

The Rich Curriculum

By MARGARET EMERSON BAILEY

Are the new schools giving the modern child mental indigestion? A teacher reflects upon today's cafeteria of education and its effect on girls she knows.

THE cry of this age is for the rich curriculum—by which is meant the varied one. Parents demand it. Schools take a proud joy in heaping up the measure until the youngest and the oldest child are set before a banquet of more courses than they can probably digest.

To make this comment or to agree with it is not necessarily to proclaim oneself as a reactionary. There would seem to be no question but that modern educators had had to take a hand in mental dietetics. Until quite recently the fare was much too set and spare and simple. The child who was curious or imaginative, or who had marked originality of mind, had to forage for himself outside the classroom if he was to keep his appetite for learning. And, quite as truly, the child who was apathetic, and who had no originality of mind, seldom had his scant curiosity aroused. By and large this is no longer true.

But, if there were dangers in monotony, there are dangers in variety—in giving too much variety rather than a careful balanced diet. While this fact has been recognized by many of the colleges, with a consequent reduction in the courses taken, it has not been recognized by most of the secondary schools or by those who send their children to

them. It is of these dangers that I mean to treat.

The former assumption seemed to be that the natural child was stubborn about learning anything; that he had to be disciplined about school matters much as he was disciplined about his table manners, till he took whatever had been set before him without grumbling and without leaving crusts or crumbs. On the contrary, the modern assumption seems to be that the natural child is finicky and must be tempted. He must be induced, not led. The intention, thus, of the much-varied course is to arouse enthusiasms, to reach and to provoke the curiosities of every child that comes within its influence, to get him to taste, then of his own accord to take another spoonful, to try everything on the whole menu, and to acquire a trust that each will be as pleasant, till he comes to school assured that in every class he will get what amounts to being his very favorite dessert.

The intellectual objection to desserts and to the disguise of enticing sauces is another matter. But, taken by itself, it is a grave question as to how many zests in the same child can be stimulated in quick succession without the mind's rebelling at too much abundance, without its reaching a state of exhaustion

from satiety, without its acquiring the habit of nibbling lightly at too much and hence not taking in what makes for retention and for growth.

The very young mind has its own protection against what is too much for it—too much for it, not in intensity of concentration, but in diversity and scope. As an illustration of what I mean, I recently ran across a little boy of five who had been taken for the first time to the Museum of Natural History. "Did you," he asked, "ever see a leaping dinosaur?" I should have tried to tell him the very small amount I knew about one, but instead I tried to switch the subject to what I knew more fully. Had he seen the butterfly collection? To which he replied: "They were wilder than lions." And, again deaf to my next question as to whether his father had shown him the hoof of the horse going back and back till it had all its toes, he went on thinking of his "leaping dinosaurs."

"Think," he said delightedly, "just think how wild they were."

Now, in his case, his mind had its own protection against the assault of anything which might confuse his interest. To all the collections which might have cluttered that one interest he had been absolutely blind. To all intents and purposes, they did not exist.

Naturally no school can cut down to a single subject or can permit absorption only in one subject. Its honest effort is to work for balance, not one-sidedness. And, quite apart from that fact, it must handle different types of mind and make some appeal to all of them. What catches the curiosity of one child lacks lustre for the next. But do we not offer an assortment that is in the end bewildering? Do we not depend too much on the mere outward fact of that assortment, without asking what inward needs it nourishes? Do we give sufficient thought to the kind of teaching in the separate subjects

that such variety requires? Has not the whole matter resolved itself into a deal between the parents and the school rather than a relation, carefully considered, between the school and child?

The curriculums differ with each school, but it is the attempt of nearly every school to offer rich ones. And what happens to the child when he is entered in the early grades and finds himself confronted with table-work in shifts of fifteen minutes to prevent a chance of boredom? Or when he finds himself confronted with rhythmic and phonics, with orientation and geography, with musical games and block-building that shall teach him numbers without inhibitions, with reading and group composition, with pottery and carpentry and costume-making? Almost at once he finds that his response, which is eager and spontaneous toward one subject, and in differing degrees to a few other subjects, is expected to be quite as eager and spontaneous to more than he can compass. Three or four he might manage with real interest. But if grown-up people are going to expect him to get excited about everything—

Little by little he learns the way to satisfy them. It is to skimp his energy on what he really cares about; it is to know or to pretend to know something about lots of things rather than to single out his bents and to pursue his real enthusiasms. The sort of mind that could remember from a big museum only "dinosaurs," begins to lose integrity from the manifold demands that are put upon it. With this result—that at an early age it has sacrificed the fierce-intensity which is so characteristic of a child's surrender to a stimulus. It has developed all the making of the tourist's superficial mind and has lost the making of the sound professional's. Were the same child sent back to the Museum of Natural History some four years later, the chances are

that he would come away with heterogeneous smatterings from quick, hurried observations. Not because his interests had been widened, though that fact would play a part in it. But chiefly because he had the habit of quickly skimming over the whole ground rather than of planting himself firmly where he could find out about some little part of it. From this to that is the habit that he has acquired at school.

The diffusion of mental energy, the scattering of concentration, goes on in all the grades, but the younger children are seldom conscious of what is happening to their mental processes, even when they feel confusion. If they are able to present enough to satisfy their teachers, they conclude that everything must be all right. If they fail in doing this, they assume that the fault lies with themselves. However, I have heard older pupils, seasoned and inured, explain what seemed aphasia, or a silly ignorance or blunder, by some such remark as this: "Of course I really knew that Milton was a Puritan, but you see we're having the Athenians in History; in History of Art we're doing the Italian Primitives; in French we've got to the Romantics. And then right on top of them, we have English Literature and the Puritans." She did not add that in the course of the morning she had also covered alien subjects such as Science and Mathematics. It was the quick, arbitrary shift from one civilization to another that she could not keep straight. Nor do I think that a closer correlation would have helped her, even were such linkage possible. Given courses all dealing with the same century, she would have met with differences, some marked, some subtle, between contemporaries of different races. She would have met with the effect of big, convulsive movements that upheaved some country violently before they stirred a tremor in another. What she

needed was to handle fewer subjects, certainly to handle fewer subjects of like kind, and to deal with those more fully. What she required was more pause between the presentation of them. Her mind was like a taut-strung instrument still reverberating to one tune and thus unready for the next.

Often, moreover, I have heard pupils from entirely different schools make this same active criticism. "It seems as though we might carry fewer subjects, and get more interest out of each." Sometimes this grows to irritation at what is supposedly the rare reward of virtue. "I cleared off my French," a pupil will say, "because I thought they'd let me do more work in Mathematics." Or it may be vice versa. "And what do they go and do but stick in a course in History of Art or Household Economics. I want to be rounded *in*. I'm sick and tired of being rounded *out*." Her irritation is almost never against the new course itself. What she is belligerent against is the largesse of the rich curriculum. Abruptly it has forced her to take on a new interest; to turn again to unbroken soil when her own impulse was to learn just what it means to cultivate, to till and glean where a furrow is already sown.

The unavoidable result of the varied programme is also the crowded programme; the schedule of the day broken up in little squares that indicate three-quarters of an hour at most, but as frequently the small slice of half an hour. This tells on teachers and on pupils, and on both disastrously. On the teachers in this way. In the best-disciplined schools it takes children little short of five minutes to get from one class to another, and another five minutes for them to be in a receptive attitude of mind. Five minutes before the dismissal bell the habit of rush prevails, even over interest. There is a profession of really listening, but books begin to be stacked up and papers

to be gathered. Supposedly the teacher has been given half an hour. She is fortunate if in reality she may use twenty minutes to advantage. But grant her her full measure; what material, even prepared and shortened carefully, can she possibly present? Her task is much like teaching nest-building to migrating birds.

But seriously, if there is any material that can be properly presented to an eighth-grade child or one more advanced in less than three-quarters of an hour, I have not found it, though I have tried in several subjects, and have watched the teaching of as many more. In Mathematics, answers to examples may be read or theorems recited, but hurry and brevity rule out the proper speculative mood in which originals should be tackled. The ability to sift and sort, to pick and choose, to discard a number of wrong methods is almost as valuable a mental process as to hit at once upon the one right method. Yet we are training children that what gets itself set down on paper, right or wrong, is all that counts. In the same way brevity rules out the slow precision and chance for verification that are necessary even for the first experiments in Science. No scientist was ever trained with his eye upon the time-clock. So, too, brevity kills any thoughtful planning, any selective sense of the right word, any evocation of a mood or plain, straight thinking in a class composition. Certainly it is at cross-purposes with those classroom discussions which are one of the chief contributions made by modern education. In History, in English, in almost any subject, the teacher must be very sure that she is really starting hares and that these hares are conveniently short-winded. There is no time for the sense of exhilaration and accomplishment that comes from the long pursuit.

That the pupils feel the effect of rush

and of little or no respite from it, is evident from their behavior and their comments.

One trivial incident comes back to me with real persistence. It occurred in a class in pottery which I was visiting. As the bell for dismissal rang, the teacher went from child to child gathering up the clay—plaque or bowl or vase—on which each had been encouraged and induced to spend his energy and his imagination. As the saying is, she was on her job. And before their eyes the children saw their individual efforts lumped back into an indiscriminate and democratic mass to be reworked to shapes by the next influx. One young rebel indignantly protested. "That bowl's mine. It's mine until it's done." A fine, but true distinction. To her the bowl was real because of its intended outlines. It was still hers by the very reason of its incompleteness. Finished, it might well have been a mere physical object that she was willing to be through with. But unfinished, she was losing a conception that no one ought to make her lose; some image in her mind that she was transferring through her hands to clay. If she was robbed of it at this stage, something indubitably precious would be taken from her, and if taken would be gone for good. But worse than being robbed was the fact of being cheated. Next time she would know better than to conjure up any shape with real enthusiasm and to see how near she could come to bringing it to being, since, before she could see how it turned out and how near she had come to mastering her difficulties, it would be thrown away.

Older children manage better to defeat the obstacles that are part of a system that keeps them rushing from one half-done problem to another. The rank and file, of course, are acquiescent if they seem to please and satisfy. But some

hardy minds survive, persist, rebel against the very worst that we can do to them. The weekly composition, begun in class as a saving of time, is crumpled up and thrown into the waste-basket when the bell rings. In its place another one is written, different from the very start and thought out quietly at home. Or one written in a rush, and actually turned in as ordered, is brought back on the next day in a new version—and not to alter marks, but to prove to the child himself what he could really do if granted a little leeway for mustering up his thoughts, for turning those thoughts to words, and bringing his intention to an end. Or a pupil really keen about his work will carry it from one class to the next. He will go on with it beneath the teacher's nose and will incur the risk of a rebuke and discipline. Caught at scribbling at a Geometry problem in an English class, he will be unabashed and take the teacher into his confidence as a reasonable human being. As patiently as possible he will explain as though somebody ought to understand: "You see, I've thought up the right way to do this. And if I stop right now, I'll never get it."

Well, suppose he never does. It is easy to say that it is no great matter. Indeed, it seems a very little matter as opposed to the system and order of a school that will be thrown out of gear, that will stop running if we give too much consideration to such individual pupils. Among school systems of to-day, there are some which would take care of him, but it may be that we do not sympathize with those who let a pupil go his own gait, and that we think there is something steadying, and on the whole more salutary, in his keeping pace with a whole class.

Granted the kind of school based on the class unit and not on the unit of the individual pupil, there must be various

subjects in the programme; each of these must have its termination; different minds will not work at the same top speed. Thus the incident of the unfinished bowl, of the discarded composition, of the example interrupted must inevitably occur. But the point is that, though they must occur inevitably, they need not happen quite so continually as they must happen through the over-rich curriculum. By handling less, more might be completed. Occasionally we might remind ourselves that education is not concerned entirely with what the parent clamors for or with what the school takes pride in offering, but with what happens to the child.

For children are so constituted that they find composure in completeness and resent what interferes with it. It is my experience that children are really bothered by assignments that stop in the middle of a section, of a page, and of a chapter. Though it means a longer task, they prefer the extra length to not reaching a full stop. For them there is a real intellectual protest against splitting up a paragraph, a page, a chapter that stands for a solid block. And, as a rule, they would rather go without what they would really like to have than to have it marred by interruptions. If a story is to be read, they must first be sure that they have time to finish it. "If you start that now, we shan't get through; and next time we shan't remember where we were." If they cannot have it in its entirety, they prefer to have it saved till circumstances make completion possible. That failing, they prefer to have it not at all.

In contrast to what the child wants, and wants with a tenacity that is significant, there is what the school wants and what the parent wants in a formidable compact. Real difficulties lie in the way of satisfying either side. It is easy enough to understand that the parent who looks

over the prospectus of a school is taken by the glamour of the richness offered. Each course stands to her for an opportunity that will be offered to her child. It is as easy to understand that a school takes a real pride in its equipment and the range of courses offered. Moreover, taken separately each course has a real contribution to be made. Another cogent argument is that the child who takes pleasure in his brain must also learn to use his body and his hands; and that the child who is imaginative and emotional must be taught to deal not only with perceptions and with feelings but with concrete facts. But superabundance is not plenty, nor is it the same in its results.

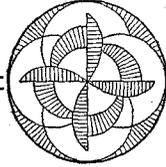
If there was weariness from monotony, there is also weariness from variety. If appetites were lost through the three R's and stolid daily fare, they fail as quickly through the table d'hôte. Moreover, no child is better off if he gets a sense of bafflement. And in no way is he baffled more easily than by being offered more than he can cope with clearly. Inasmuch as we add more than he is able to keep straight, we add so much clutter. It may be clutter in itself intrinsically valuable. But its nature is altered or is lost to him, if it does nothing but confuse. Grant, then, that a child's span of concentration is not so long as is an adult's, still the answer would seem to be fewer subjects, those more dissimilar in nature, more time between for the mind to lie fallow—not the stimulation from something different yet again.

Neither is the child better off if he gets a sense of the futility of learning. And in no way does he reach this sense of futility so quickly as by brief snatches, by constant interruptions that snap in two all growing power of concentration. "So then what is worth doing at all is not worth doing well"—is not even worth his finishing it or going on with it. If occasionally this happened, even he

could see that there were exigencies that he must put up with. But why should any subject be treated by him with respect when it is treated by the school with such apparent lightness? Why should he not belittle what his teachers seem to belittle—slowness, thoroughness, composure, and completion? No, learning will not yield itself if rushed at in a hurry and abandoned in the midst for some other field of learning. To be of any value, at least some processes of thought must come quietly to their own ends.

It thus resolves itself into a question as to whether the old curriculum of fewer courses, but of courses balanced against each other, and ones in which the former stilted text-book approach was changed to the newer methods of classroom discussion, would not be more profitable than such rich smattering. One subject taught fully, taught richly, can be made to give the key to the right way of tackling any other subject. It can be made to show—even to a child—some value in the whole mixed scheme that is great enough to include other lesser values. But, as it is, many schools and many parents seem to have combined in caring less about the individual destination of the individual child's mind than about the number of stations at which it makes a frantic rush-hour stop.

To one who watches on the platform, the resulting breathlessness seems fair reason for alarm. Such bustling spurts produce no sustained interests, no intellectual discipline, precise and patient in working to a sound conclusion. They lead at worst to a paralysis of the power of interest. At best they lead to the hodge-podge amateurishness, the cocksure knowing a little about everything, to the outline acquaintanceships with culture, to the snap-judgments, that are becoming increasingly characteristic of American thought.



Is There Hope for Politics?

By JOHN DEWEY

The foremost philosopher of the United States, who puts his theories into practice by active participation in American life, recently created a stir by his proposal of a third party. We asked Doctor Dewey to write on the reasons behind his proposal.

THE most marked trait of our recent political life is the growing disregard of politics. The disregard is shown in apathy, cynicism, and contempt. Indifference is proved by the difficulty that is experienced in getting voters to the polls. One out of two possible voters exercises the right of franchise. Even the last presidential election, which drew upon the outside interests of religion and personal tastes in drink, did not increase the ratio very much. There is no other country in which anything like so much money is spent in political campaigns, and there is none in which citizens are so apathetic about taking part in an election. To this indifference is added cynical contempt. There is apathy because the potential electorate feels that nothing in especial is gained by voting; nothing happens of public significance in consequence of approval of one party rather than another. But joined to this feeling is one of positive disrespect for politicians which reacts to create the belief that politics itself is an unworthy and low affair. "Politician" has always conveyed a sense of depreciation in this country. In latter years the feeling has deepened into a conviction that they are chiefly occupied with promoting their own private interests.

Holding down the job is the main thing, and the public is thought lucky when the job is not also made the source of personal profits outside the official scope of the job. Politics is assumed to be so much of a racket that it is extremely difficult to arouse public indignation even when corruption comes to light. "What did you expect, anyway?" is the comment, voiced or silent, of multitudes of citizens.

The rapid growth of competing interests is one great cause of apathy. Interest in government has declined from the same causes which have brought about decline of interest in the church. There are too many other interesting things to do and to enjoy. When men gather together there is likely to be one conversation about the affairs of government to a hundred about automobiles and trips. Politics may appear on the first page and on the editorial page of newspapers, but the sport pages occupy more space, and the average reader turns to these pages with an eagerness which contrasts with the languid way in which he reads the political news and skips the editorials. At election time political speeches get the attention of thousands or millions on the radio; but dance music and Amos 'n Andy continue the year around. I