LEARNING AND TEACHING IN THE INFANTS' SCHOOL

E. G. HUME

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TO

ALL MY STUDENTS

BOTH PAST AND PRESENT

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As a servant of the London County Council, I am required to state that the Council is in no way responsible for the views expressed in this work.

FOREWORD

THE primary object of this book is to demonstrate the practical application of psychological principles to the education of the child under eight. Step by step its chapters trace the general course of the child's development from the "play" attitude that predominates at the age of three to the "work" attitude that should predominate when the child leaves the infants' department; and at every stage illustrate in concrete detail how the "activity curriculum," so strongly recommended in the recent *Report on the Infants' and Nursery School,* may be carried out even in large classes and in a somewhat restricted environment.

At the outset Miss Hume designed to write a manual for students who are being trained as teachers of infants. Now that the book is completed, it is obvious that it will be of equal value to teachers of experience—indeed, I venture to say, of *more* value; for the experienced teacher will have already met the problem in the concrete, and will appreciate the solutions suggested. Even inspectors, school psychologists, and school doctors will find it helpful: for often they can easily see that something is wrong with the methods used for a particular child or in a particular classroom, but they cannot quite think what practical suggestion to make.

At a recent educational conference two inspectors were discussing the Infants' School. The first observed, a little dolefully: "The Infants' department *used* to be the most advanced of the three!" The second, still more sarcastically, retorted: "You mean some of them!" These passing comments, spoken perhaps in a spirit of playful cynicism, nevertheless deserve to be taken quite

seriously by everyone who is engaged in the teaching of infants. They fling down a challenge. I venture to say that, of all the departments, the infants' is the most important; it should *always* be "the most advanced of the three." Every infants' school that is already in the van of progress should make its aim to remain there: the aim of the others should be to catch up with the best.

Both these aims will be greatly assisted by Miss Gertrude Hume's new book. She has collected, and condensed into very concise paragraphs, all the best devices to be found in the more progressive schools, and has appended a large number of her own. Her wide experience has enabled her to survey schools of almost every type, and to record the best that can be found. In addition, her ingenuity and insight have enabled her to plan a number of teaching methods, which are based on sound psychology and have been tried out in actual practice by her own pupils. Those who follow her suggestions will, therefore (so far as it is possible to learn such things from books at second hand), really be adopting the very methods that have already brought success to the successful school. Further, by catching the spirit and accepting the general principles that inspire Miss Hume's pages, they will be able, not merely to copy the concrete devices she describes, but (what is far more desirable) to go forward in the same scientific way, meeting their own special problems, making their own adjustments, and, by constant experiment and observation, learning how to aid the dull child more effectively and how to make the utmost of the bright.

Every psychologist, I think, will agree that the teaching in the infants' department is at once the most crucial and the most difficult. Psychology has of late insisted that the child's character and mind are formed during

the pre-school years. It would, however, be a mistake to suppose that the formative process ceases abruptly when the child enters the classroom. If the pre-school years are the most important, those that immediately follow are the next in importance.

Nevertheless, during this period efficient teaching is exceptionally difficult, because then the child is further removed from the natural condition of the adult than at any subsequent stage. It is not merely that his powers are ill developed: one is tempted to say that they have scarcely started developing at all. It is not merely that he has almost everything to learn: he has first to learn *how* to learn. During the war, it was not uncommon for young women, with little or no experience and training, to be placed in various schools to fill the gaps left by other teachers, women as well as men, who had been required for different duties. It was often noted by inspectors that, where the older boys and girls were concerned, provided the new teacher knew her subject and had a reasonable measure of intelligence and personality, she quickly picked up her task; nor was it easy for the outsider to detect her lack of experience or to discover any serious deterioration in the children's work. In the infants' school, on the other hand, any want of experience was conspicuous at once, and proved a most painful handicap both to the newcomer and to the children.

If that was true twenty years ago, it is still more true to-day. The teaching of reading, of writing, of number, and, indeed, of all the other mental and moral processes that have to be acquired in the infants' school, demands a special technique, or rather a set of techniques. These have now been worked out, partly on a practical basis, partly in the light of psychological deduction. Often the technique involves a knowledge of the best type of apparatus and how to use it. Such

things were not as a rule to be found in books. They were sometimes imparted in training college courses. More frequently they had to be picked up by one teacher from another. But Miss Hume's little volume will now fulfil this want. It endeavours to put the varying experience of each at the command of all, and the accumulated wisdom of the older hands at the disposal of the younger novice.

CYRIL BURT.

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CHAPTER I

BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INFANTS' SCHOOL FROM 1870 TO THE PRESENT DAY

OUR English Infants' School has an interesting history. It is unique in the sense that it makes State provision, within the Elementary School System, for the education of children from five and, in some areas, from three years of age, while in most other countries the age of admission is six years.

This earlier age of school entrance has undoubtedly, in the past, affected adversely the curriculum for the youngest children. In 1870, when the first Education Act was passed, our Elementary Schools were still under the influence of the system of "payment by results." Teachers were over-anxious for success in the three "R's," and their energy was largely devoted towards obtaining good results in these subjects, since, in some measure, their "bread and butter" depended upon this success.

It was perhaps a natural, though quite a mistaken idea, that the sooner the teaching of the three "R's" was begun, the better would be the result achieved. In

the latter years of the nineteenth century, then, the main aim of the Infants' School appeared to be instruction in the elements of reading, writing and number. It was common to find large classes of very little children, seated in rows upon galleries, in a state of passive endurance, while the teacher struggled to teach them to count and to spell short words. Teaching was usually mechanical and discipline strict where these conditions prevailed.

When we compare this state of affairs with the life in a modern nursery class of thirty to thirty-five children, in a bright and attractive-looking room, with furniture adapted to a little child's needs, and with a choice of interesting activities, we realise that great progress has been made, although to some educationists this progress seems to have been far too slow.

Another interesting feature of our Infants' Schools is their great variety, for it is possible, even to-day, to find scattered over the country, schools, which in equipment, methods of teaching and discipline, differ very little from those of the late nineteenth century. In large towns, for instance, we may find within a few minutes' walk of each other, a "pioneer" school, in which there are nursery classes for the youngest children, followed by an activity curriculum for older infants, and a school in which the older ideas of collective teaching in the three "R's" and set lessons in handwork, drawing or plasticene, are still the order of the day.

The reason for this disparity is that, in our country, the curriculum and methods are not prescribed by the central authority or even by the local education body. Valuable "suggestions" in the form of reports on various aspects of the curriculum are issued from time to time by the Board of Education; local education authorities, by a scheme of lectures and refresher courses, bring teachers into touch with recent developments in educational theory and practice; inspectors pay friendly visits to the schools to offer advice as to curriculum and encouragement of independent effort, but no *compulsion* is brought to bear upon head teachers. The welfare of the school lies in their hands; it is through their initiative and enthusiasm that a school keeps abreast of the times.

Obviously, this freedom has both advantages and disadvantages. The vigorous-minded teacher is free to go ahead, and is able to effect changes in curriculum and methods of teaching in a way that would be impossible with syllabuses prescribed by a central authority. On the other hand, the less progressive, conservative-minded teachers may cling to out-of-date ideas as to curriculum and adhere to teaching practices which definitely hinder their children's development.

It is interesting to reflect upon the influences that have contributed to the great change in Infants' Schools since the early days of compulsory education.

The Influence of Froebel

Many years before the passing of the 1870 Act, Frederick Froebel (1782–1852) was engaged in a study of education from which finally emerged his idea of the Kindergarten, a first school for little children, where in home-like conditions they should be free to give expression to their spontaneous play activities. The development of the Kindergarten idea led to the training of women as teachers of young children. After Froebel's death this band of enthusiastic Froebelian teachers travelled far and wide to lecture upon the principles and practice of their great master.

In England, and particularly in the great towns, courses of lectures were held, which were attended by Infants' School teachers. Inspired by what they heard of Froebel's ideas, they attempted to put them into practice in their own schools, often, it must be admitted, with disastrous results, for the essence of Froebel's teaching is that little children shall live in a condition of reasonable freedom, in close touch with Nature, and shall spend their days in various kinds of self-directed activity under the guidance of an enlightened teacher.

This conception could not be applied in our barracks-like Infants' Schools, with their classes of sixty or more children. So the "Kindergarten" became, in fact, a "subject" on the time-table, instead of a place in which children could grow and develop like healthy plants in

a garden. The little "gifts and occupations," designed by Froebel to give free constructive activity, were eagerly adopted in the schools, for the material was inexpensive to manufacture and was supplied liberally by Education Authorities. From 1870 to somewhere about 1900 it was common to find classes of sixty children at work with one of these gifts—for example, a small box of eight wooden cubes. Teaching was generally mechanical, boxes being opened to numbers, objects built to dictation, while, as a reward for careful work, a few minutes was allowed at the end of the lesson to "do anything you like" before the little bricks were returned to their boxes with almost military precision. Many schools thus entirely misinterpreted the nature of the Froebelian principles, as may be gathered from the frequent adverse comments made by the Board of Education Inspectors between the years 1870 and 1905. (See *I. and N. Report*, pages 19 to 30.)

There were, however, some teachers of more enlightened mind, who did grasp the essentials of the Froebelian method, and strove by every means in their power to give more freedom in their schools. Without abandoning the idea that an Infants' School was the place to lay the foundations of reading, writing and number, they tried at the same time to include in the school programme some of the really fundamental Froebelian ideas. In some schools little gardens were laid out in the playgrounds, where the children could

dig, sow seeds, watch their plants grow and observe the visits of the bees and butterflies to their flowers; while the care and study of animals were induced by the keeping of pets.

As the numbers in the classes began to decrease, games and occupations became freer in treatment, while an easier system of discipline led to a more friendly relationship between teachers and children. There was also a noticeable tendency in these schools to postpone the teaching of the three "R's" at least until the children left the babies' class, and to shorten the length of these lessons for all children under seven.

Less successful was the attempt to express Froebel's principle of the unity of a child's life and experience by the introduction of correlated schemes of work. Since at that time there was no real belief that a child's interests were important in school, these schemes were planned by the teacher, and consisted of series of oral lessons on isolated topics, such as an apple one week, to be followed by a horse the next, a snowdrop or a twig the third, the correlation being sought through expression work of various types, forced to revolve round the particular topic. Stilted and unnatural teaching was the result of this effort, although as a relief from the routine of number and reading, the lessons probably afforded a welcome change to the children.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, then, a *good* Infants' School was one which kept the balance

between instruction in the three "R's" and expression work of one type or another. Even in the best schools, teaching was still collective for all lessons, and although teachers must have been fully conscious of the individual differences among the members of their classes, generally speaking, every effort was made to ignore these differences. The child of superior ability was relegated to the pace of the average, while the slow and backward children were over-driven in the attempt to make them keep pace with the others. Indeed, to be too clever or too slow was, in reality, an equal misfortune for a child, while a teacher's chief concern was to get the whole class to cover exactly the same syllabus in the same time. That many children appeared to be reasonably happy under this régime must, however, be admitted.

The Froebel Society

In estimating the influences that have changed our Infants' Schools, a tribute must be paid to the Froebel Society. Through courses of lectures for teachers, through a system of examinations and the issue of Teaching Certificates, it has done much to spread a better understanding of Froebelian ideas.

The Influence of Montessori

The year 1910 marks a stage in the history of the Infants' School. In that year, Madame Montessori's book first appeared in an English translation, and the