THE PLACE OF INDIVIDUAL INSTRUCTION

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BY

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JOHN KENNEDY.

Batavia, March 20, 1902.

INDIVIDUAL INSTRUCTION

I am invited to describe to you in this address an experiment in individual instruction which we have been carrying on in our schools during the past three years.

A little frankness at the outset may guard against possible misunderstanding and prepare the way for any lesson which our experiment is adapted to teach.

It is true that we have learned the very great importance of individual instruction, and have committed ourselves to it irretrievably. It is scarcely too much to say that our school system has undergone a revolution. This new system has spread somewhat. If it becomes universal, it will certainly be a remarkable transformation of school work, such a transformation as will be accounted a revolution. Still I wish to say frankly that our experiment has not taught us to believe that individual instruction will ever be the prime pillar of education or even be the normal form of teaching. We are more convinced than ever before that children will continue to be assembled in classes, to be drilled and trained and educated in the presence of their fellows. In classes only can they get the needed spur of emulation, the attrition of mind upon mind, the helpful sidelights from many minds, the breadth of teaching which is compelled by the presence of num-

bers, and the needed experience of acting a part in public as a preparation for acting a forciful part later on in real life. The class-trained pupil will not be a recluse. But,—and with that conjunction, our case begins.

It is not easy to find exact analogies, but those which are measurably exact are helpful. Some of the established maxims of military strategy are: "Strike at the enemy's communications; strike at his commissariat." I can conceive of a more destructive maxim, though I have never heretofore heard it expressed: "Strike at his medical staff; reach, if you can, his doctors and his medicine chest; you have then but to wait for his army to become *hors-de-combat.*" How quickly then would a conquering host begin to suffer extreme distress and frightful depletion. Indisposition then means doom; the army will soon be no more. Under ordinary conditions, the returns to duty nearly balance the numbers that are obliged to withdraw temporarily for relief. True, extraordinary conditions render the hospital service unavailing; a German emperor loses all his army on the deadly Campagna of Rome; a Napoleon has forty thousand conquering veterans suddenly buried in San Domingo.

An army is a magnificent organization; and a school army is a magnificent organization. Let an army move without its medical department, and it will soon be no army. The causes of indisposition are legion. It avails not to force the sick along; it only adds cruelty to their misfortune and hastens their collapse.

Now apply the figure to schools. To start a great

school-system forward on purely class-instruction is like starting a great army forward without its medical service. There will soon be cumulative distress, misery, suffering, despair, loss, depletion. One who has observed with any degree of care the history of schools, cannot fail to have observed that it is a history of great suffering. And the causes of indisposition are legion. The most casual observation will convince any one that the history of schools is a history of awful depletion. Of every regiment that starts forward, the number discharged at the expiration of the term of service would not constitute much more than a sergeant's guard. The rest are among the casualties of the service.

It is no mere figure of speech that charges up distress and suffering to schools. The work of the class is gauged to average capacity. Fully half the children are below that average, andare dragging despairingly in the rear. Their dragging is a peril to themselves and an infliction to the rest. Their dragging is also a positive peril to the teacher. Distress tends to awaken sympathy; but when the distress is hanging about your neck and tending to drag you under the water, your sympathy turns to a fierce struggle for yourself. You may say with perfect truth that half a class is composed of drowning children dragging down their teacher. And how about the other half? They are children tethered either to an immovable obstruction or to one moving so slowly as to be insufferably irksome. These children are in just as much danger as the others. Depletion will begin on both sides of the line. Loss of interest is about as fatal as loss of