

RESPONSE TO "AN OBIT FOR MCGUFFEY: LANGUAGE AND MEDIA"

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Ms. Carson is certainly right in her questioning of the results of standardized tests. It is hard, and to my mind no one has yet been able, to establish a one-to-one relationship between a student's score on an objective test and his ability to write. Yet I think most teachers, myself included, feel that there is some sort of loose correlation. Students who receive high verbal SAT scores usually write better than those who receive low ones. Also, students who know traditional grammar usually write better than those who do not. But here the relationship is very tenuous and the writing ability most certainly does not flow from the teaching of traditional grammar. More likely, it is simply that students who are sensitive to language learn grammar more easily and also write better. However, there is no doubt in my mind that a "well-honed vocabulary" does correlate with good writing, and as any teacher knows who has marked "word choice" on a student's paper, does contribute to good writing.

There is no real doubt that test scores are falling; the significant questions are why, what does it mean, and who is responsible. Recently, several reports have come out, such as that by the panel of experts convened by the College Entrance Examination Board, which offered rational, appropriate and articulate answers. The most important cause of the SAT

score declines is that more students are finishing high school and going to college. As more students take SAT's, including women and minorities, who previously had few opportunities and little social encouragement to get a higher education, naturally the scores go down. This cause of lower SAT scores is demonstrated by the fact that scores of females are falling faster than those of males and that scores from urban areas are falling faster than those from rural areas. This cause of lowering scores is in many ways to be commended.

Yet the panel did find that some of the causes of lowering scores do result from what goes on in the schools. While more students finish school, more are also absent. Automatic promotions and decline in the amount of homework were also felt to affect the scores. Even more important has been the significant drop in English enrollments, especially composition and language courses. The fact that SAT math scores have declined at a slower rate than verbal scores supports this position. One final cause, the panel found, was that the reading level for high school textbooks has dropped. This might well make one ask himself, "Do we want to reinstate McGuffey's Readers?" As Ms. Carson points out, one would hope not, but it does lead into the "Back to Basics Movement."

Support for the McGuffey Reader, as well as the "Back to Basics" movement involves much more than a wave of nostalgia. The Readers were not only concerned with intellectual education, but with moral and cultural

education as well. In fact it is the latter two that most traditionalists want brought back into the schools. One has only to look at the recent textbooks controversy in Kanawha County, West Virginia, to see that many parents want a McGuffey-like reader. These parents were not objecting to sex or profanity in texts. There was none. They objected to having their children read the writing of controversial figures such as Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X. In other words, they wanted their children's education to be primarily what they considered to be moral, and only secondarily intellectual. These West Virginians reflect the views of a great many American parents: the primary business of the schools is to inculcate moral values and to build character.

Certainly these parents would approve of McGuffey. What is impressive in the Readers is their morality. There is hardly a page in any of the Readers from the first to the sixth that does not address itself to some moral problem or point to some moral lesson. Of course, the morality was that of the Victorian era. It was deeply religious, which meant Protestant Christianity, closer to Puritanism than to the Unitarianism of New England. God was omnipresent. He had His eye on every child every second both day and night. He was a just Father who would surely punish the slightest transgression. No one questioned the truths of the Bible or their relevance to everyday life -- especially to the classroom. Of course, the Readers are filled with stories from the Bible that support the proper religious point of view.

Yet for all their concern with religion, like the Victorian age in general, the morality of the Readers was materialistic. Virtue was not its own reward: the pious widow discovers the tattered stranger with whom she shares her last morsel of food is really her son who has returned rich from voyages to India; the barber who respects the Sabbath receives a rich inheritance, and the boy who controlled his curiosity was rewarded with a job. Malfeasance was also punished physically or materially. The boy who stole a cherry not only lost his job, but the cherry was filled with cayenne pepper so that he burned his mouth. All of the essential virtues were stressed -- industry, sobriety, thrift, propriety, and conformity. Those who practiced them succeeded materially. Those who were lazy or self-indulgent lost out in the material world.

Certainly one might question the reality of this morality, but not object to it very strenuously. What is objectionable in the McGuffey Readers is the view that the arrangements of society were all for the best. If the widow starves through no fault of her own, society should not be held accountable. It is not society's fault. She should wait for charity. Society should not be concerned with a laborer who loses an arm or a leg; the kind employer will reward him. In other words, life is full of hardships, but remember God looks out for his children. Today few people can accept this point of view, and they do not really want their children inculcated with it. Most people feel society and government have responsibilities toward citizens. Few people, as one of my students who was injured in a taconite plant can

testify, are naive enough to believe Big Business is altruistic to its employees.

However, the "Back to Basics" movement has another genesis besides the tradition of the schools teaching morality and building character. That is the view that education must be a useful tool. Perhaps the best example of this is The First Book of Country Life Readers by Cora Wilson, founder of the Moonlight Schools and President of the Kentucky Illiteracy Commission. The Moonlight Schools were set up to teach adult farmers and their wives who found their way to night school by moonlight. Ms. Wilson wastes no time on frills. She is eminently pragmatic. Her purpose is to immerse her students in the mainstream of American life.¹ She tells them the necessity of voting, why one should keep clean, the filth of flies, the need to rotate crops, and many other such pragmatic topics. The goal of these primers is not religious indoctrination, although that appears in them, but that "clean pores, clean teeth, a 'garage' for the farm wagon, and a neat house, painted in an acceptable suburban hue are essential to full participation in American life." (Schroeder, p. 68)

How much of the concern over falling SAT test scores and how much of the "Back to Basics" movement is a result of the schools getting away from these two traditions is difficult to say. Yet it is undoubtedly a major cause. Little comment was raised about test scores falling in the 1960's. Modular scheduling and film courses probably contribute more to the outcry than do the actual scores. These courses are fun. Whether or not they are

effective is not the question: Americans know that good education, like good medicine, should taste bitter. While I agree with Ms. Carson that the McGuffey Reader should be put to sleep, I wish that we had a comparable reader today, one that could capture the spirit of the 1970's the way they caught the flavor of their times. But then today is more complicated -- sociologically. We are no longer a rural nation, but an urban one with different values for each major group. I doubt if even the venerable William Holmes McGuffey could come up with a common reader that would be suitable for all.

Notes

1. All references to the Moonlight Schools come from Fred E. H. Schroeder, "The Genesis of Dick and Jane" in Outlaw Aesthetics, Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1977, pp. 62-93. Anyone interested in the tradition of American school primers should read this chapter.

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An impression of an impression of color
brushed with a sun ray
tipped of spider silk
Images arose
never to be again
Worlds turned together
in an instant
then melted
like fog in the sun