"The Teacher a Psychologist"

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The Teacher a Psychologist

No fact of today is more readily admitted and more completely ignored than that a teacher should be a psychologist or mind-student.

The farmer succeeds better if he knows the character of his soil and the nature of his crops. The physician must be well informed concerning the structure of the human body and the function of each organ. The child is an embryonic citizen with possibilities of a great and wonderful influence upon the world. At least his presence will have an influence either for good or evil. Shall he be trained for life by those who know almost nothing of his latent powers and the methods for developing them?

If we are to train men we study the psychology of men. Should we not then in training the child, in which, with Pestalozzi, we find the man, study the psychology of the child? How few of our teachers realize this fact,
and, of those who do, how few try to make psychologists of themselves. I do not mean psychologists in the scientific sense, but in the sense of observers of the pupils' mental powers, students of the mental capabilities of the boy or girl.

A teacher does not need to be learned in technical psychology to be a student of the mind and to be successful in training it, bringing out all its powers in their proper relations. Few of us realize our opportunities for soul culture. We attend teachers' meetings, state and national conventions, we hear it urged time and again that the teacher should study the souls of his pupils so as to be better able to develop their latent mental and moral powers. We soon go back to our work and teach in the same unprofitable way in which we taught our first country school, a time when we taught for money only, and after which the school boards did not employ us for a second term. Three teachers out of every four
are, after a few years, "Jack Whacker" and unsuccessful, just because they do not study the arts of their own calling.

And what employment is more important in its relations to the nation, to our civilization, to the welfare of mankind than that of the teacher? Fitch calls it "the noblest of arts and the sorriest of trades."

The teacher's business is not only to give the pupil scholarship, but also to cultivate his powers of mind, to lead to greater powers of mental action and to quicken his moral nature. Yet how many of us are mere hearers of lessons. We have an idea that knowledge is everything because "knowledge is power." About two years ago Gen. Sherman, in addressing the students at West Point, said "Bacon said 'knowledge is power,' but there is more truth in the statement 'Action is power.' I have seen men in our armies who knew all there was to be known in military matters, yet I would not trust them with a picket fence."
Knowledge is a good thing and very necessary in most callings in life, and we should try to obtain as much of it as possible, but action or the using of knowledge is just as desirable, and knowledge without it is of no effect.

And how can the pupil be able to act, having knowledge?

By “to act” I mean to reason, to weigh, to consider, to determine and all those mental operations which are so often expressed in physical acts. Here comes in the highest or one of the highest functions of the teacher, to bring out into more full development the mental faculties, to enable the mind to grasp perplexing subjects, to think clearly and reason correctly in regard to truths which lie too deep for the senses to explore.

It is, therefore, as much the duty of the teacher to cultivate faculties as to give instruction.

One of the most useful faculties and perhaps the first one to be cultivated is the faculty of observation, that is, of perceiving things, reflecting upon them, reaching logical and
correct conclusions concerning nature. It is a part of our education much neglected and the consequences of this neglect are most serious. Many persons go through life seeing nothing of the beauties of nature, the loveliness of flowers, and plant life, grandeur in a landscape, a sunset, distant mountains, the diamond dewdrops, or the wonders of lower animal life.

A lady recently said to me "I did not know that wild flowers grew in my yard till my daughter studied botany, then we found nearly twenty species." If the faculty of observation were only cultivated in the country schools by the study of botany and zoology, or by the teacher's calling the attention of the pupils to the beauties and wonders of nature. The boys would not run off to town to work in shops, on railroads, in hotels, or saloons. They would become interested in nature, more content with country life, and remain on the farm.

The teacher sees the bad consequences of a defective attention, and if he is a mind-student, he will find means to correct it.
He will realize that with most persons the attention is easily drawn away from a subject. This is natural with the young as well as with the old. He will find that to cultivate the attention one sensation instead of several must be perceived, that it must not endure too long, that the mind can be appealed to more easily through the sensations than by abstractions, and that variety within certain limits cultivated attention.

He will also find that "creating interest" and exciting curiosity help to excite attention.

A wise teacher will not neglect the memory. Have not many of us drifted to the extreme of neglecting the memory in order to cultivate the powers of reason and observation?

Yet Bain says that it is "the faculty that most of all concerns us in education." The teacher who is a psychologist will try to cultivate the memory of his pupils by securing a clear original impression, by association of ideas, by logical connection and by many other devices. The readiness of acquiring
knowledge, and the power of retention depend on several things. Impressions must be stamped upon the mind with a certain degree of force. A bright object clearly seen is recalled better than a dull one hardly noticed. A good subject clearly and forcibly presented to a pupil is understood and remembered much better than when poorly presented. A topic in history with an attractive story will be indelibly fixed upon the mind.

The teacher finds that one impression may be associated with others in various ways. In learning about places or events, the pupil may build up associations of time or place.

He will connect the introduction of slavery in 1620 with the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth at the same time, or the voyage of Magellan in 1520 with the Missouri Compromise in 1820, or the discovery of America in 1492 with the exodus of the Hebrews about 1492 B.C.

When he thinks of Quebec it will recall by association the death of Wolfe and Gray's Elegy, a stanza of which
Wolfe waited as his boat floated down stream.

When he thinks of Charleston, he thinks of the British repulse, which was our first experience in war with a foreign fleet, or Mollification, or the earthquake of 1886.

The peculiar conditions under which different pupils remember should be studied by the teacher. One pupil recalls impressions of sight while another recalls impressions of sound.

Though the imagination is not one of the faculties which needs to be cultivated, yet with many it is necessary. Many a boy or girl is too prosaic, too practical, to see the ethical significance of life. He can see no beauty in poetry, art, or literature. The teacher seeing the necessity in the pupil may apply the means of correction. In short, the teacher, to develop the pupils as they should be developed, must understand the nature of the faculties of the soul, their order of development, the means of influencing them.
and also know how to use these means. There can be no appeal to faculties of which little is known and there can be but little training or systematic development.

Thus there is a psychology of personal influence which is more neglected than any other branch of psychology; more definitely, it is the influence of mind upon mind. Psychology, as we generally think of it, means the study of mental action within one's self, apart from the living influence of one mind upon another. "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver." A few words spoken privately to one whom the teacher recognizes as one who will not take them publicly, how productive of good results, morally. By a careful study of natures we know the boy or the girl who can be reached only by a public reproof, caring nothing for principles or private rebuke. We know when to be silent and when to praise, when to rebuke and when to laugh with a pupil, when to
discourage and when to encourage. In short, we learn how to handle the most complicated piece of machinery the world has ever produced - the human mind.

The influence of a teacher's mere presence can be cultivated by the teacher. By carefully preserving a firm, energetic, business-like manner during school hours, the teacher, unconsciously to himself and his pupils, enforces them with a spirit of industry, order and discipline. He makes industry "contagious." After the force of one character has a greater influence than words. By an insight into the natures of pupils, one will realize what are natural tendencies and will do what he can to direct them instead of trying to check them. Also, with a little thought, a teacher will conclude that his own tendency is likely to be that of his pupils.

No influence is more powerful upon the minds of students than the feeling among them that the teacher is
a leader, not a driver. Opposition develops the thinking disposition, laziness, and a desire to leave school. The pupil, however, will readily see the folly of trying to oppose the teacher who endeavors to help him. But as the teacher is the authority in the schoolroom, he must be the one to act so as to show his intentions. The teacher must do more than simply desire to help; he must act, and knowing what to do and how to do it demands a fine perception of mental conditions and tendencies. This faculty is not common but is, at least, latent in everyone and may be developed by effort and application on the part of the teacher.

It is especially necessary to study the minds of the younger pupils. They have their own peculiar ways of thinking and feeling. We as teachers can but poorly recollect our early feelings, our ways of thinking. If then we are to comprehend the mental condition of our pupils, we must do so by close observation and correct reasoning. Nor is this
all; one must—be a lover of his pupils, or, at least, have enough interest in them to see the active side of their natures, as well as the order of development of faculties.

One must sympathize with them. A sympathetic mind is strongly influenced by interest on the part of the teacher. It causes a responsive sympathy for the teacher, which, in turn, causes a desire on the part of the pupil to please the teacher. This wish to please always leads to intellectual activity. Many a student takes to disagreeable studies to please the teacher for whom he has a strong affection. This regard for a teacher is a strong factor in education, especially in moral training, and prevents much wrong-doing. Pupils often try to be like a teacher whom they respect and revere.

In these observations, and others which could be suggested, we see the necessity and great value of mind study. The work of a teacher who makes no study of mind is
very apt to be mechanical, and disagreeable to pupils, while the work of one who understands how to influence the mind in the right direction is interesting and profitable.

Many a pupil leaves our schools simply because he "has" to go to school. Many times the teacher is partly to blame. He did not know how to reach the boy, how to interest him in some certain direction, how to awaken some dormant faculty which might make a Darwin or a Gladstone. By a study of natures and mental conditions the teacher might be able to rear such pupils from lives of ignorance, of regret for lost opportunities, of moroseness and bitterness.

It seems to me that this is one of the very best of reasons why a teacher should be a psychologist, not only to make splendid men and women of those who readily respond to influences, but also to make happy contented citizens of those whose surroundings in life have been adverse to all improvement.

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