TEXTO 1

How Far Can We Learn Anything of Practical Value From the Study of Foreign Systems of Education?

An Address given at the Guildford Educational Conference on Saturday 20 October 1900 (the Mayor of Guildford in the Chair), by M E SADLER, Christ Church, Oxford.

Canon Grant, who presided over the Morning Session of this conference, humorously complained that we were suffering from too much unanimity. But I am inclined to think that, on the subject which we are about to discuss, if we are quite frank with ourselves and with other people, we shall have to confess that we are not all of one mind. We are going to ask ourselves whether really there is anything of practical value to be got from studying foreign systems of Education. To that question, I suspect, we shall not all be disposed to give the same answer. However, it will at any rate lessen the likelihood of disagreement if we clear the ground to start with as to what is signified by the words Systems of Education.

In the address to which we listened with so much pleasure before luncheon, Mr Sharpe genially derided people who attempt to give a definition of an abstract word right off on the spur of the moment. Into that trap I am not going to fall, but it will prevent possible misunderstanding and difference of opinion (suppressed, if not expressed) if we ask ourselves in passing what we mean by Education. Now probably we shall agree that education does not consist solely in book-learning. It is, indeed, not so very long since those people in England who seemed to care most for the spread of popular Education, often spoke as though learning something new necessarily helped one to better. Sometimes they used language inherited from bygone times and from an earlier generation of reformers, which laid itself open to that interpretation. They often said things which implied that, if only you gave people more information, you would necessarily make them better. In these days we are not so sanguine as to think that. One of the last things we should wish to do would be to speak disrespectfully of knowledge, and of the need for learning, and of the delight which learning often brings. And obviously there are some things in the world, to learn which is a necessary part of trying to become better. Nor would anyone who knows what hard intellectual work is, deny that the effort made in learning a thing thoroughly, weighing it judiciously and applying it accurately, has a good effect on the character, and may refine and enoble it. But how rarely can any of us say that the mere fact that one has gained a little bit more information has strengthened the moral purpose of our life? Knowledge is a necessary ingredient and instrument of education, but not the be-all or the end-all of it. And let us not do some of our dead-and-gone educational reformers the injustice of believing that they really took so pedantic a view of human life as to think that intellectual enlightenment alone would suffice to secure moral reformation. It is true that their writings sometimes conveyed this impression, but those writings were composed at a time when the struggle for the means and the power to diffuse intellectual enlightenment was so severe and carried on at such heavy odds against the entrenched powers of resistance, that it naturally evoked almost a passion of moral enthusiasm among those who hated to hear stupidity singing the praises of popular ignorance. In those days, more than now, the winning of the right to knowledge...
was a moral victory, and some of our educational reformers failed to realise how much of
the moral good which in their own lives they had found to follow from the gaining access
to new knowledge, had really come to them through the strenuous and often most
unselfish efforts which they had made to break a way through mischievous barriers or to
rouse men from intellectual slumber.

To us, education is not intellectual enlightenment alone, nor the skilful care of
physical powers alone, though I fear that any one who took a candid view of some parts of
English education at the present time might feel that some of us care more about the body
and health than we care about anything else. Any part of education which has suffered
from undue neglect, revenges itself on us by securing for a time more attention than is in
fact its due. But, though education includes the training of the body and the training of the
intellect, it is something deeper and greater than physical and intellectual training. It is
these, and a moral influence as well. Nor is it a matter merely of schools and schoolrooms.
Surely, what we in England really mean in our hearts by education is that great aggregate
of the influences which come to us in our bornes, at church or chapel, in daily life, in
intercourse with our contemporaries, in love of home and father and mother — in all the
thousand streams of influence and suggestion which in a free country converge upon each
individual life, and shape ideals of conduct. The things which we in England most care for
in Education are just the things which in public we least like to talk about. Do we not
sometimes take refuge from that difficulty by laying quite undue stress on some of the
appurtenances and accessories of education which are indeed necessary but not essentially
important? Yet today we are about to discuss a subject, to the right understanding of which
it is necessary to come with no artificially narrow view of the meaning of Education.
Therefore, I must venture, with your leave, to touch for a moment on matters about which
it is necessary to come with no artificially narrow view of the meaning of Education.
Next, what do we mean by a System of Education? In his most kindly — worded
opening remarks, the Mayor alluded to me as an “educational expert”. While sincerely
thanking bis Worship for the confidence implied by that remark, may I most respect fully
deprecate the use of the expression “educational expert”, and certainly its application to
myself? Once used the word “education” in its larger and truer sense, and we begin to
realise that anyone who calls himself an educational expert is really claiming to be an
expert in life. Education is nothing less than an aspect of life. The more one is a student of
Education, the more one realises the depth and the necessary variety and the far-reaching
and delicate complexity of educational influences. In order to judge them fairly, to
interpret them sympathetically, it is not sufficient to be a specialist in pedagogy. One needs
a far deeper and more living experience than that. On Education as an aspect of life, all
who have tried to do their duty — be they rich or poor, learned or simple — have some
wise or warning word to say. The specialist is necessary — necessary up to a certain point
— in education as in everything else. But in nothing is it so dangerous as it is in education
to be guided by the judgement of the specialist alone. The judgement of the specialist
needs to be criticised, corrected and supplemented by the experience of all who have
direct knowledge of the problems of life for which education professes to prepare us; and
the methods of the specialists need to be frankly discussed by those who have watched the
practical results of those methods as illustrated by the skill, the character, and the good sense of the people in whose training those methods have been applied.

When we compare different systems of Education, we are often in great danger of slipping unconsciously into expressions which implicitly carry with them the idea that an educational system is nothing more or less than a system of schools. Now you may have an elaborate system of schools, perfectly tidy and neat, known to everybody in the street, an object of local satisfaction and immense boasting; you may multiply it by a thousand, and call it a national system of Education; and yet all the time you may be actually having less of a really national system of Education than is enjoyed by a free country which possesses a strong tradition of national unity, and knows that education is not a matter of schools or book-learning alone. Therefore, if we propose to study foreign systems of education, we must not keep our eyes on the brick and mortar institutions, nor on the teachers and pupils only, but we must also go outside into the streets and into the homes of the people, and try to find out what is the intangible, impalpable, spiritual force which, in the case of any successful system of Education, is in reality upholding the school system and accounting for its practical efficiency. No one can visit the German Schools without feeling great reverence for the brain-power, the energy, and the foresight of those who built up that school system. But a great school system like that of Germany (to speak of Germany as a whole, as at this distance we are justified in doing, though, of course, as a matter of fact the different parts of Germany have separate systems which differ from one another in many respects) a great school system like the German, does not run by itself. It is upheld by something outside itself — by the national interest in education. The higherschool system of Germany, as distinct from the elementary school system, is greatly influenced by the possibility of getting off part of the period of compulsory military service. If a boy goes through the whole course at a recognised secondary school, he is let off a year of compulsory service, and, what is more, he serves his year on a much higher social level than if we went as an ordinary private. In Wales, the new Intermediate Schools are upheld by the wonderful social enthusiasm of the people, and unless we take that into account and enter sympathetically into all that it implies and involves, we cannot judge those schools fairly. In the United States, where there is a far stronger public interest in organised education than there is here, you will find, I think, if you dig down deep enough, that what is really at the bottom of the matter is the inherited Puritan zeal for education and an earnest conviction that by means of schools alone can they stir up together all those alien elements which are going to the making of the American nation and convert them (as assuredly they are doing) into one people.

Some critics are fond of saying that our English system of schools is chaos. It is chaos in the sense in which a balloon that has not been blown up is a heap of cords and silk. In England (at least so it seems to me) what we want is not a cut-and-dried uniform system, but variety inspired by a sense of national unity. Foreigners often come to the Board of Education under the impression that it is the Education Department for the whole of the United Kingdom. Yet how different from the English is the Scottish system of Education, different not merely in administrative organisation, but in its traditions and in many of its most characteristic influences. How different again from both is the Irish system of Education, and how many of those present could, if taken by surprise and without books of reference, put down on paper an accurate account of the educational system of England and Wales, Scotland and Ireland? Yet the four countries are a United Kingdom. Or let us raise our eyes and look out over the chief colonies of the British Empire Nothing could be more diverse than many of the education enactments in force in
different colonies, and yet who shall that we are not a United Empire? I would submit, therefore, that, just as within the Empire as a whole, so also within the mother country which is the centre of the Empire, we shall find most congenial to our national temperament that system which will give us variety of education inspired by a sense of national unity. But, in order to preserve variety, we must insist on the efficiency of each part of the organisation. Inefficiency, sloppiness in organisation, indolence, slackness, administrative cynicism, want of precision in effort, want of imaginative and sympathetic foresight — these things, in education as elsewhere will always cost a country dear, and to no empire would they so disastrous as to our own. The price which has to be paid for freedom and prosperity, (the real prosperity which follows from noble effort, not the illusory prosperity which mistakes profits for progress), is unsleeping effort after a higher level of national and individual life and endeavour. And one of the surest symptoms of healthy vigour in the national character, and of earnest resolution to blend what is best in modern science with what is of tested value in our traditional way of life, will be found — under modern conditions — in the state of our school England cannot afford to be slack about education. And in order to remain the England of which we are proud, she must set her self to excel the whole world in that larger kind of education which results in a deepened character as well as in a sharpened intellect.

In studying foreign systems of Education we should not forget that the things outside the schools matter even more than the things inside the schools, and govern and interpret the things inside. We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and pick off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant. A national system of Education is a living thing, the outcome of forgotten struggles and difficulties, and “of battles long ago”. It has in it some of the secret workings of national life. It reflects, while it seeks to remedy, the failings of the national character. By instinct, it often lays special emphasis on those parts of training which the national character particularly needs. Not less by instinct it often shrinks from laying stress on points concerning which bitter dissensions have arisen in former periods of national history. But is it not likely that if we have endeavoured, in a sympathetic spirit, to understand the real working of a foreign system of education, we shall in turn find ourselves better able to enter into the spirit and tradition of our own national education, more sensitive to its unwritten ideals, quicker to catch the signs which mark its growing or fading influence, readier to mark the dangers which threaten it and the subtle workings of hurtful change? The practical value of studying, in a right spirit and with scholarly accuracy, the working of foreign systems of education is that it will result in our being better fitted to study and to understand our own.

Yet, apart from this, though on a lower plane of importance, there are some points in foreign systems of Education (administrative contrivances, methods of inspection, devices in teaching, etc.), which, even if they cannot be actually reproduced here, will at any rate suggest improvements in our own practice, just as foreign visitors find in English schools many suggestions for the improvement of their own schools at home. I do not lay stress on this, though I do not wish to underrate its importance. But it is not the most important side of the benefit which we shall derive from the careful, intelligent, and broadminded study of foreign systems.

Perhaps many of those present are aware that an increasing number of Training College students, in their third year of training, are being sent to France and Germany in order to study the language of the country and also its methods of teaching and system of
Education. We have reason to know that the results of this experiment have been beneficial to the students concerned. I should like to see this privilege of the selected third-year students extended to a number of older and more experienced teachers who, after several years of strenuous and successful work in their own schools, would thus enjoy a Sabbatical year of leisure for study, observation, and reflection under the stimulating conditions of residence in a foreign country. Considerable numbers of American teachers enjoy such a privilege, and I feel confident that a similar arrangement would serve an excellent purpose in our own country also. An experienced teacher learns a good deal from visiting another school and watching another teacher at work. It would be an excellent thing if considerable numbers of our experienced teachers, both in secondary and in elementary schools could be sent abroad and to America, in order to see and to judge, and then to tell us when they returned home whether some of the things which they had seen abroad were not an improvement on what is ordinarily done at home.

Another plan — it is rather a pious hope than a plan — which sometimes floats through my mind is that little groups of people should go abroad together (say, a couple of inspectors, a couple of chairmen of School Boards, some clerks of School Boards, some managers of Voluntary schools, a headmaster and mistress, and an assistant master and mistress, from a good town school and a master and a mistress with experience in good country schools) and really try in a systematic way to see something of the actual working and inner life of some foreign system of Education, studying it with exactitude and without hurry, according to a plan carefully made beforehand. The party would form a peripatetic commission, and I feel sure that, if permission from the foreign government were sought in the proper manner, the commissioners would meet with a cordial welcome. I should not venture to suggest that they should all agree to a single report, but that they should all write their reports separately. The minority reports and notes of dissent are always the most interesting things- in Blue Books, and are best read first. There is no reason why the report of the travelling commission of inquiry should not entirely consist of minority reports. I daresay that we should find some common measure of agreement running through them all. If we were to have a set of reports, say on Swiss Education of all grades and types (town and country; primary, higher primary, and secondary; technical and professional) from such a group of Imperial scouts, the public interest in the welfare of our own schools and colleges might be greatly stimulated.

But I cannot say that I foresee any likelihood of such a well equipped and practical body of commissioners being sent out on such a mission at any time in the immediate future. But supposing that such a commission had been dispatched, I am inclined to think that on their return to England they would tell you that our teaching of the mother-tongue is quite a long way behind the point of excellence which it should have reached. All over German-speaking Europe close attention has been given to this subject for many years, and much more has been done there than here to train children to a sense of the beauties of good literature. We in England have a literature which cannot be rivalled all the world over, and it is a burning shame and a national scandal that more of our people are not taught from early childhood to love and revere and use it. Perhaps it is because we in England have been favoured with so constant a succession of great men of letters, and because a natural love of literature is without artificial stimulus so widely diffused among the very numerous private students in our midst, that we have neglected, to our discredit among other nations, the duty of spreading yet more widely and systematically, throughout all classes of the community, a trained appreciation of the prose and poetry
which are among the greatest glories and the most precious treasures of our land. Though I am far from meaning that Germany is as fertile as England in fine literature, I should be inclined to believe that a respect for their great national classics is much more widely diffused amongst Germans than is the case amongst Englishmen for their own. And if this is so (and I believe it to be the case), it is the outcome of years and years of patient work done by thousands of faithful teachers in the schools.

In the next place I would urge that more of us should go to America and learn what is being done to encourage Nature-Study in the schools. We English people, especially those of us who live in large towns, are in danger of becoming a purblind people. Our real love is for the country and for country pursuits. But instead of trying to make the best amends we can for having to live in towns, we are in danger of leaving our natural country tastes wholly undeveloped, without setting up any substitute in our education to take their place. I doubt whether at heart we are, in the mass, an industrial or commercial people. That is a paradox, but I should be prepared to defend it. But any way, very many of us have at present to live in towns and to live by town pursuits. Let us do what we can to keep alive among town children the love of nature. Country children, too, need training in order that they may have eyes and understanding for what lies round them. But this question of Nature study has roots which strike deep. You cannot study Nature unless you have, implicitly or explicitly, a basis of belief in relation to Nature. And what Dr. Martineau used to call the “suppressed premises” of our text books on Nature study need to be in harmony with the principles by which we live, or the thoughtful and systemazised study of Nature may bring discord and disturbance into many a mind.

To take a further point; we are far, far behind some foreign nations — Germany, Belgium and Holland especially — in our methods of teaching modern languages. One of the things which most needs to be done from a national point of view, is to train at least five hundred first-rate teachers of modern languages (they must be highly educated men and women to start with) as a sort of staff corps to lead the movement for modern secondary education.

Lastly — you cannot go to Berlin and see the famous Technical School at Charlottenburg, or to Boston and see the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, without realising that we in England ought to have a great deal more of the best kind of the highest technical education.

If therefore I were to answer the question submitted for our discussion this afternoon, I should venture to do so in the following terms: It is a great mistake to think, or imply, that one kind of education suits every nation alike. If we study for eign systems of education thoroughly and sympathetically — and sympathy and thoroughness are both necessary for the task — I believe that the result on our minds will be to make us prize, as we have never prized before, the good things which we have at home, and also to make us realise how very many things there are in our English Education which need prompt and searching change.

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