

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Personalized learning

In recent decades, public schools have increasingly turned teachers into specialists, each of whom is expected to drop specific dollops of knowledge into students' heads as they traverse a rigid and complicated daily schedule.

Administrators ballyhoo the increasing sophistication of their schools as necessary to foster student achievement.

Yet, curiously, children and youth have for centuries managed to learn reading, writing, calculating and other essential skills without all the bells and whistles of today's public schools.

Two hundred years ago, James Freeman Clarke had already learned by the age of ten to read and write English, to understand Greek and Latin, learn history, and to do algebra and trigonometry.

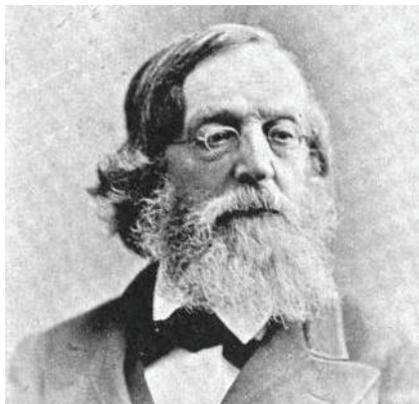
And what teacher performed this miracle?

Clarke's grandfather.

Here are some excerpts from Clarke's autobiography:

"After breakfast each morning, my grandfather taught my elder brother and sister and me Latin, Greek, and mathematics." "I did not know at the time what a wonderful teacher he was.

"In the first place he made our studies interesting to us. Next he removed all unnecessary difficulties, and only required us to learn what was essential....



JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE (1810-1880) was a popular Unitarian minister. His early tutoring by his grandfather shows the importance of relationships in learning.

"Real discipline comes to the mind (grandfather says) when it acts not languidly, but with its full energy, and it acts with energy only when it is interested in what it does."

"Therefore, as soon as I am unable to keep up their interest in what they do, I turn their attention to something else, or send them out to play."

Clarke recollects, "the excellence of this method may be seen in the fact that before I was ten years old I had read Ovid, some Odes of Horace, a little of Virgil, the Gospel of Matthew in Greek, and had gone as far as cubic equations in

algebra. I had also read through the 'History of the United States,' Hume's 'England,' Robertson's 'Scotland,' and Gibbon's 'Rome.'

"Nor was I aware that I was doing a great deal, for study was made almost as entertaining as play. "I once met with the term 'trigonometry' and asked my grandfather the meaning of the word. 'Trigonometry,' said he, 'is a wonderful science. It is all about triangles.'

"He proceeded to draw on a slate a number of triangles, showing me that each had three sides and three angles, and explaining if we knew three of these (one being a side) we could find the other three.

"He told me by that law we could tell the distances of the planets and the moon. Then he took me out on the lawn and showed me a tall tree, and explained how by trigonometry I could tell the height of the tree.

"Thereupon I made a little quadrant out of a shingle, and proceeded to measure the height of the trees and houses around me...."

Unfortunately, I only have space to relate a small portion of Clarke's recollections of his grandfather, his joy of learning, and his freedom to exercise outdoors, including horseback riding, swimming, and walking in the woods.

Clearly, the love that Clarke and his grandfather had for each other, and his grandfather's flexibility to teach as he saw fit, was the key to Clarke's academic success.

Are we better off today? It's not necessarily so.

Tom Hylton is a member of the Pottstown School Board. However, the views expressed are his alone and not the board's.



Commentary by
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