

EDITORIAL

It Could Work Better

Arthur W. Foshay

It's back to fundamentals time again. Last time, we reacted by giving up our talk about progressive education. This time, because of our failure to make our goals clear to the public, we are being forced to phrase education as objectives, narrow competencies, and the like. Predictably, this reaction will be followed by a counterreaction toward the tradition of Rousseau, Parker, Dewey, and the others.

I wish to comment on what works, on what is basic, and to make a brief observation about what may be a large-scale mistake we make in the sequence of learning activities in the elementary school.

I was drinking tea with Arthur Gates a number of years ago, and we talked of reading. At that time, the Initial Teaching Alphabet was being trumpeted as the cure-all, and I asked him about such methods. "They all work," he answered, "if you follow them consistently." I made up a Foshay method on the spot. You give a six-year-old a copy of *War and Peace*, and require that he memorize ("learn," we say, though we shouldn't) every fifth word. It might be a bit slower than some other approaches, but it would work eventually.

In fact, everything works for most people. One might say that all the methods work 80 percent of the time, like weather forecasts. It's the other 20 percent that is the problem. When the 20 percent is concentrated in pockets of poverty in the largest cities, it looks like 50 percent or more. When it is dispersed in the more affluent places, it looks like five percent, and we say these are good schools. Of course they are, for 95 percent of the population. As Casey Stengel once said, "With Mickey Mantle in the field, I'm a hell of a manager."

What works for most people, in the case of the 3 R's and in other academic fields, follows

some rules: the student must see the point of what he/she is doing in his/her own terms; the reward for doing these things must correspond with what the student wanted in the first place; the student must become acquainted with the symbol systems; the student must come to understand their use and application; the student must "make" with them (this is often overlooked); and the student must play with them (this is almost always overlooked). Learning all this depends in large measure on how much time one spends doing it, though more in the case of math than language, presumably because children do more on their own in the case of language.

"Making" in math involves, for example, making up your own problems as well as finding your own applications. In language, it involves all the forms of original expression: much more writing than we now usually require; production of plays, signs, school papers, and so on. Yet the hard-mouthed "basics" advocates consider even these essential activities less important than drill. And they have convinced the children of it. One problem to overcome is that children don't think they are learning unless they are memorizing.

One of the things teachers hope for is that children will continue doing what they have learned to do in school. This voluntary activity can't be taught directly in school, since the learners have to do it on their own, after formal instruction has ended. But we can induce voluntary activity in school, especially through play. Play is, after all, voluntary activity. That's why games, rhymes, composing music, making up codes and number systems, and the like are so basic.

What Is Basic?

It turns out that the process used in confronting content is as basic as the content. This

obvious truth has been around for a long time, but some people seem to overlook it. In bringing about an encounter with content, there are four basic considerations we have to keep in mind. Leave one out, and the student's ability to survive

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is impaired. The basics are the *coping skills, citizenship, morality or character*, and a *valid view of the self*.

Coping Skills

The 3 R's are coping skills, though of themselves they are far short of being adequate. Other coping skills include emotional development, physical realization, intellectual functioning, social growth, aesthetic encounters, and spiritual awareness. To live a decent life, one must have developed in all these spheres.

Citizenship

A good many crooks have good coping skills of a certain kind. But crooks aren't the only poor citizens. Every time someone refers to the government as "they," you can be sure that the schools have failed to do their historically basic job. Citizenship, defined as the pursuit of justice between humans and their institutions in a civilized way, ought to be a basic result of having attended school. We ignore it at our joint peril.

Morality, or Character

We teach a moral code in school, whether or not we intend to. When we avoid making values explicit, we leave the whole matter to the children. But, being children, they have childish values, and character development takes place unevenly, crudely, and vaguely. That's the meaning, perhaps, of Kohlberg's finding that most people don't get beyond his stage three, though it has been pointed out that the Constitution is based on stage five.

A Valid View of Self

Every year, a few students commit suicide. In every tragic case, it is found that the child considered himself or herself worthless. For every suicide, there are hundreds more who destroy themselves gradually, through abusing their bodies or distorting their minds. That's why individual counseling or guidance is basic. The schools are such a powerful social forum that children learn much of their personal worth there. We can't leave this basic fact to chance.

We need a context as broad as this to discuss the basics intelligently. The public seems to be saying, through the press, that if we don't teach the 3 R's better than we ever did, they don't care what else we do. The public and the press are, in a word, wrong. There is more to life than the 3 R's. If we are trapped into pushing the curriculum out of balance to silence the present public clamor, we will misportray to children what it is to be a human being.

A Better Sequence

It has been noticed for a long time that children learn the symbolic skills faster when they

are older. Some of our trouble with the 20 percent who have trouble learning symbols may arise from this fact. I offer here a brief statement of what a more reasonable sequence might be. Don't try it, however, if you can't face public wrath; our habits are so deeply ingrained that this proposal could not expect to receive an understanding reception.

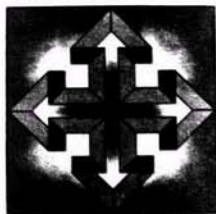
The proposal proceeds from the principle that one should first become acquainted with reality before attempting to deal with it abstractly. We would begin in the early grades with attempts to become saturated with the realities of the world: the physical realities, the life forms, the human phenomena, art forms. Only after children had an extensive acquaintance with these data would we introduce abstractions of them in the form of the 3 R's. The early grades would be full of talk about reality, excursions into fantasy (remember the earlier point about play), and the making of one-step abstractions, such as models or pictures. Direct, prolonged attention to the 3 R's would come for most children in grade three. Some children would have taught themselves to read by then, and a few would not be ready yet. But most—perhaps 90 percent—would be ready because of their rich experience with reality.

However, in our present hysterical public climate, such an experiment is probably forbidden.



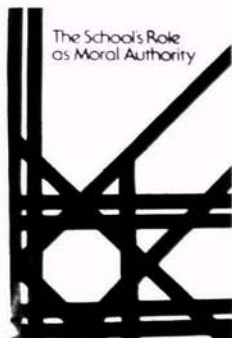
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