

Progressive Education Association

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PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION AND CHARACTER BUILDING.

A Lecture to the Washington Section

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"Character is not instinctive, it is not inherited, it is obtained by building."†

IF modern education through progressive methods does nothing more for children than to make them interested in school work, it is not performing its full function. The factors of self discipline and of character building are strongly involved in the progressive movement of education. Training in habits of order and of industry; in the idea of responsibility; in the obligation to produce something ultimately worth while to child life, is the very foundation of the structure which progressive education purposes to raise. *If educators fail to evolve such school room procedure as will inevitably lead to the exercise of habitual moral conduct on the part of the children, they fail altogether. Failure in character formation means total failure.*

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to draw a sharp distinction between morals and ethics. Ethics deal with the *principles* of right conduct, morals deal with the *practice* of right conduct. The ultimate purpose of moral education is behavior, performance, and conduct. The ultimate outcome of ethical education is knowledge, the ability to make nice discrimination concerning what is right.

Writing of this distinction between morals and ethics, Dr. Dewey reports in "Ethical and Moral Instruction in Schools" that a London newspaper printed the following nonsense rhyme:

"The centipede was happy, quite,
Until the toad for fun
Said, 'Pray which leg comes after which?'
This worked her mind to such a pitch
She lay distracted in a ditch,
Considering how to run."

†Editor's note: Moral fiber is inherited, character is built.

*Price 10 cents each, 75 cents a dozen, and a special price \$3.00 a hundred.

Asking children to weigh, judge, and evaluate their springs of action, often results in much talking and little action. In homes and in schoolrooms there is too much preaching about worth while conduct and too little attention paid to the practicing of the same. Give the child a motive for telling the truth, provide many natural opportunities for him to tell the truth and inevitably he will become veracious. Later on he may make generalizations concerning truthfulness. But this is an ethical conception, and long before he is able to comprehend it, his moral conduct should have been formed.

In other words, ethics is a science for which the young child has no more need than he has for geometry. *The primary function of a progressive school, then, is not to teach arithmetic, nor language, nor reading and the like, but to have children learn to make, to do, to create, to produce, to study, and to live together cooperatively and sympathetically.* Through these manifold activities the children will grow in ability to meet their civic responsibilities and to become socially serviceable. This result can not be obtained from direct moral instructions. A special period in the daily program called "Moral Teachings" will not avail greatly in producing character. No set program or lessons for teaching morality can be relied upon to perform this task.

What can be done in the way of developing moral characters is to know first, very definitely, what objectives in the way of social and moral conduct are desirable for the children of various ages in the different grades.

The next important duty for the teacher is so to manipulate the details making up the situation confronting the children daily, that, as they respond, they will be constantly forming new habits of a desirable moral character. Among some of these desirable characteristics are obedience, trustworthiness, cooperativeness and ability to do independent thinking, ability to deal justly and fairly with people, and the like. Habits of this character can be formed as definitely and as surely as the habit of responding "four" to the question, "two and two are what?" Children learn to be moral only when, confronted by real moral situations, they are guided by wise teachers to make the correct decisions, and are aided to perform the appropriate overt acts that such decisions entail.

Moral Conduct Means Shared Social Relationships.

Before proceeding further, it might be wise to define the term "moral conduct." Moral conduct means shared relationships. It may be many other things, but it means this, preeminently. Moral conduct is learned, too, in the same way as are topics in such subjects as arithmetic and spelling. Give a motive, a "set" for the

activity, allow a certain amount of repetition with satisfaction in the performance and the desired result will follow. Through his own activities bring the pupil face to face with social issues. Here he will meet actual conditions, not theoretical situations, and under these circumstances moral fiber will be developed.

Movable Furniture Requisite for Shared Social Relationships.

What stimulating situations for socially desirable conduct does the ordinary schoolroom provide? There are forty or more desks screwed to the floor. The future citizens of a social democracy are expected to attain habits of social responsibility and cooperation when they sit five days a week, for forty weeks a year, in such a position that only the backs of their heads are visible to each other. They are in an environment where the school work usually consists in learning lessons, and where helping another child becomes a crime. Yet from such an environment, the school expects to give to society citizens saturated with a spirit of service and provided with the instruments of effective self-direction. Surely, this is psychologically impossible.

The schoolroom must be reconstructed physically, in the first place. The inflexible furniture must be replaced with chairs so that the children can arrange themselves in groups, work together upon a common project, communicate freely with each other, realize each other's difficulties and proffer mutual assistance whenever necessity arises.

A very natural yet at the same time a rather sorrowful circumstance attends the introduction of flexible furniture in a great many instances. It was noticed in visiting twenty so-called progressive schoolrooms last year, that in the larger per cent of them, furnished with flexible equipment, there still persisted the old-style aisle arrangement. Before securing movable furniture, it is essential to secure a teacher with a movable point of view. In other words, if there is flexible furniture in the school make it really flexible. If flexible furniture can not be purchased it can often be secured by screwing the desks to heavy pieces of board rather than to the floor. These with chairs can then be moved in such a manner that it will be possible for shared social relationship to exist among children.

Teachers Must Adapt Themselves to Noise of Movement and Tongue.

A movable point of view on the part of the teacher is absolutely necessary. It is very pleasant for adults to have quiet in the schoolrooms. They work better when there is absolute calm. The pro-

gressive normal schools, however, are now preparing teachers who can listen to children's spontaneous conversation in the schoolroom without having hysterics. Those who have been teaching for a number of years find it difficult to realize that through this constructive noise of movements and of tongues, real education is going on. Unless teachers can adjust themselves to an atmosphere of buoyant, outgoing, creative energy it will be impossible to have children learn through activity. Did you ever see some one lift the door of a bee-hive when the bees were making honey? One could hardly call the place quiet. There is a great deal of movement and noise while the cells are being filled. Children make honey while doing things with a real motive behind and a real outcome ahead. They, too, need movement for this. The drones are the ones who sit still and do nothing. *Never mistake this calm, still attitude for a learning attitude. It is not.*

Many Experiences in Moral Conduct Essential.

Before children can arrive at ideas and ideals of conduct they must have experiences. Through these, will they be led to ideas and ideals. You can not thrust upon them adult standards and generalizations of moral conduct any more than you can thrust definitions in history, geography or literature upon them.

Experience must always precede. The following incident will serve as an illustration of how, through experiences the children of a first grade gained ideas of shared social relationship. This incident is taken from "The Teachers College Record" of March, 1919, in an article on Primary Education, by Mrs. Meadowcroft, of the Horace Mann School of Columbia University.

The children in this first grade had had a painting lesson, and each child had been supplied with paints in a box. When a second painting lesson was scheduled one boy had no paint box. The teacher said to him, "Bobbie, where is your paint box?" In this school each child has a twelve-inch locker with a shelf upon which he is supposed to keep such things. Bobbie said, "My paint box was in my locker when I went home yesterday." "Well," was the reply, "go and look for it." Five minutes passed, when a small voice said, "What am I to do? I can't find it." "Bobbie, you may do anything you like, but you can not take a painting lesson without paints," was the reply. Bobbie took a book and went to a little table, but he watched with envious eyes the other children, busy at painting. The next day again there was a call for painting and Bobbie had forgotten all about his paint box. "I have not found my paint box, what am I to do?" "I do not know, Bobbie; but you can not paint without paints." This kept up for three days, and

Bobbie missed his lesson each time. Finally, one of the little girls came up and said to the teacher, "If you would just look at Bobbie's locker you would understand that nobody could find anything in it." The teacher's reply was simply, "Have you told Bobbie about it?" Jane said, "No." "Suppose you do." Nothing had been said to the children in these early weeks of school about orderly arrangement of materials in the lockers. Jane went to Bobbie and said, "Bobbie, if you would straighten out your locker, maybe you could find your paints." He followed this suggestion and removed everything from his locker. Hidden behind some papers, he discovered his paint box. He brought it to the teacher, who said, "Bobbie, you have missed three days' lessons, haven't you?" "Yes." "Why?" "Well, I guess if I kept my locker in order, I might not have missed the lessons." She said, "I think that is true." Then said Bobbie, with a very proud air, "I am not the only one with an untidy locker." "No," was the answer, "but you were the only one who could not find his paint box." Then she went to the piano and struck a chord. After the children were quiet, she pointed to the pile of things from Bobbie's locker and asked them what they thought of it. The children then discussed the value of orderly arrangement of their lockers. They finally decided on a plan of writing an honor roll for orderly lockers. Orderliness, growing out of real needs, is one of the moral lessons that may be taught in every first grade.

Now let me relate an incident that happened in this same classroom near the end of the school year when I was present.

The teacher was called from the classroom just at lunch time. She said to me, "Don't interfere unless you have to." I kept on with my work and the children did not seem to notice the many visitors present. All of us were thrilled by the following occurrence. These children, aged five and one-half to six and one-half years (two were seven), went on with their activity. The tables had been arranged in a hollow square and the teacher had said as she left the room, "Jeannette, will you please take my place?" The rule of the school is that there shall be happy conversation during lunch time and that no two people shall talk together. Jeannette called on one boy who gave an account of a motoring incident which he had had. Then Bobbie arose, and putting back his head said (these are his own words), "I want to submit to the class whether I can not report James to Mrs. M——." Jeannette said, "What do you want to report him for?" "Well," said Bobbie, "you see it is my turn to distribute the lunch. Every day when I give James his lunch he says he does not want it, after he has ordered it. Then when I make out the account it isn't right, and Mrs. M—— thinks

that I do not know how to do it. I don't think that's fair." A little boy, named Allen, said, "That's right, I have watched and James does this every time. I think we ought to do something about it." Then one of the girls said, "Well, we can manage this. We don't have to tell Mrs. M——." James then arose and said, "I don't care what you do about it. I never eat any lunch anyhow." Through all this no two children had spoken at the same time. Now three children arose. Jeannette called upon Allen, who said (the words just tumbling out of his mouth), "That proves that James was fooling him and that Bobbie was right, because if he never eats any lunch, why does he order it?" Then one of the other boys said, "Well, I think what we can do is this, Bobbie will not give him any lunch at all until everybody else is served, and then if there is any lunch left over and he wants it, James may have it. If there is none, he can go without." After some further suggestions which were not well received by the class, Bobbie arose and said, "I will do that, and you don't think we should tell Mrs. M——?" They decided that it was not necessary. The next morning before I left I asked Mrs. M—— if anyone had told her what took place at lunch the day before. She knew nothing. Here was a fine example of real, shared social relationship.

In the school, then, there must be furnished opportunities for real situations to arise. If rooms are kept quiet all the time, if order is imposed all the time, if teachers make the laws all the time, there is no chance for a real vital situation. Through normal, natural situations in the schoolroom, such as might arise on the playground or in the nursery, give the children opportunities to discuss and plan for themselves correct, appropriate action to suit each occasion.

Labeling the situation with the right name is a forward step in moral conduct. Not often, in or out of schoolrooms, are actions labeled correctly. When an untruth is told, it should be stamped as a lie. The offender should be made to feel the disapproval of the whole group for his conduct. Such disapproval should rest on the conduct, however, and not on the child.

Situations Giving Opportunity to Lie Should Be Avoided.

Many times situations arise in the schoolrooms which are handled so injudicially by the teachers that the opportunity to lie is made so attractive that the children lie simply to show others how easy it is to fool the teacher. Thus a concept is formed which, by repetition and satisfaction in the doing, grows gradually into a habit. Let me illustrate this point with a story. I read recently in a book on education. I have forgotten the exact source.

A little boy in a rural school caught a young owl asleep. He

realized that it would awaken after a time and so planned, with the knowledge and consent of a group of children, to take the bird into the schoolroom and let it fly free. A little later, when he thought the opportune moment had arrived, he opened his coat and let the owl out. The bird flew around the room and settled up on the door frame. The room was very still. Had the teacher been wise he would have done nothing in the situation. As it was he picked out the worst boy in the class and asked, "Arthur, did you bring that bird into the schoolroom?" Arthur had not brought it in but he was with the boy who had done it, and he had promised the group that he would stand by them and not tell. He also felt that the teacher was very unfair to put him in a situation where he had either to lie or to be disloyal, so he said what one hundred children out of a hundred would have said, "No, I don't know how the owl got here." Then the teacher said, "We will find out." So he proceeded to make inquiry of one child after another until he reached the mischievous leader of the group. "Do you know how this owl got in here?" The leader answered, "Yes, sir." Then all the children thought that while they had kept him out of trouble they were caught lying themselves. They looked at him very carefully as the teacher continued, "You do? Well, how did it get in here?" Then the boy replied soberly, "I am not sure, but I think perhaps it came down the flue." A sigh of relief ran all through that classroom. The mischievous boy became immediately a hero in the eyes of his classmates. Thus his group stamped with approval an unworthy action and these children had been taught an easy way to escape.

When things go wrong in the schoolroom and it is impossible to know what to do, it is wisest to do nothing. Wait. Do not ask children questions if there is little or no chance to obtain the information. Above all things prevent the children from getting the idea that loyalty to each other is higher than loyalty to truth.

Character, then, is not instinctive, it is not inherited, it is obtained by building. If we desire to obtain it we must work to build it. The only way is to allow children through natural situations to learn the need of certain kinds of behavior. Next, there must be the correct naming of such kinds of conduct for the children in order that they may realize what sort of conduct they are performing. Good moral conduct is that which adds to the sum of human happiness; bad moral conduct is that which increases the sum of human woe. Lastly, the school room management must be so planned as to provide opportunities for much practice in real social behavior. Habitual social conduct will then be the resultant.

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Washington, D. C.

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