
The K E Y S

T O T H E

M I N D

Parents, Children and School

J.E. MURPHY

THE KEYS
TO THE MIND
Parents, Children and School

J. E. Murphy

Dear Reader,

A number of objectives and questions are presented at the beginning of this booklet in order to focus attention on the issues that parents must face as they guide their children through their school years; these issues are the subject matter of this booklet.

NOTE:

For stylistic purposes, the masculine gender is used throughout this text.

OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

1. OBJECTIVE: that the child master the art of reading
QUESTION: What method is the teacher using to teach reading?
What level of reading skill should my child have achieved?
How will my child's reading skill level be measured?
How will the school give the parents the results of this measurement?

2. OBJECTIVE: that the child develop a mastery of his mother tongue
QUESTION: How is language taught?
Is grammar taught? How is it taught?

3. OBJECTIVE: that the child learn numerical skills
QUESTION: How are numerical skills taught?
Are multiplication tables learned by rote memory in grades two and three?
At the elementary level, are calculators used in class or for homework?

4. OBJECTIVE: that the child master spelling and the use of the dictionary
QUESTION: What method is used to teach spelling?
Are students required to have a dictionary?
Are students taught to use a dictionary?
At what levels or grades?

5. OBJECTIVE: that both the child and the parent understand the relevance of homework
QUESTION: What are the basic rules of your child's school with regard to homework?
What is the purpose of homework?
How promptly is homework corrected and returned?

6. OBJECTIVE: that the use of television in the home be controlled
QUESTION: What is a reasonable use of television by the child?

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7. OBJECTIVE: that the parent have a clear understanding of the success or lack of success of the child
QUESTION: How is the school work of my child to be evaluated?
How can I be sure that my child is performing at the level that is acceptable for his age or group?
8. OBJECTIVE: that the extent of computer use by my child be kept at a reasonable level
QUESTION: How do parents determine this reasonable level?
What is the extent of computer use by my child in school?
How does the use of computers in school fit into the overall academic program?
9. OBJECTIVE: that my child has the necessary textbooks (a textbook for each subject that he can bring home)
QUESTION: Does the school provide each student with a textbook for each subject?
What does the school consider the role of textbooks to be?
10. OBJECTIVE: that both students and their parents be educated with regard to the potential impact of alcohol and drugs on the young
QUESTION: What steps are being taken by the school to enlighten children about drugs and alcohol?
Does the school have a means by which parents can become informed?
11. OBJECTIVE: that children make constructive use of their free time
QUESTION: In what ways does the school promote free-time activities?
Is there a way that I as a parent can help with free-time activities?
What can parents do at home to help their children use their free time constructively?

FOREWORD

The purpose of this booklet is to provide some basic information to parents about the schools that their children are attending or will be attending. Often parents are frustrated when they try to understand why, what and how their child is being taught. This is an experience that is all too common among parents.

We all have hopes that our children will use their human powers to the fullest. In order to develop these powers, it is essential that certain basic skills be mastered: the ability to read, to write, to comprehend and to manipulate numbers.

In addition to our simple hopes, we should have a clear understanding of the nature of the child. An understanding of this nature should determine the kind of education that the child receives. This understanding can also help to make a distinction between education and training. Education develops the human powers of the child; training, a phase that takes place later in the schooling process, develops the child's ability to earn a living. In terms of school, we can say that education deals with those things that do not change, just as the nature of the child does not change, while training deals with things that do change because the requirements of the workplace are always changing and in recent years are becoming more and more knowledge based.

Often parents do not clearly understand what is to be achieved by their child in school and thus they do not ask the right questions when dealing with their child's teacher or the principal of the school. This booklet presents a number of objectives, some relevant questions and a few thoughts on the issues parents face. I hope that you find this effort useful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 4. OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS
- 7. FOREWORD
- 9. TABLE OF CONTENTS
- 4. INTRODUCTION
- 11. SECTION ONE
 - 13 The Early Years
 - 15 Reading
 - 17 Grammar
 - 19 Numerical Skills
 - 21 Spelling and The Use of The Dictionary
 - 22 Homework and Study
 - 25 Television
 - 27 Evaluation and Report Cards
 - 29 Computers
 - 31 Textbooks
 - 33 What Is To Be Learned?
 - 35 Drugs
 - 37 Activities
- 39. SECTION TWO
 - 41 The Context
 - 45 The Nature of The Child
 - 47 Readiness To Learn
 - 49 Constructivism
 - 51 My Child Right or Wrong
 - 52 Social Problems
 - 54 The Good Teacher
 - 56 Student Promotion
- 57. CONCLUSION
- 59. BIBLIOGRAPHY
- 60. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

INTRODUCTION

The irrefutable and inescapable truth is that parents have the earliest and the primary responsibility for the education of their children. The school, in whatever form it takes, has the responsibility to continue and to enhance this educational process. In this way the school should be the handmaiden to parents not to the state or any other agency. The role of the parents and the role of the state require careful reflection. Because the family, though it is the essential unit in the structure of a society, is not a perfect society in itself, it needs help to carry out its role with regard to the education of children. The role of the state, through its school system, is to help the family to educate children and to be sure that the common good as it applies to children is respected. The purpose of this booklet is to help parents recognize more clearly their responsibilities and the challenges that these responsibilities bring.

This text has two sections. The first section sets down the way in which parents can interface with their child, with the child's school, especially with the principal and the child's teacher, and what parents can reasonably expect from their child's school. The second section presents some basic ideas in order to clarify what the foundation of a good education is and to review some of the trends in the development of our schools and the teaching and learning that goes on in them.

SECTION ONE

THE EARLY YEARS

As noted in the introduction, parents have the earliest and the primary role in the education of their children. Until the child reaches school age, the parents are, in most situations, the sole educators of children. We must remember though that, depending on the situation of the parents, daycare staff or other family members may also have a role to play. This early education begins the development of the rational, spiritual and moral dimensions of the child. In particular, parents establish the moral discipline necessary for the child to develop those virtues, those good habits, which will make him a good citizen, a good human being.

A comment on the word “morality” is appropriate here. Humans possess the ability to choose, referred to as free will or liberty. They can make choices; they need not be controlled by their environment and, with few exceptions, they can overrule instinct. If humans did not possess this power to choose, there would be no morality, because morality presupposes freedom to choose, hence the need for moral formation. Parents must be conscious of the moral dimension in the formation of the child and help their children to recognize right and wrong and help them to choose between the two. (Please refer to “The Nature of The Child.” in Section Two.)

Parents must have certain principles that guide them in the education of their children. For instance, we know that a certain level of material goods is necessary for happiness, but that goods in themselves do not provide happiness; they are a means to happiness. However, in our world, the extent of an individual’s happiness is often considered to depend on the amount of material goods that the individual possesses. Here is a comment from Charles de Koninck on this subject:

We ought not to bring up our children in the manner advocated by the majority. We ought not to give in to their wishes, to allow them to play as they demand, to listen to no matter what music, or to look at everything that might fall within their eyesight. If the moral virtues were infused and all the acquired habits were conformed to right reason there would be no problem. It is incumbent upon the

parents to mould the nature of the child toward good dispositions which become second nature to him, and to support at the same time the first efforts of his reason, nourishing thus his innate desire for knowledge. Failure to fulfill this duty which truly ought to be their principal task, would make parents unjust towards the child. And unjust too towards the persons who later will be charged with perfecting their education.¹

Clearly, Dr. de Koninck recognizes the three fundamental dimensions of the child's human nature and gives us guidance on what we must do as parents. There is a very practical message embedded in his comments. Not only do parents have a responsibility to begin the education of their children, by fulfilling this responsibility they prepare the child for formal schooling. This is a very important idea to keep in mind.

It is generally accepted that the more preparation a child has in terms of a first knowledge of fundamentals when he starts to school, the faster the rate of that child's progress will be. Conversely, it is also generally accepted that, usually, the child who does not have this first knowledge could spend years trying to catch up to his better prepared classmates. Or worse, he may never catch up. However, the academic program of the school can be designed to remedy this lack. (Please refer to "Readiness To Learn" in Section Two.)

The rest of this presentation will be devoted to the role of parents during school years. In particular, the difficulties that parents may face when trying to determine exactly what is being taught to their child, why it is being taught and how it is being taught are considered. Several specific topics are presented with a view to understanding how each involves your child in order that you, as a parent, can ask the relevant questions and recognize valid answers.

¹ Charles de Koninck. "The Importance of Education Before the Age of Reason," Address to the Graduates of Saint Mary's College. Notre Dame, Indiana (June 1960) 3

READING

One of the most basic and most important skills that a child has to master is reading. This is an undisputed fact. Considerable debate takes place about how this skill can best be developed by the child. There are two basic approaches to the teaching of reading: the natural (whole language) approach and the unnatural (phonics) approach.

The natural approach is to allow the child to progress at his own pace, to emphasize the joy of good literature while avoiding the drill like instruction in letter sounds; this is the whole language instruction method, termed a natural process. Children are motivated by having their teacher and others emphasize an interest in books by encouraging them to learn to read by reading holistically. In other words, they will learn to read in the same way that they learned to speak: by means of a natural method.

The other approach, the unnatural one, is to teach reading using the phonics method. The basic definition of phonics is that it is a method of teaching beginners to read or enunciate by learning the usual sounds of letters or groups of letters. Critics attack this method because it is not a natural process.

Consider the following. We all know that there are adults who are illiterate; they can neither read nor write, but they can speak fluently. The situation of the illiterate adult suggests that there is a basic difference between learning to speak, and learning to read and to write. It seems that speaking is a natural process while reading and writing is an artificial (unnatural) rather than a natural process. Based on the fact that reading and writing are not natural processes, it is reasonable to conclude that in order to teach these skills a method that is “not natural” is valid. I am convinced that the process that should be used, one that is not natural, is the phonics method because written letters constitute a code that must be ‘broken’ if the child is to read and to write. Consequently, the efficient way to teach this code, to teach reading and writing, is to use the phonics method that connects sound to letter within whatever reading program is being used.

While other methods work for some children, research shows that phonics can work for all children. Two things to remember: It is generally agreed that the child should have learned to read no later than the end of grade two, and we should all remember that reading is the key to every other subject in school. Consequently, parents should have explained to them in a clear way the methods being used to teach their child to read; they should know what level of reading ability the child is supposed to achieve; they should be sure that they know how the level of reading ability of their child is to be measured, and they should know how they are to be informed of these results.

The idea that reading involves breaking or learning a code can be better understood by the following consideration. Though we can read our own alphabet, we cannot read a passage written in Russian which uses the Cyrillic alphabet. Those of us who have not learned this alphabet are, therefore, illiterate when faced with a text written in it. This example gives a further demonstration that an alphabet is a code where we must learn to match the sounds to the letters, and it also gives us some idea of the problems faced by an illiterate person in our world.

It cannot be said too often: skill in reading is the key to all other subjects that a child is studying or will study in school or at work. Reading is the major key to the mind.

OBJECTIVE: that the child master the art of reading.

QUESTION: What method is the teacher using to teach reading?
What level of reading skill should my child have achieved?
How will my child's reading skill level be measured?
How will the school give the parents the results of this measurement?

GRAMMAR

The topic of grammar generates a lot of different responses these days. I asked a high school principal recently whether or not grammar was taught in his school. His reply was that, thankfully, his school had discarded the teaching of grammar. My thought was that, though he is following current teaching guidelines and theory, he is certainly misguided.

If someone were to buy a complicated machine and then discard the operating manual, saying that he did not need it because he intended to learn to operate the machine by trial and error, we would likely question his intelligence. My reaction when someone tells me that grammar need not be taught is that they are discarding the operating manual for the English language, or whatever language is under discussion. A good grasp of grammar is necessary if a person is to understand and explain how language works. Grammar must be taught because it is the underpinning of language.

Most teachers, both active and retired, state firmly that grammar must be taught but that to attempt to do so using group discussions or through reading good literature means that grammar is taught by accident if at all. One teacher asked me to explain how a student could understand the errors in his writing if he had no knowledge of grammar.

I am told by teachers, by parents and by employers that high school graduates do not have an adequate command of their mother tongue. One parent estimated the hours our students spend in English classes from grade one to the end of high school and then he wanted to know what in heaven's name we are doing in our schools. I had no explanation for him. Here is a statistic to ponder. By the time a student completes high school, he will have spent approximately 1600 hours in English class. As a parent and former teacher, I do not understand why a human being would not have acquired a complete grasp of his mother tongue after so many hours in English class. Consider that it takes 1800 hours over four years to earn a bachelor's degree at university.

Recently, I studied the curriculum guides for elementary school in Ireland. At the end of grade six, students are expected to know and to use the following: the sentence, subject and predicate; clauses and phrases; the parts of speech and their nature and function. They must pass a non-governmental standardized test to demonstrate that they possess this knowledge so that others, including parents, will know that they possess this knowledge. Non-governmental standardized tests are also used in other subjects.

OBJECTIVE: that the child develop a mastery of his mother tongue
QUESTION: How is language taught?
Is grammar taught? How is it taught?

NUMERICAL SKILLS

One of the characteristics of children between the ages of six and twelve is their ability to imitate, to repeat rhymes and to memorize facts and figures. Children have an exceptional ability to memorize at this stage; and after this period in their development memorization becomes much more difficult. Spelling and the multiplication tables are two areas where memorization is most effective.

The basis for the manipulation of numbers in multiplication, in division, in fractions and in decimals is to have memorized the multiplication tables. Based on my inquiries, it seems that the system of learning the tables by memorization has been abandoned in favor of a method whereby the student figures them out somehow without memorizing them. The drill and kill method, as rote memory work is disparagingly referred to, is rejected out of hand. This rejection is a shame because the time when the child could have easily memorized the multiplication tables, as noted above, has been let pass.

Another problem is the use of calculators, especially at the elementary level. When a child uses calculators the likely result is that the child will not learn to manipulate figures. The fact is that children should have, at the ready in their memories, the knowledge necessary to make calculations quickly and correctly. Not knowing the multiplication tables combined with the use of calculators inhibits the development of this ability. Experienced mathematics teachers, a good many of whom I have interviewed, deplore the inability of our students to manipulate figures. For more information, contact the following: **HYPERLINK** <http://www.mathematicallycorrect.com>. Another perspective can be gained by examining the Kumon tutoring system for teaching mathematics that was developed in Japan and is gaining popularity in Canada. This system consists of a daily drill and repetition method to strengthen mathematical skills.

OBJECTIVE: that the child learn numerical skills

QUESTION: How are numerical skills taught?

Are multiplication tables learned by rote memory in grades two and three?

At the elementary level, are calculators used in class or for homework?

SPELLING AND THE USE OF THE DICTIONARY

Spelling is another subject under dispute in our schools. Those who advocate teaching students using approaches such as whole language instruction, where students learn to use their language by exposure to good literature, do not think that spelling should be taught by memorizing words. Once again, our children may suffer from an opportunity lost because as they grow older their capacity to memorize can weaken. Why is spelling important? Because it is a convention, an agreement in our daily lives as to how words are to be spelled. The spelling of words is not a natural happening in our world; it is man made and of course, as with much of what is man made, it is full of imperfections. In any event, our children must master correct spelling because it is one of the means of clear communication with our fellow humans.

The idea that there is a system of conventional spelling leads us to our next topic, the dictionary. A working knowledge of a dictionary is essential for a student and every high school graduate should have totally mastered the use of the dictionary. A dictionary contains the following information: spelling, definitions for the different parts of speech under which the word is used, pronunciation, the history of the word, and many other kinds of information. The dictionary is a rich source of knowledge that we can use at any time; we should have a dictionary as a companion for life. This is one “text” that parents should purchase for their child because each should have his own personal dictionary.

OBJECTIVE: that the child master spelling and the use of the dictionary

QUESTION: What method is used to teach spelling?

Are students required to have a dictionary?

Are students taught to use a dictionary? At what levels or grades?

HOMWORK AND STUDY

Homework provides an opportunity for the student to gain knowledge and good work habits while providing parents with the opportunity to encourage their child and to gain insight into what is being learned in school. How homework is handled can be influenced by the following: the intellectual aptitude of the child, the ability to concentrate, interest in the subject, the difficulty of the subject, the grade level, the goals of the child, the enthusiasm of the teacher, the approach of the parents, distractions such as television, and the place in the home where homework is done.

Some suggest ten minutes each evening for children in kindergarten and up to ninety minutes for children in grade six. Higher levels could apply in high school. Critics of too much homework argue that parents have to be careful to let their child have the necessary time to be a child. Common sense should be a guide. Further, parents should have a clear idea of what the teacher is trying to achieve in a given subject at any given level.

There is one hard and fast rule: parents have got to guide their children regarding homework. Based on my own experience and on that of many teachers over the years, it is clear that children whose parents encourage and support them are more likely to be successful at school; children whose parents are not involved usually do not do so well. Teachers affirm that on parent-teacher night the parents of students who do well are usually present while the parents of students who are doing poorly usually do not attend. The fact is that parents must be involved in their child's learning in order to nurture success.

Here are some things to do:

- A. Find out about the homework policy of your child's school.
- B. Make sure that your child understands how the homework relates to what the teacher is doing in school. Homework is supposed to reinforce what has been taught, not introduce new material.

- C. Make sure that there is a time and a place for homework. Do not overlook the kitchen table which, especially for younger children, can be used while dinner is being prepared. Lots of work can be done if Mom or Dad is nearby to provide encouragement.
- D. Do not do your child's homework. It may be quicker to do so, but it will do the child very little, if any, good.
- E. Make sure that the teacher corrects the homework promptly. This is a condition that makes learning more likely.
- F. Remember, if you think the homework given to your child is unreasonable or irrelevant, chances are that it is. Perhaps one consideration would be to think of the question of the quantity in relation to the quality of homework. Meet with the teacher to be sure that you understand what is expected of your child.
- G. Keep in mind that you do not have to be an expert in a given subject to monitor your child's homework. This is especially important in the higher grades. Do not let a child convince you that it is of no use for you to look at the work that has been done.
- H. Do not let homework become a source of tension in your home. A clear understanding reached, perhaps in the presence of the teacher, can make clear what everyone is expecting and remove the chance for any attempts at deception.

A final topic is the question of study. While homework is assigned by the teacher, study can be the initiative of the student. Especially at the higher grades, if no homework has been assigned, then the student should be encouraged to develop the habit of study, an independent, habit building activity. Study could be a review of material already covered in class or a look ahead at material not yet

covered in class. The point here is that the student should come to realize that he has to start taking initiatives with regard to learning. Developing the ability to take initiatives will help a student to succeed in his studies and in anything else undertaken in life.

OBJECTIVE: that both the child and the parent understand the relevance of homework

QUESTION: What are the basic rules of your child's school with regard to homework?

What is the purpose of homework?

How promptly is homework corrected and returned?

TELEVISION

Television can be a high impact influence in our lives. There are at least two negative features that should be underlined. The first is that it undermines the control that parents have over their children. The second is that it reduces the viewer to a very passive role.

Undermining parental authority may seem like an exaggerated claim. However, much research has been done which supports this claim. Rather than present a synopsis of this research, an anecdotal approach will serve our purpose. A number of elementary school teachers trace the decline in the behavior of students in class to the arrival of the Simpsons on television. The mockery of authority be it parental, school, police or otherwise is undeniably a theme of this program. There are many other programs that undermine, subtly or blatantly, the authority of parents and other values that are essential to functional families.

I prefer to pose the problem in another way. If I were to arrive at the front door of a family and offer to meet each afternoon or evening with their children providing that I could teach them whatever I judged to be appropriate, preferably without the presence of the parents, I am sure that I would be refused entry to that home. Yet these same parents very often allow television to be the stranger in their midst who baby-sits their children. And this stranger is able to “teach” whatever the producers of the programs feel will attract viewers.

The other negative feature of television is the intellectual or mental passivity that it induces in viewers. Tests have been made which show that the brain activity of the viewers of television almost reaches zero. Television mesmerizes the viewer which leads to an unquestioning acceptance of the cleverly delivered message. Surely, such a mental state hardly contributes to the learning that a parent expects a child to be experiencing.

On the other hand, television can, when used carefully by parents, be a tool for learning. There are many programs of very high quality on a variety of subjects that are designed to teach the viewer; these programs can help expand the horizons of the child. As with everything in our lives, we have to know how to use television so that

it is beneficial for the child. Such an approach to television is the preferred one, but for parents it takes a considerable effort.

It is widely recognized that television is the major force in our world that, because of the adult themes used in the prime-time programming, does the most to rob children of their childhood, of their innocence as it were.

OBJECTIVE: that the use of television in the home be controlled

QUESTION: What is a reasonable use of television by the child?

EVALUATION AND REPORT CARDS

Report cards give parents the results of the evaluations of the child's life at school. The report card is a document which the parents have in hand and which they can analyze and use as a basis for questions they may want to ask their child or the teacher. There are two basic types of report cards: evaluative and descriptive. The differences between these two types of report cards usually reflect the teaching methods being used by the teacher.

An evaluative report card for most of us is the traditional report card with subjects listed and with the results achieved by the child expressed in numbers or letters. As well, these report cards usually have a space for the teacher to comment on the effort of the student or other issues of behavior. These report cards also indicate the success of the child in relation to the rest of the class. This type of report card is used when the teaching is "subject based" rather than "child-centered" (Please refer to "The Context." in Section Two.).

Ordinarily, the descriptive report card is provided by a teacher who is using a child-centered method of teaching. Subjects are usually not listed and even if they are marks using numbers or letters are not given. The thought here is that marks inhibit learning, make learning a competitive activity, and promote an attitude among the weaker students that they are failures. What this type of report card usually contains is written feedback from the teacher(s) about the attitude of the child, relationship with classmates and teachers, cooperation with others and comments on the portfolio which is the centerpiece of the child's academic work. With the portfolio, the traditional report card is set aside.

Assessment using a portfolio is based on the approach that students preserve in a portfolio their work (essays, results of research and so on) and then students are graded on all the work in the portfolio at the end of certain time frames, say four times a year. For this method to be revealing for parents, interviews with the teacher are essential. If the child has received remarks such as "achieved," "making progress" or "not yet," the parent needs to meet with the teacher to

know the meaning of these terms as measures of the success achieved by the child.

What parents must be on their guard about is the real meaning of the information in any type of report card. If the report card is descriptive, does it only measure the child against himself? For instance, a child in grade five may be doing much better than he did last year. However, the rest of the truth could be that even though he is doing much better than last year, he is still reading at a grade two level. Parents have to be vigilant without apologies about acquiring precise answers from their child's teacher during the interview if they hope to have a clear picture of the status of their child's success in school.

The report card is often the only tangible contact between the parent and the teacher. If the report card fails to convey understandable information, then a visit with the teacher coupled with a clear set of questions is advisable. Even if parents do understand the information, a visit with the teacher should be a must so that the teacher will know that you are aware of and understand what your child is doing.

OBJECTIVE: that the parent have a clear understanding of the success or lack of success of the child

QUESTION: How is the school work of my child to be evaluated?
How can I be sure that my child is performing at the level that is acceptable for his age or group?

COMPUTERS

The expanded use of computers is fairly recent which means that their impact on our lives and on the lives of our children has yet to be determined in a conclusive way. But the analysis has started and many reports have been written and are being written. Analysis suggests that parents and teachers should be very careful when allowing children to use computers

Computers operate in several ways. They have their operating software; games can be played on them; and they give access to the internet. It is estimated that a substantial number of children have computers in their room and a large percentage of those children have access to the internet. If television, computers and video games are combined, children could spend an average of almost five hours per day in front of a screen.

This information means that parents face yet another challenge while raising their children: control of computer use. Parents have to have a reason for limiting or excluding the use of computers, and, as argued earlier, television. Research provides only what are described as preliminary and partial analyses of the impact of computers on the development of children. While some are calling for a halt to the introduction of computers into our elementary school classrooms, at least until a more complete understanding of the impact they have on children is available, others advocate making computers easily available to preschool and elementary school children. What position should a parent take?

Here is a list of factors to consider:

- A. Research shows that computers can hamper the health, and the social and intellectual development of children. Children need to spend time with their parents with no screen present.
- B. Parents should put limits on screen time. Computers do not improve learning and may even make it worse. Give children

limited amounts of screen time. Do not let children have screens in their rooms; keep the screens where parents can monitor what children are watching.

- C. Though the existing research is inconclusive, many contend that in the final analysis computers do not encourage children to think.

Though research on the impact of screen time on the development of the child is extensive, the fact is that common sense combined with vigilance and a constant awareness of what a child is doing, at home and in school, is required of parents. Children have only one childhood and parents have to do all that they can to assure that it is well spent.

OBJECTIVE: that the extent of computer use by my child be kept at a reasonable level

QUESTION: How do parents determine this reasonable level?
What is the extent of computer use by my child in school?

How does the use of computers in school fit into the overall academic program?

TEXTBOOKS

The word “textbook” is defined by Webster’s New World Dictionary as a book giving instructions in the principles of a subject of study, specifically one used as the basis or partial basis of a course of study. The key word in this definition is “subject.” Textbooks deal with subjects and if the school your child is attending is child-centered rather than subject-based, then textbooks could possibly be considered redundant. (What a great way for the powers that be to save money.) They would be considered redundant because the learning in the child-centered mode is gained from hands on experience rather than statements in textbooks.

Another reason for objecting to textbooks is that some textbooks are simply bad. A bad textbook does not give a clear explanation of the topic under discussion, is poorly written, is not well organized and, finally, is very difficult to learn from. If the parent cannot understand what is being explained in the textbook, it is safe to assume that the child will not. Common sense should be applied here.

The fact that there are bad textbooks should not be grounds for rejecting good textbooks. The most effective teaching of subject matter can be achieved using a well-designed textbook. Further, a textbook can give parents a clear understanding of the subject matter to be covered during a single homework session or during the whole course. Thus, textbooks can be a very effective way of communication among the child, the teacher and the parent.

The availability of up-to-date textbooks is often a problem. There are many explanations, even when the teaching is subject-based, why proper textbooks are not available. The curriculum has been revised, but new textbooks for the revised curriculum are not available; the funds for textbooks are not available; in certain instances, the textbooks are not yet translated. Excuses abound. They should not be accepted; parents individually and through whatever committees are available should insist that relevant and well-written textbooks be provided to each child for each subject.

Of course, if the teaching method used in the classroom is child-centered, then textbooks are more likely to be declared redundant. Faced with such a situation, parents should have a discussion, with the teacher and/or the principal, of the teaching method being used and the reasons why. If parents are not satisfied with the textbook situation, they should discuss their concerns with the teacher. However, the more affective approach will likely be to bring the textbook issue to the school committee (in whatever form it takes in your school).

OBJECTIVE: that my child has the necessary textbooks (a textbook for each subject that he can bring home)?

QUESTION: Does the school provide each student with a textbook for each subject?

What does the school consider the role of textbooks to be?

WHAT IS TO BE LEARNED?

In order that parents focus their questions regarding what their child is to learn in school, dividing the school years as follows can help:

1. by grade or cycle,
2. by subject within each grade or cycle,
3. elementary school and
4. high school

Based on these divisions, the following questions are suggested.

QUESTION FOR GRADE LEVEL OR CYCLE: What specific content are children at this grade level or cycle level required to learn? Will this required content prepare the student to succeed at the next grade level or cycle level? (Will the child have the learning to be able to participate fully in the learning, in the discussions and in the activities of the next level?) How will the mastery of the content to be learned be evaluated? How will the parents be informed? Do not let the teacher or the principal give you a document or documents by way of an answer to your question. Demand a clear explanation in response to your question. (This applies to all answers that you may seek.)

QUESTION FOR THE SUBJECT WITHIN A GRADE OR CYCLE: What specific contents are students in this subject at this grade or cycle level required to learn? What teaching methods and learning methods are to be used to teach this content? How will the mastery of the content to be learned be evaluated? How will the parents be informed?

QUESTION FOR THE WHOLE OF THE ELEMENTARY LEVEL: At the end of elementary school, what knowledge is my child supposed to have mastered? How will my child's mastery of this knowledge be evaluated? How will parents be informed of the results of this measurement?

QUESTIONS FOR THE HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL: What specific content is to be mastered at the level of each grade or cycle? What content is to be mastered within each subject at each grade or cycle? At the end of high school, what knowledge is my child required to have mastered in order to be prepared for the next level? At each stage of high school, how will the required knowledge be evaluated? How will parents obtain the results of these evaluations?

The difficulty experienced by parents when asking the above questions is that the answers received are unclear. The answer may be unclear because the teacher has not been given a clear statement of what is to be covered within the given cycle or grade by his or her principal, or the government may not have given the information to the principal. Then again, the teacher may not be well organized. Parents should persist with their questions until they have clear answers. If you do not look after your child, who will?

DRUGS

Drugs are very much a part of the fabric of our society and are, therefore, sooner or later, a part of the fabric of school life. The purpose of this brief discussion is to remind parents of this fact and to suggest practical steps that can be taken.

Members of criminal organizations want to make money in whatever way possible. One way is to sell addictive, illicit drugs. The question that should be of concern to parents is where will these criminal organizations find a market for these drugs? The unfortunate answer is that one place is our children's schools. We must make no mistake about this fact.

Time and again some parents and some school officials will make the statement that, in our school, we do not have a drug problem. This attitude of denial plays into the hands of the drug salesman or pusher. The attitude of parents should be that, based on the fact that drugs are a part of the fabric of society, we must take steps to deal with drugs in our schools. Parents must not be in denial of this need for action.

At the elementary school level, parents should ask the school to provide information to the children in grades five and six, or in the third cycle, on three subjects: the devious ways that drugs are circulated, the negative effect that drugs can have on their lives and the need to discuss drugs frankly within the family. This kind of presentation will give the children the information they need to better contend with the drug scene in high school.

Having a member of the local police force give a talk on recognizing the various forms of drugs may not be that useful. Children usually have this kind of information; it is a part of the street culture.

At the high school level, parents should insist on the need for students to be educated with regard to illicit drugs. Parents should also ask about the policies or action plans that are in place to counter the distribution of drugs and to help students who are involved in drugs. Rest assured that the drug pushers are well organized; parents, students and school personnel must also be well organized. The most important thing to do is to raise the level of awareness among all those involved in

the struggle against alcohol and drugs. Especially should everyone understand the relationship between alcohol and drugs.

An understanding of the major role peer pressure can play in the initiation to drugs is useful. First, there is a very strong and natural desire on the part of the child to be popular. The street-smart kid, who wants to push whatever he is pushing, uses this desire for popularity. If a student wants to belong to a certain group, he has to fulfill the requirements for membership which could be simply that the student smoke a cigarette. This requirement can be a starting ploy. Then depending on age, beer can be next, then pot, then sex, and whatever else. Being popular can be very costly for the child and, inescapably, for the family.

Obviously, parents themselves should be sure that they are well informed. There are people in the community who can provide relevant information and guidance to parents. Evening sessions can be arranged to take place in your school.

OBJECTIVE: that both students and their parents be educated with regard to the potential impact of alcohol and drugs on the young

QUESTION: What steps are being taken by the school to enlighten children about drugs and alcohol?
Does the school have a means by which parents can become informed?

ACTIVITIES

“All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” Parents are well aware that life is not all work so there must be something else. Smart parents make sure that their children, at home or in school, have things to do during their free time. Gentle urging can be used to guide children to choose to participate in hobbies, games or sports at home and in school. The point is that constructive activities can provide an alternative to the dangers of being idle, for instance during noon hour at school.

The staff in our schools can use all the support that parents can give them to promote activities. Support can take many forms including going to the school to share an interest or skill with the students.

The bottom line is that children will not remain inactive when not at “work.” Constructive activities can prevent their becoming involved in destructive activities. Not only are constructive activities a positive influence; they are also a way to introduce students to a life-long skill: the understanding and management of leisure.

OBJECTIVE: that children make constructive use of their free time

QUESTION: In what ways does the school promote free-time activities?

Is there a way that I as a parent can help with free-time activities?

What can parents do at home to help their children use their free time constructively?

SECTION TWO

This section presents some of the issues that are fundamental to developing an understanding of the education a child receives and of the philosophy that forms the foundation of this education. The issues discussed include the legal context of the education system, the nature of the child, readiness to learn and a number of other topics.

THE CONTEXT

Education in Canada is a provincial rather than a federal jurisdiction. This means that in Canada, unlike in many countries, instead of one education system, there are a dozen or so government-controlled education systems. However, irrespective of the education system under consideration, there are many parallels among these systems. There is the government, an education act, a department of education, a minister of education, various committees reporting to the minister, complex regulations, school boards, councils of commissioners (or trustees), numerous committees, directors general and their staffs, school principals and their staffs, teachers, students and parents. In each system, many tiers of staff exist between the student and the minister. The reason for listing all these components of education systems is to remind all of us of the size and complexity of the system and also to make us realize the difficulty of changing how things are done.

One thing is clear: the government is in control of education through both legislation and regulation. The government controls finances, curriculum, textbooks, teacher certification, labor agreements, and, in large measure, the evaluation of learning, and so on. A reading of the various provincial education acts reveals a very clear distinction between the executive process and the consultative process. Very little, if any, executive power is in the hands of parents. All school level committees are limited in scope to the individual school and they are almost exclusively consultative. These committees fulfill a useful function by enabling elected parents to participate in the management of the school within legislated and regulated guidelines, and to lobby for change within their local school or at other levels. However, though these committees are important, it is not within these school-level committees, or even board-level committees, that parents fulfill their real educational task as parents.

What is that task? As noted earlier, parents by nature and by law have the primary responsibility for their children in all areas of their lives including education. My point is that the real influence on your

child's education is wielded outside of committees but within your own home and in the school.

The two most important individuals in the school are your child's teacher and the principal. These are the two people who have the direct responsibility for your child within the school and within the education system. They are the two individuals who will be able or should be able to answer whatever questions you may have about your child's education and about what goes on in the school and what the school expects of you as a parent. The purpose of Section One of this booklet is to determine the valid questions to ask of your child's teacher or of the principal, questions regarding your individual child. What follows here is more general in its scope.

In order to understand what happens in your child's school, it can help to understand one of the key phrases used in our schools: child-centered education. Across the world and through the years a battle has been and is being fought in our schools. As with all battles and wars, the first victim is the truth. The problem is that our children are in the midst of this war and, unfortunately, may be among its casualties or, to mix metaphors, its guinea pigs. These are not roles that you would approve for your children.

What is the crux of the problem? There are two sides to this battle. On one side are the "so-called" traditionalists and on the other are the "so-called" progressives. The traditionalists hold that the school must teach the child certain basic subject matter. The progressives hold that the school must recognize the developing needs and interests of the child and that the child spontaneously generates the forces that should govern how and what he is taught. The traditionalist approach is knowledge-based where the teacher teaches the subject matter to the children; the progressive approach is the child-centered one where the teacher is a facilitator and the child chooses the approach to the subjects that interest him.

This battle generates considerable heat and often not much light. The progressives view the traditionalists as regressive, as drill and kill artists, as back-to-basics pushers and so on. The traditionalists view the progressives as frivolous, misguided, utopian, inefficient betrayers of children. Allegedly, the traditionalists fit the child to the system while the progressives fit the system to the child. This essay will leave them

to their struggle and try to find the truth.

The problem, one that short changes the thought process, is the use of labels such as “child-centered”. I have always thought that the people who build schools, and hire principals and teachers, serve on boards and committees are child-centered because they were doing these things for our children. Since this term has been taken over by the progressives, it can no longer be used to describe those people who devote their lives to educating children: people who are centered on children but are not “child-centered.”

Let us be clear about one fact. Neither the traditionalists nor the progressives abhor the child. All those involved in education want the best for the child. But good intentions are not enough. Here is an analysis of the rationale that is at the basis of the opposing viewpoints of the traditionalists and the progressives.

The two polarities, let’s assume that they are polarities for the moment, feature the child and society. The rap against the traditionalists is that they force the child to conform to the mould that meets society’s needs rather than recognizing the needs of the child. I am convinced that this interpretation is wrong. The curriculum espoused by traditionalists is based on the one constant in the education system: the child. If there is to be any agreement on how and what should be taught to our children, then there has to be agreement on the nature of the child. If the nature of the child is not recognized and agreed upon, the possibility of agreeing on a curriculum and how it is to be taught is remote and likely impossible.

What is the nature of the child? (Please refer to the “Nature of the Child” which follows.) In other words, what are the powers that constitute the child’s nature and how are these powers to be developed? I cannot write a learned treatise on this subject. However, based on my own observations and what I have been taught, I think we must recognize that the child has a mind and the power to choose. What must parents and the schools do to assure that the child develops and uses the power of mind and of choice?

When our children reach a certain age in Canada, they come to us to ask for the car. If we agree to let them use this power of transport (and social status), then we give them the keys so that they will be able to access the power of the car; we empower them. Apply this

image to education; we want our children to be empowered as human beings and the keys to this empowerment are certain things that we can teach them, the means to use the two powers identified above. These means include the ability to read, to write, to communicate and to handle numbers. Dorothy L. Sayers calls these keys “the tools of learning.”² What she means is explained in her essay, “The Lost Tools of Learning.” She maintains that before the learning of knowledge can begin, the child must master the above skills (reading, writing and numerical skills) so that the power of the mind can be used.

These are the keys that we must supply to the child so that he can unlock the powers of his mind. Thus traditional education, contrary to the charges against it, is not founded on the needs of society, but rather on the recognition of what the child needs to fully exploit his human powers and thus become a successful member of human society.

In the many conversations that I have had with progressive, child-centered people, they generally agree that the child must have the basic skills necessary to be a functional human being. So on the face of it, there seems to be common ground between the traditionalists and the progressives. Yet they seldom agree on much else. The question becomes in what way do these differences have a bearing on the child in the school? The answer is in the approach to teaching, the ways the teacher deals with the child in the classroom.

If it is simply a matter of teaching method, then the task facing a parent is not to argue teaching philosophy with the teachers or the principals. The task for parents is to know what they want their children to be taught and to learn, and then to assure themselves that this teaching and learning is taking place. This text is intended to help parents in their approach to the school so that they can successfully assure themselves that their child is learning how to control the keys to the mind.

² Dorothy L. Sayers, The Lost Tools of Learning (London, 1947) 28

THE NATURE OF THE CHILD

When curriculum is being designed, attention should be paid to the nature of the child for whom it is being designed. That there should be some unchanging foundation for curriculum is an idea that does not get much recognition. Otherwise we would not be subjected to recurrent changes to what is taught to our children and how it is taught without reference to any guiding principle. The rationale for changes to curriculum usually consists of a list of expedient and vague factors designed to meet challenges such as the new millennium or some other allegedly pressing need. The problem with this approach is that the basis for the change is subject to change, therefore, the curriculum is also subject to change. We have to ask ourselves if there is a constant, something that does not change that can serve as a foundation for the design of curriculum and teaching methods.

My opinion is that there is such a constant and it is usually overlooked; that constant is the nature of the child. A reading of government documents, remember that the government designs and approves our curriculum, reveals no mention of the nature of the child. One could logically assume that a clear recognition and description of this nature would be an important factor to be taken into consideration when curriculum is being designed. If the government appears to have ignored the nature of the child, then you as parents must come to some understanding of the child's nature if you are to understand what your child needs to learn and how he is going to learn it. Then you will be able to ask those questions the answers to which should give you a clear picture of your child's life in school.

It would seem logical to state that, since the child is a human being, it follows that the child has a human nature. Many reject this notion, but their rejection does not change reality. This document presumes that the child possesses a human nature. A description of the many facets of the human nature of the child, and all of us, is beyond the scope and purpose of this essay.

Here is a simple diagram:

FACETS OF HUMAN NATURE:

Intellect or Mind

Free Will

Soul

CHARACTERISTICS:

Rational

Moral

Spiritual

AGENT:*

School

Parents

Church

(*In my listing of the agents, I highlight the parents because they have the primary responsibility to develop in their children the three listed characteristics. However, parents can receive support from the school and/or their church in developing these characteristics.)

The above diagram provides a simple reference, for many simplistic, to the nature of the child. If we are to understand each other, we have to have some common ground with regard to the basic nature of the child.

It is a fact that the intellect or the mind must have words in order to function. In order for a child to formulate ideas and to communicate these ideas to others, words are necessary. This observation points out the obvious. Yet, in the development of curriculum and the methods of teaching, this simple fact seems often to be ignored. We must realize that in the development of the child all the basic facets of human nature must be recognized and their needs met. We must avoid the tragedy of having our children graduate from high school in a state of illiteracy, and thus be doomed to a life of frustration during which their human powers are trapped within an undeveloped mind. Such a child has not been given power over words, and words are the keys to the mind.

READINESS TO LEARN

Every subject connected to education has been exhaustively researched. Choose one side of an issue and you can certainly find research that supports your side of that issue; this approach is often referred to as selective research. One way to avoid being confused by all this research is to use common sense. Parents have to have faith in their own common-sense-based judgement.

What is common sense? Though it has never been clearly defined, the best explanation is that it is a measure of how well connected an idea is to reality. Reality in this context is your children and the world in which they live.

In this chapter, “Readiness to Learn,” two ideas are dealt with. The first is that the child who is ready to learn when he starts grade one will have greater success throughout his school years. The second is that if a child is not as ready to learn as the others in grade one, then the school should have a program to assure that by the end of grade two the child has acquired the necessary readiness to learn.

Faced with these two ideas, parents have to examine their role in developing their child’s readiness to learn. Given that parents are the primary care givers for their children, then it is up to them to be sure their child is made ready to learn when he starts grade one.

Based on my experience when I started to school, I know that being ready to learn is an advantage. Before I started school, my parents encouraged me to learn the alphabet, to read simple texts (the Baby, Sally and Joe readers), and to count. I was very proud of myself when demonstrating my learning to the teacher. Others in grade one could not do these things. At the time, this lack on their part did not seem important. Unfortunately, though they tried, they never did catch up and never did complete high school.

This idea of catching up is important. If a child is not as ready to learn as others in grade one, then there should be an adjustment to the curriculum by the school to help him or her to catch up by the end of grade two. The inequities that exist at the start of grade one can be remedied. Consequently, it is very important that parents determine

that their child, unless there is a learning disability involved, is up to speed by the end of grade two. If this equity is not given to a child, that child could be at a disadvantage throughout his or her school years and beyond.

Two blunt facts emerge: First, parents must help their pre-school child to become ready to learn. Second the failure to do so means that, if the school does not have a catch-up program that prepares the child for grade three, then the child is in danger of forever trying to catch up and in the long run could have limited success in school and beyond.

CONSTRUCTIVISM

Constructivism is a theory of learning based on the idea that only constructed knowledge, knowledge that a person discovers for himself based on what he remembers, is really understood and retained. The key word here is 'only.'

There is no denying that memory is essential for learning. If a person cannot recall an experience or a fact, we can say that this person does not know the experience or fact. The tragedy of Alzheimer's disease demonstrates this point. A person afflicted with advanced Alzheimer's disease cannot remember and, it follows, that because he or she cannot remember an experience or a fact, it means that they do not know the experience or fact in question. This example is intended to show the simple truth that memory is essential if there is to be learning.

Now to deal with the word 'only.' The problem with constructivism is not with the fact that learning is based on memory, but with the idea that the only way for a person to learn things is for the individual to construct them for himself; the idea that learning could come from an outside source is rejected. This rejection seems to reduce the role of the teacher to that of a facilitator or coordinator of classroom activity rather than a person who teaches knowledge to students.

To agree that children can only learn for themselves is also to agree that the student must determine what he or she will learn. This child-centered approach means that the knowledge-based or subject-based approach to teaching and learning is set aside. To pursue this child-centered approach to its logical conclusion, questions must be answered. How does a teacher function in a classroom in which twenty-five or so students are free to choose for themselves what they will learn? Is it possible that child-centered learning can lead to self-centered learning and other self-centered behavior?

After all is said, the plain fact is that students can learn either by themselves or from others. One way of learning does not exclude the other. Furthermore, perhaps parents are better able to judge what and how their children should be taught than are educational specialists, and parents are certainly better judges of these matters than are their

children. Finally, the established theories of learning, and the role of memory in the learning process renders this restricted application of the theory of constructivism highly questionable.

A NOTE ON CONSTRUCTIVISM IN MATHEMATICS:

The theory of constructivism originated in mathematics. Here it is in brief: The assertion that there is a mathematical “object with a given property is an assertion that one knows how to find or construct such an object.” The objection of realists to this idea is that “mathematical objects exist independent of the mind of the mathematician.”³ This position raises a very relevant question for the learning process of students. Does knowledge exist independently of the individual? The response to this question certainly has a bearing on the role of the teacher in the classroom. A discussion for another time.

³. Stuart Shapiro, “Constructivism,” The Oxford Companion to Philosophy (1995) 159

MY CHILD RIGHT OR WRONG

This is a short comment on a problem that arises occasionally between the parents and the school. Certain parents take a very uncritical view of their child and are very unwilling to admit that he may be misbehaving in school. Consequently, when the teacher or the principal contacts the parents about the problem, the parental reaction is one of anger and rejection of the claim that the child has misbehaved.

When the teacher or the principal calls, parents should respond calmly and they should determine what exactly their child has done. The thing for parents to remember is that the child is watching his parents to see how they handle the complaint. If the child realizes that his parents are taking his side in the discussion while rejecting out of hand the remarks of the teacher or principal, you can be almost certain that there will be further misbehavior.

Parents should realize that the teacher or the principal has the same objective as they have which is to educate the child to be a responsible and successful adult. Should you, as a parent, receive such a call from a teacher or the principal, keep this fact in mind. As well, parents should not discuss their child's teacher in front of the child. Respect for authority, yours and the teacher's, has to be given a chance to develop.

SOCIAL PROBLEMS

As a child goes through elementary school to high school, there are many difficulties, other than academic ones, that must be overcome. One dimension that children who are home-schooled may miss is the development of those social skills, sometimes referred to as street smarts, necessary to survive in the context of a school and in the context of society. While these skills are important to the social well being of the child, parents must be on the alert for the extremes that can come about. For instance, bullying and other forms of aggressiveness can be a problem.

There are a number of factors that contribute to social difficulties in school: families that are dysfunctional (poverty, divorce, alcoholism, financial difficulties, etc.), teachers, administrators and others who are unobservant or lacking in the proper training, lack of individual attention to students, and various other factors. Antisocial behavior in school is a fact of life. Failure of the school staff to recognize such behavior and to deal with it effectively is not acceptable. Nor is the failure of parents to accept the fact that their child may need help an acceptable reaction. The staff and the parents must work together to help the child.

In the sixties, there was an evolution in education that many think is to some degree a cause of the social problems in school. The first was the creation of larger schools and the other was the school bus system to transport students to the larger schools.

Larger schools, both elementary schools and high schools, were to provide more and better services, a broader curriculum, and a host of other advantages. But these advantages brought the following disadvantages: loss of control over the behavior of students, the inability of all teachers and staff to know the names of all students, loss of recognition of students as individuals (I am just a number here.), a general failure to develop school spirit and a sense of belonging, a feeling on the part of students that nobody really cares, and so on.

The school bus is in many ways the bane of student life. A large number of students with a lone driver, often for a long trip, means

that bullies, drug pushers, and others have more freedom to do their thing. And the busing of children, especially elementary school children, takes the parents out of the picture. The small elementary school located within the community and which parents could control to quite a degree has been closed in favor of the bigger school generally located outside their community.

Experience shows that large schools often do not work well. The alleged financial efficiency is often purchased at too great a price. However, since the large schools have been built, the evolution back to smaller schools will be difficult; the money has already been spent and officials do not want to lose face.

Many parents turn to private schools that have one important feature in common: they are relatively small. While they may not have all of the services and other so-called advantages of the large schools, they do offer considerable individual attention.

As you see, this is a very cursory coverage of a very complicated topic. The issues raised are often debated by various players in the field of education and an in depth presentation is not possible here. What is important is that the student should receive individual attention. Everyone has strengths and each of us likes to be recognized, by our peers, by our parents and by our teachers, for these strengths be they academic, athletic, or artistic. And if students have difficulties, which they sometimes cannot recognize by themselves, they should be able to receive help. Life is worth living when we are with people who care, people who reach out to us.

Another cause of difficulty for students, especially at the high school level, is to be inarticulate. My suspicion is that many students who act badly do so out of frustration. Here I return to my plea for a thorough training in language as the tool or the key that gives the student access to those mental powers that make him human. Once confidently in charge of these powers, the world is a much more pleasant place to spend our days.

THE GOOD TEACHER

The basis of the successful school is the good teacher. Fine buildings and modern facilities are important but it is the successful teacher who enables the school to fulfill its mission. What follows is a short description of the good teacher.

Good teachers must possess intellectual competence that includes a mastery of the subject that they teach. They teach, keep up to date in their field, and possess a capacity for analysis. Coupled with these qualities must be a willingness to allow for rational opposition and critical comments by students.

Intellectual competence must be accompanied by a level of patience toward beginners which accepts as natural that the uninitiated will have trouble as they grope their way towards understanding. What is simple and obvious to the teacher, depends for the student, as was noted earlier, on what antecedent skills and knowledge he already possesses. The good teacher is always conscious of this difficulty in the learning process.

Planning is another feature of a good teacher. The trick is to plan a lesson without imposing it in a rigid way on a class. The teacher plans his presentation of a subject so that it leads to discussion and understanding. The student should be able to see where the teacher is going and where the student is expected to go. Making classroom presentations that permit and, even more important, encourage spontaneity of student reaction is essential.

The good teacher has also to possess a common-sense knowledge of human beings. This quality is necessary when dealing with individual students and when motivating and evoking participation in class. The realization that a subject cannot be continuously fresh, is a fact of a teacher's life. For the teacher, the art of teaching is not one of personal discovery, but of communication. Faced with a timeworn subject, the stimulation must come from the teacher's evident love of truth and the student's desire to discover the truth.

As conventional wisdom goes, the teacher must know how to relate to his students. The good teacher has compassion. An intellectually strong teacher who does not have compassion can do more harm than good. The teacher must have a positive concern of the needs of others. Students respond very positively to a sympathetic teacher. This reaction will manifest itself in their willingness to do more and, therefore, they will achieve more.

A person without a vision is a person who has no clear idea of where he is going. For a teacher vision is crucial to his role as a teacher; he needs vision to inspire excellence. This vision can be, among others, a belief, a dream, a hope or an ambition. This vision can lift the hearts and minds of the students beyond the immediate concerns of today. It can give them a larger context within which to develop intellectually, morally, spiritually and socially.

These are the qualities of the good teacher. The challenge for the teacher is to develop and increase his possession of these qualities. The challenge for administrators and whomever else is involved, when they are hiring teachers, is to find for their schools teachers who possess in good measure these qualities of the good teacher. Our children will then be the beneficiaries of good teaching.

STUDENT PROMOTION

Governments, school boards and their officials abhor failure. Successful students are the key to their receiving a positive assessment. As governments and their agencies strive for success and our tax dollars, they can take a number of steps that can deceive students and their parents. Here are examples.

The results of government administered examinations can be manipulated so that the percentage of students who pass these examinations can be put at a level deemed acceptable. Consequently, if an 80% success rate is judged to be appropriate, then the results obtained by the students can be manipulated, bell curved, to give an 80% success rate. What this manipulation means is that a student who scored 55% on his examination could have a 74% after the manipulation. His mark is bumped up but, of course, his level of knowledge remains the same. Sadly both he and his parents are more than likely totally unaware of this situation which can cause failure at the next level.

Some government systems require social promotion. This means that at a certain age, say age thirteen, all children are promoted to high school, and then at age eighteen, they are given a high school diploma. The amount of knowledge acquired by the student is not the central concern; the success rate of the system is. This success is measured by dividing the number of students who started in grade one by the number of students who graduate from high school.

Any such scheme promoted by a government to enable it to state that its educational system is a success must be recognized and resisted by parents. If students are in such a system, it is possible that they will not acquire the learning and the knowledge upon which success in life is based.

CONCLUSION

This booklet is intended to benefit parents and children. Hopefully, the questions suggested at the front of this booklet, the answers that you receive to them and the contents of this booklet itself will help you to meet the challenges that you face when seeking to be sure that your children become educated.

Clear answers to these questions, or to your own questions, are the key to understanding clearly the educational process your children are undergoing. Insisting on these answers will sometimes be difficult. Occasionally, the principal or teacher, using the approach that they are the experts and that they know what is good for your child, will dismiss your questions as irrelevant. You know that this response is not acceptable. You would not let your child's doctor answer you thusly.

You should require clear answers and you should insist on getting them. It is worth repeating the statement that if you do not look after your children it is unlikely that others will.

The approach that the school takes to educating your child can be at the extremes either of the traditional approach or the progressive approach, or, as some disarmingly say, a healthy balance between these extremes. The definition or description of this healthy balance is often very vague leaving the parent with no clear information.

A direct approach is to look at what are called the unnatural (artificial) and the natural approaches to education: the classical versus the romantic or the traditionalist versus the progressive. There is a place for the natural processes of learning. As indicated earlier in this booklet, it is a natural process for the child to learn to speak a language, but it is not a natural process to learn to read and to write and to master numerical skills. The shortcoming of the progressives is that they insist that the child can learn the unnatural subjects, such as reading or mathematics, using a natural method like whole language, for reading, or real world, hands-on methods, for mathematics. Reading, writing (grammar and spelling) and mathematics (multiplication tables for starters) are not natural processes; to try to have children learn these subjects using natural methods is almost always counter productive and inefficient.

Rather than get caught up in the battle between the natural and the unnatural methods, or the classicists and the romantics, or the traditionalists and the progressives, parents must determine what they think their child needs to be a complete human being and then determine whether or not their child is receiving what is needed.

My experience shows that arguing with progressives about education is akin to arguing against a religious belief. Rather than arguing, parents should remember that each child possesses a human nature and that this nature has specific needs that must be met.

And the essential need is the mastery of that unnatural, man-made code used to express and record thoughts: words. Words are the keys to the mind. We should always remember that if an individual does not master words then words will master that individual.

Finally, parents should face this task of guiding and supporting their children with a positive attitude. Remember to make learning a happy time for your family because if it isn't enjoyable who will want to be bothered with it? And we do want our children to pursue learning. Our democratic system of government depends on the participation of educated, informed and thinking citizens. We depend on our children to carry on our traditions.

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J. E. Murphy possesses a Master's Degree in English Literature and an undergraduate degree in the social sciences. He studied economics, sociology, education, philosophy, theology, and literature at Saint Dunstan's University, the University of Montreal, and Laval University. He has teaching diplomas for the provinces of Prince Edward Island and Quebec.

Mr. Murphy taught high school full time for eleven years. As well, he has taught at the college and university levels. He was director general, academic dean and chairman of the Board of Governors of Quebec Saint Lawrence College for the 1971-1972 academic year. Upon successfully negotiating an affiliation with Champlain Regional College, he was director of Champlain-St. Lawrence (CEGEP) for twenty-four years until his retirement in 1996.

Mr. Murphy is married to Mary Lou O'Grady. They have seven children all of whom are university graduates.

He was a member of several school committees (home and school committees in some provinces), at both the elementary and secondary levels, over a span of sixteen years and served as chairman for twelve years. During that time, he was for two years a member of a school-board-wide parent committee. Mr. Murphy has also served and is now serving on the boards of other organizations and their committees. In 1997-1998, he was a vice-chairman of the transitional board leading to the creation of the Central Quebec School Board under the educational reforms of the Province of Quebec. Since 1998, he has served as vice-chairman of that board.

AS PARENTS we strive to provide our children with an education that will enable them to live successful and happy lives. This booklet offers some insights into the world of education that are intended to help parents to meet the challenge of assuring a well-balanced education for their children, an education that takes into consideration the true human nature of the child.
