

What the various task forces and national commissions are now saying is that our educational systems must take on the job of making all young people literate, and their definition includes both cultural and scientific literacy. No one knows whether it can be done, because we have never tried to do it on a mass scale. If we make the attempt, it should be done with full knowledge of where we have gone astray in the past. At one extreme, the perfervid traditionalists have been content to educate those at the top without regard to the welfare of the majority of students; at the other, the perfervid progressives have cooperated in dividing and diluting the curriculum, which left the majority of students with an inadequate education. Most schools and teachers are not at the extremes, but they have little ability to blunt the lure of either progressivism or traditionalism, particularly to an indiscriminate media and hyperactive policymakers. Pedagogical practice follows educational philosophy, and it is obvious that we do not yet have a philosophical commitment to education that is sound enough and strong enough to withstand the erratic dictates of fashion.

Bring Literature and History Back to Elementary Schools

(1984)

DURING the national debate about education that began in April 1983 with the publication of "A Nation at Risk" by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, the elementary schools have been almost entirely ignored. This is a pity, because it is in the elementary schools that children gain (or don't gain) a firm foundation for future learning.

Perhaps the major reason so little attention has been paid to elementary schools is that there is general consensus that the significant problems of the schools begin after sixth grade. After all, unlike high schools, the elementary schools offer everyone a fairly common curriculum and they are not plagued by absenteeism or disciplinary problems. There is little doubt that the chief job of the elementary teacher is to teach a good command of basic

skills and to instill good work habits. If there are problems later on, everyone seems to agree, it must be the fault of those in the junior or senior high schools.

My complacency on this score was shattered by two items that crossed my desk within a twenty-four-hour period. The first was an article that appeared in *Education Week*. The headline was "Using 'Real Books' to Teach Reading Said to Heighten Skill, Interest." The second was an exchange printed in one of the leading elementary-school journals, in which the magazine's social studies consultant was asked, "Will history ever make a comeback in the elementary-school curriculum?" His answer was, "Probably not in the near future," and he predicted that history and geography would never again be central in the social-studies curriculum because the emphasis should be on "process" skills such as "student inquiry, social problem solving, and helping kids learn to think."

These two items persuaded me that the problems of the high school are integrally related to what is happening in the elementary school. The *Education Week* story described an "experiment" in Upper Arlington, Ohio, where alternative programs are used to teach children to read by providing "real" books instead of basal readers. Lo and behold! While there was no difference in standardized test scores between those who read "real" books and those who learned with basal readers, the children who read storybooks seemed to enjoy reading more than the basal-reading children did, and their teachers in junior high said they were "superior writers" and "independent thinkers."

It shocked me to discover that educational researchers had to fall back on the customary technical jargon to demonstrate that classic children's literature is superior to basal readers. In my foolishness, I imagined that such a statement would be a self-evident proposition, needing no justification. But to my astonishment, the article on reading

contains an estimate that 95 percent of elementary schools have basal readers and 65 percent use them every day. What? Is it now "experimental" and "innovative" to propose that young children should read good literature and that it might be more enjoyable than a basal reader? Is it possible that America's reading teachers think a controlled vocabulary "developed" by pedestrian writers can compete with the works of the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, L. Frank Baum, or the myths of many lands? Is there a single author employed by the great publishing houses whose works should be considered superior to the stories that have entertained, instructed, and challenged generations of children?

In fairness, it should be noted that many basal readers, like those produced by Lippincott and Open Court, include stories and poems of high literary quality. Even good basal readers, however, should be used as a prelude to original works of literature, whetting the child's appetite for more of "the real thing." Above all, children's literature should be presented to the reader as it was written, neither excerpted nor rewritten to cater to contemporary tastes.

How can children be motivated to read at all if what they learn isn't worth the time it takes to decipher? What child won't plead to stay up "just a little longer" if he or she is in the middle of an exciting story? I found myself wondering whether it was the publishing houses, each with its own copyrighted basal-reading series, that persuaded reading specialists that their materials were better than "real" books. Or was this incredible phenomenon a product of the reading profession's fascination with "whole-word" or "look-say" instruction, which requires a controlled vocabulary so that children don't encounter unfamiliar words?

Whether the fault lies with the publishers or the profes-

sionals, the important fact is that the basal readers somehow managed to monopolize the elementary-school "market." The basal readers may be well fitted to producing mastery of basic skills—the sort of skills that makers of standardized tests treasure. But did anyone ever love a basal reader? Did anyone ever take a flashlight to bed to read a basal reader under the covers? The dearth of literature in the elementary school may go far toward explaining some of the problems encountered by secondary-school teachers, who complain that children don't like to read, don't read well, and can't apply what they read to their own lives.

I was equally astonished to discover the contempt with which the elementary social studies consultant viewed history and geography. Like others who don't like history and never took a good history course, this educational expert associated history with "memorization and parroting of facts" rather than problem solving. As every good historian knows, history is problem solving. The writer of history asks: What happened? How do we know it happened? Why did it happen? Why did people respond as they did? History is about issues and controversies, about heroes and villains; it is about people struggling to improve their lives and about the ways people have devised to enslave others or to free themselves. History is the substance that students use to exercise the skills of problem solving, inquiry, and thinking.

It is certainly true that history cannot be taught in elementary school as it is taught in junior high or high school, but young children are fascinated and challenged by the incredible but true stories of human history. Biographies offer a fertile ground for involving children in the lives and stories and historical context of remarkable individuals, the men and women who overcame personal obstacles to change the world in some important way—political leaders, scientists, explorers, doctors, generals,

writers, educators, civil rights leaders, and so on. History provides the framework within which the elementary teacher can use myths, legends, and fairy tales. Why shouldn't children read the fabulous Greek myths while learning about Greek history, culture, and society? Education is debased when the curriculum is stripped of its content and when skills, free of any cultural, literary, or historic context, are all that is taught.

No wonder research shows that the elementary schools are not the problem. On standardized tests of skills, the students are apparently doing fine. It is only later that their teachers report how they falter when it comes to making inferences or deductions. But it is not only higher-order skills that they lack: They are culturally illiterate. They can read the words put in front of them, but they have no "furniture" in their minds, no vocabulary of historical persons or events to draw upon, no reference to the ordinary literary images that fifth graders once imbibed in every common school in the nation.

The problem, I would suggest, lies not with the teacher, but with the experts who have told them for years that skills and process are all that matter. In this strange world of the overcredentialed but undereducated, content, knowledge, and context count for nothing. The children of this regime arrive in junior high schools and secondary schools knowing *how*, but not *why* or *what*. They have been miseducated; they have been taught to read without learning to love reading; they have been taught social studies as a package of skills rather than as a window on the varieties of human experience in other times and places. Such educationally baneful practices are part and parcel of the "rising tide of mediocrity," and it is unfortunate that they have been ignored by the national commissions.