



The Transformation of the Classroom

Those of us — of Tom Brokaw’s greatest generation — who attended the public schools in the 1930s and ’40s remember our classrooms as quite barren, immaculately clean, quiet and orderly. There was a portrait of George Washington on the wall, and cursive letters were on a printed strip across the top of the blackboard. That was it. No fancy posters.



We all sat in rows behind desks bolted to the floor. Unless you were in the front row, you only saw the back of the head of the student in front of you. You were not permitted to chat while the teacher was engaged in teaching.

The teacher, of course, was at the head of the class, and all eyes were focused on her and what she was teaching, whether it was reading by phonics, traditional arithmetic by rote memorization, or cursive writing. In teaching cursive, she made sure you formed the letters correctly and held the stylus correctly. She did not want you to develop any bad habits which would be difficult to correct in later grades. Incidentally, that was before ball-point pens were invented. We wrote with wet ink in ink wells and instruments with steel nibs. And I don’t remember a single mishap with all of that potential mischief.

That was the kind of classroom that produced the “greatest generation” in American history. We all could read, write, and calculate with competence. And because we had mastered all of these basic academic skills, we could learn history, geography, biology, foreign language, etc. There was no such thing as Attention Deficit Disorder and no need for drugs like Ritalin, another invention of the psycho-secular age. Since our attention was focused on the teacher, our attention was riveted on what she was doing. And, of course, there was no distraction in the classroom.

Also, there was no such thing as dyslexia since everyone learned to read with phonics, and we all learned spelling at the same time. The teacher periodically tested us on what we were being taught, so there was no need for federal or state testing programs. The teacher knew exactly how well we were progressing, and parents were given report cards that graded the student’s progress. There was no need for special federal funding to improve academic standards.

Fast forward to 2011, and what do we find today in American public school classrooms? Children are now seated around tables, chatting with one another, pestering one another, coughing into each other’s faces. Everyone has their own individual learning plan, so everyone is doing something else. The teacher is now a facilitator, and she roams around the room helping this student or that one. She is no longer the focus of attention. In fact, there is no focus of attention in that classroom. There is only a form of chaos.

However, occasionally in the first grade the teacher will gather a group of students seated on the floor and she will read to them, instead of having them read to her. And occasionally, the First Lady or some



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corporation CEO, or a politician with come by and read to the children, as if being read to is the equivalent of learning to read.

Today the walls are covered with every sort of poster, cartoon, student writings (or chicken scratches), sight words, and decorations. Mobiles hang from the ceiling swaying in the breeze. There may be gerbils or goldfish bowls on window sills. In other words, every sort of distraction is in that room which makes it impossible for many students to concentrate on anything. They are soon labeled with this new mental condition known as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Reading is no longer taught by the phonics method. The teacher uses a new method called Whole Language in which children are taught to read by a whole word method as if English printed words were like Chinese characters, to be memorized on the basis of their shapes.

The pupils are no longer taught to write cursive. They are encouraged to print the letters anyway they can. The result are the chicken scratches that now pass for handwriting. As for spelling, there is something new called "invented spelling," in which the pupil is encouraged to spell anyway he or she wants.

As for arithmetic, rote memorization of the arithmetic facts is now considered as a form of child abuse. So how is arithmetic taught? First, it is no longer called arithmetic. It is now called Mathematics, and there have been a number of different programs taught in the schools: Set Theory; New Math; New New Math. The result is that we now have fewer students who want to or can become engineers and scientists where math is needed. These kids are mathematically crippled, along with being poor readers, poor spellers, and atrocious writers.

Well, you might ask, how did all of this come about? Why did we abandon the orderly classroom for the disorderly one? Why did we abandon phonics for teaching children to read English as if it were Chinese? Why did we abandon cursive penmanship for chicken scratches?

The answers will be found in the works and philosophy of John Dewey, the leader of the socialist progressives who were determined to use the public schools as the means to change America from an individualistic society into a socialist, collectivist one. According to Dewey, the traditional school encouraged competitive individualism. "Each child sits in his place in a fixed row of desks and faces, not his companions as an active, guided social group, but his teacher as an instructor and disciplinarian. He studies largely by himself and for himself and is, during much of the time, in direct competition with his mates."

And so, when he became head of the Department of Psychology at the University of Chicago he set up a Laboratory School in 1896 and experimented on a new kind of classroom, one that would turn children into little socialists and collectivists.

The result was a classroom constructed around the concept of social interaction. "The physical set-up of the classrooms of the Laboratory School with their movable chairs helped to make each period a social occasion. In all classes teacher and children started off the day's work with a face-to-face discussion of cooperative plans for individual and group activity."

That was the beginning of the process that has led to what we now have in our public school classrooms. They are colorful, noisy, messy and, we are told, very "creative." Creative of what? Chaos.

Indeed, it is only in the academically driven private school that one can find a classroom configuration that encourages concentration and rigorous teaching methods. On the other hand, what is unique about home-schooling, is that it eliminates classrooms altogether. Parents teach the academic subjects in the



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traditional manner, and the children are permitted to pursue their interests because they now have the time to do so.

So we are learning a lot about what true education is all about, and it seems that the best way to educate is to go back to the methods used by the Founding Fathers and the early Americans. Yes, the advance of science and technology requires a lot more intense learning in the sciences and mathematics. But that is the challenge we face as a nation. And the solution is less government in education and more educational freedom. With freedom, the American people are capable of the impossible.



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