

## **On the education and training of the feeble in mind / by J. Langdon-Down.**

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ON THE

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

OF THE

FEEBLE IN MIND

BY

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TO THE EARLSWOOD ASYLUM.



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## PREFACE.

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THE following pages are for the most part a reprint of a paper which was read at the Social Science Congress of 1867 and printed in the *Transactions of the National Association* for that year.

They have been reprinted by special request, in the hope that they may assist in the elevation of the class to which they refer.

J. L. D.

39 Welbeck Street,  
Cavendish Square,  
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ON THE  
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PROBABLY nothing indicates more fully the onward progress of civilization than the thought which is now being given to the waifs and strays of humanity which are comprised in the subject of this paper. In a barbaric age the extermination of those who could not help the State or tribe was considered the wisest political economy. Even so short a period as fifty years ago it would have been regarded as vain enthusiasm to expend care or thought on members of the community who were treated in every way as the solitary ones which their name suggests.

We live, however, in times when it is not thought unsuitable at a Congress of those who are interested in the social progress of our land, to discuss the best plan for elevating and improving individuals who, without any fault of their own, are powerless to rescue themselves from a condition than which humanity knows nothing more



pitiable, and which as yet society has only made partial efforts to relieve.

Any real attempt to educate the idiot in this country dates from about the year 1846, while it was only in the year 1858 that the experiment was carried out on a large scale.

It is not possible in the limits of this paper to do more than sketch the general principles which should guide us in the education of those who are the subjects of congenital mental defects.

The largest proportion of idiocy is to be found amongst the lower orders, where the parents are making a desperate struggle for existence—where the afflicted child is not only a consuming member, but an incubus, paralysing the efforts of the productive class, and absorbing the time and energy of at least one sane life. How is it possible, in this cottage existence, that anything can be done to rescue the child from a condition which is deplorable in every aspect, moral as well as physical? How, moreover, can it be expected that the mother, with her attention always concentrated on this object of care and anxiety, should propagate other than an enfeebled race? Ascending a step higher in the social scale, do the arrangements of middle-class life meet the requirements of one who demands more than the usual appliances to fan into a flame the flickering



spark? The children of this class are either educated at school or taught at home. The imbecile cannot advantageously accompany its brothers or sisters to school, for its presence there would be prejudicial to the establishment, even if the teaching were suited to its needs. Nor is it found that home instruction, with others, is more practicable. The teacher soon devotes the greatest attention to those who best repay the effort, while the feeble one falls hopelessly behind, without the benefit of individual skill, or the helpfulness of collective emulation. In some cases it is found that the presence of the imbecile entails pecuniary loss in business, and then a more solitary existence still becomes perforce the lot of the afflicted one. Nor is his position more desirable in the houses of the wealthy. His claims are lost sight of, and the great aim is to keep his existence a secret, while no kind of companionship is established between him and the other members of the household. Moreover, the claims of society, the presence of visitors, the changes of residence, and like occurrences, tend to make what little training there is desultory and futile, and lead to his being consigned to the care of servants in the upper and less frequented portions of the house, where his life must necessarily be monotonous and uninteresting. Of course there are



some laudable exceptions, but the rule is much as I have portrayed. But even where the child takes his place in the family circle there is no true companionship established and but little emulation excited, as he is depressed by the consciousness of being unable to compete with those by whom he is surrounded. He spoils the games of his brothers and sisters and gets gradually excluded from the enjoyments of the rest.

The first thing, therefore, to be done is to rescue the feeble one from this *solitary* life, to give him the companionship of his peers, to place him in a condition where all the machinery shall move for his benefit, and where he shall be surrounded by influences both of art and nature calculated to make his life joyous, to arouse his observation, and quicken his power of thought.

Nothing has been more clearly shown by the experience of the past than that the improvement of the imbecile can only be satisfactorily accomplished by having reference to a judicious combination of *medical, physical, moral, and intellectual* treatment.

The treatment, while thus divided, must, nevertheless, have entire unity. The whole system must have unity of origin and unity of execution. It should be, as far as possible, the



reflex of *one* mind, and the executive should carry out the purpose of *one* will.

The basis of all treatment should be *medical*. I mean by this that it should be founded on the principles of medicine, in an enlarged sense; that it should have reference to what is known of the laws of Hygiene, of Physiology, of Chemistry, and of Therapeutics. Success can only be obtained by keeping the patient in the highest *possible* health. The truth of this is frequently illustrated by the influence of deranged health, and of diminished temperature. It often happens that declension of health takes place, and with this declension a loss of the mental power which had been raised. I am frequently able to indicate early threatenings of fatal disease by the altered mental power which is antecedently evinced.

Many cases of imbecility, especially those which I have elsewhere described (having reference to the *racial* types which degeneracy imprints), as Mongolian imbeciles, lose a large amount of intellectual energy in the winter, go through, in fact, a process of hybernation, their mental power being always *directly* as the external temperature. Moreover, the results of morbid anatomy teach us, that independently of the occasional grave defects in the cerebral mass, and the larger number of instances of want of



size or of symmetry in the central nervous ganglia, there is frequently a very general deficiency of nourishment of the brain, as indicated by the pallor of the vesicular neurine. All these facts indicate that our first attention must be directed to the improvement of the nutrition of the tissues generally, and of the nervous centres in particular. This must be accomplished by the employment of a very liberal dietary; a dietary which, while containing a fair proportion of nitrogenous elements, should be rich also in phosphatic and oleaginous constituents. Moreover, care should be taken, not only that the diet is sufficient in amount and good in quality, but that it is exhibited in a form suited to the powers of mastication of the various children.

It is of great importance that the training, recreation, and sleeping apartments be lofty and well ventilated, while special care should be taken to keep them warm. The skin should be daily attended to by sponge and other baths, not only for the sake of the individual health, but also for the health and comfort of those with whom they are associated, in consequence of the peculiar exhalation from the skin of imbeciles, which is something *sui generis*.

It is desirable that their residence should be on gravel soil and surrounded by well drained



and well made walks, in order that in our precarious climate no opportunity should be lost of daily out-door exercise. In addition to this hygienic treatment, special medication will, from time to time, be needed in some cases, in consequence of the frequent complication of other disorders with imbecility.

Having placed our patient under the most favourable hygienic conditions, we enter on the special training which his circumstances demand, a work which requires the utmost enthusiasm.

Physical training must always form an important part of his education. The attenuated muscles have to be nourished by calling into exercise their functions, and the simple automatic movements which are frequent among imbeciles have to be replaced by others which are the product of will.

We have to commence with the simplest movements, gradually making them more complex, and thus causing to grow up together the mandate and the result. In all imbeciles there is a striking want of co-ordination in the muscular system, and it is by physical training only that this mutiny of the muscles can be overcome. From purposeless acts we build up a series of voluntary efforts which are applicable to the wants of daily life.

This kind of training has to be carried out in



minute detail, so that every voluntary muscle and every congeries of muscles shall be called into action and trained to fulfil with rapidity the end for which they are designed.

In this way the muscular system is strengthened, the various acts of prehension, locomotion, and mastication are more effectually performed, the tongue becomes a willing agent, and the lips retain the saliva, the dropping of which formerly gave a repulsive characteristic to our patient. Not only so, we secure by this means an improved nutrition of the central nervous ganglia themselves, which are influenced *pari passu* with the development of the physical powers. It is impossible to bring into harmonious relation the muscles and the will, without improving the physical quality of the brain and the other nervous centres.

The child will have become by these means more capable of observation; we shall have drawn him into practical relation with the external world and initiated reasoning power.

The *moral* education of the imbecile is of paramount importance. While his physical and mental powers are being developed by hygienic and physiological processes, he has to be taught to subordinate his will to that of another. He has to learn obedience; that right doing is productive



of pleasure and that wrong doing is followed by the deprivation thereof. He has to be taught this through the agency of officers and attendants, who must be influenced by the governing power, and it is in this aspect especially that the necessity of unity of government is important.

The whole staff takes its tone from the head, and that tone should be one of affectionate regard for the subjects of its care.

The affective faculties of the patients should be so cultivated that the deprivation of the love of their teachers should be felt as the greatest punishment, and the manifestation of it as the highest reward. Nor is this difficult, in consequence of the quick appreciation of kindness which exists in this otherwise deficient community. In this way we should check manifestations of untruthfulness, selfishness, obstinacy, sensuality, theft and unkindness to companions. Corporal punishment is to be strictly prohibited. The tact of the teacher will be called into exercise, in devising the reward or punishment to suit the special case. It is curious how a study of the peculiarities of the patient will reveal a ready access to his moral control.

In no case should the punishment be such as to interfere with the hygienic treatment. As a rule, nothing is more objectionable than the



deprivation of food for an offence. I have seen a case of violent and uncontrollable temper reduced to calm obedience by the administration of a basin of bread and milk. The moral delinquency was the result of mental excitement, dependent on defective nutrition. While attaining an amount of obedience to rule, because it is known to be the will of the head of the community, it is possible to engraft on this, in many cases, moral compliance and right doing, because they are believed to be the will of the Supreme. It is even possible in some cases to raise them to an appreciation of the simple teachings of Christ, so as to influence their acts; but attempts to make them understand doctrinal tenets or sectional creeds, is, according to my experience, utterly futile. Any amount may be committed to memory, but often the letter and not the spirit is received.

The *intellectual* training to which imbeciles should be submitted, must be based on a cultivation of the senses.

They should be taught the qualities, form, and relation of objects by their sense of touch; to appreciate colour, size, shape, and relation by sight; to understand the varieties of sound when addressed to the ear; the qualities of objects by their taste and smell. Their lessons should be



of the simplest kind at first, and gradually cumulative. Nothing is to be left to their imagination. They must be taught the concrete, not the abstract. In this way we give them the basis from which their reasoning and reflective powers can be developed. Synchronously with this we should make use of the physical powers we have cultivated. They must be taught individually and collectively to dress and undress themselves; to acquire habits of order and neatness; to use the spoon or the knife and fork; to walk with precision, and to handle with tact. The defective speech which imbeciles so frequently present, is best overcome by a well arranged plan of tongue gymnastics, followed by a cultivation of the purely imitative powers.

The uses and value of money, and the value and weight of commodities is best taught by a plan which I have devised of instituting a shop, furnished with the usual appliances of sale. One patient acts as the customer and another as the trader. In this way a purchase is effected, and the whole transaction of weighing, calculating, and paying is made under the criticism of an assembled class. All these things belong to school instruction. It is desirable to supplement the house and school by workshops, gardening



and farming operations, so that the physical may alternate with the intellectual training.

It is of the greatest importance that the teacher should ever bear in mind, that the primary object he should have, is to make the pupil self-helpful and, as far as possible, a useful working member of the community; in this way more is effected for his happiness than by any other means. Mere abstract or *memoriter* knowledge is of little value, everything which makes him practically useful makes him proportionately happy.

At the same time care should be taken to furnish him with varied amusements, the playground should be enlivened by music, he should be encouraged to activity in the sports as far as his physical development admits. The winter evenings should be rendered cheerful by the magic lantern, concerts, dancing, and especially theatrical representations, which are not only amusing, but educational, by cultivating those faculties which have been necessarily neglected in the more practical school and industrial routine.

It will be obvious that the principles which I have indicated can only be effectively carried out in an institution specially devised for the purpose. It will not suffice that the pupil attends merely daily, he must be an entire member of a



community where, night and day, systematic rule and oversight are afforded ; where every act becomes the subject of regard, and where the best product may be evolved from the defective materials which are furnished.

It appears to me that counties, either singly or in combination, should undertake the work of caring for their idiot poor, in the same way as they do for their lunatic poor, but never *with* the lunatic.

Voluntary effort should meet the requirements of those immediately above the pauper class ; while the middle and upper classes are able to compensate for the care and training of their afflicted ones.

The success which has attended the efforts hitherto made for idiots and imbeciles should not fail to stimulate to enlarged action on behalf of those of the pauper class, for whom up to the present time so little has been done.

