French Education Is Changing

A significant trend is under way as France plans reorganization of its secondary schools.

YEARS ago Van Wyck Brooks pointed out that it is of the essence of the colonial state of mind that the forms of the mother country are kept in the colonies all the more tenaciously when they have been cast aside at home. Some of those who loudly proclaim that they have lost confidence (did they ever have it?) in American public education are pointing to the European model, saying that, like the Europeans, we should provide extended academic education only for the most able students. They don’t know it, and they won’t learn it from this article because they won’t read it, but they are practicing Brooks’ colonialism.

The case in point is the advent of the New Education—that’s what they call it—in the French Lycée, accompanied by a general reorganization of French secondary education. The French are now confronting directly the problem of mass education for the modern world, and they are completely reversing the spirit and the intent of the French schools.

Here’s the way two well-informed Frenchmen see the need. The first is Jean Fourastié following an international meeting at the UNESCO Institute at Hamburg:

From the economic point of view, the characteristics of the education of the next generations are derived from two essential facts:

The improvement of the standard of living brings about the progressive lengthening of schooling;

The increasingly technical character and the growing complexity of the processes of production require of the working man more and more extended scientific understanding, and above all an increasingly profound awareness of the scientific experimental method. . . .

The second is Charles Brunhold, who is the General Director of Secondary Education in the Ministry of Education. Since French education is centralized, Mr. Brunhold is the chief administrative officer for the secondary academic schools of France—the famous lycées. In 1952, he wrote a series of bulletins on secondary education that state the official basis for the present extensive changes. The general purpose of the lycée he states as follows:

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1 Jean Fourastié. “L’avenir de l’éducation.” In L’Education Nationale, 15th année, No. 8, 19 Fevrier 1959. (Writer’s translation.)
The work of education extends from childhood to adulthood, and the point of arrival is as essential to define as the point of departure. Education requires a certain idea of man and by this we do not mean an abstraction. It is the men of today, better still, if possible, those of tomorrow . . . we must think of to guide our efforts. Thus education will come to be defined as a preparation for that multiform and constantly more complex action from which no educated man can escape, from which he cannot disengage himself—we will say more, in which he is duty-bound to interest himself and even to consecrate himself.

As our teaching gradually shapes the student, particularly in the latter years, the idea of the man committed to action, for whom each problem is fresh, should inspire our educational methods. Our teachers should not be satisfied by the acquisition of an organized body of knowledge, nor by a certain training of the mind. They ought, instead, constantly to confront the man we would develop with problems to study as if they were new. There is a way of teaching in which one starts from a confused situation—with a complex of unorganized facts or documents—and looks at them to find the locus of the problems. It is possible to approach such problems by the method of inquiry, helping the adolescent to rediscover the solutions by the original route. Within the time available to the teacher, it is possible to cover the steps from confusion to the clarification of ideas, arriving at a bit of the truth, even when we pass from the experimental sciences to those where the human factor introduces many more complexities. By developing in the student the spirit of research, by giving him the solid method of each discipline; by sustaining his initiative; by showing him the necessity of perseverance, and above all, the necessity of perfect intellectual honesty, we can teach him the most important lessons in the current development of theoretical science—to beware of a priori thinking, to explore all paths of thought and action, to preserve a sharp critical sense, and to perfect, enrich, and modify the instruments of his thinking and action. We should seek to give the student, finally, a sense of the openness of questions. Such appear to be the ends to attain in an education which aims to give our society men rich in adaptability, rich in means, and rich in proven methods.2

These two statements are like many such that have been made in France since the Liberation in 1945. The country entered the post-war period with a sense of having been cleansed by fire, and a determination to rid itself of those purely traditional, and no longer useful, elements of the national life that had led to Maginot Line thinking. Many reforms were proposed; some were adopted. The reform of the spirit of education that was given official statement and sanction by Mr. Brunhold had already been expressed by others. Mr. Brunhold, however, expressed it with both conviction and vigor. Chief among the faults, from the point of view of leading French educators, was the tendency in the Lycée toward a narrow, excessively verbal formalism.

French humanism, a great cultural force, had degenerated in the schools to a narrow, didactic version of knowledge and logic, in which everything was assumed to be “given” and the student’s task was (a) to master it, and (b) to learn to play elaborate deductive games with it, especially when taking the difficult written and oral state examinations. The educational process implied by such practices had come under increasing criticism in the late thirties. After 1945, it was attacked generally. The parallel between this kind of education for those

chosen as future leaders (the élite, or "chosen ones"), and the actual behavior of the national leaders was frighteningly exact. In the National Assembly, precisely these processes of over-elaborate, deductive argument, with little reference to the facts of national life, functioned to make it impossible to make crucial national decisions on the economy and on Algeria, not to mention a large number of important internal matters, such as the need for educational reform. The story of the Fourth Republic was, from one point of view, an account of an elaborate, logical minuet, in which the purpose of the debate was not to reach decisions, but rather (as in the Baccalauréate examination) to display one's elegance as a debater.

A Committed Man

Against all of this is Malraux's homme engagé, a committed man. Brunhold borrows the phrase in the statement quoted above—l'homme engagé dans l'action, "a man committed to action." The development of such a man amounts to a flat reversal of the spirit of the Lycée. Brunhold and others have carried this overturn a long way. In a recent article, Brunhold states and illustrates one implication of this new point of view. He told me in conversation that this correlation of two subjects was a "little revolution," intended to open the way to a general reexamination of the subject matter of the Lycée, along the lines implied by his 1952 statements.

The revolution is as fundamental as it could be. Here is a brief statement of what we would call the principles of application, posted in the exhibit room of the Pilot Lycée at Sèvres. Every one of them is in flat contradiction with the way the Lycée used to operate:

1. Understanding of pupils (by means of)
   a. grade-level meetings (conseils de classe)
   b. parent meetings
   c. cumulative records (dossiers scolaires)
2. Coordination of disciplines
3. Active methods (by means of)
   a. individual guided work
   b. work in teams
4. Contacts with life (by means of)
   a. studies of the environment (this includes field trips)
   b. making instruction real (e.g., making a model of an ancient city)
5. Atmosphere (by means of)
   a. self-discipline (autodiscipline)
   b. appreciation of work
6. Research on aptitudes (of students)
   a. artistic aptitudes
   b. manual aptitudes
   c. scientific aptitudes (in cooperation with the technical sections).

The spirit behind these statements will be recognizable to American educators. It has infused our work since the end of World War I, and has been expressed over and over in the American parallels to bulletins from the French Ministry—the various statements on the goals of education from the Educational Policies Commission, the recent Rockefeller Brothers statement, the Cardinal Principles statement of 40 years ago, and so on.

Now, this change is taking place at the top of the French system. It would be unrealistic to assume that it has infused the system, or that great, sweeping changes have taken place generally. They haven't. There are six Pilot Lycées in the country where the New Educa-

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tion is being practiced, developed, and demonstrated. There are many pilot classes in other lycées. But the spirit of the typical French teacher and school administrator has not changed yet in any dramatic way. What has been described above is where the French Lycée is headed, not where it is.

Where it is can be illustrated by two statements that have appeared recently. The first is by Georges Dementhon, proviseur (chief administrator) of the Lycée Jean Girardoux:

Our French system is founded on emulation and competition, but our classification of students and our prizes shock the egalitarianism of the Americans. . . We think in France that the pupils must satisfy their master; the Americans think that it is up to the teacher to adapt to the pupils. . . .

Second, a discussion of the merits of ball-point pens, which has created a minor flurry. The writer is the director of a school in Paris, who favors ball-point pens:

They can't erase any more? So much the better—they will think more before they write; they will replace a notebook of rough drafts with a notebook of essays.

The sharp difference in point of view between the official leaders of French secondary education and the field person as represented by these two brief quotations constitutes a problem the French will have to face and solve. But there is no doubt about where they intend to go. Nor is there any doubt about their dissatisfaction with the Lycée as it has been.


Present Values

Much of what is reported here is based on a month-long visit in Paris in 1958, during which I visited the Pilot Lycées at Sèvres and Montgeron, spent many hours in the classes at Sèvres, talked with a number of leaders in French education, examined textbooks, and perused books and articles. Based on all of this, it is apparent that we in the United States have some things to learn from the French. While we, too, would be critical of the over-formalism that is everywhere evident in their schools, and while we could probably be helpful to them (if they wished our help) with respect to the problems of curriculum development they now confront, it is instructive to consider some great strengths that exist in the schools as they are.

First, we can learn something about the teaching of the mother tongue. If without slavishly copying some of the wooden method-centeredness that characterizes much French teaching we could capture the intellectual excitement that underlies the explication de texte, we might hope that our students would write and speak with greatly improved precision and elegance. The great strength of the teaching of French in the lycée is in the close and logical analysis of the text of all writing and reading, year after year. The thoroughness and depth of this analysis, at its best (not at its mechanical and sterile worst) is a revelation. The development of the ability to read closely and critically would, for example, help our students to escape the influence of an often propagandistic press. I shall not undertake to explain the approach here; it is both profound and simple, and not
to be understood at first glance. Moreover, it lends itself to serious abuse, even in France. But if a teacher will consistently raise questions with a student, concerning something that is written, such as, “what, exactly, did he say?”, “why did he choose these words, rather than others?”, “what were the alternatives he probably thought of and rejected?”, “what imagery did he use, and why?”, “what did he imply?”, “what did he not imply?”, “what evidence did he adduce?”, he will get some slight feeling for explanation.

Second, we can learn something of the power of educators to shape society by acting on a coherent conception of the man they seek. Regardless of the fact that the methods are being changed, the purposes broadened, the organization drastically altered, the core of French lycee education—which accounts for its great prestige—is not being changed. As Professor Debesse says: “The prestige of secondary education explains the fact that all the new schools created after it have sought to model themselves on it, consciously or not...”

Reorganization

This prestige is overwhelming. It derives from one fact—that the program of instruction and the selection of teachers have been utterly consistent with a conception of what a civilized man is. This conception, the French now see, has been much too narrow, and they are busy broadening it. But they can be counted on to keep it clear, and to see its implications explicitly. Would we could claim as much!


We have been talking about the reform in aims and methods. There has also been a reform in school organization. Ever since the end of World War II, it has been evident to the French that a reorganization of the schools was necessary. A law was framed as early as 1947, but the instability of the national government made enactment of such a law impossible. However, in January 1959 the reform, with a few modifications, was put into effect.

The reorganization has these main aspects of interest to Americans:

1. Extension of the compulsory school attendance to age 16. This simply regularizes what is already a fact, since 85 percent of French youth are now in some kind of school until age 16.

2. Introduction of a “cycle of observation” after the completion of elementary grades, lasting for two years. Until now, French children have been sorted out at age 11, approximately 15 percent being admitted to the lycée, 40 percent to a trade school (centre d’apprentissage), others to the two-year cours complémentaire, which has been something like our grades seven and eight at the old grammar school—essentially a reviewing period—still others to technical schools. The observation cycle drastically alters this. The horrors of the “entree en sixieme” are to be reduced, if not obliterated, by this far more humane system.

3. Changes in technical and general education. The need for a large increase in technically trained people is generally recognized. Accordingly, the secondary schools other than the lycée are being reorganized and renamed. The intent of this change is to make technical secondary education more available than
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it is, and to provide an orderly arrangement of the various schools. It is interesting to an American that the new Lycée technique created under the law bears a considerable resemblance to the American comprehensive high school, since it offers a diploma equivalent to the baccalaureat though limited to the technical subjects.

4. Changes in the Baccalaureat examination. The “Bachot” is the famous, very tough state examination required for entrance to the University. In 1958 only 65 percent of those who took the second part of it passed; only 40 percent of those who enter the Lycée reach the “Bachot”; only 15 percent of the elementary school population enter the Lycée at all. The be-all and end-all of the Lycée student is this examination. Changes in it were unthinkable—but some have been made. The details are of little interest unless one knows more about the examination than can be presented here. The intent of the changes, however, is—like the intent of the New Education—to reduce formalism and to increase the likelihood that the examination will influence the student to think, rather than merely to verbalize elegantly at the drop of a hat; to study broadly, rather than to concentrate narrowly on a limited number of fields. In addition, the system of appeal from a failure has been made more sensitive. One can say that the intent of the change in the Baccalaureat is to make the examination at once more sensitive as a test and more humane as a bit of social policy.

As is true in our country, reorganization is easier for the French to understand and accept than is any actual curriculum change. The Cultural Counselor of the French Embassy in the United States, M. Morot-Sir, displays this in his editorial in Education in France (op. cit.). He is enthusiastic about the reorganization; he shows only the faintest awareness of the curricular changes (“. . . France remains faithful to a great didactic tradition . . . this education must avoid the dangers of an uncontrolled freedom in which the human mind risks falling into complaisance, and the inhuman harshness of a conditioned research obtained by constraint”). We, who admire the French in many ways, can only hope they will not fall into our error of confusing reorganization of the schools with a redeveloped content, for to do so would have them once more merely avoiding the central questions while going through an elaborate organizational ceremony.