

Module 8:

Method for Teaching, Reading & Writing

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8. Method of teaching writing and reading

8.1 Writing as a mean of expression.

Writing is not a mere mechanical art. it should be taught as a mean of self-expression as well as a mean of communicating with others. An illustration may make this clearer. Suppose that a child, who knew no German, were taught to write in German characters, he could then copy any German work; and if he had also been taught the pronunciation, he could write German sentences from dictation, or he could learn by heart the sequence of German words in a poem and write it down from memory. In all these exercises he might acquire the greatest facility. in one sense such a child would have learned to write. But writing for him would be but a mechanical art; what he wrote have no meaning for him. Such writing could never become, in the full sense, a mean of self-expression. It might, indeed, express mood or feelings_ even a careless observer would see that it varied with discontent, and so on. But it could never express thought. It would not be wholly mechanical, -no organic activity ever is,-but it would be as nearly mechanical as a human activity can be. The perfection of writing is twofold. Because it is used to transfer thought to others, it should be clear and legible. In regard to this the child of the last paragraph might excel. But he knows nothing of its higher function.

As a mean of self-expression, its perfection consists in its spontaneously following the thought which it expresses. The fingers must indeed be directed by the nerves, and some portion of nervous energy must be spent on this; but it should not require an effort of attention, because the attention given to it must detract from the attention given to the thought it expresses. Thus, paradoxical though it may sound, the more mechanically perfect is the apparatus by which the physical movement of writing are performed; the less mechanical is the process of self-expression in writing. We may illustrate-the actions of speech have with most of us become so mechanically perfect that speech has become a spontaneous expression of thought. The thought and its utterance often seem to be simultaneous- we become conscious of the thought only when we hear ourselves expressing it.

With the orator or the practiced advocate, this seems not to be uncommon.

Dr. Montessori rightly lays great stress on this expressive aspect of writing. She gets the pupil over the mechanical difficulties of writing without his knowing that he is learning to write, and there she leaves him till, in a little while, he discovers for himself that he can write words or sentences, not by copying them, or writing them from dictation, but because he has an inner impulse to express himself in that way. This sudden discovery by

the pupil that he possesses a new power is a great intellectual stimulus to him. Thus writing because a pleasure instead of a task. Perhaps the best analogy to this method of preliminary preparation is to be found in the modern mode of teaching to swim. Instead of putting the learner into the water, so that he has to learn the management of arms and legs, of breath and body, all at the same time, he is swung up in the proper position in a gymnasium, and first taught one movement, then another, and so until it becomes easy for him to combine them all. Not until he has become expert in this, is he put into the water. The result is that he begins to swim quite easily, and without that terror of the water which so often prevents young people from learning to swim at all.*

**(This method of teaching a muscular activity by teaching separately the different components of the activity is often employed, e.g. in technical schools, in army drill, in gymnastic training, etc. Itard seems to have been the first to apply the principle from the physiological standpoint.)*

Observe, too, that the process is much quicker, as well as much pleasanter. Because the separate movements can be practiced separately, it is possible to devote the whole attention to one movement until it becomes almost automatic, and it is well known that this is the condition of quick learning and of good Learning. This idea, that a combined movement was best learned by practicing the separate movements of which it was composed, lay at the root of some of the earlier methods of teaching to write. The pupil was taught to copy straight strokes, hooks and circles, one after the other, before he made letters.

The idea was that when he had learned to do each of these easily and well, he could then readily combine them into letters. That is quite true, but the method "gives no relief to the pupil, because the physiological processes involved in copying straight lines or hooks, are just about as complicated as those in copying a complete letter. The attention has always to be divided between the eye and the hand, just as in copying a complete letter, and the same set of nerves has to direct the same set of muscles whether the stroke is a straight line or a hook or a circle.

It follows that the geometrical analysis of the shapes of the letters has no analogy to the physiological analysis of the muscular actions in swimming, since it is in the latter case alone that the complicated sets of actions involved are broken up into their separate muscular components. In writing, therefore, the difficulty is somewhat different from that in swimming. No matter what letters we form, we employ just the same groups of muscles, and we are bound to educate them all at the same time; we have no opportunity of educating them separately. Happily, however, this comes far more naturally to us than

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