

PSYCHOLOGY AND CHILD LIFE

(Paper Read Before the Auckland Teachers' Conference by a Sister of Notre Dame des Missions.)

In Psychology as in most other subjects there are, of course, heights and depths; but as these conferences are chiefly for the benefit of primary school teachers, I have thought it better to confine this paper to what may be practically useful, rather than elaborate fine principles and abstruse arguments which rarely affect or influence our ordinary work. We know Abraham Lincoln's famous saying, when taunted with being only a "common fellow," that God must like common people since He makes so many of them. It is moreover the opinion of mankind in general that it is ever the common work that does the most common good.

The subjects discussed in most text books of psychology are briefly as follow:—The connection between mind and body; the general order of mental development; the influence on character of heredity, environment, and social relations; the nature and function of attention and interest; the senses and their training; memory and its laws; instincts and feelings, imagination, judgment, and reason; the great importance of developing good habits; the training and strengthening of the will. Catholic psychology would add to these a study of the development of the germs of faith, hope, and charity implanted in the soul of every Christian child by holy baptism. An elementary study of at least the outlines of these topics should form part of the training of every teacher, since before blazing a new track it is always as well to profit by the labors of others by coursing quickly over the beaten road.

The newer text books on Psychology, especially those of the American school—Professor James's *Talks to Teachers*, Colvin's *Learning Process*, O'Shea's *Dynamic Factors in Education*, and such like—have this practical advantage, that besides giving, in a succinct and entertaining style, a good workable knowledge of the main points of Psychology, they present this subject in its most useful form; that of an experimental science—which is yet, however, in its infancy.

We live in an age when science and scientific methods are transforming the world; but in spite of all the right ideas and high ideals promulgated for centuries by educational reformers, it is only very slowly that a right method of studying Psychology is beginning to penetrate the schools. The great outstanding trouble and the obstacle that has most hindered progress is that so many teachers are obsessed with the notion that from books alone is to be obtained all their knowledge of the forces underlying their work and of the powers of mind which make up their raw material. And then, moved by the same obsession, they spend their time in the arduous and sterilising attempt to make the learning of book lore almost the sum total of their educational endeavor. So long as the students of the other sciences, such as Medicine, Chemistry, or Physics, confined themselves to a mere reproduction of what was to be found in their text books, there was little or no progress. But when at last the long-proclaimed maxim that learning should be by doing was really given fair trial, actual contact with the almost inexhaustible marvels of living Nature led to newer and ever newer discoveries; and as a consequence, synonymous with the age of real scientific method, has come an astounding transformation of the material world around us.

In like manner the teacher must turn quickly from his study of the text books on Psychology to the study of that most stimulating and productive book of all—the living child. The study of Psychological text books, though absolutely necessary as a starting-point, bears the same comparison to the study of living children as the alphabet does to the study of the great masterpieces of literature. As practical teachers, we must

often have been confronted with the thought that there was something wrong, or something wanting, either in the matter or in the method of much of our teaching. Nature's ways, if given full scope, are pleasant, inspiring, and very effective for their purpose. Now as regards our teaching, we should realise that in so far as it is not pleasant, or inspiring, or effective, it must be deviating from the right and natural course. To take but a few examples in point: how many of us can remember the weariness and lack of objective we felt, either as pupils or teachers, when we were confronted with a long hour's lesson on the old-fashioned symmetrical drawing copy? And yet it is only but as yesterday that it was realised that the very fact of its distastefulness was the truest disclaimer of its wrongfulness; and at last a natural and therefore pleasure-giving and effective method of teaching drawing has been allowed to take its place. Again, think of the large amount of time we spend in all the classes—each day teaching such a "dry" subject as spelling, merely for its own sake. Even then our work is not effective—we cannot as a rule boast of the spelling of our pupils, unless indeed we obtain our results at an inordinate price. A reading lesson should of itself be pleasant and interesting to any child of ordinary intelligence, but how many of us who have stood up day after day for half an hour or more in a hot, close room with a class of 30 or 40 pupils for a reading lesson could say that under ordinary circumstances we or our pupils have derived an adequate amount of joy from even this lesson?

A Psychology that comes in real contact with school life would lead us to seek a cause for this result, and we should find it to be this:—If the topic of the reading lesson appeals to the child, and he has the book in his possession, he will already have more or less mastered it; or if he has not had the book his eye will quickly run through the paragraph, as we know often happens with a keen child, and it is a real pain for such a child to mark time, as we make him do, while one of the worst readers gets his necessary practice in reading by laboriously hacking to pieces all the beauty of the paragraph.

As a result, however, of the application of the scientific method to the study of Psychology, an almost complete revolution has taken place in the teaching of our ordinary primary subjects. Many laborers have worked in this field, but the world owes more than it is willing to pay to the sympathetic and eminently successful researches of Madam Montessori, who has obtained her wonderful success by careful observation and experiment with children themselves. Her work for infant classes is now well known, but she has lately been doing good work for the upper classes also. A New Zealand school inspector recently paid a visit to an Australian city school worked on a development of the Montessori plan. A Standard II. class, for a reading lesson, were sitting in their places, each one silently reading a book suited to his age, but different in most cases from that of his neighbor. In this way a variety of books sufficient to keep the class interested and instructed for a long time is obtained at no extra expense. Each child is trained to prepare himself to write, without the book, an account of what he has been reading, and for this purpose, during his silent reading, copies down words or phrases which he thinks he may have difficulty in remembering, and thus he learns his spelling easily, since he has a definite and useful object in view. During the reading lesson itself a child may ask his teacher's help to solve any difficulty he comes across. The teacher asks a pupil here and there to give an oral account of what he has been reading, which he does with relish. By this means so expert do the children become in oral expression that, according to the inspector mentioned above, not only do they spell decidedly better, and take a keener interest in their reading matter than other children of the same

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