

# TRAINING CHILDREN TO STUDY

Practical Suggestions

BY

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NEW YORK CITY

D. C. HEATH AND COMPANY

BOSTON

NEW YORK

CHICAGO

ATLANTA

SAN FRANCISCO

DALLAS

LONDON

## PREFACE

It is a mistake to suppose that a child who is given no suggestions as to methods of study but time and again is merely told to study such and such a lesson, will go about it with any definite plan. He will probably do one of two things; simply read it through once or twice, trusting to luck that he will remember enough to be able to answer any questions the teacher may ask, or he will attempt to memorize it *en bloc*, thinking that then surely the correct answer will be forthcoming.

Under such circumstances the emphasis is placed on the absorption of as large an amount of material as possible, not on the understanding of the material; and on marks rather than on gain in power.

If we are to produce citizens who will react intelligently to the life about them, we must teach children to analyze the subject matter with which they deal, to discriminate between important and minor points, to trace causal relations, to estimate ethical values, to question the validity of statements, to suspend judgment until data have been accumulated sufficient to justify generalization.

The following pages constitute an attempt to outline the work which has been done along these lines in the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Grades of one department of the Ethical Culture School.

The greater part of the book is given over to a discussion of the content subjects, history, geography, and so forth, rather than to the tool subjects.<sup>1</sup> While there are both

<sup>1</sup> This subject is amplified in the chapter on "Mastery of Certain Common Tools," pp. 211-229.

better and poorer methods of drill, the goal obvious to pupil as well as to teacher in the case of the tool subjects is complete mastery of something not to be questioned; for example, the multiplication table, spelling, and punctuation.

It is when we place in children's hands a textbook organized according to the author's point of view, colored by the author's opinion, that we need to train them in the elements of study as listed above.

Literature when instructive falls under the head of content material. In its æsthetic aspects, a thing to be enjoyed and appreciated, it is not studied in quite the sense in which the word is employed here.

On the other hand, creative English is given a section to itself, in which it is shown how, in contrast to organizing and balancing the thoughts of an author, children are taught to organize and balance their own ideas in their effort to express them for the instruction or delight of their readers.

The first factor to be considered is the coöperation of the child. We may be amused at Irving's inimitable description of Ichabod Crane as with the birch he "urged some tardy loiterer along the flowery paths of knowledge," but if we really wish our pupils to become citizens who will function helpfully as men and women (and why else teach at all?), we do not follow his method either actually or in spirit. Not the rod, but the will to learn, is the first requisite for success in learning how to study. We may force the uninterested pupil to follow certain steps, but there will be little chance of his following them voluntarily, once the pressure is removed.

We do not intend to convey the impression that it is necessary or possible to secure the interest of every pupil

all the time. But in the atmosphere of the classroom there must be an enthusiasm that will sustain most of the pupils during periods of necessary drudgery.

How then are we to maintain this enthusiasm? There are those who say it can be done only by allowing the child to choose what he will study and how he will go about it. Undoubtedly in the past the child has had far too little to say about his own education, and the makers of curricula today, for the most part, utterly disregard individual differences in children. Having planned a course of study, they consider it suitable for all normal children. Children of a wide range of mentality, some with very special talents, some with special inaptitudes, all must cover the same ground, unless adjudged subnormal. This is irrational, and in revolt against this senseless uniformity the pendulum has started on a long swing in the other direction. Is it fair to the child to expect him to be able to choose paths when he cannot know where they lead? Talents and deficiencies should surely be taken into consideration in planning a child's education, but the child himself (below the high school certainly), seldom if ever knows what subjects will best develop his possibilities. He may choose a subject because an older brother has been interested in it, or because he has seen one book that interested him, and later may regret his choice.

Moreover, with the best will in the world, the teacher can scarcely help influencing the choice by some unconscious look or inflection. Some teachers, feeling that certain subjects are best for the children, and on the other hand that children should exercise choice, try to secure both results by deliberately "setting the stage so that the children will be sure to choose the right thing." This is a species of "hocus-pocus" belittling to teacher and pupils.

Not thus can we discover each child's bent and develop individuality sufficiently to secure from each his best contribution.

There should be opportunities for initiative and selection, many of them. Individuality cannot be developed unless the child is frequently encouraged to exercise individuality. But interest can be aroused and sustained in required subjects if they are suited to the child's mental capacity. Of that suitability he is frequently a poor judge through complete ignorance of what the name of a topic connotes. Yet he cannot be fitted to make his best contribution now, or hereafter except by being introduced to all the fundamental aspects of human knowledge and endeavor. The choice of socially worth-while problems and their arrangement in some kind of reasonable sequence cannot fairly be left entirely to the pupil with his narrow horizon and immature judgment. In his address, delivered at the Eighth Annual Conference of the Progressive Education Association, March, 1928, Dr. Dewey left no doubt of his position:

... "the teacher, as the member of the group having the riper and fuller experience and the greater insight into the possibilities of continuous development found in any suggested project, has not only the right but the duty to suggest lines of activity, . . . there need not be any fear of adult imposition provided the teacher knows children as well as subjects . . . progressive schools by virtue of being progressive, and not in spite of that fact, are under the necessity of finding projects which involve an orderly development and inter-connection of subject-matter, since otherwise there can be no sufficiently complex and long-span undertaking."

If then it is not necessary to allow the child always to lead, how shall we be guided in securing the child's interest? By calling into play the child's natural impulses, the impulse to investigate, the impulse to communicate, the constructive impulse, etc. Give him a question to

answer, a problem to solve; give him a chance to pass on the information he has acquired or to construct something which will illustrate the matter in hand. Once thoroughly interested, children are usually glad of suggestions as to ways and means of achieving the desired result, and study periods are frequently times when the teacher is very actively engaged in unfolding to the children methods which later they will be expected to follow independently.

Methods of study differ with the subjects under consideration; for example, observation of natural phenomena as in nature study, experimentation and manipulation of materials as in industrial art, or interpretation of thoughts and feelings as reflected in actions, as in history and literature. Sometimes the teacher gives direct instruction in some new study procedure. Frequently it is desirable for her to analyze a problem with a class, helping them to select the particular method best adapted to its solution. As various modes of attack are mastered there should be many times when the pupils are left to select for themselves, given the chance to make mistakes and grow towards student independence.

Always in the teacher's mind there should be consciousness of the underlying principles which must influence procedure in any given instance. She must bear in mind that the child needs to be taught to study always with a specific purpose; that he must be instructed in effective methods of collecting and organizing data, and in the application of these data to new situations; that he needs direct teaching in the most scientific methods of memorizing and careful guidance in order that he may attain free and forceful self-expression. Furthermore, the teacher must maintain about immature children, and encourage them more and more to maintain about themselves, an

## INTRODUCTION

There has not always been a close relation between studying and thinking. In fact a generation ago when studying meant simply the acquiring of facts, there was scarcely any relation between the two. To be sure teachers now and then were heard to demand that the children "think and think hard"; but it was a very thoughtless requirement, for few teachers in such cases could have shown the children how to meet the demand. Probably even now it is exceptional for studying to be anything more than the memorization of facts. Only three years ago one of our leading University presidents took the position in a magazine article that thinking should be the goal of college instruction, and he maintained that view as though it was something new.

In theory now very many teachers want studying to be real thinking, and some of those identified with the primary school believe that even the quality of instruction in the tool subjects should be determined by the extent to which the elements of good thinking are provided for. The reason for this general view is that right method of thinking is seen to have a far wider use in life than the facts acquired through instruction. The right way of thinking is in demand all the time, while there is so little need for most of the facts of subject matter that they are soon forgotten. We have not reached the point where examination on method of study is advocated as the main test of the learner's progress; but that time is certainly coming. How

much do we now know about the thinking process? A good deal. We know that thinking takes place in units of effort in which the motive power and the basis for the selection and organization of ideas are found in a difficulty of some sort that we desire to solve, and in which other large elements are planning, executing, and testing out. Persons who have read understandingly only the first few chapters of Dewey's *How to Think* have a pretty clear conception of the outline of the thinking process.

What remains to be done, then, more than to apply this conception in each of our many branches of study? Nothing at all. But there lies the rub; for there is a host of difficulties in the way of making this application.

The first difficulty is the fact that the ordinary curriculum is unfavorable to study; it scarcely allows it. For example, New York City used to have as its required work for one-half year in geography for the fourth grade the study of seventeen of our states, the most important seventeen, among which were New York and California. Facts covering the boundary, capital, main cities, and products for each state had to be learned. Under such conditions good thinking was scarcely possible; the only thing to do was to memorize the thousand facts wanted. The slow progress we are making in the attempt to functionalize our subject matter indicates how difficult it is to select matter that plainly relates to the learner's life. Yet the feeling of a close relation is the first condition for good study by the child. When we recall that most of our courses of study have been made out more from the point of view of an outline of the subject rather than from that of the child, we realize how great this difficulty is.

If the question is asked, why don't we get to work and quickly produce the right kind of curriculum, the answer



is again discouraging. One is that we do not yet know child nature well enough to determine what it most naturally feeds upon. Child study is a new subject; it has not been many years since G. Stanley Hall first attacked the problem, and up to the present time there is much more enthusiasm about it than definite and usable knowledge.

Besides this, it must be emphasized that method of study is not a fixed procedure that can quickly be adapted to each branch of study after its content has been carefully selected. It must always be to a considerable extent an outgrowth of the particular subject. The method of studying literature is different from that of arithmetic; and the method for arithmetic is different from that for geography or history. I think that this fact is now pretty well understood. Yet we know very little about how subject matter should influence method and not many persons are now even vigorously at work on the problem. Indeed, it is hardly yet a recognized field of study and experiment.

There is, however, a still greater difficulty than any of these. The moment we give high rank to teaching children how to study, we are asking for a radical change in the common conception of instruction. The ordinary aim of instruction is the acquisition of facts and that is what children are examined on, as we have stated. But when method of study is raised to prominence it really becomes our aim which tends to supersede knowledge. Proper study is seen to be one of the very conditions of knowledge. It is so vital both in that respect and in others, that study habits become the basis for judging teaching, and consequently the main thing on which children should be examined. The controlling point of view in the classroom is then the child's growth rather than his mastery of subject.

matter; and to attain that end, both the teacher and the subject matter must be subordinated to the child. Such a double subordination would be a very radical departure from prevailing practice. It will be a long time before teachers will thus place the center of gravity of the classroom in the children themselves.

But suppose that they now saw the need of doing this; how should they proceed to bring it about? There is extremely little literature on the method of studying the different subjects, so that they could not get much help from that source. The other main source could be the extensive experience each teacher has had on her own method of study. Everyone has a method of some sort; and an analysis of it could not help but throw much light upon children's methods. But, again, the difficulty is that teachers are so close to their own method that they cannot see it; they are unconscious of it. It is a big struggle to bring it into consciousness so as to observe it closely and improve it.

Considering all these difficulties how shall progress be undertaken? The main help must come by experimenting with children on their method of getting their lessons. The teacher can observe their present procedure closely, and, if she keeps in mind the outline of good thinking, she can suggest little ways in which these procedures can be improved. As time passes and better subject matter is put into the curriculum, larger improvements can be effected. I see no better plan than this at the present time.

This is the point at which the great value of this book becomes evident. There are many broad questions to be faced in teaching children to study: for example, the assignment of the lesson so that the child's initiative is exercised rather than stifled; the proper taking of notes; the use of verbal expression in the clarification of ideas; the sensing

of value to the self of what one is hearing or reading, etc., etc. This book is a presentation of attempts at a solution of such problems. For some years the author and her colleagues have conducted their classes with constant attention to the children's proper method of work; and the results are here faithfully recorded. In the course of this long experiment they have covered the main elements in proper study as these found expression in several studies, so that the experiment includes a wide range. To see teachers at work on this problem in the classroom from day to day would certainly be a great aid to anyone interested in method of study; and this book gives its readers that opportunity. Even though one finds the conclusions not directly applicable in one's own teaching, the method of procedure and results must prove highly suggestive for method of study in other subjects and under other conditions.

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Yonkers, New York,  
*March 1, 1928.*

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## INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER

BY BOYD H. BODE

### THE PLACE OF THINKING IN EDUCATION

Perhaps the most significant sign of the times is the fact that there is everywhere a growing belief in the need and value of education. Illiteracy is becoming more and more uncommon, the period of school attendance is lengthening, and the standards of teacher training are constantly going up. There is more discussion of education and more experimentation in this field than at any previous time.

In one sense the belief in education is not a new thing, but as old as humanity itself. Every community, however primitive, has a certain stock of racial experience which it desires to transmit to its children. How to secure food and shelter, how to avoid danger, how to distinguish between what is desirable and what is undesirable in conduct, or between what is noble and what is ignoble—on matters of this sort every form of community or group life has a certain body of experience and tradition which constitutes a legacy for every new member that is born into its circle. But this legacy is not passed on automatically, like the shape of the nose or the color of the skin; it can be acquired only by a process of education.

A great deal of this education is very simple and direct. Children learn to dress themselves, to behave properly at table, to avoid tracking dirt into the house, to wash behind the ears, and other things of social value, by methods known

to every mother of a family. This form of education is continued and extended on the street, in the workshop, in the market place, and wherever associated living is going on. Children are subjected from the start to social pressure in all sorts of ways, and by this pressure their habits and standards are molded. They thus acquire a certain body of knowledge regarding their material and social environment and they also acquire ideals of conduct. Some things are admired by the group, while others are condemned; and these approvals and disapprovals become, by a sort of contagion, the source of the ideals and the inspirations of the younger generation. Listening to camp-fire stories of prowess and endurance, the Indian boy became fired with the ambition to grow into a great warrior, possessed of many scalps as trophies, and feared by his enemies for deeds of torture and slaughter; just as in earlier times Greek lads learned from the Homeric bards the meaning of piety, magnanimity, and nobility of character. All this is education, although it may have nothing to do with schools.

In modern society such out-of-school education is no longer sufficient for the conservation of racial experience. A little reflection will show why this is the case. Many of the activities carried on at the present time require special preparation; they cannot be learned through direct participation. A boy may learn the arts of hunting, fishing, warfare, or the raising of crops, by sharing in these occupations, without any school training. But he cannot hope by any such process of sharing to become a physician or a lawyer or an engineer. He is excluded from the start; and this applies also to the thousand and one everyday activities and interests which require a knowledge of the three R's. The child does not absorb such knowledge from mere association, any more than a janitor in a college building is likely

to acquire, by virtue of association, a liberal education. Schools become indispensable, if the experience of the past is to be conserved. That is to say, certain subject matter must be specially selected and graded so that pupils will finally reach a point where direct sharing is possible. Thus reading is taught, not by using current newspapers and magazines, but by beginning on the level of the primer and proceeding to more difficult material in accordance with the pupil's rate of learning. Much the same thing might be said regarding the other subjects commonly taught in the schools. In other words, the school constitutes a special environment to facilitate the business of learning.

The school, therefore, is an institution by means of which society provides for its own perpetuation. It is the only alternative to a relapse into barbarism. But this new institution has created a new problem. The problem is to keep the school from becoming a little world all by itself, apart from the larger life by which it was created and which it is supposed to serve. Learning outside of school is for the purpose of interpreting our material and social environment; learning in school easily becomes an end itself, without reference to anything else. When the pupil enters the schoolroom, the door seems to close on the outside world. He may learn that the earth is round, that Columbus discovered America in 1492, or that Washington was the first President, but this information appears to make no appreciable difference when he goes back home after school has been dismissed. The school and the life outside the school remain on two different levels; with the result that the work of the school tends constantly to become a matter of rote learning. The assignments are just so many lessons or tasks which, except in the case of the fortunate few, have no inherent interest or significance.

It is only within comparatively recent times that this difficulty has been properly recognized and understood. For a long time the failure of the schools to arouse genuine interest was attributed to the natural wickedness of children, who must be perpetually flogged for the good of their souls. Now we are coming to realize that the trouble is not so much with the wickedness of children as with the stupidity of educators. The school became dissociated from the normal affairs and interests of everyday life because teachers failed to understand that the purpose of education is, first of all, to initiate the pupil into the society of which he is a part; and that schools are maintained because, to some extent or in some respects, they can conduct this initiation more effectively than can be done outside. The teachers as a class tended to misconceive the purpose of the schools and so the results which were achieved were naturally unsatisfactory.

From our present standpoint the school is properly a substitute for the natural social environment. The actual environment has grown so complex that the average person can go but a little way in understanding it, unless he has special assistance. A person who does not learn to read in school stands little chance of learning to read at all, in spite of the fact that he is surrounded by newspapers, magazines, and books. Similarly his everyday life, although it brings him into frequent contact with the world of business, government, and applied science, gives him no significant comprehension of these matters. Such an individual is only a few removes from the level of his dog, which likewise spends its life among these achievements of civilization but which is interested in the things of its environment chiefly as things to be smelled and things to be barked at. But unfortunately the school environment



which we substitute for the natural environment easily becomes an artificial thing, in the sense that the learning which goes on in the schools tends to become an essentially different kind of thing from the learning outside of the schools. This difference is the source of all kinds of problems and difficulties. The outstanding educational problem, therefore, is to make the schools more nearly continuous with life so as to enable the pupil to participate in adult activities and to contribute to their improvement. If we adopt this point of view, it follows that educational reform must take its cue from an analysis of the learning process, in order to determine ideals for schoolroom procedure.

It has been customary for a long time to think of learning as a process of adding new items of information to the stock of knowledge which we already possess, in much the same way that a moving picture camera keeps adding new impressions to those which have already been recorded. There is much reason, however, to think that such a view is far too simple. The learning process—if an analogy is appropriate—is more like a chemical change, in which every addition of a new substance involves a transformation of the whole mass. Thus if hydrogen and oxygen are brought together under certain conditions, the different elements are not simply placed side by side, like marbles in a bag, but the hydrogen and oxygen disappear completely and are replaced by a different substance, which we call *water*. In somewhat the same way the original “bloom-ing, buzzing confusion” which, according to William James, constitutes the experience of the infant, is progressively replaced by an orderly arrangement of things, which are spread out in space and time and which compose what we call our environment. From an educational standpoint