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Schooling in an Earlier Era: Some Reminiscences and Convictions

This article should be childishly simple because it is a record of my own experience as a boy and as a pupil during the early part of the present century, with occasional indications of how that experience fitted in with educational thought and conditions at the time.

From age three to seven I was taught at home to tell the time and to play dominoes, checkers, and a variety of card games—including euchre, cassino, thirty on the king, poker, and whist. These were obviously useful accomplishments because we lived with grandparents, an aunt, and two uncles—all maternal. My aunt seemed to rely on me to get her off to work on time, and I was constantly in demand to make a fourth at cards, except on Sundays, when only dominoes and checkers were allowed. Another advantage was that I was well prepared for learning to read at school without having interest killed by pre-knowledge of what the school would teach. Although the school had a kindergarten, I was not sent to it. My Anglican parents were probably aware of concern expressed in the Toronto synod in 1900 about heretical religious views of Froebel, but that would not have deterred them. Certainly it was not because kindergartens were “progressive:” my father and mother were extremely “permissive” even if unaware of any such labels. My only recollection is that they saw no reason for rushing things by sending a child to be cooped up in school earlier than need be. Of course, no one in our house had received more than an elementary education except my relatively young aunt, who had a year or two in fifth book, but my parents set no upper limits on the length of formal education—quite the contrary.

My chief recollection of beginning school is being made aware of the need for protection. Mother commissioned the elder brother of one of my two chums to ward off bullies at school. My chums and I kept together on the two blocks’ walk to and from school for fear of ambush by the Sheridan (next street) gang who, among other things, were reputed to put coal or stones in snowballs. Such practices, we gleaned from our elders, were to be expected of “Micks,” or R.C.’s, and we shunned them so successfully that we never learned for sure who they were, what they did, or whether the danger was imaginary. But fear of the strap in school was solidly based, and the strap was an awesome topic of conversation among the kids. My mother and some other parents sent

letters to the principal (a woman) forbidding use of the strap and demanding that their offspring be sent home if they got into trouble. Apart from the prejudices engendered, the chief effect of all this on me was to foster physical cowardice—a valuable characteristic for survival in twentieth century civilization. Although grateful for the result, I cannot recommend the prescription, but have nothing but praise for a paternal uncle's instruction in pacifism, as a result of which I fought down and overcame at the age of eight the tingling sensation ordinarily aroused by martial music. This was my first step towards a modicum of moral and intellectual courage, which society and its schools do their best to repress. Although now an agnostic, I must acknowledge that the second major step was accomplished by prayer—putting an end for good to persistent nightmares by just one prayer on just one night, also at the age of eight. It was possible for a child in Ontario to have a simple faith of his own in those days because there was no debilitating religious education in school, and the Church of England which we attended went through its ritual with a remote and dignified confidence which never upset the emotional security of the parishoners.

My first school, attended for four years, left no other clear impression. The reasons for this good fortune intrigue me now. To escape the unpleasantness of any undue attention from teachers and the principal it was necessary then only to learn what the school demanded. This was easy for me—not chiefly because I was academically bright but because I was docile. Docility is a word rarely encountered in educational writing nowadays, but it is a quality worth considering. The explanation of my own docility is as follows. Primarily it must have been because (a) like my parents I thought of the school as having only a limited, specific, albeit important function and (b) parents, relatives, and friends gave me such solid security and keen interests that paying attention in class for twenty-five hours a week seemed only a moderate allotment of the work that everyone had to do. It probably never occurred to me that one could possibly like school, and two of my chums and I were delighted to endure whooping cough to escape for a month and watch construction of a subway under the railroad. But we could accept the necessity of work, congenial or not, for limited periods of time. I know that all this reads like heresy from the pen of a progressive educator. Note, however, that in my opinion the chief desideratum for docility during five hours is a complete release from any such requirement for ten.

During the first three years of elementary school my parents rented a house of their own near the city limits and I used to walk about a mile to the nearest school. My chief recollection concerns the visit of an inspector who took over a third book class in mental arithmetic from the teacher. He showed us how to multiply by 25 by adding two noughts to the multiplicand and dividing by four. Soon most pupils were giving quick answers to such problems as 60×25 , 84×25 , and even 144×25 . He then asked us to consider how we might "do in our heads" multiplica-

tion by 125 and put on the board as an example, 888×125 . This lazy pupil apparently surprised him by giving immediately the obvious answer, 111,000. When the inspector asked how it was done, he seemingly expected the pupil to say, "Add two noughts, divide by four, and multiply by five." But the pupil caused him to blink and earned his praise by answering "Add three naughts and divide by eight." You will understand why I thought that a good school and why I am annoyed by popular articles on allegedly unprecedented ways of teaching. Progress in education is achieved not so much by new discoveries as by making exceptional practice more common.

The word "exceptional" leads me to recall a good old way of making special provision for the bright without objectional segregation. In my own case enrichment was provided by a friend of my aunt's who took me to Shea's vaudeville theatre every Wednesday afternoon. This extra-curricular study was supplemented when I encountered manual training in the junior fourth and gave up when the board I had planed for seven weeks was noticeably thinner but more noticeably undulating in appearance. Thereafter I skipped manual training every Tuesday afternoon in favor of attendance at Crystal Palace, then the only motion picture theatre in Toronto. Possibly the school was a bit surprised at the regularity of the "Please excuse Charlie's absence" notes my Mother readily provided, but even a twenty per cent planned absence of the academically gifted reduces the need for the school to make other arrangements to relieve their boredom. When I moved to the senior fourth in another school, my parents tried a plan of having me stay away for two weeks out of every other month, with the result that I stood alternately first or last in class. Although the experiment was not scientifically controlled, and the data not processed by computer, I can cheerfully recommend the go-and-stay-away alternative to piling on more of the same in special classes.

To continue the special education theme let me say that in high school I objected to staying away from classes and that my permissive parents allowed me to attend regularly. The advocates of tight control may see this as a lamentable outcome of excessive freedom, but I may modestly claim to have devised alternative techniques of my own to cope with the problem. In the first form those of us who could handle Latin, Algebra and the like acceptably lent our homework to the less confident. Since this had to be done in class, the hazards of transmission and return were a challenge to ingenuity and occasionally helped develop an appreciation of high comedy. For example, we had a Latin teacher, Mr. Dunkley, who remained suspicious after examining the impeccable homework of a boy named Mac in front of me and sent him to the board without his exercise book to repeat his performance in translating one of the homework sentences. Mr. Dunkley, who had a reputation for unerring aim in throwing a Latin textbook, stood at the back of the room while the embarrassed and perspiring Mac made hesitating marks with the

chalk as he faced the board at the front. Imagine our suspense! When would Dunkley throw? Could he hit the culprit at thirty feet? It was almost an anti-climax to the tension of those ninety seconds when he did, and did—square on the back of the neck. But to continue the theme, by the time we were in IIA (grade X), several of us gifted regularly did our French homework in the algebra period, geometry in the Latin period, and so on. This is special education for the gifted *par excellence*, requiring, as it does close if bifocal attention and an alertness of mind equal to that of a sleeping dog who leaps at the first word of an invitation to go for a walk. It also provides leisure for the pursuit of congenial intellectual activities in the late afternoon and evening. I also learned to write examination papers with speed, except in English and history, and to make two copies for circulation among friends during the second hour of the test. This also is an exercise which sharpens the wits.

Nevertheless, in spite of such opportunities unwittingly encouraged by this very good school, there were stultifying practices impossible to circumvent. In the Ontario third form (grade XI) in 1913 there was virtually nothing of a strictly curricular nature for a pupil to do. One day the principal came to our class and invited those who intended to go into engineering to transfer immediately to the fourth form. Naturally I volunteered, but was told to report to the office after school. There the principal, a classical man and an autocrat known as the Iron Duke, said this: "Phillips, you will not waste your talents on engineering. You will do what I say. Spend six years in high school, win the highest scholarships, and take the honours course in classics at university. That is all. You may go." This was the guidance of half a century ago. I obeyed. Whether that was a loss or gain to science or education, I still think it proof that the old schools pushed people around more than modern airlines when they kept some of us for one or two extra years to ensure success (whose?) in scholarship examinations. In that third form a group of us managed to keep busy, but not out of trouble, by organizing an Anti-Dog Collar Society to discourage girls from wearing narrow velvet ribbons on their necks. Whenever the constant stream of communications in the algebra class was interrupted, the president had to write another five hundred or a thousand lines. Even now I advise against this exercise for the bright.

If you think that there were goings-on in this school of high reputation that would shock critics of schools today, you are right. A distaste for the French language quite unrelated to present national problems seemed to put teachers of that subject in an unenviable position. In the Second form we had a teacher whose native language was French and who was potentially excellent as an instructor, but he was never given a chance. He was provoked by tricks and veiled insolence into tirades which sometimes evoked a bedlam of mock support. In the fourth form, where French came in the last period of the morning, a daily manoeuvre was to pull a boy named Arbuthnot from his seat, keep him crawling up

the aisle, whisk him into a large wooden cupboard at the front of the room, and lock the door—all at opportune moments when the teacher's attention was diverted. The sport thereafter was to ask Miss Blank for permission to get a book from the cupboard, let Arbuthnot' head appear, push it back, and re-lock the door. If Arbuthnot was not sufficiently co-operative, one or two pupils detained Miss Blank in the room for part of the lunch hour, so that the prisoner could not be immediately released. Although it would be easy to add more along this line, let me just repeat that the strictly disciplined schools of fifty years ago were not models of propriety even if the long hair was restricted to girls.

Some of the instruction was stilted. A history teacher distributed forty questions to pupils in regular order down one aisle and up the other. Everyone tried by calculating his position in the line-up to anticipate the question and fortify his mind by a peek at his notebook, but many failed and received an automatic detention. Then the teacher wrote on the board notes to be copied and used for questions next day. Apart from Shakespeare, who carried himself, and some intrinsically interesting narrative poems, my boy friends and I regarded literature in school as a total loss and decided that the way to pass examinations in the subject, apart from spotting, was to reproduce the cant handed out by teachers and never to say what you thought. One year we had a teacher of outstanding reputation who later in the year suffered a severe set-back in mental health, and for two months during the study of several poems the Philistine males in the class were unaware that what he said made less sense than before.

But we also had excellent teachers. Let me select only one—the senior teacher of classics. In Greek grammar and composition he would give fifth form class of seven pupils just an inkling regarding new material in the textbook. He then announced that he was going to the boiler room for a smoke and that we had fifteen minutes to master the new points of grammar and usage in the textbook and to put on the blackboard a translation—one sentence each—of the related English to Greek exercise. He promised to use the nose of the pupils to rub out any mistake he made. Surely this was the opposite of spoon feeding, an incentive to self-help and learning, and to individual self-reliance tempered by group co-operation. It worked very well.

You will, of course, realize that this high school was a strictly academic institution and you may wonder how successful it was in educating those who even ten years later might have accepted the alternative of a more practical course in a vocational or composite school. Avoiding statistics and relying on personal recollection, I am forced to say not very well. Many of my first form friends, who struck me as fairly intelligent characters, dropped out of the school environment before the third year. This means more than it would now because not everyone entered high school. Today I am one of those who would like to follow the American trend towards keeping the door to university open for a majority of pupils

through high school—partly by refusing to classify them as definitely vocational or academic. But I don't think that the old academic high schools could have carried them along. Perhaps there is no model of what is needed even among the high schools of today.

For those of academic bent, however, my old high school was quite a good institution—until the war came. Under our militaristic principal, who even before was always addressed by his retained title as "Colonel," the cadet corps was rapidly expanded. By 1915-16 he drafted even me—as an officer, no less—though I had never been in the ranks and was by disposition utterly unqualified. During my later teaching career at U.T.S., I came to see some value in compulsory cadet training because boys told me that they soon learned to hate it. During World War I, however, the unfortunate cadets had little chance to express their feelings before they volunteered under pressure to enlist in the army proper—a transition expedited by the Colonel's formation of an infantry battalion associated with the school. The Colonel's sudden and indiscriminate hatred of everything German caused him to engage in a violent altercation before an assembly of pupils with my school chum's father, who was a professor of German and a German by birth. This spectacle revealed dramatically the atmosphere of non-education which emanated from the principal's office and permeated the school, although nearly all teachers did all they could to keep it out of their classes.

To conclude with a summary of what may have significance today in these recollections, let me begin with the last and say we should begin immediately to teach a new kind of patriotism and get it well established while there is still time. For the rest, there is a need: to focus philosophy clearly on important problems; to realize that unorthodox preschool education in some homes may be better than impatience to begin formal schooling as soon as possible; to ask whether the cult of physical prowess and courage is not a more gross superstition than religion, a respect for which might be raised to a fraction of what is given to football if we avoid indoctrination with the dogmas promulgated by any church, boy scout leader, or health expert; to ask whether docility, or willingness to learn, might be more reasonably expected of the young if the demands of their "employers" (teachers and parents) were restricted as an adult union would demand; to know that there were always some good teachers and good ideas and that the improvement of education depends, not on novelty, but on getting a larger proportion of good teachers, as may be possible some time after the birthrate falls; to try out "released time" instead of segregation for the bright, especially when individual progress and less formally structured schools make it more practicable; to encourage co-operative learning in ways other than copying; to inform everyone concerned that guidance must enable, and must be allowed to enable, young people to make wise decisions and act upon them; not to set up rigid programs of study and timetables from which pupils cannot be exempted when occasion warrants; obviously to avoid certain other practices from which I can abstract nothing worth considering.