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The Modern Teacher: From the Unpublished Writings of Harriet M. Johnson

Harriet M. Johnson

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THE MODERN TEACHER
FROM THE UNPUBLISHED WRITINGS OF
HARRIET M. JOHNSON

CURRENT NOTES ABOUT CHILDREN CURRICULUM AND RESEARCH FOR TEACHERS AND PARENTS ... COOPERATIVE SCHOOL FOR STUDENT TEACHERS HARRIET JOHNSON NURSERY SCHOOL · BUREAU OF EDUCATIONAL EXPERIMENTS

69 bank street · New York City
When Harriet M. Johnson died in the spring of 1934, the nursery school had made a definite place for itself in the progressive education program. Those who are familiar with the transition from the day nursery to the nursery school are aware of Miss Johnson's contribution to the thesis, now commonly accepted, that the early periods of growth are crucial ones requiring the guidance of highly trained teachers. In 1919 she founded the first professional nursery school in the United States as part of the program of the Bureau of Educational Experiments and, as its active director, saw it expand substantially in size and influence.

Harriet Johnson's years of work in defining the values of nursery school education were an expression of her broad concern for the larger problem of human behavior. Without ever crossing the line into sentimentality, she had a warm devotion to everything that was human. Because of her natural endowment it was inevitable that her devotion should express itself in the form of careful analytical study, in an unceasing search for an understanding of fundamental processes of growth, for the formulation of optimal conditions for growing. She felt that a child, if he is to live well, must live realistically. He must live in terms of his own experience, for the sake of his own needs, in the warmth of his own gratifications. It was the adult's job to bend himself to the level of the child, to try to feel the child's kind of seeing, hearing and touching, to comprehend what qualities in the child's experience yield pure joy and create the desire to go on. In her writings, as well as in the capacity of teacher and director of the nursery school which now bears her name, Harriet Johnson had crystallized general ideas into a solid body of working methods, a formulated procedure.

In recent years she gave much of her time as a staff member of the Cooperative School for Student Teachers to the question of the relation between the child and the adult, more specifically the adult who serves as teacher. From her papers we have made several selections, all focussed on the central theme of what kind of person a child needs for his teacher. These extracts are presented here with brief explanations added where it seemed necessary. Other material dealing with curriculum problems will soon be published.
THE MODERN TEACHER From the Unpublished Writings of HARRIET M. JOHNSON

(This first excerpt raises a group of questions which came out of a discussion with the teaching staff with whom Miss Johnson did her most recent work. Several teachers meetings had been devoted to trying to define what kind of control a teacher should seek to exercise, to asking whether a sound and natural teacher-child relation might not spontaneously create an adequate mode of control.)

Teacher control in the classroom is a misleading term. We mean by it a variety of things. First perhaps, the methods that are used when some details of the program are resisted by the children or when the teacher-child or child-child relationship is in question. Second, those that keep the program moving, that add an experience when it is needed, those that make it possible for a curriculum to have meaning and unity in terms of child control. Specifically, what is the procedure when dinner is refused, when nap is resisted - not only passively but violently and at the expense of group serenity?

What should the teacher's reaction be to personal attacks, and how does her response differ with different age levels? What should she do about flagrant social violations - biting, seizing toys, pushing? At what point shall she enter the play situation, to check or to stimulate?

As I see it the basis of indecision in regard to these things rests on the assumption traditionally held that teachers were not people in their relationship with children. They were guides and counsellors but never friends. They were guardians of morals, they were fountains of wisdom, they had a very active instructional attitude and responsibility toward their pupils, and always they were persons above and apart.

Then came the new education and the pendulum swung out into a different arc - if such a figure can mean anything. Preschool education was taken very seriously, especially in the larger research centers. The Child, capitalized, was to be regarded with such respect that no adult was to intrude upon his activities or his impulses. He was allowed Experimentation and Investigation, in the course of which he was to develop Habits, Attitudes and Skills which would help him become a self-educated social being.

The role of the teacher was to be that of the benevolent neutral - an automaton all of whose reactions were studied and so controlled that no personal flavor except approval or disapproval could reach the children.
The third point of view seems to us more nearly an approach to normal. Here are children and adults living in a social group. The attitude of the adults - the teachers - is that the society established is essentially the children's, the activities carried on are child initiated, and the freedom from dependence on adults is one of the major aims - yet there must be a relationship between teacher and children which is as genuine to the adults as it is to the children.

This necessitates the possibility of spontaneous social responses on the part of the teachers. That is, as soon as the teacher ceases to be a detached superior and becomes the senior partner in a social organization, she has less fear about just what responses she should make in any given situation. The moment she becomes assured, she is a freer and therefore a more easily understood person.

From that point on she has tried to examine the conclusions and to determine the degree to which her own individual prejudices or points of view have weighted her planning. To a certain and limited extent this is possible but, for the most part, her safest course is again to go back to children - to early known growth tendencies, to their responses to the curriculum, and to observable steps in their development.

(The briefer selections which follow are representative of Miss Johnson's search for a broad concept of what a teacher-child relation should be. Where she introduces the need for a quality of playfulness in dealings with children, she is speaking out of deep personal experience. At the same time that the staff of the nursery school were seriously studying growth sequences, and carefully recording minute illustrations, they were maintaining a light and buoyant relation with each of their children. The human factor was never lacking.)

The first attention of the teacher is directed to knowing and understanding the individual children and introducing herself to them so that they will know and understand her. The younger the children the more all adults seem alike to them. They are likely to address all teachers as "mama" and after they get the name of one to apply it to all, "Louise," "other Louise," just as all children including themselves are "baby."

The relationship which the teacher has to establish is different from that which the child has known before. It is less indulgent and less demonstrative; but at the same time
personal, intimate and attentive. Her attitude is equally authoritative but less corrective. She is working all the time to make children independent of her, to teach them to look to themselves for the solution of their problems, but at the same time she has and maintains a real place in the social group. She is never a neutral spectator.

It is a very intensive individual study that she is undertaking, for however important the group concerns are, the individual members must not be allowed to sink out of notice.

With little children there may be personality problems which have already assumed serious proportions, like acute fears or difficulties of muscle tensions, or a fixation on familiar adults which makes adjustment an acute and also an imperative item for consideration and treatment. Some of these difficulties might not be discovered if the teacher were not holding in mind the opportunities offered the children in the school situation and each child's acceptance or rejection of them. Children are allowed for instance, a wide choice in their activities, but if one of them consistently avoids heights, or consistently limits his play to vehicles which keep him seated and propelled or propelling, it becomes part of the teacher's challenge and satisfaction to free him from restricting fears and narrowing choices so that he may meet his environment with the zest of confidence.

* * * * *

A teacher should be, I believe, quite a new kind of person. She must be at first a mother understudy. After the first few weeks of adjustment, in the case of older children after a few days or hours only, she needs no longer to play the part of a substitute. The impression she must try to carry with her, and give out because it is true, is of her interest in children's activities - an interest that recognized that play, the development of play interests and play products are really important. I hesitate to say play products because that may seem to put the emphasis upon a standard in producing, whereas it is the process, the activity, that is really important in its effect upon development.

A teacher must be a person to whom a child is as real a person as another adult. If she actually and intuitively has this feeling about children, she will treat them as equals. She will be informal, casual, interestingly cordial and not patronizing in her relationship with them. In her man-to-man attitude she will consider difference in development but not in essential quality. Affection and respect will be combined.

* * * * *
Above and beyond the practical techniques of classroom teaching, of planning trips, discussions and stories so that the sense of continuity which the teacher feels will be communicated to the children in terms of an ordered living and experiencing together, there are other methods used by the skilled teacher which lend to the life of the group a lyric quality of beauty and joy. It is true that each teacher has an opportunity to use in her teaching whatever individual artistry is native to her in her contacts with people.

It may take the form of a bantering, humorous response. A child catching the word "please" says with a grin, "Did you ever hear of 'ease'??" "Did you ever hear of 'tease'??" counters the teacher promptly. "Did you ever hear of 'ice'??" laughs Henry. "Did you ever hear of 'mice'??" the teacher flashes back companionably.

It may take the form of whole-hearted appreciation of a joke even when it is directed against the authority of the teacher. It may mean that, in a quiet moment, between items in the schedule, the teacher will recall something the group has done or seen together - a sensuous rather than an intellectual experience. "Do you remember how the snow bent down the branches of the big pine tree when you were playing snowbirds under it last week?"

It may mean the adaptation of an expression in some story or poem they have all enjoyed together. In a tense moment among six-year-olds, an explanation concluding with a cheerful, "And so that was all right, Oh Best Beloved," from their favorite "Just So Stories" has cleared away the clouds at once.

(Miss Johnson was deeply concerned with the idea of how far the teacher's job might extend itself without getting outside the range of what could be humanly expected from active teachers. She did not think a teacher should attempt to become expert in dealing with individual deviations - the problem child. She regarded it as essential, however, that she have a sufficiently clear realization of physical and mental health so as to be able to call upon appropriate specialists at the proper time. Her position is expanded in the following extract.)

Teachers as well as children must proceed from the point which they have reached in their understanding. They must go from the known to fields of further investigation. It
is still a much debated question how far teachers should be expected to enter the mental hygiene field. It seems to me somewhat comparable to that of medicine. We ask teachers to be students of behavior; to be so aware of the usual responses of children-in-health that they can detect variations in individual patterns, and from them can judge whether or not a child is in a state of health which makes it advisable for him to remain in the group, to be withdrawn for a period of rest, or to be excluded for his own safety and that of other children. We do not expect teachers to diagnose or to treat illness, but to judge when a physician should be consulted or the responsibility turned back to the home.

I realize that the critical difference between physical and mental health lies in the fact that the educational program may contribute part of the treatment of disturbed emotional states to a greater extent than it does of any specific physical disorder. As far as general hygiene is concerned, the school program should contribute to physical and mental health alike, and we believe that within and because of the school experiences our children gain in physical vigor, in emotional control, in buoyancy and satisfaction unless they are suffering from serious maladjustments. The recognition of symptoms requiring more expert help than it lies in the school's power to give should certainly be a part of the teacher's equipment.

Beyond that there is a job that is essentially the teacher's, namely, that of working out the principles on which she bases her educational procedures, the experiences which are to be offered children and the methods by which, as children gain in maturity, continuity is maintained and the school's program becomes an integrated one. To do this she must know something of the activities and interests which engage children and how these activities and interests change with increasing maturity - the maturity levels of different growth periods. She must go a step further before her researches can serve her in their practical application to the educational process. She will find impulses that tend to pull children back into familiar, well-trodden paths of dependence - as well as those that promise experience on a wider horizon. She will find the cultivation of limiting, restricting activities less difficult often than those which tend to establish a child in a more dynamic relationship to his environment. She will observe that reliance upon her, or upon other members of the group, may seem to give deeper satisfaction than self-initiation. From the wide variety of behavior patterns that she observes, she must choose those which seem most surely to favor devel-
opment - and must cultivate them by means of the play materials she provides and the attitudes she holds toward activities carried on by the children.

Teaching I conceive to be continually a learning situation. It is essential that the teacher construct an hypothesis, a conception of the conditions within which children can live together and grow most profitably, and that she carry out a program consistent with her conception. However, she will maintain a critical attitude toward the program and her educational practice, and will attempt to test it by the new knowledge of children and of growth that the extension of her experience brings her. There must be stability in the school environment and consistency in the methods used with children. It takes time to test any thesis. An experimental attitude does not mean rapid shifts in method. It implies a clear-eyed honesty in looking at one's work, and a willingness to make modifications which will hold it truer to its original purpose.

The teacher is a specialist in education. She has before her the task of building a curriculum and of testing it - its suitability and its effectiveness - with the group as well as in the case of individual children. It is essential that she work closely with other specialists concerned with the problems of growth, especially in the field of emotional motivation, and that she gain enough insight into the basis of their assumptions to understand the possible relationship to her work with them. An interpretation of behavior and of educational processes in terms of individual psychology lies outside her province when she is working closely with a specialist.

(Such indices as categorical lists of personality traits or routine outlines of desirable responses for a teacher are proffered from time to time. It was characteristic that such classifications were repugnant to Miss Johnson. An itemized teacher - as well as an itemized person - seemed an unproductive concept to one who saw the teacher always as a person functioning in a professional situation. Perhaps nowhere else has Miss Johnson stated so succinctly her realization of the dependence of professional contribution on personal development.)

Why is there so much agitation just now about teachers of progressive schools? In educational conferences and periodicals one hears addresses and reads articles discussing the demands made on teachers by the newer education, and more rarely the opportunities and privileges it opens to them.
The teacher needs first of all to see children. She needs to see them primarily as active doers; to understand that at all ages doing is a force for growing if it is controlled and directed by the individual in action; she needs to study the impulses that dominate children at different periods and to recognize whether their drive is native or the result of adult influence. Second, she needs to realize children's powers, the scope of their ability to handle problems, whether concerned with everyday living or more narrowly intellectual. Third, she needs to appreciate that children are essentially artists and that it is the process of the creative use of materials rather than the resulting product that is important in growth. Beyond all this she needs to have resources at her command so that she can carry an experimental attitude toward the work she is doing and can be ready to regard the opinions she holds as subject to change if her own growth or further experiences lead her to modify them. It is this that makes teaching a continuously learning process. It is not a process of fixed knowing but of finding out.

How can a teacher learn these things more vividly than by living in an environment which opens to her opportunities to test her own powers, to pursue lines of investigation in various fields, to try out for herself some form of art expression.

In our schools the exploration of the environment is done in terms of the level of maturity and interest in the different age groups. We find that the process itself at each age means a distinct sharpening of children's observation, an increase in the ability to seize upon salient points, and an added enjoyment in living and playing.

The same thing seems to be true of adults. Crossing the ferry with a group of teachers who have done field work in their own environment proves the value of their experience. One gets a sense that the world is an open source book and the study of it a thrilling adventure.

This is only an illustration of a method of teacher training which we believe would begin to make teachers more real and vivid people — more able to give the newer education the security and stability of the older formal method, without losing the poignancy and delight of a creative art.

The child who, meeting her teacher, said "I thought at first you were a lady," was making a distinction that has often been made in thought if not in speech, not that teachers have not been considered ladies, but that they have not been expected to be real persons. It is essentially the real person that
the modern school requires a person who has had richness and variety in her background, to whom life has brought developing experience aside from the scholastic training required by her school job.

The same methods prevail when the teachers lead their pupils back into the past or afar into distant fields. The modern school asks of teachers a quality that is rarer than encyclopedic knowledge of a subject. They must see their particular field in its relation to various situations and times. They must be familiar with source materials so that whether the question that comes up concerns certain modern processes in manufacture, or political life in the time of the Incas, they can open up significant lines of investigation for pupils to follow, and can suggest points of discussion which will lead students to see the bearing of one phase of modern life upon other phases, or to find common factors in ancient and subsequent periods of history.

The people of this present-day culture tend to live vicariously to an extent beyond that of any previous age. They look at other people's work and play; they listen to other people speak or sing; they satisfy their interest in games by watching a score board or listening to a radio announcer. We are not entirely complacent about this tendency of ours. We become restless and seek a more active sharing in life.

There seem to be two methods used by people as a compensation and resistance to this sort of living. First is the attempt to divert the vicarious experience of the present to an equally vicarious but less feverish living in the past.

A study of past civilizations when they were in the process of growth seems a more significant experience to many persons than any sort of study or participation in our own. The art of the past and gone is more living, because familiar and better understood, than present experiments in new forms. Primitive processes seem more full of meaning to these scholarly protestants than any achievement of this mechanistic age.

The second method involves using the here and now, looking at the past in the light of the present and at both as phases in an evolutionary process which is still going on. Its emphasis is on the future rather than the past. The group which is its exponent demands participation in the present. They seek avenues of exploration. They repudiate the role of quiescent acceptance and raise questions which they attempt to answer by their own' investigations. They tend to a wide field of experimentation, with the result that their activities seem per-
haps cruder and their techniques often less masterly than those of the first group.

Which of these methods means an actual grappling with present conditions? Will social progress and maturity ever come by a retreat from reality? If we are ever to cope with the evils of the present age and if we are ever fully to profit by its advantages, we must face it and understand it.

We can never turn back the clock and revert to a period of simpler, less sophisticated living. Evolution does not proceed that way, and after all the normal person in any day and age is the one who faces life and lives it, trying at least to get the drift of the tendencies of his times - to understand them. This it seems to me is the basis of modern school planning.

To carry on such education teachers are needed - more of the rare spirits that the fortunate among us may have met once or twice in the course of our school years. In a recent book by a schoolman, Abraham Flexner, he quite unintentionally stated the case for the progressive school in these words: "From the standpoint of practical need, society requires of its leaders not so much specifically trained competency at the moment, as the mastery of experience, an interest in problems, dexterity in finding one's way, disciplined capacity to put forth effort." When opportunities for growth are found within the educational field, it will be possible to attract to training schools teachers who have the quality for such leadership and the challenge of the children will be answered.

NEXT MONTH - Barbara Biber, psychologist of the Harriet Johnson Nursery School, will use case records as the basis for raising such questions as the interpretive possibilities of standard psychological tests, various levels of individual adaptability and others which are pertinent to the study of the individual child in the setting of the progressive school.
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THE ART OF BLOCK BUILDING
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Reprints of Articles by Harriet M. Johnson

Play Materials for the Pre-School Child ) $0.10
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Harriet M. Johnson: Pioneer
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Harriet M. Johnson: The Scientific Attitude in Education
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