

A LIBERAL EDUCATION FOR ALL. [Letter to the *Times*.]

Sir,—*The Times* never fails to give us a timely lead, and after unfolding the spacious (and costly) educational prospects which in some sort we all contemplate, the Editor brings us up with a hint that if we are to have high thinking it must go with plain living, for we shall be as poor as the world was after the Napoleonic wars; poorer probably, for we live by our manufactures and trade, and many of our best customers will be themselves too impoverished to deal in our commodities.

Two things follow: our education in those days must be spiritual, for material efficiency counts for little when nobody wants the things we make; and our methods must be severely economical, for our dreams of highly-paid and well-pensioned teachers, of well-staffed schools and the like, must needs be postponed to less strictly frugal days than those of the two or three decades after the war. But, “are we downhearted?” No, not we, for we remember that the best educational work the world has seen was done by sundry sorely impoverished nations freed from the sordidness of prosperity and the vanity of “*la gloire*.”

It is our turn now; we did not do great things in education 100 years ago, but to-day we are ready, and—who knows?—may give such a lead as shall mark a new era in the history of education. I am not going to take up space with ardent hopes and nebulous desires, but may I bring before the reader some proofs,—

(a) That our people are capable of receiving a liberal education in a generous sense of the term.

(b) That no limitation of vocabulary or environment need be an obstacle.

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(c) That the method and means of such an education give delight to the teachers, the children, and their parents, for, says Bacon, “Studies are for delight.”

(e)[sic] That such an education need cost no more than is spent at present.

Seeing that the scheme of liberal education I am proposing is working very successfully in a dozen or so elementary schools and is welcomed by school authorities—county councils, directors of education, H.M. Inspectors—perhaps I may be allowed to offer a short outline of what is being done; and, in the first place, I should like to remark upon the very fine asset we as a nation possess in the teachers of elementary schools. I am able to speak with knowledge of no more than a score of these from a single district, but those I have met strike me as singularly intelligent, disinterested, and devoted educators.

More than a quarter of a century ago it became necessary to devise a scheme of *self-education* for the children of families taught at home by governesses. The original idea was that these should be brought up to the level of the school-taught child, but the success of the scheme was surprising and it became evident that certain principles commonly ignored accounted for results which were, in thousands of instances, much beyond expectation. Had we, indeed, here a key to a scheme of national education calculated to raise our children to an unprecedented level of character, conduct and intellect?

But there was an apparently insurmountable obstacle; the method and scheme of work—which were known to produce eagerness for knowledge, fluent and often literary

expression, clear thinking, and some originality—had hitherto been applied only to children of the “educated classes.” It seemed a foregone conclusion that the intelligence and the possession of a considerable vocabulary, upon which success depended, would be wanting in the children of elementary schools. Various attempts had been made to induce teachers of such schools to try the experiment—vain attempts, even when made with the support of an H.M. inspector [sic]. It was not yet certain that the lever would act. But at this juncture, a lady living in Yorkshire, who acted on her own initiative, succeeded, with the help of the H.I.M. of the district, in introducing the Parents’ Union School to a group of teachers.

One of these, the mistress of a school in a mining village, took the matter up thoroughly, with results that may eventually

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revolutionize education. The surprising fact demonstrated in this school was that, given the right teaching, the limited vocabulary and adverse home conditions of the working-man’s child make no appreciable difference; that these children appreciate and require a literary setting for their studies just as much as do the others, and respond to the same test;—they are able to tell (or write) a passage or chapter of considerable length after a single reading, the narratives being touched by each child’s individuality and given in terse, vigorous English, not without style.

Now, the obstacle to a liberal education in schools of all classes has hitherto been that school hours are short, while history, literature, science, and so on, are so very “long” that it hardly seems possible to cover much ground, seeing that children learn with painful slowness. But if a stiff chapter on English or French history, for example, a play of Shakespeare’s, a survey of France or Egypt, is to be mastered, each chapter at a single reading, why, the school-day expands as if a Genie were at work—so much is got into it and so delightful is the labour.

A dozen or so elementary schools are already at work on this method, and children, teachers, and parents are eager. From one school we hear that “‘Santa Claus’ has brought many of our children ‘our’ books—‘Life and Her Children,’ the history book, next year’s geography book. They have been brought to-day for the teacher to mark the next term’s work.” Now, the books are of such a calibre that a while ago we should as soon have thought of those children asking for Aristotle’s “Poetic” or a Greek Lexicon. I do not know how long beyond the current term children retain what is learned in this rapid way, but at the end of the term they are able to answer at length any question on any part of the hundreds (or thousands!) of pages set for the term’s reading. Seeing that children learn that they may *grow* intellectually and morally, rather than that they may *know*, we make no attempt to test their knowledge after the period of the term.

The underlying idea of the scheme is a common curriculum for all schools in certain subjects up to a given age. It is possible that the Public Schools may embrace the movement *pour les autres*, and they would possibly find their advantage in doing so. Many secondary schools, on the contrary, are limited by the local examinations of the universities, &c.—which also imply common curricula, but confined to a particular class. If

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it should prove, however, that any given method and curriculum produce pupils who are unusually well informed, intelligent, and, consequently, well mannered, the question of method will settle itself. Schools which should find it convenient to make use of the several public

examinations might secure the advantages of wide reading by postponing these until the seventeenth or eighteenth year of their scholars.

The war has discovered to us new force of character, unsuspected moral power of a high order, in the rank and file of our men quite as much as in their officers; in like manner, in this experience of *self-education*, practically the only education, there has been revealed to us unsuspected intellectual and moral power in the average child, of whatever class of society. This is a new thing in the history of education, as surprising as the discovery of wireless telegraphy, and, like that unsuspected possibility, only discovered *because it was there*. People did not know of it in the past, and the stray child who showed the powers I have indicated was looked upon as a genius; but now that we do know of the practically unlimited powers of attention, comprehension, assimilation, and reproduction—in some form of moral or intellectual force—which every child possesses, shall we not be culpable if we neglect to use these powers under the conditions prescribed by the natural behaviour of mind?

I should like to premise in this connexion that attention is the only activity of mind with which the teacher has any concern; all the processes of judgment, reflection, imagination, reason, the “faculties” which we labour in vain to develop, are exercised by the mind itself once attention has been arrested by proper mind-stuff, just as in the healthy body nature takes care of the assimilation of fitting food duly provided. The gist of the matter is that the education I have outlined is addressed to *mind* and is regulated solely by the behaviour of mind.

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