CLASSICS OF SCIENCE: Pestalozzi on Education

Education

The father of modern teaching methods, summing up for his friend Greaves in England his principles of child training, points out a goal which our most progressive educators are just beginning to find ways to attain.

LETTERS ON EARLY EDUCATION. Addressed to J. P. Greaves, Esq., by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Translated from the German Manuscript. London, 1827.

Letter XXIX.

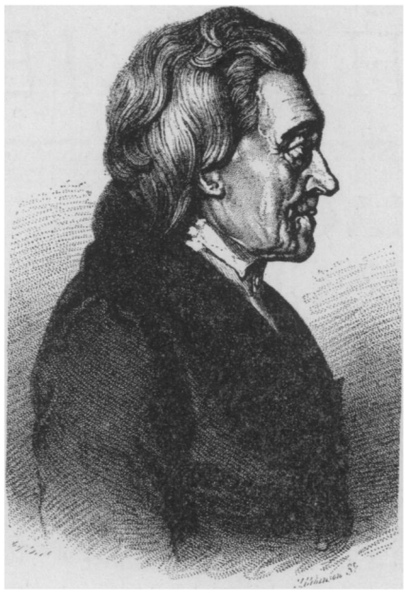
April 4, 1819.

MY DEAR GREAVES,

The second rule that I would give to a mother, respecting the early development of the infant mind, is this: Let the child not only be *acted upon,* but let him be an *agent* in intellectual education.

I shall explain my meaning: Let the mother bear in mind that her child has not only the faculties of attention to, and retention of, certain ideas or facts, but also a faculty of reflection, independent of the thoughts of others. It is well done to make a child read, and write, and learn, and repeat—but it is still better to make a child THINK. We may be able to turn to account the opinions of others, and we may find it valuable or advantageous to be acquainted with them: we may profit by their light; but we can render ourselves most useful to others, and we shall be entitled to the character of valuable members of society, by the efforts of our own mind; by the result of our own investigations; by those views, and their application, which we may call our intellectual property.

I am not now speaking of those leading ideas, which are from time to time thrown out, and by which science is advanced, or society benefitted at large. I am speaking of that stock of intellectual property, which every one, even the most unpretending individual, and in the humblest walks of life, may acquire. I am speaking of that habit of reflection, which guards against unthinking conduct under any circumstances, and which is always active to examine that which is brought before the mind; that habit of reflection, which excludes the self-sufficiency of ignorance, or the levity of "a little learning"; which may lead an individual to the modest acknowledgment that he knows but little, and to the honest consciousness that he knows that little well. To engender this habit, nothing is so effective, as



JOHANN HEINRICH PESTALOZZI

an early development, in the infant mind, of thought—regular, self-active thought. . . .

If a mother asks for the designation of the subjects which might be profitably used as vehicles for the development of thought, I would answer her, that any subject will do, if it be treated in a manner suitable to the faculties of the child. It is the great art in teaching, never to be at a loss for the choice of an object for the illustration of a truth. There is not an object so trivial, that in the hands of a skilful teacher might not become interesting, if not from its own nature, at least from the mode of treating it. To a child everything is new. The charm of novelty, it is true, soon wears off; and if there is not the fastidiousness of matured years, there is at least the impatience of infancy to contend with. But then there is for the teacher the great advantage of a combination of simple elements, which may diversify the subject without dividing the attention.

If I say that any subject will do for the purpose I mean this to be understood literally. Not only there is not one of the little incidents in the life of a child, in his amusements and recreations, in his relations to his parents and friends and playfellows—but there is not actually anything within the reach of the child's attention, whether it belong to nature, or to the employments and arts of life, that might not be made the object of a lesson, by which some useful knowledge might be imparted, and, which is still more important, by which the child might be familiarized with the habit of thinking on what he sees, and speaking after he has thought.

The mode of doing this is not by any means to talk much *to* a child, but to enter into conversation *with* a child; not to address to him many words, however familiar or well chosen, but to bring him to express himself on the subject; not to exhaust the subject, but to question the child about it, and to let him find out, and correct, the answers. It would be ridiculous to expect that the volatile spirits of an infant could be brought to follow any lengthy explanations. The attention of a child is deadened by long expositions, but roused by animated questions.

Let these questions be short, clear, and intelligible. Let them not merely lead the child to repeat, in the same, or in varied terms, what he has heard just before. Let them excite him to observe what is before him, to recollect what he has learned, and to muster his little stock of knowledge for materials for an answer. Show him a certain quality in one thing, and let him find out the same in others. Tell him that the shape of a ball is called round; and if, accordingly, you bring him to point out other objects to which the same predicament belongs, you have employed him more usefully than by the most perfect discourse on rotundity. In the one instance he would have had to listen, and to recollect; in the other, he has to observe, and to think.

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Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) as a youth was filled with zeal to help humanity, and came to the conclusion that education, especially for the poor, was the great need of his time. After some experience in conducting a school in his own home, he published, at the age of 35, his story "Leonhard and Gertrude" in which he developed his ideas of teaching children. He became recognized as the foremost authority on education. When he was 53 he was able to establish the school of his plans, at first in Burgdorf, later at Yverdun on Lake Neuchatel. Here he taught Fröbel, the originator of the kindergarten, among other great teachers. Here he continued to expound his principles of education until, at the age of 79, he retired to Neuhof, the scene of his first little experiments in "unfolding the treasures of the infant mind."

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