

THE TEACHER IN THE ACTIVIST SCHOOL

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It has long been realized that an educational system cannot be better than its teachers. Changes in curricula and regulations mean very little unless they are accompanied by understanding and a desire to change on the part of those who interpret courses in the classroom. Many educators are convinced that the way in which a child is taught is at least as important as what he is taught. This does not necessarily discredit the content of courses in the elementary or the high school. It merely recognizes first that the habits and attitudes which a child acquires may be more permanent than the information which the teacher relays and second, that leading a child to think, to organize, to relate, and to discriminate is much more significant than insisting on recall. Activist education accepts both of these principles.

Activist education, as described in the Report of the Parent Royal Commission, is education "which always tries to begin with the child, with his interests, with his play, with his imagination in order to develop in him curiosity and personal initiative. The object is to eliminate the formalism of the teacher, the restraint of fixed programmes, the passivity of the child."¹ This implies that the elimination of the present restraints on the teacher should lead to a more active or involved participation in education by the child.

Ever since the publication of the Report, teachers have been inquiring about activist methods, textbooks, and courses. However, there is no single prescription which will transform their classrooms. Activism embraces a wide variety of methods and can be developed in the work of all courses. It does not rely solely on changes in methods although in some instances it might find more encouragement in new textbooks. Instead, its secret and its strength lie in the spirit of the teaching, the tone of the classroom, the rapport among the pupils and between the pupils and their teacher, and the clarity in aim of the educational programme. The Report refers to the objectives and the changes in such sentences as: "The activist school must be regarded as the best realization of the genuinely child-centred education;" "The school today must at a very early stage develop in the child independence

of thought, habits of personal initiative, a sense of responsibility . . . ;” and “Teachers well versed in child psychology and aware of the needs of our day can very largely infuse into their teaching the spirit of the activist school which depends on the curiosity of the child and accustoms him to work on his own.”²

There are many teachers in our schools today who have always been activist in spirit. These the Report frees to do their best work without the fear of criticism. There are many others who have been interested in the possibilities of activist education. Such teachers are now encouraged to experiment widely with the new approach to teaching. A few think of education in more traditional or restricted terms. These teachers are invited to examine more closely the objectives towards which their teaching is directed. The transition to activist teaching can be achieved in any school where the teachers have the courage to accept change and the patience to work towards a new understanding of the educational process.

Activism establishes priorities in the classroom. For instance, it is more important that a child should want to seek out additional material about Brazil than that he should be able to repeat back every detail which the textbook supplies about that country. It is more essential that he should think through the implications of what he reads than that he should memorize the fact that the country has a smart new capital city. It may also be more worthwhile for him to spend an extra period preparing a report on his outside reading than to abandon his project in favor of the next scheduled lesson. It is more rewarding to have him ask questions than answer them, to have him challenge a statement than give the textbook reply.

The child should be encouraged to read, to talk, and to write instead of just to listen. He needs to think clearly about such things as school rules, inter-pupil relations and class standards rather than to submit to them uncritically. He must be led to reach out in many directions regardless of the restrictions of his present course of study, for the course of study is a rough guide of possible work for the average child and is not intended to stand between the pupil and his learning. Finally, the child must have practice in using his mind, relying on his own resources and accepting responsibility, rather than in memorizing lessons.

The activist school is dedicated to the unfolding of the potential of the pupil. This implies faith in the creativity of each child. However, his creativity is not restricted to originality in art, competence in drama, or inventiveness in science. Rather it consists of maximum use of his mental abilities and it is a freeing of his powers through his own active involvement and participation. Each child's need for discovery is part of creativity. Alice Miel³ defines creativity as a way of responding that is available to all human beings enabling them to cope with increasingly complex problems, conditions, and opportunities. Paul Torrance states: "No individual is fully questioning intellectually if the abilities involved in creative thinking remain undeveloped, unused, or paralyzed."⁴ Creativity implies intellectual curiosity, imagination, scientific awareness, and initiative. These are the qualities which activist education is designed to develop. As long as these are accepted as goals in education, the problem of individual differences can be met in many ways which would be impossible if the aim of the school were to assure the possession of an identical body of knowledge by each child.

The activist school calls for a shift in emphasis. In the traditional pattern, the teacher presents material in the various subjects in the hope that the child will learn it. A by-product of the work may be a greater drive to learn, more initiative and independence, the development of powers of organization and clear thinking. With activist education, the teacher presents material with the main objective of arousing curiosity, motivating self-development, and sharpening powers of observation, generalization, and self-expression. The by-product should be a knowledge of the material and a retention of the facts.

The activist school requires freedom for action. Many impressive studies have been made to show that pupils in less authoritarian classrooms not only learn as much in the usually accepted sense as those in traditional settings but, in addition, they acquire greater insight, develop more outside interests, improve in ability to meet problems and in flexibility of approach to difficulties, and have superior powers of organization. One of the first major studies was begun by the Progressive Education Association in 1933. The findings of the P.E.A.'s famous "Eight Year Study" have been repeated in various patterns by such investigators as Ackerman⁵ who

studied intermediate-grade pupils in 1956, Thompson and Tom ⁶ who indicated that similar results applied in the teaching of Agriculture (1957), and Cogan ⁷ who demonstrated the relationship between the pupils' concept of the teacher and their results in class work (1958). Gagné concludes: "There are many aspects of the personal interaction between a teacher and his students that do not pertain, in a strict sense, to the acquisition of skills and knowledge that typically form the content of a curriculum. These varieties of interaction include those of motivating, persuading, and the establishment of attitudes and values. The development of such human dispositions as these is of tremendous importance to education as a system in modern society." ⁸

Activist education makes heavy demands on teachers. The teacher himself must have broad interests and sound academic preparation in order to face the requirements of the new classroom and be able to guide young people in their wide range of inquiry. He cannot be an expert in all the scholarly disciplines but he should be willing to urge pupils to investigate areas little known to him. He must be personally well-adjusted so that he may have confidence in himself and not just in his textbooks. He must also be sufficiently acquainted with the theory and practice of education to be able to assume responsibility for the development of his pupils rather than to rely on instructions in a manual. Finally, he must be able to see the growth of the child as a whole and not as something divided into ten subjects. For instance, he must recognize that one of the best reading lessons may involve using resource materials in history; that one of the best science lessons may arise from discussion in current events; and that essential work in oral English may be done without giving a single oral English lesson as such. If the spirit of the classroom is vital, the powers of the child are increased through a wide variety of experiences and exposures rather than by the marshalling of his opportunities to learn under the domination of a stern timetable which offers reading at 9.40 and speech at 1.30.

This does not mean that there will not be timetables, textbooks, and discipline. **The activist school should not be characterized by confusion but by a sense of purpose.** It is not a place in which children do as they please; rather a place in which they learn to work because work has taken on meaning and has become satisfying.

A teacher cannot teach what he does not know. It is obvious that a teacher who has no knowledge of chemistry should not be asked to direct a science programme. In the same way, it should be apparent that a teacher without initiative will not be able to spark much initiative in pupils and that a person without curiosity is unlikely to kindle inquiry in others. Every teacher should be a clear thinker. He should know how to organize material, how to generalize, how to detect the irrelevant and the specious argument. If he is to encourage originality he must have some creativity within himself. If he is to foster responsibility and self discipline, he must demonstrate these qualities; and if he is to impart a love of learning and a drive towards accomplishment he must set the example. He is himself a subject in the curriculum and it is likely that pupils learn more of permanent value to their intellectual development from contact with the right teacher than from completing their courses with passing marks.

It is well known that certain types of teachers are more successful than others in working with pupils. Biddle⁹ concludes that the "good" teacher is not only characterized by high academic achievement and broad interests but by a liking for people and confidence in the potential of pupils. He also shows that emotional stability is highly desirable and is most frequently achieved by those who consider themselves to be usually cheerful and self-confident, who like active contact with others and express favourable attitudes towards people, and who find satisfaction in hobbies as well as in work.

One of the most exhaustive studies on the characteristics of good teachers was made by David G. Ryans¹⁰. He found three patterns by which the good teacher might be identified. Pattern X shows the desirability of friendly, understanding, and sympathetic teacher behaviour as opposed to the aloof, the egocentric, and the more inhibited type; Pattern Y indicates the superiority of the responsible, systematic, business-like teacher over the one whose work is unplanned and slipshod; and Pattern Z shows that the stimulating and imaginative teacher is more successful than the dull and routine type. These findings may seem to be too obvious to be startling but when we consider the changes which are necessary to promote activist education, we realize how very important it becomes to have the right teachers. Among Ryans' best teachers there

was an age range from 22 to 56; their academic records showed only three-fifths to have been above average in school. However, on Guilford-Zimmerman tests they were found to be more friendly, more cooperative, more restrained and objective than the average and, according to the California Psychological Inventory tests, more tolerant. Such people, Ryan believes, are able to produce both better results in traditional learning and better development in the qualities which are implied in a broader concept of education. The search for teachers of the best calibre is not intended to convert the school into a pleasant social centre staffed with expert "sitters." However, it is essential that the atmosphere which the teacher tries to create should be challenging but pleasant because the right tone leads both to better learning and to more learning.

Good teachers have always attempted to make some provision for individual differences. Grouping, streaming, teaching to level, individualized assignments, extra-curricular programmes, remedial classes, and subject promotion are all evidence of the recognized need. **The activist approach makes greater demands for a recognition of individual differences and provides greater opportunities.** As the activity which is proposed is primarily intellectual, it follows that the teacher must be fully aware of the differing needs, abilities, and levels of development of each child. Above all, he must recognize the worth of each child, respect him as an individual, and have a genuine concern for his growth. Individual instruction is important but, clearly, a teacher cannot present thirty different lessons in any given class period. The teacher should realize that in many areas there can be inestimable value in a common presentation to the entire class and that frequently pupils can and should do things together as a part of the learning process.

Without minimizing the significance of completely individualized instruction, the activist approach tends to place more emphasis on individual learning opportunities arising from common presentations. Strict insistence on a common level of achievement, based on a single assignment which must be carried out in an identical manner and responded to in a restricted fashion, cripples class instruction or, in the words of the Parent Report, "it may well be the rigidity of courses which contributed to the passivity of the child." However, the

teacher's concern with the child's development rather than a traditional emphasis on the course substance may easily create a class situation in which many different learning opportunities are present within the framework of common assignments.

The activist approach above all else requires originality and courageous experimentation by the teacher. If it is intended to free pupils, it must also free the teacher to be creative in his work with the members of the class. At the same time, it adds to the teacher's responsibility to produce results. The Minister of Education in Quebec has stated that he is "... placing the responsibility for pedagogical decision in the hands of those who will actually carry them out in the classroom with their pupils." When teachers grow in this responsibility, they should also be in a better position to promote a similar sense of responsibility on the part of each child in the classroom. It is in this way that the activist school is thought of as being a challenge, an opportunity, a revitalization rather than a method, a set of rules, or a single type of approach. It is designed to make the school child-centred without being child-dominated and to subordinate concern with textbooks and course requirements to the development of pupils as people. This means that it must transform traditional instructors into professional teachers.

References

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