

Lawrence, E

The Malting House School

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THE MALTING HOUSE SCHOOL

EVELYN LAWRENCE

The following account of the Malting House School was written in 1927, when it had been running for two and a half years. The document was not intended for publication, but was produced in response to an invitation from Dr. Isaacs to set out my first impressions, when I had been a member of the staff for only a few months. A few minor alterations have been made, but it is substantially as it was written at the time. It does not pretend to be an adequate description, but it has the merit of being contemporary with the school, and it may help to answer some of the questions which are often asked.

“The purpose behind the school seems to me to be twofold. In the first place there is a definite group of children to be educated. Something has to be done with them. They cannot be put back to sleep until educational theory has devised the perfect method of bringing up the young. Such psychological and pedagogic knowledge as has been arrived at can, however, be used for their benefit, and this is being done. The lag of practice behind principle which characterises most schools was seen to be avoidable, and is here being avoided.

But principle still has very far to go. The child psychologist has not yet completely formulated, much less solved, his problems. One of the reasons for this is that, under the old coercive methods of education, it was almost impossible for adults to know the minds of children. A few parents or teachers may have known their children well, but the number

with both the inclination and the psychological training to describe them scientifically is lamentably small. It was felt, therefore, that an indispensable preliminary to improvement in educational theory was a detailed and consistent study of a group of children living under conditions of the maximum freedom. This study is being made, and at the same time innovations in educational practice are being made and tried out.

For the practical educator, there are again two problems. To begin with, however much he may want his human plants to flower freely, and nature to take its course, however much he wants to break bad precedents and keep his new generation away from the shadow of the past, he knows that many courses are open to him, and that his choice will probably affect the whole lives of his pupils. He must therefore decide what kind of people he would like to produce. Secondly, having made this decision, he must find out how to get the desired result.

The kind of people that the promoters of this school want to produce will have a scientific attitude to life. They must have intellectual curiosity and vigour, and be averse to taking their opinions ready-made. They must also be as physically healthy as is possible. I think this is as far as Dr. Isaacs would go in particularisation. She is anxious that the decision as to what exactly the children should become should arise naturally from the children's own characters, aptitudes and inclinations. Capacity for successful adjustment in society is included in the scientific attitude. Social ability is largely an intellectual thing, and if we can create reasonable people a large part, at least, of their social battle is won.

The emotional life of the children makes an even more difficult problem. Our chief concern is to produce a new generation less nerve-ridden than the old. The newest psychology has taught us something about what to avoid in the way of repression, what kind of attachments should be encouraged and what discouraged, what sort of emotional outlets should be provided. This knowledge is being acted upon as far as possible, and new light looked for from the observation of this group of children.

I will come to what is actually done in the school. The best way to prepare a person for life is to safeguard his zest for life. The Malting House children certainly have it. When I first came to the school I tried to decide what was the most striking difference between this school and any other I have known. I came to the conclusion that it is the happiness of the children. Not that I have not been in happy schools. But I have never seen so much pleased concentration, so many shrieks and gurgles and jumpings for joy as here. Of course this joy is particularly apparent because its expression is not hindered. If you want to dance with excitement you may. But even if the contrast is made with a free home environment the distinction remains.

I suppose the reason for this happiness is that there is plenty of space, that material equipment is abundant and suitable, and that the child is free to use it in ways that appeal to him, instead of being forced to do with it those things which his elders consider good for him. It is delightful to be in a school where the usual answer to the question " May we do so-an-so ? " is " Yes ", instead of the almost automatic " No " one finds oneself expecting.

The consequence of this policy is that many activities which all children love, but which are usually indulged in when the Olympians are safely out of the way, go on in the school under the full eye of Olympus. These

children play with water and with fire, they climb and swing and even smoke, with the grown-ups not indulgently turning a blind eye, but approving and helping. As a result these games are robbed of the fictitious charm usually given them by the need for conspiracy, and those in which this was the only support die out. For example, D. has a pipe of his own, but does not smoke it. Activities such as climbing and playing with fire, which contain an element of danger, are carried on in the presence of older people who can make sure that accidents do not occur.

I will describe the school briefly. There is a large schoolroom opening into the garden. At one end of the schoolroom is a platform with a piano, and at the other a rest gallery with mattresses, pillows and rugs. Round the walls, below the window, are shelves and cupboards holding the material which the children use. This is very abundant. There are things for drawing and painting, sewing and modelling, brightly coloured raffia, canvas and wools : the Montessori-material : material for counting, such as counters, beads and shells; an aquarium, a gramophone, books and glasses and bowls for bulbs. Each child has a small table and chair which it can carry about. These have been painted by the children themselves in gay colours. A swing hangs from the gallery.

Beyond the schoolroom is a cloakroom with bowls for washing, and a gas stove where the children make their own cocoa, and occasionally cook lunch.

In the garden are an open summer house, a sand pit, a see-saw, and hutches for the rabbits. Each child has a plot, and there are fruit trees whose fruit is gathered, cooked and eaten by the children.

As well as the large schoolroom there are two small rooms where the older children spend part of each morning. Here the more advanced number and reading material is kept, and apparatus, such as dissecting instruments and test-tubes, glass vessels and burners, for scientific observation in zoology, chemistry, and physics. A carpenter's bench, a lathe, and a quantity of tools have recently arrived, and one of these rooms will probably become a workshop.

Leading from these schoolrooms are the children's bed-sittingrooms. Each child living in the school has one to itself. These rooms are charming. Each is painted in some bright colour, and each has a gas fire and a settee bed, gay curtains and cushions, and low tables and cupboards. In its own room the child is absolute master. The doors will lock from the inside, and no one is allowed to enter without knocking.

The school is designed primarily for very young children. All those now coming are between the ages of three and seven, with the exception of one ten-year-old. Several are the children of dons and all are above average in intelligence.

There is no fixed curriculum. The children do what appeals to them at the moment. The work of the educator is so to select his material, and at times indirectly to suggest activities, that the child will of his own accord do things which are useful for his growth. Lately one or two of the older children have drawn up rough outlines of their day's work. The categories are very wide—for instance, part of the day is devoted to "making things and finding things out"—and their order was arranged by the children themselves after discussion with the Principal. No child would be forced to keep to his programme if he seriously wanted to depart from it at any time.

The older children voluntarily spend part of each morning at reading and number work. They have reached the stage where they feel the need of reading and writing, and are learning rapidly with no urging. They find the number material interesting and like to use it, though the most valuable part of their number training is probably incidental. A good deal of time is spent in "finding things out" with the help of gas and water, glass vessels and tubes, simple mechanical apparatus, skeletons and animals, alive and dead. A rabbit, crabs, a mouse and worms have already been dissected. Text books will be home-made, in the form of written records of what has been observed.

The younger children spend a good deal of their time in running about, in conversation, and in simple handiwork. No work involving fine hand or eye muscles is encouraged, and no attempt is made to teach them to read. There is, with all the children, much more active movement than one finds in most schools. In fine weather they are out in the garden for most of the day, digging, running, carpentering or climbing. Even when they are in school the door is often, and the windows always, open. They are encouraged to swing from bars, jump, and supply for themselves in play the kind of exercise which in most schools has been elaborately worked out as drill and gymnastics. The consequence is that their health is excellent. There has been practically no illness since the school began. In two instances people were actually in the school with infectious complaints, which no one caught.

The aim of the teachers is as far as possible to refrain from teaching, but to let the children find out all they can for themselves. They are urged to answer their own questions, with the teachers to help them discover where the answers are to be found. Above all care is taken that their ideas of values shall be their own. They are not told that such and such a thing is good or bad, nice or beautiful, but only that it seems so to some particular person.

Discipline is very free. There is no punishment, and little admonition. Prohibitions, when unavoidable, are of particular acts, not of whole classes of conduct. It is not true, however, that the school is entirely without rules. It is generally understood that material used shall afterwards be put away. If the user (as often happens) is reluctant to clear up at once after his game, he is allowed to wait until he feels more inclined. But the matter is not forgotten, and sooner or later he usually agrees to put back what he has used in its place. Another rule is that implements must not be used as weapons. If this happens, the weapon is gently but firmly taken away. No anger, however, is ever shown by the teacher. If the two participants in a serious quarrel are unevenly matched, there is intervention on behalf of the one who is at a disadvantage, so that the weaker child does feel that he can get just support.

There are three main advantages of freedom of action and emotional expression. In the first place you can get to know your children. Under the old disciplinary methods the educator knew his pupils only very partially and mistakenly. The child was forced to wear a mask of seemliness and respectability in the presence of grown-ups, and behind that mask his own inner life bubbled unseen. Here the children's crudities, the disorder of their emotions, their savagery even, are allowed to show. Emotional troubles can then be dealt with scientifically, or allowed to straighten themselves out, as they so often do, given time.

Secondly, the danger of driving strong emotions underground, to work havoc in the unconscious, is avoided. The open expression of sexual interests is allowed, but where possible they are canalised by being turned into scientific channels. This freedom entails a certain amount of unpleasantness for the grown-ups. It is useless to expect children to be free at times, and at others to exercise discretion in situations where discretion is usual. But one cannot have it all ways, and it is time conventional parents learnt that their children are not the little angels they had believed. Hostility, another uncomfortable passion, is allowed freedom of expression. If the Malting House children hate a person, they tell him so. It is then possible to investigate the reason for that hatred, and probably to remove it. Fights and squabbles often occur, and if the fighters are fairly evenly matched, they are left to work out the adjustment themselves.

This leads me to the third advantage of freedom. With conventional discipline, the child is kept wriggling under a dead weight of adult disapproval and prohibition. Here his position is that of a fencer, continually adapting himself to the shifting conditions of the group mood. This is what he will have to do in adult life, and it is surely a mistake to make all his social adjustments for him until adolescence, then pitchfork him into the world to discover from the beginning how human relationships work. When you have fought with another person over a thing, you realise that his desires are as strong as your own, and also, eventually, that fighting is not the best method of settling differences. The result of this policy in the school is not anarchy. I have seen several children combine to prevent conduct which they rightly considered unjust, and I have seen children of the most forcible character voluntarily submit to the leadership of a weaker-natured child.

The position of teacher in such a school as this is not an easy one. He needs patience, self-control, and a great deal of alertness. He must be able to see the implications of the children's remarks, questions, and acts, and respond appropriately with no appearance of indecision.

The second main function of the school, that of providing source material in the field of child psychology, entails the keeping of detailed notes. The children are under trained observation out of school hours as well as in them. In fact, there is no break between their school and their out-of-school life. Practically all that they do, and much of what they say, is recorded. The children are discussed individually, and the meaning of their actions, as well as how to deal with them, considered. Very much valuable material has already been accumulated."

Looking back after a space of over twenty years at this description of the school, I should record that at the time I was not without doubts about the possible effects on the children's future manners and habits of the degree of freedom which they were allowed. Furthermore, was there enough positive attempt to help them to build up attitudes of kindness, unselfishness, sensitiveness to the things which remain unexpressed but which are important in other people's lives ? Were they going to see the value of giving more than a *quid pro quo* in personal relationships ?

Time has shown that I need not have worried. When the Malting House School ceased to exist a number of them went on to other schools working on free methods. Others went to more formal schools. In neither case was there difficulty in adapting to a new environment, and in establishing

satisfactory relationships with their school fellows and teachers. We have remained in touch with a number of them, and they have developed into young men and women with pleasant and easy manners, and with an adequate sense of social responsibility.

NEEDLEWORK AT THE PRIMARY STAGE

CONSTANCE HEYSMAN

How the children look forward to Optionals ! On one afternoon a week the children over six years may work at a craft, an absolutely free choice is allowed, there may be forty doing one craft, and only one doing another. Choice is varied—woodwork, clay, carving, weaving and book-making are regular favourites. Needlework is one of the most popular of the optionals, and usually about forty children come, ready and eager, to make something. They attend for half a term, and then if, and only if, their work is finished, they may choose again.

At the first optional meeting we show how the optional room is arranged. There is a working part where desks are pushed together to make tables which are covered with white American cloth. On a side table are pencils, plain pattern paper, rulers, tape measures, needles, pins, thimbles and scissors. There is a box of rag-bag material ready for use. In another part of the room the rolls of new materials, cottons, embroidery thread, knitting wool, buttons, tape, and bias binding are arranged on the shelves of the "Needlework Shop".

The next business is to elect a shopkeeper ; we always discuss what a shopkeeper must be able to do first. Qualities usually mentioned are :—
(1) Good at cutting; (2) Good at money sums; (3) Quick at writing;
(4) Good tempered.

So far a very sensible choice has been made. While the shopkeeper is showing off her wares, and the children are discussing the materials, each child is asked, privately, what she is going to make. This is done privately to avoid children choosing what they hear others suggest. The purpose of asking them was in order to give us some indication as to why they chose needlework. No child has ever yet said that she had chosen needlework in order to learn to sew. One child (in two years) has said that she had chosen sewing because she liked the feel of the material. So far everyone has come in order to make something definite. These fall into two groups (*a*) a present for someone, and (*b*) something the child needs for her own play (especially dolls), or for herself.

The shopkeeper then explains that if, the intending customers will work out how much material they need, and then come to the shop, she will measure it, and cut it off, while her assistant is making out the bill, the money to be brought the following week, when the bill will be receipted.

Then the children get busy; the older girls design their articles, make patterns, and work out the quantity of material needed.

Some of the younger children like to hunt through the rag-bag materials and use some of this first. A low ironing board and two travelling irons