

The Importance of People

Column Editor: Richard L. Henderson

Contributor: James Brown

Still asking, "What in Education burns you up?" we stopped off recently in Denton, Texas, where we got this colorful reply from JIM BROWN, who teaches English at North Texas State College. It's such a lively response that we'd like to follow it up ourselves next month.

RICHARD L. HENDERSON

Graduation Gowns: Styled by Philistine

IN MY checkered past I have occasionally found myself, to my own startled surprise, aligned on the side of modern education. These temporary allegiances were each assumed at its time for humanitarian reasons, not educational ones: it seems obvious that the barbarities which we commit today in the name of education are less brutal than those which we favored in the not-so-distant past. And in general I hold for those things which tend to reduce human misery, even as it is felt by those always-available objects for adult manipulation—school children.

My part-time support of today's frying pan against yesteryear's fire of brimstone is sometimes mitigated by the role which I must play as a parent with children in school. In this situation, I find modern education as practiced by the professionals demands not support but submission. I have twitched with rebellion more than once as the eleemosynary juggernaut ground onwards, solemnly callioping a tune not really compatible with my convictions about the dance. But I hesitate to draw upon my children the onus of a noncooperative parent, and my comments, appearing to be complaints, are more than likely to prejudice teachers whose ability

has been certified. So as a parent I fulfil my cultural function by adjusting to my children's environment, and modern education scores a statistical approximation to the cultural line by my capitulation.

Thus it is that I grant, willingly in one case and grudgingly in the other, that modern education has a kind of humanitarian and cultural validity. But still something keeps me from standing up to be counted among the wholehearted, unreserved subscribers to those theories, practices, institutions, activities and requirements which have come to be identified with modern education. This reluctance is not that which sets the Flesch of some people to quivering; as an adjusted parent I am immune to tremors of this sort. It is somewhat more complicated than a mere cultural lag, and when I reflect upon its cause, it comes to me that I don't want to stand up at such a census because of the people with whom I must stand. Birds of a feather, the saying goes, and I don't quite fancy the aviary.

This is a pretty brutal statement, I suppose, and a word or two in explanation is in order. I do not intend personal affront to those people who do stand when the count is being conducted. But whatever modern education is, and I am convinced

NEW!

Prentice-Hall Texts

TEACHER & SCHOOL ORGANIZATION, 3rd Edition

by LEO M. CHAMBERLAIN, Univ. of Kentucky and LESLIE W. KINDRED, Temple University

A thorough revision of a text which sold over 44,000 copies. Deals with non-teaching phases of a teacher's work. Extremely useful in helping a teacher see his place in a modern school system, and his relationships to the state and federal government.

672 pp. 5 3/4" x 8 3/4" Pub. March 1958
Text price \$6.75

DEVELOPING THE CORE CURRICULUM, 2nd Edition

by ROLAND C. FAUNCE, Wayne State Univ. and NELSON L. BOSSING, Univ. of Minnesota

This thorough revision deals with the core curriculum, combining both theory and practical application. It provides theoretical background: the basic social and economic developments that have contributed to core, and the philosophical and psychological bases for core. It shows the ideal core class, the role of the teacher and of the administrator; cooperation with the community; and evaluation techniques.

approx. 400 pages 5 3/4" x 8 3/4" Pub. Jan. 1958
Text price \$5.00



Send for

FREE

48-page Catalog

Box 903
Prentice-Hall, Inc.
Englewood Cliffs,
New Jersey

Please send me a free copy
of your latest Education and Psychology Catalog

Name

Address

Affiliation

that in some important way it is mistaken, it is run by people; people direct the institutions, formulate the rules, state and accept the principles, practice the profession. And if something needs to be done about the system, it must be done by people. So my reluctance to stand at the counting is not based on personalities, but upon the complex of ideas, theories, practices and philosophies for which these people stand, or which they stand for: I am dissatisfied with them because they are satisfied with so little.

Reflection of Popular Culture

For it seems to me that modern education, at a terrific expenditure of effort, ingenuity and other precious human resources—not to mention money—has devoted itself merely to the wholesale reflection of the popular culture and its understandably real but not always very realistic standards. The key to my impression is the fact that modern education, with all its complex machinery, seems to have little if any real impact upon the culture. The process of being educated means, finally, that I can check a certain square on the job application form when I fill it out. For any other part of life, the education of the average person has served principally to condition him for the intellectual and moral shallows of TV commercials, the herrings—red and otherwise—of newspaper circulation gimmicks, and the questionably motivated, high-sounding platitudes of the Chamber of Commerce. So I am forced to the conclusion that modern education is, in effect, an amazingly redundant—and therefore useless—phenomenon of our day. That it has not correctly called the turn of those requirements for cultural survival which relentlessly apply to us all may well be indicated by the progress of current

events. And I resent being thrown a lead life-saver.

There are several ironies connected with the position of modern education, and one of them lies in its devotion to the popular culture. For this devotion is not returned. This, too, is a key to my impression of education's essential cultural futility. For despite all the self-nurtured hullabaloo, education's minions remain minions: the low social and financial status of teachers is matched only by the arrogant and doctrinaire manner with which they are treated by society. And any idea which the professional educators may have of actually implementing their Better Homes and Gardens Utopia is effectively hamstrung by the powers and conflicting interests of school boards, superintendents, budgets, tax rates, and that elusive factor which everybody in the front office always knows all about, public opinion.

Another irony, and a more crucial one, concerning the position of modern education is its relation to its immediate environment. For professional educators have traditionally and actually originated in the academic community, which is perhaps the last shelter in our world for the intellectual life. In fact, any prestige which modern professional education may really have is gained, either entirely or initially, from the mystical background of the intellect which haunts the popular public concept of the college. But the history of modern professional education, in keeping with its development of an easily mass-produced cultural chameleon, has been a history of anti-intellectualism; the measure of evolution in a modern education curriculum is the thoroughness with which it has eradicated all chances for the student to partake of the intellectual life, to know through practice about study for the sake

of study. The discipline of modern education schools today, through necessity, I believe, closely resembles the conduct of a Thought Reform camp, in which sincerity in repeating the accepted formulae is the standard for release to society, suitably stamped "Safe." The education student gets little practice, or even introduction to the practice, in disciplines out of which he may learn for himself the highly unsocial, solitary, exacting, exciting and legitimate reality of using his mind to answer any and all questions which his mind puts to him. And the manure-pile inevitably draws flies: not only interdepartmental gossip among college instructors but also national survey figures show that the education department consistently draws low-level students. What is more bothersome to me, of course, is that it consistently graduates them. With a degree in "science"!

As modern education has oversimplified the culture to which it legitimately and justly feels an obligation, so it has oversimplified the intellectual essence of the very environment whose shaky prestige it borrows so willingly. These simplicities are part of a thoroughgoing tendency which has operated upon anything touched by the tribe—its own role in the culture, the role of the intellectual in the culture, the concept of utility, and any other basic matter which you care to name. And I am led to suspect that modern education and its products are, in terms of what they actually accomplish, just about on a par with the modern barber college and its products. The major difference is that modern education has a better press and its practitioners are both paid less and controlled more strictly by the society.

Certainly both institutions are necessary to the culture; their functions are vital in some sense. But their contribu-

tions to the development of the culture are about the same. And it seems fairly obvious that modern education, despite its high-sounding phrases, is about as concerned in its basic assumptions with the life of the mind, with study for its own sake, as is the tonsorial profession. Neither institution can point to any effective modification of the culture which it has achieved—nothing, say, on the level with commercial TV, or the supermarket concept, or even fin tails on cars, which everyone must put up with. Both institutions deal in fads and fashions which depend upon popularity for their validity; neither one has the impressive cultural validity of pleasing everyone. So modern education passes on to the mass of the people those attitudes, opinions, standards and behavior patterns which inevitably originate elsewhere in the culture; it passes these on because it is modeled upon an acceptance of their reality. For modern education has never been able to separate the philosophy from the cultural prophecy in John Dewey's thinking. And it will come into its own only when it ceases to be an unthinking mouthpiece for those cultural forces which focus on man's ever-present ability to function uncritically.

For it has a more significant, less simple responsibility to the culture than it has yet fulfilled. It is a responsibility based upon recognizing the life of the intellect as a genuine and legitimate activity in man's existence. In keeping with its traditional function and its obvious equipment, education must abandon its hiding place behind the skirts of popular standards and instead assert explicitly its inherent authority. It must define, not reflect, the standards by which the nation lives. And to do this it must become a dominant intellectual force, for only through critical study and thought can

it arrive at actions compatible with its exercise of such authority. Only through demanding intense activity of the intellect throughout all elements of its complex system can it become anything besides the pathetically ridiculous, laughably tragic affair that it is now.

So the task of modern education becomes incredibly difficult: it must combine in a mutually acceptable union the popular culture, of which it partakes liberally, with the minority culture of those who think critically, of which it must learn to partake. But it is a problem in union, not mass conversion. I do not pretend that every man should become an intellectual; this is patently impossible even if it were desirable, which it is not. Nor do I pretend that the intellectual community is a kind of heaven on earth occupied solely by unerring saints. It is, in fact, probably more limited in its successes than is any other group of human beings. For people think, if at all, in short and infrequent bursts and with extremely limited accuracy. But in some real and necessary way, an active group of people dedicated to study because they like to study is vital to the health of any admirable culture; their discoveries and evaluations are the raw material for real cultural progress. Their activities should not be circumscribed by cultural scorn and superstition, nor should their communications be jammed by the inevitable and natural cultural babble. It is to the everlasting shame of modern education that it has contributed only negatively to the practice of the intellectual life in our time. And the anti-intellectualism of our nation for the past fifty years may well be the cause of our failure to survive through the next five.

—JAMES BROWN, *professor of English, Department of English, North Texas State College, Denton, Texas.*

Copyright © 1958 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.