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We Suggest

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WE SUGGEST

Eleanor Buelke

Isaacs, Susan

The Children We Teach

New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1971. 160 pp.

. *entheos*, a term used by the Greeks to symbolize hidden aspects of man's nature that motivate him to perform memorable deeds *entheos*, the god within each of us. If the forces that generate our energies and provide the directions for our teaching reflect a commitment to the conviction that each child is a "unique, unprecedented, and unrepeatable person," then most likely they are a gift of *entheos*.¹

In an attempt to show the most important of all educational concerns, "the children we teach," as real and living individuals, Susan Isaacs "clothes the dry bones of theoretical discussion with the behaviour of living children." She writes easily, understandably, with the simplicity and sincerity of conversation with a good friend. She writes of topics that comprise the well-known skeleton of almost any teacher's knowledge of theory and curriculum: individual differences, social development, and intellectual development. Yet, as she writes, she does, indeed, clothe these bones with the behavior of children of many differing endowments and roles; in their changing and developing moral judgments and social relationships; through their behavioral manifestations of individual needs and rates of cognitive growth.

Isaacs writes of problems which perplex even the most experienced and best qualified educators of the day. These are problems brought about by the very diversity among learners which, purportedly, is acknowledged and accepted, even cherished and nurtured. She believes that "differences in temperament are as real and as significant as intellectual differences, and that they must be taken into account." Even though teachers may not understand how differences in mental life of pupils have come about, the relationships between cognitive and affective domains of learning must be recognized and of vital concern in planning for "the children we teach."

Discussing social development of children, the author stresses *activity* and *movement*, and the maximum use of practical opportunities for children to gain from their intense desire *to be doing*. She emphasizes and reiterates that social development and intellectual

¹ Russell G. Stauffer, "Entheor," *The Reading Teacher*, 26 (January, 1973), p. 360.

growth in children, at any age, are intimately connected, that it is always the whole child who acts, that thought and behavior are *mutual* influences. Here, she details some interesting illustrations of children's notions and ideals of punishments, of loving and hating, and of chums and heroes. She suggests that doing things together with others fertilizes the child's spirit. "The seed will ripen in its own time, if we but sow it. It is the inactivity that is barren."

In the last section of the book Dr. Isaacs writes of intellectual development, reaching some practical conclusions, presented here in a conceptual pattern of contrasts:

1. Teachers cannot fruitfully foist upon children problems that do not arise from the development of their own interests; children's native interests in things and people around them offer all the opportunities needed for their education.

2. In early years of education words cannot be substituted for things, nor theoretical reasoning for practical issues; children's activity in these years is most fruitful when it has to do with real things, things that can be seen, handled, made, and measured.

3. Shutting the school door upon conversation among pupils and insisting upon a dumb tongue will not spur clarity of thought or ease and fluency in the written word; children need chances to put their experiences into words, to describe, to discuss, and to argue, in order to develop a sense of logic, depth of thought, and richness of expression.

4. Teachers need offer no defensive justification for smaller classes, and modern methods for studying and providing for individual differences; realization that it is what children do and say that educates them, that their very real and all-consuming need is for activity, should release educators from the old conspiracy of silence and stillness in the classroom, and from lock-step patterning for all.

Further, she suggests that teachers work for the possibility of letting children have the "free activity which is their breath of life," with "each child making his own special contribution to the larger whole."

At its best, teaching *must* be a means for both teachers, and the children they teach, to become better human beings. In the words of Margaret Mead, great difficulty and a puzzling dilemma face those dedicated to this kind of growth for themselves and others:

The whole dilemma of humanity—to yield to and glory in the characteristics we share with other living creatures, or, alternatively, to work at and glory in our capacity to transcend our creatureliness—is

summed up in the acceptance of the biological child, however different it may be²

It is extraordinarily difficult to love children in the abstract It is only through precise, attentive knowledge of particular children that we can become—as we must—informed advocates for the needs of all children.³

² Margaret Mead, *Blackberry Winter* (New York: Wm. Morrow & Company, 1972), p. 280.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 282.