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EDUCATION AND EVACUATION

THE war has given many education authorities a new and complicated problem to solve. These are the authorities of evacuation and of reception areas. In the former, between twenty and thirty per cent. of elementary school children have been evacuated to and have remained in the reception areas, a small percentage have made private arrangements for shelter in the country, leaving, perhaps, seventy per cent. of the children remaining at home.

Correspondingly the reception areas have had their school rolls increased in number in the same proportion, this necessitating in many cases modifications of the school organization.

The fact, however, remains that the well-planned evacuation scheme for school children in school parties has broken down through lack of complete support from the parents living in the vulnerable areas. A twenty or thirty per cent. response leaves the education authority of the evacuation area with the major task of education still to be carried out within its own precincts. At the same time the teaching staffs, in the first place, left with the evacuated children and were billeted in the reception areas. A large proportion have now, however, been recalled. Taking first the problem as affecting the children who refused to be evacuated, the President of the Board of Education, after much pressure, announced in the House of Lords on November 1st, 1939:

' The Government have decided that as many schools as possible shall be reopened for the education of children of parents who desire them to attend.

'The Home Secretary has promised to help local education authorities by instituting at once a survey of the school premises in order to decide which of them are suitable and what form of protection is most appropriate in each case.

'The essential conditions are that the attendance shall be voluntary and not compulsory—as required under the Education Act—and that suitable measures for the protection of the children—except, of course, from direct hits—are undertaken.'

At the time of writing, no air raids of serious character have taken place upon any of our populous centres, and the drift back to the towns of evacuated children has continued without interruption, in spite of appeals made over the radio by Ministers of the Government that parents should think first of their children's safety.

This reverse flow of children back to the towns dislocates the arrangements made for their education in the rural areas and also creates further problems for the home authority. No stable plan is possible, and make-shift provisions only can be adopted.

The schools reopened in evacuation areas are to be used only by small numbers at a time, chiefly of the older children, and for these sufficient shelter is to be provided. In some areas the school is only being used as a clearing-house for the homework of the children. The teachers meet small groups at pre-arranged times at the schools, mark their exercises and discuss with them their problems. With the issue of further exercises and materials the children return to their homes, where they continue their studies in readiness for the next visit to the school. In this way only a few children attend school at a time or are on the streets at a particular moment. The majority are at their homes and under the control of their parents. So far this method has worked reasonably well, but it is clearly not a plan for use over a very extended period.

A variation of the method just described is practised by some other education authorities of vulnerable towns. Teachers visit, in turn, small groups of children at selected

houses distributed about the town. Here groups up to perhaps ten children are met for an hour or two every day and dealt with as individuals. Tasks are set and discussed, and exercises are marked. The teacher then moves on to another of the houses selected for this plan, and the children disperse to their own homes to work at their set lessons.

Special attention is given to children of about the nine-to-eleven-year group in order to prepare them for entrance next year into a secondary school. At this stage the loss of education is most serious in its effects upon the higher education of the child in later years. Nevertheless, it is probable that, with the close checking of the teacher, the individual work done by such children will be an admirable means of training them in sound habits of study later on. It is likely that much of our teaching in the day schools is too standardised and of mass type wherein the individual may not have the fullest chance of development. The individual initiative now made necessary under the schemes described may, in fact, prove of great value both in character building and in the actual acquisition of knowledge, especially to the brighter and more able children.

Another group which needs and is receiving special consideration under these emergency educational schemes is the child about to leave the senior school at fourteen years and the one preparing for the School Certificate in the secondary school at about the age of sixteen. Where accommodation and teaching strength are insufficient in the reception areas to deal with all the children evacuated there, preference is being given, for a full-time education if possible, to the children in these age groups. In the case of secondary schools, particularly, it has usually been possible to pair off the evacuated urban school with a similar school in the rural district used as the reception areas.

In this way the corporate group has been maintained, even though the actual attendance at school may only be possible for half the day. Then the work is concentrated

upon essentials and other half-days used for visits to places of interest, homework, games, and physical education. This open-air education is unquestionably of great value if conscientiously carried out, for it is an excellent antidote to the artificial and theoretical attitudes engendered so often when teaching wholly or mainly takes place in a classroom. To see farming being actually done is, for example, practical education in geography which cannot be bettered. There is, however, a grave deficiency in the country areas of specialised accommodation suitable for abnormal children who are best dealt with on the institutional plan. Then there are few counterparts in the rural areas of the nursery schools of some of the industrial towns. Centralised baths with disinfection annexes, centralised canteens, etc., are also important provisions if the children are to remain for a lengthy period in the country. Recreation in large halls and on playing fields also needs organization.

Village halls could quite well be established or extended to form the nucleus of a new social life in the country both for the native children and the evacuees (hateful term) alike. When the war is over these would be invaluable assets to the country and would perhaps assist that return to country life which is so desirable.

Again, rather than continue to work the village school in 'double shifts,' it is now obviously desirable to bring into service other premises which may be available, so as to establish more widely-spread and numerous schools in the countryside. For these schools, children, both evacuated and native, should be pooled on the basis of geographical distribution, at any rate for the younger children. This would obviate the long walks in the open which attendance at country schools so often entails. If we are to experience continuous and serious air raids on this country, such arrangements are obviously most desirable, especially when we appreciate the danger from the showers of shrapnel which must fall from the fire of our anti-aircraft batteries scattered all over the countryside.

The Ministry of Health and the Board of Education are now ready to consider proposals for the use of such additional premises where the need can be justified, and we may find such justification not only on grounds of numbers of children, but also of distance and of safety.

There has, so far, been little evidence of sickness among evacuated children above the normal rate, but, with a long sojourn in the country, the possible stress of the war and the effects of nervous depression, we must be prepared for an increase. It is doubtful whether the medical services and provisions now existing in the reception areas are enough to cope with a sudden rise in the demand for them. In all areas these needs should be anticipated and surveys made to decide as to possibilities of their rapid extension. The retention of such a high proportion of the children in the evacuation areas has increased the problem, since most of the normal medical staff has had to remain there to deal with these children and with the rest of the civilian population to be subjected to intensive air raids with resulting heavy casualties.

Technical education has received a severe blow because this is mainly centred in the large and vulnerable towns. The difficulties of transport, especially at night, and the inconvenience of the 'black out' has reduced the attendances at evening technical classes very considerably.

Yet technical education is at the root of our industrial efficiency, and is therefore a basic factor in our war potential. Strenuous efforts consequently have been made to re-establish the classes even under the prevailing difficulties, and special measures for the protection of the students have been undertaken.

The fate of technical day-students evacuated to the country areas has been variable. So much has depended upon whether there were schools of similar type in the reception areas. In the hurry of preparations it was not always possible to arrange for this pairing of schools, although con-

siderable re-adjustments have since been carried out. In some cases a pairing with secondary schools has been possible.

There will be a considerable amount of sorting out to be done in respect of school fees, and also in the application of Government grants for education. The existing grant formula of the Board of Education is bound to be suspended during the period of hostilities, as it is clear, for instance, that grants dependent upon the average attendance of the children and upon the maintenance of a minimum of four hundred school openings in any financial year would operate unfairly upon an education authority with thirty per cent. of its children away from its area and the remainder attending school within the area only under the modified schemes described. Some provisional grant payment scheme will have to be devised probably based upon the grants paid during the last financial year when we were at peace.¹

Enough has been said to show that here we have a complicated tangle to unravel. The evacuation so well prepared in its inception by the Ministry of Health and certain of the local education authorities has, in fact, been only a very partial success. It has left two problems instead of one, and they will take all the ingenuity of the officials to make their schemes work reasonably well.

On this question there appear to be two opinions. The first is that evacuation of school children should be compulsory, so that one complete scheme for their education in reception areas can be fully worked out and applied. The other opinion is that the expenditure involved in evacuation would have been far better utilised to provide adequate and well dispersed shelters in the vulnerable towns themselves and there to have attempted to continue

¹ Since this article was written, new grant regulations have been issued, based upon the scale of grant for the previous financial year,

the work of education under, it is hoped, sufficiently normal conditions.

Which of these views is the more reasonable, only our experience in the war will demonstrate. It can, however, be said that the evacuation scheme has been an experience in organisation and social adjustment from which we are learning, and will learn, a great deal.

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