

A LIBERAL EDUCATION FOR ALL.¹

Sir,—A thoughtful letter on “A Liberal Education for All” which appeared in your issue of March 22nd seems to call for some reply. Certainly I am in sympathy with Dr. Montessori on several points, though I fear hardly on that of “silent reading” which the writer of the letter instances; we have no “scientific” reasons for the practice; the children read simply that they may know. This is one indication of the gulf fixed between the two methods. I delight in and share Dr. Montessori’s sincere respect for children and in her idea that teachers should keep rather in the background, but even when we adopt superficially similar lines of action our reasons for doing so are far apart. It is the old contention of mind *v.* matter cropping up afresh. A “scientific pedagogy” implies that education deals with ponderable substance, be it light as air; for seventy years we have been going on these lines, and few people will contend that we have made adequate progress, other than the material exterior progress of better buildings and more complete organization. The *Literary Supplement* helped us the other day by explaining why Herbert Spencer is “dead as a door nail”; it is the spirit that quickeneth, and the school to which he belonged took little cognizance of the things of the spirit.

Much is said about the “scientific treatment” of history and other humane subjects, and, in that sense, a method which is the result of investigation prolonged through many years, and of thousands of experiments, might be plausibly called “scientific”; but such a misleading use of terms confuses the issue, which is, as baldly as ever it was, between mind and matter; not as to whether of the two is concerned in education, but as to which is principal and which is subsidiary, for undoubtedly each

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has its part to play. Our desolating failure in purpose and progress for, indeed, better than a century is due to the sterilizing effect of the education we offer, in which the importance of knowledge in and for itself, without utilitarian end, is hardly recognized at all.

Now, we have re-discovered mind; not that we claim this as a discovery, for there have always been countless individuals aware of the potentialities of mind; but the question has been in abeyance; people have not given due reflection to the ways of mind, and therefore it has been left to us to make a few discoveries in this direction, trifling enough in themselves, and yet of power to vivify education in a surprising way.

We are enabled by means of such, shall we say “spiritual” education, to envisage an educated democracy not as a Utopian vision, a thing to be seen in “Erehwon,” but as immediately practicable and effective. Let us think for a moment what that means—each detail of the work of the schoolroom become a matter of sympathetic interest in the home; the lonely miner, labourer, sailorman, sempstress, never less alone than when alone—for the lonely places where these are shine in the light of, say, Collingwood’s fortitude, Pitt’s patriotism, Kipling’s enthusiasm, or of whatever books may be delighting their leisure at the time, all of which they are able to “tell” to themselves as they work. Think of the family readings and neighbourly readings of Scott, Dickens, *She Stoops to Conquer*, or of some graver book of history or travel—of whatsoever things are lovely and of good report. The “Pictures” and the “Halls” will still command occasional visits; but they will no longer offer the only sustenance for vacant minds. And what will our villages be like in those (quite near at hand) days? “Back to the land” will be an irresistible challenge, for every man will be in command of his own resources,

and we all like to use what we have got; what delightful village communes we shall see when every neighbourhood is leavened by literature, science and art! And what industrial and even political stability may we look forward to from an educated democracy! Lest the reader should say, "Behold, this dreamer cometh," let me append four testimonies, which are I think unique in the annals of education.

Our pioneer school has been at work these three years on the "Parents' National Educational Union" method, and three other schools took it up last October. I ventured to send half-a-dozen test questions to the two headmasters and the two head-

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mistresses of these schools, and I am allowed to publish the answers, premising that the schools are in different localities and that the views of each writer are independent. The questions deal with "the effect of P.N.E.U. work" on attendance, the tone of the school, the interest of the children, their intelligence, their power of attention and command of language, and its effect in promoting good relations with parents.

Mr. A. says.—Attendance.—The children appear to be fond of school and our absences are mostly children who are sick. Tone.—We were greatly handicapped by lack of books up to six months ago ... but we have no doubt that the continued use of the valuable and interesting books will eventually raise the tone of the school. Interest.—We find that the books in almost every case are so interesting that the children are very keen on them and take great interest whilst the teacher is reading. Intelligence.—The scheme appears to further the intelligence of the children—the field is so wide that many hitherto unknown paths tempt the children to acquire even more knowledge by themselves. Attention.—There is no doubt that the child's power of concentration is developed; this is rather twofold (1) The child knows that one reading of the chosen piece has to suffice; (2) the attractiveness of the work. It is our experience that so long as the teacher is reading dead silence reigns. Language.—We certainly find that the method increases the command of language. The children acquire the habit of speaking better English and of using words and phrases in the proper sense. They try to imitate the teacher's voice and speak in a much more refined manner than heretofore. Parents.—The parents (fathers and mothers) of the children are chiefly out at work in the mills, consequently we do not have much opportunity of meeting them. However, those we come across tell us of their children's love of school, and invariably the parents are pleased with their progress.

Miss B.'s report is:—Attendance good, especially in the case of the more intelligent girls who have not stayed away from school without good reason. I have not noticed any difference in tone, it being always reported as excellent by H.M. inspectors. Interest has undoubtedly increased. This is shown by (*a*) the number of books, magazines, &c., which happen to contain anything bearing on the lessons, which are brought to school for the teacher to see; (*b*) the number of specimens of anything read about which are brought to school. Intelligence seems to be awakened earlier, as we find the children are capable of reading books two years in advance of former times. Powers of attention are greatly increased without doubt. Command of language has wonderfully improved. We think we can see how promoting good relations with parents

can easily be done, but are not trying ourselves till the war is over. At present we have no means of knowing the opinions of the parents, because we have practically no opportunities of coming into contact with them.

Mr. C. writes:—Attendance has been below the average during the winter months (weather and epidemics). The tone of the school is improving, although I can honestly say there has been a gradual improvement for the last two and a half years. Interest.—The increase of the children's interest is, to my mind, one of the great advantages of the scheme. My staff is composed of five excellent teachers, who invariably gave sound lessons and made them as interesting as possible—*i.e.*, by direct teaching, such as is the general method of to-day. But the whole-hearted interest of all the

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children was seldom there. A casual observer walking into any one of my rooms now would be immediately convinced that the children gave their undivided attention to the work, whether private study or collective reading. I can state most emphatically that the attention of the children has increased by leaps and bounds. Intelligence seems to me to be very closely connected with interest, for it seems obvious that close interest in good books must increase the intelligence. I have known cases where children from unavoidable reasons have missed certain work. But next day they have stayed in at recreation time to make it up. Surely this is interest most deep. I think that the power of attention is obtained by the interest in the books, and also (1) the child must rely on its own efforts. When the child reads a chapter it must pick out essentials for itself. By ordinary teaching this is done by the teachers. (2) The children here write a ten minutes' report at the end of each study period. Their anxiety to write a good one again exemplifies keen interest and also increases their attention. Language.—Examination of the written reports shows a great improvement in the command of language quite as much as I expected in six months. It is my belief that an improvement in this direction must be gradual, and I think it would be unwise to expect great things in a short period. I should say that the greater progress has been made relatively at the lower part of the school. The only reason for this I can suggest is that in the case of the older children "habit has become second nature." I don't wish you to think that there is only little improvement, but still it is here that progress is slowest, and also I wish to give you my testimony without exaggeration. I can say, with reluctance, that after almost three years here and 16 years in similar types of schools, there have been few cases where parents show their interest in school work. A point of interest you do not mention is spelling. I can report definite progress.

Since writing the above, Mr. A. has held an Open Day, during which the ordinary class-work was carried on. The parents of the children simply "poured in," and showed a great deal of sympathy with and interest in the new methods, especially when the teachers invited them to hear at home "narrations" for which there is not time at school.

Miss D. says:—Attendance.—The girls like to attend school regularly rather than break the continuity of class-work. Scholars speak out openly that they do not like to

have work repeated because of others staying at home. Absentees sometimes ask to be excused other work in order to have private study. Tone.—The children are eager and most anxious to make the best possible use of their time, and thus they secure the highest moral tone. Sighs, not of relief, when lessons finish. The girls try to live up to the school motto, “Whatever is worth doing at all is worth doing well.” Interest.—In my opinion it is impossible for girls to be more interested than ours are in P.N.E.U. books. Children learn by doing for themselves; 50 girls bought a copy of *Twelfth Night* and 90 a copy of *Coriolanus*. The children have acted on their own initiative and borrowed full volumes of Shakespeare from various quarters and carefully compared their small copies in order to see if theirs were quite complete. Real heroes appeal strongly. Intelligence.—The girls absorb the subject matter and gain knowledge for themselves. The children compose and write very sensible questions about their work. They quickly ask for help when needed. The girls write their compositions in less time than before and avoid “padding.”

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Attention.—The children feel they must attend to work or they cannot write properly. Language.—A decided improvement. The various literary styles influence the language. Parents.—There have been great demands for the small war book by Strang. Whole families have read the copies. During the winter, parents and children have read and dramatized *Twelfth Night* and *Coriolanus* together. Soldier brothers home on leave have been interested. Other points. No danger of monotony. Freshness of the programme adds to the interest. Keen inquiries about next term’s books and full titles to see if they can be borrowed. Appeals by girls to mistresses for their reading of Scott to help their understanding. Children eager to bring any card or small picture that refers to their work. Girls are ready for Form III. mentally, but are unfit physically. A reform in education during war-time rather than waiting until the war ceases.

These four writers appear to feel very justly that as regards attendance and the tone of the school there was not much room for improvement, some think that little has been done in the way of approaching parents, but they are unanimous in stating that the interest of the children, their intelligence, and their power of attention have increased by “leaps and bounds”; and there are hints and glimpses of things being done which justify our fondest dreams and must gladden the heart of any lover of his kind. (Perhaps I should add that a considerable number of schools in seven counties are now doing this work, but their experience is too short to be cited.)

We have had before us various weighty proposals for the reform of education, and all of them, as well as the utterances of leaders of thought who have spoken on the subject, emphasize what I may call the spiritual aspect of education, and their recommendations embrace the broad lines on which we work. But perhaps they all assume too lightly that a subject in the curriculum is therefore a subject of which children gain an intelligent mastery. As a matter of fact, it would be hard to conceive wider, more liberal schemes of work than are sent in for the consideration of the Inspectors by probably many thousands of teachers in elementary schools. But, alas! these schemes—with which the inspectors are no doubt highly satisfied, for, indeed, they are intelligent and comprehensive—are like Mr. Micawber’s projects,

admirable in intention. But the power of passive resistance in children has to be reckoned with, and a letter from which I am allowed to quote shows the sort of thing that happens under even cultivated teachers:—

“Very many thanks for the educational literature which interests me very much. The most remarkable thing about Miss Mason’s method to my mind is that the children are expected to remember, and apparently do remember, what they have read through once only for months afterwards. Indeed, I gather that they remember it for always. That strikes a blow at

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the very root of the ‘hammering’ principle that we elementary teachers place our faith in. We give a lesson, carefully revise its main points, insist on notes being written and learnt later on, question the class, and generally work on the assumption (which is often justified) that unless we hammer the lesson-matter well in it will be forgotten in a week. Yet we cannot fail to realize that the majority of children leave our schools at 13 with only the sketchiest of educational attainments—they often cannot speak, and still more often cannot write, good English ... and beyond reading the weekly newspaper and odd magazines [sic] that come their way, they seldom attempt to read anything after leaving school. There are perhaps two or three children in these village schools (I have had no experience of town schools) who are ambitious enough to wish to win a scholarship and enter a secondary school. I have three this year, but the general idea is that one can get on very well without education, and it is better to be earning 8s. a week on a farm at 13 than be trying to learn anything out of books. It is extremely likely that Miss Mason’s method of studying a large number of well-written books might have a good effect on public opinion of the value of education of the rising generation, and I should much like to make the experiment. I do not know if you are at all familiar with the teaching we give in our schools. To the best of our ability we try to arrange as wide a syllabus as our means allow. ... You might possibly be interested in my scheme of work for next year—we commence a new year after Easter and I will enclose it. This year’s scheme, which I am at present using for Examination purposes, is on similar lines, but we have taken European Geography, with History of other European Wars and their effects upon civilisation. ... I have been trying the method of attentive reading followed by narration in my class this week. The children really remembered surprisingly well, and I shall be interested in testing the staying power of their memories in a few weeks’ time.”

The net result of much of this painstaking teaching is waste of time, thought, and energy on the part of the teacher, and of precious time and *his sole* opportunity on that of the child. (By the way, Miss X.’s experiment, however allowable as an experiment, would prove somewhat futile if a series of such experiments [sic] were attempted by way of an ordered education.) Would teachers but acquaint themselves with the few “ways” of mind which I have tried to indicate, the result would be evident and immediate; children discover the fact at once when that which they are required to hear or read is worth while; there is no repetition, a single reading is sufficient, and the scholars themselves become insistent upon full measure, running over, of which they let no grain be lost.

I hesitate to recommend this scheme of “spiritual” education on utilitarian grounds, but I might do so because it effects a very grave saving of time. English history, French history, general history, geography, travel, literature, Bible, natural history, science (with demonstrations), citizenship (including fable, [p 383]

tale and Plutarch’s Lives), studies in nature and in art—all these and more are included in seven hours’ work a week as shown on the time-table. Not a minute is wasted and nothing is read that is not fully known. See how wide a margin is left for physical training, vocational training, all the more or less “material” education which is already so admirably given in our schools that it is unnecessary for me to dwell on the subject, though our “programmes” of work arrange for much practice—in handicrafts, cooking, dancing, Swedish drill, and the like, as well as for field nature study and gardening. We find that alertness of mind leads to physical alertness and energy, and the light, brisk marching and drill of an elementary school doing this work has been commented upon.

Of the grave changes in the organization of education now being adumbrated, it is not my part to speak; but in the matter of “spiritual” education, it probably rests with elementary schools to revolutionize the general practice. People will be quick to perceive the fact when the children of these schools are widely read (for children) and well informed, while those of secondary schools, carefully taught and under accomplished Heads, are keen it is true about games and marks and school interests, but *not* on knowledge for its own sake. Parents will cease to sacrifice their children to the Moloch (50 years old) of, say, the universities local examinations, and will send them, as they do in America, to those schools in which they hope to get vital education. This would be a grave loss to the country, because the secondary school is indispensable and has much to offer over and above the fine gloss of scholarship; wherefore we have reason to hope that the enlightened Heads of such schools will reflect on the matter, and that they may be led to perceive the fact that discoveries have been made which nullify general educational practices. In this way our final goal of a Common Curriculum would be brought within measurable distance.

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¹ From *The Times Educational Supplement*, April 19th.