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ADDRESS

BEFORE THE POTTER CO. TEACHERS' INSTITUTE,

DELIVERED THURSDAY EVENING, APRIL 26, 1855,
By the County Superintendent.

REV. J. B. PRADT—*Dear Sir:* The undersigned were appointed a Committee to solicit a copy of your address before the Teachers' Association on the evening of the 26th ult., for publication; and in discharging the duty assigned them, the Committee take the opportunity to express their high appreciation of the Address, and their belief that its general circulation through the medium of the newspapers of the county, must have a most salutary effect in advancing the cause of Education. They therefore trust it will suit your convenience to furnish the desired copy at an early day.

We are, Rev. and dear sir,
Your frieds, etc.,
LEWIS MANN, } Com'te.
S. C. SMITH, }
C. W. ELLIS, }

Coudersport, May 3, 1855.

COUDERSPORT, May 3, 1855.

GENTLEMEN: I have the pleasure to acknowledge the receipt of your note of the 3d inst., asking a copy of my late Address before the Teachers' Association of this county.

In complying with your kind request, I cannot but take the opportunity to remark, that the earnest desire now evident in our county and Commonwealth, for the advancement of the cause of Public Education, is a most happy omen of future welfare and prosperity.

Very truly yours,
J. B. PRADT.

Messrs. Lewis Mann, S. C. Smith, C. W. Ellis, Committee.

FELLOW TEACHERS:—Since receiving, a few days since, your kind invitation to address you before the close of our exercises, I have found no leisure to gather from books, a literary repast for your entertainment. I have endeavored, however, to revolve a few thoughts in my own mind which may be of use to you, in the future discharge of your duties. And begging your indulgence for the abruptness with which I enter upon my subject, I will ask your attention to some observations upon the nature of the work which you have to do, and the conditions of your success.

You have had opportunity, during the last two weeks, of listening to various and valuable instructions from others, upon these topics—instructions of a more directly practical nature. It has seemed proper for me, therefore, at this time, to go back a step further, and present some general and comprehensive ideas of your vocation, which you may be able profitably to expand, perhaps, at your leisure.

The nature of the work in which you are expected to engage, the character of the result which you are to aid in bringing to pass, is usually expressed by the terms Education and Instruction. My present remarks will be confined to the first of these heads.

You are to take charge, for a season, of young immortals, and to act as the handmaids of Providence in unfolding their plastic natures, in drawing forth and directing the affections of their hearts, the faculties of their minds, and the powers of their bodies. And what *is* this work of education, this process of unfolding the nature of the child, in which you are to aid, but a part of the great design of Providence in regard to all things? Every created object has its appropriate, appointed destiny. In order to the fulfillment of this destiny, the *unfolding* process of which I have spoken, must take place. And those agencies, whether of man or of nature, which *aid* in this development, are educating agencies. They stand in the same relation to that which is to be unfolded and drawn forth, as that in which the teacher stands to the mind of the child.

All things, then, are educated; all things, I mean, which fulfill their destiny, which carry out the end of their being. The plant is developed from its seed, through all its several stages of germination and growth, to its final perfection of flower and fruit. Its educators are the heat and light of the genial sun, the dews and rains of Heaven, the hidden forces of Nature, and last of all, the fostering care of man. The animal is developed from its embryo state to its fulness of life and strength. The mighty nation is developed from its first dawnings of civilization, its first beginnings of power, to its culmination of greatness and glory. And how varied the agencies which educate the nation! How many vicissitudes, how many struggles, how much expenditure of blood and treasure, how much dear-bought experience, how many alternate reverses and triumphs, before the nation can take rank among the powers of earth. And how true is all this of the man, before he can take rank among Nature's noblemen!

All development—all education—is not successful. Thousands of failures meet us on every hand. Innumerable existences are blighted, perverted, or destroyed. But the cause of every failure, of every blight and perversion, will be found to resolve itself into one and the same thing at last. If the plant, the animal, the man, the nation, does not fulfill its destiny, if it fails to reach a worthy result, it is because there has been a failure in compliance with the prescribed conditions of success and perfection. And these conditions, let us remember, are prescribed by an unvarying, inexorable, and universal law. To this law there must be conformity. In a word, obedience to the great law which regulates all things, and to those requirements of this law which extend to each particular existence, is the condition of all successful development. To secure this obedience, must be the first aim and work of the teacher, in order to success in *his* vocation. You will of course understand me to use the terms Law and Obedience in a larger sense than their ordinary import. By Law, I mean not merely that which prescribes man's moral and civil duties; I mean by it, even as the great commentator on English Law defines the term—a rule of action; and by Obedience, I mean conformity to that rule of action.

Let us illustrate this principle. If the plant be rudely or widely removed from its native soil or clime, if it receive not its needful light and moisture, if, in short, in any essential particular, the laws of growth be violated, its proper development cannot take place. If there be not entire failure, only some partial, abortive result is attained. Why is it that some nations have gone onward in the career of improvement, while others have reached but an imperfect degree of civilization, unless it be that the latter have failed to observe the conditions of national development?—Would Spain have sunk to her present degraded position in the family of nations, had she not allowed her vigor to be enervated and her enterprise to be checked, by her sudden accumulation of wealth? Why have the teeming millions of China and Japan remained stagnant and unprogressive, but that their policy of building up a wall of exclusion against other nations, has deprived them of those external incitements, without which national expansion does not take place?

In like manner, the individual nature of man must have freedom of development; must have secured to it the conditions of development, or that development will not take place. This is especially true of that period of life, when the impress of character is chiefly received. How important, then, that the Teacher give heed to this great principle, while seeking to aid in the education of the child. Let us extend this thought to each of the several parts of the child's nature, while in the process of education.

And first of all let us notice its application to the physical system. I begin with this, because it is that which needs our first, and for several years, our chief care. It is a striking feature in the beautiful order of Divine Providence that the several parts of man's nature must be developed in the order of their relative importance; first the physical, then the intellectual, and last of all the spiritual nature is educated. By this I do not mean, that while either of them receives attention, the others are to be neglected; but that in the design of Providence, the fullness of the development of each part is in the order I have named. For several years, the chief amount of care required by the child from the parent, is bestowed upon the well-being and growth of the body. The mind awakens spontaneously, and usually needs but a judicious presentation of natural objects, and such familiar oral instruction as the intelligent parent can readily impart, with little aid from books. The unfolding of the moral affections must also be carefully watched; but the grand discipline of the heart required in man, is found in the experience of later life. With the child, the preservation of its innocence from contamination, the repression of its waywardness, and the securing of its docility and obedience, constitute the chief part of its early moral education. But how long, and painful, and unremitting, the care that must be bestowed upon the child's physical wants and weakness. And nought but the deep yearnings of the parental heart, and especially of the maternal instinct, could prompt to such tenderness and assiduity as are necessary to the proper rearing of the child through its physical infancy.

But I do not purpose to dwell upon that portion of the physical education of the child, which comes under the exclusive supervision of the parent. And yet I cannot forbear to remark that a great want of discretion is exhibited, as it seems to me, in sending children to school at so premature an age as is often done; and still more so, in the object chiefly proposed to be accomplished at school, and in the general system of physical treatment, to which they are subjected by custom in their tender years. The opinion is constantly gaining ground, among enlightened and reflecting parents, that children, if it can be avoided, should not be sent away from the parental roof, deprived of a mother's care and consigned to the discipline of the school-room, before they have arrived at the age of at least seven or eight years. Nothing is gained, but rather ground is lost, even in the matter of intellectual development and acquisitions by urging the child forward at an earlier period. No doubt some parents reluctantly part with their children, and regret the supposed necessity for their absence. If some place their children in the school-room at an early age, on the plea of relief from their care at home, this but proves a want of sensibility as well as of discretion. For who so fit a guardian of a child as its mother? What office more honorable and noble than that of the mother, if she faithfully and intelligently discharge her duty to her offspring?

The law admits all children who have reached the tender age of five years, to the Public Schools; but be it remembered, that the law also provides for a graduation of schools, and evidently does not contemplate, if it can be avoided, that children of all ages shall be gathered promiscuously in the school-room. Thus viewed, the system is less objectionable. Moreover, parents are under no legal obligation to send their children to the school at so early an age; and would that the time may come, when this shall be the exception, and not the rule. First, however, it is desirable that our schools send forth a generation of children, who, as future parents, shall be able to discharge more intelligently the duties of parents, than is often done at the present time. Until then, it may frequently happen that children will be benefitted by the training of an intelligent teacher, tho' it be at the expense of that motherly care, and home influence, which Providence designed should play so important a part in early education. But however we may adjust the question of advantage or disadvantage in any given case, growing out of the early attendance of the child at school, the teacher has no direct control over the question of the number or age of the pupils who shall be confided to her care. And receiving, as you will, no doubt, into your respective schools, many children yet in their tender years, it will of course be a question of deep interest to you, how you shall best discharge your duty towards them.

Now it is a maxim which may be safely adopted by teachers as well as by parents, that their younger charges require that more care shall be bestowed upon their physical than upon their mental wants. It is of far less importance, at this early period, that the memory be taxed to retain, and the tongue, parrot-like, to repeat, all the powers and combinations of the Alphabet, than that the limbs have freedom to grow, and that the yielding, plastic frame be not subjected to such undue confinement, as will induce deformity and disease. But until the good time arrives, when our school-houses shall be more capacious, and shall be provided with more than one room, and until the adjacent yard is something else than the highway in front, and the swamp and pile of burnt logs in the rear, and until some other roof is erected to shelter the children's sports in inclement weather, than the canopy of heaven, the ingenuity of the teacher will be taxed to the utmost, to furnish such occupation to the smaller pupils in the school-room, as shall relieve them from irksome physical constraint, and yet not disturb the elder portion of the school.

And here I cannot but advert to the value in this respect, of those physical exercises which have been successfully introduced into the school-room, in many quarters, where an improved system of school management prevails. Exercises which at once awaken the attention, and afford a change of posture, and relief from the well-known monotony and confinement of school hours, and yet involve no real sacrifice of the time of the teacher, or of the quiet of the school. I allude now, to those simple gymnastic amusements, which exercise and strengthen the muscular and bony systems of the child. In the same connection, may be mentioned elementary lessons in drawing and writing, taught by the aid of the slate and blackboard, and the softening, enlivening recreation of vocal music. The teacher who can so far overcome the prejudices that such new things will of course encounter, as to be able to introduce them successfully into her school, will have done her young pupils far more good, than she who has drilled them to a stupid and painful confinement to the hard bench, for almost six hours in a day.

And here let us note the application of a certain point of the theory with which I set out: namely, that the condition of all successful education, is obedience; that is to say, the prompt action of the several powers of body, mind and will, in submission to a prescribed rule of action. In the first place, the teacher who bestows due attention upon the physical welfare of her pupils, is of course acting in harmony with the great law which requires freedom of physical development, in order to anything like symmetry and proportion in that development. But more than this: those exercises of which I have spoken, and which of course the intelligent teacher will increase and vary as circumstances require, can be made subservient, not only to the education and invigoration of the various muscular powers, and the several senses of the child, but to training them to that precision and facility of action so important in after life. This precisson and this facility of action imply, not only proper obedience in the abstract to the laws of health, but a proper obedience of the muscles and senses themselves, to the will that calls them into action. And none but those who have ascertained the fact by observation and experiment, are aware how much may be accomplished in the school-room by the aid of gymnastic exercises, the pencil, the song, and other similar appliances. Children delight to imitate motions, objects, and sounds;—especially when concert, order, symmetry, and harmony are connected with them. The application of this idea may be extended beyond the walls of the school-room, and the very sports of children, made subservient to their education.

Indeed, is it not one of the grand defects of our present system of school training, that we make by far too broad a distinction between the nature of exercises within and without the schoolhouse? The overwise deem it absurd to look for wisdom to the past. But may we not draw a useful hint from the idea entertained by the ancient Romans of the nature of a school? The term which they used to express this idea, finds its equivalent, in our language, in the word play, or sport. Thus much, at least, they meant by this, namely, that at school the bodily, mental, and moral faculties of the child are to have free play—are to be exercised, not by a physical or intellectual treadmill, but by means which shall at once be attractive and useful; free from irksome constraint, and yet requiring and securing a cheerful obedience.

And let it not be supposed that no intellectual action or physical training is involved in those exercises, whether in the schoolhouse or on the play-ground, which have primary reference to the training of the senses, the muscles, or the vocal organs of the child. On the contrary, they cannot but awaken the mind in a natural and healthful manner, through the medium of the objects presented to the eye, and the sounds and words that reach the ear. Music, especially, is a most powerful softener of the heart, and is of itself almost sufficient to preserve order in the school-room. The intelligent teacher will of course be ready to impart additional knowledge to the inquiring mind, and to instill good thoughts and gentle emotions into the softened heart, as the picture copied, or the story told, or the song ended, may furnish fitting opportunity.

Distinct articulation, as every teacher knows, lies at the foundation of all good elocution, and all ordinary practical use of the vocal organs. This art of articulation is indeed a mechanical operation, resulting from the use of certain muscles; and to teach it effectually, requires long and persevering effort from the teacher, especially when bad habits in this respect have been suffered at home. But the tediousness of this process may be constantly beguiled, and at the same time, the end itself carried forward, by the concert recitation, and the enlivening song.

It is true that the introduction of any of the foregoing exercises will be opposed to the absurd, but prevalent and fixed notion, that children go to school simply to study books—to learn and recite the lessons therein contained. But it may be presumed that every teacher, whose ideas of education extend beyond the mere dull task of conning a book and overloading the memory, will find some parents who entertain similar thoughts. Such teachers, and a few such parents, will soon diffuse more correct impresionss upon this subject.

I have dwelt at considerable length upon the several points involved in the matter of physical education; but I do not feel that any apology is due, when I reflect how much this is overlooked, and that a large portion of the pupils who fill our common schools are such as demand much attention in this respect.

Let us now advert, however, to the matter of intellectual training. And here I shall start with the proposition, (which may possibly sound paradoxical to some who hear me,) that the attainments which children make in their earlier school days, are of far less importance than the mental discipline which they receive. Whoever has reflected much upon the subject, must be aware, that beyond the partly mechanical exercises of reading and writing, very little of what children learn at elementary schools is of much practical utility in after life. How little, for instance, even of Arithmetic, except the simplest operations, do most persons ever have occasion to use; and what they do use has generally to be unlearned and learned over again, before it can be applied. But who can limit the value to the child, of a thorough training in mental arithmetic? The truth is, that this mental discipline is or should be a chief object in view from the first day of school to the last day of college. The professional man usually makes but little use of the Latin, or Greek, or Mathematics learned at school; nay, may even forget the most of it; and yet he would be very poorly prepared, in most cases, either to acquire a knowledge, or to discharge the duties, of his profession, without that previous intellectual training. Why is it that many fail, but that they lack this previous preparation?

Hence arises the use of the term education, as descriptive of one of the great objects to be sought by school discipline. Education in reference to the mind as well as the body, is development, training. It is the drawing forth, and giving a right direction and proper symmetry to the mental powers. And here I cannot but remark, that the maxim of inspired wisdom, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it," is quite as applicable to physical and intellectual, as to moral education. That disease, ignorance, and vice so much prevail, is mainly attributable to an imperfect or vicious education. What, then, is the secret—what is the condition—of a proper and successful education of the mental faculties, so far as the school is concerned? The secret is unveiled, the condition is expressed, when we speak the word obedience—obedience to the law of mental development—obedience to that law of symmetry and proportion, without which the development will be imperfect and abortive, or distorted and unshapely. How arduous and difficult then, the task imposed upon the teacher! What a rare combination of qualities, of tact and skill are requisite, in order to the highest exhibition of the teacher's art! How invaluable to the community the services of one who possesses these rare qualifications!

The first element of this great principle, of obedience, as relating to the point now in hand, I shall call attention. By this I mean the submission of the intellect to that which claims notice. And when we reflect how eager is the curiosity of the child to see and examine what is new, it would seem that there need be no great difficulty in securing that attention, at least to the point which divides the sensible from the abstract, or that which requires observation only, from that which demands comparison and reflection. But how often do school exercises, even of the simplest and least abstract nature, fail in securing the requisite attention from the pupil, and therefore fail also both in impressing and invigorating the mind. A certain degree of attention is gained for a time, but it soon becomes listless. This is because the agency of the teacher is of a mechanical rather than of a vital nature—the mere turning of a machine, of alternate questions and answers. What is thus monotonous and lifeless, soon becomes tiresome. Children, however, under the stimulus of curiosity, are almost as ready to exercise the mind, as they are under the stimulus of amusement and love of motion, to exercise their limbs. The great end to be accomplished by the teacher, is to awaken and keep alive this curiosity. This done, and the first condition of success is secured. And I know of no general or infallible rule that will serve to meet every case, except it be this: the teacher must have resources to draw from, independent of books, and must exhibit life and warmth in drawing forth those resources. In a word, oral, varied, and animated teaching is the great desideratum of the schoolroom. The exactness, even of military drill, may be kept up, in those exercises which require instant and uniform attention and compliance in order to their successful performance; but this strictness should sometimes be relaxed, and the familiarity of the family circle indulged. The soldier is not less attentive and obedient on drill, because his commander, at another time, exchanges with him a word of cheerful greeting. "A time for everything, and everything in its time" is a rule indispensable in a well regulated school. But it does not follow from this, that the same things must be done day after day, in precisely the same manner. Musical sounds may be listened to with some pleasure, though marked by no proper division of time, or intervals of cadence; but this would soon become insufferable or inaudible, if but a wearisome monotone, or a constantly repeated strain. In like manner, the best exercises of a school will be marred by irregularity of recurrence; but however regular their recurrence, they will be benumbed in themselves, and benumbing in their influence, if of a dull uniform sameness. The more so, because this single fact indicates that the incumbent of the place "keeps school" indeed, after some stereotyped pattern, but has as yet, gained no conception of the art of teaching his pupils, by any vital contact of mind with mind. During the session of our Institute, you have listened to many hints, from others than myself, in regard to the manner in which this life and variety may be secured in the schoolroom. I will only add, in this connection, that this is essential to your success. I do not counsel you by any means, to abandon at once and entirely, all dependance upon customary forms and practices; but study to devise such variations and improvements as you find to be necessary. Do not attempt to discard the book, unless you are master of the subject upon which it treats. But on the other hand, do not allow the convenience of resting entirely upon the book, to excuse you from any effort at teaching from the resources of your own mind.

Next to attention, comes the necessity for order and method in the development of the mental powers, and in the investigation of the studies pursued. This topic would of itself require a volume in order to its proper consideration. For an order of studies, I can at this time only commend to your attention a resolution adopted at a session of this Association in February last. A full explanation of the reasons of the order then proposed, would itself involve a discussion of the proper development of the mental powers. I may remark, however, that elementary Physiology was proposed as one of the first subjects to be presented to the child at school, after it has acquired the ability to read. In giving the pupil a distinct study, it is highly desirable to begin with something both instructive and useful. The early study of mental arithmetic is also important, as laying the foundation for close and methodical habits of reasoning. The reasons for the subsequent gradations in the course recommended, will probably suggest themselves to your own minds, upon examination. One general remark may here be made; namely, that each of the three great divisions of mental power, the memory, the judgment, and the imagination, should receive its due share of attention, neither being exercised or stimulated to its own injury, or to the neglect of the rest. The most common mistake, is to regard the exercise of the memory as the chief end of scholarship, and remarkable feats of memory as the evidence of superior powers of mind. No error of this kind can be more pernicious. Those who are prodigies of memory in childhood, are often imbecile in judgment in manhood. One of the most difficult and delicate of the tasks imposed upon the teacher, is to regulate, if permitted, the studies of the pupil, and thereby control, in