

THE EVOLUTION OF THE NURSERY-INFANT SCHOOL

Nanette Whitbread

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A History of Infant and Nursery Education in
Britain, 1800-1970

By

NANETTE WHITBREAD

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in Britain, 1800-1970

Nanette Whitbread

Leicester College of Education



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J. W. TIBBLE

A history of infant education by R. R. Rusk was published in 1933. Little or nothing has been written on the subject since, except in the relation to the theory and practice of such outstanding figures as Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori—or of that pioneer of the infant school, Robert Owen of New Lanark. The merit of this book is that it considers the actual development of infant schools and education in Britain against the background of industrialization and social change, making clear how this development was influenced by the ideas of particular theorists from both the continent and England.

The British infant school is a unique institution, in so far as most continental countries begin formal schooling at six or seven rather than five. But there were also many more children under five in the elementary schools of the nineteenth century than is usually realized. As the rigidity

of the elementary school was broken down, so there were more opportunities to develop appropriate methods for teaching the youngest children. But, at the same time, the tendency in the early twentieth century was to exclude from the schools those under five. Then the nursery school was born, and a new history began of devising an appropriate environment and activities for the children from the age of three.

In this book, Nanette Whitbread has made a contribution to the history of primary education which will interest all students of education and suggest a number of fruitful issues which deserve to be followed up.

BRIAN SIMON

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Preface

In the last few decades there has been growing recognition of the importance of the pre-school and infant years in a child's intellectual development. For this and a number of other, largely social, reasons the demand for nursery education has increased among all social classes. These considerations make this an appropriate time to examine the historical evolution of nursery and infant education in Britain. Previous histories of infant education have focused on the ideas of the great educators without paying much attention to the development of the infant school, and there has been little historical consideration of pre-school provision. This study attempts to reappraise the influence of individual theorists on the kind of education given to young children, to analyse sociological factors that determined need and demand for nursery provision, and to assess the effects of voluntary enterprise and official policies.

Content and method in nursery and infant schools have been subject to conflicting traditions. The idea of

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fostering the child's natural development was derived from Rousseau and, particularly as interpreted by Froebelians, struggled for acceptance against pressures for early formal instruction in, or in preparation for, elementary and private schools. Social rescue and physical welfare alone tended to motivate nursery care, but the idea of nursery education consistent with the developmental tradition slowly gained acceptance. Nursery-infant education came to be seen as a continuum. Child-centred developmentalists for some time resisted structured learning based on research concerning cognitive and linguistic development, but gradually accepted it for the infant stage while for long continuing to question its validity for nursery education.

Until quite recently it was generally assumed that children under about five or six years old should be at home with their mothers; but in practice, ever since the start of the Industrial Revolution, very young children of working mothers were left with child-minders or sent to school with older brothers and sisters. The practical origin of nursery-infant education in the last century was in babies' classes of elementary schools, separate schools for twos to sevens supposedly modelled on Robert Owen's at New Lanark, and middle-class Froebelian kindergartens. From early in this century the need for nurseries in slum districts was recognized, but provision has been negligible except in war-time. More under-fives were accommodated in infant schools, even when official policy kept numbers to a minimum, than in separate nursery schools. Infant teachers, particularly in certain parts of the country, have been empirically evolving nursery-infant education for over a century.

A review of national trends inevitably hides local variations, though the most significant of these have been noted in this study. Statistics have been given when available to demonstrate trends in provision for children under five:

PREFACE

those in special and hospital schools have not been included, and until 1969 no information was available about many small private nurseries.

Today the demand for nursery education greatly exceeds provision in both maintained and private sectors, and there is danger that the relatively faster growth of the latter may promote greater social inequalities in educational achievement than result anyway from differences of home background. The English infant school evolved as a unique institution, widely acclaimed, but its success continues to be undermined by restrictive policies towards nursery education.

Among the many people who have helped me in this study I should particularly like to thank Miss M. H. Saul, Librarian of the Froebel Educational Institute, who kindly made published and unpublished documents available to me, and my ex-colleague Mrs K. Douet for her invaluable advice, criticism and encouragement.

N.E.M.W.

