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RECENT EDUCATIONAL DISCUSSION

Educational Determinism; or Democracy and the I. Q.—
"Let me now examine the basic assumption that underlies the whole theory of mental measurements. Native mentality or native intelligence, the determinist himself will admit, is not directly measured by the tests. What is measured? 'We never measure inborn intelligence; we always measure acquired intelligence, but we infer from differences in acquired intelligence, differences in native endowment when we compare individuals in a group who have had common experiences and note the differences in the attainment of these individuals.'

"This, then, is the assumption back of the I. Q. which is playing so important a part now in our educational programs and which threatens to overturn the entire theory and practice of democratic education. The validity of mental measurements and of every inference that is drawn from the alleged facts that the measurements have disclosed is based upon the assumption that with respect to the materials of the tests the environment, the experience, the education, the stimulation, and the inspiration of those compared have been identical. We have had assumptions in science before this; in fact, the history of science is largely the history of assumptions and hypothesis. They have their place. This particular assumption has its place, and restricted to this place I grant its pragmatic justification. ..The tests measure a certain ability or group of abilities, but the contributions of experience become so numerous and influential and these vary so widely even among individuals of fairly homogeneous groups that it is the height of absurdity to contend that it is a native and unmodified factor that is being measured. Yet this contention is made the basis of sweeping conclusions regarding what education can or cannot do. If the determinist claims scientific validity for these extensions of his theory I say without fear of contradiction that no theory in the whole history of science has been based on a group of assumptions so questionable.

"Let us see how the determinist abuses his assumptions. On the basis of tests which admittedly measure the influence of experience he argues back to a hypothetical factor which, far from having isolated, he has never clearly defined. The closest that he has come to
a satisfactory definition is to call this factor ‘ability to learn.’ He then, by an act of pure imagination, reads out of the product everything that experience, education, and training have contributed. Until recently he has had no notion how much they have contributed or where their contribution stops. Within a month he has been confronted with the conclusion, based upon the very statistical methods upon which he himself has relied, that not less than 51 per cent of whatever it is that is measured as native intelligence turns out to be the result of experience and training. And yet his confidence in his early inferences seems to be unshaken. He makes some confident statements about the residue that he calls mentality or native intelligence. But whenever the growth stops, whenever this hypothetical native mentality matures, there suddenly appears an abrupt restriction of the further educational possibilities of the great masses of people. Its essential nature for these people never changes; whatever it is, they have so much of it and no more. For the chosen few, however, further education is not only a possibility but the very hope of civilization. By this time the factor, which originally was ability to learn or ‘take education,’ has become ability to ‘deal in abstractions.’ A little later, through some alchemy, it becomes ‘initiative’ or ability to solve new problems. Finally, it emerges into a full-blown capacity for ‘leadership.’

"Armed with this simple formula, the determinist now starts out to make over education.

"Take a man whom you would find by your measurements to be of average or even somewhat below average mentality,—the 'common man,' in short,—the Homo ubiquitus whose educational opportunities I am attempting to safeguard. Take this man in his daily business. Does he not grow in his power to deal abstractly with problems as he becomes increasingly familiar with them? I assert most emphatically that he does. I further assert that with the proper kind of instruction he can be taught to deal with many of the abstract problems that the determinist has in mind when he proposes to exclude everyone except the high I. Q.'s from the privileges of secondary and higher education. The question as to whether society can profitably undertake such an educational enterprise I shall consider in a moment when I shall prove to you that society either must undertake it or perish...

"I come now to the most fundamental tendency of the theories
which the determinist has constructed, again not on the basis of his facts, but upon the basis of his assumptions. I refer to the inevitable application of his inferences, with all of their questionable logic, to the theory of democracy and to the ideals of democratic education.

"Here the professional writers are fairly wary and circumspect. They are not anti-democratic. Far from it; only democracy does not mean what most people have believed. Intelligence is not everything, they assure us; it is only one of the many innate traits that condition achievement. A person may have a high degree of intelligence and still be a failure in life; or he may succeed on a fairly slender margin. Of late, too, the determinist has discovered that the inescapable differences in native intelligence fit in admirably with our industrial development. If automatic machinery provides gainful occupation for the predetermined human automaton, the evils that Mr. Pound and others have conjured up regarding the Iron Man of modern industry become of trifling significance. I have not yet seen this suggestion extended from modern industry to modern art, but it might well be. I refer not chiefly to futuristic painting or to free verse, but to the modern universal drama of the screen where, more emphatically even than in modern industry, the moron seems to have come at last into a real kingdom...

"Let us come to the real issue, namely, the need of democracy for a high level of trained and informed intelligence as a basis for collective judgment and collective action. We can not dodge this issue by saying that those who can not readily 'take' this kind of education may take some other kind that is far better for them individually. This may be true, but let us not deceive ourselves by calling it democratic. It is not democracy as a theory but as a stupendous fact that education must consider. The development of democracy has been unquestionably toward the elevation of the common man to a position of supreme collective control. Within a century in our own country, the franchise has been made universal. Our government is a representative government in form; in fact, it is coming every day closer to a type of direct government controlled by the great masses of the people. It is this variety of democracy that has lately spread through the world. It is this variety of democracy that was imperiled in 1914 and saved in 1918. It can not now be a question of going back to an earlier form of social control. It
is now, as it has never been before, a 'race between education and annihilation.' If education is to save civilization it must lift the common man to new levels—and not so much to new levels of industrial efficiency as to new levels of thinking and feeling...

"There is, however, a factor connected with this matter of 'leadership' that merits the most serious attention. The qualities that make for democratic leadership, far from being exclusively intellectual qualities, are not even predominantly so. They are rather 'human' qualities, such as sympathy, tact, humor, and sociability, and 'moral' qualities, such as integrity, industry, persistence, courage, and loyalty...

"The proposal to apply the intelligence tests in selecting at an early age those who are to be the later leaders of the nation has received a sanction, and in my humble judgment a most spurious sanction, from the unquestioned success of the tests in the Army. In picking out the men who are better able than their fellows to learn new duties quickly, tests which measure this capacity have an obvious value. In how far these men owed their superiority to innate traits and in how far to education, we have now no certain means of knowing, although the determinist is as usual cocksure that education had nothing to do with it. Be that as it may, to argue from the situation in the Army to the situation in the nation as a whole overlooks a very important difference. The personnel of the Army does not choose its own leaders; the personnel of the nation does. The personnel of the Army does not pass final judgment on the plans and policies that the Army seeks to realize; the personnel of the nation does...

"The determinist admits that skillful and devoted teachers can do something even with morons. As I watch these teachers at their work it is not what they can not do that impresses me, it is rather the miracles that their consummate art enables them to perform. I have seen dull eyes lighted with a momentary gleam of intelligence. It was a little light in a world of darkness. But grant that little light glowing with rapidly increasing intensity as we go up the intelligence scale, and my case is won. A little more light for the common man this year, next year, a hundred years from now, and the battle for humanity, for democracy, and for brotherhood is won."

William C. Bagley, in School and Society.
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