

Making Good Primary Schools in 1917

– Mixenden Elementary School headteacher John Arrowsmith sharing his Practice, research by Michael Newman for a talk at Hebden Bridge School's Alternative Education Festival 17th June 2017.

In 1917 a pamphlet was published by the community that called itself New Ideals in Education. This booklet was a product of their new policy to run days at their annual conferences on experiments in schools that were founded on the value of 'liberating the child'. This was the founding value of the community, created in 1914 at the first Montessori Conference in England held at East Runton, Norfolk.

"In view of the possible reconstruction of the elementary school system after the war, it seemed to the Committee that it was a matter of national importance to make these experiments known far and wide." P5 'General Introduction' Prof E.P. Culverwell

The pamphlet was called: 'Educational Experiments by Head Teachers in Elementary Schools. Five Papers read before the New Ideals in Education Conferences.'

It cost 3d post free but "By the generosity of Sir William Mather teachers in elementary schools can receive a copy free by sending name and address to the Secretary."

The experiment we are going to look at here was written as 'Physiological Education in an Elementary School by John Arrowsmith'.

As the headteacher, John Arrowsmith, explained, "The work of Mixenden School of introducing a system of Physiological Education or Education through all the senses, primarily through Touch – a system of putting the whole boy and the whole girl to school – was begun six years ago." So, in the village school this experiment had started in 1911.

Mixenden is 3 ½ miles from Halifax, 900 ft above sea level, surrounded by hills, 1,200 – 1,300 ft high, rugged, bare and of moorland character. Parents worked "in the Mills, quarries, milk farms, on roads, cart drivers". The children started at 5 and left at 13 years, though 12 year olds with a good attendance record could work half time at the Mills.

John Arrowsmith stated the purpose of his method, clarifying what would be a tension used against progressive methods for the next one hundred years, what some people state are the 'basics' of education;

"The aim is to develop the mental and physical growth of the individual child by bringing him into contact with Things instead of books.

"It is recognised, in Mixenden School, that reading and writing are excellent and necessary tools for the further development of the mind, but it is also recognised that the mind of the race gained its knowledge and its power by and through things handled, seen, heard, tasted and smelt." P9

To ensure that the children learnt through their senses and by doing, it was important to ensure a landscape that would promote action, as well as learning, using the environment.

"At Mixenden School, there are 2 large playgrounds, a playing field, a large garden, a sand-pit, swings, hen-house, chicken coops, rabbit hutches, all with the exception of the playgrounds and the playing field, made by the children with the help of the teachers.

"From these things, together with our rambles, nearly all our educational work flows." P9-10

As well as looking after numerous pets, and each other, the children grew plants, food and flowers.

“Every child at Mixenden School has a bit of garden and there is also a large communal plot.” P16

The older children made things for the younger children, furniture, toys and a large playhouse with table and chairs to seat four children. The eldest girls work with the youngest: “to manage and educate little ones. These mothers, in embryo, thus learn how to sing, to play, to tell stories dramatically, and also to attend to items of personal hygiene...”

A typical day in the school would involve: “stories, dancing, gardening, feeding, attending to numerous pets, drawing, building and constructing the striking things in their stories, sweeping, dusting, washing, cleaning teeth, playing with dollies, acting out stories...”

John Arrowsmith also writes that children should learn about sex not through the boring use of flowers, but through their observations of their pets.

Not only is this a state school, for the village community of Mixenden, a community of working class, impoverished families, that from 1911 has had its headteacher, John Arrowsmith, trying to create a happy school based on learning by doing, within an atmosphere of freedom. It is a school that has shared its successful experience with the New Ideals Conference, who have further shared it with teachers and others throughout the country. This is one image of what a school should be like.

Another, in the same pamphlet, was that of a school teaching its elementary children how to manage their own learning, how to research, how to summarise, how to learn from books by themselves, without a teacher. Miss N Price, Headmistress of Wood Street Girl Council School, Rugby presented her method of ‘Independent Study in a Girls Elementary School’.

This presentation of experimental case studies by their headteachers, this searching for such examples, this promoting of them through annual conferences, detailed conference reports, separately published pamphlets sent free to teachers, and then from 1924 the publication of a quarterly magazine, with examples from abroad. This, along with a clearly defined identity of purpose, ‘to liberate the child’, stated at every public opportunity, and a short summary of the foundation and history of the community at the beginning of every conference and therefore in every conference report. With networking of teachers, teacher trainers, inspectors, educational organisations, adult educators, health workers, prison workers, artists and cultural leaders, and local and national politicians, all talking about practice within their philosophy of liberation. This created the community that defined the good primary school from 1918 until the 1980s, a community of learning through play, joy, exploration and freedom. Its practice was so successful that it inspired a similar community in France, and the international community of the New Education Fellowship, founded by New Ideals member Beatrice Ensor.

As research extends our awareness of this struggle and practice we shall celebrate members of this community like John Arrowsmith and his school.

Why do we live in a world in which they seem to have failed? As a community, from the start, they analysed what issues they faced. What would stop them from succeeding. They listed; exams, national curriculum, inspection of academic outcomes, and the aspiration of parents of teenagers for their children to go to university or get middle class jobs. John Arrowsmith’s voice joined thousands of others when he wrote in 1917:

“The scholarship and the examination systems are only a species of trade rivalry brought into schools from the commercial world... the malady has so worked itself into every part of the schools that children do not learn because they like learning, they cram to beat their fellows in the race for marks.” P10