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Beam in the Eye

Last April when the A.C.E. held its annual meeting in Washington, Major Witty spoke at one of the general sessions. Many in his audience expressed the wish to see the address in print so that they might review his interpretation of the Army training program and its significance to public education. Major Witty and Miss Van Buskirk, formerly on the editorial staff of Military Training Division, A.S.F., and now with the War Relocation Authority, have prepared this article jointly, basing its content upon Major Witty's address.

MUCH HAS ALREADY BEEN SAID, in the course of post-war thinking, about our plans for improving and developing educational procedures in other countries. In true American fashion, we assume that education is one of the strongholds of democracy and that we are the ones to strengthen that fort. But should we not first consider the beam in our own eye?

According to some calculations, it has been found that there are around sixteen million functionally illiterate adults and youth in the United States. In other words, about one-seventh of our adults are unable to read a newspaper intelligently or write a correct letter. Many Americans were greatly disturbed when, in the summer of 1942, it was announced that hundreds of thousands of otherwise acceptable selectees were being rejected from the Army because of their lack of education.

There is, of course, nothing essentially sacred about education. We all know highly literate individuals who have made neither good soldiers nor good citizens. It is clear, too, that little of our crime and

delinquency can be attributed solely to lack of education. Many other social ills seem unrelated to literacy. And still most Americans believe in universal education as one of the fundamental bases of democracy. Although we cannot always differentiate cause from effect, we are convinced that there is a somewhat close relationship between education and social progress, and that conviction makes us wary of tolerating widespread ignorance in our midst. As long as poverty, disease, and social delinquency go hand in hand with illiteracy, an effort to reduce or eliminate illiteracy becomes a deep responsibility.

There are many good reasons for our faith in education. Society is made up of individuals. In one sense, it can be no stronger than its weakest link. On the other hand, it is improved by the strengthening of all its links. Not every young Negro who gets an education in spite of limited facilities in his own community becomes a George Washington Carver. But one of them did, and that one has contributed much to the good not only of his own people but of the whole world. We recall, too, that Dr. Yefim I. Smirnov, the Russian surgeon who became chief of the Army Medical Service Administration in charge of the health of the entire Red Army at the age of thirty-five, could not read until he was twenty. Until he was twenty, he had been in school only about three months. According to his own statement, he could not tell A from B at that time. The world can use more scientists and doctors like these two men, either in peace or war.

Granting that the millions of functionally illiterate people in this country are not

as gifted as these two men, it is, nevertheless, clear that most of them would profit from an improvement in their academic skills. Some might even attain the distinction of a Carver or a Smirnov. That most of them are educable has been demonstrated by the men in the Army Special Training Units.

Reading and writing are tools by which a man may help himself. Without them, he is handicapped in practically every undertaking. One of the best ways to get rid of post-war relief problems is to provide potential indigents with the means of taking care of themselves. This is one way of providing freedom from want and fear, to say nothing of the other freedoms for which we are fighting. With such equipment, the individual is better prepared to make his own adjustment to the requirements of social living. His problem will not be completely solved, but the solution will no longer be impossible. Education is no panacea for all ills. But like the well-known sulphur drugs and the precious quinine which are saving thousands of lives, it is powerful to stay infection until the body can establish its own equilibrium and thus effect its own cure.

But we have schools! Why don't they teach people to read? Isn't that their responsibility? What is wrong with the present educational system? It costs enough! Why has the Army been able to do what the schools failed to accomplish? Many answers have been offered for these questions. Some of them are sound. Others are the result of the same biases and faulty thinking which have permitted illiteracy to exist as long as it has in a country dedicated to principles of equality and freedom. Since this is a social problem which should concern all of us, let us study the situation, its causes and its cures. An examination of the Army's program for illiterates will aid us here.

The Army's Program for Illiterates

In order to satisfy the need for additional manpower in the armed forces, it became necessary to induct large numbers of illiterate, non-English speaking, and Grade V (slow-learning) men. Special Training Units were henceforth organized to give these men the necessary academic training to enable them to become useful soldiers. The fourth grade level in reading was the standard set. It was believed that men who fell below this level of ability would be unable to proceed with basic military training. The essential skills in oral and written communication and in arithmetic were also included as part of the program of instruction.

With these needs in mind, the Army began to teach the three R's. Some men finished in three weeks; the average took eight weeks; a few men—mostly non-English speaking men—were retained twelve or even sixteen weeks in exceptional cases. Those who could not meet the Army requirements in this time were separated from the service. Compare these figures with the years spent in public schools developing comparable skills! And the statistics on the nineteen reception centers where the Special Training Units were set up show that around ninety per cent of the men were regularly being sent on for basic training. Some units claimed ninety-five per cent. Thus thousands of men have been salvaged for military service and for better citizenship after the war.

A study of what the Army has found out about illiterates and what it has done for them should help in the solution of the total problem in the nation.

First of all, where do these Special Training men come from? Many of them come from the rural and mountainous sections of the country where the schools are poor and inaccessible during several months of the year. Many of these men come from

the border and coast states where immigrants settle in their own little groups and manage to get along without finding it necessary to learn English. Even an inland city like Chicago has its little Italy! One camp in Texas reported that ninety-five per cent of its trainees were of Spanish or Mexican background and belonged to the non-English speaking group. An increasingly large percentage of Special Training Unit men are Negroes from sections of the South where schools are generally inadequate. Moreover, there are occasional cases from all parts of the country—men whose experiences in school have been unfortunate. Many of these men had family needs which made them leave school at an early age to help earn a living. Others were from the slums of large cities. Nevertheless, a few came from relatively prosperous neighborhoods.

Many of these men are eager to learn. Experience has taught them the disadvantage of being unable to read. They want to overcome their handicap while they have the opportunity. In camps where there are no facilities for literacy instruction, they ask the chaplain or someone else who takes an interest in them to help them in the evenings. With such an attitude, it is little wonder they are able to acquire in six or eight weeks skills which they have not developed heretofore in many years.

Some men are somewhat ashamed of having to learn to read at this late date. They may have been successful in keeping the people around them from realizing their deficiency by one ruse or another. Such men find it hard to take part in class activities at first. They are afraid of exposing their ignorance. But after a while, with skilful handling, they master their fear and overcome their handicap instead of hiding it.

A few of the men are sullen at first and resentful of any attempt to teach them

reading or anything else. Some of them seem to feel at first that reading is not essential in the war effort. Others resent the treatment which society has accorded them. These men change their attitude quickly when they appreciate their new and special opportunities. Often these very men become the most enthusiastic students in the units, once their interest is awakened. For many of them, this is the first time they have been able to feel that they are getting a square deal in life.

Now let us consider the methods and materials which the Army uses to bring about these changes both in ability and attitude. First of all, both materials and methods are functional. The men are taught only those things which they are able to use immediately, and all subject matter is presented in the form in which it will be most readily and most frequently used. The *Army Reader* and *Arithmetic* deal with life in camp: how to take care of the barracks, how to shop at the PX, how to drill, how to keep a budget, and why we are fighting this war. Film strips and other visual aids show the men how to wear a uniform, when and how to salute, how to obey general orders, what is to be seen around camp, and how to get a pass to go home. At the same time, these strips are teaching the simple sight and speaking vocabulary which the men need in order to deal with these new problems.

One book of supplementary reading material is called *Your Job in the Army*; it tells the men about the various kinds of work which they may find to do once they have finished their basic training. The monthly magazine and the weekly *Newsmap* (Special Edition for STU men) provide orientation and morale building materials: they keep the men up to date on the war and also give them some understanding of the background and cause of the struggle. They contain accounts of

the leaders of our military and civil life and of the men and women who are doing heroic things both on the fighting front and at home. They show what the folks back home are doing to help win the war, and they tell the soldier many things he needs to know in order to get along in the Army. Both periodicals and textbooks are well illustrated with pictures, charts, maps, and diagrams which help give meaning while they also hold interest.

Other supplementary reading materials are issued monthly. They deal with war heroes and the contribution of each of the United Nations to the present struggle. There are specific lessons, also, dealing with such special vocabulary problems as those having to do with defense against chemical warfare, first aid, tent pitching, personal hygiene, and safeguarding military information.

There is no drill for drill's sake. The repetition which is necessary for learning is provided through a variety of meaningful activities. Reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling, and oral expression are integrated in natural and interesting pursuits. They reinforce each other by being constantly called into use for a real purpose. For instance, a reading lesson on Army insurance and bonds might call forth a great deal of oral discussion. This would naturally call for some calculation so that each man may know exactly how much money will be taken from his pay and what he will get for that money. This activity might very well be followed by a letter home explaining to the family what the soldier has recently learned. The letter in turn brings a reply which the soldier wants to be able to read for himself and to answer. Thus living and learning go on together so that the soldier soon comes to feel that the one cannot do without the other.

The Army's Teachers

Lest this all seem too easy, let us describe also some of the hard work which goes into the special training of men for the Army. The teachers are enlisted men. Most of them have had considerable professional and academic training, and many of them have had experience in teaching either in public schools or colleges. But comparatively few of them have had specific training or experience in teaching adult illiterates.

They learned that the hard way, and they have done a good job.

The materials already mentioned, as well as teachers' manuals and suggestions for the presentation of specific subjects, were provided for them from Washington. But the instructors had to make their adaptations and adjustments. They had to learn to use new methods with a completely new type of problem. They had to prepare their own visual aids and supplementary materials to fill gaps in learning and supply information appropriate to the needs of each specific camp. Many of the instructors sent their best contributions in to the Washington office so that their good ideas might be shared with other units through the medium of the monthly bulletin. Their supplementary reading materials, remedial devices, and such motivational materials as plays and songs made a real contribution to the Army program.

Some camps published mimeographed newspapers for their Special Training Units. One of these, called *Students*, carried personal greetings from the officers to the men, as well as honor lists showing the names of the men who were being "promoted" from one grade to another.

Besides preparing supplementary materials, many instructors spent much time giving individual help to men who were unable to keep up with the class. They helped them to help themselves and each

other. They did everything they could to help a man develop self-reliance and self-confidence. Some of the men had personal problems which made it difficult for them to adjust to the requirements of Army life. As in other Army units, some men were over-aggressive and resentful at first. Some of them adopted malingering tendencies in order to avoid responsibility. The most serious of these maladjustments were turned over to the personnel consultants assigned to the units. But many problems were handled by the teachers themselves. By maintaining a friendly relationship with the men, they gained their confidence and respect. Many malcontents were able to iron out their own grievances by the simple expedient of airing them. Others needed friendly counsel. Many of the men increased in confidence and satisfaction with their new life as they developed skills in reading and writing, thus removing handicaps which had troubled them for many years.

Some Implications for Public Education

Implications for education to be derived from the Army program are these: G. I. education for illiterates and non-English speaking men is as useful now as it will be in the uncertain future. It is direct and purposeful, conducted by the best known methods for the benefit of the trainee; it is well motivated both by the recognized need of the student and by the attractiveness and genuine validity of the approach.

Two other factors certainly contribute to the effectiveness of the program: many of the men found in the Army are living in a better environment than they have ever known from the standpoint of health and hygiene. Moreover, in the Army these men live a more secure, well-ordered kind of life. All these factors are conducive to rapid learning.

Some of these desirable conditions are already present in existing school systems.

After all, the cause of illiteracy is not "education," but rather the lack of it. When the problem of inadequate academic preparation confronted the Army, it was professional educators who were called in to solve the problem. The solution was to apply the best of what was already known about effective learning. Here was a case where necessity did not mother invention so much as did interest and enthusiasm, along with a strong feeling of responsibility for applying and demonstrating sound educational procedures.

These, then, are the lacks in the present program of education and they are deficiencies which you and I as citizens must supply. We need not a new system of education, but a better use of the one which already has proved successful. There is nothing to be gained by passing the buck back to the already overworked and underpaid teachers. Some of them would have solved this problem long ago had they been permitted to do so, just as they have already done more than their share to extend the rights of democracy to the underprivileged.

The question now is whether we can maintain the social consciousness which we have developed in time of war to meet the demands of peace. Most of us have learned to work harder than we ever worked before. Are we willing to work equally hard to maintain the benefits for which we have been fighting? Or will we let our enthusiasm lag in favor of our former less altruistic interests?

Those of us who are not numb to our social responsibilities will want to do two things: improve the present educational offerings, and make opportunities available in equal proportions for all. Both objectives will take hard work and determined effort. The first will mean keeping classes down to a size which experiment has shown is most conducive to learning,

as well as providing extra time and effort for the special cases which do not adjust readily to the class pattern. (Since the war, public school classes have increased in size because of teacher shortage—a warning to us). It will mean, also, providing funds for paying teacher salaries which will attract our best talent to the teaching profession. And that should include the teachers in all schools—north and south, east and west. This objective will include, also, extending educational opportunity to adult levels. And here is the real problem, for many illiterate adults lack the initiative to seek out educational opportunity. We need enthusiasts who will find these people and convince them of the values of education. Here is a problem to meet when the last bond drive is finished.

Providing equal opportunities for all is likewise more complicated than it seems on the surface. Too many of us have been under the impression that public schools have offered equal educational opportunities to all boys and girls. To be sure we have gone a considerable way toward achieving this goal. But the high frequency of functional illiteracy in our country reveals the long road that lies ahead. There is much still to be accomplished. We can bring the environment of every pupil up to a level where it will not interfere with effective learning, to say nothing of contaminating his mental and physical health. We can eliminate, if we try, our slums and our tobacco roads so that the dead-end kids and Jeeter Lester's offspring may have a chance at learning. We can set about assimilating our little Italys and little Chinas through the medium of language and the press speaking in terms of social tolerance.

Education, like other social programs, must be both remedial and preventive. We must improve the inadequate phases

of our teaching practices, and we must set up a far-reaching and constructive program which will insure that problems are not being created in one area while they are being corrected in another.

This means work for all: it means studying the present successful programs and using that which is best from each to improve the effectiveness of the whole, and it means getting these findings into action where they are needed most. It does not mean that all schools should be giving identical programs under identical circumstances. Instead, it means recognition of the fact that every community should offer its members equal chances with those of every other group. The ways and means are problems which various groups must work out for themselves. But the problem of initiating this effort may be the problem of the larger group which sees the problem of the country as a whole.

If the cost and effort involved in such a program seem prohibitive, we should look at it in terms of other costs. Delinquency and ignorance are expensive liabilities in a democracy. We have already seen the cost in time and effort of educating men who have been denied educational opportunities. Without education, these men could not serve their country in this emergency. These men have become literate in the Army. Thus, they have been able to take their places as effective soldiers. Similarly, many other men could readily be offered the opportunity to attain the academic skills needed by every good citizen. The Army has demonstrated that illiteracy need not continue to be a great social problem. The way of correcting this condition lies within our reach. Such an effort would yield gains which would make the cost worth while. We must keep our eyes fixed on these gains if we would wash away the beam which at present impairs our vision.