

THE ENGLISH NURSERY SCHOOL

By

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PREFACE

THERE are indications that the progress of nursery education in this country will, during the next few years, proceed much more rapidly than has hitherto been the case ; and this book has been written in response to the need, frequently expressed by many whose duty or inclination leads them to take an interest in the subject, for a single volume that should bring together in convenient form much scattered information relating to the growth, organization, and function of the nursery school and nursery class as an integral part of our educational system.

In matters of fact I have taken pains to ensure accuracy and, where possible, to give the sources of information. In matters of opinion it should be understood that responsibility for the views expressed is entirely my own.

It has been my good fortune to have had my interest in the nursery school movement aroused and strengthened by personal associations with Margaret McMillan and other pioneers who are happily still engaged in shaping the course of future developments in this field and upon whose inspiration, wise guidance, and encouragement I have drawn heavily. In this regard it would be difficult to express adequately my sense of indebtedness to Miss Grace Owen, Miss Lillian de Lissa, and Miss Margaret Drummond.

I am grateful to directors of education, medical officers, and superintendents of nursery schools who have, from time to time, allowed me facilities for observation and have kindly supplied information and material.

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to Sir Fredk. Mander for permission to reprint the temperature chart from the memorandum of the National Union of Teachers on *Rural Education*. I ask the indulgence of others from whom I have quoted less extensively without specific permission.

For plans and photographs I have to thank Mr. F. P. Armitage, Director of Education for the City of Leicester; Dr. C. F. Strong, Director of Education for Tottenham; Mr. H. Sanderson, Borough Engineer and Surveyor for Accrington; the *Architects' Journal*; the St. Pancras House Improvement Society Ltd.; the Gas, Light and Coke Company; the London School of Hygiene (for the photograph of the Cynthia Mosley Nursery School); the Hon. Secretary of the Somerstown Nursery School; Miss Z. D. Brown, Superintendent of the St. Leonard's Nursery School, London; Miss Joan Cass, Superintendent of the Edith Kerrison Nursery School, West Ham; Miss Honor Edwards, Superintendent of the Everton Road Nursery School, Liverpool; Mr. H. A. Tozer of Sheffield (for the photograph of household play at Broomhall Nursery School). It is a matter for great regret that it has been possible to publish only a very small proportion of the many excellent pictures that have been lent to me.

I am indebted to Mr. F. V. Merriman, Chief Education Officer to the Reading Education Committee, for the prolonged loan of official reports; and to Mr. F. M. Bunce, Chief Librarian of the Reading Public Libraries, and his staff, for their unfailing courtesy and assistance in procuring books that were out of print or difficult to come by.

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PHOEBE E. CUSDEN.

READING,
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THE ENGLISH NURSERY SCHOOL

CHAPTER I

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE NURSERY SCHOOL MOVEMENT

THE story of the English nursery school is one of the romances of our time. It is in large measure the story of pioneers who, having seen a vision of what childhood might be and of the nobler race that might grow out of it, spent their lives and energies in a supreme effort to translate that vision into reality in the slums of our great cities. In this respect the movement here differed in origin and purpose from that of its American counterpart; for whereas in England the nursery school was instituted as a remedy for unsatisfactory social and economic conditions, in the United States it developed mainly as a laboratory for psychological research in a middle-class setting. Developments on both sides of the Atlantic have largely modified these tendencies and widened the scope of the movement in both countries. Thus America has, under its reconstruction programmes, established very many emergency nursery schools for the under-privileged sections

of the population ; while in England the value of nursery schools as a means of satisfying the psychological and social needs of young children has become increasingly appreciated by parents in comfortable circumstances who therefore desire these facilities for their own children. Moreover, the view of those who have consistently acclaimed the nursery school as the indispensable basis of any sound system of education is becoming ever more widely accepted.

The movement as we know it is a growth of the present century. Dame schools there were in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ; but these were often little more than makeshift nurseries set up in the stuffy living-rooms of uneducated women who, in the absence of other means, adopted this method of earning a living. A few there were with somewhat higher aims, and in them the children were initiated all too soon into the rudiments of learning.

One of the earliest approaches to the modern nursery school was made by Robert Owen who, in 1816, opened a school at New Lanark where children from the age of two were cared for while their mothers were at work in the mills. Under Owen's influence other infants' schools were opened in various parts of England and Scotland ; but although the best of these were conducted in such a way as partly to justify the term "well regulated, systematic nurseries" applied to them in 1829 by Lord Jeffrey, in the majority of them the formal instruction and too rigid discipline were unsuited to the needs and capacities of young children. Moreover, the motives which led to their establishment were not so much consideration for the welfare of the children as the necessity to release their mothers

and elder brothers and sisters for work in the factories, mills and workshops, and the desire to accustom the children themselves to habits of industry so that they in turn might be able to take their place in the industrial maelstrom.

In this connection the following passage, from the 'Minutes of the Committee of Council on Education' of 20 February 1840, is significant :

'The value of infant schools is daily rendered more apparent, by the evidence which transpires of the extent to which elementary education is interfered with, by the employment of the children in assisting their parents at an early age, not less in the agricultural occupations of rural districts than in the manufactories of towns.'¹

It is interesting to note that about this time Samuel Wilderspin advocated infant schools chiefly as a means of combating child 'crime.'

During the latter half of the nineteenth century the influence of Froebel's ideas on the educational thought of the day became apparent, and growing importance was attached to the provision of an environment in which joyous activity, free play and contact with nature could be experienced. Any tendency towards applying this wholesome doctrine was, however, counteracted by the introduction of grants and the accompanying system of payment by results ; for although, after much protest, children under six were exempted from individual examination, the knowledge that this hurdle loomed ahead affected the treatment even of the youngest. A tradition grew up that the ultimate aim of the infants' school was to give the

¹ Quoted in *Report of Consultative Committee on Infant and Nursery Schools*, 1933, p. 15. (H.M. Stationery Office, 2s. 6d.)

children a thorough grounding in the elements of reading, writing and number ; and although in the best modern infants' schools it has been superseded by more enlightened methods, it is a tradition that has persisted to this day. It colours the outlook of the teachers even in the lower classes, while in the last year of the infant stage it is quite commonly the case that pressure is exerted in order to enable the children to pass with credit into the junior school.

That the results of this sort of schooling were definitely harmful and defeated the object in view was abundantly evident to anyone who had eyes to see. Speaking from her¹ experience as a Sunday School teacher in the 'nineties, Miss Julia Lloyd, a pioneer of the modern nursery school in Birmingham, said :

' Our infants' schools were far from ideal. The children sat in rows before me, dull and lacking in imagination, just repeating parrot-wise whatever I tried to teach them.'¹

In an introductory memorandum to the reports of five women inspectors on the admission of infants to public elementary schools and the curriculum suitable for children under the age of five (1905), the Chief Inspector of Public Elementary Schools said that " the inspectors were agreed that children between the ages of three and five gained no profit intellectually from school instruction, and that the mechanical teaching which they often received dulled their imagination and weakened their power of independent observation."²

Manifestly it was essential that young children should

¹ 'The Beginnings of the Nursery School Movement in Birmingham.' (Pamphlet by Julia Lloyd.)

² Quoted in *Report of Consultative Committee on Infant and Nursery Schools*, 1933. (H.M. Stationery Office.)