



School Daze

We had a story about school last week, and let's keep in the same general topic this time, but moving back about ten years - to my entry to elementary school, in Edmonton in Canada.

At the beginning of the school term in September that year, I was a couple of months shy of my sixth birthday, and under the regulations covering school attendance in that area it was time for me to enter first grade. But there was a bit of a twist to the situation. We had been in Canada only a couple of weeks, having spent much of the summer on the long journey from Britain by ocean liner and transcontinental train. Now that in itself was no problem; in those days immigrants from Europe were streaming into every Canadian city, so to be a 'newcomer' was nothing out of the ordinary at all. And as my native language was English, my situation was far easier than that of kids who had come over from countries that spoke other languages. They were simply tossed into the 'pool' right at the deep end, where it was sink or swim.

And this advantage that I held over some of the kids was compounded by the fact that I had already had nearly two years of schooling back in England. Even though my parents had grown up as 'working class', they had the (quite natural) idea that their children would 'do better', and so they had enrolled me in a Preparatory School. It seems to have been quite a 'posh' little place, and I have seen a kind of Report Card that showed my progress in the various lessons - of course the basics like English and Arithmetic, but also such things as Elocution, and even Boxing.

So imagine the situation on those first days of school that September - the teacher faced with a couple of dozen kids ranging from those who spoke only Polish or Hungarian, all the way over to me at the other end of the scale, with my very 'proper' British English accent.

I can't remember those days at all, but my mother tells of how I was given a newspaper to keep me occupied and told to sit out of the way while the teacher got busy on A B Cs with the other kids. Might it be the experiences of this first year in school that was the origin of the 'get me out of here' feeling that I still feel to this day any time I step into a classroom?

Well, that I can't say, but if I left the story there, I would be leaving a misleading impression of my school experiences. At the end of that first year there must have been some discussions along the lines of 'what should we do with him,' and the decision was made to send me on to Grade 3 next, skipping 2.

These days it's common to analyze abilities in terms of not only IQ (how 'intelligent' you are) but also of EQ (an 'emotional quotient'). In making that decision to move me ahead, it seems they were focussing perhaps a bit too much on my academic ability to the exclusion of the other side. My report cards from those years show a steady decline in grades as the years went by - from 'perfect' at first, down to 'barely passing' some years later. By the time I got to the end of Grade 5 the situation had become untenable, and I was asked to repeat it.

I was a 'failure'.

About the only thing I can take away from these experiences is that a school system of the traditional type - with kids sitting in desks in rows, all being fed an identical curriculum with no regard to their particular skills

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and weaknesses, might not be the best way to do things. It made sense in the early days of our industrial culture, when there was a need for a steady supply of basically literate people able to work in factories, etc., but I think that it long ago became quite divorced from the actual requirements of contemporary society.

When chatting with people about this, and I am asked, "How do you think we could improve our schools?" I usually reply with a one word answer, one that is not entirely facetious.

Dynamite.

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