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Harriet M. Johnson: Pioneer 1867-1934

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Harriet M. Johnson: Pioneer

1867-1934

NOWADAYS, nursery schools are more or less taken for granted as appropriate undertakings even for federal emergency relief, though, of course, they are not universally approved of. But seventeen years ago—in 1917—when Harriet M. Johnson presented her first plan for “An Educational Experiment for Young Children” to the Bureau of Educational Experiments, there was not, so far as I know, a genuine nursery school in America. Under the name of Nursery Schools, Miss Macmillan had been working in England with groups of children. The main object was relief to working mothers, and the general scheme was an enlargement of the family set-up with older children helping in the care of younger ones. Harriet Johnson’s thinking about nursery schools extended beyond this family need, and placed the chief emphasis upon the needs of the children themselves. This was true from the beginning, as indicated in her first plan; to the end, as outlined in a plan she made a few days before her death on February 21st; and all through the intervening years when she directed the Nursery School of the Bureau of Educational Experiments, now appropriately changed to the Harriet Johnson Nursery School.

In her own interests, which included the social-economic problems of the parents, there met two other trends in the attitude towards children both of which were in the early stages of development. The first trend is represented by experimental education; the second, by child research. She organized her Nursery School as a laboratory for experimentation along both lines.

Harriet Johnson not merely reconciled these two trends in her work; she made each function more fully because of the other. (Theoretically this should always be the case; but in practice, one of these interests usually prevails to the detriment, if not the obliteration, of the other.) Experimental schools were in the early stages of working out a curriculum based upon experience rather than content. The more consistent of them,—a more accurate word than “radical”—were attempting to make the school a laboratory where children could make strategic discoveries about things and people—a place where experience went over readily and naturally into expression. The group with whom Harriet Johnson worked made a survey of twenty-seven of these early experimental schools in 1917, besides working in close affiliation with the City and Country School which Miss Johnson always considered the original inspiration of her educational thinking and which was in its fourth year at the time she made the first plan for a nursery school.

Harriet Johnson had a rare ability shown both in her genius for friendship and in her work. She understood the way other people thought and felt and learned even from seemingly alien minds. This, combined with a singular integrity of purpose and thinking, enriched her own deep experiences. At the same time, it kept her from the dogmatism or “infallibility” which so often characterizes pioneer thinking. Thus she was able to apply the thinking of these experimental schools in a fresh way to the needs of younger children.

She approached the problem of a Nursery

School from the educational point of view of working out an environment suited to the growth needs of two- and three-year-olds. She was singularly fitted by training and temperament to understand the wide gamut of these needs. She knew the physical needs of small children as a specialist knows them, and paid meticulous care to diet, sleep, and routine physical habits, sending a report home with each child each day to each mother. She was keenly alive to the emotional needs of these small human beings just emerging from complete dependence upon adults and still needing the security of affection to return to after valiant excursions into independence. She believed that these babies needed a warm relationship with the adults within the school and was never afraid to be a human being—friendly, humorous, and responsive. She treated play, even in its earliest sensuous and motor manifestations, as an educational adventure—not as a “pre-educational” period to be outgrown as soon as possible. She recognized the educational play element in the motor experiments with their bodies, in the rhythmic and colorful laryngeal activity which permeated their early language and often carried on its existence independently of content, in the pattern or design quality in their block building.

The problem of the school set-up—its equipment and program, and the attitude of its teachers—thus became quite literally the problem of constantly adjusting the environment to meet the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual needs of children of eighteen months, or two or three years. This meant thinking in terms of growth needs and of the corresponding “maturity levels.”

Such a statement will sound fairly obvious to many people now. That this point of view no longer seems strange within a nursery school is due in no small measure to

Harriet Johnson herself—to the influence of her writings and of her own Nursery School. For she did not rest content with “hunches” as to maturity levels nor with general impressions as to the success or failure of her nursery environment. She wished to know the precise use which the babies made of each specific piece of equipment; she felt it important to know how such habits as food dislikes or control of urination were affected by the attitudes of the adults; she was interested in establishing any relationship between a child's behavior and his physiological maturity such as bodily proportions, use of small muscles, method of going up or down stairs. She demanded of herself that the procedures within the Nursery, even when based on “hunches,” be intentional to the point of being stated, and that the results be recorded in terms of behavior and analyzed in terms of growth.

Behavior norms, motor patterns, maturity levels, were new expressions in Nursery School language when she began to work out her behavior records. In addition to taking a full-day record of each child once a month, she and her staff lived with pencil and pad in their pockets, prepared for running comments. Aside from their intriguing content, some of these records might well be published as a contribution to the methods of studying growth. They were not worked out in isolation. They bear the imprint of many minds. For seventeen years Miss Johnson worked with the specialists on the Bureau staff—physician, psychologists, social worker, anthropologist, statistician, and other special recorders. She was a member of the research staff as well as director of the Nursery School, and her records provided the chief data for many purely research workers. She learned to speak their language—not quite as did the specialists themselves, but in a way which immensely enriched her

own observational and interpretive powers.

Due to her rare ability to project herself into the thinking of other people, she probably profited by this "coöperative thinking" more than any other member of the group, though for all it was a rich experience. Here, again, some of her studies of individual children made from consecutive years of her long, full-day individual records and interpreted against the background of the child's brief daily record and of the record of the activities of the whole group make a contribution to the methods of study as well as to child psychology worthy of publication.

In the course of this discipline of record taking, Miss Johnson faced questions such as the technical reliability of her records, the value of qualitative descriptions of behavior which could not be reduced to quantitative measurements, the significance for nursery children of formal psychological tests, of bodily proportions, of home attitudes and, above all, the possibility of building the observations of the various specialists into an organic picture of a growing child. At the same time she was facing within the classroom such questions as: When should a child be given responsibility for his own actions and when should the teacher take it for him? Is there a "pre-social" stage in which children react to one another in much the experimental way that they do to things? What effect has emotional stability upon the development of work habits? And many, many more.

She came through to working answers on many of these fundamental problems of studying behavior and of interpreting behavior in terms of growth—of maturity levels. Some of these answers she embodied in her publications, some of them in the practices of her Nursery School, and some in her teaching at the Coöperative School

for Student Teachers of which she was so vital a part. But some, she was still hard at work upon last February. That more of her thinking did not get into publishable form constitutes a major loss both to education and to child research. But I suppose a creative person—and surely Harriet Johnson was one—never gets through, by the very nature of the case.

Enough of her thinking got into practice and into print to affect very deeply the trend of nursery school development. There is still the danger of haphazard living in a nursery classroom content with pleasant, unchallenging "busy work" or with over-stimulating or over-mature content. There is still the danger of losing the human relationship with little children in the attempt to assume the mask-like impersonality of science and the danger of basing the study of behavior upon situations which can be split into units and counted, regardless of the impulses behind the behavior or of the significance of the conditioning factors. All of us know many nursery schools and much research work of all these types. Harriet Johnson threw the weight of her experience against divorcing education and the study of growth, against recording children's behavior except in an educational environment, and against leaving an educational experiment unchecked by records. The extent of this contribution, the extent to which it is embodied in the Nursery School which now bears her name and in the training school which she helped to organize, the extent to which it has permeated and modified the thinking of educators—research workers, present and future—cannot be measured. The contribution of pioneers is often absorbed into the work in its later stages of development. But that makes it no less real.

LUCY SPRAGUE MITCHELL.