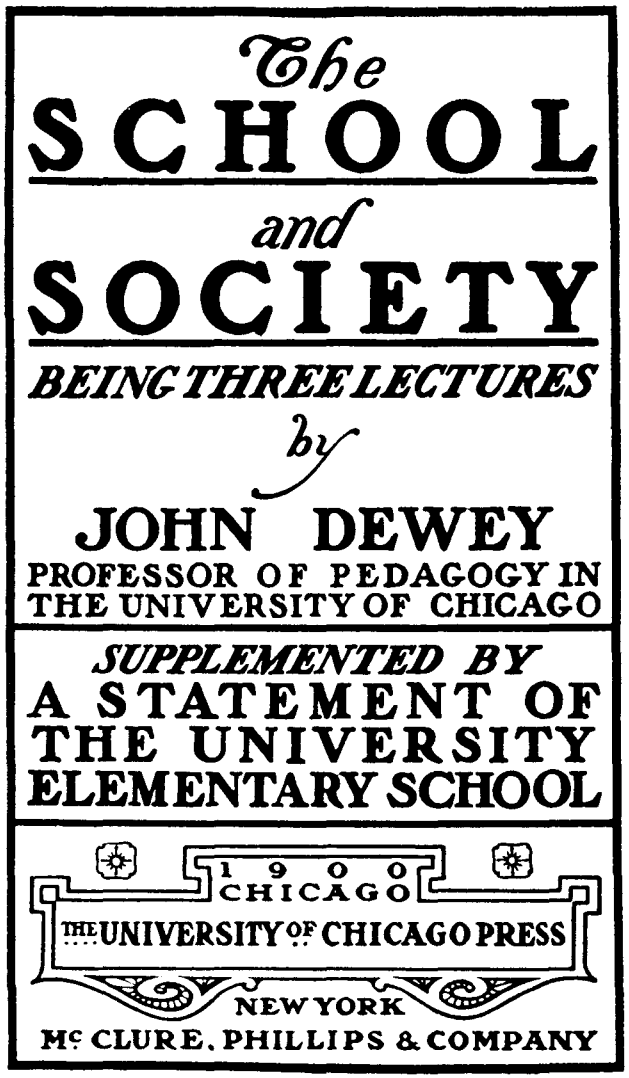

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VII

The Development of Attention

The subprimary or kindergarten department is undertaking the pedagogical problems growing out of an attempt to connect kindergarten work intimately with primary, and to readapt traditional materials and technique to meet present social conditions and our present physiological and psychological knowledge.

Little children have their observations and thoughts mainly di-

rected toward people: what they do, how they behave, what they are occupied with, and what comes of it. Their interest is of a personal rather than of an objective or intellectual sort. Its intellectual counterpart is the story-form; not the task, consciously defined end, or problem—meaning by story-form something psychical, the holding together of a variety of persons, things, and incidents through a common idea that enlists feeling; not an outward relation or tale. Their minds seek wholes, varied through episode, enlivened with action and defined in salient features—there must be go, movement, the sense of use and operation—inspection of things separated from the idea by which they are carried. Analysis of isolated detail of form and structure neither appeals nor satisfies.

Material provided by existing social occupations is calculated to meet and feed this attitude. In previous years the children have been concerned with the occupations of the home, and the contact of homes with one another and with outside life. Now they may take up typical occupations of society at large—a step farther removed from the child's egoistic, self-absorbed interest, and yet dealing with something personal and something which touches him.

From the standpoint of educational theory, the following features may be noted:

1. The study of natural objects, processes, and relations is

placed in a human setting. During the year, a considerably detailed observation of seeds and their growth, of plants, woods, stones, animals, as to some phases of structure and habit, of geographical conditions of landscape, climate, arrangement of land and water, is undertaken. The pedagogical problem is to direct the child's power of observation, to nurture his sympathetic interest in characteristic traits of the world in which he lives, to afford interpreting material for later more special studies, and yet to supply a carrying medium for the variety of facts and ideas through the dominant spontaneous emotions and thoughts of the child. Hence their association with human life. Absolutely no separation is made between the "social" side of the work, its concern with people's activities and their mutual dependencies, and the "science," regard for physical facts and forces—because the conscious distinction between man and nature is the result of later reflection and abstraction, and to force it upon the child here is not only to fail to engage his whole mental energy, but to confuse and distract him. The environment is always that in which life is situated and through which it is circumstanced; and to isolate it, to make it with little children an object of observation and remark by itself, is to treat human nature inconsiderately. At last, the original open and free attitude of the mind to nature is destroyed; nature has been reduced to a mass of meaningless details.

In its emphasis upon the "concrete" and "individual," modern pedagogical theory often loses sight of the fact that the existence and presentation of an individual physical thing—a stone, an orange, a cat—is no guaranty of *concreteness*; that this is a psychological affair, whatever appeals to the mind as a whole, as a self-sufficient center of interest and attention. The reaction from this external and somewhat dead standpoint often assumes, however, that the needed clothing with human significance can come only by direct personification, and we have that continued symbolization of a plant, cloud, or rain which makes only pseudo-science possible; which, instead of generating love for nature itself, switches interest to certain sensational and emotional accompaniments, and leaves it, at last, dissipated and burnt out. And even the tendency to approach nature through the medium of literature, the pine tree through the fable of the discontented pine, etc., while recognizing the need of the human association, fails to note that there is a more straightforward road from mind to the object—direct through connection with life itself; and that the poem and story, the literary statement, have their place as reinforcements and idealizations, not as foundation stones. What is wanted, in other words, is not to fix up a connection of child mind and nature, but to give free and effective play to the connection already operating.

2. This suggests at once the practical questions that are usu-

ally discussed under the name of "correlation," questions of such interaction of the various matters studied and powers under acquisition as will avoid waste and maintain unity of mental growth. From the standpoint adopted the problem is one of differentiation rather than of correlation as ordinarily understood. The unity of life, as it presents itself to the child, binds together and carries along the different occupations, the diversity of plants, animals, and geographic conditions; drawing, modeling, games, constructive work, numerical calculations are ways of carrying certain features of it to mental and emotional satisfaction and completeness. Not much attention is paid in this year to reading and writing; but it is obvious that if this were regarded as desirable, the same principle would apply. It is the community and continuity of the subject-matter that organizes, that correlates; correlation is not through devices of instruction which the teacher employs in tying together things in themselves disconnected.

3. Two recognized demands of primary education are often, at present, not unified or are even opposed. The need of the familiar, the already experienced, as a basis for moving upon the unknown and remote, is a commonplace. The claims of the child's imagination as a factor is at least beginning to be recognized. The problem is to work these two forces together, instead of separately. The child is too often given drill upon familiar objects and ideas under the sanction of the first principle, while he is intro-

duced with equal directness to the weird, strange, and impossible to satisfy the claims of the second. The result, it is hardly too much to say, is a twofold failure. There is no special connection between the unreal, the myth, the fairy tale, and the play of mental imagery. Imagination is not a matter of an impossible subject-matter, but a constructive way of dealing with any subject-matter under the influence of a pervading idea. The point is not to dwell with wearisome iteration upon the familiar and under the guise of object-lessons to keep the senses directed at material which they have already made acquaintance with, but to enliven and illumine the ordinary, commonplace, and homely by using it to build up and appreciate situations previously unrealized and alien. And this also is culture of imagination. Some writers appear to have the impression that the child's imagination has outlet only in myth and fairy tale of ancient time and distant place or in weaving egregious fabrications regarding sun, moon, and stars; and have even pleaded for a mythical investiture of all "science" —as a way of satisfying the dominating imagination of the child. But fortunately these things are exceptions, are intensifications, are relaxations of the average child; not his pursuits. The John and Jane that most of us know let their imaginations play about the current and familiar contacts and events of life—about father and mother and friend, about steamboats and locomotives, and sheep and cows, about the romance of farm and forest, of sea-

shore and mountain. What is needed, in a word, is to afford occasion by which the child is moved to educe and exchange with others his store of experiences, his range of information, to make new observations correcting and extending them in order to keep his images moving, in order to find mental rest and satisfaction in definite and vivid realization of what is new and enlarging.

With the development of reflective attention come the need and the possibility of a change in the mode of the child's instruction. In the previous paragraphs we have been concerned with the direct, spontaneous attitude that marks the child till into his seventh year—his demand for new experiences and his desire to complete his partial experiences by building up images and expressing them in play. This attitude is typical of what writers call spontaneous attention, or, as some say, non-voluntary attention.

The child is simply absorbed in what he is doing; the occupation in which he is engaged lays complete hold upon him. He gives himself without reserve. Hence, while there is much energy spent, there is no *conscious* effort; while the child is intent to the point of engrossment, there is no *conscious* intention.

With the development of a sense of more remote ends, and of the need of directing acts so as to make them means for these ends (a matter discussed in the second number), we have the transition to what is termed indirect, or, as some writers prefer to say, voluntary, attention. A result is imaged, and the child attends

to what is before him or what he is immediately doing because it helps to secure the result. Taken by itself, the object or the act might be indifferent or even repulsive. But because it is felt to belong to something desirable or valuable, it borrows the latter's attracting and holding power.

This is the transition to "voluntary" attention, but only the transition. The latter comes fully into being only when the child entertains results in the form of problems or questions, the solution of which he is to seek for himself. In the intervening stage (in the child from eight to, say, eleven or twelve), while the child directs a series of intervening activities on the basis of some end he wishes to reach, this end is something to be done or made, or some tangible result to be reached; the problem is a practical difficulty, rather than an intellectual question. But with growing power the child can conceive of the end as something to be found out, discovered; and can control his acts and images so as to help in the inquiry and solution. This is reflective attention proper.

In history work there is change from the story and biography form, from discussion of questions that arise, to the formulation of questions. Points about which difference of opinion is possible, matters upon which experience, reflection, etc., can be brought to bear, are always coming up in history. But to use the discussion to develop this matter of doubt and difference into a definite problem, to bring the child to feel just what the difficulty is, and

then throw him upon his own resources in looking up material bearing upon the point, and upon his judgment in bringing it to bear, or getting a solution, is a marked intellectual advance. So in the science there is a change from the practical attitude of making and using cameras to the consideration of the problems intellectually involved in this—to principles of light, angular measurements, etc., which give the theory or explanation of the practice.

In general, this growth is a natural process. But the proper recognition and use of it is perhaps the most serious problem in instruction upon the intellectual side. A person who has gained the power of reflective attention, the power to hold problems, questions, before the mind, *is* in so far, intellectually speaking, educated. He has mental discipline—power *of* the mind and *for* the mind. Without this the mind remains at the mercy of custom and external suggestions. Some of the difficulties may be barely indicated by referring to an error that almost dominates instruction of the usual type. Too often it is assumed that attention can be given directly to any subject-matter, if only the proper will or disposition be at hand, failure being regarded as a sign of unwillingness or indocility. Lessons in arithmetic, geography, and grammar are put before the child, and he is told to attend in order to learn. But excepting as there is some question, some doubt, present in the mind as a *basis* for this attention, *reflective* attention is

impossible. If there is sufficient *intrinsic* interest in the material, there will be direct or spontaneous attention, which is excellent so far as it goes, but which merely of itself does not give power of thought or internal mental control. If there is not an inherent attracting power in the material, then (according to his temperament and training, and the precedents and expectations of the school) the teacher will either attempt to surround the material with foreign attractiveness, making a bid or offering a bribe for attention by "making the lesson interesting"; or else will resort to counterirritants (low marks, threats of non-promotion, staying after school, personal disapprobation, expressed in a great variety of ways, naggings, continuous calling upon the child to "pay attention," etc.); or, probably, will use some of both means.

But (1) the attention thus gained is never more than partial, or divided; and (2) it always remains dependent upon something external—hence, when the attraction ceases or the pressure lets up, there is little or no gain in inner or intellectual control. And (3) such attention is always for the sake of "learning," i.e., *memorizing ready-made answers to possible questions to be put by another*. True, reflective attention, on the other hand, always involves judging, reasoning, deliberation; it means that the child has a *question of his own* and is actively engaged in seeking and selecting relevant material with which to answer it, considering the bearings and relations of this material—the kind of solution

it calls for. The problem is one's own; hence also the impetus, the stimulus to attention, is one's own; hence also the training secured is one's own—it is discipline, or gain in power of control; that is, a *habit* of considering problems.

It is hardly too much to say that in the traditional education so much stress has been laid upon the presentation to the child of ready-made material (books, object-lessons, teacher's talks, etc.), and the child has been so almost exclusively held to bare responsibility for reciting upon this ready-made material, that there has been only accidental occasion and motive for developing reflective attention. Next to no consideration has been paid to the fundamental necessity—leading the child to realize a problem as his own, so that he is self-induced to attend in order to find out its answer. So completely have the conditions for securing this self-putting of problems been neglected that the very idea of voluntary attention has been radically perverted. It is regarded as measured by unwilling effort—as activity called out by foreign, and so repulsive, material under conditions of strain, instead of as self-initiated effort. "Voluntary" is treated as meaning the reluctant and disagreeable instead of the free, the self-directed, through personal interest, insight, and power.