

**THE EDUCATION OF GIRLS: A
PUBLIC LECTURE DELIVERED
AT THE CHARLOTTE SQUARE
INSTITUTION**

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The Education of Girls: A Public Lecture Delivered at the Charlotte Square Institution by James Oliphant

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JAMES OLIPHANT

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EDUCATION OF GIRLS:

A Public Lecture

DELIVERED BY

JAMES OLIPHANT, M.A., F.R.S.E.

AT THE

Charlotte Square Institution

On 30 January 1889.



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THE EDUCATION OF GIRLS.

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I HAVE asked permission to address you on a subject which must be interesting to us all at any time, but which is specially appropriate at the present moment. A serious indictment has recently been framed against those who are responsible for the school education of girls in Edinburgh, in a weighty paper by Dr. Milne Murray, who has given much study to the question, and whose professional experience has supplied him with ample opportunities of forming a mature judgment upon it. Dr. Milne Murray contends that there is a prevalent neglect of healthy conditions in girls' schools—a neglect which is causing much danger to the well-being of society, present and future. It is unnecessary at present to enter into the evidence on which this opinion rests, and it would be out of place for the headmaster of any school to thank God that his is not as other schools are in this respect. It may be accepted in a general way, on competent medical authority, that there are dangers in the education of girls which at present are too apt to be ignored. The important questions are—1st, Who is to blame? 2nd, How are the dangers to be avoided?

In answer to the first question, it seems natural to say at once that the responsibility must lie with the directors and head-masters of the girls' schools, by whom the educational arrangements are made. Such a reply would be substantially just in the case of those schools where the endowment gives them the character of charitable institutions, and where, therefore, those who take advantage of the charity are not in a position to interfere with the independence of the management; but wherever there is free competition for public

favour—wherever a school is carried on, not as a philanthropic enterprise, but as a business—the position is altered. In education, as in everything else, the supply must for the most part be regulated by the demand, not only as regards the amount, but as regards also the nature of what is produced. It is idle to expect that the proprietors of schools will continue to offer advantages which they find the public do not appreciate, and are unwilling to pay for. Those who have sufficient capital and sufficient faith in the progress of reason will naturally venture on experiments from time to time in the direction of their ideals, but the permanent adoption of improved methods and appliances cannot be assured until the public approval and support has been gained for them. The responsibility of teachers for faults and deficiencies in the educational system must accordingly be shared by the public; and by “the public” is here meant not only parents who require education for their daughters, but, in a wider sense, the whole community. For the demands of the parents will naturally be influenced to a great extent by the prevailing standard of what a girl’s training ought to be. It is impossible here even to refer to the social facts and tendencies which, especially in our own country and in our own day, have made this a prominent and a difficult question, or to enter in detail into the different theories on the subject; but there is one view of the matter which has of late years gained a certain acceptance, and which in my opinion deserves the most strenuous opposition. This is the opinion, either openly expressed or tacitly implied, that girls should be educated as much as possible as if they were boys. I do not say that if the education of boys were all that it ought to be, this opinion would still be a dangerous heresy. If our system of general education, as distinct from special training, had reached its ideal limit, it might be equally suitable for girls and for boys. But we are as yet far from this goal. Defects of aim, of method, of arrangement, are still largely present, and these are for the most part defects which press much more hardly on girls than on boys. What

is only a slight hindrance to a boy's advancement may be a source of serious danger to a girl; and I consider it therefore necessary at present to protest most strongly against an identity of ideals which would only be admissible when education had been made completely rational. That this standard, which may without injustice be said to represent the University opinion, consciously or unconsciously, influences many parents, can scarcely be doubted, and the responsibility for the present condition of affairs is still further subdivided. In short, if any improvement is to be reached, it must be through the co-operation of the head-masters of the girls' schools, of the parents of the pupils, and of the official authorities who represent academic opinion and impose a standard on the community. Such co-operation requires more direct and frequent conference among all parties interested than has hitherto existed, and it is with this end in view that I have asked your leave to address you to-day.

What I have to say will represent my answer to the second question, viz., "How are the dangers to be avoided?" The dangers may be divided into three classes—

- (1) There is too little regard to physical conditions.
- (2) The mental energies are overtaxed.
- (3) The nervous system is unduly strained by excessive competition.

The physical requirements are simple, and need not detain us long. The rooms must be well-ventilated, and the windows should be opened for a few minutes at the close of each hour. Book lessons should be distributed throughout the day, being alternated with such subjects as singing and drawing. There should be some minutes' interval between each hour, so that the physical strain of remaining in one position may be frequently relaxed. There should be in every school a gymnasium and play-room, where the relief of free exercise may be enjoyed at intervals through the day, and, where possible, there should be opportunity of getting into the open air. The observance of these simple conditions would, I

think, in conjunction with the other reforms of which I have still to speak, remove any risk of interfering with healthy physical development.

A much more difficult question is that of the proper nature and extent of the demands upon the mental powers. This involves not only the matter of the curriculum, the studies which should be included in a girl's education, and the proportion in which they should stand to each other, but also the equally important subject of the best methods of teaching the different subjects. Leaving the question of the total quantity of work to be spoken of later, I would point out, in the first place, in regard to method, that the ideal of every teacher must be to render the head work more intelligent and less mechanical; to lessen the tax on the memory by putting the facts of knowledge in the form in which they can be most easily apprehended and retained. In the second place, in regard to the question what subjects a girl should study, and in what proportion, I would remind you that we are dealing entirely with general education, that all special training for particular pursuits must be left until after school age, and that the aim must be simply to equip the pupils as thoroughly as possible for taking up the ordinary duties of life, whether these are to include the earning of a livelihood or not.

Apart from the so-called "accomplishments," it will be generally admitted that the curriculum must include, besides the "Three R's," Literature, History, Geography, Science and Languages; and as the proportion which should be maintained among these studies cannot well be decided apart from the methods by which they should be taught, it will be well to consider each subject separately from the beginning, before any attempt is made to hold the balance between them. In what I have to say I shall naturally have always in view the primary and secondary school education of girls, though much of it will be equally applicable to home education, and to the education of boys.

The school education of a girl (or boy) may fitly begin at the age of four or five, when they should come under the charge of the

KINDERGARTEN

Mistress for two or three hours daily. At this stage, of course, the teaching will not be given through books, which require the understanding of artificial signs, but by direct appeal to the senses of the child through object lessons, so that it may first become acquainted with things themselves; and while knowledge is being gained in this easy and natural manner, there will be the training of eye and hand, in the first place, by the simple fancy work which is prepared for them, and later by the more definitely artistic methods of drawing and clay-modelling. At the same time the pleasantly organised games which form such an important part of the Kindergarten system afford not only agreeable and valuable physical exercise, but also the elements of moral discipline, by accustoming the children to act in concert with each other in obedience to rules. So far there is scarcely room for any controversy. Educational authorities are agreed, almost without exception, that for the early years of childhood no better training could possibly be devised; and yet, strange to say, in this country which prides itself on educational enlightenment, the Kindergarten system can scarcely be said to have taken root at all. Most parents are surprised to find that any such establishments exist amongst us, and there are actually some who think them pure waste of time. With such, however, it is useless to argue, and I pass to the next step,

LEARNING TO READ.

I strongly support the theory that children should be taught to read before they learn the alphabet, and though this method has not yet been received with general favour, I think I shall, at least, be able to show that there is much to be said for it. There is a popular impression that a child