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The Downfall in Education

With school turning out more runners, jumpers, racers, tinkers, grabbers, snatchers, fliers, and swimmers instead of examiners, critics, knowers, and imaginative creators, the word 'intellectual' became the swear word it deserved to be. You always dread the unfamiliar. Surely you remember the boy in your own school class who was exceptionally 'bright', did most of the reciting and answering while the others sat like so many leaden idols, hating him. And wasn't it this bright boy you selected for beatings and tortures after hours? Of course it was. We must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone *made* equal. Each man the image of every other; then all are happy for there are no mountains to make them cower, to judge themselves against. So! A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it. Take the shot from the weapon. Breach man's mind. Who knows who might be the target of the well-read man?¹

This quote is from Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, a book considered by many to be a scarily accurate description of current American culture. In this excerpt he describes the decline of the school system in the world of *Fahrenheit 451*. Bradbury mentions two key points of this decline that are mirrored in American schools: a hatred of 'intellectuals'—those who seek truth, and a desire to eliminate differences between people. This combination of everyone having their own truth and a need for a 'classless' educational setting has created a downfall in educational quality because such an environment is antithetical to maintaining a high standard of quality.

History texts have been dumbed down; that is, vital parts of their curriculum has been cut out by publishers. Using buzzwords such as 'multiculturalism' and 'religious equality', editors have pushed their writers to include stories that involve minorities, regardless of the actual relevance of that historical episode. In fact, editors have cut out stories of important white male characters and replaced them with less important stories about minorities. Even when such extreme editing has not entirely eclipsed a narrative, history is very poorly covered. A study by

1 Bradbury, Ray, *Fahrenheit 451* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1953), .

the American Textbook Council found that in the history textbook *The United States and its Neighbors*, “Abraham Lincoln warrants two paragraphs, slightly more than Molly Pitcher, a minor heroine of the Revolutionary War. Valley Forge goes unmentioned. The production of potatoes, blueberries, and cranberries in New England receives approximately the same coverage as the history of the Progressive movement. World War II is covered in less than four pages, introduced with the subhead, ‘Another War.’”² However, examples of racial favoritism are not scarce either. In the same book a large four-color print of Tony Anaya, who was the governor of New Mexico for four years, is featured. Why? “The evident, grim answer,” the American Textbook Council reports, “is that Anaya is of Hispanic birth, thereby providing [the publisher] a chance to score some political points...” They go on to say, “This willingness to distort in order to mention and appease various interest groups marks many of the history textbooks assessed in this study, much to the consternation of this assessment's reviewers, who repeatedly noted how crude and obvious, not to say meretricious, most of these efforts were.”³ Also, in the interests of separation of church and state editors have cut religion almost entirely out of their texts, replacing religious motivations with economic or political motivations. A 1986 study of textbooks reported that “Children reading a typical fifth-grade U.S. History text would reasonably come to the conclusion that religion was either no longer practiced in this country or that it had long since ceased to have meaningful impact on its history, institutions, or social movements. The excision of religion was so thorough...that even a social studies text that devotes thirty pages to the Pilgrims includes not a single word or image about the Pilgrim's religion or the role that religion might have played in their decision to come to this country.”⁴ These omissions from history texts ultimately penalize our children by leaving them uneducated on key

2 Sykes, Charles, *Dumbing Down Our Kids: Why American Children Feel Good About Themselves But Can't Read, Write, Or Add* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 133-134.

3 Ibid., 134.

4 Ibid., 135.

points of our history.

History texts are far from the only texts to have received such a treatment. Math text writers have changed their emphasis from learning mathematical identities and facts, such as the multiplication tables, to ‘new math’. New Math emphasizes using computers and calculators as early as kindergarten.⁵ The philosophy behind this holds that because experienced mathematicians use computers, students should learn math with computers. This is akin to arguing that an experienced cyclist doesn't need training wheels, so why would we give them to beginners? We have training aids for a reason—to help teach people how to do something. Once they understand how something is done, then they can use shortcuts (tools, advanced methods, etc.). Replacing math basics with calculators prevents students from learning how math actually works and instead teaches them to trust in the black box that is their calculator. The root problem is best summed up by Charles Sykes, “But mathematics is more than merely function. It is a mental discipline that trains the mind for logical, ordered thinking that in turn provides students with the tools to move to higher and higher levels of reasoning and calculations. Ironically, experience shows that it is the well-trained mind that is more practical than the strictly functional approach.”⁶ New Math also brings in an element of ‘feel-good mathematics’. That is, it tries to use ‘math’ problems to teach concepts like sharing. Take, for example, this first grade math problem: “There are ten children in the small school Samuel goes to. There are five jars of paint. How many children can paint?” Bob Unger, a New York attorney and talk show host, tried to solve that problem for several hours after his son asked him for help. He eventually faxed it to the school, which informed him that the correct answer was, “If they share, they can all paint.” He commented, “That's math? It's a nice lesson in sharing—but does it teach students the basic

5 Ibid., 119.

6 Ibid., 120

math facts they'll need in life?”⁷ New math's failure to teach basic math facts extends far beyond first grade math classes. The NCTM (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics) put together a set of standards for math instructors. It pointed out that math was needed for, “business, economics, linguistics, biology, medicine, and sociology,” but qualifies that by commenting, “However, the fundamental mathematical ideas needed in these areas are not necessarily those studied in the traditional algebra-geometry-precalculus-calculus sequence, a sequence designed with engineering and physical science in mind.” Sykes comments, “...despite all of the educationist rhetoric about higher-level mathematical thinking and problem solving, the new New Math marks a sharp turn away from preparing students for the most competitive scientific and technical fields.”⁸ New Math is failing to equip students with the proper mindset, knowledge, and skills to compete in the math, science, and technology arenas.

Science class is likewise being rewritten to “emphasize doing instead of merely knowing.”⁹ What does this mean? Eighth grade students spend time imitating animals' actions and make collages of scientists. They trace pictures. They engage in “‘creative’, ‘motivating’, ‘hands-on’ education”.¹⁰ Teachers focus on scientists as people and almost completely ignore their scientific contributions, going as far as assigning students to make artwork of particular scientists. (One author of a letter to the editor said about this, “Are we to believe that Charles Darwin excelled due to his proficiency at scribbling uncanny portraits of other scientists at work?”¹¹)

Overall, academic standards have been lowered as well. Students are given a grade based on whether or not they turned their homework in. They are allowed to retake tests until they pass.

7 Stormer, John, *None Dare Call It Education: The documented account of how education “reforms” are undermining academics and traditional values* (Florissant, Mo.: Liberty Bell Press, 1999), 4-5.

8 Sykes, 125.

9 Ibid., 5.

10 Ibid., 6.

11 Ibid.

Why? Students need to be allowed to take their time and set their own goals for learning. Grading them based on their performance would discourage them, and thereby hamper their learning. As well, it helps to lessen the disparity in grades between smart and less-talented students. Ostensibly, this is to make students feel better about themselves, but it also helps teachers and schools by improving their ratings. In fact, many schools set performance goals that can only be achieved by manipulating grades and lowering standards. One example: “In its goal statement, Milwaukee’s suburban Whitnall district declared that ‘By 1996-97, *all* students will demonstrate 100% proficiency in the District’s performance outcomes.’ Whitnall school board member Ted Mueller quotes one astute resident remarking, ‘If we require *all* students to be able to stuff a basketball to be able to graduate from high school, the only way you’re going to be able to accomplish that is to lower the basketball hoop.’”¹²

The effects of such curriculum changes—the so-called ‘dumbing down’ of school texts—have been widespread. Probably the most immediately visible effect has been a loss of the reputation of American Schools. It is an almost universal observation that Americans receive a lower quality education than most other modern nations. Headlines across the US confirm this: “City Schools Get Poor Grades In Survey...SAT Scores Fall To New Low...College Test Scores Lowest Since Mid-1950s...Students Today Have Vocabulary Problems, Educator Says...City 8th Graders Slip Again In Basic Skills Test Scores...Cleveland Pupils Do Poorly On Test...Schools Brainwashing Our Children...High School Diplomas Should Mean Something...U.S. Students Lag In Math, Science...Trouble In Schools—Will It Get Worse?”¹³ This observation is also supported by many test scores comparing American students with students from other countries. “The Second International Mathematics Study found that the ‘performance of the top 5 percent of

¹² Ibid., 74.

¹³ Stormer, 11.

U.S. Students is matched by the top 50 percent of students in Japan'...In tests measuring the mathematical ability of eighth graders in 20 countries, American students finished tenth in arithmetic, twelfth in algebra, and sixteenth in geometry. High school seniors fared just as poorly."¹⁴ Filling our school courses with multiculturalism, inclusivism, and 'feel-good education' has reduced the time spent on academics. This, in turn, has impacted what our children are actually learning.

Ultimately, we're teaching our children a fantasy world. They're learning about things that only tangentially relate to the real world. The grading system isn't helping either; children learn that they can slack off and just make up a test later. They're learning that they don't actually have to know division or multiplication. Their basic philosophy is that students need to feel good about themselves above all else. Academics takes a distant second in their plan. As a result, children think they're smart, but actually know very little.¹⁵ And even if they are smart, they just know facts, not the discipline of applying something.

Part of the reason why educational failures are not recognized by many teachers is that within a school, teachers can manipulate the 'real world'—the grading systems, accomplishment awards, and so forth—so that all students appear to do well. Grades can be weighted, requirements lowered, standards redefined. However, they make nothing more than an elaborate lie to the students; when they get into the workforce, nobody cares about the world their teachers had crafted. Students find out what is actually important, and often find out that it's different from what they learned was 'reality' in school. But most teachers won't notice this inconsistency because their world of grades and accomplishments can be tweaked to fit the lack of quality education. Because of this, the grades never show that problems actually exist. It's like

¹⁴ Sykes, 17.

¹⁵ Ibid., 28-29.

disconnecting a warning light. You can't tell there's anything wrong once it's been disconnected, but in reality something is dreadfully broken.

The root philosophy behind this educational movement is a combination of Postmodernism and Social Marxism. Multiculturalism is supported by postmodernism. If each culture has its own version of truth, you cannot teach all versions of the truth if you ignore one subculture. Additionally, it supports inventive spelling and new-new math; subjects where the individual decides his own truth. 'Touchy-Feely' education comes out of this too; asking "Four birds were in a nest, but one flew away. How do you think the one who flew away felt?" opens a mathematical problem up to personal interpretation.¹⁶ History books are being rewritten from a 'constructivist' view. Constructivism believes that each person needs to construct his own meaning from the text. "In reading storybooks, language only means what students think it means; in history, events matter only to the degree that various groups (blacks, women, Hispanics) "construct" their own meanings."¹⁷ In essence, each social group, and ultimately each individual, exists in their own world of values, truths, and priorities. Gertrude Himmelfarb, a historian, comments that "it is a denial of the fixity of the past, of the reality of the past apart from what the historian chooses to make of it, and thus of any objective truth about the past."¹⁸ Ultimately, constructivism is based directly in postmodernism. And its influence in textbooks is unmistakable. In essence, constructivism ensures that the writers of a textbook do not know what the students will learn from it, or even what the teacher will teach from it. So for a textbook to be widely accepted, it needs to cover every group possible, even at the expense of cutting useful information and filling it with less useful knowledge. Postmodernism forces writers to lower the quality of their texts.

16 Ibid., 13.

17 Ibid., 135.

18 Ibid.

Social Marxism strives to remove the social classes of the school system. It does this by lowering standards so that every student can do well. This eliminates the 'good' and 'bad' student strata; everyone can be a good student. As well, it stifles the desire of smart students to learn, either by telling them that they're being overbearing or by forcing them into classes where they are taught nothing. Take, for example, Stephanie Ramskulger. Stephanie was a bright student who was a natural leader and enjoyed debating ideas. One day her mother received the following note from Stephanie's teacher:

Mrs. Ramskugler,

Stephanie needs to make sure and comprimise [sic] with her group. Each member likes to try and get his/her own way, which leads to arguments. The groups should be working towards everyone being equal and not towards leaders and followers.

This is not a big problem—just something that can be improved with Stephanie and her group.

Thanks [teacher]¹⁹

This note sums up the influence of Social Marxism in the classroom. Class is not mostly about teaching each student as much as they can learn, but about making each student equal. It is a drive towards, as Ray Bradbury put it, “Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal.”²⁰ However, this drive towards equality effectively lowers the quality of education to the level of the slowest student in the classroom.

In conclusion, Postmodernism and Social Marxism have heavily influenced the curriculum in public schools today. This influence has resulted in the so-called 'dumbing down' of texts, and ultimately of education as a whole. Students are spending more time studying irrelevant events and writing 'feel-good' assignments. Why? The most probably reason is that it makes people happy. Teachers are happy because they can teach whatever they like—because of postmodernism, and they don't have to fail students—because of Social Marxism. Students are

¹⁹ Ibid., 81.

²⁰ Bradbury, 58.

happy because classes are easy—Social Marxism, and because they can believe whatever they want—Postmodernism. Fahrenheit 451 described this well: “Ask yourself, What do we want in this country, above all? People want to be happy, isn't that right? Haven't you heard it all your life? I want to be happy, people say. Well, aren't they? Don't we keep them moving, don't we give them fun? That's all we live for, isn't it? For pleasure, for titillation? And you must admit our culture provides plenty of these.”²¹ And our culture values this happiness over a strong education.

²¹ Ibid., 59.

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