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A NEW SCHOOL YEAR

An article in the Education Section of the Sunday, June 12, 1988 *Providence Journal* excited my imagination. The article is by Edward B. Fiske of the *New York Times*. With today's attention to and scrutiny of teachers and schools I am sensitive to both criticism as well as assistance.

I wrote this essay after reading the article, then I let it sit in my desk since late June. After the retreat this past summer on our new *Rule* and after many experiences with study, teachers and students, I have taken it out, made some adjustments and now present it for your thoughts and stimulation.

The article details the research going on into successful methods used by teachers and the different learning capabilities of students. The teacher who does not stick adamantly to the same method – if it is not working – is praised. Of course we are dealing with the challenge of the classroom, the challenge from the student, the challenge of the day-to-day "business" of teaching. This "business" forces us, not only in the classroom, but wherever and whenever we attempt to put our vocation, our apostolate into effect, to adapt our methodology and message.

Fiske opens his article by stating that most teachers have only «one arrow in their quiver.» If the arrow doesn't «stick» in certain students then those students are blamed for the failure of the school. Possibly, Fiske says, the «teacher was not teaching the best way for that child.» The teacher should have shot a second arrow, or discarded the quiver altogether and used some other arsenal.

John Dewey, says Fiske, was of the first to recognize that students learn in different ways. Research is progressing on ways of learning:

«As a group, boys learn somewhat differently from girls. Some students learn best by using their senses, feelings and intuition, others by watching

and reflecting. Some students need logical sequences, others thrive on trial and error.»

To activate our usage of various devices, to encourage us to go to our bags of tricks, to force us to look for various schemes and methods we also yield to the students' responses to them through our knowledge of them. John Dewey may have been a proponent of different learning capabilities, but I can't help thinking of the Founder's very penetrating passage in his meditation for «Good Shepherd Sunday,» the former Second Sunday of Easter:

«Jesus compares those who have the care of souls to a good shepherd who is careful of his sheep. One of the qualities which Our Lord says distinguishes him is that he knows them all individually. This is also one of the essential qualities of those who instruct others, for they must get to know their pupils, and discern the manner in which to act towards them. Some require great mildness, while others need to be directed with firmness. Some require much patience; others need to be goaded on. It is necessary to punish and reprehend some, in order to correct their defects, whereas others need to be continually watched lest they should wander and perish. This varied conduct must depend upon knowledge and discernment of character, and this grace you must beg of God most earnestly as being one of the most essential for you in the direction of those over whom you have charge.» (Pg. 115, De La Salle Meditations, Longmans, 1953).

In his comment upon this meditation, Battersby gives this wise comment:

«...It is clear that although he (De La Salle) adopted the simultaneous method... he nevertheless realized full well the drawbacks inherent in it, namely, that the individual may be obliterated in the mass, and he recognized that the only true education is individual. Thus this Meditation... is a remarkable effort to attenuate the evils of the class system of teaching by inducing the teacher to give as much individual attention to his pupils as is possible.» (pp. 116-117).

Reading over these passages again, and reflecting upon the *Management of Schools* I find it hard not to feel "Our Founder said it all," or that "We (Brothers) knew that all the time." I continue that by asking myself how I put these ideas into my own dealings with students – if indeed I do accept them! Obviously the Founder is speaking from a spiritual point of view, but aren't the problems of education ultimately of the spirit and spiritual?

Whether or not the Founder "had it all," he was on to something.

Look at the organization of the schools according to the *Management* and the concern for many and various methods and procedures in the classroom. In the furor today over the graduation of students who are poor readers yet are routinely promoted because they should "stay with their class," or simply that the system cannot do anything for them, I recall one of my early impressions from the history of our Institute, namely that a student would not be promoted until he had mastered the material for that level or was otherwise ready. Of course monitors assisted in dealing with individuals. We still use them but call them tutors today.

Getting back to somewhat of the Founder's implications, I think that other than the methods we actually use at whatever level or in whatever arena of education we are engaged, we all make it a point to get to know our students. In that actual process we all have a variety of approaches depending upon our students' response to us from day to day. More informally we try to talk to our students whenever or wherever we see them, call them by name, show interest in and support of their talents, their activities, their pursuits, other likes and dislikes. Nowadays, particularly, we try to know their home and family situation which has such a bearing upon their performance and well-being.

Summarizing this is a passage from *General Introduction to the Management*, a St. Mary's College Press publication of 1965. From Chapter IV on "Motivation" on pages 25-26 we read:

«The teacher, if he is to be successful in motivating his students to fruitful activity, must be vividly aware of the needs and desires of human beings in general. But more specifically, he must have a definite appreciation of the attitudes existing in the group before him. For this purpose, he has to be well aware of the type of home from which these students come, the social strata in which they live, the type of environment which conditions their thinking and acting. We should, likewise, know as much as possible about the individual students, their temperaments, mental and physical characteristics, problems, interests and aspirations. Such knowledge is essential to any realistic effort to lead students to higher levels of motivation.»

This is a great task for an educator, but history, research and our own experience tell us that this must be part of our very being. Whether or not we use all the devices put at our disposal critics countered that the system discourages us. A researcher, William Rioux, quoted by Fiske in his article, observes:

«Students have to be batch processed. If you are alone in a classroom with 30 kids, how do you figure at five different experiences for every lesson? Teachers have to cover a certain amount of material. So you can't pause to help students who aren't keeping up.»

A school or classroom with a diversity of learning styles going on would be a busy place, seemingly disoriented, and noisy. Peoples' image of what a school should be would be shattered. People don't like their images being shattered.

Possibly the subjects in which a student is proficient are those not always offered or highlighted in some of our schools, for example the Fine and Performing Arts. Often a student can express himself/herself non-verbally, by manipulation of color, of movement, of sound, or of some material. The eyes, the voice, the hands, the ears, the limbs are important in the complete person. All learning may not be book learning, nor is all learning done by the head.

Not only may some teachers fail using less effective or only one or two methods, but our systems may be less effective by our having only one or two views of what education is. In today's world of patent success, of heady achievement, of preconceived notions of "the man or woman of the 21st Century" we may be forgetting the total human organism which is composed of limbs that move, voices that sing, eyes that see, hands that mold, and hearts and feelings which operate without words or calculations.

It is frustrating to realize "I don't have it made" regarding teaching. On the other hand, it is exciting to look for ways and means in the midst of students and the events of each day.

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