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CONFERENCES
on the
EDUCATION & MANAGEMENT
of
CHILDREN

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In the Recorder, Vol X pp 341-343 is given Mrs Bell's account of the opening of the first Children's Laboratory conducted after Dr. Maria Montessori's method, in Canada, on Thursday, July 13, 1912.

This account received considerable notice in the Canadian Press, and was the means of evoking much interest in the Montessori method on Beinn Bhreagh and the neighborhood.

In the course of the working of the 'Laboratory' so many interesting and varied problems arose in the training of the young idea to shoot, that at Dr. Bell's suggestion a conference was held each week on Friday afternoon at the Museum, to discuss and criticise the happenings of the week, and plan a course for the future as directed by necessity and experience.

On the following pages will be found an account of the first few conferences.

JS

Conference August 30.

1912 Aug 30: Present at conference to-day: Mrs Bell, Miss Fletcher, A G Bell, J Smallwood.

Bell: We have appointed Friday as the day for a conference on children.

This is our first regular conference.

AGB

Miss Fletcher: First of all I want to ask for criticism by Dr. Bell of my school which he visited a few days ago

RTF

Bell: I was extremely interested because it seems to me to illustrate an important principle of education - "Education not Instruction" - "a leading forth from within rather than a putting in from without".

"Instruction" may be illustrated by the way they feed geese in the Bois de Boulogne to produce that delicious diseased product known as Pâté de Foie Gras. The creatures are simply crammed with food.

"Education" may be illustrated by the ordinary method of feeding chickens, which is to scatter the food on the ground where the chickens may get at it, and then leave the chickens to pick it up for themselves.

In Miss Fletcher's school, it seems to me that in the Montessori material supplied, Miss Fletcher is scattering grains of mental food where the children can get at them to pick them up for themselves.

This is a natural process which should lead to the

Conference Aug 30 contd

(Bell contd) healthful assimilation of the mental pabulum supplied.

As a scientific man I am pleased to see a process in operation by which children are led to observe for themselves.

The faculty of observation lies at the basis of reason itself, and the modern processes of instruction are destructive of the faculty of original observation.

Education is preferable to instruction and I am therefore very much impressed by Miss Fletcher's 'Childrens' Laboratory' and would like to know more of the ideas that guide her in her work.

AGB

Mrs Bell: What Mr. Bell has said is simply in general. He does not say what he thought of Miss Fletcher's school on the day he saw it. What did he think of it on that day?

MGB

Miss Fletcher: It is very evident it is the big underlying principle which interests Dr. Bell.

Did he see any weak point in the way I applied the method the day he was at my school?

RTF

Mr. Bell: I was so impressed with the strong points that I have not been able yet to find out the weak points, and that is why I want Miss Fletcher to discuss the ideas that underlie her teaching, then perhaps I may be able to differ with her, and help her by the discovery of weak points that might be improved. At present I have nothing but admiration for all I have seen.

AGB

Conference Aug 30 contd

Miss Fletcher: It seems to me that if you would ask me specific questions we would arrive at the point more quickly.

There is one breaker I see ahead with this method of so much individual development and with so many different individuals for the Directress to study and handle. It is going to be a great effort to develop each individual with the continuity and unity that should go hand in hand with consistent development.

A child is more or less a capricious individual and has so much still before him to acquire that he jumps from one half-mastered thing to the next in his eagerness.

Is all this half finished work ever going to shape itself into useful knowledge, or will it at least give the child a love for knowledge that will make him able to master whatever he wants to when the desire comes.

Does Mr. Bell see the point I am trying to make and does it seem a real obstacle to him ?

RTF

Mr. Bell: Yes, I follow you perfectly, and believe you are going on the right road. First, you are striking at the weak point of our present educational system -- the neglect of the individual in favor of the mathematically average child - who, by the bye, does not exist.

Develop individuality by all means. The only obstacle I see ahead is in the number of children that can be properly handled where we want to develop individuality.

Conference Aug 30 contd

(Bell contd) Your method is one more suitable for a small class than a large one, and I think you should be careful to limit the numbers to those only you can study individually.

As to the multitude of unfinished or unmastered experiments, I think your plan is all right. It is proceeding on nature's lines and it is difficult for us, as adults, to place ourselves in the condition of the little child seeking to acquire knowledge - and all children seek to acquire knowledge, and eagerly too, if they can only be left to acquire it in their own way. It cannot be crammed down their throats and properly assimilated.

It must be picked up here and there in little pieces as the child itself wants it.

What he wants is at once assimilated and digested and becomes a part of what I might term "his own knowledge" - it is his, and will always be his. Whereas much that is forced upon him will be forgotten.

It should never be forgotten that a child's mind is a living organism that grows from within on the mental food assimilated. You can't make a plant grow by merely watering it or fertilising the ground. We cannot judge of the amount of what is required etc. The necessities of the organism dictate that a little child cannot absorb much at a time or keep his attention fixed continuously upon any one subject. It is variety that interests him and I think that the true basis for the acquisition of knowledge is a smattering of many things. Then you will find that he possesses a little

Conference Aug 30 contd

(Bell contd) knowledge of a great many things, the points of knowledge that have been absorbed and assimilated form nuclei upon which other knowledge may be deposited as the child grows.

This may be illustrated by my own study of myself.

When quite a boy I became ashamed of my ignorance upon many subjects and tried to form a plan for self-improvement.

At first I began by forcing myself to read books upon the subjects upon which I was weak, and found that I made little progress because I was so ignorant of the basal points that much I read escaped my memory.

I then came to the conclusion that we only absorb readily information upon subjects that already exist in nuclear form in our own minds.

Information closely related to these nuclei sticks in the mind. What does not, goes in at one ear and out at the other. Why then, waste time in trying to absorb what the mind is not prepared for.

"Tasting" Books

I started out on a new plan which I have carried on ever since. It is to taste books rather than to read them.

In glancing through a book on some subject with which I am not familiar I find little points here and there that strike my attention because they are related to the little knowledge I already have of the matter.

Conference Aug 30 contd

(Bell contd) I find it very profitable to glance through books again and again, and each time I do so I absorb something new that extends my knowledge.

Then again I search books for information on certain points which I desire to know, and in doing so always strike something new which I was not looking for. It is like looking up a word in a dictionary, and finding other words with which you are unfamiliar during the process of the search.

Nuclei of Information

I don't know whether I have made myself clear, but the practical application is:- Seek to establish nuclei of information in a child's mind, and these nuclei will grow if the proper material for growth is presented and the child is left to pick it up as the needs of nature demand. AGE

Miss Fletcher: I cannot begin to tell Mr. Bell how wonderfully illuminating and helpful the theory he has just propounded of nuclei of knowledge or information being established in early childhood is to me.

It gives me the courage to go on, and opens up a large new vista to me in the way I shall proceed to educate children.

RTF