

‘General mobility of the limbs and stamina in their various movements are the points of which elementary physical education consists.’

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Often you can hardly bear to look. You take advantage of a rainy day to go to a museum, this time not to look at paintings but at the art of the craftsman. In the display cases are the most delicate woven materials, fantastic products of the decorative art, as fine as spun gold — and we are told they were made from rye straw. What nimble fingers these people had — men, women and children! Yes, look the other way so as not to be reminded how weak, clumsy, ungainly all our wonderful technology has made us. Pestalozzi was right, faculties only develop with use. We become painfully aware of this in the area of manual dexterity. Advances in technology have largely taken over physical labour and manual skills in the rich countries of the West. Everything is easy, we don't have to lift a finger. But it comes at a price — at the expense of our manual dexterity and delicacy of touch.

Very early on schools, under Pestalozzi's influence, accepted that they should also develop the children's craft skills. Thus here in Switzerland, for example, there were 'manual dexterity lessons', as they used to be called, in which boys learnt first of all to handle paper, scissors, folders and knives, later on planes, saws, drills and chisels. Sometimes the course went on to include filing, grinding, polishing, soldering, repoussé work. And during their years of compulsory schooling the girls completed a collective apprenticeship in sewing and dressmaking, the best of them being well able to make their own clothes. They learnt all kinds of knitting, crocheting and embroidery as well, of course. And that was not the end of it. They learnt to cook, to furnish and decorate rooms,

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to run a household. The practical training of girls was seen as more important than that of the boys. There was a kind of second and third school for them beside the normal school: for work and for housekeeping. There were special colleges to train the teachers for this profession.

Single-sex education is a thing of the past now and the economic situation, which in the nineteenth century was the reason for the practical training in schools, has changed radically. Nowadays there is no economic reason for a young person to learn to knit stockings or pullovers, sew shirts, patch trousers, make cardboard boxes or bookshelves. As a result, the special courses, that took up such time and resources, have been replaced by other models: boys and girls learn the same and the goals in handicrafts, textiles and housekeeping have been changed and extended. Above all, however, the total time devoted to craft/practical subjects has been drastically cut.

This is not without its consequences. Most children do still learn to knit, but only a tiny minority develop sufficient skill to make it part of their lives. But at least they know about knitting and how it is done. The same is true of all the other handicraft techniques. The range of possible activities has been expanded, but in general the level of skill reached in the individual techniques is low. The reason is simple. Children would have to spend considerably more time learning a single technique and keep at it, practising properly until they had developed the desired degree of skill. That is tedious for many children, who have been spoilt and refuse to stick at the same thing for long, demanding constant variety.

Sometimes one finds well-equipped workshops for woodwork, hardly used any more, that have really just been left to go to rack and ruin. They are a symbol of the crisis in handicraft. It is clear to see, but it was also unavoidable, for the basic drive behind really good practical education has disappeared: economic necessity. That leaves us with the fundamental question of *what other motives can justify the teaching of handicrafts today?* I can see three.

Firstly: To a large extent technology has relieved us of physical activity and working hours have been reduced. That has led to a new problem, the organisation of our free time. Today many people pursue some hobby involving manual skill in their leisure time as compensa-

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tion. It is helpful, then, if basic skills have been taught in handicraft and ideas for specific activities passed on. Among those are the classic techniques involving textiles, but also handling modelling clay, scissors, paper, glue and all the tools for artistic creation.

Secondly: The modern economy still has need of workers who are skilled with their hands. Good handicraft instruction can be useful preparation for this, not by anticipating specific aspects of an apprenticeship but by encouraging manual skill in general.

Thirdly: In these first two points, handicraft is considered with regard to its later practical usefulness. That was the reason behind the ‘lessons in manual dexterity’ and the ‘work school’ in the past. But the development of all our physical abilities, not just those of our hands, can and should be more, namely part of holistic education. This corresponds to Pestalozzi’s view. Young people should enjoy an *all-round* education. The faculties that are developed should equip people to cope with any situation. It is not only our manual skills that benefit from good instruction in handicraft, it encourages other qualities such as perseverance, a sense of form and practical reasoning as well as precision and carefulness.

It is understandable that, given current attitudes, educational policy will emphasise the first two reasons and assess the quality of education according to its usefulness for the economy. It is, therefore, up to us teachers to take on the task of speaking out with demands for education that has the individual *as a full human being* at its centre and not just the needs of the economy. One of these demands concerns the development of the ‘hand’. It is to the disadvantage of our development as human beings that it is unfortunately neglected in modern schools.

To what extent can the development of manual dexterity — not only in handicraft, but also in writing, drawing and painting — contribute to our development into full human beings? I see the following possibilities:

- As is well known, an infant first explores the world with its mouth but very soon with its hand as well. Anyone who uses their hand — from an infant to an old man — learns with every movement things that are important for life which do not need to be expressed in language. It is the hand itself which makes contact with the world, adapts to it

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and takes hold of it independently. When Pestalozzi talks of ‘observation’, he means the perception of the world with all our senses, including our sense of touch and movement. This is particularly effective in our hands. In this way our hand is also there in the ‘observation’ of the material world.

One example: Anyone who has never worked with modelling clay will find, when they first try it, that their fingers squeeze it clumsily, with no idea of the effect they produce, with no sense of the consistency, strength and malleability of the material. But their hands and fingers become increasingly more experienced, adjust to the reality of the material they are working with, adapt almost imperceptibly to its demands and possibilities and their idea increasingly takes form almost automatically. Our fingers are ‘thinking’ and acting themselves as they become more and more skilled.

- In using our hands we make what is perhaps our most important discovery: that not everything we can see in our minds is possible in reality. Our hand tells us what works and what doesn’t. This practical work with our hands leads to *practical reason*, to a feeling for subtler but more important connections. It is not for nothing that superiors who started out with practical work have a better reputation with their workers than those who come from the theoretical side and often have little idea of what actually works or doesn’t.
- It is the ‘head’ that is central to work in our schools and that has the great disadvantage that the pupils hardly ever perceive the results of their efforts with their senses — apart from marks. It is quite different with handicraft. There the success of their work is evident to their senses. Visible progress encourages them to continue their efforts which is a great help for pupils who lack motivation. *Perseverance* comes in a particular way in craft activities in that the stage the work has reached tells the pupil what has already been done and what is still to do. And when, finally, he can hold a satisfying or even good piece of work in his hand that will strengthen his *self-confidence* and his *self-esteem*. You only have to ask a bricklayer whether he feels inferior to an office-worker; he will tell you with

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pride that he gets pleasure from seeing the results of his work at the end of the day.

- Contemporary society has many names, one of which is *the throw-away society*. We don't just throw away things that are damaged, no longer usable, we throw away more or less anything, casually, as if it were nothing. Many people no longer feel any true *bond with their material possessions*. They are just props for the part we are playing at the moment and therefore quickly lose their attraction — so chuck them out! One has a true bond with an object when one knows its history, likes using or looking at it, looks after it and would be unhappy to give it away. Naturally it is difficult to feel such a bond with mass-produced industrial products. We feel closest to things which required some kind of special effort. At the very least that means care taken in choosing it, perhaps a high price, but that is nothing compared with the time and effort that goes into *making an object oneself*. By getting a child to make things himself in handicraft at school, we give him the opportunity to forge an emotional bond with material things.

It is only the work of a moment to vandalise a stone statue on a fountain with spray-paint. But if children were allowed to work on a piece of stone with hammer and chisel at school and shape it into a simple figure, they would certainly not deface their handiwork out of pure boredom. Nor would they do it to their classmates' sculptures, unless they deliberately wanted to do it to spite them. The vandalism that is widespread today has its roots in the lack of emotional bonds with material objects, which leads to an inability to respect things to the creation of which others have devoted time and effort.

That brings us to the question of the principles it would be sensible to follow if we are to be successful in developing handicraft skills. Let us have a quick look at the way Pestalozzi saw things. He understands the development of these faculties as a four-stage process as well, though he stresses that the development of our physical faculties is *linked to that of our intellectual faculties* from the outset. This can be seen at the very first stage.

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Pestalozzi calls this *first stage* 'attention to accuracy'. First of all the pupil should be made aware of what is important, of which movement and which way of using a tool is correct. As a rule that is done by the teacher demonstrating it, usually several times, starting slowly and pointing out the key factors at every stage. It starts, then, with a mental act.

Many teachers nowadays reject the idea that there is one correct way of doing things in the area of skills and allow the pupils more or less unrestricted freedom at this early stage. Generally, however, the result is that they get into the habit of using the wrong movements and the wrong way of using tools and have to put a great deal of effort into unlearning them later on, when they want or have to improve their skill.

The clearest example of this process is the way the pupils hold their pencils when writing or drawing. Children quite rightly start drawing and painting before they go to kindergarten; generally, however, no one shows them how to hold a pencil in a relaxed way. But that problem should be dealt with at kindergarten and infant school. If that does not happen, the impractical positions and movements will become fixed, resulting in those handwriting styles that are not truly personal, just clumsy. Naturally there are activities where it is appropriate to let a child get on with it without further instruction, but I believe it is wrong to make that a general principle, for the following reasons:

- Every skill such as writing, knitting, weaving, sewing, playing a musical instrument, using particular tools has been developed over the years or the centuries by specialists. Every technique, therefore, *represents a social resource* and success depends on following it. Also, every tool has been conceived with the appropriate use in mind, which puts relatively narrow limits on its employment. Putting tools that are possibly even dangerous into children's hands without preparation and simply telling them to be creative has nothing to do with freedom and imagination. I see no reason why the regulations controlling the use of a chisel, for example, should not apply to all tools — including writing implements.

In the area of leisure activities this Pestalozzian basis is accepted as a matter of course. Take a first golf lesson, for example, or watch the children at ballet class. I therefore find it even more difficult to

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understand the resistance I occasionally encounter from colleagues when they are asked not to let the children write letters or numbers the wrong way round and to show them the correct way to hold writing implements.

- Teachers who love children take their childish urges seriously and respond to them, but that does not mean we must always accept them. Rather, we take them seriously by dealing with them openly. Granting these childish urges absolute validity encourages an *asocial attitude*. The child will begin to believe he only has to accept things that spring from his own desires. But the world and society — not just ours, every society — quite justifiably make demands which individuals must be able to conform to. If a young person does not learn this, he will attract attention for the wrong reasons at the very latest when he starts an apprenticeship. There he will have to stick to quite specific techniques without argument for reasons of safety, quality and efficiency.

At Pestalozzi's *second stage* the child imitates the teacher and tries things out for himself. Very often he also needs to acquire the physical strength needed for the sequence of movements. Pestalozzi calls this phase 'strength to produce'. The teacher should keep a close eye on the pupils as they do this and point out mistakes in the imitation of the desired movements. Thus when a child starts learning a musical instrument, for example, one should not leave him to practise alone, but do so together with him until one is sure that he is not reinforcing mistakes during practice.

The *third stage* is concerned with dexterity, agility, with what Pestalozzi calls 'lightness and delicacy of movement'. It is the stage of patient, persevering practice. Through it the child increasingly integrates the skill into his own being. He gradually starts making the sequence of movements correctly without having to think about it. He can feel himself in each of his movements and they are successful. This is the development of the 'observation with the hand' I talked about at the beginning of this chapter.

The *fourth stage* is the stage of 'freedom and independence'. The learner has reached a certain degree of 'mastery' and that means two

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things. In the first place he can use the skill he has acquired to realise projects he chooses himself because he likes them or because they are important to him for other reasons. If, for example, he has learnt to play a musical instrument, he can now choose himself what he will play; if he has learnt woodworking techniques, he can decide what objects he will make. In the second place mastery means that, should he feel the need, he can develop the technique in a way that suits him. Thus this fourth stage is the stage of true creativity.

It is to be welcomed that in handicraft we allow the imagination and creativity of the individual pupils much greater scope than in the past. The problem with this is that we are in danger of losing any sense of external constraint, of everything becoming a matter of ‘just please yourself’. The constraints the pupil will come across as he learns to apply a technique or to use a tool will prove a necessary counterweight to that. The technique comes from society and is therefore — naturally within sensible limits — determined; the content is the expression of individual creativity and therefore free. In this synthesis of models that are produced and handed down by society and the individual’s own creativity, the pupil will experience a paradigm of one of the fundamental aspects of our existence as human beings.

In this chapter on the development of craft skills I have deliberately placed great emphasis on careful attention to techniques and the proper handling of tools and materials. In that I was conscious of following Pestalozzi’s principles. I was also trying to counter the widespread low regard in which craftwork is held. There is a constant supply of new factors to back up this disparagement:

- All modern machine-made products are characterised by a high degree of perfection and therefore often seem very impersonal, cold and dead. There is a reaction against this, especially among the younger generation. As a counterweight people cultivate the incomplete, preferring things that are unfinished, imperfect, used, worn. One only needs to look at the current fashion in dress! Advertising also relies on the effect of the incomplete: drawings that look as if they were done by a child and handwriting that is as clumsy as possible are used to suggest spontaneity, liveliness, genuineness. It is thus natural for a

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teacher simply to enjoy the poetry of the incomplete and not exasperate his pupils with demands for greater care and precision.

- It is not only fashion and advertising that cultivate the incomplete, fine art does so as well. That is not a value judgment, for neither the rejection nor the cultivation of perfection tells us anything about the real substance of a work. The rejection of perfect detail has been with us since the Impressionists at the latest; the Action Painters were probably the ones who took it farthest. Anything that is thrown or sprayed onto the canvas quickly and with passion seems spontaneous, refreshing, expressive. It does not just liberate the artist, it also liberates the observer, leaving him free to make what he likes of the work. Some sculptors reject perfection as well, attacking the clay furiously or using a chain saw. I do not dismiss that, for 'art' has its own laws. The simple fact is that a significant part of the visual arts has rejected and still rejects perfection and that this development has had its effect on what happens in school today: care, precision and delicacy are hard to find. In the past a fuss was made when a pupil blotted his exercise book; nowadays if one of these painters lets paint that is a little too thin dribble unintentionally over the picture, he leaves it — chance made the decision for him.
- In some respects even Pestalozzi did not take children as such entirely seriously. He saw them primarily as beings that needed to be educated with regard to their full humanity and the tasks awaiting them as adults. Consequently too little attention was paid to childish playfulness, childish imagination and childish spontaneity. It is only in the twentieth century that children have been taken seriously as children, that the intrinsic value of childhood and childishness has been recognised. Even in this, however, it is possible to go too far, as happens when no limits are set on children's selfishness and a laissez-faire attitude results in absolute trust in children's powers of self-development. In this context, the idea that children must also accept and acquire social norms has a hard time of it.

Do not get me wrong. I like modern art and take pleasure in the poetry of incompleteness and the spontaneous expressions of children

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before they have been educated. There is a place for all that. When we first give children clay at school we should be happy to leave them free to find out what it is like for themselves. When we give them finger paints they should daub them all over the paper like an Action Painter. But when they have a pair of scissors in their hand, I want to show them how to use them so that they do not poke anyone's eye out and get the best result they can. And in making a pot I would not rely entirely on their spontaneity but would show the clumsier ones, if they do not realise it themselves, that they must not press too much or too little when rolling out the clay. I want to avoid flaws appearing after the pots have been fired because air got into the clay. And I don't want a child to be frustrated when a beautiful vase he is making slumps just as he reaches the neck because he did not strengthen the join between the bottom and the sides properly. Or to put it as a principle: I think all one-sidedness is wrong, in everything I look for a synthesis between tradition and innovation, between freedom and constraint.

The title of this chapter is the question: 'A delicate touch or the big fist?' It reflects my opinion that someone who has developed a delicate touch will be more likely to stroke with his hand than clench it into a fist. But I am clear that what I hope will be the end product of education — full humanity — cannot be achieved by one-sided training of the hands, but requires all-round education. Part of that is practice in the way to resolve conflicts, which is what I want to look at in chapters 20 and 21.