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SCHOOLS COMPARED WITH 40 YEARS AGO

As part of the growing national debate on education, the New York Times recently presented a chart showing a comparison of "who learns what when." The chart showed at which grades American and Japanese students are usually taught particular subjects.

It is interesting to know what is happening in foreign lands, but it is not wholly comparative because of other differences between Japanese and American educational systems in orientation, methodology, and purpose. It would have been far more instructive if the New York Times chart had compared public schools in America today and 40 years ago.

Let's go down the list and compare what the Times says is the norm in today's U.S. schools with what I was taught in ordinary elementary public schools in mid-America 40 years ago. The difference is depressing.

According to the Times, today's American children are taught the multiplication tables (1 through 10) in the fourth grade. I was taught the multiplication tables (1 through 12) in the third grade; and the whole class knew their tables through 12 x 12.

According to the Times, today's American children are taught to add and subtract with fractions in the fifth grade; I was taught fractions in the fourth grade. Today's children are taught to calculate percentages in the sixth or seventh grades; I was taught percentages in the fifth grade.

According to the Times, U.S. children are taught to write paragraphs in the second grade; I was taught this in the first grade.

According to the Times, U.S. children are taught to write creative essays in the ninth grade. I was taught this in the fourth grade in what is now an inner city ghetto public school. My most vivid memory of the fourth grade is being required to write a short creative essay daily.

Writing is the finest learning experience because it forces a pupil to organize his thoughts and put them on paper in a form that is intelligible to others. An important fringe benefit of early training in creative writing is the development of perfection in grammar and spelling.

It is curious that the Times chart did not include the most fundamental of all the basic skills taught in elementary schools, namely, reading. I was taught to read anything and everything well (including the newspaper and the encyclopedia) in the first grade, and never needed to study "reading" again.

Today's American children, however, hobble along trying to learn to read a few hundred words per year in the first through fourth grades. After that, some children must take a course practically unheard of 40 years ago called "remedial reading." The decline in the quality of American schools has nothing to do with funding or public support or teacher-student ratio. Several years of the excellent public school education I received was in classrooms where one teacher taught two full grades in the same room.

The deterioration of education is the most shocking of all the changes that have taken place in the United States over the last few decades. The American people have uncomplainingly paid billions of dollars a year in taxes to build and staff supposedly better schools to educate their children.

Yet they've been cheated by a massive rip-off that makes any sale of shoddy or defective merchandise by corporations insignificant by comparison. No corporation could get by with consistently reducing the value of its product while regularly raising its price every year.

American inventive genius has had to develop memory typewriters for secretaries who must retype pages again and again until they clean up all their mistakes; word processor programs to locate misspelled words (for secretaries who not only cannot spell but can't even spell well enough to find the words in the dictionary); and cash registers that automatically calculate the change due a customer's payment.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education concluded that a "rising tide of mediocrity threatens our very future as a nation and as a people." That's putting it too casually; functional illiteracy threatens millions of Americans today in their ability to get and hold a job here and now.

Everybody's been cheated by the deterioration in the quality of education in America. And the ones cheated most of all are those who have a high school diploma but have not been taught what Americans up to a generation ago had learned by the sixth grade.