Imagination in Child Development.

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Outline

Imagination in Child Development

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Imagination in Child Development.

To him whose part in life it is, to train the intellect of the child, must come the feeling of vast responsibility, at holding in his hand that most delicate of all mechanisms, and knowing that largely on him depends its destiny. If he takes up his work carelessly, without realizing the importance of his mission, it may result in the downfall of nations; but if he regards it as a sacred charge to which he must devote his best thought and action, he may succeed in moulding the little mind into the form it was intended to be.

Until of late years, child study has been either ignored altogether or at best, studied in an aimless, wholly impracticable way. Some one has said "It is strange that the child should be the last of all
God's creatures, to be studied scientifically." Now however, parents and teachers are beginning to understand the necessity of a clear conception of the child mind - which knowledge is largely obtained by a thorough acquaintance with him as an individual, during the time when his mind is so rapidly unfolding.

The early intellectual stages in child development are dominated by the senses, but gradually are added the more complicated mental processes with which the investigator has to deal. Important among these is imagination - "The ideal faculty which perceives ideals and helps us to realize them."

During the period in the child's life, when his imaginative power is at its height, his steps should be carefully guided so that this faculty may indeed prove a God-given one. Imagination may be classified as reproductive and constructive. The former is defined as a mental
picture of something seen and heard. For instance, the young child listens to daily conversations, always trying either consciously or unconsciously to understand, and he forms pictures which connect with certain words he hears. Constructive imagination is known as a mental picture of things not experienced.

Closely allied with these two terms are passive imagination—that which appreciates what another constructs and active imagination which is in itself constructive. After all, it is not correct to say that we have two kinds of imagination for they are but different aspects of the same thing. When the mind looks on the work, it must form its own picture in order to understand. Constructive imagination must depend for its working material upon the constructive imagination and thus the necessity of the careful study of the child. We would not hire a workman
without giving him necessary
material for his work, neither
should we expect the child to form
out of nothing his images.

The simplest forms of imag-
ination are found in construc-
tion as exemplified in children’s
plays. Here we find a constant
exercise of the faculty. The child
will work for hours, building
playhouses or mud dams, and
his make believe plays portray
art as truly as do the models of
day which he makes under
instruction. Surely the ideas or
images which the child develops
in his play are a prediction for
his future, and thus the expres-
sion which may at first have no
particular purpose, may later be
the result of the soul’s highest
ideal. The block house which he
builds today, may be the forerun-
ner of some beautiful piece of
architecture which he will pro-
duce tomorrow.

As the child grows toward man-
hood, he will constantly find deeper meanings in nature, and as his imagination reaches toward perfection, he will strive for the expression of universal ideas. There can be no more richly rewarded theme for study than the progress of the mind from the purely mechanical on up through the realms of fancy into the highest type of creative imagination.

Imagination has sometimes been regarded as dealing with dreams instead of realities and unfitting the child for practical life. In the days of our grandparents the imaginative child was looked upon as an oddity, and when a child showed a tendency toward that quality, means were promptly taken to weed it out of his nature. All the harm that has been done by such attempts can never be estimated, but we can now look with pride when a better day
when imagination is looked upon as a gift from heaven — one that is intended for practical use instead of an unprofitable dream in the mind of the sluggard or freak. Clark in his "Self Culture" speaks of imagination as "the vision of the perfect in the midst of imperfection." Imagination then, gives a knowledge of the beautiful and no work can be complete that is not unless there is held before the mind, all through the process, an image of its perfected state. But the working toward the beautiful does not include merely the painting of pictures or the writing of poetry. Anything which is useful is beautiful, and so the child should be taught that a simple little task well done represents beauty and art in its best sense.

It must not be thought that imagination is a thing distinct and separate from the other mental
processes. On the contrary, it is closely allied to them, and they are dependant upon it to supply the details in the mental pictures they form. What would perception and apprehension be without it and how much would be left of memory, were imagination eliminated?

The one great force in invention and discovery is imagination, and while these two factors of civilization lie somewhat beyond the pale of child development, yet the man is only the child grown older, and the seed must be planted in infancy if it is to grow to full maturity. Clarke says again:

“The imagination is the prophetic soul which dreams of things to come, and is always making a new heaven and a new earth.”

In morals imagination again shows itself to be a prominent force. If you would teach a child to be sympathetic, you must
appeal to his imagination, else how can he learn to put himself in the place of another? Selfishness too is often the direct result of lack of, or rather an unawakened imagination. The selfish one cannot practice the Golden Rule until he can form an image of himself as "done by." The imagination takes different forms with different children, and this fact, the teacher or parent should be acquainted with, before he begins his work of instruction. Have the children tell you of a frolicsome excursion which they took together, or read them a story and have them repeat it, and notice the difference in the accounts. One will give you a mere catalogue of events, another will follow the details of a certain order, while another will perhaps go so far as to give a touch of ornamentation to his story.
The imaginative faculty also varies with different ages. At each successive stage, the child takes up new themes and often his manner of dealing with them, changes also. Perhaps he begins to appreciate the aesthetic, or it may be that utility appeals to him: at any rate, as he advances and added delicacy manifests itself along with an increase of individuality.

There are certain dangers however to which the imagination of the child is liable. We have all heard the exaggerated stories which children are prone to tell, and we have doubtless seen those same children punished by the horrified parent who fears lest his child will grow up to be an habitual prevaricator. But these highly colored tales do not result from strong inclination on the part of the child. He is to begin with, entirely innocent of any wrongdoing. On the contrary, the
act is perhaps due to his over exuberant spirit which overflow in the wrong direction. He is eager to express what he feels, but his lack of experience combined with the desire results in the so-called "false hood." The reason for this riot in his mind is, that his how to distinguish truth and falsehood does not come into being until after he begins to form images. He is not then capable of knowing the difference between actual images and those which arise in his own mind.

Usually the child outgrow this period naturally. But if guidance is needed, it should be given gently and with the spirit of love so that the imagination will not be retarded but only led in safe paths.

Closely allied to this distorted form, perhaps growing out of it, is the excessive imagination which occurs in childhood, early youth.
or even later in life. The victim is inclined to live too much in a world of dreams and romance and is thus unfit for practical life. His surrounding influences, particularly his reading matter, should be such as will broaden and strengthen his imagination, and turn his will into the right channel.

Another disease of the imagination is lethargy, and this is perhaps the worst affection of all since it is most difficult with which to deal. Work without that essential element to enliven it, becomes drudgery, and life, prosaic. The unimaginative child is the dull plodding pupil in whom it is difficult to arouse interest, and who learns chiefly by rote. The best cure for both extremes is to look for beauty and the beauty to be seen is the beauty of usefulness. Then, after a true appreciation of beauty, will come
a desire to produce the beautiful, the motive to see and to do the best in everything.

But as the richest soil requires cultivation and care, so the intellect of the child demands the best of culture to broaden and strengthen it. "Into its upbringing flows every current of his mental life, and upon its genuineness, every ideal and every destiny depends."

If then we would have the child do beautiful things, his imagination must be educated by the sight of beauty, both in the world of nature, and in the work of men's hands. Beautiful grounds, clean and artistic rooms, walls hung with the best pictures, all aid in the formation of bright images. These elements are not accessible to the child of wealth alone; for the idea can be carried out, with the simplest of materials. Included with these things, and
most important, is the beauty of character which this model must possess; for to repeat once more, the old thought, “Every human action well done is beautiful.”

An excellent field for the use of imagination is found in natural objects and scenery; and among other ways by their presentation to the child’s mind, is through lessons in geography.

For instance, instead of telling him in a didactic way dry facts, paint a wood picture for him in bright colors, being careful however not to include too many details. If his imagination is to grow, it must have soil for development, and he must be given a chance to help in the construction of the picture.

Scenes and incidents from life form also some of the best material in the formation of images in the child’s mind. The deeds
of great men serve to inspire him and evoke an answering echo in his own nature, bringing to his mind pictures where he too has a part on the stage. One author says that it is not so much existing things as the things which are imagined to exist, which affect the child’s mind. If this is true the literature is presented to the child as of a wholesome character, is an important aid in his image formation.

The study of the imagination as a factor in the development of the child has been sadly neglected in schools in the past, but teachers are now beginning to realize the prime necessity of storing the young mind with beautiful ideals so that it may later be able to guide itself in the same way. Since the inexperienced little mind, not knowing the ideal
from the real, acts according to its conception, how important it is to give the right training to that faculty which can form reality out of mind pictures. And there can be no more divine mission on earth than the leading of the child mind to the God who is "revealed by the universe which shows him in his beauty, manifested in the sun and storms and flowers."

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