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Editorial: Education, a shared enterprise with reality

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1961
Johannesburg College of Education
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/25049
Rose, B.W. (1961). Editorial: Education, a shared enterprise with reality. Symposium: A Journal for Education in Southern Africa, pp. 5-7.

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EDITORIAL

Education, A Shared Enterprise into Reality

Any educational system must concern itself both with utilities and with values; and in times of economic pinch the utilities tend to be increasingly stressed. If this happens at a period of considerable, though often unrealised, social change, when the values formerly approved with little question by society are subject to scepticism if not suspicion, a trend to a sort of Roman practicalism is accelerated.

Growing Complexities in Society

The very nature of our urban-industrial society is to force human patterns into a growing diversity, so that simplicity in any department of modern life has a sweetness of memory that one associates with Vergil's pastoral poems. Diversification of life has reality in increased skills, in increased accomplishments possible to the individual and in an expanding range of choice that eventually widens the gap between the world of the school and the world beyond. In a simple society a type of direct apprenticeship of son to father, or boy to elder, rapidly provides the limited skills of adulthood that are practiced in a primitive community. There is little choice permitted or possible. In fact there is a generalisation of labour rather than a specialisation, the hunter often making his own spear or bow, as well as fashioning from bones his own needles or shaping his own clothes. But as our Western European civilisation expands — and despite the Jeremiads, there is little to show that its possibilities of expansion are in the least exhausted — specialisation in the adult working world proposes to the educator an impossible task. One cannot through education ever hope to provide all children with an adequate practical basis for all vocational choices.

The Value of a Liberal Education

The educational statesman has therefore to resist the demand for more vocational bias in the schools, because if he admits it he would find himself increasingly hammered by rival claimants, only a slight fraction of whom he can hope to satisfy. And it is this thought that provides good ground for those who support the concept of a liberal education. But even this demands some adjustment with realities. One might describe a liberal education negatively as one which does not provide skills that directly contribute to income earning; or one might say perhaps that a liberal education was one that provided pupils with attitudes and means of communication most likely to create a balanced person and to contribute to the spiritual wellbeing of the community. Medical training is not a liberal education: it is essentially a vocational education in techniques and knowledges appertaining to a particular set of skills. For most people a course in, say English Literature is a liberal pursuit — unless one becomes an English teacher. But even if there is good sense in excluding from our schools all matter that is directly vocational, and including only that which provides the spiritual scaffolding for the creation of sane and whole personalities, there is still an importunate clam-

our on the curricula of our schools for the inclusion of an intolerable litter of interests. Indeed there is a feeling among many Primary School Teachers that we have now broadened our school interests to such an extent that few of the vital subjects—the old Three Rs—are studied deeply enough. And at the heart of this criticism lies that fact that human interests increase, but the number of hours in the day do not. Nobody doubts that in isolation a knowledge of what is going on in the world about one — Current Affairs, as it is sometimes called on the Timetable — is a very worthwhile subject. It is one of the alarming signs of our times that an adolescent who can talk glibly enough about orbits and three stage rockets or Elvis or Calypso, finds it difficult to recognise meaning in Angola or Nkrumah or Carnegie. But when it becomes a matter of edging Current Affairs into a tight and overloaded timetable, it is another matter. For the problem cannot be solved merely by agreeing that Current Affairs is important: the problem is its *priority of importance*. Is is more important than musical appreciation, than Race Studies, than First Aid, than "Recent Advances in Science", than "Classical Life"? Each of these can be defended as a valid area of human interest with its own importance. How is one to decide whether to include two periods of Current Affairs as against two periods of, shall we say, Industrial Arts? Somebody has to make such a decision.

Bridging the Gap between Classroom and Life

The Elizabethan schools that Mr. Roger Ashcam so ably described undoubtedly served their contemporary community well. But to transfer the curricula of those schools to our present systems would be foolish. They no longer serve. The need to overhaul education is less urgent in moment of social stasis, but insistent in times of change. And there can be no doubt about it, when changes in utilities are made — when we change from eight periods of Latin to five of science and three of Race Studies, for instance — these changes should be dictated by new values. The problem in our present society is to stand aside from change long enough to predict reasonably correctly the new values. For only when this has been done successfully can a reorientation of utilities wisely be effected.

Dangers of Educational Conformity

A new syllabus begins to go out of date as soon as it is published; so that any educational system geared to the survival of the community it serves must not resent criticism, it must foster it; it must not demand blind adherence to the letter but a broad and intelligent loyalty to the spirit which permits the constant reconstruction and restatement of aims, methods and principles without which a society cannot adequately function. Rigidity by proud planners leads to a slow erosion of that ultimately most life-promoting of all qualities, intelligent curiosity and sane dissent. The ultimate reality in education is a relationship between an adult and a child: the ultimate relationship is neither timetable, syllabus, nor curriculum: these are bits of machinery to guide the inexperienced. Real education is shared experience that leaves a sense of wonder from which all future learning and interest spring: it is beyond rules and beyond the nice organisation of the statistician and the beaurocrat — just as falling in love is, with apologies to Dr. Mace.

Does our system of Education need overhaul?

It would be well if we asked ourselves just how far our schools match up to the requirements of modern living? Are we due for a major overhaul? Is the English taught in our schools adequate? If so, adequate for what? Does it leave children with an instrument that enables them to communicate: to speak to others not only of the facts of geography, but of the facts of human relationship, of the inner tensions and fears, of the aspirations and need? Does it fit them to interpret and handle the batter of advertisement, the cunning of political pleading or the danger of techniques of assertion? Some teachers may feel that it does. Many will decide that it fails. Does our home language teaching train children to communicate exactly and with precision when this is essential — in a legal document, in a report for a Company Meeting? Does it give them any sense of judgement so that they differentiate the spurious from the real in imaginative writing: so that they can tell the difference, say between the usual type of writing of a novel in "comic" form as against that written by a writer of standing. One does not demand the full armament of Saintsbury's literary criticism, let alone the recent anatomising of intention that Mr. Leavis has developed. But perhaps it is typical of a generation that is no longer sure whether there are such entities as good and evil, let alone of the differentiation between them, that they should sometimes not know a passage of well-

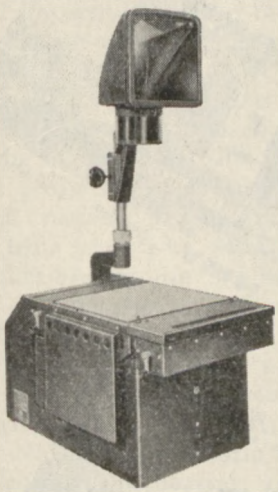
balanced English writing from a shoddy one.

In arithmetic, for instance, is much that we do of any importance at all? Does it matter whether you can multiply 7 tons, 3 cwt., 19 lbs. by 19574? Does it matter in the least whether you can paper a room with this or that area with paper of this or that width at this or that price? Does neatness really matter if the material is incorrect, misunderstood or without meaning in reality? There will be some teachers who will maintain that these skills are important and should be retained. But there is a growing awareness that we are not learning arithmetic for the sake of arithmetic but the sake of its use in life.

Authoritarianism as a direct danger to our survival

All too often the best reason that can be found for the inclusion of a subject is that authority has so decreed. This is on a par with the small boy who asks, because his mind is attaining to a healthy curiosity, "Why should I walk on the outside of the pavement when I am with mother?" And father, who has had enough of his questioning says: "Because I say so! Isn't that good enough for you?" Small boys have to leave it at that. Intelligent adults should not do so. "Because I say so" is not an intelligent answer, and from educational statesmen and senior administrators we must insist on intelligent behaviour.

This issue of Symposium considers the theme of the relationship of the school with life. Not every contributor has written with this as his main and sole theme, but the consideration runs like a leit motif through most of the articles that are printed here. We presume to follow Aristotle, who, as one modern sage remarked, is worth studying not for the answers that he gives us but for the questions that he asks.



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