

Nursery Schools: Some Planning Principles Based on Child Psychology

By Dr. Margaret Lowenfeld 1945

The author of this article is chiefly known for her work as a psycho-therapist. At the Institute of Child Psychology, of which she is honorary director, and in private practice, she has exceptional opportunities for studying the child mind and of judging how each individual child should be trained. Very few schools in this country have been built for the individual training of the child during its most formative years. but it is to be hoped that in the near future schools will be established affording opportunities for meeting these individual needs.

In all organised society there must be the few who govern the solid background of ordinary citizens pursuing their daily lives.

Britain is particularly favoured in the wide variety of individual types of her people, and education has now accepted as a basic principle the wisdom of providing differing types of educational curriculum. The question of selection is a very serious one; children conform over easily to a dominant, pattern, and if prestige is attached to it make the most earnest endeavour to succeed within that pattern—or else they rebel against it, and rejecting the whole emerge from school uninterested and culturally illiterate.

This is not essentially perhaps the fault of the school. The battle has already been lost by the time the child reaches eleven.

Small children show great variety of type and characteristics, and the day is long past when the child was looked upon as a tabula rasa upon which the adult wrote what he would. All modern work on children is agreed that it is in the years up to five that the foundations of future character are laid, a fact known to Roman Catholic educators from very early days. This is the time when, if circumstances are suitable, it is possible to discern differences of temperament and aptitude and when it is possible for a child to discover its own possibilities and lay the foundation for future self-confidence and productivity.

The circumstances must however be such as make this possible. In the past nature took care of this, and contact with streams and flowers, animals and growing plants, gave the child that variety of experience upon which real contact with life is based. All this is

denied to the greater majority of modern children. Whether they are rich or poor, water is a substance that comes from a tap, milk from a bottle, light and heat from something controlled by a switch in the wall. Music too comes now, not from a friendly grown-up at a piano, but from a switch. Nothing can be experimented with, all is fixed, mysterious, immutable. How in these circumstances can a child find itself?

But democracy is based upon people who have found themselves: who have their roots deep in nature and have made their terms with reality. The discipline which works with children, or with adults for that matter, is the discipline of reality, the contact with the compelling forces of nature, not the often inconsequent commands of human beings. A child needs to try the stability of natural law and discover for himself the nature of the elements, as this child of four is doing in a modern playroom:—

Play with water.—Partly filled a jam-jar With water and fetched two celluloid fish to put in it. Filled up the jar with water and was interested to find that the fish floated and that they came up again if pushed down. Then filled the jar with sand until the fish were buried. Fetched a handful of coloured sticks to float in the world tray and pushed them about in the water. Fetched a tin lorry to float it in the water, but lost interest in it when it did not float. Filled up various containers with water. Found a fitment belonging to the tap and was interested and rather surprised that the water ran through instead of staying in it. Fetched a chair and splashed water over it.

To do this he needs the provision of suitable circumstances in which by himself he can experiment with them.

Children are very individual. Some like noise, some hate it, some like playing with their fellows, some working out their own problems on their own initiative. Some are keenly responsive to beauty, some indifferent to it; some good with their hands, some clumsy and unskilful; some children like drawing and painting, others prefer to “mess” with sand and water; some are responsive to colour and some indifferent to it; most children are all these things at one time or another and rarely long at any of them. But for sound education provision should be made for all these things. The pathetic part of so much education is the lack of interest children show in school subjects, and the foundation for this is laid in the early years when school comes to mean carrying out activities prescribed by grown—ups, most of which come as an intrusion into the child’s own world of interest and adventure.

On the other hand the teacher’s point of View has also to be taken into account. Classes are already too large and work too heavy for any further burdens to be laid upon them. Work needs to be made easier, not heavier, and nursery-school buildings so

designed that part of the work is accomplished by their construction. This is an easy goal which can be satisfactorily accomplished by sound planning.

Let us then consider what is necessary to achieve this end, taking each point in turn:—

1. Water.—All those who work with children in natural surroundings know the fascination water has for children. This is sound and carries the seed of future interest in science and experimentation and should be given full scope. At the same time this must so be planned that it makes no further work for the adult staff.

This can easily be achieved by provision of taps at a convenient level in a separate part of the room over a floor which slopes slightly to an outside drain. A low barricade of cement or other material separates this and the children playing on it from the rest of the room. In the Institute of Child Psychology and the clinics designed by it, this type of arrangement has been found successful and greatly appreciated by children of all ages, and with the addition of very simple equipment of jars and tins can provide children with the opportunities they need for experiment and joy in the amusing characteristics of water.

2. Mess-Digging in the garden is mess in the drawing—room—lack of opportunity to explore the smearing qualities of substances leads too often to dislike of kindred activities such, for instance, as cooking. Sand is clean dirt and if available in suitable trays within reach of water, gives children an essential foundation of tactile experience.

3. Variety—A group of 30-50 children can be induced to do the same thing at the same time but they rarely want to, or not for long. Nursery schoolrooms (and playgrounds) should be so constructed that instead of presenting to children and teacher a rectangular space they should, in their construction, suggest the breaking up into smaller groups doing different things.

Thus, in addition to the "water and mess" corner there should be possibilities for those periods of hammering and destructive noise needed by most children at some time in their week to be exercised without disturbance to the rest; and a quiet corner for the quiet child. This quiet corner can also be the place where "precious things" can be studied and admired.

Experiment is a necessary part of every child's life and adventurous nursery-school head—teachers have already found that, if scope is allowed for it, children will combine together spontaneously and not by command of the teacher (and command however

gently given is still command) in the design and carrying out of projects expressive of their own desires. These will be crude, doubtless, but it suitable long, low cupboards are available whose tops can form bases for "piers and walks" (if the goal be the construction of a "seaside with ships ") and sufficient crude material be available, scope for all kinds of activities is provided.

It seems unnecessary to say, rooms should be sunny except that sad experience shows that nursery schools are still built facing north and with uniform asphalt playgrounds. Buildings designed to cater for the needs of small children could so distribute their bulk that outdoor play-space is broken up into manageable units and the possibility created for the protection of the shy child, and the one liking small groups on the other hand, and equally give scope to the rowdy, boisterous different type of child.