

The Conquest of Illiteracy

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In School and Society

THE need for manpower in the Armed Forces made it necessary to induct large numbers of illiterate and non-English speaking men. In order to give these men the academic training they required as soldiers—the fourth-grade level was the standard believed to be essential—the army organized special training units. By applying standard principles of education, a very efficient program was developed which enables the average man to acquire the basic academic skills needed in eight weeks in Army life.

Most of the men in the special training units come from sections of the country where educational opportunities are meager; some come from the border states where immigrants form independent groups that manage to get along with a very limited amount of English. There are, however, trainees from communities where educational opportunities are good; some of these men have been faced with family needs which compelled them to leave school at an early age, and others have learned little during their years in school. Typically these men in special training units, experience having shown them the disadvantage of being unable to read, are eager to learn.

Of special significance is the fact that both materials and methods are functional. The *Army Reader* and *Army Arithmetic* deal with life in

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camp—taking care of the barracks, for example. All material is written in very simple English, the average difficulty being about that of a third-grade book, and abundant use is made of visual aids.

Teachers in special training units are enlisted men, most of them with considerable professional and academic training and experience. These instructors emphasize success and steady progress; they expect every man to learn effectively and rapidly. This attitude spreads to the men, who come to believe in their own ability to learn.

In addition to the high calibre of teaching personnel in the Army program, the special training unit provides for many recruits a better environment than they have hitherto known from the standpoint of health and hygiene. Moreover, many of these soldiers experience a stable well-ordered kind of life for the first time. Undoubtedly such factors as these contribute to the success of the program.

The program of special training has certainly demonstrated that the mass of American youth are educable and that illiteracy need not

continue as a great social problem in this country. The following steps will have to be taken, however, if illiteracy is to be reduced or eliminated:

1. It will be necessary to guarantee an equal educational opportunity to every boy and girl in America and to enforce school attendance. It is well to note that part of the success of the STU is traceable to the soundness of materials and methods and that every student is provided with essential books and instructional materials. Furthermore, classes are relatively small.

2. It will be necessary to extend educational opportunity to adult levels. Enthusiasts will be needed to find those people who lack initiative to seek out educational opportunity for themselves and to convince them of the value of education. The major requirement, however, will be the establishment of schools and classes equipped to function with maximal efficiency.

The results secured outside the Army are not reassuring at present, for it is reported that city and state programs established for teaching illiterates have succeeded in salvaging relatively few individuals. According to some authorities, this lack of success "may be due. . .to an absence of the promising practices in motivation, functional materials, control, and excellent teachers which have been noted in the Army programs." To provide the essential factors cited above, then, it will be necessary to devise new programs and to secure financial assistance to train teachers, develop instructional materials, and establish schools.

If state and local school systems will recognize their responsibility

for the education of adults, the solution of the problem may well be within our grasp. Work on the larger problem could be initiated by establishing classes or schools for men returning from the Armed Forces. According to a recent report, approximately 150,000 illiterates were inducted into the army from June 1, 1943—June 1, 1944, and 50,000 probably went into the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. Many others entered the Army prior to the above dates. What will happen to them? Most of them will return to civilian status sooner or later. One possible answer is inherent in the GI Bill of Rights.

Every eligible serviceman is entitled to one year of training; those whose education was "delayed, interrupted, or interfered with by reason of entrance into the service" (men under 25 years of age) are eligible for an additional period not to exceed three years.

For veterans wishing to obtain elementary education, then, financial aid will be forthcoming through the GI Bill. But schools equipped with properly trained teachers and suitable materials are needed if the men are to be motivated sufficiently to take advantage of the help. It is clear that men returning from service, for obvious reasons, should not be placed in classes with public-school pupils. In fact, few men would probably care to enter such classes. Veterans will need teachers trained for instructing adult illiterates, instructional materials cho-

sen and developed especially for them, and a curriculum that aims to enable every man to make the most of one to four years of general and specialized training on the adult level. Clearly it is the responsibility of agencies and organizations such as the NEA, the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, the U. S. Office of Education, and adult-education groups to assume the leadership necessary to assure immediate action.

Although the writer has emphasized the need for providing educational opportunities for men who entered the Armed Forces as illiterates, he is not unmindful of the millions of men who, when they left civilian life, had not completed elementary school. For them, too, the public schools should provide adequate educational opportunity.

Nor is the writer unaware of the large number of illiterate men and *women* not in the Armed Forces. It is reported that by September 1,

1943, selective service had rejected and placed in 4F approximately 341,000 registrants with inadequate educational accomplishments. A chance to complete their education should not be denied these people, either.

The writer recognizes the crucial need for financial aid to public education in some states and communities. He wishes simply to cite the significance of an opportunity we *now* have — an opportunity which, if seized on, might initiate a movement to provide equal educational facilities for all citizens and their children. Let us act *now*. It takes time to train teachers, prepare instructional materials, and set up schools and classes for men who need elementary education. We have reason to believe that if we act *now* our country may ultimately eliminate illiteracy and thus add measurably to its stature as a democracy representing and serving all its people.

Veterans in College

THE University of Denver, in evaluating the work of 7 veterans admitted to their College of Arts and Sciences before having completed the prescribed 15 high-school units, found that the average grade points for the 180 hours carried by the group was 1.88 as compared with an average of 1.53 for all veterans under the GI Bill and Public Law 16. The range was from 1.00 to 2.60.

This limited study would seem to indicate that the fact that returning veterans cannot present the prescribed high-school credits does not preclude their doing acceptable college work. In each of the 7 cases studied, the veteran was a mature individual, the age range being from 23 to 50 years, with a median of 27 years.