

MISS CHRISTISON'S ADDRESS

When I spoke to you last year I remember saying that our decisions, both administrative and professional, must always be based on what we know of the children in the kindergartens for whom and with whom we all work.

I would like this year to take a closer look at the children in our kindergartens. Why, for example, do we provide any pre-school education at all, what do we hope to do and how do we try to do it. It is only in terms of these questions that we can evaluate our practice and plan its development.

If you ask any parent of a kindergarten child why he sends his child to kindergarten you will get many different answers. Some will speak of the value to the child of meeting and playing with other children; others will hope that he will be able to start school and school work easily and with confidence; others will say they do not know how to direct the child's boundless energy and curiosity and they seek the help of the kindergarten in giving him profitable occupation. I could continue the list but I think that in this company there is no need for me to do so.

If you pick up any book of educational theory you will find that there are almost as many aims in education as there are authors of such books and as I read them from time to time the most obvious fact that strikes me is that almost every one of these carefully thought-out and worded "aims" is just as valid for pre-school education as it is for the education traditionally undertaken in the schools. Here is one example which I have picked more or less at random. It is a statement of the general purpose of education as set out in the State of Western Australia, and it was quoted at a recent conference of Inspectors of Schools from Australia and New Zealand. I quote -- "The purpose of our education is the continuous, all round development of the individual so that he can take his place as a valued member of society contributing his particular individual skills through his ability to work as a member of the group." In this statement there are points which have real significance for our kindergartens. Let me take them one by one.

1. Education is a continuous process:

You, as parents, will know full well that education doesn't start when the child goes to school and it doesn't end on the day that he leaves. Learning begins when the child is born, when he first becomes aware of sights or sounds or smells or movements. And as he grows his learning grows. By the time he gets to kindergarten he has built up a complex structure of learning and we often don't realise how much he has actually learnt and how complex it is. He has learnt not only to stand upright, but to walk and to run and to jump. He has learnt to control his body to a large extent, in meeting the social demands of our society, in eating and toilet training. He has learnt to use a few tools -- a spoon, a wooden hammer, perhaps a crayon. He has learnt to use words to communicate with others and this is a tremendous step forward. He is learning some control over his feelings which is more difficult than learning bodily control. The temper tantrums of the 2-year old are going.

But you know what 3-year olds are like. And this is my point. If education is a continuous process each stage must be based on what has gone before. And whether you like it or not parents are the first educators. No kindergarten teacher can hope to educate a child effectively if she does not base her work on what the parents have done. So she must know the child's home and parents so that for the child there is no bewildering break that endangers continuity. Furthermore, even when the child does come to kindergarten his parents are still the most important people in his life and his home is still the place where most of his growing is done. So parents, too, need to know what the child does in kindergarten and how and why so that they can work in double harness with the teacher to give the child a stable background in which to grow. This is, of course, the reason why every good kindergarten teacher works with mother helpers and

Assists that initial settling-in is done gradually and runs pre-entry groups and so on. This is why the weekly schedule sets aside an afternoon for parent work. This is why every really interested kindergarten parent finds out why a well-equipped kindergarten possesses junk material and finger paint and equipment for water play as well as polishers and lawn mowers, for which the adult can see more immediate use.

All of this leads on to the next point. If education is a continuous process it must not only be built on what has gone before but it must also lay good foundations for what is to come afterwards. It is not part of the kindergarten's job to anticipate the traditional work of the school. The school years are the time for school work and we do no service to the children of 3 and 4 if we try to give them what is suitable for 5 year olds, watered down a bit. But if we provide well for 3's and 4's we are inevitably laying the foundations for what happens at 5. For example, when a kindergarten child learns to manage a crayon, a paint brush, a hammer, or even when he learns to carry a cup of milk without spilling it, he is learning to use and control the hands that will later use pencils and tools of all kinds. When he learns that this block is too small to fill up this space or that that roll of newsprint is too heavy to carry or that there aren't enough pieces of apple to go round, he is learning about big and small, heavy and light, more and less -- the foundations of all work in numbers and quantity. When he looks at books or listens to stories, when he uses words to ask questions, make comments, communicate with others, he is laying the foundations for later reading and when he paints and draws he is starting on what will later be writing. And these are only a few examples. You will think of many more.

2. All-Round Development:

The second point is that education aims at all-round development. We do not know yet all there is to know about human growth and development but we do know that it is not always a straight-forward process and we do know that difficulties in one part of a child's life can hamper the development of other parts. A child who is physically handicapped is often socially handicapped as well -- he simply cannot always join in the play of others so that his experience of living and learning with others is limited. A child who is obsessed by fears or anxieties or who is frustrated by continually being expected to reach too high a standard is not likely to get on with the job of learning with confidence and eagerness. Any kind of institution that aims at promoting development must consider all kinds of growth. And so the kindergarten aims to provide for intellectual growth, the learning of facts and relationships, for social growth and the increasing ability both to contribute to the life of the group and to receive from it, for emotional growth and the steady increase in the ability to control and direct feelings in the appropriate way and his physical growth as well. In no kindergarten does the director say "We will provide this activity for intellectual growth and that for social growth." Instead the total environment, the building, the materials, the activities outside and inside, the arranging of the programme and the handling of the children are all carefully planned to help all-round development. Even to find his own locker demands intelligence from a 3-year old and for him to hang his coat by the loop on the hook demands physical skill. The sand and the water and the blocks and the puzzles and the clay and all the other materials are chosen for their versatility.

3. The Development of the Individual.

It is a good many years now since kindergartens have generally adopted free activity programmes in place of the more formal teacher-directed programmes. The type of programme commonly found now grew out of what had gone before for many reasons. But one of these reasons was the growing realisation that no two children are alike. Although all normal children follow the same broad pattern of development their rate of growth varies widely and the ways in which they

develop vary widely; a programme thought up by the teacher and presented to the group might be exactly suitable for some of the children but it will be far too advanced for others and too simple for others again.

To encourage individuality it is necessary to have a programme in which each child can pursue his own activity at his own rate. Further, each activity must be chosen not only, as I said earlier, because it can be used for different purposes, but also because it can be used by children of different ages and stages of development. Hence in kindergartens the most valuable materials are the raw materials like the clay and the carpentry wood and the sand and the paint. They can be used by children of all ages and stages.

Such a programme, of course, makes heavy demands on the teacher. It is not enough for her to be kind and pleasant to the children and able to look after them. She needs sensitivity, understanding, skill and great resources both personally and professionally. Underlying these must be a high standard of general education and a high standard of professional training. And if our children's individuality is a thing to be valued and preserved so is the individuality of our teachers. There is, I think, sometimes a questioning of a teacher who works differently from her colleague in the next kindergarten. We must, of course, do what we can to achieve a uniformly high standard but that does not mean a uniform provision. Kindergartens should be different in different areas and we should not expect a kindergarten in a small country town to be a duplicate of one in a busy city suburb. I don't want to labour the point but I am convinced that the individuality of both children and teachers is a precious thing to be respected and encouraged and that we are sometimes guilty in our attempt to produce an evenly high standard -- in buildings, in activities, in the training of teachers -- to insist too much on uniformity.

4. Ability to Work.

It may seem a little strange to talk about the kindergarten child's work. It is play, yes, but work? Yet work is a word which I think can well be applied to what the child is engaged in at kindergarten. He is, after all, undertaking the main business of his life at this stage -- growing up. And what he does demands effort and concentration and often involves drudgery in order to achieve the desired result. All these are characteristic of work as we know it and all these are characteristic of the activity going on in a good kindergarten.

If we are to get from the children the ability to stick to a job worth doing for the sheer joy of doing it, or to face failure and try again, it is not enough to give them materials and leave them alone. They need the materials, of course, and lots of them, and they need space and they need time; but above all they need the challenge and the stimulation and ideas to spur them on to start the job. They need understanding support to encourage them to continue it when the going gets hard and, in themselves, they need skill and confidence in the field of their own efforts. And if you think about it you realise that this all applies to the kindergarten child, but it also applies to the school child, the adolescent and the adult as well. In other words, we are back where we started -- "the purpose of our education is the continuous, all-round development of the individual so that he can take his place as a valued member of society contributing his particular individual skills through his ability to work as a member of the group."

With all that, how far have we got in realising our aim? I think that without boasting and without false modesty we have gone some way to achieving it. A good kindergarten is rooted in the families of the child and looks towards the schools. It does provide opportunities for individual learning, but I believe we could do more. But I have no intention of attempting an assessment now. I leave that to you. It is surely the task of the conferences and the Union which is the national policy-making body of the kindergarten movement to build on what has already been achieved and to find ways and means of strengthening our work where it needs it. 294