

Schools Without Subjects?

BEECHER H. HARRIS*

IT IS my thesis here that no significant changes will take place in the elementary school until we eliminate the subject-teaching program. Until we do, our treatment of children will remain substantially the same, and the effects upon children will remain substantially the same. They will remain the same because they are integral to the program, inseparable from it. They are corollaries of the program, inevitable, inescapable. The program is independent of us, its administrators. It yields the same results whoever administers it, however he administers it, and in whatever guise he administers it.

What are the built-in characteristics of the program that cause it to produce the treatment and produce the effects? The answer is to be found first of all in the nature of subjects.

Children Encounter Subjects

Subjects—reading, mathematics, language, and all the rest—are adult constructs. They represent legitimate adult interests, scholarly pursuits, practical specializations. Each is differentiated and isolated from the total world of experience for concentrated adult analysis, study, and use. For children, however, subjects—subjects of any kind, however conceived—hold no inherent interest, meaning, or use. For them the world has simply not yet so fragmented itself. It

will do so eventually, as the children gain experience and as they mature, but not for a presently known number of years.

Take reading, for instance; children are truly interested in many of the stories and much of the information to be gotten from reading. Their interest will prompt them over a period of time, in degrees and ways consistent with their level of readiness, to learn to read. But scholars have analyzed the act of reading into a large body of skills and knowledge. They insist on organizing this body of skills and knowledge into a rigidly structured subject and “teaching” it. They teach it and the children must learn it. The children must learn it even though the skills and knowledge as such hold no interest, meaning, or immediate use for them.

Again, for example, children encounter number in daily living. It holds immediate interest, meaning, and use for them as number. They grow into its use at the beginning as a part of language. With increasingly organized help consistent with their degree of readiness, they gain facility in its use. But scholars have developed number to a high degree of complexity—interesting, meaningful, and useful to them. They insist on organizing it into a rigid, sequential set of knowledge, skills, and processes, currently quite abstract, and “teaching” it. They teach

* Beecher H. Harris, 3598 Bechelli Lane, Redding, California

it as the subject of mathematics. The children must "learn" it. They must learn it even though it has no interest, meaning, or immediate use for them.

In short, children do like to read, but the subject of "reading" means nothing to them. They do encounter number and they do use it, but the subject of "mathematics" is foreign to them. They do use language, but the subject of "language" is pointless to them. They do like to draw, to manipulate, to construct, to sing, to look at bugs, to investigate, to roam the countryside, to hear about what has gone before, to communicate, to run and jump and play; but the subjects of "art," "music," "science," "history," and "physical education" are artificial, extraneous to their lives. These constitute for children a premature compartmentalization of experience. But adults insist upon teaching the subjects and they demand that children learn them.

Adult reasoning on this point apparently is that since they, the adults, have found it useful for academic purposes to study and learn in terms of subjects, they must therefore teach the subjects to children. Since they have analyzed the act of reading into its component skills, they must teach the skills to children. Their conclusion is obviously a *non sequitur*. Yet it gains further support in adult thinking from the universal belief that we send children to school to learn. Teachers must teach and children must learn. Isn't that what schools are for? And what shall we teach if we do not teach subjects? So far, it seems, no one has even considered the possibility of dispensing with either teaching or subjects or of trying to invent something else.

Children are confronted with subjects from the beginning—yes, sadly enough, in recent years from the beginning in kindergarten and currently in preschool. At first they are compliant. Could they be else? Soon and increasingly, attention wanders, effort wanes, compliance comes reluctantly. Children become more resistant to the requirement we impose on them to sit still, pay attention, and do something they do not want to do.

The very nature of subjects is thus the

first problem in the subject-teaching program.

A second problem immediately reveals its disturbing self. The children do not "achieve" equally. The expectation in the subject-teaching program is mastery—mastery, in its rawest concept, by all children in equal degree at the same time. Disconcertingly, however, children distribute themselves, in terms of mastery, on the curve of normal distribution. A spread exists from the beginning and increases with time.

We are not daunted by these two problems. We are determined to teach the subjects and we are determined that children shall learn them. To accomplish our purpose we rely upon a great complex of administrative arrangements, administrative and instructional practices, technological devices, and building designs. Over the decades, and especially in recent years, we have developed a great array of innovations. Some have been designed to alleviate a few of the more obvious evils of the subject-teaching program, though they doggedly retain the program. Most have been designed for "academic excellence" in the program, that is, more and faster learning of whatever we decree must be learned. None has even hinted at the possibility of abandoning the program.

How does the subject-teaching program treat children?

1. It orders their lives in school in every respect. It is in its basic conception and in practice authoritarian in the extreme. It denies to children their heritage of freedom. Current practices in individualization purport to give children freedom. They do permit some freedom of movement and some self-propulsion in learning activities—both very limited and both very superficial. Children are generously permitted to master subject content at their own paces and in their own ways, but master it they must.
2. The program subjects children to constant harassment, pressure, demands, expectations, threat of failure, and actual failure—all external, all imposed.
3. The program maintains itself through an elaborate system of rewards and punishments, through "discipline." Children are "disciplined."

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4. It labels and rejects children who do not readily master the subjects, who master them too rapidly, or who do not yield to discipline: M.R., E.H., Remedial, Z Group, Specials, Pre-kindergarten, Junior First, Slow group, G.C., Behavior Problem.

5. It regards children only as "learners," not as people. So regarding them, it has no hesitation in subjecting them to instructional or behavioral objectives, operant conditioning, CAI, contract performance, programmed learning, IPI, and similar programs in mastery.

6. It tests, judges, and classifies children. It "reports" on them. It subjects them to many other kinds of indignity and humiliation.

7. It justifies all of these practices on the grounds of preparation for something ahead, on the belief that we as adults must shape the lives of our children because we know what is good for children and they do not, on a total lack of confidence in the potential of the human organism for self-determination, and on a cultural compulsion to require children to achieve well in school.

Effects Upon Children

And what are some of the effects upon children? The negative effects are pronounced. They are predictable from the nature of the program. And they echo down through the years in all our lives—dissonant reverberations from a discordant past, hurts from old wounds.

1. Children build up an elaborate system of defensive, compensatory, and evasive behavior to maintain themselves as people. Some become totally withdrawn. Some become wildly defiant.

2. Their individual growth patterns become badly distorted.

3. They develop unnatural self-images ranging from total self-abnegation to superiority complexes.

4. All lose in creativeness, attack, initiative.

5. They do not develop the ways of freedom.

6. Many of the baser human traits are called into play and hence into predominance: jealousy, hostility, suspiciousness, competitiveness, selfishness, cruelty, disrespect, revenge. Many of the finer human traits atrophy through

disuse: friendliness, openness, generosity, cooperation, kindness, compassion, forbearance, consideration.

—And so on.

The positive effects? Well, some of the children, the academically strong children, do master most of the subjects to a high degree. All children master them to some degree.

Yet children who survive the subject teaching program with any degree of balance, with positive personal-social attributes, with strong or even seemingly strong mental health, survive in spite of the program. They survive basically because of the resiliency of the human organism and because the organism possesses within itself the mainsprings to healthy living and growth. They survive also because of family and other sociological influences and because of the system. The big contribution of the school is the system, not the program. The public school system brings children from all backgrounds together in a social relationship inherently satisfying and growth-stimulating. To be sure, the relationship is stultified by program-induced competitiveness, but it nevertheless makes a marked contribution to personal-social growth.

Thus, the program by its very nature is

impossible to administer with any high degree of humaneness. We, the professionals, the agents, the administrators of the program, are cast in impossible roles. We are taskmasters. However benign, compassionate, considerate by nature and by intent we might be, we have to be taskmasters. We cannot be anything else. We will not be anything else until we eliminate subject-teaching, and all of its implementing concepts and practices. Until then we shall continue enslaved by the program. And until then, in spite of all we can do, we shall continue to treat children as we do now, and the effects upon them will be the same.

Once freed from the subject-teaching program we shall be able to express our true selves and to assume our true roles. In the exhilaration of our own new-found freedom, we shall move vigorously and successfully to the development of a program consonant with the nature of children. We shall be competent to do so because we already have a philosophy and a knowledge of people to guide us. We already have many bits of program from the past. We shall be able to assemble them into a new program. And in this program, children—all children—will be able to live life to its fullest and to grow in their own ways. □

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