2-19-1923

Amherst Student Newspaper Article: "Teacher Frankly Outlines Deficiencies of Student for Benefit of Proud Parent

Amherst Student

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We quote in part the following extract from the New York Times of March 11. The italics are our own.

By a College Instructor.

"You gave my boy Arthur an F in English composition and I wonder what the matter is? He says he has been studying very hard, and he is a truthful boy. If he does not learn to write correctly, he will never succeed, and I want to know what is the matter. Please tell me what you think is wrong with Arthur and what I should do?"

Every college instructor has received such letters, and has answered them with vague politeness, expressing his fervent interest in Arthur's progress, and his belief that what the boy needs is "closer concentration," or "further drill in the mechanics of expression.

The other night I found myself addressing to an imaginary father an imaginary letter which told, for once, the complete and unvarnished truth. The letter would not, of course, serve for all cases; but it might almost be kept as an office form to be sent a certain type of father about a certain type of boy. Here it is:

"I flunked your son Arthur in English because his work was illiterate and because he never attempted to improve it. Even if by the end of the term he had become able to write with reasonable correctness, I could not have given him a passing mark, for he would never have been able to use English as a medium for the expression of ideas. This must seem to you a harsh judgment, and you will wish me to explain it.

Arthur, like everybody else, is the product of heredity and of environment. As to his heredity I can only guess, being ignorant of what lies back of him. He seems to have inherited a sound and healthy body, together with a good stock of characteristic American virtues. But something is wrong with his brain. I would not call the lad a defective. He responds to crude stimuli, and can perceive certain obvious similarities between things. He lacks, however, that power to make distinctions which is the basis of logic. To define a term and to keep a central point of view in classifying a body of material are for him impossible feats. He cannot stick to a subject, arrange his thoughts in coherent order or apprehend relations of cause and effect. The boy is inherently inhibited from creative study—the only kind of study worth while.

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"These faults may, of course be partly
due to bad education; but no educa-
tion, however bad, can entirely deprive
a human mind of all constructive power.
With Arthur thinking so evidently a
painful and unnatural process that I
must regard his hereditary mental
equipment as deficient. You will say
that it is the business of the instructor
to cure these defects. But education
merely guidance in self-realization.
Its results are Dead Sea apples when the self
is not worth realizing. Education can-
not turn a poor mind into a good one
any more than it can turn a good
mind into a poor one.

Does environment no power to
influence heredity? The right enviromental
influences have been exposed, remembering
that the most powerful of these
influences are to be found not in school
or college, but in the home.

How Was Arthur Raised?

"Has Arthur ever heard you express a
broadly rational conception, ever joined
with you in any fine sport of the mind?
Have you brought him up on noble
legends, read Shakespeare to him before bedtime?
When he awoke, did his eyes
rest on beautiful pictures? Did you ever
take him to an orchestral concert, or
to a really good play? Your son's face
and actions and speech have already an-
swered these questions for me. You
have stuffed his mind with dull plat-
itudes, have done everything you could
to convince him of the impiety of orig-
inal thought. You have crammed his
mind with ugly chromos, jazz, movies,
yellow newspapers and sensational mag-
azines. You have addressed your son
every day, for eighteen years, in un-
grammatical, ill-chosen and fumbling
words. Yet you do not blush to toss him
me with a 'Here! Make a scholar of
him'!

At the large high school to which you
sent him he met hundreds of replicas of
himself, association with whom fixed,
instantly and made more blatant his dull-
ness and vulgarity. In many cases his
teachers were more expert than his pres-
cent college instructors, but they were
underpaid, overworked and unintelli-
gently supervised. The system forced
them to give not a liberalizing educa-
tion, but a narrow training designed to
prepare some students to meet specific
vocational situations and others to an-
swer specific college examination ques-
tions. Arthur never discovered in high
school that the mind is more than a pas-
sive factor in the learning process.
Instead he received the impression that
text-books contain the answer to every

March 19, 1923

Outlines Deficiencies for Benefit of Proud Parent

"Arthur is unable to account for his presence in college. He is perplexed when I question him on the subject, because going to college seems the obvious conventional procedure. The burden of proof, I am sure, is on me. Why should he not go to college? He speaks of the practical importance of an education, and with his next breath proclaims the uselessness of all that he is studying. The explanation on which he falls back is the value of a vague abstraction called 'college life.' No doubt you have assured him that 'college life' is a great thing. I wonder how great it really is, for Arthur has made a parade of vices which he does not possess. Two glasses of beer would make him silly, but he will loudly"
And so into Arthur's world of college life I burst with the stern claims of scholarship. To him it is a game, a rather dull game. He tries to conceal the fact that he is not studying, and I try to catch him. If I gave him a passing grade, he would boast to his fellows of his talent for blufing. Since our contest, however, he is beginning to realize me a cold-hearted tyrant. He wants me to raise his mark, arguing that his work for the varsity entitles him to a special dispensation. Has he not been serving Alma Mater? If only you had taught him to abide by the consequences of his decisions!

I conclude that you have cast Arthur for a role which he cannot play because you are the victim of certain widely prevalent delusions. You believe that every American boy should go to college, whereas only a few American boys should go to college. You believe that education can remove fundamental defects of heredity and the results of adverse home environment, whereas it stands powerless in the face of such obstacles. You believe that liberal studies are intended to increase earning power, whereas they are intended to illuminate the mind and spirit. You believe that 'college life' has great educative value, whereas the activities included in this term are forms of play under pompous and wasteful disguises.

"If you have followed me thus far you should be in no doubt as to what is to be done with Arthur. Remove your son from college and set him to work at something within his powers. College education is an initiation into the life of reason, and this life Arthur will never lead. In certain forms of business, however, he would be successful; would become a prosperous, happy, useful and respected citizen. There is nothing undemocratic in reserving opportunities for those who are qualified to take advantage of them. When you and men like you realize the foolish wastefulness and cruelty of forcing advanced studies upon the Arthurs of the nation, the American college will be able to turn unhampered to its proper task of developing the talents of the talented."