

SESSION FOUR - THE 'ASOCIAL' LESSON

Introduction

Our primary concern in education should be the extension of a child's capacity for *learning to learn*. Only secondarily are we concerned to advance the particularised exploitation of such abilities. Hence our aim in work with the vulnerable child is to consolidate his fundamental understanding and to raise his competence at all levels; to enlarge and extend his general and linguistic abilities; to increase his effort, concentration of attention, adaptive persistence and reliability in the face of potentially distractive influences; to raise his tolerance to untoward emotional strain ('frustration'); and to eliminate specific undesirable habits.

Major forces impeding and diverting development in such children are those behaviours associated with what I have called 'retardation' and 'handicap'. As these behaviours are learned, they are, at least potentially, capable of being unlearned so that educational measures aimed at diminishing their influence would seem to be the most profitable approach in practical teaching.

Attainment of these objectives may be promoted most readily by employing an 'asocial' attitude at certain times during the day, and through the use of the 'asocial lesson', within which high concentrations of activities of the appropriate kinds (content) may be exercised in appropriate ways (conduct) under conditions near optimal for the child.

The purpose of the 'lesson'

The 'lesson' is not a coaching or training session for, in general, encouraging the child's acquiring skills more specific than the fundamental learning-to-learn 'tools' is always of low priority. On the other hand activities likely to lead to the acquisition of specifically useful skills commonly represent the most suitable basis and substrate for the gaining of experience and growth of understanding. Hence, although little overt attention is given to the completion of individual tasks as such and no attempt is made to hasten the acquisition of such obviously serviceable skills, and notwithstanding the child's and the teacher's primary interest being in the activity itself rather than in its outcome, children do acquire these skills, almost as a sort of bonus.

The purpose then of the 'lesson' is the engineered provision of a period of time during which the various environmental forces likely to induce a state of 'handicap' and hence to provoke defensive behavioural reactions, are reduced to a minimum, whilst active effort is strongly encouraged.¹ In the long run no special effort is made to minimise other distractive influences for it is assumed that fugitive attention is a reflection of the child's inability to concentrate his attention effortfully on his activity, which is in turn a measure of the quality of his 'understanding' the activity. Hence 'concentration' is fostered and 'distractibility' diminished by strengthening the quality (competence) of the child's understanding under conditions within which he has opportunity to resist potentially attention-diverting influences.

¹ The general rule is – high demand for effort coupled with low demand for understanding.

Such a set of conditions is intended to be entirely analogous to the ordinary everyday solitary learning conditions of the young normally developing child where learning is open-ended, having direction according to the prevailing conditions and the child's present level of understanding, where the interest is more in the activity than the outcome, where the learning experience-gaining process is self-reinforcing and largely free from social prejudice and linguistic direction, so that the growth of experience is exponential.

The 'lesson' is intended to facilitate learning *during the intervening all-day-long activities of the child's waking hours* and should therefore complement whatever else happens during the day. In practice a high density of activity, often equivalent to many ordinary days of the child's casual activity, can be induced during the approximately one hour of a daily 'lesson'. This lesson is not a coaching or training session but a laboratory within which experience can be gained which will, when successful, allow the child to make much more effective use of his ordinary daily routine.

The work is generally divided between exercising fundamental non-verbal abilities and encouraging the understanding of the speech of others. Conditions are as asocial as possible, no praise or non-specific reward (that is to say, reward not deriving directly from the activity itself) is given, and verbal explanation is used only when appropriate for fostering and extending verbal understanding.

Emphasis is placed on consolidating established learning through repetition with maximal variation of method, materials and conditions, and *subsequently* on increasing competence and strain-tolerance by varying the degree and form of adverse or slightly stressful conditions.

As achievement per se is virtually irrelevant to the work that goes on within the asocial 'lesson', the teacher must look to find her own personal satisfaction in different immediate rewards from those of ordinary educational practice where usually the concern is to propel the child through a fairly well-defined sequence of attainments or information acquisition - such as a reading scheme, a mathematics 'programme', etc. - which is monitored by specially designed tests of attainment. Teaching 'success' in such enterprises can be measured by the rate of the child's advance through the system.

On the other hand changes in the child's competence in understanding, such as one hopes will accrue from the asocial lesson, must be judged primarily from his attitude towards the range of activities. He evidences improvement or progress within the 'lesson' by increased interest in and attention to the activities. Outside the 'lesson' he shows its effects by a more spontaneous and constructive attitude, including towards activities which may not *seem* to be closely related to those exercised during the 'lesson' (see Session Nine).

The form of the 'lesson'

The 'lesson' is normally set up or carried out by one teacher working individually with the child in a place set aside for the purpose; however, the conditions are

quite different from those normally obtaining in a socially orientated one-to-one relationship (see later: 'Integration of over-social child into the classroom').

It is convenient to think of the 'lesson' in terms of its **conduct** and its **content**.

The *conduct* consists in the set of rules which governs the demands made on the behaviours of the child and those, specifically the teacher/parent, who interact with him during the 'lesson'.

Broadly² the child is required to engage and interact freely with the materials provided; to accept any impositions made as if they originated from the physical environment³; and to relinquish his use of social expression whether spontaneous or defensive during the time of the 'lesson' unless specifically requested by the teacher⁴.

The teacher on the other hand, is required to make continual, heavy but appropriate demands on the child so as to elicit *maximal effort*; to plan the impositions so that they fulfil their function⁵ without being unduly restrictive; to avoid making excessive demands on the child's *understanding*; and to forgo inviting or responding to the child's social expressions (overtures, diversions, provocations, threats, etc.).

The content Clearly the conduct is an expression of the content so that there cannot be conduct without content; however the amount, form and variety of *what* is done during the 'lesson' will largely determine the rate, character and status or fundamental value of what is learned. Heavy demands are made on a child's putting effort into everything he does by optimising towards a maximum the physical energy he must expend in carrying out any activity (increasing the amplitude, vigour, frequency, etc., or changing the form or postures involved in the movements and/or the emotional control energy involved in overcoming obstacles etc.).

Whatever the task⁶ he is expected to actively try, that is to say, engage with it but, as there is no social reward for correct interpretation, for completion, for success, or getting the right result etc., task difficulty is essentially an observer-centred criterion and irrelevant to the child's attitude and approach to an activity⁷. It follows that any activity in which the child can actively participate in some way is suitable as a content substrate for the lesson, even those which

² The conduct of the lesson subsumes, of course, those basic 'laws' of learning which govern the child's satisfactory gaining of experience, which will be continually alluded to during these discussions.

³ The teacher's moving the child's limbs should not elicit social complaint; deliberate interference with the form of the child's activity under the conditions should not be responded to by him as due to another 'person'; rules set by the teacher must be accepted as if inevitable.

⁴ Once the lesson is well established it should be possible for the teacher to invite various levels of social behaviour from the child at times during the lesson, should she wish to do so, without in any way interfering with its overall asocial course.

⁵ 'Impositions' may be used to increase 'passive' experience, to enforce or induce greater effort, to extend or produce variation in movement, activity or approach to a task, or to induce just sufficient emotional discomfort for the child to learn to control and dominate it.

⁶ It is very important to distinguish between the teacher's observation/interpretation of a task or activity and that of the child himself.

⁷ Clearly a child will come in time to consciously recognise his inability (at that moment and under that set of conditions) at times to solve a problem or overcome an obstacle; however, this discovery of its difficulty is the result of and is defined by his actual attempts and is not an epithet which distinguishes one group of tasks from another.

might seem ludicrously complex to the observer; however it is clear that there must always be a range of activities with which the child is already familiar or can, within the foreseeable future, come to be familiar with and to understand better. It is this optimal range of activities which would generally be chosen as 'lesson' content and, generally speaking, the teacher's expectation (not of course apparent to the child) of a reasonable functional level of performance should be up to but below the child's 'known', 'best' levels, and even then susceptible of being lowered at a moment's notice⁸.

Clearly activities will be chosen in practice so as to include those likely to promote the development of the child's capacity for learning to learn and will follow the normal developmental pathways. Some aspects of these are outlined very briefly in the accompanying diagrams:

⁸ *Competence*. A child's competence is that degree of preparedness etc., which allows his understanding to be exercised reasonably *independently* of such untoward factors as emotional upset, fatigue etc.

Figure I: General order of fundamental development

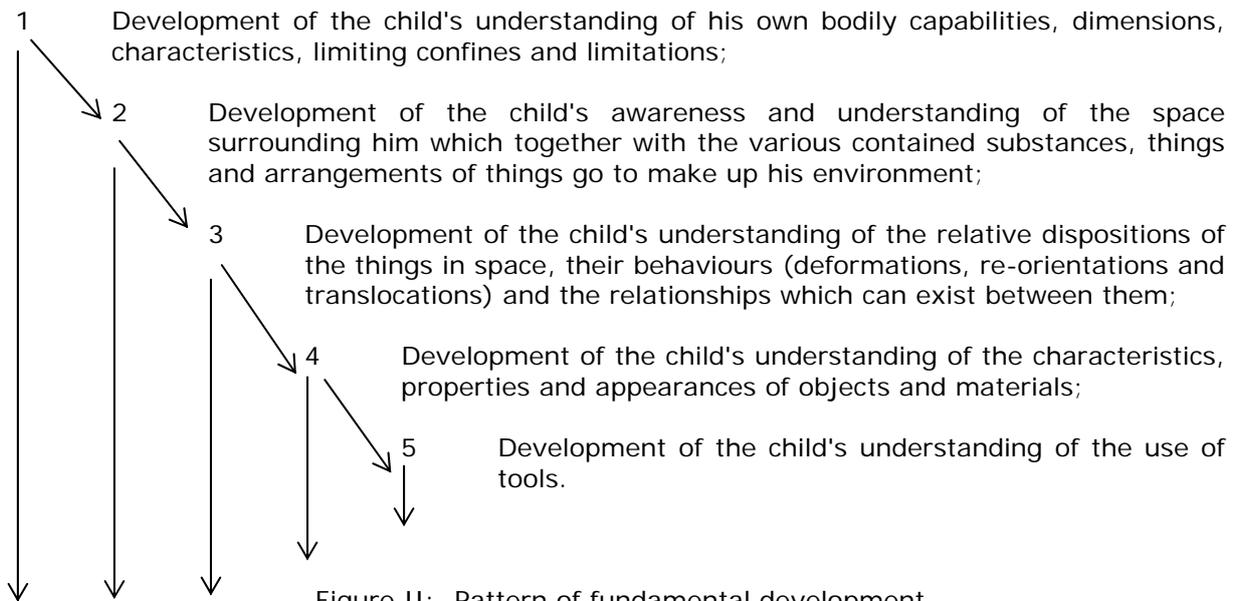
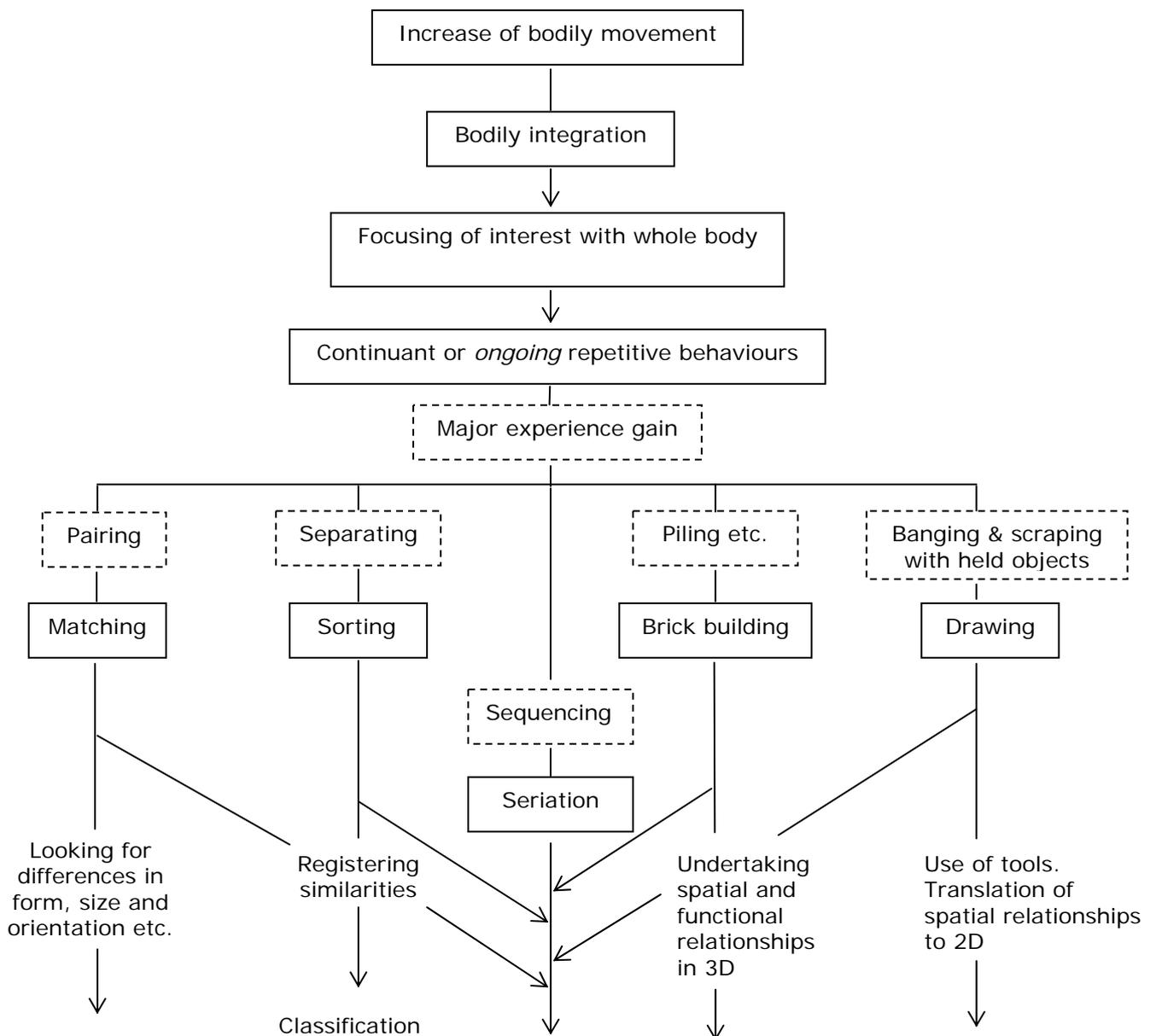


Figure II: Pattern of fundamental development



As the later understanding rests on the basis of and is a natural outcome of the earlier, the earlier always has priority over the later however complex and sophisticated and seemingly more important or valuable the latter might seem. (see Session Nine)

The development of the main 'learning-to-learn' tools is discussed separately but some ways of encouraging the activities concerned with functional integration, and with the child's earliest acting on his environment directly and through the agency of physical tools will be outlined later in this session.

The initial assessment

The objects of the initial assessment are the definition of the primary impediments; the determination of the ability levels and overall form of the 'delay'; the estimation of the child's competence (i.e. the degree of agreement between what he can do under ideal conditions and what he can do under less favourable circumstances); the measurement of his strain tolerance (i.e. the readiness with which the child resorts to 'escape' measures when subjected to overdemanding conditions); the description of the form and variety of the 'handicap' behaviours; and the delineation of any truly undesirable or expendable habits (i.e. obstructive behaviours which are perpetuated for no long or short term adaptive purpose other than the pleasures they bring or the satisfaction of needs created by their habitual nature).

This assessment, which takes from one to one-and-a-half hours for a child functioning up to a four or a five years level, is intended to give an overall picture of his functional capacity and main developmental problems. Its object is to provide the information necessary to design an educational syllabus; it should in fact generate a basic plan of action. It is not intended to minutely catalogue the child's credits or to provide a general 'mental age' or 'IQ', and it does not normally include an analysis of expressive speech or vocoarticulation, hearing or vision, functions which can be assessed subsequently at the same time as the original findings are verified or corrected.

The Educational Programme

The settling down period On the strength of the initial assessment the basic educational work is planned in the first place to consolidate the child's already established abilities and to raise his levels of competence. This early stage is also a period of acclimatisation and acceptance for the introduction of such an unfamiliar regime naturally requires considerable adjustment on the part of both child and teacher. It is usual to assume that it is the child's difficulty in accepting the change of conditions which delays or prevents the establishment of any major change of regime; however, it is just as, if not more, often the vulnerability of the teacher which delays the effective establishment of the work. It is essential that careful thought is given by the teacher to the choice of place, time, circumstances and materials for the 'lesson' and to its organisation.

Fatigue is likely to make the individual more vulnerable; however, in working with vulnerable children an alert teacher working with a tired child is a much less dangerous practice than a tired teacher with an alert child, even though neither is of course satisfactory.

During the settling down period it is sometimes, but by no means invariably, necessary to deliberately, however regrettably, induce temporary conditions of 'handicap'. This is not the result of the child's finding himself in a truly strange set of physical conditions but occurs because the child with a highly developed system of 'handicap' (defensive) behaviours, whose effects are normally highly predictable, now finds that his actions fail to produce the expected results. Clearly such a discovery grossly undermines the child's security and a fair period of time (depending on the degree of handicap, the duration of the established response behaviours, and the consistency and vigour of the teacher's new behaviour) may elapse before the child comes to learn that under this special set of conditions his defences are not only ineffective but also quite unnecessary.

This settling down period should not be confused by teachers with the ordinary 'settling in' period following a child's introduction to a new class and during which an attempt is made to 'build up a relationship'. In fact it is almost the negative of this for one is trying to produce a temporary and discrete situation where the relationship is an asocial one and overt communication is one-way, always towards the child.

All being well and in due course the child's own intense and effortful activity together with his consistent failure to awaken social reaction becomes part of his security within the 'lesson' situation; and subsequently this security, intimately associated as it is with increased competence, is carried by him from place to place and from task to task.

The established 'lesson' From this time on the child is exercised so as to provide a high concentration of potential experience. Continual consolidation with variation in mode and material encourages optimal advance and maximum competence. At opportune times during the period of the established 'lesson' specific efforts can be made to raise the child's strain-tolerance - a task which becomes easier as his competence increases - and to diminish or eliminate undesirable habits within or outside the lesson framework.

Weaning towards normality Almost as soon as the 'lesson' is properly established the seeds are sown for subsequent weaning towards the child's behaving similarly within more everyday circumstances, it being intended that in due course the separate formal 'lesson' should weaken and dissolve and come to merge with normal educational practice. The child should however retain a proclivity for active and sustained effort together with a relative independence and immunity from approval.

The 'oversocial' child in the classroom A common problem within a school is the child who, in virtue of his social overdependence, is constantly wooing or demanding the teacher's attention or distracting the attention of children who would otherwise be able to concentrate. Such a child is too busy with other people's business to give attention to his own. He is referred to as 'overactive', 'not able to concentrate', etc., and represents a two-fold problem to his teacher, being both a needy child and a nuisance.

The 'asocial lesson' is an ideal set of conditions for redressing such behaviours for, unlike the more usual 'one-to-one' attention, it does not reinforce the child's

social overdependence, whilst controlled diverting influences can be generated deliberately so that an increasing capacity for concentrating attention, which results from improved competence in understanding, is accompanied by practice in ignoring distractions. In due course the potentially distracting influences can be the presence of other people, deliberately introduced so that a functioning classroom can be built up around the child prior to his being expected to integrate into the regular classroom situation.

Undesirable habits The problem of 'undesirable' socially-orientated habits, such as socially reinforced head-banging, throwing, tantrum blackmail, etc., their analysis and eradication when necessary, will be discussed during a subsequent session but it can be pointed out here that, as with the difficult behaviours resulting from an 'oversocial' demeanour, the 'asocial lesson' affords an excellent opportunity for their investigation and redress.

Basic content Activities which encourage the general use of the bodily movements and, reciprocally, the use of the space adjacent to the body, the integration and attention-focusing capacity of the body as a whole and the operating on the physical environment, are those which need to be exercised. Generally speaking all of these aspects of development can be exercised in conjunction with the last named - those in which the child acts upon his physical surroundings.

As has been stated elsewhere all of these actions can be reduced to a simple paradigm which might be expressed as: pick it up, shake it, put it down. Actions such as putting objects into a box, or piling, or putting pieces into a form-board, can be seen to consist of picking up and putting down, as can 'sorting', 'matching', constructing a brick pattern or arranging components in a sequence. The kind of activity depends on the materials and the rules by which they are selected, secured and disposed of.

If after securing an object it is agitated before being disposed of, a further set of possibilities becomes available. To simplify the argument we might assume that the held object is shaken or waved. This of itself would create a visually apprehensible effect and could in some cases generate sounds and a draught of air. If the moving object is allowed to make intermittent contact with another object or surface we have percussion, producing sound, and perhaps movement or deformation of the target object. If the moving object is kept in sustained contact, scraping or controlled displacement (pushing, pulling, raking etc.) or deformation occurs, or marks are left on the surface.

It is easy to see that the tool operations of hammering, whether to deform or drive in a nail, as well as the production of musical sounds, arise from basic percussion; whilst the various uses of lever action, such as that of a spoon, screw-driver etc., simple hook extensions of the limb, as in raking etc., and in cutting, sawing, and spreading soft materials, as well as drawing and painting, all derive from sustained pressure or 'scraping' activities.

Furthermore the movements of orientation within, for example, the fingers prior to some careful alignment or placement may be seen to arise from the agitation of objects between securing and disposal. Disposal by projecting as in dropping and throwing may be interpreted as hybrid forms partaking both of the nature of

disposal ('where' or in what association, being the main criterion) and of a tool-induced action ('how' and 'having what effect' being more important).

All activities should always continually exercise and strengthen those prior activities which have given rise to them. Hence in theory the child's practising the outcome of his increasing complexity and sophistication of understanding should take care of the constant need for a recapitulation of fundamental understanding. The same argument however, leads to a recognition of the fact that early neglect of certain ranges of activity leads to a steady increase in the effects of this neglect, and frequently to an extension to areas previously less affected. Therefore, there is a very important place for activities not only practised for the sake of practising them but which have no or only very simple overt end purposes. In keeping with the previous remarks we might classify these activities as 'Picking-up and putting-in' and as 'Banging and scraping'.

Let us imagine a child sitting to a table who visually locates an object, reaches out for it and secures it within his grasp, translates it to a new location where he releases it into or onto a box. Taking some point on the child's body or in the main axis of his trunk as a reference point the object will occupy a position in space relative to him which can be defined in terms of *direction* (the intersection of two planes rotating at right angles to one another from the reference point), and *distance* (with reference to a series of concentric circles having their common centre at the reference point). The state of the object also requires further description to define its orientation relative to the child.

In the act of picking-up these references are very important, for the truncal and more particularly the arm movements must guide the hand to its location, so that reaching has the basic *direction*, *distance* and *orientation* of the grasping hand to contend with; however, the hand will rarely actually traverse the reference direction and even if it does it may be moving away from or towards the body. In practice it is more likely to be moving from some other position which itself might be defined with reference to a particular point on the child's body, so that in addition to relative direction, distance and orientation we must add *sense* when defining a picking-up operation. The importance of such a fundamental analysis of the apparently 'simple act' of picking-up an object will, I hope, be apparent when the need for some sort of design, or plan of action, to guide the teacher in encouraging the child's active effortful and *comprehensive* use of his body and bodily near-space, is recognised.

Picking-up and putting-down activities The teacher may put down objects one at a time and at various distances, in various directions and at varying orientations relative to the child. By controlling the positions of disposal, the 'senses' of the movements can also be controlled. It is easiest at first to have a fixed position for the receptacle 'target' for each dozen or so disposals, the target being re-located periodically. The teacher selects which hand she wants used, keeping the other out of the way, so that the child may have to twist his body considerably to reach well over into the territory of the other hand. Directions in the horizontal plane should range over rather more than two right angles (200 degrees), whilst variations in the vertical plane, rather more difficult to manage in practice, can utilise boxes and chairs as well as the floor. It is convenient to use a mnemonic system of five cardinal directions in the horizontal plane: 'normal', extreme right, extreme left, intermediate right and intermediate left,

and three in the vertical plane: 'horizontal', and above and below the horizontal. Distances are conveniently divided into 'very close to', 'full reaching distance', and 'middle-distance'. Naturally objects can vary in size, form, absolute weight, density, material, consistency, surface and thermal properties, as well as orientation relative to the child; target receptacles can vary in form, size, orifice size and shape, transparency, material etc., as well as in position and orientation.

One-at-a-time picking up should be exercised to the stage where the child not only puts maximal effort into reaching anywhere necessary but also works so quickly that he almost automatically hunts for each new object already placed by the teacher during the child's disposal of the previous one. The activity can be extended by (i) introducing small and/or awkward-to-grasp objects; (ii) using cylindrical or spherical objects which can be *gently* rolled in various directions and senses so that the child must make the necessary adjustments in securing, etc.; (iii) arranging that some change of grasp or object orientation is necessary in disposal, e.g. sticks which have to be 'fed' end-on through a hole in the target, too small to take them side-on.

The second main kind of picking-up exercise involves spreading the objects widely about the table relative to the child and encouraging both continuant (see Sessions Two, Nine, etc.) picking-up or putting-in and the **alternating** use of the hands. Exercises for promoting alternating action will be given under 'banging and scraping activities' but it is important to note here that children who work continually frequently use one hand *or* the other or, if encouraged to use both hands together, may either pick-up with one hand passing the object to the other hand for putting-in, or pick-up with both hands before putting-in with both hands. Both these actions have some value in their own right but do not encourage bodily integration or the focusing of attention.

Banging and scraping activities The 'banging' exercises consist, strictly speaking, in shaking hand-held objects with intermittent (striking) or sustained (scraping) contact. The overall aim is to combine the use of a tool with activities maximising the use and integration of bodily movements, with the structuring of the bodily near-space and the 'focusing' of attention.

Specific objectives include encouraging the child's:

- acceptance of a wide range of changing bodily postures
- directing attention along the limb holding the tool
- actively switching attention freely from one limb focus to another
- actively complete focussing (with both arms and eyes)
- complementary use of the combined limbs
- improving his tool grasp postures
- specific and adaptive use of tools
- secondary use of the effects (sounds, marks, movements, deformations) produced.

Practice The exercises, which will be seen to vary considerably in form and purpose, may each be either 'passively imposed' (i.e. the teacher imposes the form, direction and power) or 'actively' exercised (i.e. the child provides the power etc.). Passively imposed exercises can be more vigorous, more complex

and, at first, last longer. Either or both hands may be involved. Various 'tools' (sticks, hammers, etc.) and a variety of 'targets' (boxes, tins, 'musical' instruments, etc.) can be variously disposed relative to the child.

The activities can exercise (i) a more-or-less regular alternation between the arms; (ii) a switching of attention to and fro between the actions of the arms; (iii) a one-side-at-a-time striking with a tool at targets variously situated relative to the child's body, actions requiring the focusing of attention along the length of the artificially extended limb; (iv) rhythmically alternating percussion on variously placed targets; (v) the switching of attention from the action of striking at one target to that of striking with the other hand at another target; (vi) striking with a tool in one hand at a target held, at various distances etc. and orientations, in the other hand, either directly or by means of another tool; (vii) various two-handed scraping actions; (viii) one-handed scraping to push, pull, rake and produce movement 'figures' of the kind that will facilitate drawing.

For example - each exercise to be employed first in 'passively-imposed' and then 'active' form:

(a) Hammer held in each hand No targets

- (i) Simple alternating banging with different rhythms, frequencies, degrees of vigour, etc., in each direction

at all distances	relative to
at any orientation	the child's
from each sense	body

- (ii) Alternating banging but with repeated transfer of attention from a limb striking in one position to the other limb striking elsewhere

in each direction	relative to
at all distances	the child's
at any orientation	body
from each sense	

- (b) Stick held in first one hand, then the other Target tins, boxes, etc. deployed to direct attention towards the main directions, distances and orientations, and to induce continual changes of sense

- (c) As with (a) (i) but with targets so that a combination of both arms and visual attention is operating at each point in each direction, at all distances and orientations and in every sense

- (d) (a) (ii) with targets. Focused attention directed through the tool held in the hand but the action frequently transferred to the opposite side of the body

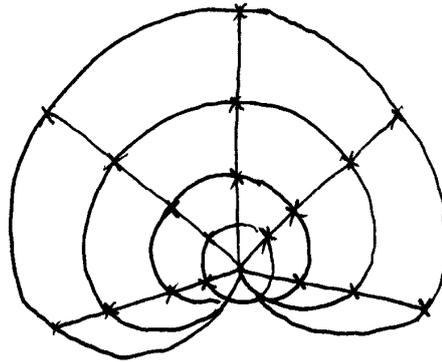
- (e) (i) Target held in one hand and struck with tool held in the other, as always having regard for direction, distance, orientation and sense
(ii) As above but with target supported by a hand-held tool

- (f) Grasp strengthening exercises in which the form, degree and plane of pressure exerted on the hand by the held object is varied frequently and abruptly by striking or pushing the projecting extremity from various directions
- (g) Stick held in each hand and their extremities pressed against the table whilst they are pushed and pulled and made to describe circular and angular figures, symmetrically and asymmetrically, in-phase and out-of-phase
- (h) Stick held in one hand only (this can be predominantly the favoured hand, usually the right) and used as above so as to produce a wide range of movement and transient figures, and to involve as much as possible of the space in the plane, being guided by structuring the area of the surface according to direction, distance and sense
- (i) Large, soft pencil, crayon or chalk held in the preferred hand so as to leave traces on a large sheet of paper or blackboard, etc. (see Session Eight - 'Drawing and the use of tools')

These latter exercises patently lead into drawing (see Session Eight, and subsequent outline of 'Pencil and paper activities') but all the basic activities can be extended profitably through the 'Obstructions game' and the 'Stick and Rings game' (both to be described later) as well as through the use of the spoon and pusher, pouring, forceps and scissors.

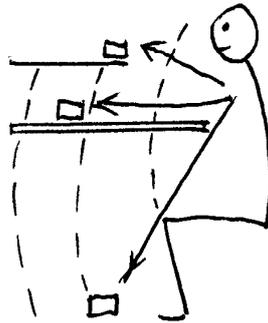
GEOFFREY WALDON
1976

Figure III: Evolution of circular (in this case right-handed) counter-clockwise scribble



Directions and durations in the horizontal plane

Scraping



Directions and durations in the vertical plane

Banging

Scraping and Scribbling

