THE NEW DEPARTURE IN THE COMMON SCHOOLS OF QUINCY AND OTHER PAPERS ON EDUCATIONAL TOPICS

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by Charles F. Adams

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BY

Francis

CHARLES F. ADAMS, JR.

I.—THE PUBLIC LIBRARY AND THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS.
II.—FICTION IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES, AND EDUCATIONAL CATALOGUES.
III.—THE NEW DEPARTURE IN THE COMMON SCHOOLS OF QUINCY.

BOSTON:
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1879.

PREFACE.

As a rule anything worth publishing at all should, I think, explain itself, and stand in no need of a preface. In the present case, however, I feel that some apology is necessary for my — a mere amateur — offering to specialists these discussions of matters relating to their calling. I can only say that for quite a number of years now I have been actively concerned in the management of the Common Schools and Public Library of Quincy. Whether the observation and experience thus locally obtained are likely to prove of any general interest, I do not care to discuss; meanwhile, as I may now claim a speedy discharge from work of this description, on the ground of having done my full share, I prefer, for my own satisfaction, to put on file some evidence of my ten years' participation in it.

QUINCY, August 1, 1879.

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY AND THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

A PAPER PREPARED FOR THE TEACHERS OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF QUINCY, MASS., AND READ TO THEM ON THE 19TH OF MAY, 1876.

As the result of a conversation I some time since had with our School Superintendent, Mr. Parker, and at his suggestion, I propose this afternoon to say a few words to you about books and reading; on the use, to come directly to the point, which could be made of the Public Library of the town in connection with the school system in general, and more particularly with the High and upper-grade Grammar Schools. I say "*could* be made" intentionally, for I am very sure that use is not now made; and why it is not made is a question which, in my double capacity of a member of the School Committee and a trustee of the Public Library, I have during the last few years puzzled over a good deal.

You are all teachers in the common schools of the town of Quincy, and I very freely acknowledge that I think your course as such, especially of late, has been marked by a good deal of zeal, by a consciousness of progress, and a sincere desire to accomplish good results. I am disposed neither to find fault with you nor with our schools, — as schools go. I should like, however, to ask you this simple question: — Did it ever, after all, occur to you, what is the great end and object of all this common school system?—Why do we get all these children together, and labor over them so assiduously year after year? — Now, it may well be that it never suggested itself in that way to you, but I think it may safely be asserted that the one best possible result of a common-school education, — its great end and aim, — should be to prepare the children of the community for the far greater work of educating themselves.

Now, in education, as in almost everything else, there is a

strong tendency among those engaged in its routine work to mistake the means for the end. I am always struck with this in going into the average public school. It was especially the case in the schools of this town four years ago. Arithmetic, grammar, spelling, geography, and history were taught, as if to be able to answer the questions in the text-books was the great end of all education. It was instruction through a perpetual system of conundrums. The child was made to learn some queer definition in words, or some disagreeable puzzle in figures, as if it was in itself an acquisition of value, — something to be kept and hoarded like silver dollars, as being a handy thing to have in the house. The result was that the scholars acquired with immense difficulty something which they forgot with equal ease; and, when they left our grammar schools, they had what people are pleased to call the rudiments of education, and yet not one in twenty of them could sit down and write an ordinary letter, in a legible hand, with ideas clearly expressed, and in words correctly spelled; and the proportion of those who left school with either the ability or desire to further educate themselves was scarcely greater.

Perhaps you may think this an exaggeration on my part. If you do, I can only refer you to the examination papers of the candidates for admission during any year to our High School. I have had occasion to go over many sets of them, and I assure you they warrant the conclusion I have drawn.

Going a step further and following the scholar out into grown-up life, I fancy that a comparison of experiences would show that scarcely one out of twenty of those who leave our schools ever further educate themselves in any great degree, outside, of course, of any special trade or calling through which they earn a living. The reason of this, I would now suggest, is obvious enough; and it is not the fault of the scholar. It is the fault of a system which brings a community up in the idea that a poor knowledge of the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic constitutes in itself an education. Now, on the contrary, it seems to me that the true object of all your labors as real teachers, if indeed you are such, — the great end of the common-school system, is something more than to teach children to read; it should, if it is to accomplish its full mission, also impart to them a love of reading.

A man or woman whom a whole childhood spent in the common schools has made able to stumble through a newspaper, or labor through a few trashy books, is scarcely better off than one who cannot read at all. Indeed, I doubt if he or she is as well off, for it has long been observed that a very small degree of book knowledge almost universally takes a depraved shape. The animal will come out. The man who can barely spell out his newspaper confines his spelling in nine cases out of ten to those highly seasoned portions of it which relate to acts of violence, and especially to murders. Among those who make a profession of journalism this is a perfectly well known fact; and any one who doubts it may satisfy himself on the subject almost any day by a few words of inquiry at a news-stand. Mr. Souther, in this town, I fancy, could impart to any of you, who happen to be curious, a considerable amount of information under this head. A little learning is proverbially a dangerous thing; and the less the learning the greater the danger.

Let us recur, then, to my cardinal proposition, that the great end of all school education is to make people able to educate themselves. You start them; that is all the best teacher can do. Whether he is called a professor and lectures to great classes of grown men at a university, or is a country school-master who hammers rudiments into children, he can do no more than this; but this every teacher, if he chooses, can do. How very few do it though! Not one out of ten; — scarcely one out of twenty. It is here our system fails.

I do not know that what I am about to suggest has ever been attempted anywhere, but I feel great confidence that it would succeed; therefore, I would like to see it attempted in Quincy. Having started the child by means of what we call a common-school course, — having, as it were, learned it to walk, — the process of further self-education is to begin. The great means of self-education is through books — through much reading of books. But just here there is in our system of instruction a missing link. In our schools we teach children to read; — we do not teach them *how* to read. That, the one all-important thing, — the great connecting link between school-education and self-education, — between means and end, — that one link we make no effort to supply. As

long as we do not make an effort to supply it, our school system in its result is and will remain miserably deficient. For now, be it remembered, the child of the poorest man in Quincy — the offspring of our paupers even — has an access as free as the son of a millionnaire, or the student of Harvard College, to what is, for practical general use, a perfect library. The old days of intellectual famine for the masses are over, and plenty reigns. Yet, though the school and the library stand on our main street side by side, there is, so to speak, no bridge leading from the one to the other. As far as I can judge we teach our children the mechanical part of reading, and then we turn them loose to take their chances. If the child has naturally an inquiring or imaginative mind, it perchance may work its way unaided through the traps and pitfalls of literature; but the chances seem to me to be terribly against it. It is so very easy, and so very pleasant too, to read only books which lead to nothing, — light and interesting and exciting books, and the more exciting the better, — that it is almost as difficult to wean ourself from it as from the habit of chewing tobacco to excess, or of smoking the whole time, or of depending for stimulus on tea or coffee or spirits. Yet here, — on the threshold of this vast field, you might even call it this wilderness of general literature, full as it is of holes and bogs and pitfalls all covered over with poisonous plants, — here it is that our common-school system brings our children, and, having brought them there, it leaves them to go on or not, just as they please; or, if they do go on, they are to find their own way or to loose it, as it may chance.

I think this is all wrong. Our educational system stops just where its assistance might be made invaluable, — just where it passes out of the mechanical and touches the individual, — just where instruction ceases to be drudgery and becomes a source of pleasure. Now, I do not propose for myself any such task as an attempted radical reform of education. Each man has his own work to do, and that is not mine. What I do want to suggest to you Grammar School teachers is that it is in the power of each one of you to introduce a great spirit of improvement into your own schools, and at the same time the greatest pleasure and interest a true teacher can have into your own lives.

You know it is said that poets are born, not made; and the same

is true of teachers. For myself, I don't think I could teach; — if I had to take my choice I would rather break stones in the highway; and yet other and better men than I would rather teach than do anything else. There is Dr. Dimmock at the Academy, for instance. He found his place in life, and a great one too, only when he got behind the master's desk. He was born to teach boys, and, with much happiness to himself and them, he is fulfilling his destiny. But, though I never could teach myself, I can see clearly enough that the one thing which makes the true teacher and which distinguishes him from the mechanical pedagogue, which any man may become, is the faculty of interesting himself in the single pupil, — seeing, watching, aiding the development of the individual mind. I never tried it, but I know just what it must be from my own experience in other matters. I have a place here in town, for instance, upon which I live; and there I not only grow fields of corn and carrots, but also a great many trees. Now, my fields of corn or carrots are to me what a mechanical pedagogue's school is to him. I like to see them well ordered and planted in even rows, all growing exactly alike, and producing for each crop so many bushels of corn or carrots to the acre, one carrot being pretty nearly the same as another; — and then, when the Autumn comes and the farming term closes, I prepare my land, as the pedagogue does his school-room, for the next crop; — and the last is over and gone. It is not so, however, with my trees. They are to me just what his pupils are to the born school-master, — to Dr. Dimmock, for instance; in each one I take an individual interest. I watch them year after year, and see them grow and shoot out and develop. Now let me apply my simile. You are, all of you, I hope, and if you are not you at least believe yourselves to be, born teachers, and not mechanical pedagogues; so, of course, your schools ought to be to you, not mere fields in which you turn out regular crops of human cabbages and potatoes, but they should be plantations also in which you raise a few trees, at least, in the individual growth of which you take a master's interest. This feeling and this only it is which can make a teacher's life ennobling, — the finding out among his pupils those who have in them the material of superior men and women, and then nurturing them and aiding in their development, and making of them something which, but for their