

## SESSION ONE

### Introduction

This brief course is intended to introduce the practising teacher to a philosophy and practical approach to education, in particular to the education of unusual children, which will probably be unfamiliar.

A fair amount of time must be spent in theoretical discussion primarily because it is the underlying theory which must always inform effective practice; however, it is particularly important in this case to grasp at least the elements of the theoretical basis, for many of the inferences which derive from this recommend practices which may appear to 'fly in the face of common sense' or seem at first to offend against 'human nature', and which will certainly contradict many of the 'authorised' and commonly recommended practices.

After this rather forbidding start it might be as well to move on quickly to make a number of statements which can subsequently be argued or amplified.

- (i) The essential core of human development is the child's increasing capacity for dealing competently and adaptively with the *unexpected* or, putting it another way, for being ready and able to deal with *any* contingency.

*Organised education, on the other hand, is more concerned with preparing the 'normally developing' child for the specialised sorts of conditions to which his culture, future career, etc. **are expected** to expose him.*

- (ii) The increasing understanding, or progressive ability for learning-to-learn more effectively, develops as a result of the child's continual interaction with his environment, new understanding always developing as a direct result of the exercise of earlier, and as variations on and variants of, previously established understanding.

*New fundamental learning cannot be put into the child, it must be derived or fashioned from earlier understanding.*

- (iii) Understanding is fashioned as concepts, or fundamental principles, are distilled from patterns of accumulating experience. Theme is derived, so to speak, from the varied examples of its use.

*Organised education, however, tends to attempt to teach or put across a principle (and) then secondarily to give the child practice in its use: that is to say, attempt is made to reinforce an 'established' or recognised theme by the conscious exercising of variations on its use.*

- (iv) All learning is basically self-centred and personal, the learning of any new experience being reinforced by the specifically flavoured 'pleasure' sensations which accompany any and all perceiving (i.e. realised experience). Almost all the basic learning in the early years, although often brought about *by* or modified *by* the action of another person and frequently taking place in the *presence* of others, and probably being facilitated by the past behaviours of

others, is as far as the child is concerned **asocial**.

*However, conscious efforts at furthering or accelerating understanding usually involve the concepts of correctness (being 'right'), of 'success', of reinforcement by adult approval, of verbal classification, verbal explanation, etc., all of which tend to exaggerate the degree and importance of normally relatively minor means of furthering fundamental understanding.*

- (v) Not only does most of a child's learning happen under asocial or non-social conditions, his day is much less social than most adults believe. That is to say, the time spent in which a parent and young child are actively and consciously enjoying one another's company occupies quite a small fraction of the child's waking hours, and even if we include those times such as routine feeding, toileting, bathing, dressing, etc., which may range from fully social to virtually asocial conditions, the greater part of his time is still spent in asocial activities.

*But attempts at deliberate education usually set out to create a social context for this exercise.*

- (vi) The development of the rate and adequateness of the capacity for learning-to-learn at any moment in time is determined primarily by the previous state of development of such a capacity, and the more effective this has been in the past the more effective future learning is likely to be; conversely, the slower and weaker the previous learning the poorer the expected learning development.

*Retardation tends to perpetuate a retarded condition. The original 'cause' of developmental upset, having produced its initial effect, may or need play little or no further part/role in a child's continuing **retardation** and **state of handicap**.*

- (vii) Whatever the child's functional levels, demands on his understanding (for being right or successful or for pleasing others, etc.) which he interprets as excessive, will be accompanied by sensations of unpleasure ('anxiety', 'insecurity' etc.) which are likely to be countered by behaviours aimed at or 'designed' for the 'neutralisation' of, escape from, or avoidance of, this unpleasure or state of 'handicap'.

*Therefore, such behaviours, which are inevitably encouraged by excessive demands on understanding, interfere with development, by diminishing and distorting normal learning.*

- (viii) Conventional language, however important as a means of communication can, as far as early fundamental 'non-verbal' understanding is concerned, only **label** and **reflect**. It is always **secondary** to and **contingent** on prior non-verbal experience.

*Language is restricted as a medium for teaching basics or for transmitting novel information. Furthermore, it can be restrictive in its influence on the manner of learning.*

Expansion of (i) Preparation for the unexpected rather than for the expected

As a child develops his body gets bigger and stronger and changes shape so that he is fitted to perform more complex and intricate operations. He thus appears to get steadily 'cleverer' even though we accept that he is always normally clever for his age. For example, by five years the child is skilled in walking long distances and along narrow beams, running and jumping in a variety of ways, speaks clearly, can toilet, wash and dress himself fairly effectively, may be able to tie his shoe laces, can 'count' at least small quantities, is commonly able to recognise some written words, is capable of going into a shop to buy something, and so on. (I am of course deliberately listing disparate examples of behaviour to emphasise that we tend to measure advance by the number and order of achievements themselves rather than by the child's increasing capacity for achieving.) However such acquisitions and achievements as we tend to notice are merely a few specialised and noticeable applications of a much less obvious but much more important fundamental development which steadily prepares the child to a state of relatively unspecialised readiness or 'preparedness' for coping with or at least adaptively approaching any set of conditions which might be met with. This flexibility of possibility or pluripotentiality arises as a result of a child's doing for the sake of doing, not generally speaking doing for some immediately 'useful' purpose.

The notions of

- doing something because it serves some clear cut purpose
- being 'successful'
- being correct
- doing or doing in some particular way in order to please another
- etc.

all involve the *specialised* exploitation of a more fundamental, more general and unspecialised understanding.

Perhaps the ordinary school can take basic unspecialised development for granted and concentrate on 'useful' and unspecialised skills aimed at fitting the child for coping with the life he is expected to lead and for the roles it is anticipated he will fill (although I personally do not accept that we should do so). However, such an attitude applied in 'special' education leads naturally to the concept of 'useful' skills for vulnerable children and when combined with commonly used methods of teaching (see [iv], later), means *training* the child in special skills which are considered to fulfil some 'useful' and specific function. This deliberately limits the possibilities for learning in a vulnerable child and compounds his retardation.

Expansion of (ii) Later learning always develops from earlier

Experience, and the understanding which is derived from it, increases as the child continually practises what he already 'knows' with sufficient tolerance to produce minor unintended variants so that what he does is rarely precisely what he had 'intended' and under normal conditions of learning (see [iv]) is recognised to contain novelty and to serve to swell experience. Some variations may lead on towards new understanding whilst others consolidate and enrich that which is already partially understood. That is to say, they increase the competence of the understanding as well as extend its functional level.

Repetition without (or with minimal) variation leads to stereotypy or unwarranted precision whilst repetition within a narrow range of activities leads to the narrow

extension of a small range of skills.

From this it follows that it is not possible to 'push' or 'pull' a child forward developmentally or to insert or 'add on' bits of fundamental understanding. To promote a maximal satisfactory rate of advance he must be caused to actively exercise his existing abilities optimally as regards total amount, distribution of interest, variety of interest, variation of activity and materials, location, circumstances and conditions. (What is optimal in any respect must of course be in practice arrived at by experimentation but, if the conditions - to be set out - are realised, 'optimal' within the special 'lesson' situation is close to maximal.)

Learning for the very young child does not normally involve his setting aims and objectives to be achieved; he allows the nature and direction of his activities to be dominated by what is present to his senses. In due course his capacity for imagery and self restraint allows him to anticipate the outcome of his activities and the components of his more complex behaviours become themselves complex. He comes to discern patterns within his own activities which become accentuated and finally delineated by overlap and partial repetition with variation so as to lead to the crystallisation of concepts which then impose the beneficial constraints of order without in any way restricting the enlarging learning 'front'.

Teaching methods which are concerned solely with attainments and obsessed with the child's doing the correct thing or getting the 'right' answers narrow his learning front and limit his pluripotentiality.

#### Expansion of (iii) Concepts arise from examples of their expression

As we have seen, concepts arise from the active rehearsal and consequent expansion of experience which somehow embodies examples and the application of the concepts subsequently to be derived. These fragments of experience are commonly examples of several simultaneously evolving concepts and are intermixed and interlaced with one another so that a number of main themes emerge together reaching the stage where they begin to be deliberately applied *before* they are consciously recognised.

In designed education it eventually becomes necessary to state certain main themes or concepts after, of course, the child has had preliminary experience but before he has derived them spontaneously. It is subsequently necessary to give him exercise in the application of such themes. However, not infrequently the child is not fully prepared for the acquisition of such concepts and in any event this method is not only the reverse of the natural development it is clearly inferior to it in several respects. Despite its eventual necessity this self-limiting form of learning should clearly be postponed for as long as is reasonably possible.

The extension downwards of such a teaching technique to the education of young and/or vulnerable children is obviously unnecessarily restrictive to the development of their fundamental understanding.

#### Expansion of (iv) The non-social and self-reinforcing nature of basic learning

All activity is basically pleasurable although some may become secondarily and additionally associated with unpleasure (anxiety, 'insecurity', fear, etc.) in virtue of unfamiliarity in a grossly inexperienced child or by simple association with accesses of unpleasure. The pleasure accompanying the activity reinforces it thus making repetition more probable and rendering activity self-motivating. An activity is sought to be repeated as a result of the pleasure previously found to be associated with it whilst the recognition of the variations and novel ground opened up during such attempts at repetition leads to continual gain of new experience and to expansion of understanding. Very little fundamental learning can possibly take place as a result of social reinforcement for this is only rarely available (as well as quite unnecessary) to basic learning and, unless utilised in practice simply to create an overall atmosphere of social approval, can only be applied to those sorts of learning which evidence a distinct stage of achievement or moment of 'success' or a 'successful' outcome, which therefore rules out most of basic experience acquisition.

(Success in this case would imply such as recognised by the independent observer. Success as recognised by the child may be an entirely different thing but, however defined, occurs equally rarely in fundamental learning.)

#### Expansion of (v) Social and non-social interaction

It is difficult to define the word 'social' especially as at first sight it seems unnecessary to do so; however, there are various ways in which one individual can be influenced by or can influence another. I shall classify these not only according to whether **A** (adult) influences **C** (child), **C** influences **A**, or **A** and **C** influence each other simultaneously but according to whether each recognises (or at least is himself influenced by the fact) that he is influencing and/or being influenced: e.g. **A** drops a stone and later **C** picks it up, neither being aware of the other's action. **A** nevertheless has influenced **C**. **A** may leave an object or pattern of objects deliberately in order that **C** should find it and be influenced ('stimulated') in some way. Much good teaching is of this form (e.g. pictures on the walls, the 'nature table', etc.) especially if taken to the next stage where **A** observes **C**'s response so that subsequently the nature, form, conditions and timing are governed largely by the observed form of **C**'s response to the previous stimulus.

When the timing is so telescoped that **C** is influenced by **A**'s actual behaviour rather than by residual traces of it alone he is likely also to be influenced by **A**'s responses to his own (**C**'s) responses so that in both directions each participant is being influenced by whilst intentionally influencing the other. It is this last fairly evenly balanced two-way (often emotionally charged) interchange which I term 'social'. It is the situation where adult freely plays with child or where two individuals engage in balanced conversation. However, much of real life interaction between individuals consists of one party's significantly influencing another but being much less influenced in return, as when an employer gives an instruction to an employee, mother instructs her child, etc.

Within the home and between mother and young child we meet with all degrees of interpersonal relationship from

- parent and child being close to one another without interaction (no

communication)

- one influencing the other unintentionally (asocial communication)
- mother influencing child - child not noticing, child influencing mother - mother not noticing (pre-social communication)
- mother influencing child but being unimpressed by other than an appropriate and relevant response from the child (as often occurs during feeding and dressing for example - semi-social communication)

to

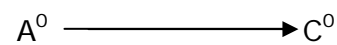
- two way interchanges (fully social communication).

These relationships might be illustrated briefly in diagrammatic form:

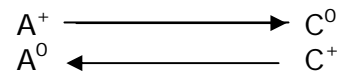
No communication



Asocial communication



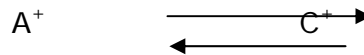
Pre-social communication



Semi-social communication



Fully social communication



Communication between individuals. Degrees of awareness of influencing/being influenced determining the degree of 'social-ness' of an interaction. For the sake of simplicity the 'sense' has been chosen as from adult (A) towards child (C) so that the arrow determines whether and/or implies awareness/unawareness of influencing/being influenced.

Note regarding the focusing of attention on asocial condition as of prime importance to the child's learning

I must emphasise that I am not undervaluing the essential importance of what I have called semi-social and social interactions both in influencing the child's social behaviours and, in their own right, in promoting in the child the social behaviours which typify normal human beings.

It is the pathological imbalance between the social and the non-social tending to be heavily reinforced by adults, which is the target for my onslaught.

Similarly it is a proper balance between

- the child's verbal and non-verbal learning
- the verbal and non-verbal environments
- the functional and simple associative verbal 'understanding'
- expressing himself functionally and 'talking' as a non-specific 'defensive' weapon

which I wish to achieve and maintain.

Part of the problem is a terminological one for although asocial behaviours are prior to social ones the secondary (and contingent) behaviour is given a special term whilst the prior condition is relegated to an absence of or simply a precursor state. And similarly with the terms 'verbal'/non-verbal.

#### Expansion of (vi) and (vii) 'retardation' and 'handicap'

The child's tools for learning consist of his physical apparatus energised, guided and informed by his established understanding. In fact understanding represents the individual's capacity for increasing his powers of dealing adequately and adaptively with whatever conditions he encounters. As it is his state of understanding which determines future understanding-development, it would seem reasonable to suppose that limited and distorted understanding leads to limited and distorted development.

Instead then of directing our attention to attempting to push development on, to catch up etc., we should work on increasing the adequateness or competence of the understanding as it already exists, so diminishing its limitations and reducing the distortions, consolidating its condition from the bottom upwards so to speak.

Increasing the amount, extent and range, density, etc. of the child's activities also increases the potential experience; however in order that this should become actual experience the activities must consist of effortful strivings (concentrated trying) under emotionally secure and comfortable conditions. It is necessary then that the child learns that (a) excessive demands will not be made on his understanding so that his defence behaviours are unnecessary or superfluous and (b) any use of these will be ignored so that they become functionless. As fundamental learning conditions are essentially asocial (see [iv]) the child must be encouraged to be socially independent and to rely on his own judgement in learning.

#### Expansion of (viii) The restrictedness and restrictiveness of spoken language

Conventional language derives from and reflects more basic understanding and, although subject to the same mental processes which expand and enrich non-verbal elements and patterns of understanding, must always be contingent on such understanding. It is not possible to use a name to draw attention to a truly novel entity or characteristic. Furthermore the verbal labelling of information or understanding tends to freeze the subject matter or principles it refers to, not infrequently limiting their free extension and association.

Language is therefore not only somewhat restricted in its role as a medium for

teaching, especially the young and/or delayed children, it can also be restrictive, frequently limiting mental flexibility.

### The asocial attitude and 'lesson'

As the majority of children we teach in special schools for vulnerable children are roughly on a par with young pre-school children whose developmental efforts are devoted much more to developing their capacities for learning than with refining specialised 'useful' skills, I suggest that a substantial proportion of our deliberate teaching time and energies should be devoted to furthering this end with children with delayed development.

Our object then is to induce something like the prolonged periods of active interest in association with exploratory and experimental behaviours which in normally developing children give rise to the experience which forms the substrate of understanding. These behaviours normally take place either when others are not present or when the child can ignore the presence of others.

In order that the child can acquire a learning attitude of this sort he must (a) have concentrated experience of it and (b) be given the opportunity to practise it under ordinary conditions. The first can be taught within the 'asocial' lesson period which requires a one-to-one teacher-child relationship for a period of an hour or so regularly whilst the second requires a *suitable attitude* on the part of those who are around the child all day long.

Of course the child needs a certain amount of fully social and semi-social interaction with others but most vulnerable children are already getting many times the attention they need and many have reached the stage where they do little at all except when in the company of adults and then behave as if obliged to win their attention at every opportunity. Conditions in which adults deliberately ignore such social overtures but provide suitable learning opportunities and encourage self-endeavour and self-reliance, causing the child to behave *as if* his understanding were more adequate, are necessary for spontaneously maintained fundamental learning and these are likely to be made use of by the child under the influence of the concentrated 'asocial lesson' periods.

The **asocial lesson** represents a highly concentrated and telescoped equivalent of the sorts of environment-sampling behaviours that the normally growing child continually engages in throughout the non-social majority of his waking hours. Doing is done primarily for the pleasure it brings so that the more the child does the greater his pleasure (evidenced as 'interest', 'persistence', 'trying', ignoring distractions, etc.): as the child does not have to be 'right' or to 'succeed' in order to please his companion, the levels of any demands on his understanding are set by himself and therefore do not normally lead to emotional discomfort. The activities are those that children normally engage in spontaneously so that the terms 'work' and 'play' refer to the same things. Hence within reasonable limits the harder the child 'works' the greater his enjoyment.

Active effort in 'doing' and 'trying' (putting/looking for, struggling to acquire or attain, transferring, etc.) bring about exposure to potential experience at an optimal rate and under conditions optimally conducive to learning (actively searching for, discriminating, recognising, interpreting, and accepting) and



assimilating.

It can be engineered that the general pattern of relative uncertainty of form and direction in the activities occurs but also that there is some accentuation of certain patterns, a somewhat greater likelihood of certain patterns' occurring, an increasing chance of certain 'coincidences', etc.; however, it is vital that we expect the child to become fully aware of those ideas and concepts which we actively attempt to teach always and only when he has reached a proper state of preparedness.

The establishment and maintenance of the 'lesson' may be artificially but conveniently considered under two headings: 'conduct' and 'content'.

The **conduct** consists in the provision of a suitably receptive emotional climate, free from social overdemands on the child's understanding and from social distractions.

The **content** consists in the provision of suitable forms of activities designed to encourage the integration of the child's activities into a satisfactory learning unit and to exercise all main areas of mental functioning and development.

To summarise very briefly

- 1 Our concern in the education of vulnerable children should be to extend the child's capacity for **learning-to-learn**, and only secondarily are we concerned to advance the specialised use of such abilities.
- 2 Major forces impeding development in such children are those behaviours I have called 'retardation' and 'handicap'. As these are learned they are at least potentially capable of being unlearned so that educational attempts aimed at diminishing their influence would seem to be the most profitable approach in practical teaching.
- 3 Attaining these objectives may be promoted most readily through the use of the 'asocial lesson' in which high concentrations of activities of the appropriate kinds may be exercised in appropriate ways under conditions near optimal for the child.

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