

On Teaching Children.

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I. THE CHILD'S POINT OF VIEW.

A MORE discriminating study of children has wrought many beneficial changes in educational practice since Rousseau published "Émile" a century and a half ago. Paradoxical as it seems, much of the salutary change has been brought about through the writings of a father who successively abandoned his own five children to the care of a foundling hospital. "We never know how to put ourselves in the child's place," he complains in "Émile"; "instead of entering into his ideas, we lend him our own," and the consequence is that what is truth, in our minds, becomes the support of error and extravagance in theirs.

The world has never been without women and men who, in virtue of a sympathetic insight into the childish nature, have escaped Rousseau's condemnation; but their number at any time has never been so great as to render his criticism superfluous. After a generation or two of "child-study," there are still some mothers, many professional teachers, and very many whose profession is not the schoolmaster's, who, in Rousseau's phrase, "are ever seeking the man in the child." Exceptions being duly allowed for, it may be said that amateur and inefficient teaching of children is distinguished from the efficient kind by the teacher's preliminary attitude in this particular. The inexperienced teacher is disposed to see a difference only in degree between the intelligence of the child and his own; the experienced teacher knows that the differences between his own mental processes and his young pupil's are so many, so varied, and so considerable that failure awaits the teacher who ignores them by treating the child as a miniature of himself. "Nature wills that children be children before they be men; if we would

pervert this order, we shall produce precocious fruit, unripe, flavourless, and hastening to decay. Childhood has ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling which are peculiar to itself; nothing is less sensible than wishing to substitute our ways for theirs. I should as soon require a child of ten to be five feet high as expect him to be a person of judgment."

In so far as their thinking is valid, children and men *formally* think alike; the rules of syllogism and of all other modes of inference are binding on both, although their appreciation of the obligation may differ. But children and men do not in all cases apprehend the same matter in precisely the same manner, nor do they attend with equal closeness to the same things, their interests and power of withstanding fatigue being different. Fatigue and attention are, of course, questions of degree, but apprehension and interests give differences of kind.

A comparison between the minds of the adult and of the child must of necessity be superficial in character and somewhat abstract, since there are adults and adults, as well as children and children. The "average child," like the discredited "economic man," is a denizen of Cloud-Cuckoo Land only; and even the stress of professional experience cannot make all teachers identical. But, by hypothesis, the teacher possesses a mind which is both well-informed and mature, and for the present purpose we may recognize the adult type by those two marks. Such a mind grows impatient with detail unless detail is plainly required; the picture-making mind of the little child and the similar mind of the uneducated person delight in detail for its own sake. The truth of this statement may be verified by anyone who will try to please a child by presenting to him the salient facts only ("the statistics," as Mark Twain called them) of "Jack and the Beanstalk" or of "Puss in Boots." The chattering inconsequence of Shakespeare's clowns and of George Eliot's rustics makes excellent reading, but it is another story in actual life, when the first object is to get at the clown's meaning. Some years ago the Post-office journal, *St. Martin's-le-Grand*, printed the following from a letter of explanation

written by a telegraphic messenger, who had been mobbed by other boys and rendered unfit for duty: "One of them threw the core of an apple at me, which hit me in the ear. I took no notice of that and walked on, and they then threw their hats at me. I turned round and was about to say, 'Who are you throwing at?' when I took my own part and hit him back, and a crowd gathered. I stopped to pick up my hat, when he kicked me, which proved fatal, and ran away."

The person of mature intelligence greatly appreciates the economy of general terms and general propositions; and, forgetting the long and toilsome journey by which he reached the notions for which these words stand, he is often tempted, on the plea of saving time, to force generalities prematurely upon the child. The readiness with which the latter picks up words and mere sounds often deludes the instructor into believing that the child has attained the general truths or general ideas because he can repeat the words correctly. Only the educated mind can freely and intelligently make use of that shorthand of thought, an abstract term, and it does so in consequence of a somewhat lengthy experience, to which no child can pretend, and which teachers can but very partially abridge. It is notorious that amongst adults the speculative philosophers, the great mathematicians, and the men who frame large and sound generalizations concerning nature or human life are in a decided minority. So, too, are those whose attitude towards knowledge is quite disinterested, who pursue truth purely for its own sake. How, then, can we expect to find these exceptional attributes in all children as a matter of course?

The typical childish traits offer a great contrast to these characteristics of the educated adult intelligence. The immature mind finds difficulty in conceiving the abstract, and fights shy of it in consequence; it is much more at ease in the concrete world of its tangible, sensible surroundings. True, the immature mind *is* a mind, and therefore spontaneously generalizes concerning these surroundings, and to that extent takes a tentative hold of the abstract; but its generalizations are frequently rash

and ill-founded. For "knowledge" as such, and for abstract truth, the child's interest is usually weak ; but his curiosity as to the use or function of most things which he encounters is insatiable.

The contrast might be elaborated at length, but it will perhaps be sufficient to consider it in its relation to the familiar instrument of teaching—the textbook. A manual of this kind, when skilfully written, presents a compact body of knowledge arranged conveniently for reference and in accordance with the demands of logic. The old-fashioned "Euclid" is an excellent illustration. Before we can discuss ideas we must conceive them, and from the logician's point of view the sign that ideas are conceived is the ability to define them. Euclid therefore begins each of his books by defining all the terms used in the book ; next come the axioms and postulates relied upon in the text ; then, and not till then, the pupil is confronted by examples of geometrical processes. The whole is arranged with an eye to logical requirements, to meet the needs of an assumed average mature intelligence, but irrespective of individual idiosyncrasies. It is not primarily addressed to the immature mind, which has yet to grow to the logical standpoint. The book is meant to be a presentation to a mature, instructed mind of a body of knowledge, clear, formal, complete ; and in the light of its own purpose it is justified.

The teacher who thinks of himself as being, first and foremost, a teacher of this or that branch of knowledge is tempted to accept the textbook, not only in this sense, but also to fall into the error of thinking that the sequence of topics in the textbook is an exact indication of the order in which those topics should be introduced to the immature minds of children. This is an instance of the kind of error which Rousseau denounced in "Émile"; it is to disregard the child's spontaneous mode of acquiring knowledge. Outside the schoolroom and away from tutors of all sorts, the child's learning does not begin with clear-cut, well-defined ideas such as the textbook puts before him at the outset, presenting him with an analysis ready-made. The child learns by making his own analysis, starting from an

experience which is entirely concrete, complex, without definite boundaries; from this vague welter his mind moves towards order, consistency, definition. The movement is not at all assisted by a premature halting before abstractions and generalities, which are beyond his understanding, however economical and helpful they may be to his grown-up instructor.

To-day, the school does not begin its teaching about the world in which the child lives by offering him rudimentary scraps of botany, chemistry, physics, or by trying to teach him any one branch of science. Under the name Nature-Study, it endeavours to bring his mind to the observation of his surroundings as these may be noted by eye, hand, ear, and the other organs of sense. The analysis of those surroundings, which he thus begins, may at one moment be botanical, at another physical or chemical, to the understanding of students of those sciences; but it is only at a later stage, as the analysis develops in his own mind, that the child realizes this, or that knowledge is thus separated into federations and kingdoms.

The differences which divide Scot and Englishman are portrayed by the magic of genius in Stevenson's essay, "The Foreigner at Home," wherein the writer reminds us that "two divergent systems" are embodied in the two first questions of the English Church Catechism and of that Shorter Catechism which possibly is Scottish only by adoption. The English question, "What is your name?" Stevenson thinks "trite," while the other strikes "at the very roots of life" with "What is the chief end of man?" But the teacher of children is not free to dismiss matter of instruction because it is trite, and little children (and big ones too) are more likely to be induced, by a question which starts on their own plane of thought, to work their minds into the subject, till *at length* they dimly discern that man's chief end is "to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever." For this purpose, another sequence than the strictly logical is required when introducing a study to a pupil. The Westminster Assembly of Divines or the Scottish Commissioners, in their collective capacity, were less discerning in-

structors of children than the sometime Westminster master, Dean Nowell, "author of the Catechism and inventor of bottled beer."

But it is seldom that the teacher of children finds the matter of his instruction predigested as in a catechism; nor, indeed, would the man who experiences an intellectual zest in such teaching desire help of that kind. As a rule, the material must be recast in order to be presented successfully to the immature minds who are to receive it. It is impossible, however, to make the necessary changes apart from fulness of knowledge of the subject and that sense of proportion which comes from mastery. The teacher's most obvious duty is, therefore, to "know his subject," as they say in the schoolroom; and this duty is a direct consequence of that other which bids him know his pupil. The good student is often confused with the good teacher, so that the ideas become interchangeable. The difference between them is, that while the student knows his subject, the teacher knows both that and his pupil also; and this is a cardinal difference.

One of the ways by which the teacher effects the necessary adjustment of material is that which is known technically as exposition; that is, expounding a passage at large. The need for this kind of instruction is much more general amongst young children than their instructors often realize. Books, catechisms, hymns, and the like, which have been written expressly for children, are often taken at their face-value by the teachers, who pass them on to their pupils. The consequence is, that the contents of these books is misunderstood by their young readers, sometimes ludicrously so. An unfamiliar word, or turn of phrase, disconcerts the child. If he is lazy, or indifferent, he merely memorizes the words or sounds which approximate to the words, and leaves it there. If he is disposed to exercise his intelligence upon the novelty (and in all probability that is the case with the greater number of children), he misinterprets it through supposing analogy where it does not exist. Then, having given the passage a nonsensical meaning,

he accepts the nonsense, and may even fail to reconsider it in the light of fresh information. There are at this moment, no doubt, large numbers of children who are puzzled when they hear of that "green hill far away without a city wall." Why, they ask themselves, should a green hill require a city wall? Surely, they think, it was needless to say that the hill had no city wall. The writer knows one child, at least, who for years used to connect the words "pity my simplicity" with the thought of mice in captivity.

Here, however, we must not get out of one error to fall into another. The tyro at teaching supposes that unfamiliar or difficult passages are not understood, because the meaning of a word here or there is not known. More frequently it is the thought, or the whole of its expression, which proves to be the obstacle. A single word usually has its meaning stamped upon it by the context. A reader with a little experience sees that "without" in Mrs. Alexander's hymn *must* mean "outside," "beyond." But if the whole frame of the sentence, or the thought which it renders, be external to the child's range, he is helped little or not at all by being told synonyms for the "hard words."

What he needs is to get at the heart of the passage, to realize its drift, to see "what it is about." In this case the teacher may do much for him by reading the passage aloud sympathetically. When that is done, the pupil may be invited to say what he thinks is the gist of the whole. The questioning and discussion which ensue will sufficiently deal with phrases not understood, after which comes the time for explaining "hard words."

