



A WEEKLY COMMENTARY

ON TARGET



- NEWS HIGHLIGHTS
- BACKGROUND INFORMATION
- COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

The price of Freedom is eternal vigilance –

Print Post Publication Number 381667 00258

Vol.40, No.45

November 19th, 2004

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK: *"Fascism should more appropriately be called Corporatism because it is a merger of State and Corporate power."* – Benito Mussolini

YET ANOTHER INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION SYSTEM: The on-going issue of too many students leaving school unable to competently read and write has surfaced once again. This time the Federal Coalition has launched a national inquiry into how children learn to read, *The Australian*, 01/11/04. The debate, it is said, is focused on whether the phonics approach is the way to go or that the 'look-say' method is satisfactory, but needs some modifications.

How far back in the history of education in Australia will the inquiry go? More importantly, will the inquiry delve into the powerful forces who, 50 years or more ago, brought about such dramatic changes in the philosophy, policies and practices of education in this country?

Why was it that in the late 1800s early 1900s: The percentage of children of school age, five to fourteen years, able to read and write, increased from 59.1% in 1871 to 79.8% in 1901 and 90.27% in 1911. And yet, the size of the school population increased from 432,153 in 1871 to 890,572 in 1901. (Ref: *"Understanding Australian Education 1901-14"* by John Lawry. Figures from Commonwealth Year Book 1924 pp477-8).

The 'New Education': Will the inquiry delve into the introduction of the *New Education* into our institutions and the pedigree of the ideas from which it stemmed?

"Even though a survey in November 1951 showed that pupils in primary school performed 'on the average at lower levels than pupils twenty years earlier,' the 'progressive' changes of the New Education spread to all the states," wrote Jean M. Wallis in *The Subversion of Australian Education*.

American scholar Russell Kirk made an evaluation of the New Education in 1954: It is, he said: "...a system in which the very tools to any sort of apprehension of systematic knowledge, spelling and grammar, mathematics and geography, are despised as boring impediments to 'socialization' -- why, is it possible to conceive of a system better calculated to starve the imagination, discourage the better student, and weaken Reason?" (Ref: Augustin G. Rudd. *Bending the Twig*, pp. 274, 275)

Over thirty years ago the system was already failing our children! In 1976 a Federal Parliamentary enquiry was told that between 30-40% of children were leaving primary school with a reading age of less than ten! Monash University lecturer in special education, Stewart Sykes, stated that many children

IN THIS ISSUE: • *Thought For The Week* • *Yet Another Inquiry Into The Education System* • *The Lost Tools Of Learning*

were entering secondary schools 'functionally illiterate'! (*The Age*, 18/5/76, cited in *The Subversion of Australian Education* by J.M. Wallis)

In the 1970s former teacher Jean Wallis wrote: "Today, imagination is the criteria in many class room activities. In essay writing and composition, correct spelling and sentence construction are no longer important. And grammar – grammar is DEAD, it belongs to a bygone age.

In art, children are encouraged to express themselves without the "frustrating" discipline of learning how. Unintelligible drawings and finger paintings emerge which teachers describe as imaginative, exciting. At a later stage such creations are known as contemporary art, and with the taxpayers' money, Governments buy them to hang in picture galleries.

At all stages, the standard of education declines ever further. A recent innovation, the Radford Scheme, which eliminates external examinations, is reported to have produced a further decline in standards where it has been introduced.

When challenged by the critics, modern educators state '... In the years up to the fifties, a large number of students did not go beyond primary school and therefore their reading disabilities were not detected at secondary school level. . . Recent surveys do suggest a need to attach greater importance to the fundamentals although it is not perfectly obvious that the standard of the typical child of today is in any way inferior to that of his counter-part years ago.' (from Victoria *Hansard*, 28.4.76 page 270)."

So, we're to have yet another inquiry into why 'Johnny Can't Read'!

THE LOST TOOLS OF LEARNING: World-famous writer and dramatist, Dorothy L. Sayers, entered the debate on education in 1947 by putting forward proposals for improvement, but she wasn't too optimistic: "It is in the highest degree improbable that the reforms I propose will ever be carried into effect. Neither the parents, nor the training colleges, nor the examination boards, nor the boards of governors, nor the ministers of education would countenance them for a moment."

The stock argument is only partly true: "If we are to produce a society of educated people, fitted to preserve their intellectual freedom amid the complex pressures of our modern society, we must turn back the wheel of progress some four or five hundred years, to the point at which education began to lose sight of its true object, towards the end of the Middle Ages...

The stock argument in favour of postponing the school leaving-age and prolonging the period of education generally is that there is now so much more to learn than there was in the Middle Ages. This is partly true, but not wholly. The modern boy and girl are certainly taught more subjects -- but does that always mean that they actually know more?

The product of modern educational methods: "Has it ever struck you as odd, or unfortunate, that today, when the proportion of literacy throughout western Europe is higher than it has ever been, people should have become susceptible to the influence of advertisement and mass-propaganda to an extent hitherto unheard-of and unimagined?

Do you put this down to the mere mechanical fact that the press and radio and so on have made propaganda much easier to distribute over a wide area?

Or do you sometimes have an uneasy suspicion that the product of modern educational methods is less good than he or she might be at disentangling fact from opinion and the proven from the plausible?

Have you ever, in listening to a debate among adult and presumably responsible people been fretted by the extraordinary inability of the average debater to speak to the question, or to meet and refute the arguments of speakers on the other side?

...Have you ever followed a discussion in the newspapers or elsewhere and noticed how frequently writers fail to define the terms they use?

Or how often, if one man does define his terms, another will assume in his reply that he was using the terms in precisely the opposite sense to that in which he has already defined them?

Have you ever been faintly troubled by the amount of slipshod syntax going about?

And if so, are you troubled because it is inelegant **or because it may lead to dangerous misunderstanding?**

Do you ever find that young people, when they have left school, not only forget most of what they learnt (that is only to be expected) but forgot also, or betray that they have never really known, how to tackle a subject for themselves?

The Art of learning how to think: "Is not the great defect of our education today... that although we often succeed in teaching our pupils "subjects", we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think: they learn everything, except the art of learning. It is as though we had taught a child mechanically and by rule of thumb, to play "The Harmonious Blacksmith" upon the piano, but had never taught him the scale or how to read music; so that, having memorized "The Harmonious Blacksmith", he still had not the faintest notion how to proceed from that to tackle "The Last Rose of Summer."

The Mediaeval Syllabus: "Let us now look at the mediaeval scheme of education – the syllabus of the schools. It does not matter, for the moment, whether it was used for small children or for older students; or how long people were supposed to take over it. What matters is the light it throws upon what the men of the Middle Ages supposed to be the object and the right order of the educative process.

The syllabus was divided into two parts; the Trivium and Quadrivium...

"The interesting thing for us is the composition of the Trivium, which preceded the Quadrivium and was the preliminary discipline for it.

It consisted of three parts: grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric, in that order.

Now the first thing we notice is that two at any rate of these "subjects" are not what we should call "subjects" at all: *they are only methods of dealing with subjects.*

Grammar, indeed, is a "subject" in the sense that it does mean definitely learning a language – at that period it meant learning Latin. *But language itself is simply the medium in which thought is expressed.*

The intention – to teach the proper tools of learning: *"The whole of the Trivium was, in fact, intended to teach the pupil the proper use of the tools of learning, before he began to apply them to "subjects" at all.*

First, he learned a language; not just how to order a meal in a foreign language, but the structure of language – a language, and hence of language itself – what it was, how it was put together and how it worked.

Secondly, he learned how to use language: how to define his terms and make accurate statements; how to construct an argument and how to detect fallacies in argument (his own arguments and other people's). Dialectic, that is to say, embraced logic and disputation.

Thirdly, he learned to express himself in language: how to say what he had to say elegantly and persuasively.

At the end of his course, he was required to compose a thesis upon some theme set by his masters or chosen by himself, and afterwards to defend his thesis against the criticism of the faculty. By this

time he would have learned – or woe betide him – not merely to write an essay on paper, but to speak audibly and intelligibly from a platform, and to use his wits quickly when heckled. There would be questions, cogent and shrewd, from those who had already run the gauntlet of the debate.

Bits and pieces of mediaeval tradition still linger: "It is, of course, quite true that bits and pieces of the mediaeval tradition still linger, or have been revived, in the ordinary school syllabus of today. Some knowledge of grammar is still required when learning a foreign language -- perhaps I should say, "is again required"; for during my own life-time we passed through a phase when the teaching of declensions and conjugations was considered rather reprehensible, and it was considered better to pick these things up as we went along.

School debating societies flourish; essays are written; the necessity for "self-expression" is stressed, and perhaps even overstressed. But these activities are cultivated more or less in detachment, as belonging to the special subjects in which they are pigeon-holed, rather than as forming one coherent scheme of mental training to which all "subjects" stand in a subordinate relation.

"Grammar" belongs especially to the "subject" of foreign languages, and essay-writing to the "subject" called "English"; while dialectic has become almost entirely divorced from the rest of the curriculum, and is frequently practiced unsystematically and out of school-hours as a separate exercise, only very loosely related to the main business of learning.

Forging and learning to handle the 'tools' of learning: "Taken by and large, the great difference of emphasis between the two conceptions holds good: Modern education concentrates on teaching subjects, leaving the method of thinking, arguing, and expressing one's conclusions to be picked up by the scholar as he goes along.

Mediaeval education concentrated on first forging and learning to handle the tools of learning, using whatever subject came handy as a piece of material on which to doodle until the use of the tool became second nature.

"Subjects" of some kind there must be, of course. One cannot learn the theory of grammar without learning an actual language, or learn to argue and orate without speaking about something in particular." (emphasis added...ed) Taken from *The Lost Tools of Learning*.

Comment: The problem goes much deeper than the education system churning out too many students who are unable to read and write competently and what 'modifications' are needed to help to them improve. The deeper problem is that of a system churning out too many who have not mastered the ability to think for themselves!

They have not been "fitted to preserve their intellectual freedom." They have become more "susceptible to the influence of advertisement and mass-propaganda to an extent once unimagined."

And undoubtedly, in the mass, "the *product* of modern educational methods is less good than he or she might be at disentangling fact from opinion and the proven from the plausible!"

Further reading: "*The Lost Tools of Learning*" by Dorothy L. Sayers, 1947; "*The Disaster Road: Planned Failure & Psychological Seduction in the Schools*" by Jean M. Wallis, 1986; "*Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling*" by John Taylor Gatto, 2002.

For background history of 'the ideological soil' in which the New Education 'took root', "*The Culture of Critique*" by Kenneth MacDonald 2002 is essential reading – a few copies are still available.

"ON TARGET" is printed and published by The Australian League of Rights, 145 Russell St., Melbourne.
Postal Address: GPO Box 1052, Melbourne, 3001. Telephone: (03) 9650 9749, Fax: (03) 9650 9368.

Subscription \$40.00 p.a.