

SUCCESSFUL TEACHING

Its Psychological Principles

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First Edition

THIRD IMPRESSION

New York

London

McGRAW-HILL BOOK COMPANY, INC.

1946

SUCCESSFUL TEACHING

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For JEAN

PREFACE

What must any teacher do if his pupils are to learn well and are to achieve lasting, usable, and meaningful results? This is the crucial problem with which this book is chiefly concerned.

The first step in writing this book began with applying the method of universal doubt. The author tried to wipe his mental slate clean, to suppose that nothing at all is known about what makes teaching successful. He attempted particularly to suppose that all methods—progressive, conventional, or otherwise—are equally unacceptable. This assumption was not too difficult, for it is quite clear that good teaching is not a very common thing. Thus, no method could be considered as answering the problem immediately.

Where, then, to start? There seemed only one possible point of departure. If there were any answer at all, it could only be found in what is known about the psychology of learning. True, our knowledge is not complete and does not go down to bedrock, but a great deal has been discovered, and we have a pretty good natural history of learning. Above all, there is a very striking and growing agreement among the best psychologists about the conditions of good learning. The author therefore undertook to find out the implications of this knowledge for the practice of teaching, beginning with as few preconceptions as possible.

The next step was to apply this body of knowledge about learning. It was obviously futile to say in effect to a teacher, "Here is what we know about learning. Now go ahead and use it." That procedure has been tried often enough, and it doesn't work out. Consequently, the author set about to refresh and extend his contacts with actual teaching. He reviewed his own experience, visited classrooms, conferred with teachers, worked with groups of student cadets, studied accounts of teaching situations and various recommended plans for teaching. He tried to do all this without preconceived ideas for or against and with only one question in mind. How does psychology bear on these situations? The author was looking for the bridge between our psychological knowledge and the practical teaching job.

The solution was not found in any set method. Learning sometimes seemed to go well and sometimes badly, almost irrespective of the particular method used. Moreover, many samples of teaching

hardly seemed to represent any definable method at all, and such samples also might be good or bad.

The author found this bridge in a set of six principles. The more he looked at teaching and learning, the clearer it became that from the psychological standpoint certain crucial aspects attach to them. The learner's mind must work in the right kind of *context* if he is to learn well. He must set up the right kind of *focus*. The right kind of *social relationships* will help him enormously. To some extent he must work in his own *individual* way. Each particular job of learning must be a part of a *sequence* of developing power and insight. The right kind of *evaluation* is essential, for the learner needs to know how he is getting along and other people need to know it too. These six principles—context, focalization, socialization, individualization, sequence, and evaluation—comprise the author's bridge between psychology and the classroom.

In dealing with them, the first requirement was to find out what psychology has to say about each one. It can tell us a great deal. It can show quite definitely the general characteristics of *good* context, *good* focalization, *good* socialization, *good* individualization, *good* sequence, and *good* evaluation. It can show us how learning must be organized with respect to each principle if it is to yield the best results.

But a question still remains. Just exactly how does each of these principles work out on the job? Here the author came upon the idea of a hierarchy or scale of applications for each of the six. Take context, for example, which is always found in learning and teaching. Sometimes it is very poor (as, for instance, a dull, compact textbook), sometimes very good, sometimes intermediate in excellence. Thus, for each principle, one gets a hierarchy or scale by which actual teaching practices can be rated and arranged in an ascending order of excellence according to whatever psychology can tell us about how the principle in question ought to operate. Teaching cannot be seen simply as good or bad but exhibits varying degrees of excellence in six definite respects. So, for the teacher, the problem is not to practice any particular method, conventional or progressive, but to apply the six principles at the highest possible level.

Several additional explanatory comments now may be in order.

1. Teachers, supervisors, practice teachers, observers, or students of methodology can evaluate any job of teaching, actual or described, in terms of these principles. All of them can be seen operating in the teaching process, and the level on which they are operating can be estimated. And so a definite basis for forming a judgment and for indicating improvements is arrived at.

2. It is doubtful whether the author's set of principles is the only possible one. The only claim made is that they are definite, recognizable, and add up to a full, consistent account of the key aspects of teaching. Other sets might be developed. Motivation, for instance, does not appear in the author's scheme, although it might in another. It is omitted not because it is unimportant, but because, for the author, it does not represent a separate, recognizable aspect of teaching; it appears, rather, to be a result of all six principles. When these are applied at a high level, good motivation is the end product.

3. If a teacher applies these principles at a high level—*i.e.*, if he uses sound psychology—it will affect all his professional activities—particularly his preparation. Surprisingly enough, preparation has been badly handled in most books on teaching; it has been presented as routine daily lesson planning. Accordingly, a good deal of attention has been paid to this topic throughout the book, especially in the last chapter.

4. The issue of "one-man rule" versus classroom democracy is a very live one. The author's slant is that a teacher is not an autocrat nor a mere member of the learning group nor even in essence a director or a guide. He is an organizer, and he does a good job by applying specific principles of organization that are based on a sound general doctrine.

5. In emphasizing results, there is no conflict with those who emphasize child development, except when the latter is made an excuse for mere vagueness. Good learning is a primary agency for proper development, and good learning requires a proper developmental setting or sequence. No dividends, developmental or otherwise, accrue from bad learning.

6. This book deals with the problem of practical teaching. Of course, curriculum, administration, and an over-all philosophy are vital issues, all interrelated and connected with teaching. Moreover, with the decline of books and courses on general methods, the problem of teaching has been underemphasized of late. But after all, what is the use of the best curriculum, the most expert administration, the wisest philosophy, if teaching is so technically bad that it fails and potential learners simply do not learn?

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NEW YORK, N. Y.,
June, 1946.

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CHAPTER 1

SUCCESSFUL TEACHING: ITS MEANING

THE CRITERION

Successful teaching is teaching that brings about effective learning. The decisive question is not what methods or procedures are employed, and whether they are old-fashioned or modern, time-tested or experimental, conventional or progressive. All such considerations may be important but none of them is ultimate, for they have to do with means, not ends. The ultimate criterion for success in teaching is—results!

This may perhaps seem so obvious as to be beyond all possible doubt. A person decides to take some lessons in golf or piano playing. As a return for the time and money invested, he wants an improvement in golf or piano playing, and the bigger the improvement for a given expenditure, the better he is pleased. A school conducts courses in algebra, French, or American history. The only assumption on which this makes sense is that the pupils are going to learn algebra, French, or American history, and the more they learn and the better they learn it in the time available, the better the courses have done what they were intended to do, which is a good working definition of success. Thus our criterion for success in teaching seems entirely harmonious with common sense.

Nevertheless it raises far-reaching and debatable issues which require considerable elucidation. Since the purpose of this book is to show how teaching must be managed in order to succeed in the sense indicated, it is very necessary to be as clear as possible from the outset about the meaning and implications of the criterion adopted.

1. By what kind of results should the success of teaching be judged? This is the first and perhaps the most obvious of all the numerous questions suggested by our criterion. It is closely related to the business of making the curriculum, an important part of which is to determine what the proper and desirable outcomes of education are. This book, however, does not deal with what are ordinarily thought of as curriculum problems as such. But if we look at the matter purely from the standpoint of teaching, which admittedly involves an abstraction but is possible and helpful nonetheless, it

immediately becomes clear that certain kinds of results are enormously more important than other kinds. This is a distinction of great importance, because results of the former kind should always be regarded as the only true indicators of success.

Thus, results that are lasting are evidently far more important and significant than those that are transitory. An investigation revealed that over a thousand college students in zoology, psychology, and chemistry did fairly well on objective tests given in June but had forgotten at least half that they knew when the tests were repeated in October. Another investigation showed that college seniors lose an enormous proportion of the information they have acquired, or at least studied, during their school careers—such things as the meaning of an erg, an ohm, or a watt; the names of two substances used in making hydrogen; the velocity of light and sound; the date of the Hegira; the name of the American president during the Mexican war; or the main issue at the Council of Nicaea. One might, of course, say with much justification that the loss of such material does not matter. But after all, it was taught, and presumably with the idea that it would be retained. One can easily imagine a teacher's placing great emphasis upon it, working hard to organize and present it well, driving his pupils to study it diligently, running a test to find out how well they had done so, and then congratulating himself on a satisfactory job when the showing was favorable. This, however, would be a very unintelligent criterion if, as would almost certainly be the case, most of it disappeared in a short time and there was nothing else left. Every teacher does well to consider, in connection with every lesson he presents, how much of it will still be in the learners' minds after a week, or a month, or a year, or ten years, or twenty years. If he has the courage to do this, he is facing an extremely formidable challenge, but also a very healthy one, for it is the long pull that counts.^{1*}

Again, results that a learner can use freely, flexibly, and confidently in a variety of situations are clearly far superior to those which he can only produce when he is given the right cue or asked the right question. A thousand out of twelve hundred ninth graders could handle algebraic operations such as multiplication, the use of brackets, the manipulation of fractions, and the solution of simple equations. But out of that thousand, only a little over three hundred could find the value of x in the equation

$$\frac{5}{2-x} = \frac{3}{4+x}$$

* This, like all similar numbers throughout, refers to the notes and references at the end of the chapter.

although not a single unfamiliar operation was involved. Again, a grade-school group, most of whom could manage the four basic arithmetical operations when presented in standard and familiar form, were given the following problem: "Joseph rode on a merry-go-round 12 times. Each ride cost him 3 cents. How much did he pay for all his rides?" The majority were helpless. A few said they multiplied, but only because they noticed the word "times." One child added, "Because there were lots of numbers." And one reported thus: "If there are lots of numbers, I add. If there are only two numbers and lots of part [digits], I subtract. But if there are just two numbers and one littler than the other, it is hard. I divides if they come out even, but if they don't, I multiply." Here again, in both these cases, one can readily imagine a teacher working hard to get across the basic algebraic and arithmetical operations or skills. But it would be a very ephemeral and delusive success, hardly worthy of the name. And so once more every teacher does well to ask himself, in connection with every lesson he presents, whether the children are really able to use and apply what they are learning and to see its bearing upon unfamiliar situations, for these quite obviously are the kind of results that count.²

So there are some results which, on the basis of the merest common sense and without any theorizing whatever, cannot be considered as anything but unimportant, because they do not last and because they can be produced only on the one right occasion. Both weaknesses flow from the same underlying defect. Such results consist only of memorized words, without any real grasp of what the words convey. Here and there some detail may stick in a learner's mind and be retained for a surprisingly long time. But it is merely an inconsequential and useless psychological curiosity. For the most part, after the lapse of a year, it is as though they had never been. Such results cannot possibly be taken as the criterion for good teaching, and when it is oriented chiefly towards them, which all too often happens in fact and deed if not in word, then it is pointed toward failure. Results of this kind, which do not enter into the personality of the learner, or shape his mental development, or affect his thinking, or influence his action, may properly be called *spurious*.

But there are results of a very different sort. These appear when a child learns his mother tongue, when a student on a football squad learns the meaning of team loyalty, when mathematics is taught so that pupils grasp it as a method of thinking and analysis with endless implications and applications, when history is presented so as to convey a sense of the sweep and current bearings of past events, when the study of science yields an understanding of how explanations are elaborated

and nature controlled by objective analysis. Such results last. They may not be retained with all their accompanying detail exactly as they were first acquired, but they establish lines of mental growth, and although they may be assimilated and transformed as deeper and wider understanding comes, they are never lost. And even the detail can easily be reconstituted and brushed up if desired. So, by the same token, they can be used in thought and action for the reason that they are not superficial or merely verbal but enter into the personality of the learner, influence his point of view and approach to things, and are richly meaningful for him. These are the kind of results by which the success of teaching must be judged and, in contrast to the others, they may be called *authentic*.

2. Should teaching be judged by results in terms of the learning of subject matter or by results in terms of the development of pupils as persons? This, in a sense, is a continuation of the previous question, but it opens up new considerations, and it brings to a focus one of the most crucial and earnestly debated of modern educational issues, on which it is altogether necessary to take a definite stand. Let us begin by putting the opposing arguments as completely and fairly as may be possible in a brief statement.

On the one hand it is contended that since human personality is far more important than any school subject, or indeed all the content of the curriculum put together, teachers should concentrate on the development of pupils as persons and accept this as the primary criterion of their success. Subject matter, indeed, is important, but it is only a means, and the development of personality is the end.

This position has been excellently expressed in the following words:

This self is emerging hour by hour as the child integrates his concepts, desires, and ways of thinking and acting around his ever-widening and ever-deepening life purposes. Such integration comes best through happy social living. The teacher's daily thoughts should dwell most about this process of happy living rather than about the child's expression of facts or mastery of specific techniques. Those are the little things, which though a part, should take their rightful very subordinate place in the large whole. Children themselves quickly recognize such differences. In a side room three little girls sit busily at work. One says to the others, "Does not the new girl in our room draw beautifully?" Then musing further, "But she is not a very good classmate to the rest of us yet." All continued to work. "Don't you know what I mean?" asks the talkative one. "Yes," and "Indeed yes," say the other two in surprised tones as they work calmly on.*

* Inga Olla Helseth, *Living in the Classroom*, p. 220, Edwards Bros., Inc., Ann Arbor, Mich., 1939.

Thus it is intimated that the efforts of the teacher should center not so much on curricular attainment as on the development of the right kind of personality which is far more important.

It may be interesting to remark that there is nothing new or novel about this doctrine. The famous theory of formal discipline or general mental training claimed precisely that Latin, Greek, mathematics, and pure science were not to be studied for their own sakes, but rather for the building up of certain powers and capacities, such as concentration, attentiveness, and the ability to think. The personal qualities that would commend themselves to an intelligent teacher of the classics a hundred years ago might be considerably different from those a modern progressive educator would think desirable. But the two would have very similar views about the relative importance of subject matter as such and the development of the pupil as a person.

So much for one side of the case. On the other hand it is argued that as a matter of fact the practical business of the school is and always has been to get the pupils to learn a stated curriculum. The school is fundamentally different from a general-welfare institution or a club or a clinic. It is an agency established and maintained by society to convey, particularly to young people, a body of content believed to be of great importance. In conveying this content and also in the general conduct of its affairs, it should no doubt have a constant concern for desirable personal qualities. Indeed the very purpose of conveying the stated content at all is to build them up. But they cannot and should not be the chief consideration in the day-by-day business of operating the school. The primary job which it has, apart from choosing the curriculum, is to get that curriculum well and truly learned. The success of its teaching can only be judged justly by how well it manages to get this done.

Such, then, is the issue. Desirable personal traits and qualities can certainly be considered results. So can subject-matter masteries. Which are we to choose? Which does our criterion indicate? On which should the success of teaching be judged? The answer is simple. We reject the alternative. To learn subject matter authentically, such traits as independence, initiative, creativeness, responsibility, cooperativeness, and the power to think and enjoy must be brought into play. The little girl who drew "beautifully" but who was "not yet a very good classmate" needed to learn to use her skill in a cooperative situation, and to do so would be good both for her skill and her growth as a person. On the other hand, when teaching evokes such traits as dependence, fear, insecurity, furtiveness, envy, and the tendency to get by no matter how, what happens to the subject

matter? It is being learned, not as something that grips the pupil because it has a vital meaning for him, but at best as an external, superficial, mechanical routine. Nor is it true that a teacher can afford even relatively to neglect the learning of subject matter and concentrate chiefly on "happy living" in and of itself, for some of the most important and strengthening happiness in school comes from an awareness of increasing power with subject matter, and some of the most important and defeating unhappiness comes from a sense of laboring at an alien and meaningless routine, even though one does fairly well with it.

One might put the whole matter like this. A teacher should by all means be concerned with the pupil as a person, and should deal with him so that he develops as a person as well and completely as possible. But this is not quite all. The pupil in school is not a person without any further qualifications and specifications. He is a person with a job to do, a person who learns. If he is mishandled as a person he will not learn well. If he does not learn well he will be to that extent frustrated as a person. So the specific answer to the question at the head of this section is that the teacher must deal with the pupil as *a person who learns*, and that his work must be judged by the results which come from such dealings. The point is of such fundamental importance that a couple of concrete instances seem in order to make its meaning clearer.

The first is that of a certain high-school course in world history, which it is interesting to review from the standpoint of a student going through it. At the very beginning of the course, the student starts to gain a sense of the fascination and infinitely rich significance of the great story of the past. At first, assignments are sporadic, unsystematic, and different for different pupils. He himself, perhaps, is asked to look up a topic treated but slightly in the textbook, and to report to the class. His report, and those of other pupils, lead to stimulating discussions of the historic causes of present happenings. Little by little the chronological sequence of occurrences begins to establish itself in his mind, but it is always made meaningful by rich applications and many experiences of a revealing nature. For instance, he is helped to find readings which grip his interest and attention, and which dramatize great personalities and great events, and make them real. Before very long he may find himself working with a group of his fellow students to assemble, collate, and arrange for display a set of pictures bearing upon an important historical period. He himself, let us say, has strong literary inclinations, and he is encouraged to concentrate within reason upon the poetic masterpieces of the past, as revelations

of how the men of long ago felt about the problems of their lives. Later on, when occasion serves, the whole class visits a historic site not too far away. There is careful preparation for the trip. Maps are made, notes are taken. And when the group returns there is much to discuss and collate. As the course draws to a close, the class undertakes to prepare and produce a historical pageant which calls for much hard and careful work. A textbook forms part of the material—used chiefly to keep the sequence straight, to round out the various topics, and to serve as a reference source—and for these purposes it is extensively utilized. Such, very briefly and with many omissions, is what happens, described in terms of the experience of one of the members of the class.

Notice that the whole business of learning history is organized in such a way as to emphasize and call for understanding, insight, initiative, and cooperation, and to develop appreciations and encourage creative tendencies. It is very certain that the course is an inspiring, stimulating, growth-producing personal experience. Our pupil learns a good deal about how to work effectively, how to cooperate with others, how to value and display initiative, and he gains deeper and broader appreciations and insights. All these are factors in his personal development; yet in a real sense they are subject-matter factors too, for they all come about in and through and because of the business of learning history. If one insists on asking whether history itself is well learned, the answer is in the affirmative. The *memoriter* results of the course have been found triumphantly to resist the test of time; and the pupils who have taken it have been shown to possess a markedly superior ability to see the relationship of history to what are ordinarily considered nonhistorical problems. Here is a clear case of the pupil being treated as a person who learns, and of the indivisibility of personal development and authentic subject-matter achievement.

A contrary instance is furnished by a history teacher in a certain high school who made a great feature of a remarkable system of penalties for mistakes during recitations. When a mistake occurred, she had a routine for assigning what she considered an appropriately long passage to be copied from the textbook after school. She was very lavish with these penalties and thought them a very valuable instrumentality for producing learning. Pupils were in a constant state of latent rebellion. Parents protested. But the teacher was wedded to her idea. She was contemptuous of all suggestions that it turned pupils against her, her subject, and schoolwork in general, that it was emotionally injurious, that it was antidemocratic. She insisted that it forced them to work hard at history which was the only important

thing. Since she was on tenure and had the firm support of her superiors, nothing could be done.

This was bad teaching. One might say that it was bad because it developed various undesirable traits in the pupils, such as a tendency to cheat whenever they could, a delight in fooling the teacher, and numerous emotions of a decidedly unchristian kind. This was perfectly true, and also important. Yet common sense suggests that it was not quite enough. What about the history? The teacher was very proud of her results, and to be sure the pupils did seem to make a good showing on objective tests. But an ingenious committee of parents, acting on the suggestion of a malevolent professional educator among them, was able to show that these results were very transient *i.e.*, that the pupils forgot very fast, and that they developed such a negative slant towards history that they never willingly studied or read it again. That is what happens to subject matter when pupils are treated not as persons who learn but as receptacles into which material is to be crammed.

Thus the case seems clear. Teaching establishes its success in and through the production of authentic subject-matter results, which results are indistinguishably associated with desirable personal qualities. To learn something well and successfully is itself an inspiring and enlarging experience. And the material becomes nourishment for the mind and spirit. But when teaching does not bring about authentic results, when the best results it can show are spurious, even though they may be quite impressive when arrayed in a statistical tabulation, nothing can save it from failure. There is no nourishment, inspiration, or enlargement in routine and mechanical learning, and moreover it is a bad way to teach subject matter.

Thus the criticism which is being made today against a paramount emphasis on subject matter does not lie against subject matter as such, or subject matter effectively learned, but against the mechanical, routine, meaningless learning and teaching of it for the sake of spurious and superficial outcomes. And it is perfectly justified.

3. Does our criterion indicate any particular plan or procedure or methodology by adopting which teaching may succeed? No, it does not. In particular it does not indicate the kind of procedure of which people are likely to think first when they are told that the primary business of teaching is to get results. This is to determine precisely and carefully in advance just what results are wanted, to lay them out in some kind of orderly topical sequence, to teach them under the greatest possible pressure, to give long assignments, to pile on written work, to administer frequent and drastic tests, and to be very sparing

of high marks. Practice of this kind seems very direct and sensible. Many teachers cling to it because they have never seen anything else, and cannot imagine a good job done in any other way. But as will be amply demonstrated later on, it leads to disappointment more often than not. Its tendency is to produce not authentic but spurious results, and even these are frequently very meager.

The work of a certain English headmistress shows how very differently teaching can be managed and still succeed in terms of our criterion. She decided to take personal charge of the music in her school. The school was situated in a district not quite in the slum category, but well down towards the poverty line. The children came from underprivileged homes, enjoyed very few opportunities for culture or intellectual or aesthetic stimulation, and lived in a meager and forbidding environment. The headmistress, who well understood the people with whom she had to deal, did not begin in the conventional way by laying out a sequential course of study in music. She had a very definite plan, but it was not that kind of a plan. She began by uncovering whatever interest the children had in music, and wherever she found some flax smoldering, no matter how dimly, she proceeded to fan it to a flame. For instance, she warmly encouraged creative endeavor whenever the least sign of it appeared. True, most of the early efforts would excite the pitying scorn of musical theorists, but she was dealing with children and learning, not with preconceived ideas. She encouraged the children to sing whatever they wished to sing and then helped them to discover other things that they might like still more to sing. A few of them could play a little, and these talents too were put into circulation instead of being buried in the ground. By the end of a couple of years these children were discovering music, and finding happiness and satisfaction in so doing. As to artistic standards, they were enjoying the best music of the ages, singing and playing the easier works of Bach, Haydn, and Mozart, and their efforts in the way of composition, some of it done individually, some in groups, were a credit to her and to them. In spite of all the limitations of her situation, personal and physical, she had a program and activity in music which would be a pride to the best-equipped and most favored elementary school in the United States. Results? Beyond all question. And achieved without one trace of conventional systematization.³

Clearly then we must not take our stated criterion as a starting point and jump to hasty conclusions about the right kind of procedure. The obvious thing to do is often the wrong thing. The reason is that good learning is a subtle and intricate affair, and often does not go as one would ordinarily expect. This is the reason why a direct, head-on

drive for results, with all other considerations ignored, very often fails to get them, while a much more roundabout approach, seeming to lack systematization, apparently wasting time, taking account of all sorts of personal values, may succeed quite amazingly well. At the same time one must not infer that systematic teaching is always bad any more than that it is always good, or that developmental teaching of the kind done by the headmistress is under all circumstances and for all kinds of learners the most desirable. The truth is that the success of teaching cannot be defined in terms of procedure or methodology at all. The question is not what kind of method to use, fashionable or unfashionable, up-to-date or out-of-date, progressive or conventional, but rather what actual influences are being brought to bear upon the learner. For effective teaching is not a matter of choosing a certain method but of applying psychological principles which indicate how learning must proceed if it is to lead to fruitful and authentic results.

4. Is our criterion fair to the teacher? The criterion of authentic results, properly understood, is exceedingly exacting. It is one thing to get children to make a decent showing in daily recitation or in classroom tests, or even in examinations set by outside authorities like the College Entrance Board, or the New York State Regents, although even this is not as simple as falling off a log. But to get them to grasp what they learn so intimately, so personally, so adequately that they will remember it long and be able to use it in the concerns of living is a very different matter indeed. Yet this is precisely what teaching must do if it is to be called successful. This is precisely what our criterion means. Is it not, then, grossly unfair to the individual teacher? Is he not prevented from achieving results in this inclusive, ample, deep-going sense by all sorts of conditions and limitations over which he has no control?

What if his classes are enormously large, running perhaps to 50, 60, 70 or more pupils per period? What if he has to deal with hundreds of pupils each school day? What if he has to use a textbook that is ill-written and ill-planned? What if no facilities in the way of books and materials of various kinds are available? What if he is under the kind of supervision which makes him go along from topic to topic at a set tempo whether or not the pupils are hanging on or dropping off one by one by the wayside? No one familiar with the practical problems of schoolkeeping will deny that all these conditions exist, or that they are very limiting. And very often the individual teacher cannot do a great deal to change them.

What, then, can be said about it all? Two things, here and now. Firstly this. Failure is failure, whatever the reason, and whoever may