

PLAYFUL INSTRUCTION, AND GENIUS.

BY THE EDITOR.

AN old friend of mine asked me some time ago whether it was advisable to begin teaching children at a tender age, not of course by systematic lessons, but by playful instruction. One of the professors of a school had advised him not to impart any playful instruction, "because," he said, "instruction is a serious thing, and if it were taught playfully it would demoralise the boy's nature. He would never learn to apply himself with seriousness in later life."

The reason of this advice is good, but the advice itself is bad. The spirit of the old schoolmaster's advice can be recommended, for the acquisition of knowledge is indeed a serious thing and should be taken seriously, but the professor's logic is perverse. It is true enough that the time will come when children must learn to apply themselves seriously, but that is no reason why children should not acquire playfully as much knowledge as they possibly can. Would it be right to prevent mental growth? Certainly not! On the contrary, mental growth should be fostered by all means in our power. Our aim, however, must not be to change the acquisition of knowledge into sport, but to utilise the plays of the child for the higher ends of education.

It is a design of nature to let the life of adult creatures be foreshadowed in the games of the young; and educators are bound to take the hint.

The plays of children should not be simply a waste of time, but ought to be utilised for furthering their intellectual life. They should serve higher purposes than merely keeping the little folk out of mischief. The old schoolmaster's maxim, therefore, is wrong, although his intentions may be appreciated; and we must let the child learn playfully as much as possible.

Let the letters of the alphabet appear on the child's toys, let him become familiar with the various pursuits of life in his games, let his little hands become accustomed to the shovel, the pick-ax, the drill, the plane, and, if certain precautions are taken, also the knife, the scissors, and the compasses. Let him hear in great outlines and in the simplest words the stories of invention, the deeds of heroes, and the feats of discoverers. When the time comes for him to apply himself with greater concentration upon school work he will be better prepared for it. The exertion will be easier for him, his labors will be lessened, and he will pass through his studies more joyfully than the boys to whom, for the mere purpose of teaching them the seriousness of learning, the acquisition of useful knowledge is made irksome.

Seriousness in the performance of duties is of great importance in life, but seriousness is nothing if it is not guided by intelligence and accompanied by zeal. Our young folk, in order to learn to apply themselves, must be taught to love work and be anxious to do something. Their enthusiasm must be roused and their endeavors must be guided at an early age.

For this purpose the kindergarten has been invented and is doing splendid work.

No doubt that there are kindergartens which are not conducted in the right spirit. Instead of lifting the children up to a higher level and helping them to understand the significance of life, some of the teachers stoop to them and let childishness have full sway. Instead of teaching the little folk playfully how to work, giving them glimpses of truth and the elements of right conduct, they dissipate them by idle plays and foster the spirit of sport. But in all innovations it is natural that mistakes will be made, and we need not for that reason reject the whole system.

The kindergarten is a great advance in our educational methods; and when public kindergartens shall be instituted all over the country we may expect a decided and noticeable improvement of the race accompanied by an increase of intelligence and a decrease of crime.

In a recent number of one of our best magazines,¹ an educational writer, apparently a grammar-school teacher who took a dislike to the pupils, and perhaps also to the principal, of a special kindergarten, condemns the whole system for its lack of seriousness. She claims that the kindergarten children expect interesting

¹*The Atlantic Monthly*, March, 1899, pp. 358-366.

stories and not instruction, they want amusement, and refuse to pay attention ; they go to school to play, not to work.

Granting that there are kindergartens which are not yet conducted with the necessary seriousness and that mistakes are made, we must also know that seeds sometimes fall by the wayside or on rock. If there are some kindergartens that fail to produce the right results, this is no reason for doing away with the method altogether.

The kindergarten is not for play, but for playfully imparting lessons, and the main thing to be taught must be method ; method in small things, in games, in behavior, and in human activity generally. Far from abolishing the kindergarten, we would advocate its extension and the introduction of certain of its methods into the high schools and universities.

The gist of the educational problem is this : Teach the methods of work and the elements of any science or art, not in a dry and abstract manner, but by infusing enthusiasm into the pupils. Lessons can be made interesting by pointing out the connexion which the object of instruction has with life by showing its value in the economy of human society, and indicating the wants which it serves. Pupils must feel the thrill which the inventors and scholars feel in their attempts at making discoveries and solving the various riddles of life.

The kindergarten method will accomplish miracles in the field of education. It is a new dispensation, a dispensation of love, of voluntary good will, stimulating the springs that work from within, which must replace the old dispensation of the rod, the law that enforces virtue by punishments and makes noble and good aspirations a burden.

A spiritual sunshine should spread over all exercises of the kindergarten, but for that reason there need be no dillydallying with toys. The teacher must never lose sight of the ultimate aim, which is the building up of character. She herself must therefore at once be earnest and cheerful, qualities which it is by no means impossible to combine, and while she keeps her children buoyant and joyful, she must not fail to impress them with the importance of duty, of application, of seriousness.

It might be an improvement in the system of the kindergarten if it were not exclusively in the hands of women, and if at least from time to time the influence of male teachers could be brought to bear upon children.

Old-fashioned teachers who still cling to the method of rendering lessons tedious, must, from sheer prejudice, have become

blind to the results that can be obtained in this way; for it is remarkable how persevering and patient children can be when they are interested in a certain kind of work.

The difference between a genius and a pedant consists exactly in this, that the genius performs his work playfully, while the pedant groans under the drudgery of his task. No doubt the pedant's work would be preferable, if its worth were to be measured by the resistance overcome, but the fact is that the work of the genius always increases in excellence according to the ease with which it is accomplished.

Genius is sometimes looked upon as a mystery, but there is no mystery about it. While it is difficult and often impossible to account for the appearance of genius in special cases, because it crops out where we least expect it, its nature in and of itself is no mystery. The soul of a genius consists of motor ideas which are correct representations of things in the objective world and of the work to be performed. They interact without the laborious effort of conscious concentration. They act with machine-like accuracy, so as to allow all attention to be concentrated upon the main purpose of the work and not upon its details. A genius originates partly by inheriting a disposition for easily acquiring certain functions, or generally by possessing the knack of viewing the world correctly. Whatever may be the cause of genius, it certainly shows itself in the playful ease with which work of great importance is performed. It would be wrong to think that a genius need not work, for a genius as a rule is a great worker, but he enjoys his work and can therefore accomplish more than those who constantly remain conscious of the seriousness of their labors.

Genius is instinct on a higher plane. Certain inherited dispositions are probably indispensable for producing a genius of a certain kind and it may be that an educator can do nothing when they are absolutely absent. Nevertheless much can be done by a careful education. The impressions of children who, in a certain line of activity, see nothing but the right methods from their very babyhood, will be so organized that from their unconscious depths up to the conscious surface of their soul, they will be predetermined to hit naturally the right mode of action. The child of a musician, for instance, who has never heard anything but good music, and has playfully acquired since his very babyhood the various experiences of touch by contact with the keys of a piano, will naturally become a virtuoso. He will naturally find the right harmony, and the great wealth of melody that unconsciously slum-

bers in his early recollections will form a source of living tone-images, which upon the least provocation will well up automatically and engender new combinations of harmonious melodies that, through the influence of other conditions, may possess a character of their own.

What is true of music is true of poetry, oratory, all arts, the sciences, handicrafts, and industrial pursuits. The condition of genius is a ready and automatic interaction of a sufficient number of clear and correct thought-images, or representative pictures, which must be brought under the control of a guiding purpose.¹

The whole method of making education irksome is wrong. It reminds one of the Gothamites who, according to the principle that we should do the disagreeable part of a task first, unloaded the wood from their wagons by pulling out the lowest trunks first, which they did with great difficulty; and they were delighted that by and by the work grew easier. They rejoiced when the last pieces could be simply taken off without trouble.

Why not begin to teach children without causing them trouble from the beginning? All learning is a pleasure, and our teachers will find that it is unnecessary to make instruction irksome to children during their school years. Acquisition of knowledge is a growth of soul, and our children ought to feel the joy of mental growth. There need be no fear that their minds will be dwarfed thereby. On the contrary, they will develop all the better, as much so as plants that are transplanted from a barren land to fertile soil, or from the shade to the sun, and when the time arrives in which some great purpose will demand special concentration, the growing boy will apply himself with all the vigor of his youthful ambition.

A youth will be more confident of success in life if he has been playfully made accustomed to its serious duties and to their difficulties, and he will thereby acquire a buoyancy which under the present conditions of education is rare. We must, however, see to it that the seriousness of work, far from suffering from playful instruction, shall be intensified and strengthened by it.

¹ Mr. Nicola Tesla's lecture before the Commercial Club of Chicago (May 14, 1899) was of special interest to the psychologist. He dwelt at length on the vividness of his visual conceptions which appeared before his eye like real things. Thus he would, when speaking of a cat see a real cat; or when thinking of a machine, see a machine in all its details and in accurate proportions so plainly as to enable him to make measurements. This condition was oppressive to him in childhood and early youth, so long as he could not control it; and he felt relieved as if ridding himself of a nightmare when with increasing strength in his riper youth he succeeded in gaining control over the appearance and disappearance of these images.