

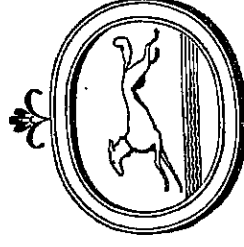
Anti-intellectualism

IN

A M E R I C A N L I F E

BY

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and junior colleges—and the higher the proportion of the young population that attends such institutions, the greater their capacity becomes to pull talent out of the lower levels of the system. It remains difficult to find enough trained talent to educate large masses in a society that does not make teaching attractive.

RICHARD HOFSTADTER

*ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM
IN AMERICAN LIFE*

CHAPTER XIII

The Road to Life Adjustment



• 1. •

THE appearance within professional education of an influential anti-intellectualist movement is one of the striking features of American thought. To understand this movement, which has its most significant consequences in the education of adolescents, one must look at the main changes in public education since 1870. It was in the 1870's that this country began to develop free public secondary education on a large scale, and only in the twentieth century that the public high school became a mass institution.

Here certain peculiarities of American education are of the first importance—above all, its democratic assumptions and the universality of its aims. Outside the United States it is not assumed that all children should be schooled for so many years or so uniformly. The educational systems of most European countries were frankly tailored to their class systems, although they have become less so in our time. In Europe children are generally schooled together only until the age of ten or eleven; after that they go separate ways in specialized schools, or at least in specialized curricula. After fourteen, about eighty per cent are finished with their formal education and the rest enter academic pre-university schools. In the United States children must be in school until the age of sixteen or more, and a larger portion of them are sent to college than in European countries are sent to academic secondary schools. Americans also prefer to keep their secondary-school children

in school under a single roof, usually the comprehensive community high school, and on a single educational track (though not in a uniform curriculum). They are not, ideally, meant to be separated, either socially or academically, according to their social class; though the relentless social realities of poverty and ethnic prejudice intervene to preserve most of the class selectivity that our democratic educational philosophy repudiates. In any case, the decision as to a child's ultimate vocational destiny does not have to be made so early in this country as elsewhere, if only because it is not institutionalized by the demands of early educational classification. In the United States specialized preparation even for the professions is postponed to graduate education or at best to the last two years of college. American education serves larger numbers for a longer period of time. It is more universal, more democratic, more leisurely in pace, less rigorous. It is also more wasteful: class-oriented systems are prodigal of the talents of the underprivileged; American education tends to be prodigal of talent generally.

The difference in structure was not always so great, especially in secondary schooling. Before the mass public high school emerged, American practice in secondary education was less in keeping with our democratic theory than with the selective European idea. During the nineteenth century, public education for most Americans ended with the last years of the graded primary school, if not earlier. Free education beyond the primary-school years was established only in the three decades after 1870. Before 1870, the class system, here as well as in Europe, was a primary determinant of the schooling children would get after the age of about thirteen or fourteen. Well-to-do parents, who could afford tuition and who had intellectual or professional aspirations for their children, could send them to private academies, which were often boarding schools. Since the days of Franklin these academies had offered a mixture of the traditional and the "practical": there was a liberal, classical course, founded upon Latin, Greek, and mathematics, commonly supplemented by science and history; but in many schools the students had an option between the "Latin course" and the "English course," the latter being a more "practical" and modern curriculum stressing subjects supposedly useful in business. Academies varied widely in quality, duplicating, in their lowest ranges, some of the work of the common schools and, at their peak, some of the work of the colleges. The best of them were so good that graduates

who went on to college were likely to be bored by repetition in the first and even the second college year.¹

The disparity between the country's moral commitment to educational democracy and its heavy reliance upon private schools for secondary education did not escape the attention of educational critics. On one side there were the generally available public primary schools; on the other, the rapidly proliferating colleges and universities—not free, of course, but cheap and undiscriminating. In between there was an extensive gap, filled by a few pioneering public high schools, but mainly by the private academies, of which it is estimated there were in 1850 about six thousand. As early as the 1830's the academies were denounced as exclusive, aristocratic, and un-American. For a nation already committed to the free common-school system, the extension of this system into the years of secondary education seemed a logical and necessary step. Industry was growing; vocational life was becoming more complex. Skills were more in demand, and it seemed that both utility and equality would be well served by free public education in the secondary years.

Advocates of the public high school had strong moral and vocational arguments, and the legal basis for their proposals already existed in the common-school system. Short-sightedness and mean-spirited taciturnity stood in their way, but not for long. The number of public high schools began to rise with great and increasing rapidity after 1860. From 1890 (when usable enrollment figures begin) to 1940, the total enrollment of the high schools nearly doubled every decade. By 1910, thirty-five per cent of the seventeen-year-olds were in school; today the figure has reached over seventy per cent. At this tempo the high school has become an institution which nearly all American youth enter, and from which about two thirds graduate.

Whatever may be said about the qualitative performance of the American high school, which varies widely from place to place, no one is likely to deny that the free secondary education of youth was a

¹ It was not necessary to go to an academy to prepare for college; one could also enroll in the "preparatory departments" many colleges maintained to give prospective applicants enough grounding in classics, mathematics, and English to enter upon the college course proper. The existence of a large number of such preparatory departments—as late as 1889, 335 of 400 colleges still had them—is testimony of the inadequacy of the secondary schools to prepare for college requirements those who wanted to go to college. Edgar B. Wesley: *N.E.A.: The First Hundred Years* (New York, 1957), p. 95. On the academies, see E. E. Brown: *The Making of Our Middle Schools* (New York, 1903).

signal accomplishment in the history of education, a remarkable token of our desire to make schooling an instrument of mass opportunity and social mobility. Since I shall have much to say about the high school's curricular problems, it seems important here to stress the positive value of this achievement, and to note that, in its democratic features, if not in its educational standards, the American high school has been to some degree emulated by European school systems in the last generation.

The development of the high school into a mass institution drastically altered its character. At the turn of the century the relatively small clientele of the high school was still highly selective. Its pupils were there, in the main, because they wanted to be, because they and their parents had seized upon the unusual opportunity the high school offered. It is often said, but mistakenly, that the high school, sixty or seventy years ago, was primarily attended by those preparing for college. This was less true than it has come to be in the past fifteen years. Today approximately half the high-school graduates enter college—an astonishing proportion. I do not know what proportion of the high-school graduates actually entered college at the turn of the century, but there is information as to how many of them were so prepared. In 1891, twenty-nine per cent of the graduates were. By 1910 the portion of those prepared for college and other advanced institutions was forty-nine per cent. The figure has fluctuated since.²

The great change which has affected the high school is that, whereas once it was altogether voluntary, and for this reason quite selective, it is now, at least for those sixteen and under, compulsory and unselective. During the very years when the high school began its most phenomenal growth, the Progressives and trade unionists were assailing the old industrial evil of child labor. One of the most effective devices to counteract this practice was raising the terminal age for compulsory schooling. In 1890, twenty-seven states required compulsory attendance; by 1918 all states had such laws. Legislators also became more exigent in fixing the legal age for leaving school. In 1900 it was set at a mean age of fourteen years and five months in those states which then had such laws. By the 1920's it was close to the figure it has reached today—a mean age of sixteen years and three months. The welfare

² See John F. Latimer: *What's Happened to Our High Schools?* (Washington, 1958), pp. 75-8. For a penetrating brief account of the place of secondary education in American society since 1870, see Martin Trow: "The Second Transformation of American Secondary Education," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, Vol. II (September, 1961), pp. 144-66.

state and the powerful trade union, moreover, saw to it that these laws were increasingly enforced. The young had to be protected from exploitation; and their elders had to be protected by keeping the young out of the labor market.

Now, in an increasing measure, secondary-school pupils were not merely unselected but also unwilling; they were in high school not because they wanted further study but because the law forced them to go. The burden of obligation was shifted accordingly; whereas once the free high school offered a priceless opportunity to those who chose to take it, the high school now held a large captive audience that its administrators felt obliged to satisfy. As an educational committee of the American Youth Commission wrote in 1940: "Even where a pupil is of low ability it is to be remembered that his attendance at secondary school is due to causes which are not of his making, and proper provision for him is a right which he is justified in claiming from society."³

As the years went by, the schools filled with a growing proportion of doubtful, reluctant, or actually hostile pupils. It is a plausible conjecture that the average level of ability, as well as interest, declined. It became clear that the old academic curriculum could no longer be administered to a high-school population of millions in the same proportion as it had been to the 359,000 pupils of 1890. So long as public education had meant, largely, schooling in the primary grades, the American conviction that everyone can and should be educated was relatively easy to put into practice. But as soon as public education included secondary education, it began to be more doubtful that everyone could be educated, and quite certain that not everyone could be educated in the same way. Beyond a doubt, change was in order.

The situation of school administrators can hardly fail to command our sympathies. Even in the 1920's, to a very large degree, they had been entrusted by the fiat of society with the management of quasi-custodial institutions. For custodial institutions the schools were, to the extent that they had to hold pupils uninterested in study but bound to the school by the laws. Moreover, the schools were under pressure not merely to fulfill the laws, but to become attractive enough to hold the voluntary allegiance of as large a proportion of the young for as long as they could.⁴ Manfully settling down to their assignment,

³ *What the High Schools Ought to Teach* (Washington, 1940), pp. 11-12.

⁴ This was, of course, accentuated by the effects of the great depression and the growing power of the trade unions. But even in 1918 the N.E.A. was advocating

educators began to search for more and more courses which, however dubious their merits by traditional educational standards, might interest and attract the young. In time they became far less concerned with the type of mind the high school should produce or with the academic side of the curriculum. (Boys and girls who wanted to go to college would hang on in any case; it was the others they had to please.) Discussions of secondary education became more frequently interlarded with references to a new, decisive criterion of performance—"the holding power of the school."

The need to accept large numbers with varying goals and capacities and to exercise for many pupils a custodial function made it necessary for the schools to introduce variety into their curricula. The curriculum of the secondary school could hardly have been fixed at what it was in 1890 or 1910. But the issue posed for those who would guide public education was whether the academic content and intellectual standards of the school should be made as high as possible for each child, according to his will and his capacities, or whether there was good ground for abandoning any such end. To have striven seriously to keep up the intellectual content of the curriculum would have required a public and an educational profession committed to intellectual values; it would have demanded much administrative ingenuity; and in many communities it would have called for much more generous financial support than the schools actually had.

But all this is rather in the nature of an imaginative exercise. The problem of numbers had hardly made its appearance before a movement began in professional education to exalt numbers over quality and the alleged demands of utility over intellectual development. Far from conceiving the mediocre, reluctant, or incapable student as an obstacle or a special problem in a school system devoted to educating the interested, the capable, and the gifted, American educators entered upon a crusade to exalt the academically uninterested or un-gifted child into a kind of culture-hero. They were not content to say that the realities of American social life had made it necessary to compromise with the ideal of education as the development of formal learning and intellectual capacity. Instead, they militantly proclaimed that such education was archaic and futile and that the noblest end of a truly democratic system of education was to meet the child's immediate interests by offering him a series of immediate utilities. The history of

that normal children be educated to the age of eighteen. *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* (Washington, 1918), p. 30.

this crusade, which culminated in the ill-fated life-adjustment movement of the 1940's and 1950's, demands our attention; for it illustrates in action certain widespread attitudes toward childhood and schooling, character and ambition, and the place of intellect in life.

• • 2 •

The rise of the new interpretation of secondary education may be traced through a few examples of quasi-official statements by committees of the National Education Association and the United States Office of Education. These statements were, of course, not obligatory upon local school boards or superintendents. They represent the drift of educational thought without purporting to reflect exactly the changes actually being made in curricular policy.

Toward the close of the nineteenth century, two contrasting views of the purposes of the public high schools were already competing for dominance.⁵ The original view, which remained in the ascendant until 1910 and continued to have much influence for at least another decade, might be dubbed old-fashioned or intellectually serious, depending upon one's sympathy for it. The high school, it was believed by those who held this view, should above all discipline and develop the minds of its pupils through the study of academic subject matter. Its well-informed advocates were quite aware that a majority of pupils were not being educated beyond high school; but they argued that the same education which was good preparation for college was good preparation for life. Therefore, the goal of secondary education, even when college was not the child's end-in-view, should be "mind culture," as it was called by William T. Harris, one of the leading advocates of the academic curriculum. Spokesmen of this school were intensely concerned that the pupil, whatever the precise content of his curriculum, should pursue every subject that he studied long enough to gain some serious mastery of its content. (In the continuing debate over education the ideal of "mastery" of subject matter dominates the thinking of the intellectualists, whereas the ideal of meeting the "needs" of children becomes the central conception of their opponents.)

The most memorable document expressing academic views on secondary education was the famous report of the National Education

⁵ The general outlines of this controversy are sketched in Wesley: *N.E.A.: The First Hundred Years*, pp. 66-77.

Association's Committee of Ten in 1893. This committee was created to consider the chaos in the relations between colleges and secondary schools and to make recommendations about the high-school curriculum. Its personnel, which reflected the dominance of college educators, compares interestingly with that of later committees set up for similar purposes. The chairman was President Charles William Eliot of Harvard, and the members were William T. Harris, the Commissioner of Education, four other college or university presidents, the headmasters of two outstanding private secondary schools, a college professor, and only one public high-school principal. A series of subsidiary conferences set up by the committee to consider the place of the major academic disciplines in high-school programs also showed college authorities in full control. Although many principals and headmasters took part, there were also university professors whose names are recognizable in American intellectual history—Benjamin I. Wheeler, George Lyman Kittredge, Florian Cajori, Simon Newcomb, Ira Rensen, Charles K. Adams, Edward G. Bourne, Albert B. Hart, James Harvey Robinson, and Woodrow Wilson.

The Committee of Ten recommended to the secondary schools a set of four alternative courses—a classical course, a Latin-scientific course, a modern languages course, and an English course. These curricula varied chiefly in accordance with their relative emphasis on the classics, modern languages, and English. But all demanded, as a minimum, four years of English, four years of a foreign language, three years of history, three years of mathematics, and three years of science. In this respect, the contemporary reader will notice the close similarity between this program and that recently recommended by James Bryant Conant, in his survey of the high schools, as a minimum for "academically talented boys and girls."⁵

The curricula designed by the Committee of Ten show that they thought of the secondary school as an agency for academic training. But they did not make the mistake of thinking that these schools were simply college-preparatory institutions. Quite the contrary, the committee almost exaggerated the opposite point of view when it said that

⁵ Conant recommended four years of mathematics, four years of a foreign language, three years of science, four years of English, and three years of history and social studies. In addition, he thought many academically talented pupils might wish to take a second foreign language or an additional course in social studies. *The American High School Today* (New York, 1959), p. 57. Conant felt that minimum requirements for graduation for all students should include at least one year of science, four years of English, and three or four years of social studies.

"only an insignificant percentage" of high-school graduates went on to colleges or scientific schools. The main function of high schools, said the committee, was "to prepare for the duties of life," not for college, but if the main subjects were all "taught consecutively and thoroughly, and . . . all carried on in the same spirit . . . all used for training the powers of observation, memory, expression, and reasoning," the pupil would receive an intellectual training that was good for college preparation or for life: "Every subject which is taught at all in a secondary school should be taught in the same way and to the same extent to every pupil so long as he pursues it, no matter what the probable destination of the pupil may be or at what point his education is to cease."⁷

The committee recognized that it would be desirable to find a larger place for music and art in the high schools, but it apparently found these of secondary importance and proposed to leave decisions about them to local initiative. Its members proposed, among other things, that language instruction should be begun in the last four years of the elementary schools, a suggestion that was lamentably ignored. They realized that an improvement in the caliber of secondary-school teachers was necessary to execute their recommendations effectively; they urged that the low standards of the normal schools be raised and suggested that universities might interest themselves more deeply in the adequate training of teachers.

In fact, the high schools had not developed entirely in accordance with the committee's conservative ideal. Even in the 1880's there had been a considerable efflorescence of programs of practical and vocational training—manual training, shop work, and other such studies. Increasingly, those primarily concerned with the management and curricula of high schools became restive about the continuing dominance of the academic ideal, which they considered arose from the high schools' "slavery" and "subjugation" to the colleges. The high schools, they insisted, were meant to educate citizens in their public

⁷ For relevant passages, see *Report of the Committee on Secondary School Studies Appointed at the Meeting of the National Education Association, July 9, 1892* (Washington, 1893), pp. 8-11, 16-17, 34-47, 51-5. The committee believed that what pupils learned in high school should permit them to go to college if they should later make that decision. Colleges and scientific schools should be able to admit any graduate of a good secondary course, regardless of his program. At the present time, the committee found, this was impossible because the pupil might have gone through a high-school course "of a very feeble and scrappy nature—studying a little of many subjects and not much of any one, getting, perhaps, a little information in a variety of fields, but nothing which can be called a thorough training."

responsibilities and to train workers for industry, not to supply the colleges with freshmen. The high schools should be looked upon as "people's colleges" and not as the colleges' preparatory schools. Democratic principles, they thought, demanded much greater consideration for the needs of the children who did not go to college. Regard for these needs and a due respect for the principles of child development demanded that the ideal of "mastery" be dropped, and that youth should be free to test and sample and select among subjects, deriving from some what they could retain and use, and passing on to others. To hold children rigorously to the pursuit of particular subjects would only increase the danger of their dropping out of school.

A number of historical forces were working in favor of the new educators. Business, when it was favorably disposed to education, tended to applaud and encourage what they were doing. The sheer weight of growing student numbers increased the appeal of their arguments. Their invocation of democratic principles, which were undergoing a resurgence after 1890, struck a responsive chord in the public. The colleges themselves were so numerous, so competitive, so heterogeneous in quality that in their hunger for more students they were far from vigilant in upholding the admissions standards of the past. They were, moreover, still uncertain about the value of their own inherited classical curriculum, and had been experimenting since about 1870 with the elective system and a broader program of studies. College and university educators were no longer vitally interested in the problems of secondary education, and reformers in that field were left with little authoritative criticism or opposition. The staffs of high schools were increasingly supplied by the new state teachers colleges; and high-school textbooks, once written by college authorities in their fields, were now written by public-school superintendents, high-school principals and supervisors, or by students of educational methods.

• 3 •

The slight concession made by the Committee of Ten to new schools of thought was hardly enough to allay discontent. It had not been able to foresee the extraordinary growth of the high-school population which would soon occur or the increasing heterogeneity of the student body. It quickly became evident that the curricular views of the Committee of Ten were losing ground. By 1908, when the N.E.A. was fast growing

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in size and influence, it adopted a resolution repudiating the notion that public high schools should be chiefly "fitting schools" for colleges (which, to be sure, had not been the contention of the Committee of Ten), urging that the high schools "be adapted to the general needs, both intellectual and industrial, of their students," and suggesting that colleges and universities too should adapt their courses to such needs.⁸ The balance was tipping: the high schools were no longer to be expected to suit the colleges; instead, the colleges ought to try to resemble or accommodate the high schools.

In 1911, a new committee of the N.E.A., the Committee of Nine on the Articulation of High School and College, submitted another report, which shows that a revolution in educational thought was well on its way. The change in personnel was itself revealing. Gone were the eminent college presidents and distinguished professors of the 1893 report; gone, too, were the headmasters of elite secondary schools. The chairman of the Committee of Nine was a teacher at the Manual Training High School of Brooklyn, and no authority on any basic academic subject matter was on his committee, which consisted of school superintendents, commissioners, and principals, together with one professor of education and one dean of college faculties. Whereas the Committee of Ten had been a group of university men attempting to design curricula for the secondary schools, the new Committee of Nine was a group of men from public secondary schools, putting pressure through the N.E.A. on the colleges: "The requirement of four years of work in any particular subject, as a condition of admission to a higher institution, unless that subject be one that may properly be required of all high-school students, is illogical and should, in the judgment of this committee, be immediately discontinued."

The task of the high school, the Committee of Nine argued, "was to lay the foundations of good citizenship and to help in the wise choice of a vocation," but it should also develop unique and special individual gifts, which was "quite as important as the development of the common elements of culture." The schools were urged to exploit the dominant interests "that each boy and girl has at the time." The committee questioned the notion that liberal education should precede the vocational: "An organic conception of education demands the early introduction of training for individual usefulness, thereby blending the liberal and the vocational. . . ." It urged much greater attention to the

⁸ N.E.A. *Proceedings*, 1908, p. 39.

role of mechanic arts, agriculture, and "household science" as rational elements in the education of all boys and girls. Because of the traditional conception of college preparation, the public high schools were⁹

responsible for leading tens of thousands of boys and girls away from the pursuits for which they are adapted and in which they are needed, to other pursuits for which they are not adapted and in which they are not needed. By means of exclusively bookish curricula false ideals of culture are developed. A chasm is created between the producers of material wealth and the distributors and consumers thereof.

By 1918 the "liberation" of secondary education from college ideals and university control seems to have been consummated, at least on the level of theory, even if not yet in the nation's high-school curricula. In that year the N.E.A.'s Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education formulated the goals of American schools in a document about which Professor Edgar B. Wesley has remarked that "probably no publication in the history of education ever surpassed this little five cent thirty-two page booklet in importance."¹ This statement, *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, was given a kind of official endorsement by the United States Bureau of Education, which printed and distributed an edition of 130,000 copies. It became the occasion of a nation-wide discussion of educational policy, and some teacher-training institutions regarded it so highly that they required their pupils to memorize essential portions (thus violating a central canon of the new educational doctrines).

The new commission pointed out that more than two thirds of those who entered the four-year high school did not graduate and that, among those who did, a very large proportion did not go to college. The needs of these pupils must not be neglected. The old concept of general intellectual discipline as an aim of education must be re-examined. Individual differences in capacities and attitudes needed more attention. New laws of learning must be brought to bear to test subject matter and teaching methods; these could no longer be judged "primarily in terms of the demands of any subject as a logically organized

⁹ "Report of the Committee of Nine on the Articulation of High School and College," N.E.A. *Proceedings*, 1911, pp. 559-61.

¹ Wesley: *op. cit.*, p. 75.

science."² In short, the inner structure of various disciplines was to be demoted as an educational criterion and supplanted by greater deference to the laws of learning, then presumably being discovered.

Moreover, the child was now conceived not as a mind to be developed but as a citizen to be trained by the schools. The new educators believed that one should not be content to expect good citizenship as a result of having more informed and intellectually competent citizens but that one must directly teach citizenship and democracy and civic virtues. The commission drew up a set of educational objectives in which neither the development of intellectual capacity nor the mastery of secondary academic subject matter was even mentioned. It was the business of the schools, the commission said, to serve democracy by developing in each pupil the powers that would enable him to act as a citizen. "It follows, therefore, that worthy home-membership, vocation, and citizenship demand attention as three of the leading objectives." The commission went on: "This Commission, therefore, regards the following as the main objectives of education: 1. Health. 2. Command of fundamental processes. [It became clear in context that this meant elementary skills in the three R's, in which the commission, no doubt quite rightly, felt that continued instruction was now needed at the secondary level.] 3. Worthy home-membership. 4. Vocation. 5. Citizenship. 6. Worthy use of leisure. 7. Ethical character."

With justice, the commission argued that the traditional high school had done too little to encourage interests in music, art, and the drama—but instead of presenting these as a desirable supplement to an intellectually ordered curriculum, it offered them as an alternative. The high school, it said, "has so exclusively sought intellectual discipline that it has seldom treated literature, art, and music so as to evoke right emotional response and produce positive enjoyment." Moreover, the high school placed too much emphasis on intensive pursuit of most subjects. Studies should be reorganized so that a single year of work in a subject would be "of definite value to those who go no further." This would make the courses "better adapted to the needs both of those who continue and of those who drop out of school."

The commission further argued that the colleges and universities should follow the example of the secondary schools in considering themselves obliged to become mass institutions and to arrange their

² Quotations in this and the following paragraph are from *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, *passim*.

offerings accordingly. "The conception that higher education should be limited to the few is destined to disappear in the interests of democracy," it said prophetically. This meant, among other things, that high-school graduates should be able to go on to college not only with liberal but with vocational interests, and that, once in college, they should still be able to take whatever form of education they can which affords "profit to themselves and to society." In order to accommodate larger numbers, colleges and universities should supplant academic studies to some degree with advanced vocational education. The commission urged that all normal children should be encouraged to stay in school, on full time if possible, to the age of eighteen.

The commission quite reasonably urged that the high-school curriculum should be differentiated to offer a wide range of alternatives; but its way of expressing this objective was revealing:

The basis of differentiation should be, in the broad sense of the term, vocational, thus justifying the names commonly given, such as agricultural, business, clerical, industrial, fine-arts, and household-arts curriculums. Provision should be made also for those having distinctively academic interests and needs.

Provision should be made also. This reference to the academic side of the high school as being hardly more than incidental to its main purposes captures in a phrase how far the dominant thinking on the subject had gone in the quarter century since the report of the Committee of Ten.

The rhetoric of the commission's report made it clear that the members thought of themselves as recommending not an educational retreat but rather an advance toward the realization of democratic ideals. The report is breathless with the idealism of the Progressive era and the war—with the hope of making the educational world safe for democracy and bringing a full measure of opportunity to every child. Our secondary education, the commission argued, "must aim at nothing less than complete and worthy living for all youth"—thus far had education gone beyond such a limited objective as developing the powers of the mind. Secondary-school teachers were urged to "strive to explore the inner meaning of the great democratic movement now struggling for supremacy." While trying to develop the distinctive excellences of individuals and various groups, the high school "must be equally zealous to develop those common ideas, common ideals, and common

modes of thought, feeling, and action, whereby America, through a rich, unified, common life, may render her truest service to a world seeking for democracy among men and nations."

• 4 •

The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education, which set the tone and expressed the ideas current in all subsequent quasi-official statements on secondary-educational policy down to the life-adjustment movement, appeared in the midst of a focal change in the dimensions of the high-school population. Standing at 1.1 million in 1910, it rose swiftly to 4.8 million in 1930. When the document itself was published, all states had adopted compulsory education laws—Mississippi, in 1918, being the last to straggle into line.

The schools, moreover, had been coping for some years, and were to continue to cope for many years more, with the task of educating the children of that vast tidal wave of immigration that had come into the country between 1880 and the First World War. By 1911, for example, 57.5 per cent of the children in the public schools of thirty-seven of the largest cities were of foreign-born parentage.³ The immigrant children, now entering secondary schools, brought the same problems of class, of language, of Americanization that they had brought to the primary schools. Giving such children cues to American life, and often to elementary hygiene, seemed more important to many school superintendents than developing their minds along the lines of the older education; and it is not difficult to understand the belief that a thorough grounding in Latin was not a primary need, say, of a Polish immigrant's child in Buffalo. Immigrant parents, unfamiliar with American ways, were inadequate guides to what their children needed to know, and the schools were now thrust into the parental role. Moreover, the children, exposed to Yankee schoolmarms in the morning, were expected to become instruments of Americanization by bringing home in the afternoon instructions in conduct and hygiene that their parents would take to heart. Against this background one may better understand the emphasis of the *Cardinal Principles* on "worthy home-membership," "health," and "citizenship." The common complaint that the modern school tries to assume too many of the functions of other social agencies,

³ See, on this general subject, Alan M. Thomas, Jr.: "American Education and the Immigrant," *Teachers College Record*, Vol. LV (October, 1953-May, 1954), pp. 253-67.

including the family, derives in good measure from the response of educators to this problem.

Changes in professional education also favored new views of secondary education. The normal schools, which had been at best a kind of stop-gap in teacher education, were now being replaced by teachers' colleges and schools of education. Both the business of training teachers and the study of the educational process were becoming specialized and professional. Unfortunately, as Lawrence Cremin has observed, the schools of education and the teachers' colleges grew up with a high degree of autonomy.⁴ Increasingly, the mental world of the professional educationist became separated from that of the academic scholar. The cleavage between Teachers College and the rest of Columbia University—which led to the quip that 120th Street is the widest street in the world—became symbolic of a larger cleavage in the structure of American education. Professional educators were left to develop their ideas without being subjected to the intellectual discipline that might have come out of a dialogue with university scholars. In sharp contrast to the days of Eliot, academicians scornfully turned away from the problems of primary and secondary education, which they now saw as the preoccupation of dullards; too many educationists were happy to see them withdraw, leaving the educationists free to realize their own credos in making plans for the middle and lower schools.

At the time the ideas of the *Cardinal Principles* were supplanting those of the Committee of Ten, a new kind of educational orthodoxy was taking form, founded in good part upon appeals to "democracy" and "science." John Dewey was the master of those for whom educational democracy was the central issue; Edward Lee Thorndike of those for whom it was the application to education of "what science tells us." It was not commonly believed that there was any problem in this union of democracy and science, for a widespread conviction existed (not shared, it must be said, by Thorndike) that there must be a kind of pre-established harmony between them—that since both are good, both must serve the same ends and lead to the same conclusions; that there exists, in fact, a kind of science of democracy.⁵

Concerning the use, or misuse, as it may be, of Dewey's ideas, I

⁴ *The Transformation of the School* (New York, 1961), p. 176.

⁵ For a witty analysis of the same blend of science and democracy in recent American political thought, see Bernard Crick: *The American Science of Politics* (London, 1959).

shall have something to say in the next chapter. Here it is important, however, to say a word about the use of the techniques of testing and the various kinds of psychological and educational research. Much of this research was, of course, valuable, though of necessity tentative. The difficulty was that what should have been simply a continuous inquiry had a way, in the fervent atmosphere of professional education, of being exalted into a faith—not so much by those who were actually doing research as by those who were hungry to find its practical applications and eager to invoke the authority of science on behalf of their various crusades. The American mind seems extremely vulnerable to the belief that any alleged knowledge which can be expressed in figures is in fact as final and exact as the figures in which it is expressed. Army testing in the First World War is a case in point. It was very quickly and very widely believed that the Army Alpha tests had actually measured intelligence; that they made it possible to assign mental ages; that mental ages, or intelligence as reported by tests, are fixed; that vast numbers of Americans had a mental age of only fourteen; and that therefore the educational system must be coping with hordes of more or less backward children.⁶ Although such overconfident interpretations of these tests were never without sharp critics—among them John Dewey—the misuse of tests seems to be a recurrent factor in American education. Of course, the credence given to the low view of human intelligence that some people derived from the tests could lead to quite different conclusions. To those not enchanted by the American democratic credo—and Edward Lee Thorndike himself was among them—the effect of mental testing was to encourage elitist views.⁷ But for those whose commitment to "democratic" values was imperturbable, the supposed discovery of the mental limitations of the masses only encouraged a search for methods and content in education that would suit the needs of the intellectually mediocre or unmotivated. Paraphrasing Lincoln, the educators-for-democracy might have said that God must love the slow learners because he made so many of them. Elitists might coldly turn their backs on these large numbers, but democratic educators, embracing them as a fond mother embraces her handicapped child, would attempt to build the curriculum upon their supposed needs.

⁶ See the good brief account of the early impact of testing in Cremin: *The Transformation of the School*, pp. 185–92.

⁷ See, for example, Merle Curti's discussion of the views of Thorndike in *The Social Ideas of American Educators* (New York, 1935), chapter 14.

It is impossible here to stress too much the impetus given to the new educational creed by the moral atmosphere of Progressivism, for this creed was developed in an atmosphere of warm philanthropy and breathless idealism in which the needs of the less gifted and the underprivileged commanded a generous response. Educators had spent many years discovering a canon and a creed, whose validity seemed now more certain than ever because it seemed to be vindicated morally by the needs of democracy and intellectually by the findings of science. More frequently than ever, the rallying cries of this creed were heard in the land: education for democracy, education for citizenship, the needs and interests of the child, education for all youth. There is an element of moral overstrain and a curious lack of humor among American educationists which will perhaps always remain a mystery to those more worldly minds that are locked out of their mental universe. The more humdrum the task the educationists have to undertake, the nobler and more exalted their music grows. When they see a chance to introduce a new course in family living or home economics, they begin to tune the fiddles of their idealism. When they feel they are about to establish the school janitor's right to be treated with respect, they grow starry-eyed and increase their tempo. And when they are trying to assure that the location of the school toilets will be so clearly marked that the dullest child can find them, they grow dizzy with exaltation and launch into wild cadenzas about democracy and self-realization.

The silly season in educational writing had now opened. The professionalization of education put a premium upon the sober treatment of every mundane problem, and the educators began to indulge in solemn and pathetic parodies of the pedantry of academic scholarship. Not liking to think of themselves as mere advocates of low-grade utilities, they began to develop the art of clothing every proposal, no matter how simple, common-sense, and sound, in the raiments of the most noble social or educational objectives. Was it desirable, for example, for the schools to teach children something about safety? If so, a school principal could read a pretentious paper to the N.E.A., not on the important but perhaps routine business of teaching children to be careful, but on the exalted theme, "The Value of Instruction in Accident Prevention as a Factor in Unifying the Curriculum." It had now become possible to pretend that the vital thing was not to keep youngsters from getting burnt or hit by vehicles but that teaching them about such things infused all learning with higher values—although in this

case, at least, the speaker conceded, in closing: "Let me say that instruction in accident prevention serves not only to unify the curriculum but also to reduce accidents."⁹

• 5 •

A traveler from a foreign country whose knowledge of American education was confined to the writings of educational reformers might well have envisaged a rigid, unchanging secondary-school system chained to the demands of colleges and universities, fixed upon old ideas of academic study, and unreceptive to the wide variety of pupils it had in charge. The speaker at the N.E.A. meeting of 1920 who lamented that the high schools were still "saturated with college requirements rules and standards" and filled with principals and teachers "trained in academic lore and possessing only the academic viewpoint"⁹ sounded a note of complaint that has never ceased to echo in the writings of the new educationists. In fact, the innovators had very considerable success in dismantling the old academic curriculum of the high school. It is hard for an amateur, and perhaps even a professional in education, to know how much of this was justified. But two things it does seem possible to assert: first, that curricular change after 1910 was little short of revolutionary; and second, that by the 1940's and 1950's the demands of the life-adjustment educators for the destruction of the academic curriculum had become practically insatiable.

The old academic curriculum, as endorsed by the Committee of Ten, reached its apogee around 1910. In that year more pupils were studying foreign languages or mathematics or science or English—any one of these—than *all* non-academic subjects combined. During the following forty-year span the academic subjects offered in the high-school curricula fell from about three fourths to about one fifth. Latin, taken in 1910 by 49 per cent of public high-school pupils in grades 9 to 12, fell by 1949 to 7.8 per cent. All modern-language enrollments fell from 84.1 per cent to 22 per cent. Algebra fell from 56.9 per cent to 26.8 per cent, and geometry from 30.9 per cent to 12.8 per cent; total mathematics enrollments from 89.7 per cent to 55 per cent. Total science enrollments, if one omits a new catch-all course entitled "general science," fell from 81.7 per cent to 33.3 per cent; or to 54.1 per cent if general science is included. English, though it almost held its own in

⁹ N.E.A. *Proceedings*, 1920, pp. 204-5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1920, pp. 73-5.

purely quantitative terms, was much diluted in many school systems. The picture in history and social studies is too complex to render in figures, but changing enrollments made it more parochial both in space and in time—that is, it put greater stress on recent and American history, less on the remoter past and on European history.¹

When the Committee of Ten examined the high-school curricula in 1893, it found that forty subjects were taught, but since of these thirteen were offered in very few schools, the basic curriculum was founded on twenty-seven subjects. By 1941 no less than 274 subjects were offered, and only 59 of these could be classified as academic studies. What is perhaps most extraordinary is not this ten-fold multiplication of subjects, nor the fact that academic studies had fallen to about one fifth the number, but the response of educational theorists: they were convinced that academic studies were still cramping secondary education. In the life-adjustment movement, which flourished in the late 1940's and the 1950's with the encouragement of the United States Office of Education, there occurred an effort to mobilize the public secondary-school energies of the country to gear the educational system more closely to the needs of children who were held to be in some sense uneducable.²

¹ John F. Latimer, in *What's Happened to Our High Schools?*, has made a useful compilation of Office of Education statistics, and I have followed his presentation of the data; see especially chapters 4 and 7. It is important to note that enrollments thus put in percentages are not meant to conceal the fact that, with the immense growth in the high-school population, a larger number of the nation's youth could be studying some of these academic subjects even though a smaller portion of the high-school population was pursuing them. However, from 1933 to 1939 there occurred for the first time a drop not merely in the percentages of students studying certain subjects but in the absolute enrollments as well.

The consequences in one field, which happens to have been well surveyed, might be examined. During the Second World War the problems of secondary-school education in mathematics became a matter of some official concern. In 1941 the Naval Officers Training Corps reported that, of 4,200 candidates who were college freshmen, sixty-two per cent failed the arithmetic reasoning test. Only twenty-three per cent had had more than one and a half years of mathematics in high school. Later, a 1954 survey reported that sixty-two per cent of the nation's colleges had found it necessary to teach high-school algebra to entering freshmen. See I. L. Kandel: *American Education in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), p. 62; and H. S. Dyer, R. Kalin, and F. M. Lord: *Problems in Mathematical Education* (Princeton, 1956), p. 23. Many high schools appear to have been approaching the view, widespread among life-adjustment theorists, that foreign languages, algebra, geometry, and trigonometry have "relatively little value except as college preparation or except for a few college curricula," and that "therefore most of the instruction in those fields should be postponed until college." Harl R. Douglass: *Secondary Education for Life Adjustment of American Youth* (New York, 1952), p. 598.

² The term "uneducable" is, of course, not used by life-adjustment educators. It is my translation of what one is asserting about a youth in secondary school when

To some degree the life-adjustment movement was a consequence of the crisis in the morale of American youth which has been observable since the Second World War. But it was more than this: it was an attempt on the part of educational leaders and the United States Office of Education to make completely dominant the values of the crusade against intellectualism that had been going on since 1910. Looking at the country's secondary education shortly after the end of the Second World War, John W. Studebaker, then Commissioner of Education, observed that only about seven youths out of ten were entering senior high school (grades 10 to 12), and that fewer than four remained to graduate.³ Despite the efforts made in the preceding forty years to increase the "holding power" of the schools, large numbers of youngsters were still uninterested in completing their secondary education. The effort to enrich the academic curriculum seemed to have failed in one of its main purposes; the suggestion was now made that the curriculum had not been enriched enough.

The life-adjustment movement proposed to remedy the situation by stimulating "the development of programs of education more in harmony with life-adjustment needs of all youth." This would be done by devising an education "which better equips all American youth to live democratically with satisfaction to themselves and profit to society as home members, workers, and citizens." At a national conference held in Chicago in May, 1947, the conferees adopted a resolution drafted by Dr. Charles A. Prosser, the director of Dunwoody Institute of Minneapolis, an agency of industrial education. In its original form (it was later slightly reworded in order "to avoid misinterpretation and misunderstanding"), this resolution expressed the belief of the members one says that he can neither absorb an academic education nor learn a desirable trade.

³ *Life Adjustment Education for Every Youth* (Washington, n.d. [1948?]), p. iii. This publication was issued by the Office of Education of the Federal Security Agency and was prepared in the Division of Secondary Education and the Division of Vocational Education. For the Prosser resolution and other statements of purpose in this repetitive document, cited in the following paragraphs, see pp. 2-5, 15n., 16n., 22, 48-52, 88-90, and *passim*.

At the same time that the Office of Education was sponsoring life adjustment, the President's Commission on Higher Education was advocating, in its report of 1947, that the colleges themselves should no longer select "as their special clientele persons possessing verbal aptitudes and a capacity for grasping abstractions," and that they should give more attention to cultivating other aptitudes—such as social sensitivity and versatility, artistic ability, motor skill and dexterity, and mechanical aptitude and ingenuity." *Higher Education for American Democracy: A Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education*, Vol. I (Washington, 1947), p. 32.

of the conference that the needs of the great majority of American youth were not being adequately served by secondary schools. Twenty per cent of them, it was said, were being prepared for college; another twenty per cent for skilled occupations. But the remaining sixty per cent, according to spokesmen for the crusade, were unfit for either of these programs and should be given education for life adjustment. The life-adjustment theorists were explicit about the qualities they attributed to the neglected sixty per cent who needed life-adjustment education. These were mainly children from unskilled and semi-skilled families who had low incomes and provided a poor cultural environment. They began school later than others, continued to be retarded in school, made low grades, scored lower on intelligence and achievement tests, lacked interest in school work, and were "less emotionally mature—nervous, feel less secure."

After having compiled this depressing list of the traits of their clientele, the authors of the Office of Education's first manual on Life Adjustment went on to say that "these characteristics are not intended to brand the group as in any sense inferior." The peculiar self-defeating version of "democracy" entertained by these educators somehow made it possible for them to assert that immature, insecure, nervous, retarded slow learners from poor cultural environments were "in no sense inferior" to more mature, secure, confident, gifted children from better cultural environments.⁴ This verbal genuflection before "democracy" seems to have enabled them to conceal from themselves that they were, with breathtaking certainty, writing off the majority of the nation's children as being more or less uneducable—that is, in the terms of the Prosser resolution, unfit not just for the academic studies that prepare for college but even for programs of vocational education leading to "desirable skilled occupations." What kind of education would be suitable for this unfortunate majority? Certainly not intellectual development nor cumulative knowledge, but practical training in being family members, consumers, and citizens. They must be taught—the

⁴ That the capacities of such a large proportion of American youth should be so written off in the name of "democracy" is one of the more perplexing features of the movement. At least one of its supporters, however, faced up to its implications when he said that this neglected group lacks "aroused interests or pronounced aptitudes," but that this fact is "probably fortunate for a society having a large number of jobs to be done requiring no unusual aptitudes or interests." Edward K. Hankin: "The Cruc of Life Adjustment Education," *Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals* (November, 1953), p. 72. This is a possible point of view and a more realistic assessment of the implications of life-adjustment education. But it is hardly "democratic."

terms would have been familiar to any reader of the *Cardinal Principles*—"ethical and moral living"; home and family life; citizenship; the uses of leisure; how to take care of their health; "occupational adjustment." Here, as the authors of *Life Adjustment Education for Every Youth* put it, was "a philosophy of education which places life values above acquisition of knowledge." The conception, implicit in this observation, that knowledge has little or nothing to do with "life values," was an essential premise of the whole movement. Repeatedly, life adjustment educators were to insist that intellectual training is of no use in solving the "real life problems" of ordinary youth.

• 6 •

The thinking behind the life-adjustment movement is difficult to ex-hume from the repetitive bulletins on the subject compiled by the Office of Education in Washington. But before the movement had been so named, its fundamental notions had been set forth by Dr. Prosser himself, an experienced administrator in vocational education, when he delivered his Inglis Lecture at Harvard University in 1939.⁵ Although there are in the published lecture occasional traces of the influence of John Dewey's passion for educational democracy, Prosser relied mainly upon psychological research, and he expressed a more fundamental piety for the findings of "science." (Life-adjustment educators would do anything in the name of science except encourage children to study it.) Thorndike and his followers had shown, Prosser imagined, that there is no such thing as intellectual discipline whose benefits can be transferred from one study, situation, or problem to another. "Nothing could be more certain than that science has proven false the doctrine of general education and its fundamental theory that memory or imagination or the reason or the will can be trained as a power." When this archaic notion is abandoned, as it must be, all that is left is education in various specifics. There is no such thing as general mechanical skill; there are only specific skills developed by practice and use. It is likewise with the mind. There is, for example, no such thing as the memory; there are only specific facts and ideas which have become available for recall because we have found use for them.

Contrary, then, to what had been believed by exponents of the older

⁵ *Secondary Education and Life* (Cambridge, Mass., 1939). The argument summarized in this and the following pages is largely in pp. 1-49; especially pp. 7-10, 15-16, 19-21, 31-5, 47-9.

concept of education as the development of intellectual discipline, there are no general mental qualities to be developed; there are only specific things to be known. The usability and teachability of these things go hand in hand; the more immediately usable an item of knowledge is, the more readily it can be taught. The value of a school subject can be measured by the number of immediate, actual life situations to which it directly applies. The important thing, then, is not to teach pupils how to generalize, but to supply them directly with the information they need for daily living—for example, to teach them, not physiology, but how to keep physically fit. The traditional curriculum consists simply of studies that once were useful in this way but have ceased to be so. "The general rule seems to be that the younger any school study, the greater is its utilitarian value in affairs outside the schoolroom, and the older the study, the less the usefulness of its content in meeting the real demands of living." Students learn more readily and retain more of what they learn when the transfer of content from school to life is immediate and direct. It is, in fact, the very usefulness of a subject that determines its disciplinary value to the mind. "On all these counts business arithmetic is superior to plane or solid geometry; learning ways of keeping physically fit, to the study of French; learning the technique of selecting an occupation, to the study of algebra; simple science of everyday life, to geology; simple business English, to Elizabethan Classics."

It was an irresistible conclusion drawn from scientific research, said Prosser, that the best teaching material is "the life-adjustment and not the education-for-more education studies." Why, then, had the colleges and universities persisted in fastening unusable and unteachable traditional subjects on the secondary schools? Quite aside from the vested interests of teachers of these subjects, the main reason, he thought, was that the higher institutions had needed some device for selecting the abler pupils and eliminating the others. (The teaching of such subjects as languages and algebra had the function, one must believe, not of educating anyone, but simply of acting as hurdles that would trip up weaker pupils before they got to college.) This outmoded technique required four wasteful and expensive years of futile study in supposedly "disciplinary" subjects. The selection of pupils suited to college, Prosser thought, could now be made with infinitely more economy and accuracy in a few hours of mental testing. Perhaps, then, traditionalists, "as a sporting proposition," could be persuaded to drop at least half the academic curriculum for all students and keep only a few of the older studies in proportion to their surviving useful-

ness. On this criterion, "all foreign languages and all mathematics should be dropped from the list of required college-preparatory studies" in favor of the more usable subjects—physical science, English, and social studies.

Many new studies of direct-use value should be added to the curriculum: English of a severely practical kind, offering "communication skills"; literature dealing with modern life; science (only "qualitative" science) courses that would give youth "the simple science of everyday life," tell "how science increases our comfort . . . promotes our enjoyment of life . . . helps men get their work done . . . increases wealth"; practical business guidance and "simple economics for youth," supplemented perhaps by material on the "economic history of youth" in the United States⁶; civics, focusing on "civic problems of youth" and on the local community; mathematics, consisting only of varieties of applied arithmetic; social studies, giving attention to "wholesome recreation in the community," amenities and manners, uses of leisure, social and family problems of youth, and the "social history of youth in the United States"; finally, of course, "experiences in the fine arts," and "experiences in the practical arts," and vocational education. In this way, the curriculum could be made to conform to the laws of learning discovered by modern psychological science, and all children would benefit to a much greater degree from their secondary schooling.⁶

In a rather crude form Prosser had here given expression to the conclusion drawn by many educationists from experimental psychology, that "science," by destroying the validity of the idea of mental discipline, had destroyed the basic assumption upon which the ideal of a liberal education was based. Prosser had this in mind when he asserted with such confidence that "nothing could be more certain" than that science had proven false the assumptions of general education. Behind this remarkable dogmatism there lies an interesting chapter in the history of ideas. The older ideal of a classical liberal education, as expressed in nineteenth-century America and elsewhere, had been based upon two assumptions. The first was the so-called faculty psychology. In this psychology, the mind was believed to be a substantive entity composed of a number of parts or "faculties" such as reason, imagination, memory, and the like. It was assumed that these faculties, like physical faculties, could be strengthened by exercise; and

⁶ For a later, full-scale, authoritative statement of the views of this school on the content of the curriculum, see Harold Alberty: *Reorganizing the High School Curriculum* (New York, 1953).

in a liberal education, through constant mental discipline, they were gradually so strengthened. It was also generally believed that certain subjects had an established superiority as agents of mental discipline—above all, Latin, Greek, and mathematics. The purpose of developing competence in these subjects was not merely to lay the foundation for learning more Latin, Greek, or mathematics, but, far more important, to train the powers of the mind so that they would be more adequate for whatever task they might confront.⁷

In good time it was found that the faculty psychology did not hold up under philosophic analysis or the scientific study of the functions of mind. Moreover, with the immense growth in the body of knowledge and the corresponding expansion of the curriculum, the old confidence that the classical languages and mathematics had an exclusive place of honor in mental discipline seemed more and more a quaint parochial conceit.⁸

But most modern psychologists and educational theorists were aware that the decline of the faculty psychology and the classical-mathematical curriculum did not in itself put an end to the question whether such a thing as mental discipline is a realizable end of education. If mental discipline were, after all, meaningless, everything that had been done in the name of liberal education for centuries seemed to have been based on a miscalculation. The question whether the mind can be disciplined, or generally trained, survived the faculty psychology and took on a new, more specific form: can training exercised and developed in one mental operation develop a mental facility that can be transferred to another? This general question could, of course, be broken down into endless specific ones: can acts of memorization (as William James asked in an early rudimentary experiment conducted on himself) facilitate other memorization? Can training in one form of sensory discrimination enhance other discriminations? Can

⁷ The classic statement in America of this view of mental discipline was the Yale Report of 1828, which originally appeared in *The American Journal of Science and Arts*, Vol. XV (January, 1829), pp. 297-351. It is largely reprinted in Hofstadter and Smith, eds.: *American Higher Education: A Documentary History*, Vol. I, pp. 275-91.

⁸ It was also a conceit that served to justify a good deal of inferior pedagogy. There is overwhelming evidence, for example, that the classical languages were taught in the old-time college in a narrow grammarian's spirit, and not as a means of introducing students to the cultural life of classical antiquity. See Richard Hofstadter and Walter P. Metzger: *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (New York, 1955), pp. 226-30; Richard Hofstadter and C. DeWitt Hardy: *The Development and Scope of Higher Education in the United States* (New York, 1952), chapter I and pp. 53-6.

the study of Latin facilitate the subsequent study of French? If a transfer of training did occur, a cumulation of such transfers over several years of a rigorous liberal education might produce a mind which was better trained *in general*. But if transfer of training did not take place, most of the cumulative academic studies were quite pointless outside the items of knowledge contained in these studies themselves.

At any rate, in the confidence that they could throw light on a question of central importance, experimental psychologists, spurred by Thorndike, began early in the twentieth century to seek experimental evidence on the transfer of training. Anyone who reads an account of these experiments might well conclude that they were focused on such limited aspects of the problem that they were pathetically inadequate; individually and collectively, they did not shed very much light on the grand question to which they were ultimately directed. However, as a consequence of a great many ingenious and often interesting experiments, evidence of a kind did begin to accumulate. Some of it, notably in two papers published by Thorndike in 1901 and 1924, was taken by educational thinkers to be decisive evidence against transfer of training in any degree considerable enough to vindicate the idea of mental discipline. This and similar evidence from other researchers was, in any case, seized upon by some educational theorists. As W. C. Bagley once remarked: "It was inevitable that any theory which justified or rationalized the loosening of standards should be received with favor," by those who, without deliberate intent, distorted experimental findings in the interest of their mission to reorganize the high schools to accommodate the masses.⁹

Actually the accumulating experimental evidence proved contradictory and confusing, and those educators who insisted that its lessons were altogether clear and that nothing was so certain as what it yielded were simply ignoring all findings that did not substantiate their views. Their misuse of experimental evidence, in fact, constitutes a major scandal in the history of educational thought. If a quantitative survey of the experiments means anything, these educators ignored the bulk of the material, for four of five of the experimental studies showed the presence of transfer under certain conditions. There seems to have been no point at which the preponderant opinion of outstanding experimental psychologists favored the anti-transfer views that were drawn upon by educationists like Prosser as conclusive on what

⁹ W. C. Bagley: "The Significance of the Essentialist Movement in Educational Theory," *Classical Journal*, Vol. XXXIV (1939), p. 336.

"science has proven." Today, experimental psychology offers them no comfort. As Jerome Bruner summarizes it in his remarkable little book, *The Process of Education*: "Virtually all of the evidence of the last two decades on the nature of learning and transfer has indicated that . . . it is indeed a fact that massive general transfer can be achieved by appropriate learning, even to the degree that learning properly under optimum conditions leads one to 'learn how to learn.'"¹ Presumably, the ideal of a liberal education is still better vindicated by the educational experience of the human race than by experimental psychology; but in so far as such scientific inquiry is taken as a court of resort, its verdict is vastly more favorable to the views of those who believe in the possibility of mental discipline than it was represented to be by the educational prophets of life adjustment.

• 7 •

The life-adjustment movement stated, in an extreme form, the proposition toward which professional education had been moving for well over four decades: that in a system of mass secondary education, an academically serious training is an impossibility for more than a modest fraction of the student population. In setting the portion of uneducables with dogmatic certainty at sixty per cent, the spokesmen of this movement were taking such a strong position that some of their critics assumed the figure to be altogether arbitrary. Its source appears again to have been a touching faith in "science." In 1940, when Dr. Prosser, as a member of the National Youth Administration, was in close touch with Washington's view of the problems of youth, the psychologist, Lewis M. Terman, well known for his work in intelligence testing, estimated in a publication of the American Youth Commission, *How Fare American Youth?*² that an IQ of 110 is needed for success in traditional, classical, high-school curricula, and that sixty per cent of American youth rank below this IQ level. There is, in any case, a great discrepancy between this figure and the arithmetic of the life-adjustment educators.³ But more important is the irresponsibility of trying to base the educational

¹ Jerome S. Bruner: *The Process of Education* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 6. The important consideration, as Bruner points out, is that the learner have a structural grasp of the matter which is learned. For the modern discussion of mental discipline and a brief review of the history of the experimental evidence, see Walter B. Kolesnik: *Mental Discipline in Modern Education* (Madison, 1958), especially chapter 3.

² That is, if Terman's findings are accepted, sixty per cent of American youth might be unfit for an academic high-school curriculum; but of these surely some

policy of an entire nation on any such finding. Psychologists do not agree (and were still heatedly debating in 1939) whether an individual's IQ is a permanently fixed genetic attribute; and there is now impressive experimental evidence that an individual IQ, given appropriate attention and pedagogy, can often be raised by 15 to 20 points or more. (Results can be particularly impressive when special attention is given to underprivileged children. In New York City's "Higher Horizons" program, many slum children with slightly subnormal or nearly retarded IQ's at the junior high-school level had both their IQ's and their academic performance raised so that they were acceptable in college and some even earned scholarships.) Moreover, the IQ alone would, in no case, be an infallible index to the ceiling of anyone's potential educational achievement; there are other variables, amenable to change, which it does not take into account, such as the caliber of teaching, the amount of schoolwork, and the pupil's morale and motivation. Psychologists and educators are far from being in precise agreement as to the proportion of the students in our high schools who, even with today's teaching and low educational morale, can profit from an academic curriculum.³

Finally, the plausibility of the life-adjustment movement's view of the educability of the country's youth hinged upon ignoring secondary-educational accomplishments in other countries. It had become a commonplace argument of the new educationists that secondary curricula of the countries of Western Europe, being "aristocratic," class-bound, selective, and traditional, had no exemplary value for the democratic, universal, and forward-looking secondary education of the United States. American educators, therefore, preferred to ignore European educational history as a source of clues to educational policy and looked to "modern science" for practical guidance and to "democracy" for their moral inspiration. European education pointed to the outmoded past; science and democracy looked to the future. This considerable portion would be fit for the desirable trades mentioned in the Prosser resolution.

³ For differing estimates of the distribution of academic ability and its implications for educational policy, see the Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education: *Higher Education for American Democracy*, Vol. 1, p. 41; Byron S. Hollnshed: *Who Should Go to College* (New York, 1952), especially pp. 39-40; Dael Wolfe: *America's Resources of Specialized Talent* (New York, 1954); and Charles C. Cole, Jr.: *Encouraging Scientific Talent* (New York, 1956). "I am confident," writes one educational psychologist, "that with better teaching . . . half, or more, of the students in our high schools . . . can profit from it [the classical curriculum]." Paul Woodring: *A Fourth of a Nation* (New York, 1957), p. 49.

way of thought has been jolted by scientific competition with the Soviet Union. Russian secondary education is neither so universal nor so egalitarian as our own. But it offers the example of an educational system which cannot quite be dismissed as aristocratic or traditional and which is none the less modeled largely upon the secondary systems of Western Europe; it demonstrates in a way that can no longer be conveniently ignored the availability of a demanding academic curriculum to large numbers.

By no means should it be imagined that the life-adjustment educators were content to stop with the assertion that their educational aims should be applied only to the neglected sixty per cent of youth at the bottom of the ladder. Here it would be a mistake to underestimate the crusading idealism of this movement, which is nowhere so well illustrated as in Dr. Prosser's closing remarks to the 1947 Conference on Life Adjustment. "Never in all the history of education," he said, "has there been such a meeting as this . . . a meeting where people were so sincere in their belief that this was the golden opportunity to do something that would give to *all* American youth their educational heritage so long denied. What you have planned," Prosser assured the members, "is worth fighting for—it is worth dying for. . . . God Bless You All."

Accordingly, life-adjustment educators soon became convinced that their high educational ideals should be applied not merely to the neglected sixty per cent: what was good for them would be good for *all* American youth, however gifted. They were designing, as the authors of one life-adjustment pamphlet quite candidly admitted, nothing less than "a blueprint for a Utopian Secondary School"—a school which, they added, "could be operated only by teachers of rare genius."⁴ As I. L. Kandel has sardonically remarked, the conviction of life adjustment was "that what is good for sixty per cent of the pupils attending high schools, and, according to reports, deriving no benefit from this stay, is also good for all pupils."⁵ These crusaders had thus succeeded in standing on its head the assumption of universality once made by exponents of the classical curriculum. Formerly, it had been held that a liberal academic education was good for all pupils. Now it was argued

⁴ *A Look Ahead in Secondary Education*, U.S. Office of Education (Washington, 1954), p. 76.

⁵ *American Education in the Twentieth Century*, p. 156; cf. pp. 173-81. On the universalistic aspirations of the life-adjustment movement, see Mortimer Smith: *The Diminished Mind* (Chicago, 1954), p. 46.

that all pupils should in large measure get the kind of training originally conceived for the slow learner. American utility and American democracy would now be realized in the education of *all* youth. The life-adjustment movement would establish once and for all the idea that the slow learner is "in no sense" the inferior of the gifted, and the principle that all curricular subjects, like all children, are equal. "There is no aristocracy of 'subjects,'" said the Educational Policies Commission of the N.E.A. in 1952, describing the ideal rural school. "Mathematics and mechanics, art and agriculture, history and home-making are all peers."⁶

In the name of utility, democracy, and science, many educators had come to embrace the supposedly uneducable or less educable child as the center of the secondary-school universe, relegating the talented child to the sidelines. One group of educationists, looking forward to the day when "the aristocratic, cultural tradition of education [will be] completely and finally abandoned," had this to say of pupils who showed unusual intellectual curiosity: "Any help we can give them should be theirs, but such favored people learn directly from their surroundings. Our efforts to teach them are quite incidental in their development. It is therefore unnecessary and futile for the schools to attempt to gear their programs to the needs of unusual people."⁷ In this atmosphere, as Jerome Bruner puts it, "the top quarter of public school students, from which we must draw intellectual leadership in the next generation, is perhaps the group most neglected by our schools in the recent past."⁸ This group has indeed been neglected by

⁶ *Education for All American Youth, A Further Look* (Washington, 1952), p. 140.

⁷ Charles M. MacConnell, Ernest O. Melby, Christian O. Arndt, and Leslee J. Bishop: *New Schools for a New Culture* (New York, 1953), pp. 154-5. In partial justification of this curious remark, it should be said that our secondary schools, as they are now constituted, often find it relatively difficult to do very much for talented and intellectually curious pupils.

⁸ Bruner: *op. cit.*, p. 10. Cf. James B. Conant: "In particular, we tend to overlook the especially gifted youth. We neither find him early enough, nor guide him properly, nor educate him adequately in our high schools." *Education in a Divided World* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), p. 65; cf. p. 228. On the problems of educating the talented, see Frank O. Copley: *The American High School and the Talented Student* (Ann Arbor, 1961).

In the mid-1950's, about five per cent of the gifted were receiving special, formal attention in American schools. An earlier survey (1948) revealed that about 20,000 pupils were enrolled in special schools or classes for the gifted, about 87,000 in special schools or classes for the mentally deficient. For these and other figures on programs for the gifted, see Cole: *Encouraging Scientific Talent*, pp. 116-19.

many educators and looked upon by some not as the hope or the challenge or the standard of aspiration for the educational system, but as a deviant, a side issue, a special problem, at times even a kind of pathology. Possibly I exaggerate; but otherwise it is hard to understand how an official of the Office of Education could have written this insensitive passage:⁹

A considerable number of children, estimated at about four million, deviate sufficiently from mental, physical, and behavioral norms to require special educational provision. Among them are the blind and the partially seeing, the deaf and the hard of hearing, the speech-defective, the crippled, the delicate, the epileptic, the mentally deficient, the socially maladjusted, and the extraordinarily gifted.

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To ideas such as these, and especially to the claims of their advocates for universality, there has always been a good deal of resistance from parents, school boards, and teachers in many parts of the country. Nevertheless, to fit the views of the new education the curriculum of many a junior and senior high school has been "enriched" with new courses in band, chorus, driver education, human relations, home and family living, "homemaking," and consumer education. It has been possible for an American child to reach his majority in some communities without having had an opportunity to understand that the curricula available in his public high school are not everywhere regarded as an education, and may be wholly unsuited to his own aspirations. A few years ago President A. Whitney Griswold of Yale reported a case of a type altogether familiar to college-admissions officers. An apparently able and otherwise promising youth from a Midwestern city applied for admission to Yale but could not be considered because the academic part of his last two years of high school consisted only of two years of English and one of American history; the rest was made up of two years of chorus, two years of speech, and one year each of typing,

⁹ Lloyd E. Blanch, Assistant Commissioner for Higher Education, United States Office of Education, writing in Mary Irwin, ed.: *American Universities and Colleges*, published by the American Council on Education (Washington, 1956), p. 8; italics added. It has been pointed out that the author was, after all, proposing special programs for the gifted, among others, but this consideration does not seem to me to mitigate the implications of this bizarre list of categories.

physical education, journalism, marriage and family, and personality problems.¹

If one examines the character and content of the new courses introduced into the public high school and the rhetoric of the debate between older and newer schools of education, it becomes clear that what was at issue in the argument over life adjustment was in fact the educational aspect of the much more widely debated issue of mass culture. For certainly one of the things at issue in the schools was what kind of character and culture the large masses of high-school children could and should be prepared for. Traditional education had been founded upon a primary conviction about the value of the various subject-matter disciplines and on the assumption that the child, through some degree of mastery of academic subjects, would enlarge his mind for the general ends of life and establish his preparation for the professions or business or other desirable occupations. (It was assumed that vocational education could serve those who could not or would not enter into such competition.) Contrary to the allegations of the new educators, traditional education was not altogether unmindful of the child, but it assumed, on the whole, that he would find some pleasure in the mental activity which was offered him in an academically disciplined education and that he would gain satisfaction from his sense of accomplishment as he moved from stage to stage. In so far as the learning process was irksome to him, it assumed that the self-discipline that came from overcoming irksomeness would at least be a net gain. (No doubt some even went so far as to suggest that there was a high intrinsic value in irksomeness, on the assumption satirized in the remark that it does not matter what a boy studies so long as he doesn't like it; extreme statements of this point of view helped the new educators to draw an unattractive caricature of traditional education.) Politically the older education was conservative, in that it accepted the existing order of society and called upon the child to assert himself within its framework—which was largely that of nineteenth-century individualism. But it was also democratic in that it did not commonly assume, much less rejoice in the idea, that large numbers, from any class in society, were necessarily incapable by native endowment of entering with some degree of hope into the world of academic competition, mastery of subject matter, and discipline of mind and character.

¹ *Liberal Education and the Democratic Ideal* (New Haven, 1959), p. 29; the case was first reported by Griswold in 1954.

The new education was also at bottom politically conservative, but its warm rhetoric about democracy, its philanthropic approach to the child (not to speak of its having become the object of much harassment by right-wing cranks) made it seem, at least to its advocates, "progressive" or even radical. It prided itself on the realism of recognizing and accepting the intellectual limitations of the masses, and yet on the idealism of accepting, encouraging, and providing for the least able members of the student body. It was founded upon a primary regard for the child, and avoided making large claims upon his abilities. It made no hopeful assumptions about the child's pleasure in intellectual activity, at least where such activity was difficult, or about his satisfaction in achievement. On the contrary, it assumed that the child's pleasure in schooling, which was a primary goal, came from having his needs and interests met; and it was content to posit these interests as the foundation of the educational process. Its spokesmen did not believe that they were neglecting to teach the child to think, but they took an altogether different view from traditional educators as to what he should be encouraged to think about and how much cumulative knowledge and effort might be prerequisite to his thinking effectively. They accepted his world as being, in the first instance, largely definitive for them, and were content to guide his thinking within its terms, however parochial in place and time, and however flat in depth. They did not concede that they were abandoning the task of developing character—but they insisted that they were encouraging a more amply social, sociable, and democratic character.

As one examines the range and content of the new courses the new educators demand—which they have in some measure actually succeeded in installing—one realizes that the new education is indeed trying to educate "the whole child," in that it is trying to shape the character and the personality of its charges; and that what it aims to do is not primarily to fit them to become a disciplined part of the world of production and competition, ambition and vocation, creativity, and analytical thought, but rather to help them learn the ways of the world of consumption and hobbies, of enjoyment and social complaisance—in short, to adapt gracefully to the passive and hedonistic style summed up in the significant term *adjustment*. For this world it is deemed important that the pupil learn, not chemistry, but the testing of detergents; not physics, but how to drive and service a car; not history, but the operation of the local gas works; not biology, but the way to the zoo; not Shakespeare or Dickens, but how to write a business letter.

The new education, instead of leaving matters of consumption and personal style to the family and other agencies, converts the family and the home themselves into objects of elaborate study and sometimes offensive re-evaluation ("How can my home be made democratic?"). One life-adjustment educator explained that he wanted children to learn to inquire in school (against, as he put it, the die-hard resistance of some teachers with "a very definite academic slant"): "How can I keep well? How can I look my best? How can I get along better with others? How can hobbies contribute to my social growth?"² The aspirations inculcated by the school are intended to conform with adolescent interests, including those inculcated in mass-media advertising. Witness the case of the course in "Home and Family Living" required repetitively in one New York State community in *all* grades from seven to ten. Among the topics covered were: "Developing school spirit," "My duties as a baby sitter," "Clicking with the crowd," "How to be liked," "What can be done about acne?" "Learning to care for my bedroom," "Making my room more attractive." Eighth-grade pupils were given these questions on a true-false test: "Just girls need to use deodorants." "Cake soap can be used for shampooing."³

Today life adjustment as a force in American education has passed its moment of strength and has gone into retreat. In part this may be attributed to certain long-range changes in the function of secondary education in the American social system. As Martin Trow has observed, our secondary education "began as an elite preparatory system; during its great years of growth it became a mass terminal system; and it is now having to make a second painful transition on its way to becoming a mass preparatory system."⁴ The situation for which the new educators originally designed their programs no longer exists, and there is no longer such a large receptive audience for their views. From 1900 to the 1930's, most of the parents of high-school children had not gone to high school themselves, and many of them were new to the country and its language. They tended to accept rather passively the findings and the programmatic arrangements of the newly emerging educational

² Richard A. Mumma: "The Real Barrier to a More Realistic Curriculum: The Teacher," *Educational Administration and Supervision*, Vol. XXXVI (January, 1950), pp. 41-2.

³ *Bulletin* of the Council for Basic Education (April, 1957), p. 11. The actual exploration of such subjects in the schools is unusual, but their place among the plans of core-curriculum educators is not. See, for instance, the lists of student interests recommended as bases for curricula in Alberty: *Reorganizing the High School Curriculum*, chapter 15.

⁴ "The Second Transformation," p. 154.

specialists. Today the parents of high-school children are very commonly at least high-school graduates, and they have been joined by a large college-educated middle-class generation quite alert to educational problems. This public, which has its own ideas about what a high-school education might be, and which has cultural interests of its own, is less willing to accept as final the doctrines of the new education and has provided a large audience for the growing literature of counterattack against the ideas of the new education represented by the books of Arthur Bestor and Mortimer Smith. Moreover, the high school is no longer the terminal institution that it was for the earlier generation. The philosophy and program of the high school have to be adapted to the fact that half of its graduates are now going on to some kind of higher education, and that they are being trained for skills and specialities more complex than the ordinary white-collar jobs for which the old high school typically prepared. Parents are increasingly aware of the danger that inadequate local schools will jeopardize the chances of their children for privileged positions in college and university education, and they have become increasingly disposed to put pressure upon school authorities to raise educational standards. Finally, the post-Sputnik educational atmosphere has quickened the activities of those who demand more educational rigor, who can now argue that we are engaged in mortal educational combat with the Soviet Union. In recent years these counter-pressures have begun to take effect. But the attitudes that gave rise to life adjustment have not by any means disappeared from the educational profession or the public. Professional education is still largely staffed, at the administrative levels and in its centers of training, by people who are far from enthusiastic about the new demand for academic excellence. American education is in a position somewhat like that of a new political regime which must depend for the execution of its mandates upon a civil service honeycombed with determined opponents.

CHAPTER XIV

The Child and the World



• 1 •

THE NEW education rested on two intellectual pillars: its use, or misuse, of science, and its appeal to the educational philosophy of John Dewey. Of the two, Dewey's philosophy was much more important, for it embraced within it the belief in the power of science to illuminate educational thought, and yet went beyond this to give educators an inclusive and generous view of the world that satisfied their philanthropic sentiments and their urge to make education useful to democracy. Dewey's contribution was to take certain views of the child which were gaining force around the end of the nineteenth century, and to link them to pragmatic philosophy and the growing demand for social reform. He thus established a satisfying connection between new views of the child and new views of the world.

Anyone concerned with the new education must reckon with its use of Dewey's ideas. To consider this in a study of anti-intellectualism may unfortunately be taken as an attempt to characterize Dewey simply as an anti-intellectual—which hardly seems just toward a man who was so intent on teaching children how to think. It may also be taken as an attempt to locate the "blame" for the failings of American education—and will inevitably take on something of this color—but my purpose is quite otherwise: it is to examine the tendency and consequences of certain ideas to which Dewey gave by far the most influential expression.

An attempt to take account of the limitations and the misuse of these ideas should not be read as a blanket condemnation of progressive education, which, as Lawrence Cremin's discriminating history has shown, contained several streams of thought and a variety of tend-