

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

On Teaching Children.

By J. W. ADAMSON, B.A.,

Professor of Education in the University of London.

II.—THE MOTIVE FOR LEARNING.

FAILURE to appreciate the child's standpoint not only causes him to misunderstand what he is taught ; it is also a frequent cause of his failure to attend to the teaching. To be sure, an inattentive class is most often an unoccupied class ; the teacher does not bring home to the mind of every pupil the thought that all must work, or be found out. Where every pupil has something to do, or at least expects to be called on at any moment to do or say something, where every wandering glance is challenged by a look or a question, the symptoms of inattention are not easy to detect. But even in these favourable circumstances, the attention of the class as a whole may be but half-hearted, and in consequence the effect of the instruction will be evanescent.

The essential thing is that the pupil should have a motive for attending. The fear of detection, the discomfort of the teacher's disapproving glance, the stimulus of some form of reward, are better than nothing ; but they are too external in origin, they rank low as motives, and their driving-power is but feeble. The spontaneous interests of children spring from the circumstances of their daily life, and though many a child transcends these limits by the exercise of a lively fancy, even those imaginative flights are conditioned by what the child knows of the persons, things and places of his actual surroundings. These are at the starting-point, however distant the region to which imagination transports him. But the purely intellectual, detached from persons and from particular things, has attraction for very few children ; its aloofness from their experience, no less than the difficulty of understanding its speech, is a barrier which divides it from the appreciation of most children.

The textbook once more serves as an illustration. Dealing with chemistry, such a book will begin with topics like the following: the composition of matter, its physical properties, the nature of chemical reaction, and so on, each being presented in a purely formal way. Next, the different elements are in turn brought before the reader, often in some such stereotyped order as "i. Preparation"; "ii. Properties"; "iii. Uses"; each element being treated under these categories. This choice and sequence of topics are excellent in a work of reference, but stupefying when applied unchanged as canons of teaching. The child's natural use of his own powers, when these are aroused by interest, leads him to *discover* elements, to reach the idea of properties through an analysis of concrete things and processes, in which those properties inhere. But element and properties, as such, possess little, if any, attraction for him. His first question is always, What is the use of this? The teacher, therefore, should exhibit the use of a thing, and particularly its relevance to the boy's own experience, in order to furnish him with a sufficient motive for studying the thing itself; "properties" and "preparation" will then fall into their proper places and secure a measure of spontaneous attention. In short, while the textbook assumes the pupil's interest, the teacher takes measures to excite it.

This distinction in procedure has long been a ground of variance between rule-of-thumb instructors, who are apt to monopolize for themselves the title, "practical teachers," and their critics, whom they are wont to stigmatize as "mere theorizers." One of these critics has laid it down in reference to children that "their book, or anything we would have them learn, should not be enjoined them as *business*." "Children should not have anything like work, or serious, laid on them; neither their minds nor bodies will bear it." The schoolmaster's retort to John Locke is obvious: "These notions may work when confined to the affairs of a private tutor and one or two pupils; they are impossible as principles of school-keeping, when twenty, sixty, or three hundred pupils are in question." The school cannot remain at a standstill because some pupils are not

in the mood for lessons ; more than that, it is not desirable that children should be trained to believe that business, work, and "the serious" generally, ought to be postponed in favour of inclination.

It may be easy on such grounds to dismiss Locke. But Froebel is less manageable, since it is an undoubted fact that he founded a system of education which is in actual and extensive practice at the present day. He is also author of this dictum : " Regarded in the light of their origin and first principles, education, instruction and doctrine must of necessity be passive, following—guarding, merely, and sheltering—not prescribing, determining, encroaching." Froebel is popularly regarded in this country as a homely, kindly-disposed German, who devised a number of more or less entertaining games, by means of which a judicious person could insinuate reading, writing, and summing into the unwilling minds of little children. Thus it came about that in the time-tables of infant schools, "Kindergarten" figured as one of several "subjects" thought to be appropriate to tender years. The schoolmistresses could excuse themselves by quoting the ill-informed judgment of the late Sir Joshua Fitch : "You will not, I think, come to the conclusion that he (Froebel) took a large or very sound view of the purpose of education as a whole." Froebel's conceptions may or may not be sound ; some of them, at least, are disputable. But his largeness of view respecting "the purpose of education as a whole" would only be questioned by a person ignorant of his writings. Such ignorance is not incompatible with high official position ; our national habit of identifying "an open mind" with a vacant mind always makes this association possible.

The opinion which represents Froebel as something of a mystic is much nearer the truth than that which dismisses him as a child-like, if not childish, thinker. But those who accept the more favourable view of the German educator sometimes forget that the mystic frequently exhibits a well-marked vein of practical sagacity, a quality in which Froebel was not altogether wanting. The trait appears in the dictum already quoted.

What is the practical import of the words? Do they not indicate that the child is not simply an intelligence to be informed and directed at the will of the instructor—that there are other avenues to his intelligence than those which the schools commonly use? In Froebel's view, the child was, above all else, an active creature endowed with instincts which impelled him to be constantly doing. But these instincts are not each and all effective from the beginning; they are bound up with bodily activities, and can only become operative as bodily growth and development make them possible. The educator, therefore, must be "passive, following," in the sense that he must watch the child's development as a whole, and find employment for instincts which are morally and socially desirable as they appear, diverting or "starving out," as best he can, such instincts as are undesirable. In other words, the mental and bodily development of the child, more especially as these are exhibited through instinct and innate tendency, are the determining factors of curriculum and method. The educator "prescribes" and "encroaches" (and does amiss) when he insists upon forcing adult ways of thinking and "grown-up" ideas upon the child, with scant attention to childish capacity, limitations, and desires.

The games of the Kindergarten were to be much more than kinds of amusement; with Montaigne, Froebel was of opinion that they were the "most serious" occupation of childhood. Both writers in effect anticipated one of the most recent and most widely-accepted explanations of the nature and function of play. According to this explanation, the play of all young animals is a preparation for the specific activities of adult life. Play furnishes opportunities for exercising many instincts, and for turning them into settled habits; it gives a wider field in which the young creature may get chances of displaying actions which are self-initiated, as well as those of a more imitative character.

The games of the Kindergarten were intended by Froebel to be the means by which the young child should give expression to the impulses and rudimentary thinking which stirred

within. Above all, games and "occupations" were to furnish occasion for bodily activity, so that children might learn by doing rather than by listening or reading. The ordinary school praises and seeks to cultivate but one type of human capacity—that which is represented by the "scholar"; Froebel realized that there were other types, and endeavoured to educate them during the early years at least. But his first object was to provide a stage whereon instinct might display itself and become habit, be diverted, or be weakened or suppressed, as morality dictated. And it was an essential part of his plan that these activities should be exercised in a society; while the child was building up his individuality through self-activity, it became clearer to him that this individuality must be dedicated to social service.

Thoughtful Germans who are dissatisfied with their national systems of education declare that the German school should but does not, cultivate personality; and Froebel is securing to-day such a hearing in his own country as was denied to him while he lived. On the other hand, modern psychology recognizes the great part played by instinct in the course of mental development, and the influence which instincts have upon character. Indeed, the balance of opinion appears to favour the belief that a young child is a *plexus* of instincts and innate tendencies, whose morally and intellectually wholesome evolution will determine the life of the man. The Kindergarten, ideally conceived, is the sphere within which this evolution is assured during the early years of life; and it ensures this evolution by suggesting to the child purposes and objects of a kind which appeal to him and rouse him to activity.

This brings us back after a long digression to John Locke and his critic, the practical teacher. The question between them is, What kind of motive should be relied on to get the child to learn? Locke and Froebel hold that motives externally imposed are either harmful or of very little value; learning, if it is to be real in the sense of forming the mental texture, must be the results of a process which originates within. The child

learns because he *wants* to learn, and wanting to learn depends in the first place upon kinship between things proposed to be learnt and the instincts and innate tendencies which the child brings to them. Of course, as the learning proceeds, the motives become more complicated; the only question here is the beginning. While the schoolmaster, naturally enough, is disposed to say that the child must learn because he ought, Froebel urges that we must enlist the child's instincts and innate tendencies, or at least such of them as are relevant and desirable.

Locke has finely said that "Knowledge is as grateful to the understanding as light is to the eyes." Children are as capable of this pleasure as their elders in so far as they understand. The late Professor Bain thought that the curiosity of children was "a spurious article." This, even if founded on a truth, would tend to quench the smoking flax. The teacher will be better advised if he acts on Locke's assumption that the instinct of curiosity is "the great instrument Nature has provided to remove that ignorance children were born with." Given an adequate reason for studying a topic which is within the range of their knowledge and capacity, most children will find an interest in that topic; and the more spontaneous the reason, and the more the teacher's method is based upon the child's knowledge and powers, the greater and more fruitful that interest will be.

To revert to a former illustration, the textbook in chemistry. The teacher who makes the order of topics in the book his own order of dealing with them will "prepare" oxygen, demonstrate its "properties," and thence deduce its "uses," without considering why the child should feel any interest in oxygen at all. To say that the child "ought" to feel this interest is to expect him to occupy a level of intelligence or of duty which is certainly a long way above most childish heads. But the teacher who attaches value to childish curiosity, and recalls the interest which children feel in the concrete *uses* of things, will attach these to "oxygen" by presenting his theme in the guise of a problem to be solved. How does it come about that this merely glowing,

and virtually extinguished match flashes into flame when plunged in this apparently empty glass jar? Why is it that a paper "blower," or a bellows, revives a smouldering fire?

Again, the instinct of construction, the impulse to use the hands in disturbing, making and remaking, is universally recognized as a characteristic of the young child. But schools for the most part ignore it, or so starve or over-specialize its employment that the pen or pencil is the only tool which the boy can handle with effect, and the human hand, one of the most wonderful instruments in the world, gets but little training in the school-room. The head-master of a great public school used to describe the drawing-class as the place where "fellows who could do nothing else could do something"; yet this gentleman could also insist on the fame of Pheidias and Praxiteles! The English school-boy would become as deft as French and German boys at using chalk on the classroom blackboard if he had their opportunities; and, generally, he would be a more efficient learner if he were made to do and to say more and to listen less. For some children the instinct of construction is satisfied by speech, if it be spontaneous and self-directed; "poet" is "maker."

It is well to recognize that there are boys and girls who find it an ungrateful task to "learn their catechism," or "collects," or "texts"; reasons have already been suggested why this might be expected, apart from mere laziness. Even the plain and concrete statements of the "Duty towards my neighbour" may fall on deaf ears, because the boy fails to realize at all vividly the connection between the words and his daily life. Nevertheless, the daily life of himself and his neighbours is a topic full of intrinsic interest for him. His innate tendency to sympathize, however dumbly, with those amidst whom he lives, and with human beings in general, always makes a story attractive. Acting on the knowledge of this fact, the teacher does not begin by plunging the pupil into the "Duty"; but, selecting one or more of its clauses for illustration, he tells a story which bears on its face the "moral" summed up in the words of the Catechism.

If the story be Biblical, the device has the advantage of associating Bible and Catechism in a more living way, as the child sees it, than is the case when the bond of connection is only a series of authoritative "texts." After the story, the words of the Catechism are presented, explained or illustrated still further, and then learned by heart.

The instinct of curiosity and the innate tendency of sympathy have been chosen as examples, because they are amongst the most widely distributed qualities which make up the child's mental outfit. But effective teaching is doubly individual, seeing that it expresses the personality of the teacher and is addressed to the personality of the taught. Half a dozen little boys or girls on the bench of a Sunday-school will include very different capacities, limitations and preferences amongst them; and therefore they may severally be swayed by different motives. He will be their most successful teacher who excites in them the greatest number of appropriate desires, using the word "appropriate" as equivalent to suitable to the individual child, as well as to the occasion, or general situation.

