THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER

APRIL, 1909

THE OCCUPATIONS OF THE KINDERGARTEN

ALICE TEMPLE

The occupations may be said to bear the same relation to the kindergarten programme that the industrial and art activities bear to the elementary-school curriculum. This paper will discuss the kindergarten occupations as one of its several instrumentalities, attempting to indicate certain points where the traditional occupations fail to meet the needs of child-development, and to state some of the changes and modifications which the modern kindergarten has made in both materials and methods, in the effort to meet such needs.

To the kindergartner of twenty years ago, the term occupation stood for a certain fixed set of prepared materials and a very definitely prescribed series of exercises to be carried out with each kind of material. It seems to mean much the same to the orthodox kindergartner today. To an increasingly large number of radical kindergartners, however, the term occupation has come to mean any sort of industrial or art work with plastic materials which develops the fundamental impulses of the child of kindergarten age, and which is suited in material and process to his mental and motor capacity. In order to illustrate what one school of kindergartners claims to be the "true Froebelian use" of gifts and occupations, I quote below one week's exercises taken from their programme for the year :

MONDAY

Gift.—Fourth.

Notice square faces cut into two oblongs, four oblongs, many

oblongs. Find corners; associate with activity; do not make them symbolic; corners on top and below.

Sequence of simple life-forms by imitation, as house, chest of drawers, bureau with glass, washstand, table and chair, bed, crib for baby. If time, children invent.

Occupation.—Sewing.

Horizontal lines, long and short.

TUESDAY

Gift.—Tablets.

Forms of beauty; change (spread and contrast) "giving out and coming back."

Occupation.—Sand.

Impressions of tin cubes; forms of beauty.

WEDNESDAY

Gift.—Sticks.

Squares of different sizes—inventions. Life-forms if the children make them of their own accord. Notice corners.

Occupation.—Folding.

Book. Recall derivation of square from cube of folding paper, crackers, etc. In folding, children crease with closed fist. Book, shed, screen, trough.

THURSDAY

Gift.—Fourth.

Review corners, top and below. Into how many oblongs is front face divided? Emphasize broad and narrow. Make broad gate and path. Make narrow gate and path. Bring cloth, ribbon, paper; broad and narrow, long and short.

Occupation.—Peas and sticks.

Make squares. How many sticks needed? All same length? Give two long and two short for oblongs. Make life-forms from squares and oblongs. Draw things made.

FRIDAY

Gift.—Lentils.

Develop square. Give stick with which to measure distance apart. Give smaller and larger sticks.

Occupation.—Painting.

Long strokes with brush or pasting. Fold square and cut into oblongs, then paste. Combine into border.

A thoughtful reading of this outline suggests among other things the following questions for discussion:

I. What should be the relation between the subject-matter of the programme and the use of materials?

II. Should materials be used for the purpose of making the child conscious of form, size, and number as such, or of the logical derivation of one geometric form from another?

III. Are the opportunities and incentives offered the children for originality and invention well selected?

IV. Is there psychological justification for the division of forms of expression into forms of life, forms of knowledge, and forms of beauty?

I

What should be the relation between the subject-matter of the programme and the use of materials?

The entire programme of which the matter quoted is a part is based upon (a) the *Mother-Plays* of Froebel, and (b) the gift and occupation exercises suggested by Froebel in the *Education of Man* and the *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten*. There is no relation, apparently, between the subject-matter (a) and the use of materials (b) with one or two striking exceptions. During the weeks preceding Christmas, for example, the occupation periods are devoted to the making of Christmas gifts. Again, during the week of February 22, all the exercises of the kindergarten, including of course the occupations, center about the general subject or thought for that week—*patriotism*. While one would not select the last subject as a particularly valuable or suitable one to bring to children under six years of age, yet there is a playfulness in the exercises of this week which is sadly lacking in most of the others.

Now if the child as an active, social being is to be the center of correlation (and this was Froebel's ideal) the subject-matter of the programme must be selected with reference to the child's fundamental interests and activities and the instrumentalities of the kindergarten used as various avenues for the expression of his interest in different aspects of such subject-matter. In this way the child is helped to organize his experience in a far more

natural and effective way than when unity is sought in the materials themselves on the one hand, and in the philosophical truths underlying the *Mother-Plays* on the other. Either of these methods presupposes an intellectual grasp quite beyond the power of the little child.

In suggesting the home life and occupation as suitable subject-matter for the kindergarten programme, Dr. Dewey says:

From the child's standpoint unity lies in the subject-matter, in the present case, in the fact that he is always dealing with one thing: home life. . . . The child is working all the time "*within a unity*," giving different phases of its clearness and definiteness and bringing them into coherent connection with one another. When there is great diversity of subject-matter, continuity is apt to be sought simply on the formal side; that is, in schemes of sequence, "schools of work," a rigid programme of development followed with every topic, a "thought for the day" from which the work is not supposed to stray. As a rule such sequence is purely intellectual, hence is grasped only by the teacher, quite passing over the head of the child.¹

Quite in sympathy with this line of thought we find the following expression from Professor Earl Barnes:

Dramatic activity based on imagination, should deal also with the affairs of the home and the neighborhood. And here again they must really appeal to the child as connected with life; otherwise they are not exercises for imagination, but mere mimicry. Instead of gripping the feelings and shaping them, they stultify them. The real life of the homes from which the children come should be represented, but lifted and glorified by the play of imaginative fancy.²

It is quite possible, of course, to make the programme based upon the child's experiences in his immediate social environment as rigid, as formal, as the one criticized, and thus to sacrifice the child's spontaneity and freedom in the effort to secure unity and continuity. It is equally possible to keep it simple, elastic, close to the child's interests, and yet sufficiently unified on the concrete, dramatic basis which the little child can understand.

¹ "Froebel's Educational Principles," *Elementary School Record*, Vol. I, No. 5.

² "Fundamental Factors in the Making of a Kindergarten Curriculum," *Elementary School Teacher*, October, 1908.

II

Should materials be used for the purpose of making the child conscious of form, size, and number as such, or of the logical derivation of one form from another?

In many of the exercises given above there is every evidence that the aim is to teach the child the abstract qualities of objects as such. He makes *squares* and *oblongs* with sticks; sews *vertical* and *horizontal* lines; derives the *square* from the *cube*; develops the *square* from lines; brings cloth, ribbon, paper, which is *broad* and *narrow*, *long* and *short*, etc., and all this in a formal, mechanical, unrelated way. We have an excellent illustration here of emphasis upon technique apart from content or meaning. The little lesson comes first, a lesson in form, size, number, or what not; the making of life-forms follows; there is no real relation between the two. But modern thought emphasizes the fact that knowledge arises normally out of action, out of the individual's effort to realize his ends and purposes. A separation such as we have here is therefore unpsychological.

And, further, the many studies of children's interests go to show that they have no interest in the form of objects except as a means to an end. They are interested primarily in the use of objects, what they are for, what can be done with them.

Children at first pay little heed to the aesthetic aspect of the things they use or make; the service of objects in ministering to vital needs is mainly considered and crudity will serve as well as refinement in attaining this end.³

Dealing with common objects, the young children attend almost exclusively to their uses; gradually they become interested in classifying them into larger groups and in noticing their qualities.⁴

In the effort to satisfy this interest of the child in use, to help him construct objects of worth from *his* standpoint, the kindergartner of today has found that a greater variety of materials is needed as well as new ways of using them. The processes of sewing, weaving, folding, and cutting are all retained. but the materials have been enlarged in some cases and more

³ O'Shea, *Dynamic Factors in Education*, p. 72.

⁴ Barnes, *Studies in Education*, December, 1896.

durable ones substituted in others. It is the sewing and weaving materials particularly which have been enlarged because they call for a premature co-ordination of the small muscles.

In the matter of motor development, it is clear that the eye muscles and body muscles, as well as the nerve cells of a child of four or five years of age have not attained the degree of maturity essential to perform with safety the ordinary kindergarten exercises of weaving and plaiting and threading. The effort to accomplish these tasks leads inevitably to strain and exhaustion.⁵

Human sympathy founded in a desire for a healthful, robust, physical machine, would naturally help us to avoid such forms as would tend to the use of small muscles or the development of ideas not directly serviceable in the life of children.⁶

Miss Blow⁷ in criticizing this general tendency to enlarge the kindergarten materials, quotes Dr. Judd as her authority. Dr. Judd does say that "the finer muscles are in full operation very early in life," that "they are the muscles which in diffuse movements are most apt to be called into action," and that "development means the selection of the right movements out of the total mass of diffuse movements." But following immediately the words quoted last we read,

Only one limitation appears in all this provision of many movements. This is the limitation we have noted. No mechanism could be devised which would not, in the general stimulation of the muscles, affect the small muscles more than the large ones. This limitation in nature's provision for free movement is the first point at which the teacher's rational mode of developing the child must come in to supplement nature's provision. The teacher should see to it that if diffusion tends to emphasize the small muscles, teaching should emphasize in due measure the large muscles.⁸

This seems to the writer to be but another argument in favor of the wisdom of enlarging many of the kindergarten materials.

Much of the modified kindergarten occupation goes by the name of constructive work, corresponding as it does to the constructive work of the elementary school. It is the making of

⁵ O'Shea, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

⁶ Hatch, "Technique in Elementary Manual Training," *Elementary School Teacher*, November, 1904.

⁷ *Educational Issues in the Kindergarten*, pp. 170-72.

⁸ *Genetic Psychology for Teachers*, pp. 222-25.

little objects, mainly toys, of any plaster materials which are easily handled by the children and which lend themselves well to the expression of children's purposes. They may involve such processes as folding, weaving, sewing, cutting, and pasting, but the products make stronger appeal to the childish heart than those resulting from the older uses of these processes. They are objects which the child feels the need of in his play life, and the free play with the object made completes the activity and adds greatly to its value. A kindergartner who has been introducing these occupations with children brought up in the traditional handwork, tells me that these children no longer ask for their sewing-cards or weaving-mats, but beg to "make something," often suggesting what they would like to make.

One special value of such handwork has been clearly stated by Miss Hill:

The steps or processes in the constructive occupations are so self-evident as organic means to an end, that the child can either imitate or originate them more intelligently than in the earlier flat occupations. In many of these flat occupations, the how, or processes of making are so hidden, so disguised, as organic steps leading toward a certain end, that kindergartners have had to fall back on the method of dictation, which the child often blindly follows, and when the unforeseen result is accomplished, the child is allowed to name it according to some resemblance he discovers.⁹

The objections made to constructive work by the conservative kindergartner are that (a) it represents the substitution of work for play; (b) it makes an appeal to understanding rather than an appeal to imagination; (c) it is a substituting of constructive activities for free self-expression.

a) In consideration of the first criticism the question at once presents itself: Is not work of this kind, in which the end to be achieved is a very immediate one and one of great interest to the child, the first and most natural form of work, and does it not belong in the kindergarten period? Interest in the product, great as it is, is not "substituted for delight in the process" but rather *added to it*. When one remembers that there is no real falling apart of means and end, but that both process and product

⁹ Patty S. Hill, "The Relation of the Kindergarten and the Elementary School," *Proceedings of National Educational Association*, 1904.

are in one sense means to a further end, viz., free play with the objects made, the whole seems to be one big play-activity including within it attitudes of both play and work. And, further, it must be remembered that the constructive occupation is only one of many instrumentalities of the kindergarten, about the purely play character of which there is no question.

b) As to the second objection, that in constructive work there is appeal to understanding rather than imagination, it may be said that there is a more legitimate appeal to both than is made by the traditional occupations. The model of the object which the child makes may be supplied by the teacher or another child, or he may make his own plan. If in the process he works by imitation, at least it is conscious, intelligent imitation of steps recognized by the child as necessary ones in reaching his end. If he works out each step himself, he is getting the best kind of training in simple, logical thinking which calls for full use of the constructive imagination. Is it not in this sort of work that the child is "beginning to live in little arcs of thought, instead of mere detached points of thought" far more truly than in those sequences when he develops one form from another at the teacher's dictation? If again the child plans and executes all for himself, as he may well do when supplied with a variety of materials, there is incentive and opportunity for the maximum use of creative imagination both in the process and in the play with the product. I think anyone who had seen children as I did the other day, playing with some little cardboard street-cars which they had just completed, would have been satisfied on this latter score. They asked for blocks, built a street of houses, cut paper-dolls, and then played. The dolls came out of the houses, hailed the passing cars, went downtown to shop and returned in time for dinner. The play was a self-organized group play suggested by the little cars which the children had constructed. It is the common experience in kindergartens where toys of this kind are sometimes made, that the free play with them is often self-organized group play. Compare such an occupation and play with the folding exercise given in the Wednesday programme quoted. The children for whom this was planned are supposed

to have been in the kindergarten at least four months. They begin with recalling a previous exercise in which the square was derived from a cube of folding papers or of crackers. Then they make *one* fold in the paper according to direction and name the resulting form—book, shed, screen, or trough, as it suggests one or another of these objects. Surely there can be no question as to which makes the more legitimate appeal to understanding and imagination.

c) The third criticism, that constructive work is a substitute for free self-expression, is based upon the assumption that in this sort of occupation there is no opportunity for free self-expression. What the critics mean by free self-expression, Miss Blow illustrates thus:

In weaving, for example, the child begins with simple combinations of number; discovers patterns as the result of this combination and thereafter through the reciprocal influence of pattern and numerical arrangement *creates interesting and beautiful designs*. In folding the beginning is made by creasing and bending paper in different ways; these creases and bends suggest simple objects and finally the child folds *with intention* to make objects.¹⁰

In both these illustrations the child is first shown how to manipulate the material; this suggests to him the relation between certain processes and certain results or products; he then creates designs or makes objects with intent, with purpose. The creation, the free “self-expression” seems to come with the purposeful activity. Now in constructive occupation this is exactly what happens except that in the first imitation of process the child knows what result he is going to achieve. After he has learned something of the possibilities of material through imitation, there is the same opportunity to create that is offered in the weaving or folding, with the added advantage that the possible products of his activity are far more attractive and desirable because he can carry on a play-activity with them, giving a still further opportunity for self-expression.

It must be remembered also that the believer in constructive occupation by no means uses it exclusively. Drawing, painting,

¹⁰ *Educational Issues in the Kindergarten*, p. 265 [italics mine].

paper-cutting, clay-modeling, and design¹¹ have a *large* place in her programme. There is full opportunity given for free expression in all these occupations in which the child is less dependent upon guidance in the beginning.

III

Are the opportunities and incentives offered the children for invention well selected?

In the outline quoted there is some opportunity for invention. After the children have made squares of different sizes with the sticks they are allowed to make life-forms (inventions). Again, after a sequence of forms by imitation with the fourth gift, they invent "if there is time." The question at once arises as to whether this is the best method of developing the child's inventive powers. It seems to make invention as such an end in itself rather than an unconscious means to an end. There is no doubt that in his free play with material the child often hits upon a result that strikes him as valuable. He may then consciously repeat the act in order to get the product, and this may stimulate him to work for other ends. But it is this second act, the effort to realize a desired end that is the really educative one, and the one which gives his inventive powers fullest opportunity. Baldwin, in his treatment of invention, points out that the valuable thought-combinations, the inventions, arise in active mental life in the conscious direction of thought to certain useful ends.

The whole process is a circular one. . . . Thoughts issue in movements adapted to these thoughts. Variations in these movements react to produce variations in the thoughts. Some of these thought variations are selected. These are the inventions.¹²

When a child sets out to realize some end of his own, even though model for imitation and materials be supplied him, there is opportunity for originality in the adaptation of means to end. If he selects the material and creates the form there is still larger exercise of his inventive powers. But he is not inventing for

¹¹ These occupations will have fuller treatment in a later paper of this series.

¹² *Social and Ethical Interpretations*, p. 96.

the sake of inventing. Invention is the unconscious result of his successful effort to accomplish his purpose. While child purposes often originate in aimless activity, the thing which is educationally valuable is the following-up of such accidentally suggested purpose with really purposeful activity, demanding effort and originality. This is the teacher's opportunity. She too often fails to seize it.

IV

Is there psychological justification for the division of forms of expression into forms of life, forms of knowledge, and forms of beauty?

This is a division which Froebel makes in exercises with materials of whatever kind, but it is certainly one which modern thought does not indorse. The little child naturally makes no such artificial distinction between the products of his activity. As has been pointed out in this and other articles of this series, "forms of knowledge," as such, have no meaning or existence for him. The same may be said with almost equal truth of "forms of beauty." He will sometimes like a certain arrangement of units "because it is pretty" but it is practically never his only motive in the things he makes.

After making a study of children's drawings, Elmer E. Brown concludes that the development of symmetric forms merely for the sake of beauty is a late occurrence and due to the influence of older people. Burk finds that "the child has practically no interest in conventional designs nor in abstract geometrical forms."¹³ Allison expresses his agreement with this general point of view in these words:

Neither the conscious production in the interests wholly of aesthetic values, nor production of objects independent of utility, is characteristic of art in its earlier phases nor for children in the elementary schools.¹⁴

The art-impulse seems to be closely associated with and to grow out of the child's other instincts—the constructive and

¹³ "The Genetic *versus* the Logical in Drawing," *Pedagogical Seminary*, Vol. IX, p. 296.

¹⁴ "A Study in Theories of Art," *Elementary School Teacher*, March, 1905.

social instincts especially, according to Dr. Dewey.¹⁵ Use and beauty are as yet undifferentiated by him. It would seem to be a serious mistake then to attempt to develop the aesthetic sense through the production of series of borders or symmetrical forms unrelated to any of the child's play-activities. In her use of design, therefore, the new school kindergartner gives the child opportunity to decorate the objects that he makes—if they lend themselves to decoration—or to decorate the room perhaps. She lets him select his own motive or unit for design in most cases. It is needless to say that this is rarely if ever a square, circle, or oblong. It is rather a pet animal, a flower, a snow man, Santa Claus driving his reindeer, or some other object dear to the childish heart and which it therefore gives him joy to repeat. Earl Barnes finds in his study of what children seven and eight years old think pretty, that their feeling of beauty gathers mainly around flowers, animals, dolls. A similar study of kindergarten children might give many suggestions as to what units for design we should offer them. There is a marked tendency at present to overemphasize this form of art-work.

In conclusion and by way of summary it may be said that the traditional materials and methods of using them are subject to the following criticisms:

1. The unity sought is a formal one, one existing in the materials themselves.
2. Exercises are planned for the purpose of giving the child knowledge of form, size, number, etc., apart from any felt need for such knowledge on the child's part.
3. Some of the processes with the small material demand a premature co-ordination of the fine muscles. A greater variety of substantial materials is needed.
4. There is too little recognition of the child's constructive and play instincts.
5. There is not sufficient opportunity or incentive of the right sort offered for originality and invention.

¹⁵ *School and Society*, p. 56.

6. The threefold division of forms of expression into life, beauty, and knowledge forms is arbitrary and unnatural.

In recognition of the force of these criticisms certain changes in method and material have been made by the new school kindergartner.

1. The materials are used as a means by which the child may express the images, ideas, and play-purposes growing out of his social life. Through such expression he gradually defines and organizes his varied experiences bringing them into some sort of concrete connection with one another.

2. When materials are thus used, ideas of form, size, number, etc., follow as a necessary consequence. Exercises for the special purpose of teaching these things are discarded therefore as out of place at this stage of the child's development.

3. Many of the materials have been enlarged and some substantial ones added which lend themselves to the making of objects which the child feels the need of in his play.

4. To satisfy more fully the constructive and play instincts, the so-called constructive occupations have been introduced.

5. These constructive occupations, when rightly used, furnish both opportunity and incentive for originality and invention as means of securing desired ends.

6. Since all forms of expression are "life-forms" to the child in the sense that they have meaning and functional value to him, there is no division of his products into forms of life, beauty, and knowledge. He uses what knowledge he has in all his creative efforts, getting more as he needs it from his own experiments or the suggestions of his companions or teacher. Doubtless all of his achievements have some elements of beauty to him, although certain of them develop the aesthetic sense more than others.