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978-1-108-01886-9 - Reflections upon the Education of Children in Charity
Schools

Sarah Trimmer

Excerpt

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R E F L E C T I O N S
UPON
THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN
IN
CHARITY SCHOOLS, &c.

HAVING formed a plan for a course of instruction peculiarly adapted to the children of the poor, and prepared several articles of it for publication, I thought it incumbent upon me to explain my motives for an undertaking, which to some may appear superfluous, and to others assuming, since the world already abounds with elementary books for Charity Schools, many of which were written by authors of the most eminent abilities, and highest reputation.

But first I shall beg leave to submit to the consideration of the benevolent a few hints which experience and observation have suggested to my mind, concerning those institutions which afford gratuitous instruction to the children of the poor, more particularly such as are distinguished from *Sunday*

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Schools and Schools of Industry, by the name of
CHARITY SCHOOLS.

The important question, Whether it is consistent with sound policy to bestow education upon children in the lowest classes of life, has employed the pens of some of our best writers in the last and present centuries; and we may judge from the wonderful increase of schools supported by charitable contributions, that it is at length generally decided in the affirmative.

The objection against giving learning to the poor, lest it raise them above their situation, is completely obviated by making such learning as general as possible; for then it ceases to give pre-eminence, or to be a distinction, and must eventually qualify all better to fill their respective stations in society: and nothing could be thought of so well calculated to diffuse a moderate and useful share of learning among the lower orders of people, as these schools. To this I may add, that as literature has made such considerable advances in the kingdom, the poor seem to have a just claim to more liberal instruction than was formerly allotted to them. But there still subsist various opinions in respect to the

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the manner in which they ought to be educated, more particularly, whether the mode of *religious instruction* adopted at the first established CHARITY SCHOOLS, in this kingdom, should be continued in them, and extend to the institutions of the present day; or whether charity children in general, but particularly those trained in *Sunday Schools*, and *Day Schools of Industry*, should not be taught upon a plan limited chiefly to lessons of morality.

It is well known that those useful establishments, for which the nation is originally indebted to the wisdom and piety of our ancestors, and in which many thousands of children are constantly training in habits of piety, virtue, and decorum, have owed their chief support, from the beginning, to annual subscriptions and voluntary benefactions, collected at the preaching of charity sermons; we cannot therefore wonder that some of the trustees and managers of Charity Schools, from zeal for their welfare, should at first have viewed with a jealous eye the rapid progress of other institutions for the instruction of poor children, from an apprehension that the success of the one might interfere with the interests of the other, as they mutually depend

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on the same means for support. But *Sunday Schools* and *Schools of Industry* have already existed long enough to prove that these fears were ill-grounded; for the beneficence of the present age is proportionate to its opulence, and every species of charity meets with ready contributors; so that there cannot be any real danger of the decay of *Charity Schools*, if they be properly conducted. Nothing can give *Sunday Schools* and *Schools of Industry* a preference to them, unless they afford better instruction.

It is much to be lamented, that institutions respectively calculated, by their reflective and united benefits, to complete the long-desired end, of educating all degrees of people in the lower ranks of life suitably to their various stations and callings, should ever be regarded in the light of rivalry and competition. *Charity Schools* hold out such superior advantages, in some respects, as to give them a decided pre eminence over all the subsisting establishments for gratuitous instruction, as the money collected for them is usually sufficient to afford clothing to the children, as well as learning; and in many *Charity Schools* the children are entirely maintained in the
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house, and some of them afterwards apprenticed to trades and manufactures.

But *Sunday Schools* and *Schools of Industry*, though the emoluments of the children are less, are of equal importance with the above institutions, as they afford instruction to unlimited numbers of children, who could not be admitted into *Charity Schools*, on account of the expense attending them; neither could such multitudes be trained up as *Charity Children* are, without great injury to society: for, however desirable it may be to rescue the lower kinds of people from that deplorable state of ignorance in which the greatest part of them were for a long time suffered to remain, it cannot be right to train them *all* in a way which will most probably raise their ideas above the very lowest occupations of life, and disqualify them for those servile offices which must be filled by some of the members of the community, and in which they may be equally happy with the highest, if they will do their duty.

Many ill consequences are observed to arise among the higher orders of people from educating the children of persons whose opulence is the fruit of their own industry, and who have

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made themselves respectable without the aid of literary acquirements, together with those whose parents are of high rank and independent fortune ; but this injudicious practice we cannot expect to see abolished while in the education of youth so much regard is paid to externals, and so little to the regulation of the heart and the improvement of the understanding. It will, however, readily be allowed, that the children of the poor should not be educated in such a manner as to set them above the occupations of humble life, or so as to make them uncomfortable among their equals, and ambitious of associating with persons moving in a higher sphere, with whom they cannot possibly vie in expense or appearance without manifest injury to themselves.

But there are degrees of poverty as well as of opulence; and if it be improper to educate the children of the higher classes promiscuously, it surely must be equally so to place all the children of the poor upon the same footing, without any regard to the different circumstances of their parents, or their own genius and capacity. It would be thought very cruel to send the child, or orphan, of a pious clergyman, or a respectable but reduced tradesman,

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tradesman, to be brought up among the offspring of thieves and vagabonds in the schools so happily and judiciously founded for those most wretched of all poor children, by the Philanthropic Society ; and it would appear very absurd to send a boy designed for husbandry to the Marine Society, to be educated in the art of navigation.

Yet nothing is more common than to mix poor children together in *Charity Schools*, whose separate claims to the superior advantages which these institutions hold out, are by no means equal, and whose mental abilities will bear no comparison.

It would be justly deemed very illiberal to refuse to lads of bright parts, and uncommon activity of mind, the learning which *Charity Schools* afford, and consign them to the labours of the field ; but is it not equally injurious, both to society and individuals, to condemn those who are invincibly dull and stupid to literary studies, as irksome to them as the most servile occupations are to boys of quick parts and aspiring tempers ?

If there be among the poor children of a parish any who have been born to good prospects, who have enjoyed in their earliest years
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the comforts of affluence, and who still have respectable connections, it will be an act of particular kindness to place them in *Charity Schools*, where they will receive such an education as may hereafter prove a means of restoring them to their former station. And if there be others whose bright genius breaks through the thick clouds of ignorance and poverty, reason and humanity plead in their behalf, that they should be indulged with such tuition as may enable them to advance themselves, by the exertion of their abilities, to a higher station, and fill it with propriety. It certainly would be very unjustifiable to deny such children a chance of bettering their condition.

For a considerable length of time it has been the usual custom to admit boys and girls into Charity Schools from the principle of lightening the burden of their parents, without any particular regard to their capacity for learning. Indeed, before the establishment of Sunday Schools, there was no opportunity of giving them a probationary trial; but the happy period is at length arrived, which affords suitable instruction for poor children of all descriptions, for there
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is scarcely an employment or condition in humble life to which there is not a school adapted; the great difficulty seems to be, to form an accurate judgment of the objects for each particular charity, in order to make a proper selection of them.

IN CHARITY SCHOOLS a comprehensive plan of tuition holds forth advantages proper for the *first degree* among the lower orders, who in these seminaries might be qualified for teachers in schools supported by charity, for apprentices to common trades, and for domestic servants in respectable families.

DAY SCHOOLS OF INDUSTRY, by mixing labour with learning, are particularly eligible for such children as are afterwards to be employed in manufactures, and other inferior offices in life, as well as for training those who are usually called *common servants*.

And SUNDAY SCHOOLS, while they hold out religious instruction suitable to all degrees of poor children, furnish a sufficient portion of learning* for such as cannot be

* Excepting in the articles of writing and accounts, a little of which one could wish all the poor might obtain, though the sabbath day is not the proper time for these acquirements.

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pared on week-days from the labours of the plough, or other occupations by which they contribute to the support of families.

Sunday Schools may also serve (as was before hinted) as probationary schools to try the capacities of children previously to their admission into *Charity Schools*.

Could this distribution of learning be universally made, I am persuaded a very material objection to *Charity Schools* would be effectually done away: for by this means children endowed by nature with good capacities, would be put in the way to improve them; and others, to whom liberal instruction would be no benefit, would be prevented from losing that time over books which they might turn to more advantage by employing it in manual occupations.

It appears from the account of *Charity Schools* given by the *Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge*, that there have been no less than 1631 of these schools established in Great Britain since the reformation; in which, allowing for the deficiency occasioned by some of them having been suffered to drop, there are still 40,000 children educated annually.

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