

SELF-EDUCATION.

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The title of this paper may awaken some undeserved sympathy; gratifying visions of rhythmic movements, independent action, self-expression in various interesting ways occur to the mind—for surely these things constitute “self-education”? Most of these modern panaceas are desirable and by no means to be neglected; limbs trained to grace and agility, a hand, to dexterity and precision, an eye made to see and an ear to hear, a voice taught to interpret,—we know to-day that all these possibilities of joy in living should be open to every child, and we look forward even too hopefully to the manner of citizen who shall be the outcome of our educational zeal.

Now, although we, of the P.N.E.U. have initiated some of these educational outworks and have imitated and gladly and gratefully adopted others, yet, is our point of view different; we are profoundly sceptical as to the effect of all or any of these activities upon character and conduct. A person is not built up from without but from within, that is, he is *living*, [p 499] and all external educational appliances and activities which are intended to mould his character are merely decorative.

This sounds like a stale truism; but, let us consider a few corollaries of the notion that a child is a person, and that a person is, primarily, living. Now no external application is capable of nourishing life or promoting growth; baths of wine, wrappings of velvet have no effect upon physical life except as they may hinder it; life is sustained on that which is taken in by the organism not by that which is applied from without.

Perhaps the only allowable analogy with the human mind is the animal body, especially the human body, for it is that which we know most about; the well-worn plant and garden analogy is very misleading, especially as regards that tiresome busybody, the gardener, who *will* direct the inclination of every twig, the position of every leaf; but, even barring the gardener, the child-garden is an intolerable idea as failing to recognize the essential property of a child, his personality, a property all but absent in a plant. Now, let us consider for a moment the parallel behaviour of body and mind. The body lives by air, grows on food, demands rest, flourishes on a diet wisely various. So, of the mind (by which I mean the entire spiritual nature, that which is not body), it breathes in air, lives on food, calls for both activity and rest and flourishes on a wisely varied dietary.

We go round the house and round the house, but rarely go into the House of Mind; we offer mental gymnastics but these do not take the place of food, and of that we serve the most meagre rations, no more than that bean a day! Diet for the body is abundantly considered, but no one pauses to say, “I wonder does the mind need food, too, and regular meals, and, what is its proper diet?” We of the Parents’ Union have asked ourselves this question, or, rather, I have done so, and have laboured for forty years to find the answer. I am very anxious to impart what I think I know, but the answer cannot be given in the form of,—Do this and that, but rather as an invitation to, Consider this and that; action follows when we have thought duly.

The life of the mind is sustained upon ideas; there is no intellectual vitality in the mind to which ideas are not presented

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several times, say, every day. But, “surely, surely,” as Mrs. Proudie would say, scientific experiments, natural beauty, nature study, rhythmic movements, sensory exercises, are all fertile in ideas? Quite commonly, they are so, as regards ideas of invention and discovery; and even in ideas of art; but for the moment it may be well to consider the ideas that influence life, that is, character and conduct; these, it would seem, pass directly from mind to mind, and are neither helped nor hindered by what I have called educational outworks. Every child gets many of these ideas by word of mouth, by way of family traditions, proverbial philosophy,—in fact, by what we might call a kind of oral literature. But, when we compare the mind with the body, we perceive that three “square” meals a day are generally necessary to health, and, that a casual diet of ideas is poor and meagre. Our schools turn out a good many cute, clever young persons, wanting in nothing but initiative, intelligence, the power of reflection and the sort of moral imagination which enables you to “put yourself in his place.” All of these qualities flourish upon a proper diet, and this is not afforded by the ordinary school book, or, in sufficient quantity by the ordinary lesson. I should like to emphasize *quantity*, which is as important for the mind as for the body; both require their “square meals.”

It is no easy matter to give its proper sustenance to the mind; hard things are said of children, that they have “no brains,” “a low order of intelligence,” and so on; but many of us are able to vouch for the fine intelligence shewn by children who are fed with the proper mind-stuff; people generally do not take the trouble to find out what this is nor how it must be served-up; and so we come dangerously near what Plato condemns as, “that lie in the soul,” that corruption of the highest truth, of which Protagoras is guilty in the saying that, “Knowledge is sensation.” What else are we saying when we run after educational methods which are purely sensory? Knowledge is not sensation, nor is it to be derived through sensation; we feed upon the thoughts of other minds; and thought applied to thought generates thought and we become more thoughtful. No one need invite us to reason, compare, imagine; the mind, like the body digests its proper

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food, and it must have the labour of digestion or it ceases to function.

The children ask for bread, and we give them a stone; we give information about objects and events which their mind does not attempt to digest but casts out bodily (upon an examination paper?). But let your information hang upon a principle, be inspired by an idea, and it is taken with avidity and is used in making whatsoever in the spiritual nature stands for tissue in the physical. “Education,” said Lord Haldane a while ago, “is a matter of the spirit,”—no wiser word has been said on the subject, and yet we persist in applying education from without as a bodily activity or emollient.

We begin to see light; no one knoweth the things of a man but the spirit of a man which is in him; therefore, there is no education but self-education and as soon as a young child begins his education he does so as a student. Our business is to give him mind-stuff, and both quality and quantity are essential. Naturally, each of us possesses this mind-stuff only in limited measure, but we know where to procure it; for the best thought the world possesses is stored in books; we must open books to children, the best books; our own concern is, abundant provision and orderly serving.

I am jealous for the children; every modern educational movement tends to belittle them intellectually; and none more so than a late ingenious attempt to feed normal children with the pap-meat which may (?) be good for the mentally sick: but, "To all wildly popular things comes suddenly and inexorably, death, without hope of resurrection." If Mr. Bernard Shaw is right, I need not discuss the popular form of "New Education." It was ably said the other day on a public occasion that education should profit by the divorce which is now in progress from psychology on the one hand and from sociology on the other; but what if education should use her recovered liberty to make a monstrous alliance with pathology?

Various considerations urge upon me a rather distasteful task. It is time I showed my hand and gave some account of work, the principles and practices of which should, I think, be of general use. Like those lepers who feasted at the gates of a famished city, I begin to take shame to myself! I have attempted to unfold (in various volumes) a system of

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educational theory resting upon a physiological basis which seems to me able to meet any rational demand, even that severest criterion set up by Plato; it is able to "run the gauntlet of objections, and is ready to disprove them, not by appeals to opinion, but to absolute truth." Some of it is new, much of it is old. Like the quality of mercy, it is not strained; certainly it is twice blessed, it blesses him that gives and him that takes, and a sort of radiancy of look distinguishes both scholar and teacher engaged in this manner of education; but there are no startling results to challenge attention.

Professor Bompas Smith remarked a little while since in that inaugural address at the Manchester University to which I have already referred, that,—“If we can guide our practice by the light of a comprehensive theory we shall widen our experience by attempting tasks which would not otherwise have occurred to us.” I think it is possible to offer the light of such a comprehensive theory, and the result is precisely what the Professor indicates,—a large number of teachers attempt tasks which would not otherwise have occurred to them.

One discovers a thing because it is there, and no sane person takes credit to himself for such discovery. On the contrary, he recognizes with King Arthur,—“These jewels, whereupon I chanced divinely, are for public use.” For many years I have had access to a sort of Aladdin’s cave which I long to throw open “for public use.”

Let me try to indicate some of the advantages of the theory I venture to press upon your notice. It fits all ages, even the seven ages of man! It satisfies brilliant children and discovers intelligence in the dull. It secures attention, interest, concentration, without effort on the part of the teacher or taught.

Children, I think, all children, so taught express themselves in forcible and fluent English and use a copious vocabulary. Most children spell well. An unusual degree of nervous stability is attained; also, intellectual occupation seems to make for chastity in thought and life. Parents become interested in the schoolroom work, and find their children “delightful companions.” Children shew delight in books (other than story books), and a genuine love of knowledge. Teachers are relieved from much of the labour of corrections. Children taught according to this method do exceptionally

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well at any school. It is unnecessary to stimulate these young scholars, by marks, prizes, honours lists, etc.

Some thirty years ago I published a book about the home education of children, and people wrote asking how those counsels of perfection could be carried out with the aid of the private governess as she then existed; it occurred to me that a series of curricula might be devised embodying sound principles and securing that children should be in a position of less dependence on their teacher than they then were; in other words that their education should be largely self-education. A sort of correspondence school was set up, the motto of which,—“I am, I can, I ought, I will,” has had much effect in throwing children upon the possibilities, duties, and determining power belonging to them as persons.

“Children are born persons,” is the first article of the educational *credo* in question. The response made by the children (ranging in age from six to eighteen) astonished me; though they only showed the power of attention, the avidity for knowledge, the clearness of thought, the nice discrimination in books, and the power of dealing with many subjects, for which I had given them credit in advance. I need not repeat what I have urged elsewhere on the subject of “Knowledge,” and will only add that anyone may apply a test; let him read to a child of any age from six to ten an account of an incident, graphically and tersely told, and the child will relate what he has heard point by point, though not word for word, and will add delightful original touches; what is more, he will relate the passage months later because he has visualized the scene and appropriated that bit of knowledge. A rhetorical passage, written in “journalese” makes no impression on him, if the passage be read more than once, he may become letter-perfect, but the spirit, the individuality has gone out of the exercise. An older boy or girl will read one of Bacon’s Essays, say, or a passage from De Quincey, and will write or tell it very forcibly and with some style, either at the moment or months later. We know how Coleridge recited a whole pamphlet of Burke’s at a college supper though he had probably read it no more than once. Here on the very surface is the key to that attention, interest, literary style, wide vocabulary, love of books and readiness in speaking, which we all feel should

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belong to an education that is only begun at school and continued throughout life; these are the things that we all desire, and how to obtain them is some part of the open secret which we are labouring to disclose “for public use.” I say “we” because there are many labourers at this work who are “utterly devoted” to what seems to us a great cause. I should like to make special reference to one “Interpreter” who understands this comprehensive theory, which it is not easy to know because it embraces a great deal.

I am anxious to bring a quite successful educational experiment before the public at a moment when the Lord Chancellor declares that “Education must be . . . an appeal to the spirit if it is to be made interesting,” a sentiment in which he is supported by the Primate, and, I am sure, by public opinion. Here is Education which is as interesting, fascinating, as a fine art, to parents, children and teachers.

During the last twenty years thousands of children educated on these lines have grown up in love with knowledge and manifesting “a right judgment in all things” so far as a pretty wide curriculum gives them data. Children are at work in hundreds of home schoolrooms, in some forty girls’ schools, boys’ preparatory schools, and in classes; they are taught by about three hundred Ambleside-trained teachers and some hundreds of untrained teachers; the trained teachers have studied the principles and practices of this method for two years in a residential training College; the untrained teachers do good and conscientious work, but only in

so far as they know the principles which underlie the work do they succeed in turning out scholars who have become more of persons by means of their studies. It has been objected that this work is confined to the children of the well-to-do and educated classes, a fact which is supposed to account for its success. But it will be allowed that the average home-taught child does not distinguish himself when he goes to school; these children, however, are remarked upon for their power of attention and the wide range of their knowledge. I say “knowledge” advisedly, bearing in mind a point I have tried to make elsewhere,—namely, that information does not become knowledge until it has been acted upon by the mind of the recipient. It is of necessity and not of choice that our efforts are confined

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to the children of the upper and professional classes; the girls of these classes and the young boys are practically the only children available for such an educational experiment, an experiment founded on long study, not of the “child mind” but of the way mind deals with knowledge; (there is no such thing as the child mind, “Love has no nonage nor the mind,” is true in fact as well as beautiful in poetry, for great poets are also great seers and teachers). If we should be allowed hereafter to do those good works which we ardently desire but get no opportunity to accomplish here, I hope to find myself in some invisible way, helping to control a large elementary school in which the children are students, each engaged with his own copy of the book in use, the teacher “reading” with his class as a college tutor reads with men; helping, too, in a big Girls’ High School, at work under the same conditions; and, may I whisper it? in one of the great Public Schools, where much more and more varied reading should be accomplished than seems possible at present.

Reading! Reading! Why this emphasis on reading in an age when, “Things are in the saddle, and ride mankind?” Because it is just here that much educational work fails; there are a few girls or boys of fine intelligence in every school; these read, both during school life and afterwards; but nine-tenths of the scholars in most schools enter on adult life without having formed the reading habit. I would have children taught to read before they learn the mechanical art of reading; and they learn delightfully; they give perfect attention to a paragraph or a page which is read to them, and are able to relate the matter point by point, *in their own words*; but they demand classical English and cannot learn to read in this sense upon anything less. They begin their “schooling” in “letters” at six, and begin at the same time to learn the mechanical arts of reading and writing. A child does not lose by spending a couple of years in acquiring these because he is meanwhile “reading” the Bible, history, geography, tales, with close attention and a remarkable power of reproduction, or rather, of translation into his own language; he is acquiring a copious vocabulary, and the habit of consecutive speech. In a word, he is an educated child from the first, and his power of dealing with books, with several books in the course of a morning’s “school,” increases with his age.

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But children are not all alike, there is as much difference between them as between men or women; two or three months ago, a small boy, not quite six, came to school (by post); and his record was, that he could read anything in five languages, and was now teaching himself the Greek characters, could find his way about the continental Bradshaw, and was a chubby, vigorous little person. All this the boy brings with him when he comes to school; he is exceptional of course, just as a man with such accomplishments is exceptional; but I believe

that all children bring with them much capacity which is not recognized by their teachers, chiefly, intellectual capacity (always in advance of motor power), which we are apt to drown in deluges of explanation, or dissipate in futile labours in which there is no advance.

The world is divided into persons who read and think and persons who do not read and think; the business of schools is to see that their scholars shall belong to the former class; and it is worth while to remember that thinking is inseparable from reading which is concerned with the content of a passage and not merely with the printed matter.

The children I am speaking of are much occupied with things as well as with books, because, "Education is the Science of Relations," is the principle which regulates their curriculum; that is, a child goes to school with many aptitudes which he should put into effect. So, he learns a good deal of science, because children have no difficulty in understanding principles, though technical details baffle them. He practises various handicrafts that he may know the feel of wood, clay, leather, and the joy of handling tools, that is, that he may establish a due relation with materials. But, always, it is the book, the knowledge, the clay, the bird or blossom, he thinks of, not his own place or his own progress.

I am afraid that some knowledge of the theory we advance is necessary to the open-minded teacher who would give our practices a trial, because every detail of schoolroom work is the outcome of certain principles. For instance, it would be quite easy without much thought to experiment with our use of books; but in education, as in religion, it is the motive that counts, and the boy who reads his lesson for a "good mark" becomes letter-perfect but does not *know*. But these principles

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are obvious and simple enough, and, when we consider that at present education is chaotic for want of a unifying theory and that there happens to be no other comprehensive theory in the field which is in line with modern thought and fits every occasion, might it not be well to try one which is immediately practicable, and always pleasant and has proved itself by producing many capable, serviceable, dutiful, men and women, of sound judgment and willing mind?

In urging a method of self-education for children in lieu of the vicarious education which prevails, I should like to dwell on the enormous relief to teachers, a self-sacrificing and greatly overburdened class; the difference is just that between driving a horse that is light and a horse heavy in hand; the former covers the ground of his own gay will and the driver goes merrily. The teacher who allows his scholars the freedom of the city of books is at liberty to be their guide, philosopher and friend, and is no longer the mere instrument of forcible intellectual feeding.

But I am afraid I am saying one word for teachers and two for that which is called for convenience, the P.N.E.U. Method, after a society which exists mainly to further this educational reform. I have ventured to indicate only one or two features of a comprehensive theory which it would take a long time to unfold.

Is it true that we are within a stone's throw of Utopia? If the splendid ordering of the schools, and their first-rate teaching of disciplinary subjects, grammatical, mathematical, scientific, were added to much reading in the classes, if we might go into any schoolroom and see "forty feeding like one," for example, on Mazzini's *The Duties of Man*? a volume of Hakluyt, or Seeley's *Expansion of England*—why, our country would hold an assured place in the

forefront of the nations in all matters requiring integrity, enlightened judgment and prompt, efficient action.