WHAT CHILDREN STUDY AND WHY

GILBERT

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A Discussion of Educational Values in the Elementary Course of Study

BY

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PREFACE

WHY is the course of study in use in our elementary schools constituted as it is? Why are reading, spelling, arithmetic, grammar, and history taught the children, rather than knitting and shooting and guiding automobiles?

What particular gift has each of the conventional school studies to bestow upon the children, and hence upon society, as justification for its place in the curriculum and as compensation for the labor, the tears, the time of the students, and the care, the effort, and the financial expenditures of the community?

These are questions that should be answered by teachers, parents, and public officials, if the best results are to be obtained from the schools. But most teachers take the course of study handed to them from above and teach it perfunctorily, without much serious consideration of its reason for being or for its motive. Most parents accept the courses forced upon their children, more or less willingly, but with the vaguest notions of their meaning or motive. Most school officials accept the conventional curriculum inherited from the past and used by their neighbors and pass it on to their own schools, taking for granted that it is right.

In this book no attempt is made to trace the history of the curriculum. That I willingly leave to more

learned writers. But I have endeavored to give in plain, untechnical terms a few of the practical psychological and sociological reasons for teaching the subjects found in most of our elementary school curricula, and to state what should result, from their study, to the benefit of the children and of society.

In some cases, also, I have intimated methods that seem likely to aid in securing the desired results, but I have not attempted to discuss methods of teaching in detail. That has been well done by several writers already. However, I have it in mind, in the near future, to offer a book discussing methods more fully than the limits of the present work allow, basing such discussion upon the specific psychological and social functions of the various subjects studied, as outlined in this book.

C. B. GILBERT.

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CHAPTER I

The Course of Study as a Whole

It is the purpose of this book to discuss the Course of Study of our elementary schools, treating its different subjects and departments *seriatim* and in some detail. But as a preliminary to such particular discussion, it seems necessary to consider briefly the curriculum as a whole, as to its aim and general character.

The course of study in a system of schools, whether of a state, a county, or a municipality, serves a two-fold purpose: one economic, the other educational. Its economic function is the unifying of the schools. It is the cohesive force that makes of an aggregation of schools a system. The educational function of the course is to serve as a guide to the teachers in their work; for, unlike the ordinary college curriculum, it is not made by those who are to use it, and hence may not be departed from at will. These two main functions call for special characteristics.

1. THE ECONOMIC FUNCTION

First, the economic function: what sort of unity is desirable in a school system, and how may a course of study promote such unity?

Naturally, if the pupils in the schools are uniformly and exactly graded and daily tasks are prescribed for all the grades, the result will be uniformity, and uniformity is a kind of unity.

Is it possible to give due recognition to a desirable freedom for the teachers and to the varying needs of children coming from many kinds of homes, and at the same time to preserve necessary unity?

In any one of our larger cities, with its heterogeneous population, with the widely differing needs of black and white, foreign-born and native, children of millionaire and of ditch digger, those from homes of luxury and culture, where all the influences supplement the work of the school, and those from the abodes of poverty, vice, and ignorance, who are kept in school only through the force of law, — is it possible under such varying conditions to frame a single course of study that will properly regard the needs of all and do violence to none? Is there any wide field of knowledge, any single line of intellectual activities, of such universal adaptation that all may profitably spend time in their cultivation and pursuit? Even if such subjects of study can be found, is it well to attempt to require the same attainments in them of all children of all sorts? In other words, is it possible to frame a prescriptive course of study for New York or Chicago or Philadelphia, or even for a small city, that will not do violence to the needs, not only of many individuals, but of some whole classes of children, some entire schools? If it were possible to frame a course having this negative adaptation, is it desirable, or is it necessary to the preservation of proper unity in a system?

What Uniformity is Desirable. — What degree of uniformity in a school system is desirable or necessary to the preservation of unity?

1. It should be possible for every child to pass through all the grades of a system, from the lowest to the highest, without serious hindrance because of differences of subject matter taught, or of administration.

2. It should be possible for children changing their residences to go from one school to another without loss of grade or other embarrassment arising from differences in instruction. The good of the individual children requires this degree of uniformity.

3. It should be possible for supervising officials to judge of the efficiency of teachers according to some standard of attainment on the part of the pupils. It is not necessary, however, for this standard to be strictly uniform.

4. It is desirable, but not essential, that instructions given to teachers and aids furnished them for their work be of general service. This is more important in smaller communities than in very large cities, in which division of the supervising force and differentiation of function among its members are possible. These needs seem to indicate the natural limits of necessary uniformity in a course of study in a school system.

Differences in Administration Desirable. — It seems to me beyond question that there should be great differences in the course as administered in different schools, especially in large cities. The children of the poor foreigner, who hear no English in the home, who themselves are accustomed to speak a foreign tongue, whose knowledge of the English language is limited to a few incorrect or slang phrases picked up on the street, and

whose schooling is almost sure to be limited to the minimum required by law, certainly must have instruction different from that needed by children who have been accustomed from infancy to good English only, and who are reasonably sure to continue in school at least to the end of the public school course. With the same course of study, the knowledge acquired by these children is sure to differ greatly; and the desired end of intellectual growth by all, as nearly equal as possible, would be greatly facilitated by treatment adapted to their individual conditions.

Unity of Aim and Purpose. — The unity to be sought is one of aim and purpose, the development of each child into the best possible for him. Individual growth, rather than the knowledge of the same facts by all, is the end to be desired.

A Necessary Minimum. — A minimum must be fixed, necessarily, and this is not difficult. There *are* certain subjects so nearly universal in their adaptation that all children should pursue them. The differences should be mainly in the details of these subjects and in the methods of presentation.

The subjects a knowledge of which the experience of mankind has singled out as essential to such an education as the good citizen needs, are: Reading with its corollary, good literature; writing; the use of the prevailing language, with us, English; arithmetic; and history, especially of the student's own country; and of minor, though great, importance to all, the laws and phenomena of nature, and various manual and industrial arts, such as drawing and the use of tools. These should be in all elementary courses of study. But it by no

means follows that all students should be taught all these subjects to the same extent, or in the same manner. Their presence in a course of study insures unity. Freedom in their treatment, in the emphasis placed upon them, and in their correlations with one another, as suggested by the mental and social status of the pupils, gives the variety in unity which is to be desired.

Correlation Necessary. — A proper correlation of subjects, allowing the placing of stress upon this phase or that, is one key to the problem. For example, the children of very many immigrant families need, for a time at least, to recognize the fact that all other subjects must be subordinated to the study of the English language. That does not mean, however, that no other subject should be studied. The same subjects may be pursued by them as by other children, but with a change of emphasis. Language cannot be taught alone. It is the medium for the expression of thought. Hence "content" subjects must accompany the study of language and furnish thought for expression, else the instruction in language will be barren. Such "content" subjects are the great fundamental interests of humanity, the laws and phenomena of nature, the ideals, the occupations, and the achievements of men — that is, "nature study," history, literature, and the industries. But while all children should study these subjects, the emphasis and the portion of time given to each should vary as widely as do the children themselves.

Stress should be Varied. — In some cases the chief stress should be upon the "content" study itself, and this should be chosen with reference to the needs of the children. To those from poor and sordid homes,

literature and history, imparting ideals, should be made much of. To the children of well-to-do parents with aristocratic tendencies, human industries as exemplified in manual training exercises should be prominent as content studies. With other children, as indicated above, the form of expression itself should receive the chief attention. The need of each must be considered. It will not do to give brimstone and treacle to all because it may be good for some. A mechanical uniformity, regardless of local or individual conditions, not only wastes the time and energies of pupils, but prevents even reasonable equality of result in spiritual growth and in attainment throughout the system.

Course Adaptable.—A course of study, then, to secure unity to the system, need not be rigidly prescriptive. It should require that fundamental subjects be taught thoroughly in all schools, but should allow details of subject matter, the choice of material for elaboration and illustration and, in the main, methods of instruction, to be determined by local and individual needs.

Results Required. — The absolute requirement should be " results," as shown in the knowledge and power of the children, and these results should be determined, not by any narrow tests, but by standards of growth wisely and personally applied. These necessarily include steady progress by the children in fitness for life as it comes to them, and the acquisition of sufficient intellectual power and knowledge to enable them to meet the demands of what comes next, whether in school or out.

All children should acquire at least a reasonable minimum of knowledge of the accepted fundamentals, but not necessarily all the knowledge, or the same knowl-

edge, of those subjects that other children in the same or in other schools may possess, but merely that which is essential to progression. A pupil who cannot perform reasonably difficult problems in addition and multiplication is not qualified to work in interest, and if this power has not been acquired at the proper time, something has been wrong, because these subjects are fundamental in mathematics. But a knowledge of duodecimals is not essential to work in percentage, even if it comes before it in the book.

Course should be Rich in Suggestion. — In addition to stating in broad general terms the prescribed fundamental subjects, with their requirements for each grade, the unity of the system requires that the course of study be rich in *suggestion* as to detail, as to additional material, and as to the development of the different subjects. While mandatory instruction as to details of matter and of method are dangerous, not only to the freedom of the teacher, but also to the real spiritual unity of the system itself, suggestions as to these matters are promotive of both these desirable ends.

If the unity of the system is to be one of spirit and of aim, all means that tend to make clear the aim and to cultivate the proper spirit are helpful. The highest and best unity can be secured through freedom stimulated by suggestion and inspiration, never through force or prescription.

2. THE EDUCATIONAL FUNCTION

The educational function of a course of study is to serve as a guide to the teacher in his daily work. The characteristics that are required for the preservation

of the unity of the system are equally essential to this second function. There must be prescription as to fundamentals, freedom as to details and methods. The teacher needs to have requirements stated positively and clearly so that he may be sure of his ground and may qualify his children for progress without check or setback. The general phases of the subjects upon which his efforts are to be expended, and the results expected of his class, must be stated in unmistakable language, but in broad terms, the terms of unity rather than of uniformity.

Daily Programs Harmful. — The course of study should not give daily programs to the teachers of the different grades, even approximately. While these programs are of much importance, they are matters of detail to be worked out in every school by the teacher and the principal, according to local conditions. For example, among certain classes of children in our cities the power to compute seems to be almost hereditary, and the desired results can be secured with comparatively little effort, while the study of the English language and of history and civics needs a large share of the time. In other quarters the reverse of this condition is found.

Initiative to be Encouraged. — Moreover, prescription as to details of subject matter and of method and as to the daily program is injurious to the teacher and destructive of good teaching. Teachers who are fit for their places can attend to these matters better than the maker of the course of study, and they should not merely be allowed, they should be compelled, to do so for their own growth.

A cast-iron course of study is as destructive of teachers as the shoes worn by Chinese ladies are of their feet.

The school machine at its best constantly endangers the teacher's power of initiative, his most valuable mental possession. Hence every effort should be made to reduce this danger to the minimum. A premium, rather than the threat of disapproval, should be set upon originality that secures results in fresh ways. I have seen scores, hundreds, of potentially good teachers robbed of interest and of teaching power by the rigid requirements, in minor matters, of the course of study. These teachers, when deprived of this corselet and compelled to stand erect alone, to breathe freely and to act unstayed, have been dismayed and helpless, and have begged to be told again just what to do for each period of the day; and I have seen many forced into activity and made in the end strong, original, and enthusiastic teachers through being compelled to do their own thinking and planning.

Thus, for the good of the teacher, as well as for the unity of the system, a course of study should be rigid in its requirements as to results in the fundamentals, but should leave to the teachers its application and administration in particular fields.

It should, however, supply a great amount of material for choice and should suggest method, illustration, and correlations, all *in the spirit* of the system. It should abound in explanation, suggestion, and inspiration — in all sorts of genuine helps; but they should be stimuli to independent effort, not predigested food to take its place.

Course not too Easy to Comprehend. — A course of study should not be too easy of comprehension. It should require the teachers to study the course itself, in order to comprehend it, and to study outside the course

for help in administering it. A course that a teacher can keep in his desk and follow satisfactorily by occasional references to it is a feeble course indeed.

A good course necessarily rests upon science and philosophy, both psychological and sociological, and should continually refer the teachers to these sources for an explanation of its principles, and should require of them professional research and study, — for such study is the teacher's vital breath.

A course of study should also demand for its administration a fair amount of general culture, and should make necessary constant excursions by the teacher into the fields of science, history, and literature, for these excursions mean personal growth.

Body of Knowledge and Range of Activities. — As education consists in growth, through nutrition and exercise, that is, through the acquisition of knowledge and through expression — receiving and producing, import and export — the course should make provision for both these processes. It should provide or suggest *a body of knowledge and a range of activities.* The former calls for knowledge on the part of the teacher, the latter for the free exercise of judgment and initiative.

The field of prescription is mainly limited to the body of knowledge and indeed to the main and fundamental facts within it.

The field of suggestion and inspiration is largely in the expressive work of the school. As expression makes knowledge vital, the range of activities is the vitalizing part of the course of study. It is not enough that a course state that the work in history for the fifth grade shall cover so many pages of such and such books, or that it