

Educational Heresies

Members of the Canadian College of Teachers who heard last October the speech that follows may have told themselves, to explain their enjoyment, that here for once were plain truths plainly expressed. But Jefferis' plain truths or heresies, though they arouse instant and joyful recognition from deep within most of us, are not so plain that they stand out to the naked eye, in the landscapes of contemporary education, from the great drifts of not-very-volcanic linguistic fall-out in which they lie buried. Nor are they quite so plainly expressed. The language of his talk may be characterised by an apparent simplicity; but it is the simplicity of an elegance, and is pointed with a delicacy of timing, that is the hallmark of a classical scholarship humanely applied over the course of a life time.

This I must regard as a great honour. I have been a member of the Canadian College of Teachers for more than a quarter of a century, and today is the first occasion that I have actually attended a meeting, either General or Regional. (You all know, I am sure, how easy it is to find excuses.) And now, at my very first meeting, I am asked to speak to you.

Admittedly, I am not your first choice. It just happens that the speaker originally chosen, Dr. Caldwell, is unfortunately in poor health. He was going to speak to you under the title, "Where Have All the English Gone?", but alas, that one particular English has gone to a sick bed, and I shall not attempt myself to track down the others.

Admittedly, too, I am not going to speak to you. I am going to read to you. As you realize, I am a very old man and I have, for all practical purposes, lost my memory. So I now have to write down anything that I am going to say, for fear of forgetting in mid-delivery what is supposed to come next - because that is embarrassing both to me and to my audience.

With these caveats, nonetheless, it is a great honour for me to address you. I have chosen as title for my address, "Educational Heresies". What I propose to do, is to take certain generally accepted hypotheses about education, and tell you why I disagree with them. This procedure has two aims. First, it will relieve me of some black bile. Second, it may provoke you, too, to challenge some popular assumptions. Further, it will provide me with a plausible excuse for airing some of those personal anecdotes to which we old men are so prone.

Assumptions

A. The terms "education" and "schooling" are synonymous.

Though I have never actually heard anyone make this statement, yet it is an assumption generally accepted - that education takes place only in certain buildings, called schools, set apart to provide it. This is simply untrue. Indeed, in our beautiful English language, we have a word to denote people who educate themselves without attending any special institution; we call them "autodidacts", which means simply "self-taught". Anyone who has learned to read can educate himself, and it is not necessary to go to school in order to learn to read. I myself was taught to read by my mother before I ever went to school, and so were many people in my generation. Nowadays it is customary to frown on such maternal behaviour and discourage it. Efforts are made to bring the child into an institutional setting at an ever earlier age. There are not only Kindergartens, but pre-kindergarten classes. We can envisage a future - not in 1984 perhaps, but not long after - in which the new-born infant will be carried immediately from the hospital where it is born to an educational institution - from delivery room to school room.

What nonsense. Education is a process which goes on outside schools just as much as in them, and goes on through life. When I read Mary Renault's recent novel, "Funeral Games", as I have just done with great pleasure, I am educating myself, and I propose to continue the process till blindness or death stops me. The Minister of Education (ominous title) cannot control this process, much as he might like to do so.

I refer to "Minister of Education" as an ominous title because behind it there lurks the implication that this whole lifelong process should be under control and should be measured by someone else's norms and standards.

Actually, with the progress and spread of technology, there is less need for anybody to be physically present in a building set apart for it in order to receive even "schooling". It is already possible to attend a university while sitting at home, watching and hearing instructors on television. Children in the remoter areas of Australia have for some time been able to receive all their school lessons by radio broadcasts. Some of the so-called Futurists envisage a day when all schooling,

including interaction between teacher and pupil, can be carried on without anybody leaving home. Obviously - at least in my opinion - much will be lost under such circumstances, but such scenarios serve to enforce the point that educational buildings, and regular attendance at them, are not essential conditions for education to take place.

B. Schools can teach everybody everything.

Once again, I have never heard anyone make this statement, yet it is an assumption implicit in much popular opinion. Recently I heard a man on the radio assuring his audience that we should have a bilingual Canada if, and only if, children were taught in both English and French throughout their schooling. Again, we have those who firmly believe that the sexual problems with which our age is struggling can be readily overcome by courses in sex education from Kindergarten onwards, a remedy which, I regret to say, our Protestant system (if I may still use the term) seems only too ready to try. When I myself started teaching, nearly sixty years ago, I had to teach Grade VI Health, a course largely devoted to explaining the dangers of alcohol and tobacco. Yet our governments still depend for a large share of their revenue on the taxes and excise levied on these condemned products.

The reason, of course, is that teaching does not result in learning. You, as teachers, are painfully aware of this, but I will give you an example from my own life. For twenty years I supervised students doing practice teaching. Regular teachers were always willing to let them have a crack at Grade VIII General Science. When we started in the schools, just after Thanksgiving, they had usually just reached the section on HEAT. Consequently, at a conservative estimate, I must at least thirty times have heard students teach the difference between Conduction and Convection of heat. I still have not the remotest idea of what the difference is, and, like Rhett Butler, "Frankly, I don't give a damn". That's why I haven't learned.

The same thing is true about sex, and a second language, and drinking and smoking. One does not learn everything one is taught - only what one wants to learn.

C. There exists a right to education.

This statement, relying on our first assumption, means that everyone has a right to attend school. This I flatly deny. Schooling is not a right or a privilege. It is an obligation. It is compulsory. If you have a right to something, you can take it or refuse it. If you are a widower, as I am, you have a right to remarry, but you are not, thank heaven, compelled to do so. If you are a citizen, you have a right to vote at the election, but you are not compelled to cast your ballot for one of the rascals.

Let me support this startling truth by quoting the decisive language of the judgment in the Supreme Court of the State of

New Hampshire in the celebrated case of *Fogg vs. Board of Education of New Hampshire*. "Free schooling furnished by the state is not so much a right granted to pupils as a duty imposed upon them for the public good. If they do not voluntarily attend the schools provided for them, they may be compelled to do so. While most people regard the public schools as the means of great personal advantage to the pupils, the fact is too often overlooked that they are governmental means of protecting the state from the consequences of an ignorant and incompetent citizenship."

I cannot cite any equally eloquent decision from a Canadian Court, so I must rely on a quotation from Dr. Bergen's standard text, *The Legal Status of the Canadian School Pupil*. He writes, "An analysis of the court decisions on these matters leads one to the conclusion that education is not so much a right or privilege as it is a statutory duty imposed upon the child for the public good. Decisions have clearly indicated that the child has no inherent or absolute right to an education."

Compulsory education is imposed upon children in the hope that society may not suffer from their ignorance and incontinence after they cease their schooling.

D. Education is free.

Again, education is equated with schooling, and, again, the statement is untrue. Schooling costs money; it is, in fact, very expensive. At the least, buildings must be erected, heated and maintained, and teachers must normally be paid. Even the most stupid government - and I mention no name - realizes that it can reduce its expenditure and its deficit by paying teachers less money individually and reducing the total number of teachers.

The statement that education is free properly means that it is paid for by those not receiving it, paid for by the citizens in general, through taxation, not by the pupils in the schools. It is irrelevant whether it is the municipality, the province, or the confederation that collects and spends money on schooling; each is a government, and in each case the individual citizen pays through taxation.

This procedure is just in so far as the whole community benefits from the schooling of its children. As our own Dr. Percival once put it, "Since every person in a country stands to gain by the education of every other, it is simple justice that the expense should be shared by all." I have no children; why, I might ask, should I pay for a school which I do not use? For the same reason that I pay for a jail which I do not use either. And, incidentally, it is still cheaper to maintain a child in school than a convict in jail.

One more quotation, this time from Professor Henry Morrison. "The public school system exists for the defence of society against the menace of ignorance, vice and lawlessness and for nothing else." To this heresy I wholeheartedly

subscribe.

E. Parents should run the school.

This is a crude way of phrasing an opinion which has gained increasing impetus in recent years, which has been responsible for the introduction of School Councils, and which lurks in the dark labyrinths of the current Bill 40. The school stands in loco parentis, and now it's time that the parents take over the locus completely, controlling teachers, administration, course of study and everything else.

Now if you accept Professor Morrison's dictum, as I do, this principle is completely unacceptable. Free compulsory schooling is provided by general taxation for the general good, and every citizen has an equal interest in what is done by teachers, administration, course of study and everything else in the school. These matters are not the concern of parents solely or even primarily.

My next-door neighbour's two children go to school. (I hasten to add that they are really nice youngsters.) It concerns me, even more than it concerns their parents, that they should learn to respect other people's property, and not to mock, and perhaps eventually mug, crippled old men. It concerns me even more than their parents, for their parents can, and I am sure do, teach them these lessons at home. All I can do is hope that these lessons will be taught and learned in the school for which I am helping to pay.

In practice, as you know, "Parents should run the school" means that certain officious busybodies want to tell teachers what to do and how to do it, as if the relatives of hospital patients should control the performance of their professional duties by doctors and nurses. Both sets of circumstances are completely unacceptable.

F. Bigger is better.

This hypothesis, an accepted part of the general thinking twenty and even ten years ago, has been applied in education in this province particularly since the publication of the Parent Report. It is responsible for the appearance of the monstrous polyvalent schools with populations of more than a thousand pupils in each. To reach these schools, in rural areas, pupils may have to spend as much as two hours a day in transit. This is too high a price to pay in order to become just one more anonymous face in a mob scene. Every morning on my walk downtown, I am passed by school buses filled with adolescents whose faces bear the same look - the look of unrelieved boredom with their journey. What a way to start the day.

I remember that some years ago I uttered this complaint to a high official in the Ministry. "When I was a boy," he replied, "I had to walk for an hour to school every day, part of the way across the fields, and it did me no harm." No doubt - but his walk exercised his body and brought him in contact with the varying phenomena of nature in its changing

seasons, which is not the experience of the youngster sitting in a rattling, smelly bus on an interminable autoroute.

"Where have all the English gone?" Dr. Caldwell was going to tell you. Part of the answer is that they have gone away from our small towns which no longer boast a small high school as their educational and social centre, and which no longer house teachers who take an active part in the life of the community and provide a model of culture and rectitude as some of you surely once did.

Even without the ill effects of long distance busing, I believe that the gathering of very large numbers of pupils into a single institution is wrong. Education is properly an individual transaction between a teacher and his pupil, as in the ideal situation of Mark Hopkins at one end of a log and his student at the other, or the more recent slogan of "each one teach one".

Granted that we cannot attain this ideal situation, I should be prepared to lay it down as a rule of thumb that any education institution is too big when it is impossible for some one individual to know by face and name every other individual in it. This is obviously an elastic limitation, but I should optimistically guess that it would stretch to a school of 150 pupils and ten teachers. The one individual who would know everybody else would be the Principal, who would be, in the old English term, the Head Teacher, not a manager shut away in an office, but devoting a reasonable part of his time to the noble art of teaching.

I started by confessing that I have not previously attended a meeting of the College. This is not a criticism of the College; it is a criticism of meetings. I have valued the College and, during my membership, have written quite a few letters to the President or Secretary of the day. (It is one of my personal heresies, that a letter is a means of communication preferable to a telephone call. Another of my heresies is that it is both legal and moral to allow a telephone to ring without leaping to answer it.) I have valued the College because I believe that it is an institution through which heresies may be discussed, promoted and propagated. Having neither the power nor the responsibility of operating an educational institution, the College is not bound to accept the orthodoxy of the moment, and is very properly concerned with educational heresies.

As we look back on the history of education, we see that the great names it records - Plato, Luther, Comenius, Pestalozzi, Madame Montessori, to name but a few - all attained their place in that history by writing or acting in opposition to the orthodoxy of their day. They were not content with the currently accepted assumptions. They were Educational Heretics. It is my hope that the Canadian College of Teachers will add to their numbers.

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