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OUR COMMON SCHOOL METHODS

Poor Children Not Taught What They Want, Says Harvard's President.

President Eliot of Harvard College contributed the most interesting feature of the session of the Regents' Convocation at Albany in June. He contended for the introduction of many high school methods into grammar school work, and the pupils in grammar schools should have a chance to study Latin and French. He also advocated departmental instruction in elementary schools and said:

"There is much in our elementary school life which tends to train children to inattention. For example, one child can get in one minute which others require an hour to master. The result is that the first child spends fifty-nine minutes in not attending.

"Children and adults differ also in their stock of remembering facts, and here again natural ability must be developed and expanded. Children differ also in powers of comparison and judgment, as well as in powers of expression and in mastery of a vocabulary. Some boys come to Harvard College with a vocabulary of only 200 or 300 words. Everything is either 'nice' or 'bully.' They have few nouns, a limited number of verbs, and no adjectives to speak of.

"The original variation in children should be multiplied and intensified. This bears on the method of promotion, which should never be a mill process by which uniform products are turned out in passing through certain grades. Promotion should be determined by the capacity of children, and here the departmental system bears directly on methods of promotion. We all know that children differ in capacity for different subjects. Some can master mathematics more readily than others and should be advanced, as they have acquired proficiency in the subjects studied. The present grades keep poor children from finding out what they want. They are taught to be clerks and are made to feel that they cannot have the privilege of the rich man's son, to study language in their early years.

"The present public school system does not offer the right studies at the right time. The boy of 9 or 10 years should begin studies covering the gap between elementary and high school work. Objections to beginning these advanced subjects in early years are:

"1. Doubt as to the results of educating children of the common people as well as possible lest it lift them out of their sphere. This is one of the commonest objections, and is utterly undemocratic. It should, above all, be the object to educate children above the occupation of their fathers and mothers, if possible.

"2. It is wholly impracticable to have such teachers in elementary work. This objection underestimates the ability of the elementary school teachers. If unable to deal with advanced work they should be trained by their superintendents. The demand should be set up and supply will then be found. It can be done, for it is being done in New England schools.

"A great many principals hold that the foreign born element in their schools makes it impossible to undertake such work. They say: 'Shall we teach these foreign born children French, German, and geometry? Why not? These children are as bright and as intelligent as American children; besides, all of us were foreign born some generations ago. There is no force in any of these three objections, and two of them are manifestly undemocratic.'

President Eliot devoted an hour to answering questions suggested by his remarks. In his replies he stated that the departmental system had been introduced into several Boston grammar schools in the last two years of the course, when the children were about 12 or 13 years of age. In some suburban schools it had been introduced still earlier. This is possible in the richer schools, where a larger number of teachers can be employed. It is surprising that, in the present system of education, the plan of supplying teachers with assistants to do mechanical work had been neglected between the kindergarten and the university. This method would decrease expense and allow more personal work with the children than can be done by teachers under the present system.

"As to undue neglect of certain subjects," said President Eliot, "no study is necessary to the making of a man or woman except that of the mother tongue, which, except within the last fifteen years, has been entirely neglected by all systems of education. Many think mathematics necessary. In reality there is no subject which has been so unduly studied. Arithmetic is the most useless thing that any child learns."