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Leadership in the Adult World and Its Relationship to Our Schools and Universities

by D. H. OLLEMANS

BEFORE indicating what I think schools and universities should aim at in preparing young men and women for accepting leadership in adult life there is one general statement I wish to make, which should be regarded as the background to my subsequent expressions of opinion.

I believe that no amount of education or special curricula will in themselves fit a youth for subsequent managerial status or even guarantee his progress in the firm he joins or the profession he chooses after leaving school. If a youth has managerial capacity, energy and application, then education will certainly help his progress but it will not ensure his progress by itself.

If this proposition is accepted we can then proceed to examine what our schools and education system generally can do to ensure that a youth makes the best of his inherent ability.

In the first place I feel very strongly that specialization at too early a stage or the teaching of "easy" subjects merely to ensure the passing of an examination should be avoided at all costs. To my way of thinking all education should in the first place be broad-based and general at least up to Standard VIII so as to give the youth an awareness of the world around him as a solid foundation on which to build his future development.

In this connection I think it is a great pity that the mere reaching of a Standard VI level — often purely by the effluxion of time — should qualify a youth to enter a trade. Especially because of this I believe it highly undesirable to attempt any specialized instruction before Standard VI and for my part I would be very happy to see no specialized instruction before Standard VIII, or even matriculation.

Ample opportunity for specialized instruction exists during apprenticeship; and for the youth entering commerce specialized instruction is, in my opinion, readily available from a variety of sources. So also, if a youth chooses a profession it is quite time enough to start on specialist subjects after matriculation.

The point I am making, therefore, is that until specialized instruction becomes necessary, education should be directed at ensuring that the youth becomes a well-rounded human being with an interest in the world around him and in his fellow men. It should not, however, stop there. Education should be aimed at developing an enquiring mind, which will not merely accept what is taught at school but will continue to search for knowledge and understanding automatically after school hours and when school days are passed.

It is not even sufficient to stop there. Having achieved an awareness of the world around him and a desire for accumulating knowledge in the youth, education should then be aimed at ensuring that the young man or woman consciously attempts to sift and evaluate the facts he or she acquires.

We have now determined that (until specialization is necessary) education should be broad-based and aimed at ensuring in the youth an awareness of the world around him, a desire to acquire knowledge, and a will and ability to sift and assess that knowledge. However, if the good to be achieved by education stopped there, we would still not achieve the well-rounded human being I earlier referred to. Added to the desire to acquire knowledge and ability, to evaluate it should be the inculcation of original and independent thought.

May I say in parenthesis that I believe that what I have indicated above as the goal to be aimed at by any system of education can largely be achieved — after the formal teaching of the curricula subjects — by the inculcation in a youth of the wish to read widely and the ability to do that reading critically.

The encouragement of a catholic interest in matters beyond the school curricula can of course be encouraged quite apart from the encouragement of independent reading—by providing well organised extra-curricula activities in schools. These activities clearly should not be confined to sport, however valuable sport may be in building a team spirit and encouraging the ability to lead.

Having dealt admittedly superficially and in very general terms with what I regard as essential objects of teaching at schools, if such teach-

ing is to provide the basis from which a youth may build and develop his natural abilities, we might now attempt to define the leadership we must find in ample measure if adequate progress in industrial, commercial and public life is to be maintained.

Before attempting this definition I should say that I do not propose to deal with University education as it affects leadership, as in my opinion the foundation on which a youth can build to develop his natural bent for leadership must have been laid before he reaches the University.

Some of the attributes of leadership we have already discussed incidentally in reviewing, above, the kind of education our schools should provide. These are:

(a) An ability and a desire to gain knowledge.

(b) An ability to assess the value of such knowledge and to draw independent conclusions on the meaning and significance of the knowledge gain.

To these should, I feel, be added:

1. An ability to see and appreciate the other man's point-of-view without necessarily accepting that point-of-view, although the assessment of such point of view referred to in (b) above should of course operate automatically.

2. An ability to convey to and persuade others to accept a point-of-view which has been honestly arrived at after proper consideration.

3. A capacity to choose a delayed course of action.

4. A deep and wide religious sense and belief which need not necessarily be based on the acceptance of the teachings of any particular church as long as the religious sense and belief provides "faith" which can help to lighten the burdens and responsibilities of leadership.

Of the above attributes of leadership the capacity to choose a delayed course of action perhaps calls for further discussion. I understand this to mean an ability to tolerate for long periods of time the uncertainty of committal to a course of action resulting from decisions which can only be tested by the course of time.

The ability to tolerate such periods of uncertainty should of course not be confused with recklessness or an indifference to consequences amounting to irresponsibility. Rather, this ability to tolerate uncertainty must be supported by the certainty which flows from a careful study of, and independent and careful assessment of, available data. In other words, the individual instead of accepting the gratification of immediate decision and the consequent danger of fundamental error has trained himself or been trained to a habit of accurate thought which weighs the facts, draws conclusions and accepts the responsibility with its burden of uncertainty of making long-term decisions which can only be tested by time.

Sheer intellectual brilliance cannot in itself guarantee a decision which will stand the test of time, if such brilliance is overlain by impulsiveness and instability. A decision reached by a more pedestrian intellect trained to study facts and assess them calmly and above all supported by a genuine faith which makes possible the toleration of uncertainty is often likely to be the sounder decision.

To sum up. An education, supported by a deep religious faith, which enables and encourages a youth to search for facts, to evaluate and assess them objectively against the background of the world around him is most likely to develop the inherent characteristics of the leader and to enable him to accept the responsibility and burden of uncertainty inherent in long-term decisions so necessary on the part of leaders.

Finally, a broad-based general and liberal education without specialization at too early a stage is most likely to achieve the desired development of inborn characteristics.

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