, and having some children start to read when they are seven or eight."

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"We started writing in the regular way, with none of the manuscript stuff. There are some children who never do learn how to write correctly these days."

Such comments frequently are made by persons whose knowledge of current teaching techniques may be limited, or who assume that methods in all schools today are vastly different from those used when they were in the elementary grades. Some of our present-day students cannot read, write, spell and add as we would like them to; but this does not mean that the fault necessarily lies in the newer methods. Some children *always* were deficient in these skills, and we continue to have our share today—but the mistake is made in headlining these youngsters out of all proportion to their numbers, and in addition, putting the blame on techniques which actually have never been given a fair trial in American education. While some are trying new

methods and materials, many of our teachers still teach as they were taught.

It is healthful to question newer methods in education, as well as in medicine, business and government, but dangerous to stop respectable experimentation. Our children suffer, and so do we, when we restrict the activities of teachers and administrators who are trying to find better ways. Because the burden of those in the field of education already is seemingly greater than the understaffed personnel in this profession can bear, we ought to be seeking ways to aid by removing obstacles, instead of setting up roadblocks to progress.

Because of the strength of teachers' efforts to do a significant job well, they are usually able to "take" the questioning of outsiders. But they still need the patience, understanding, cooperation and encouragement which are abundantly accorded to other professions.

There will be thousands of changes in all areas of our lives in the months and years ahead. It seems foolish to single out the most creative and important of human activities and experiences—the preparation of our young for a better life—and to confine this endeavor through restricted imagination and experimentation. A scholarly book in one of the world's greatest religions succinctly states the issue in this way:

"Limit not thy children to thine own ideas. They are born in a different time."

Because tomorrow will be different from today, our children are entitled to an education which will prepare them for change. If we confine them within a pattern of teaching used with varying degrees of success in the past and present, we limit their ability to participate in and gain from those brighter days to come.

—WILLARD ABRAHAM, *professor of education, Arizona State College, Tempe.*

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