



# Our Outmoded Public School System

BY DOUGLAS ANGUS

WE SHALL probably never be satisfied with our public schools, and educational research continues indefatigably on a vast and complex scale in search of methods to improve them. But as in other fields today where research is so unfortunately interconnected with the granting of Ph.D. degrees and academic standing, the unwieldy mass and the minute specialization have prevented theorists from perceiving in their full implication the basic flaws in our educational system.

The fact that these flaws are part and parcel of deeply rooted social attitudes further conceals them. One of these attitudes is our ingrained practicality, which causes us to think of education always as preparation of the young to become adults, and not as guidance also in how to get the most out of being young. Another is our indestructible puritanism that simply cannot ac-

cept the fact that the school can be a pleasant place and accomplish more than it now does as a very unpleasant place. A third attitude, the attitude of adults unwilling to accept the full responsibilities of parenthood, is that children are something of a nuisance and school is primarily a place to keep them under control and out of the way. While our puritanism motivates us to make learning difficult and dull, so that the child separates learning from pleasure, the third attitude turns the school into a jail, a massive building containing group cells called classrooms, where the child is confined to a desk for hours at a time, requiring permission even to go to the bathroom.

It requires an almost fiendish ingenuity and endless, unflagging supervision to force the child to accept this situation. This is so because the child, like all other

young creatures, is intensely active. Whether it be kittens, colts, or children, the way of life for young things is full of lively, joyful, physical activity.

It would seem then an act of obvious insanity, if not downright sadism, to place a child at a desk in a room and oblige him to sit motionless for hours at a stretch. Yet this is what we do. We start in cautiously in kindergarten, by requiring him to undergo this discipline for only two hours a day. Generally we do it pretty crudely. The kindergarten classroom often has its rows of desks that are replicas of the larger desks used in later grades. Here the child is taught to sit with folded hands, or to chant the national anthem (running the words together in a meaningless gibberish); to trace pictures (a good way to destroy pictorial imagination) or copy numbers and letters over and over.

In more progressive schools the rows of desks may not be used and more subtle ways may be used to get the frisky colt to endure the yoke about to be put upon him. But by the time they are seven or eight years old, the children of the nation are all sitting at a desk for four or five hours a day, five days a week. As a result, the child's prevailing sensation during school hours, except for rare moments when a skillful teacher distracts him briefly from the protestations of his body against his unholy confinement, is one of utter boredom and restlessness.

SOMEWHERE beneath the thinking that keeps this system alive is the idea that the child will someday have to sit before a desk or a machine and that he must therefore be disciplined to such confinement early in life. To this, one might reply that it would perhaps be just as well for humanity if it never became disciplined to accepting eight-hour shifts at desks and machines, but even if we accept such a pattern of adult living as inevitable, it is surely not necessary to begin the disciplining process twelve years in advance.

In our school systems we invert the normal process. It is customary in grade and high school to require the child to sit at his desk for five hours, with a short break for lunch; whereas in college we require only three hours of classroom attendance per day and these three hours are scattered throughout the morning and afternoon. Anyone who has attended college will recall the feeling of escape from unbearable confinement that came to him as he entered this new arrangement.

What are the results of this over-restriction? First and foremost is the detriment to health. For a nation so health-conscious, it is amazing that we cannot see the danger of robbing the child of the best part of the day for ten months of the year. For fresh air and exercise we substitute crowded confinement within overheated classrooms.

Because we have denied our children, generation after generation,

their natural right of abundance of free physical play, we are now a nation generally of mass audiences satisfying our pathological hunger for action vicariously.

**M**ORE immediately paradoxical is the way we defeat the main purpose of the whole educational program. The teacher strives manfully to make the student understand and desire knowledge and culture, but the outcome of all the labor and expense is that the average pupil merely associates these things with physical discomfort and boredom. In later years he will remember them with actual distaste and avoid a serious book as if it were poison. So with all our wealth and opportunity, we produce a citizenry amazingly uncultured and immature.

Our other main misconception about the school, our idea that it is a place containing little potential adults who are being trained to enter the grown-up world, has produced the crazy curriculum now prevailing. The evolution from very early childhood to maturity is characterized by a gradual movement from a world of play and make-believe to conscious learning of the techniques and information necessary to adult living. It is accompanied by a gradual lessening of purely physical activity and an increasing mental activity.

Our great error, one involved in a basic misunderstanding of the very meaning of education, lies in our constant effort to hurry up the

process of thought before the mind has developed. It is a simple case of an almost universal failure in sympathy and imagination, a failure to put ourselves in the child's place.

We tend to foist on the child our grown-up world. Because we think of schooling as sitting at a desk, we make him do things with pencil and paper and books. We rush him into mathematics and the coldly abstract formulae of science before his mind readily grasps them or their purpose. We are very patient about it. A child can learn a great deal by endless repetition and memorizing; we spin the material out, satisfied if he takes a year of sweating concentration to learn a few pitiful theorems, and so, by the time his mind is really ready to tackle the subject, when he might come to it as something fresh and meaningful, he is utterly tired of it. We overvalue the storing up of facts unrelated to any immediate purpose in his existence, facts that he forgets again as fast as he learns them, having no use for them in his daily life. So we pay little or no attention to motivation; for we have no age-old formula for such education; yet the desire to learn something because of a feeling of its value must precede study always, and it is a fact that at the age of seventeen or eighteen, motivated by a more mature sense of responsibility than our youth now have, most young people could master in a year what it has taken four years of high school to learn indifferently.

WHAT can we do about this fantastically obsolete system? Obviously the drastic changes necessary cannot be brought about overnight; yet each year's delay makes change more difficult. Every new multi-million-dollar school built around these false concepts contributes to their immobility. We must begin at once to examine critically these flaws so fundamental that in all the flurry of new theories and progressive education, they have been left generally unquestioned. Their correction involves the matter of seeing the correct balance between mental and physical activity for the different age levels. We must stop requiring small children to sit still for hours at a time. We must break away from fixed schedules and curricula, realizing that very important changes take place in the child from year to year. We must stop being in such a hurry to make him study grown-up subjects before he has grown-up responsibilities, and abstract and complex studies before his mind is capable of handling them easily. To introduce such studies into the curriculum earlier is sheer waste. These two factors — the sense of responsibility which provides the motivation, and sufficient brain capacity — are the prerequisites to the study of any subject.

What the precise proportions of physical and mental activity are for the various ages, we have no idea; sufficiently broad experimentation is lacking. One thing is certain: the

whole problem of discipline, that terrible strain of keeping order, which is the bane of the teacher's existence, would be vastly eased under this saner approach. Our new schools should have more varied space and equipment for physical activity, instead of the long corridors and classrooms.

UNDER the system outlined above, certain problems that have long seemed insurmountable would well nigh vanish. The problem of school space would be greatly eased because more activity would take place out in the open; with a varied program, groups would be using different equipment successively. The teacher shortage would be eased because physical education can be handled with fairly large groups under one instructor.

Teachers of the academic subjects now dominating the curriculum would teach successive groups for much shorter periods and teach them *more*; so that each such teacher would be able to handle a much larger number of students. Finally, that seemingly insurmountable problem of mass education, discovering a technique whereby a teacher can guide a fairly large number of students, would be vastly reduced because there would be a positive rather than a negative attitude in the schoolroom — a momentum arising from proper adaptation of subject and environment to the needs of childhood.

# The Bobby Pin Incident

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• *By Beryl Kent*

THE WOMAN's touch has been responsible for more epoch-making events than the encyclopedias would have us believe. In fact, if history were written according to this fact, it would be more exciting reading than high-voltage fiction.

For example, if you or your children ever read about the way the ex-Japanese Navy was distributed after World War II, you probably won't find my bobby pin mentioned. But that bobby pin, on July 17, 1947, launched thirty-two Japanese ships for America's allies.

It wasn't an extraordinary bobby pin. At that time you could buy a big package, containing about fifty, for a dime. But whatever the cost, that bobby pin was worth its weight in gold to four major nations and me on that hot July day.

By the time summer burst upon Tokyo in '47, I had been a news-writer there for slightly better than two years. My job was covering highlights of the American occupation in Japan for world press release. When the bobby pin slipped into history, I was covering a series of conferences to demilitarize com-

pletely the defunct Japanese Navy.

As you undoubtedly will recall, one of the great peacetime objectives of the Allied occupation was to render the Japanese Navy, once the fourth largest in the world, completely inoperable for further military purposes. This objective was gradually being realized and thus far in the peace-plan more than one hundred submarines and thirty combat vessels had been sent down to Davy Jones' locker.

The small craft and cargo-type auxiliaries which had civilian utility were given to the Imperial Japanese Government for constructive uses.

It was the remaining ships — minor warships, destroyer escorts, mine sweepers and miscellaneous — which were earmarked for division among the claimant nations. There were more than two hundred of these and they were to be distributed only after their official release from mine sweeping and other needed missions.

That was the naval background for that hot, humid day of July 17, when my bobby pin served its international duty. In the conference I