

# MINOR REPAIRS IN EDUCATION

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**A**FTER the war, things are going to be very different. On that we are all agreed, though there is no such agreement as to the nature of the difference. One school of thought envisages a radical sweeping away of all the old machineries; the other favours their mending and gradual improvement.

There seems little doubt which school will carry the day in Canada, if the Dominion is left to arrange her internal economy for herself. We have long been developing in this country a genius for compromise. The need to balance neatly between the demands of English-speaking and French-speaking elements, between the industrialized East and the agricultural West, between the upholders of English customs and the advocates of American changes, and between the numerous other bipartite divisions of our population, is fast becoming a national trait. Ability to walk along the top of the fence without falling on to the flower bed in either neighbour's back garden is a pre-requisite for those in high position; the alternative, that of leaping from one side to the other and landing with a heavy thud, is so dangerous that it is practised only by the more theatrical of our provincial politicians. So we are well on our way to breeding a race of tight-rope walkers and diplomats, for every question of domestic policy must be steered between two currents of directly opposed demands if it is to have any hope of reaching the harbour of successful execution. Under such circumstances, the prospect of any drastic change in our institutions, barring the possibility of heavy external pressure, is indeed small.

These considerations must be taken into account when we think of our post-war educational problems. We shall be wise not to expect any basic alteration of the whole educational structure. Almost certainly we shall find ourselves compromising on a policy of tinkering with and patching up the old machinery. It is desirable, then, that, before this tinkering starts, some of the defects of the present system should be laid open to a thoughtful inspection, and some minor repairs suggested.

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One of the defects of our educational system is the persistent lowering of the standard of objective attainment in mere

knowledge. This is not due only to such exigencies of the war situation as the need to excuse pupils from school for several weeks to work in the harvest fields, or the patriotic impulse to supplant academic subjects by courses in Defence Training. Even before these factors came into play, the freight of information carried by a boy reaching the standard of Matriculation was lighter than that of his predecessor of twenty, or even ten, years ago. Even if we admit that there may be compensating gains in other directions, an admission that is not beyond argument, it still remains true that a lowering of the standards of knowledge is something to be deplored. Are we content to deplore it, or are there any ways of tinkering with the present system which may lead to improvement?

First, it will be necessary to decide what is the cause of the trouble, and at least one cause is readily apparent. It lies in our concept of Democracy. In our political life we use the term Democracy to mean representative government, and then feel aggrieved because our elected members are too truly representative, representative of our own dullness and inertia, our self-interested grasping and blind obedience to formulae. For Canada enjoys representative government far more properly than does England. This representation of ours does not depend on the direct exercise of the franchise. It does not consist solely in a member of parliament speaking in the name of the majority of those voters in a constituency who have cared to take the trouble to cast a ballot for one of two or three men, in whose original selection, by the constituency's party caucuses, they have almost certainly had no choice. It is the representation conferred by the unwritten rules as to the formation of the Cabinet, so that it must include, for instance, a representative of the Irish Catholics, and an English speaking Minister from Quebec, and all the other assurances that each racial or religious group of any significance will have Cabinet representation. So long as the Cabinet is the efficient government of the country, which means as long as our present party system remains, we are thus assured of a high measure of truly representative government.

In the world of education, however, this is not so. The actual government of our schools is under the overlapping control of local school boards and provincial Departments of Education. The personnel of the former is drawn all too often from the ranks of politically ambitious individuals, who consider

a seat on the school board as the bottom rung of a ladder which will lead to municipal office, and perhaps eventually to the provincial or federal House. Departments of Education, on the other hand, are staffed by semi-permanent officials, and presided over by a Minister of the provincial Cabinet who may have been picked for any one of a number of reasons, (and interest in education is not necessarily the most important). Under such circumstances, the administrators of education are not particularly representative, and representation of the individual elector depends entirely on the amount of pressure which he can wield personally on members of the local board.

If the representative system has so little place in the administration of the schools, what about democracy in other senses of the word? Unfortunately we seem to have interpreted the maxim that all men are created equal to mean that all children are created with an equal desire and capacity for absorbing instruction. So, under the sacred banner of equality of opportunity, we have fastened our children to a tread-mill of standardized performance, and degraded our teachers to wardens of the lock-step.

Look at our school system as it actually works. Consider what the teacher has to do. In September he has handed over to his charge thirty or forty pupils of approximately the same age, but of varying natural abilities fostered in widely different types of homes, and by June he is expected to have covered with them a fairly definite quantity of material, laid down by syllabus, and to assure the principal of the school, by some system of scoring, that all, or an overwhelming majority of them, have "passed". By this term is meant, presumably, that they are now in a position to profit by the work of the next highest grade. The teacher knows that if any appreciable number of his pupils fail to "pass", his own professional record will receive a black mark. A good teacher is one who gets good results, which means a high percentage of passes.

For the pupil, too, failure to pass brings a black mark. It is a disgrace, not merely to him, but to his parents. In this respect, so common opinion seems to hold, the sins of the children are visited on the fathers. There is a worse evil than this. Should a pupil fail to be promoted to the next grade, it involves not only such a social stigma as falls upon the parents of a "dumb" child; this the rest of the community might bear with equanimity. The worse evil is that the pupil himself will have

to "repeat" his year's work. Next September he will start again where he started last September, and will have to make the journey over the course again, working through the same exercises and problems and sums from the same textbooks, bored, discouraged, and without any stimulus of novelty.

The repeater is not the only sufferer. From an eagerness to keep the dullard from dropping behind, we commit a far worse offence; we neglect our bright pupil. Though he understands the lesson the first time that it is explained, he is doomed to sit through the second and third explanations, which are needed by those at the lowest level, yes, and through the review lesson in the middle of the year, and the recapitulation of the same lesson at the year's end. Unless his teacher is a conscientious enthusiast, or entirely reckless of the need to keep up his percentage of passes, he will leave the clever boy to his own devices while he devotes himself to the labour of driving the minimum quantum of knowledge into the heads of the desperate cases. Meantime the intelligent child, the potential intellectual leader of the community, deteriorates. He becomes bored, and starts to be "naughty" as a relief from boredom. It does not take long for him to reach the stage of becoming a disciplinary problem, and to find himself a school Ishmael, with every nervous, harried teacher ready to attack him with whatever penalties are available, for fear that he may get out of hand. Naturally he will take the first chance to escape from the clutches of an educational system which he has grown to hate.

Is there a remedy for a system which obliges the teacher to concentrate the greater part of his effort on the weakest pupils to the neglect of the best ones? At least there is a very simple palliative which would do much to lessen the trouble. This is to split the syllabus into assignments shorter than a year's work at a time. The division of the school year into three terms of three months each would be enough. Then the pupil forced to repeat would repeat only three months instead of nine. He would know that at the end of these three months he would be on new ground. He would not be a year behind the group with which he started, and he would stand a good chance of catching up at least with some of them. The problem of the average pupil who has missed a couple of months through sickness or other unavoidable absence would disappear. At present he must either struggle desperately to catch up the two months that he has missed, or else repeat the work of the seven months that he was present.

Under the proposed alteration, he would merely slip one term. The bright pupil is another prospective gainer. He might profitably be permitted to "skip" a three months term, with a reasonable chance of picking up on his own what is essential in the work thus missed. To allow him to "skip" nine months of work at one crack is a risky proceeding.

The only valid objection to such a change lies in the multiplication of the number of classes in the individual school. In the city school, where there are already three or more classes pursuing work at the same level at the same date, this objection does not hold, but in the rural school an increase in classes would demand an increase in teachers, and so increase the costs of education. A compromise, valuable in itself as a test of the feasibility of the proposed change, would be to adopt a three-term system in large centres, a two-term system in smaller ones, and a one year plan, as now practised, in still smaller communities. Advocates of uniformity may think that this variation damns the whole proposal. Unregenerate, I reply that this uniformity is one of the worst bugbears of the present system, and the less the attempt at enforcing uniformity between the urban centre with ten thousand children and the rural outpost with fifty, the better for all concerned.

It is, in fact, this uniformity which is the object of attack for a second proposal. This is the abolition of standard text books, with a free choice left to each individual teacher. Some steps have already been taken in this direction, by allowing a choice between alternative books, or the selection of one from a recommended list. This is good. Every teacher knows the disadvantages of using the same book year after year, the greatest being the absolute nausea with which he himself faces the sight of the familiar pages. *Occidit miseros crambe repetita magistros*. There are further advantages still to come. With the abolition of set books, the whole attitude to examinations might reasonably be expected to change. There would be vastly less incentive to "cram" right answers to likely questions, and the value of examinations as a stimulus and a test of relative merit would justify their occurrence. There might come an end to the horrid practice of checking over old papers in order to figure out what the examiners will ask this time. "The character of Lady Macbeth was on the paper last year. Well, it won't turn up again so soon; let's forget about her, and concentrate on the dramatic value of the witches scene. There are three points to remember to get the correct answer!"

It is too much to expect that all the abuses of the present Matriculation examinations will be wiped out simply by an abolition of set books. Some teachers will be lazy, and prefer to go on using the same text year after year rather than prepare new lessons. A more legitimate objection to change may be raised by the parent in financially difficult circumstances, for we cannot hope that post-war days will see much change in the general income level; rather, we may expect that, though the rich will be poorer, the poor will be poorer still. So there will still be pressure from those who are reluctant to buy Mary a new book this year when she could use the one that Harry used in the same grade two years ago. There are two answers to make to this protest. One is in the Spartan vein, that the parent, however poor, must be prepared to make the extra sacrifice involved. The other, more Utopian, is some scheme of providing free text books, at least for those unable to meet the expense. It is possible that the solution may be found in the production of a text book of different type, designed to last one pupil for three months, rather than to stand the continued handling of several generations.

Even with our prized "free education", the progress of the gifted child is affected by the economic status of his parents. Once this difficulty of text books is solved, there still remains the tendency for the parent in the lower income brackets to take his child out of school at the earliest opportunity in order that he may add to the family earnings. By the gradual raising of the school leaving age, the parent can be compelled to let the child stay in school; he cannot be compelled to take a sympathetic attitude to education, and, when the school pulls one way and the home another, it is likely to be a mutilated personality that will rise from this Scironian bed. What is needed to prevent this may well prove to be a subsidizing of parents, and subsidizing seems to be a principle well thought of in the Dominion. Scholarships and Bursaries should not start only when the pupil is ready to enter College, for he may be lost to formal education before he reaches that stage; they should begin at the earliest age at which potential ability can be detected with certainty. Thus the bright child will be not only a credit to his family, but a source of some small gain.

The execution of this proposal would increase the cost of education. If the bill seems too high at first, it may be wise to consider whether "free education" is such a boon as we boast it to be. Might it not advantageously be replaced by a

system in which, to some degree, the dull child foots the bill for the education of the brilliant one? On the surface, this would appear a most undemocratic proposal. We pride ourselves on democracy in our education. Such pride, if justified, is good, but the democracy, as has been shown, wears a rather pale and misshapen look. Its distinguishing features are the "equal ability" fallacy, and the drift to self-glorification. Our text books, our teachers and our commencement orators harp on the theme that democracy is an excellent thing, persistently drilling its slogans into young minds rather as, in Huxley's *Brave New World*, the gramophone records conditioned the sleeping Betas for their proper station in life. Democracy is praised, but apparently little effort is made to explain the responsibility of the individual to democracy, as witness the common attitude to that mythical creature, the Government. Can there have been any honest effort to teach the meaning of that term when so many of us falsify tax returns and smuggle cigarettes across the border, quite content to cheat an abstract spy whom we call the Government, never thinking that we are actually defrauding our brothers, our next-door neighbours, and our own selves?

What should we mean by democracy in education? Briefly, the education of the individual for the benefit, not primarily of himself, but of the community. A Banting must receive the best education that Canada has to offer, not that he may win himself a knighthood and material prosperity, but that he may benefit not only Canada but the whole world by the discovery of insulin. Personal advantages must be allowed to accrue to him as an inducement, but primarily we must aim at training the best minds for the common good.

Here, then, are three suggestions for minor repairs to our educational system. The two concrete proposals, for the shortened term unit and for the abolition of set text books, would be simple enough to put into effect. They will not, admittedly, cause any enormous or immediate change in the product of our schools. They will, however, do something to lighten the load borne by the two classes most victimized by our present system, the pupils and the teachers. The third, more tentative suggestion, for a different interpretation of democracy in education, involves a gradual change of attitude on the part of many Canadians. Yet gradual change of attitude is a reasonable form of compromise. The faculty of retaining outworn institutions and watchwords while slowly changing them to new ends

and meanings is essentially Canadian. "How American it is to want something better," say the advertisements, and how Canadian it is to hope that we can fix up the old and familiar so that it will work all right under changed conditions. Two new spark plugs and a different brand of gas, and we feel sure that the good old car will run more smoothly than before, and perhaps it will carry us to our journey's end just as comfortably as if we were to buy a new model with which we should have to learn to use a new set of starters, gear shifts and accelerators!