

A. Vibert Doualan

"Some Problems in Education"

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SOME PROBLEMS IN EDUCATION

A. VIBERT DOUGLAS

*Dean of Women, and Professor of Astronomy
Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario*

There are many problems in education which are common to both the U. S. A. and Canada. Both countries need more teachers; both countries are endeavouring to attract the best young men and women into the educational field; both countries are experimenting in methods of teacher training as well as in schoolroom procedure and curricula; and both countries have a tremendous up-hill task in attempting to overcome some of the detrimental influences which surround our young people.

Upon two or three of these, I shall comment briefly, and I shall begin with the last: One of the bad influences working against education is the abuse of the radio in so very many homes, where it is turned on and kept going continuously, a blare of noise and sentiment intermingling with some good programmes, news, and the ever-interrupting advertisements, forming the background against which too many young people are growing up, eating, talking, studying. Silence, so necessary to rest the nervous system, is seldom experienced and the nervous craving for a background of sound, any kind of sound, makes silence unwelcome. Is this one reason why mental and emotional instability are increasing, and our mental hospitals crowded with neurasthenics? Our young people need to learn the joy and peacefulness of silence, of quiet, yes, even of solitude. They need to ponder over and gradually comprehend the full meaning of Byron's words,—“In solitude when I am least alone.”

Another deplorable influence is to be found in the omnipresent comic strip. Thousands upon thousands of children throughout the length and breadth of our two countries go down upon all fours, six days a week, if not seven, to pour over the “funnies.” They read the dialogue, many of them spelling out these illiterate words with a beginner's difficulty. While the kindergarten and early grades are trying to teach these young citizens to speak and write grammatically, the day by day influence of these cartoon stories is too often on the side of utterly wrong words and pronunciations. “I should have gone” becomes “I should of gone.” Shorten *have* to the Cock-

ney 'ave, a contraction which is not limited to those born within sound of Dick Whittington's beloved Bowbells (only a symbolic saying now, alas, since the 1940 bombing of London destroyed that historic old Wren church)—but why, why, why replace a verb by the preposition *of*? By this sort of illiteracy, children are confused and misled. It is a great pity that old fashioned grammar, with parsing and analysis, has gone out of fashion in so many schools. In my opinion these form a mental discipline and training in logical thinking comparable to a good course in Euclid. There is so much loose thinking on the part of young people and adults, so obvious a lack of ability or inclination to think things through, that educators cannot too greatly stress the importance of some rigorous basic training in early school years. My purpose in referring to the comics is not primarily to draw attention to their subject matter—some are full of homely wisdom or ironic wit, others are slightly educative, many are utter sentimental or romantic drivel and vulgarity. What I do stress here is the menace to education in the wording—*gonna, whatcha, otter uv*,—and I ask myself whether the comic aspect would be lost if the words were less distorted. A few of these syndicated comics may originate in Canada, but not many. Their detrimental influence upon children's progress in learning and understanding their language is constant and insidious, and presents a problem to which teachers in both the U. S. A. and Canada should not be apathetic. Concerted action by national educational bodies might be effective in this matter.

The problem of drawing larger numbers of able young men and women into teaching is partly a financial one and partly a matter of public opinion in this country. In Great Britain one can approach a group of undergraduates and inquire as to the professions towards which each is heading with some expectation that the replies will include the word—Schoolmaster. Furthermore, it will be said with pride in a great profession—not in any half apologetic tone, as though it were the last resort of the man not ambitious enough to aim at law, engineering, medicine or “big business”! In Canada we need to educate our rural population, particularly, to realize that the schoolmaster or schoolmistress is one of the greatest influences upon their children and upon the future of our country. Until the teacher is so recognized, many will be lost to the profession who might otherwise have been eager to enter it.

Closely tied up with this community recognition is the financial question. In too many rural districts in some of our

Provinces, the salaries paid to teachers are a disgrace and an insult to their calling. There is also the vexed question of the lower salary scale for the woman teacher. It is extremely interesting to learn that in the House of Commons in London recently, a labour amendment to the government education bill, in which amendment equal pay for men and women teachers was advocated, the Government was defeated—even if only by one vote! This does not mean that equality is now to be established in Great Britain—but it marks an advance in public consciousness of the injustice to women teachers which the lower salary scale perpetuates.

The processes of teaching can be likened to the filling of a tank by means of a pump and pipe. There is a reservoir of knowledge and from this by dint of hard work and much exertion a certain minimum at least is transmitted under pressure through the pipe, which is the School System, into the tanks which are the school children. You think this an inadequate simile? Then let us try again. The process of teaching is like the play of water from a hose when the nozzle is fixed for spray. A child, like a tender plant or a sturdy sapling, is sprayed with many droplets of knowledge. The fountain-like effect can be made very attractive and it is hoped the child will enjoy the shower bath and eagerly absorb learning as the petals, leaves and roots of a plant absorb moisture from the garden spray or the April shower. Is this, too, inadequate? Education is actually not an intermittent process, but, like breathing, it is continuous. ‘The Education of Henry Adams’ was a life-long process—everywhere he went, in every experience of life whether active or passive, the educational process was operating. Thus we must stress the need for producing a total environment in which the child lives, moves and has his being, breathing in the knowledge of facts and of values, of things useful and of things beautiful, as naturally as he breathes the oxygen and the fragrance of grass, trees and flowers in the air surrounding him.

Education of the *whole* Man for the *whole* of the experiences of living is the ideal to be aimed at, an ideal stressed and elaborated in the writings of that great proponent of sound education in Great Britain, Dr. L. P. Jacks. To achieve this we must train teachers who are themselves well educated, who are enthusiastic about the whole task and challenge of education, and who are versatile enough to vary their approach according to the occasion, the subject matter, or the character of the children as a group or as individuals.

I am a great believer in the value of tossing into the classroom occasionally some idea or bit of information quite off the beaten path, something which every child knows is *not* part of a required course and therefore to be taken or left at will—a quotation from an ancient thinker, an anecdote or bit of travel lore, some recent achievement of science or philosophical idea, anything that is of such real interest to the teacher that he burns to pass it on to others, and in doing so he pays his class the compliment of treating them like intelligent adults. That is how many a spark has been kindled, a dormant interest aroused, a new Columbus launched upon what is for him at least an unexplored sea of thought. Curiosity is a divinely implanted characteristic of childhood and it is sheer tragedy that too often, in the process of education, the attitude of an impatient or unsympathetic parent or teacher results in deadening, dulling and all but killing this precious trait.

The late Master of Magdalen College, Cambridge, Dr. A. C. Benson, once said that "it ought to be the first aim of education to initiate the imagination of the young into the idea of fellowship and to make the thought of selfish individualism intolerable." The greatest need in the world today is for more and more people in every country who have been educated out of selfish individualism, out of narrow nationalism, into a world-consciousness and a sense of world wide responsibility—men and women who are in a real sense world citizens. Blindness to other people's fine qualities, ignorance of the contributions which they have made and are making to the progress of civilization, intolerance and prejudice, fear and selfishness—these are the great obstacles to world peace. Herein lies one of the greatest challenges to teachers. Theirs is the task of breaking down these barriers and obstacles to international good will. Only teachers who are themselves world-conscious can impart their vision and help to train a generation of world citizens. To this end student teacher and graduate teacher exchanges between the U. S. A. and Canada, and between our countries and Great Britain, continental Europe, and South America, are of tremendous value and importance. Every new step in this direction is to be welcomed and encouraged, for it adds to the potential forces in the world making for international understanding and good will. Education for world citizenship is one of the prime necessities if we would build and maintain a world at peace.