

Susan Isaacs and the Malting House School

by Philip Graham

Journal of Child Psychotherapy, 2008, 34, 1, pp. 5-22.



The Malting House School buildings, c.2008¹

Abstract

It is well known that psychoanalysis has over the years had a significant impact on the education of children with mental health problems. Its contribution to the theory and practice of mainstream education is less well documented. This paper gives an account of the five-year (1924–1929) history of the Malting House School in Cambridge. The school was financed by Geoffrey Pyke and headed by Susan Isaacs, a teacher, psychologist and early member of the British Psychoanalytic Society, who became a leading protagonist of the ideas of Melanie Klein. The physical structure, organisation, philosophy and curriculum of the school are described. Although the school was only in existence for five years, through the writings and teaching of Susan Isaacs it had a lasting impact on early years education.

Introduction

The progressive school movement in Britain began in the late 19th century (Skidelsky, 1969). Schools for secondary age children such as Bedales (1893) and King Alfred School (1897) were founded as alternatives to traditional public schools with their emphasis on didactic teaching and harsh discipline. Influenced by the theories of Friedrich Froebel and Maria Montessori, educational experiments involving younger children that emphasised learning through discovery began in Britain in the early years of the 20th century, but it was not until the years following the First World War that these educational movements became influenced by psychoanalysis. Summerhill (1921) and Dartington (1925), for example, were secondary schools both established with Freudian principles in mind.

¹ Photo by Keith Edkins, CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11006367>.

The progressive educational movement in Britain only gradually came into contact with psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic ideas. Sigmund Freud had, in the early years of the 20th century, advocated a more open, permissive, less harshly disciplinarian approach by parents to child upbringing than was then the rule in 19th-century Vienna and Victorian England. He had, however, stopped short of suggesting that such permissiveness should form part of public education. Indeed, his daughter Anna who became the orthodox child expert in the psychoanalytic movement, was vehemently opposed to any suggestion of full openness, for example in relation to sex education in schools (Freud, 1930).

Some teachers had, however, taken Freud's message to mean that educational methods needed to move towards approaches where children decided themselves when and what they were going to learn; it was the teacher's job to assist this process not to direct it. Logically this meant there should be more freedom and less discipline. The teacher who personified this approach most closely was Alexander Neill or A.S. Neill as he was known in the educational world or Neill, Neill, Orange Peel as his pupils later called him (Hemmings, 1972). At first alongside, but soon to be closely integrated into progressive educational ideas came a new, persuasive voice in psychoanalytic circles, a voice to which British psychoanalysts became almost immediately attracted; this belonged to Melanie Klein. Although she later modified her views, in the early 1920s Klein was very firmly in favour of the application of ideas derived from psychoanalysis to education. The first part of 'The development of a child' (Klein, 1921) was sub-titled 'The influence of sexual enlightenment and relaxation of authority on the intellectual development of children'.

In this paper Klein begins by asserting that the idea of enlightening children on sexual matters was gaining ground, especially among those who realised that ignorance in such matters was dangerous. But enlightenment would not be necessary if only – as was clear from 'the irrefutable conclusions to be drawn from psychoanalytic experience' – children were protected from any over-strong repression of their natural impulses in order to prevent subsequent mental illness or distortion of character development. In every case seen by psychoanalysts, the cause of their problems could be found in 'repressions of childish sexuality'. In order to achieve this result, it was necessary to remove from adult society the 'dense veils of secrecy, falsehood and danger spun by a hypocritical society' that currently do so much damage.

In the concluding section of the paper she asks:

How can upbringing on psychoanalytic principles be carried out in practice? ... I would like here to make a suggestion ... I mean the founding of kindergartens at the head of which there will be women analysts. There is no doubt that a woman analyst who has under her a few nurses trained by her can observe a whole crowd of children so as to recognise the suitability of analytic intervention and to carry it out forthwith.

The origins of the Malting House School

In 1921, a son, David, was born to Geoffrey and Margaret Pyke. Geoffrey, a successful speculator in the commodities market, had been fearfully bullied at his public school, Wellington, and was determined that his son should not suffer in the same way (Lampe, 1959). He looked around for a school that would provide a relaxed but stimulating education for his child but failed to find one. He decided he would found a school that would have no rules and no lessons but would enable children to learn things for themselves. At this time, in early 1924, he was in analysis himself with James Glover, one of two Scottish brothers, both doctors who were founder members of the British Psychoanalytic Society. Pyke advertised the post but also asked James Glover if he knew of anyone who could act as principal of a new school that would run along the lines he wanted. Glover immediately thought of Susan Isaacs, a 39-year-old trained teacher who was an early member of the Society and put the two of them in touch with each other (Eyken and Turner, 1969).

Susan had recently married Nathan Isaacs, who, although working in an import/export metal business, had a strong interest in philosophy, psychology and child development. Geoffrey, Susan and

Nathan began to meet together in the Isaacs's flat in Bloomsbury to discuss the establishment of a new progressive school for young children, its organisation, principles and curriculum (Gardner, 1969).

The educational writings of Melanie Klein must have seemed very attractive to Geoffrey Pyke looking to establish a new type of school for his son. Both Geoffrey Pyke and Susan Isaacs knew of Klein's 1921 paper on the education of children. Klein's views exercised at that time, and to an even greater extent later, an enormous influence on Susan Isaacs. She was probably at that time the only primary school teacher who was also a qualified psychoanalyst. Klein's idea that a person with this double qualification would be ideal to run a school for young children must have been most attractive to her.

After her birth in Bolton, Lancashire on 24 May 1885, Susan Isaacs had been brought up in a strict Methodist household. Her childhood was marked by a series of distressing events, including the death of her mother when she was six years old. For various reasons her education was interrupted and it was not until 1908, when she was 23 years old, that she began to train in Manchester as a teacher of young children. It was realised that she was unusually bright and she was transferred to an honours degree course in philosophy at Victoria University, before it changed its name to the University of Manchester.

After gaining a first-class degree, she carried out postgraduate studies in psychology at the University of Cambridge before obtaining a teaching post in a teacher-training college in Darlington. In 1914, she married a post-graduate botany student in Manchester, William Brierley and followed him down to London in 1915 when he obtained a research post at Kew Gardens. In 1919, shortly after obtaining a teaching post in Psychology at University College, London, at the end of the First World War, she became interested in psychoanalysis and underwent an analysis with J.C. Flugel, a fellow member of the University College Psychology Department and founder member of the British Psychoanalytic Association. In 1921, with her marriage breaking down she felt she needed to deepen her psychoanalytic training. She went to Vienna where she had a brief further analysis with Otto Rank. On returning to London, she and William Brierley divorced and, shortly afterwards, she married Nathan Isaacs (Gardner, 1969).

The three-way discussions between Susan Isaacs, Nathan Isaacs and Geoffrey Pyke were passionately conducted. There was much discussion of the educational principles that should guide the running of the school and here all were in agreement. This had to be a school that would draw both on psychoanalytic theory and on the experience of the most recent progressive child-centred schools. As we have seen, Geoffrey's main motivation in founding the school was to provide a permissive educational environment in which his son, David, could thrive in the company of other children of his age. Fortunately the main influences on Susan's educational approach were the German pedagogue, Friedrich Froebel, and, indirectly through J.J. Findlay, who had been her Professor of Education at Manchester, the American philosopher, John Dewey, both of whom advocated an individualised approach to learning characterised by encouragement to children to discover the nature of the world for themselves.

Structure and equipment

Geoffrey Pyke rented the Malting House, Cambridge and moved into it with his wife, Margaret and his son, David, in the summer of 1924. It was, and indeed remains, a large rambling residence situated in Malting House Lane in Cambridge. Susan later described the way the building was adapted for use as a school (Isaacs, 1930).

The striking feature of her description of the school is the lack of any mention of classrooms, and in fact there were none. However, there was plenty of space in the garden and an abundance of stimulating equipment whose use the children could explore for themselves. In the garden there was a sandpit with a water tap, a tool-shed, a summer house with roof and open sides, a see-saw (which had detachable weights hung at intervals underneath), sliding boards, movable ladders, and a 'Jungle-gym' climbing cage.

Among the equipment indoors were paints, both artist's colours and 'real' (housepainter's) paints with suitable brushes, rolls of thin coloured muslin; plasterer's laths for woodwork and, later on, pieces of small timber; hammers, pincers, nails, and other tools of the proper size and weight for carpentry (including a double-handled saw for cutting up logs), bricks for building (both a variety of wooden ones, and old 'real' bricks of small size for building in the garden); small movable pulleys that could be screwed in where desired; maps of Cambridge town and county; an HMV portable gramophone and selection of records; a pendulum, with movable weight, fixed on the wall. The carpenter's room in the second and third years included a lathe with a variety of tools, a drilling machine, and such oddments as a spirit level and callipers.

After the first year, Bunsen burners were fitted to the benches both in the large hall, and in the laboratory for the older children, and there were tripods, flasks, glass rods and tubing to use with them. (The supply of gas was controlled by a detachable key for each burner, so that the burner could not be used by the children unless one of the staff was there to supervise.) In the laboratory there were dissecting instruments and dishes, jars for specimens, a human skeleton and anatomical diagrams. The living animals (kept mostly in the garden) included several families of mice and rabbits, guinea pigs, two cats and a dog, a hen and chickens, snakes and salamanders, silkworms, a fresh-water aquarium and a wormery.

There was also some formal educative material, including some Montessori equipment. The reading material included a wide variety of the 'look and say' type – pictures of things with names attached, pictures with short stories, commands, labels and so on. Much of this was made by the staff and the children as required. The older children had a typewriter and a library of suitable books.

The richness of the material available to the children is surely remarkable. Perhaps even more remarkable to the contemporary reader is the ready accessibility of such potentially dangerous equipment. One is relieved to hear that the supply of gas to the Bunsen burners was individually controlled and their use supervised. All the same, one has the strong impression that a visit from one of today's health and safety inspectors would have rapidly resulted in at least a temporary closure of the school.

The pupils

The school opened in October 1924, with 10 boys ranging in age from two years eight months to four years 10 months (Eyken and Turner, 1969). Gradually over the next three years, while Susan was at the school, they increased in number, but only to about 20 children. By 1927, their ages ranged from two years seven months to eight years six months. In its second year, the school began to take girls, but there were always at least four times more boys than girls.

The children came mainly from professional and academic families, and some of their fathers already were or became eminent in their fields. The two sons of G.E. Moore, the Cambridge philosopher and ethicist, attended. Other pupils who attended were the daughter of Edgar Adrian, later Lord Adrian, a Nobel Prize-winning neurophysiologist; the grandson of Lord Rutherford; the nuclear physicist; and Tony, the son of Philip Sargant Florence, at that time a post-graduate student and later a Professor of Economics. Some who attended were friends of the Isaacs. Thus Jack and David Pole, the two sons of Joe and Phoebe Pole, the Isaacs's closest friends, were both pupils at the school, starting there when it began to take boarders in 1925. There were also the children of two lecturers in physiology, the son of a Cambridge tailor and another of a bank manager. There were one or two children from overseas.

Not surprisingly given their genetic inheritance and their privileged, often academic upbringing, the children were very bright, much brighter than average. In 1926, Evelyn Lawrence, a psychologist, joined the school and administered intelligence tests to the children. The scores ranged from 106 to over 140, with an average of 131. This means that they fell, on average, into the top 5% of the population.

Reading about the behaviour of the children today, one is struck by just how disturbed many of them appear. Susan wrote (Eyken and Turner, 1969) that 'It was sometimes said that the 10 most difficult children in Cambridge had been sent to us.' Reading the descriptions of some of them, this is

not difficult to believe. One child, the son of a Cambridge don, delighted in drawing, cutting out, building and modelling, but rarely sat long enough to complete anything. Instead he ran about the rooms, laughing to himself. When he hurt himself, he never sought comfort from an adult, or one of the children, but would run off, throw himself on the floor or the stairs, bury his face in his hands and sob bitterly. When recovered, he would come back with the others again, without a word about the incident. Today such a child would almost certainly be regarded as showing childhood autism. The descriptions of other children suggest that a number were extremely aggressive. One, for example, developed a habit of spitting at children and for an early period was quite unable to cope with communal life. Another delighted in smashing things, and one day broke four vases in succession, picking up the pieces and smashing them again. This boy also had a streak of viciousness, once biting Susan severely. Thus the children were, on average, highly intelligent, with some, at least, showing quite severe behaviour and emotional problems.

Philosophy of the school

Susan's educational philosophy derived from a rich personal experience, as well as her academic and professional background. She had, early on in her childhood, suffered from attendance at a harshly run, traditional school with much emphasis on rote learning and severe discipline. Later she had studied pedagogic principles at University, undertaken quantitative research and then gone on to teach in a teacher-training college, which sent teachers out to a variety of schools, all traditional in their approach. Geoffrey's views were less precisely formulated and more emotionally expressed. He believed that children's natural curiosity was taken away from them in British schools, contravening the principle that learning best takes place when preceded by discovery. So he wanted the adults in his school to be 'co-investigators', helping the children investigate and giving them the sensation that they were opening a new world for themselves. He even wanted children to be able to question the names of things. Should one of them ask what a tree was, the answer would not be 'That is a tree', but 'Shall we call this a tree?' (Lampe, 1959).

Susan's views were also expressed clearly. She wrote (Eyken and Turner, 1969, p. 39):

The key to the school is the growth of the children, and its methods must be based on direct observation of the children themselves. One of the most far reaching changes of thought in human history is the modern view of the freedom of children as the basis of education. This is the great experiment of our age. Merely to give a vague and general freedom is, however, not enough. We must also observe what children do under free conditions, and study the laws of growth, so as to be able to meet their needs in detail.

The children are free to explore and experiment with the physical world, the way things are made, the fashion in which they break and burn, the properties of water and gas and electric light, the rain, sunshine, the mud and the frost. They are free to create either by fantasy or in imaginative play or by real handling of clay and wood and bricks. The teacher is there to meet this free inquiry an activity by his skill in bringing together the material and the situations which may give children the means of answering their own questions about the world.

This is our view of the function of the school, and this leads us to follow a heuristic method over the whole field of our children's relation to the world, particularly in the earliest years. Our experience has, in fact, led us to reverse the usual assumption which says either openly or implicitly to the child 'First learn what we have to teach you, then you will be able to do things for yourself'. We cannot, in fact, teach him to grow, either in body or mind. Recent experimental work has shown, for example, that we cannot *teach* concepts of number to young children; these come by reason of the children's growth and concrete experiences of the world and we cannot hasten their coming.

We can, however, at a later stage, teach, for example, higher mathematics. In other words the children's own natural ripening and immediate discoveries come first and ability to profit by instruction comes later. We cannot do more than provide rich opportunities for early development, both because we have far less means of knowing what is going on in the minds of children in the earliest years than we have later, and because language, which is an essential part of instruction, is unsuited for the communication of knowledge and experience until these later stages are reached.

Thus Geoffrey's underlying beliefs in setting up the school arose from his views that the aim of education should be to produce young people with unfettered curiosity. This would be achieved by allowing them access to a wide range of experiences and the tools to explore their environment. In order to ensure that they were not hampered by information held by adults that might be misleading or downright wrong there would be no formal lessons; instead children would learn by finding things out for themselves. In contrast, Susan's aims were scientific; she wanted to provide children with as free an educational environment as possible and observe what happened. Geoffrey wanted to create scientists, while Susan wanted to carry out a scientific experiment.

Evelyn Lawrence, a psychologist who joined the Malting House School in 1926 and who tested all the children's intelligence shortly afterwards provided another perspective. She wrote (Gardner, 1969):

It was felt therefore that an indispensable preliminary to improvement in educational theory was a detailed and consistent study of a group of children living under conditions of maximum freedom. The school provided an opportunity to carry out such a study, and, at the same time to carry out innovations in educational practice.

But what was the point of 'maximum freedom'? Evelyn Lawrence pointed out that

... for the practical educator, there are two problems. To begin with, however much he may want his human plants to flower freely, and nature to take its course, however much he wants to break with bad precedents and keep his new generation away from the shadow of the past, he knows that many courses are open to him, and that his choice will probably affect the whole lives of his pupils. He must therefore decide what kind of people he would like to produce. Secondly, having made this decision, he must find out how to get the desired results.

The kind of people that the promoters of the school want to produce will have a scientific attitude to life. They must have intellectual curiosity and vigour, and be averse to taking their opinions ready-made. They must also be as physically healthy as possible ... the decision as to what exactly the children should become should arise naturally from the children's own characters, aptitudes and inclination. Capacity for successful adaptation in society is included in the scientific attitude. Social ability is largely an intellectual thing, and if we can create reasonable people a large part, at least, of their social battle is won.

Discipline

One large difference between the Malting House School and more conventionally run educational establishments relates to discipline. Again, Evelyn Lawrence provides information about the approach to discipline and its advantages and possible disadvantages. She wrote (Gardner, 1969):

... Discipline is very free. There is no punishment, and little admonition. Prohibitions, when unavoidable, are of particular acts, not of whole classes of conduct. It is not true, however, that the school is entirely run without rules. It is generally understood that material used shall be put away. If the user (as often happens) is reluctant to clear up at once after his game, he is allowed to wait until he feels more inclined. But the matter is not forgotten, and sooner or later he usually agrees to put back what he has used in its place. Another rule is that implements must not be used as weapons. If this happens, the weapon is gently but firmly taken away. No anger, however, is ever shown by the teacher. If the two participants in a serious quarrel are unevenly matched, there is intervention on behalf of the one who is at a disadvantage, so that the weaker child can feel he can get just support.

She then goes on to discuss the advantages of this approach to discipline (Gardner, 1969). There are three main advantages:

In the first place you can get to know your children. Under the old disciplinary methods, the educator knew his pupils only very partially and mistakenly. The child was forced to wear a mask of seemliness and respectability in the presence of grown-ups and behind that mask his own inner life bubbled unseen. Here the children's crudities, the disorder or their emotions, their savagery even, are allowed to show.

Emotional troubles can then be dealt with scientifically, or allowed to straighten themselves out, as they so often do, given time.

Secondly, the danger of driving strong emotions underground to work havoc in the unconscious is avoided. The open expression of sexual interests is allowed, but where possible they are canalised by being turned into scientific channels. This freedom entails a certain amount of unpleasantness for the grown-ups. It is useless to expect children to be free at times, and at others to exercise discretion in situations where discretion is usual. But one cannot have it all ways, and it is time conventional parents learnt that their children are not the little angels they had believed. Hostility, another uncomfortable passion, is allowed freedom of expression. If the Malting House children hate a person, they tell him so. It is then possible to investigate the reason for that hatred, and probably to remove it. Fights and squabbles often occur, and if the fighters are fairly evenly matched, they are left to work out the adjustment themselves.

This brings me to the third advantage of freedom. With conventional discipline, the child is kept wriggling under the dead weight of adult disapproval and prohibition. Here, his position is that of a fencer, continually adapting himself to the shifting conditions of the group mood. This is what he will have to do in adult life, and it is surely a mistake to make all his social adjustments for him until adolescence and then pitch-fork him into the world to discover from the beginning how human relationships work. When you have fought with another person over a thing, you realise that his desires are as strong as your own, and also, eventually that fighting is not the best way of settling differences. The result of this policy in the school is not anarchy. I have seen several children combine to prevent conduct which they rightly considered unjust, and I have seen children of the most forcible character voluntarily submit to the leadership of a weaker-natured child.

Was discipline really so lax or absent in the school? Sometimes the account of a school given by those who run it accords poorly with descriptions given by outsiders, and, as we shall see later, this does apply to some of the features of the Malting House School. However, it does seem as if the account given by Evelyn of the absence of authoritarian use of prohibitions is accurate. James Strachey, writing to his wife, Alix, on 17 February 1925, reports a conversation he has had with Lella Florence, Alix's sister-in-law, whose son, Tony, was attending the school at that time. Strachey writes (Meisel and Kendrick, 1986):

I must say I can't see the point of it. There seem to be about 8–10 children, of ages from 3 to 5½. And all that appears to happen is that they're allowed to do whatever they like. But as what they like doing is killing one another, Mrs. Isaacs is obliged from time to time to intervene in a sweetly reasonable voice: 'Timmy, please do not insert that stick in Stanley's eye.' There's one particular boy (age 5) who domineers and bullies the whole set. His chief enjoyment is spitting. He spat one morning onto Mrs. Isaacs's face. So she said: 'I shall not play with you, Philip,' – for Philip is typically his name – 'until you have wiped my face.' As Philip didn't want Mrs. Isaacs to play with him, that lady was obliged to go about the whole morning with the crachat upon her. Immediately Tony appeared Philip spat upon him, and in general cowed and terrified him as had never happened to him before. That may be a good thing; but it doesn't precisely seem to be the absence of all repressive influences.

James disliked Susan Isaacs intensely, and the tone of his report might be seen to betray a certain prejudice against her. Indeed he goes on to say, 'However I suppose all these accounts come from a highly resistant source.' Although Strachey clearly thought the approach to discipline at the school was bizarre, it is difficult to see how he could justify his statement that repressive influences were absent for that is what his account does precisely, if ironically, suggest. Indeed, to all intents and purposes, he confirms Evelyn Lawrence's description of discipline at the school to be accurate.

Establishment of the school

Despite James Strachey's reservations, the Malting House School was soon successfully established and indeed over a very short period of time, achieved a national reputation. Susan Isaacs was the head teacher (though she was known as the directress) of the Malting House School for its first three years, indeed until a very short time before it closed. Over these three years, the school evolved as the staff

reacted to the way the children behaved in this experimental setting. After about 18 months it became established in its organisation and methods, expanded both in pupils and in staff, and attracted both a good deal of favourable attention and some harsh criticism. While up to this point children only attended on a daily basis, in its second year some children living outside Cambridge, mainly from London, were taken into the school as boarders. They lived at St. Chad's, a large house about five minutes walk from the day school. Some of the children who boarded were very young. One former pupil, recounted to me nearly 80 years after he had been sent to the school as a three-year-old boarder from London where he lived with his family, how terrifying the experience had been for him (Pole, personal communication). He told me he had never forgiven his parents for sending him away and, as he saw it, rejecting and abandoning him. Indeed he thought that the emotional effects of this traumatic separation had never left him. He still had in his possession the detailed notes that Susan Isaacs had made of his first fortnight at the school. Surprisingly they make no mention at all of any distress (or lack of it) at the separation this little boy had shown over this period. I asked him why he thought this was. Could it be that she had not noticed, or that he had covered his distress up, or that he had, in retrospect, exaggerated his emotional reaction? He said he did not know, but pointed to two observations that had been made of his behaviour 80 years earlier. 'You are surely right' he wrote to me 'that the distress I felt on being dumped at The Malting House is not reflected in the record of the next few days'. But, he observed, the notes reveal his interest in

... means of transport, always deciding that buses cars, trains, have to go *backwards*. I suppose this has to be where they came from. The notes make no comment on the psychological significance of this need to regress – (or go home?). Both the demand and the absence of editorial comment on it seem to me significant of deeper things.

When he read of his three-year-old self that he had thrown Geoffrey Pyke's jacket in the Cam on an outing, he reasonably concluded this might have been a sign of his aggressive feelings towards those who had taken him from his parents. Professor Pole, incidentally a historian and not a psychologist as one might have imagined from the acuteness of his insights into the situation, recalled that he had been depressed later in childhood and that Susan Isaacs had tried to arrange an analysis for him. He started the analysis but decided he did not want to continue after a few weeks. He told me that Miss Sheehan-Dare, the analyst who saw him, kept referring to 'parts of the anatomy one didn't discuss'. He found this upsetting and stopped attending.

It is remarkable, considering that John Bowlby, who drew attention in the 1940s and 1950s to the importance of attachment and separation to later personality development, was himself a psychoanalyst, that so little attention was given by those running the Malting House School to the potentially damaging effect of separating such young children from their parents for as long as a term or three months at a time. In understanding this surprising fact, we need to bear in mind that, although Anna Freud was something of an exception, most analysts at that time, especially those like Susan Isaacs who were under the influence of Melanie Klein, were so focused on what went on inside the child's mind, they often neglected to give due importance to the emotional effect of parent-child separations. Indeed, Bowlby had great difficulty in persuading his psychoanalytic colleagues even in the 1950s that his concerns regarding such separations should be taken seriously (Bowlby, 1991). Further, in the first half of the 20th century, middle-class children were quite frequently sent off to boarding school at an early age, commonly at seven or eight, though rarely as young as three years.

Despite the apparent lack of concern regarding the effects of separation from parents on the boarders, the staff of the school had frequent and rewarding relationships with parents of day children. Mothers and fathers came to lunch from time to time, visited the school to see how their children were getting on and participated in some of their activities, mothers with sewing and fathers with constructing models. There were also frequent reports to parents describing their children's activities and reactions in an anecdotal fashion. One such report described how a little girl's behaviour had changed after the birth of twin siblings: '... she was very much subdued and clung to me or Miss Irvine

far more exclusively than she had done ... Her mind was clearly occupied with the twins to the exclusion of almost everything else', wrote Susan Isaacs.

As the months went by, the approach to discipline became more explicit and, to some degree, more flexible. Considerable emphasis was placed on the avoidance of commands: 'you must do this' or 'you must do that'. Indeed the staff was encouraged only to consider the use of the word 'must' in its causal sense – 'if you build a tower with bricks as high as that then it must fall over'. The word 'must' was never used in its moral sense. How then were the rules – for there were rules such as one that involved washing up dirty crockery – enforced? The approach taken was to leave it to the child to learn by experience the effects of breaking the rule. Susan Isaacs describes, for example, how a child of four and a half would not wash his cup after he had drunk some milk. For the next two days he got no milk as all the other cups were in use and his remained too dirty to use. When he did go to wash the cup he found the dregs in 'an advanced state of decomposition', and was both interested and disgusted. He needed no further reminders.

Direct refusals to comply with a request were dealt with depending on the seriousness of the situation. If children's refusal to comply might lead them into physical danger, for example if they ran out onto the pavement outside the school which was on a busy road, the adults would physically carry them back. But less serious infringements, that put the child in no physical danger (such as not clearing up mess), would be dealt with by waiting until the child appeared readier to comply or, if the child was tired, by helping the child to clear up.

Meal-times were used both as a means of encouraging the children to exercise choice, and as a way of helping them to learn about time-keeping. After the first year, the children took turns in choosing the menu at the beginning of the week. This gave the cook the necessary notice to go out and buy the ingredients. If the children failed to choose, then they had to be prepared to eat whatever the cook had the time to prepare in short notice. This does not seem to have worked out as well as might have been hoped. Mary Ogilvie, a junior housekeeper at St. Chad's, recalled some years later (Eyken and Turner, 1969) that '... the staff believed that it was revealing of children's behaviour to try and make them order the meals themselves, and when they forgot, as they were bound to do, to give them only apples and oranges. This happened time after time, and, of course, being small children, they often forgot. I felt that the experiment went on for too long ...' Teaching the children about time-keeping through an arrangement of regular meal-times was more rewarding. The children were always given a few minutes notice, as was the case with all interruptions to their activities. If they were late, they just had to have a cold dinner and, though this happened very rarely, if someone was very late, the tables were cleared away and the child was left to finish his meal alone.

The importance of play and exploration in education

A fundamental belief of Susan Isaacs derived, as we have seen, from Friedrich Froebel but reinforced by the writings of Melanie Klein, was that young children largely learn through play. As far as nursery age children are concerned, this is now so widely accepted (though not always acted upon) as to seem almost banal, yet at the time it was little short of revolutionary to educators who were wedded to rote learning as the primary vehicle to academic achievement. Susan Isaacs noted that when, as was usually the case at the Malting House School, children were free to occupy themselves as they chose, one of their main activities was make-believe play. With girls this was usually unsophisticated 'family' play, involving father, mother and babies; with boys it was more likely to be 'heroic' play, with policemen, soldiers, engine-drivers, bus-drivers, or, less heroically, fathers in their offices. She observed immediate direct benefit in the way play often led to greater understanding of the world, for example of the physical properties of matter. Thus 'children's play in sliding down loose boards which they arranged at different angles, in using the pulleys, in putting up and taking down the trestle tables for their games of 'house' etc. and in modelling stairs for their plasticine houses, provided a full variety of direct experience of mechanical facts'. The adults, of course, participated fully in these various play experiences, indeed, as Susan Isaacs pointed out, the adult – child relations were more as fellow-

workers and playmates, accompanying them in their real and imaginary experiences than as teachers and pupils.

The equipment was also used by children for scientific exploration that they undertook accompanied by adults but also, as the philosophy of the school dictated, on their own initiative. In the garden, each child had his or her own plot to plant and look after as they wished. The adults also had their own plots, but no direct pressure was brought on the children to keep theirs in order. As the children gained in experience of plant growth, they no longer pulled up the bulbs they had planted to see how they were doing, but were prepared to wait longer.

They learned that plants cannot thrive without water, because if they did not water their own plots, no one else did and their plants died. Gradually older children learned a good deal about plants, and many of them had successful, colourful gardens.

A freelance journalist visiting the school noted the way children learned about animal biology. When one of the animals died and the children wanted to know why:

How could you tell them in terms they would understand? And what is the worth of all those answers which cloak ignorance and burke enquiry? Here the reply is 'Let's find out' so that the children have grown used to looking for the answers to their questions. Thus, quite simply and naturally, the little dead creature was dissected. They learned far more than the cause of death. On one occasion when a calf's head had at last been successfully sawn open, one child's comment was 'What a small brain!' to which a six-year-old scornfully added: 'Well, he didn't use it much!'

Such emphasis on spontaneity allowed the adults to learn that the children could do more if left to explore for themselves, though with adult support, than if their activities were adult-led. This proved instructive to Jean Piaget, the influential Swiss child psychologist, when he visited the school in March 1927 (Isaacs, 1930). Piaget's work with children in highly structured situations had led him to the conclusion that the concept of mechanical causality was not within the grasp of children under the age of eight years. He and Susan Isaacs were discussing this point when a five-year nine-month-old boy came by on his tricycle. The child was asked why the bicycle was not moving forward, and pointed out it was obvious – he was back-peddalling. But what happens to make it go forward? 'Oh well,' he said 'your feet press the pedals, that turns the crank round, and the cranks turn that round (pointing to the cog-wheel) and that makes the chain go round, and the chain turns the hub round, and then the wheels go round – and there you are!'

It was a fundamental principle that competence in reading and number work should not be formally taught, but should arise out of the activities in which the children engaged. The children should learn to read without being taught to read. The skill of reading should emerge naturally from the child's curiosity about the meaning of the printed word, and the realisation that reading was a gateway to fascinating knowledge about the external world. Consequently, reading and writing at the Malting House School were solely related to practical tasks that required written communication. For example, the children who were able to wrote out the weekly menus and the lists allocating domestic tasks such as washing up. They wrote letters to order equipment, to each other, to members of their families and to Susan Isaacs herself. They wrote whenever they had something to communicate and were helped by the adults when these situations arose. The staff found this approach seemed to fit in with their educational philosophy better than the more formal Montessori methods.

Bearing in mind the speed with which the school had got off the ground, its first years were remarkably successful and apparently trouble-free.

Susan must have been particularly pleased that in March 1925, during the school's second term, it received a visit from Melanie Klein (Gardner, 1969), who was then on a preliminary visit to England where she came to settle the following year. Susan Isaacs got on well with her visitor and the contact was maintained and considerably strengthened in later years. Klein's visit had an interesting and perhaps unexpected impact. Before her visit, physical but not verbal aggression by the children had been checked. Klein felt that this gave rise to too much pain in the victim and guilt in the aggressor. Susan Isaacs agreed and the checks were increased to include verbal aggression (Gardner, 1969).

By the end of 1926, as it entered its third year, the Malting House School seemed well established. The staff was stable and the number of pupils was increasing. Even the finances took an up-turn. Pyke was left £9000 in a legacy from an aunt who had recently died. He decided to put this then considerable sum towards the expenses of the school that was now his main interest in life.

He decided to commission a film of the school that could be used both to attract parents to send their children there and to publicise the educational methods more widely. British Instructional Films Ltd., experienced in making natural history documentaries, were engaged. The producer, Mary Field, later described the experience (Eyken and Turner, 1969):

He told us exactly what he wanted and I got the impression that some of the activities had been laid on specially for us. For example, the children were dissecting Susan Isaacs' cat, which had just died, when normally they were working with frogs or dogfish. They all seemed to be enjoying themselves immensely, digging away at the carcass. Only the camera man and I were present while this was going on and I can remember him turning to me and saying: 'It fair makes you sick, doesn't it?' Then there was the bonfire. It was supposed to be an exercise in free play, but it got a bit out of hand. The fire spread and reached the apple trees, and then it destroyed a very nice boat. Even Geoffrey Pyke was a bit upset about that and he seemed a very calm man.

During the filming Mary Field was able to see how Susan and Geoffrey Pyke interacted. 'I got the impression that he was far more influenced by Susan Isaacs than she was by him. He always spoke of her with great respect, although she was often not there when we were making the film. I personally thought Pyke was rather confused in his thinking about children and mixed up ideas from Froebel and Freud in a rather haphazard way. He paid for the film himself and I don't think he ever gave a thought to how much it might cost him or where the money was coming from.' It was not an easy film to make. One of the camera men said afterwards: 'In all our experiences of photographing every kind of wild creature, not excepting cultures of bacilli, the problem of photographing children in their wild state proved the most difficult to tackle.'

The film was shown to an invited audience of between 400 to 500 people at the Marble Arch Pavilion on 24 July 1927. It was well received. A journalist reported in the *Spectator* (Eyken and Turner, 1969):

For a short half hour I watched children of from four to nine years of age having the time of their lives, wading up to their knees trying to fill a sandpit with water, mending a tap with a spanner, oiling the works of a clock, joyously feeding a bonfire, dissecting crabs, climbing on scaffolding, weighing each other on a seesaw, weaving, modeling, making pottery, working lathes – in fact, doing all those things which every child delights in doing. At Malting House School children's dreams come true.

The journalist went on:

It is a system of education by discovery, aiming at the preservation of this precious gift of discovery. At present there are seventeen children at the school, some boarders and some day children, and it is hoped they will continue their education there up to university age.

No child is ever told anything he can find out for himself. For the very young children, at any rate, there are no set lessons. Reading, writing and arithmetic are learnt theoretically after their practical value has been realised. For instance, the cook would give notice if she were perpetually bothered with countless verbal requests for favourite dishes (she will only pay attention to written menus) and so the children must somehow learn to put their requests on paper.

There is no discipline. There are no punishments. Children may hit one another so long as they only use their hands, but I believe quarrels are rare and, though it seems almost unbelievable with the unending opportunities which must occur, there has never been an accident of a serious nature. The children are left to form their own opinions, tastes and moral codes. After having seen this film, I came away wishing with all my heart that my own dull schooldays had been as theirs were, and that education could be made such an adventure for every child.

The response of the audience for the film was equally enthusiastic. Pyke and Susan Isaacs received numerous letters of support and encouragement, some enclosing donations. Pyke then proceeded with the recruitment of a 'scientist of the first order'. The man to whom the job was offered later achieved considerable eminence in the United States as a child psychotherapist and a pioneer in group psychotherapy. Richard Slavson, also known as Samuel Richard Slavson, was a 32-year-old American, born in the Ukraine, trained as an engineer, but with a strong passion for teaching science and mathematics to children (New York University Archive). He had experience of working with children at Teachers' College, Columbia University, New York. He was assigned a secretary who took down verbatim his interactions with the pupils. It can be seen from the transcripts that Slavson faithfully follows the principle that learning should take place in the context of the spontaneous activity of the child, with the adult answering questions but providing no guidance and no information beyond that demanded by the child's question.

Whether this approach would have resulted in the production of a galaxy of creative scientists we shall never know, for it was at this point that the financial structure on which the school was founded collapsed, leading to its closure over the next couple of years (Eyken and Turner, 1969). By the end of October 1927 both Geoffrey Pyke's companies had lost all their assets and the three brokers with whom he dealt were demanding payment of a sum of £70,000 (perhaps £7,000,000 in today's value) that he did not have. He was bankrupt, though he did not behave as if this were the case. Using the last of his assets, he sent £2,000 worth of cheques to Margaret, his wife, in Cambridge, instructing her to pay a year's salary in advance to all the staff of the school.

It was at this point that Susan and Nathan Isaacs resigned from the staff of the school. It is not exactly clear when they left, but certainly they had departed by the end of the year. At any rate, Susan Isaacs' descriptions of interactions between pupils and staff in the books she published later contain no entries after October 1927. Their resignation was the culmination of a love-hate relationship between Susan and Geoffrey that had been going on from a few months after the school had opened its doors to pupils. The complicated emotional and sexual relationships between Susan, Nathan and Geoffrey and the details of the reasons for Geoffrey Pyke's financial problems are described elsewhere (Graham, in press).

Although by the end of 1927 Geoffrey Pyke's finances were in a hopeless state, he was determined to make the survival of the school his first priority. One of the parents, a Dr Edgar Obermer, a young London doctor from a wealthy family, had sent his sons to the school a few months earlier on the understanding that, if the school came under financial threat, he would have the first option to buy Pyke out. At this point, Pyke had little option. He sold the lease, furnishings and fittings to Obermer for £451.14s. Obermer borrowed some of the money from other parents and well-wishers, some of them well-known people such as Victor Gollancz, the publisher, and the writer, Siegfried Sassoon. Geoffrey Adrian, the Nobel Prize winning physiologist who later became Master of Trinity College, moved into St. Chad's to live there with his family, thus further reducing the burden of Pyke's overheads.

Geoffrey and Margaret were now tenants in what had been their home, owned none of the furniture or equipment, and had no money to pay the staff beyond the end of the current financial year. However, Geoffrey did not give up. He applied to the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Trust in New York for a grant to enable the school to continue. He drafted a lengthy memorandum to go with the application to be signed by a galaxy of eminent academics. The application was signed by Sir Charles Sherrington, Past President of the Royal Society, Professor Cyril Burt, Professor Jean Piaget, J.B.S. Haldane, G.E. Moore and Percy Nunn, between them representing the top names in science, educational psychology, developmental psychology, philosophy and education. It was to no avail; the application was turned down for unknown reasons, but perhaps information about Geoffrey's improvidence had leaked out and, in any case, the school was much less viable in the absence of the principal whose educational philosophy had guided its development. The school closed for good in July 1929. The pupils went on to other schools, usually to progressive establishments such as Dartington and King Alfred's in London.

But the influence of the school by no means ended with the school's closure. Susan Isaacs had made detailed notes of the interactions of the pupils and teachers. These she took with her to London when she resigned her post. She spent the two years after she left Cambridge writing a textbook based on her experiences at the Malting House School – *The Intellectual Development of Children*, which was strongly influenced by, though largely a reaction to, Piagetian psychology (Isaacs, 1930). A companion volume, *Social Development of Young Children*, which contained many Kleinian ideas, was published a little later (Isaacs, 1933). On the basis of these publications she was appointed to be the first Head of the Department of Child Development at the Institute of Education, London becoming responsible for the training of numerous influential figures in early years education (Gardner, 1969). Her books, promoting the theory and practice of child-centred education became standard texts in teacher-training colleges and remained so for 30 years. Her entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* refers to her as 'the greatest influence on British education in the twentieth century' (Pines, 2004).

Susan Isaacs remained an active member of the British Psychoanalytic Association. She was a strong protagonist of Kleinian ideas and, in the 1930s, underwent a third analysis with Joan Riviere, a leading Kleinian analyst. She was the first person to qualify as a child psychoanalyst and subsequently played a leading part in the so-called 'Controversial Discussions' that took place during the Second World War (King and Steiner, 1991). She was a close friend of Melanie Klein and for a brief time shared a flat with her in Cambridge where they were both evacuated during the London blitz of 1940–41. She died on 12 October 1948, having made significant contributions both to the education of young children and to child psychoanalysis.

References

- BOWLBY, J. (1991) 'The role of the psychotherapist's personal resources in the treatment situation', *Tavistock Gazette*, Tavistock Clinic, London.
- EYKEN, VAN DER W. & TURNER, B. (1969) *Adventures in Education*, London: Penguin.
- FREUD, A. (1930) 'Four lectures on psychoanalysis for teachers and parents', in *Introduction to Psychoanalysis, Writings*, Volume 1. London: Hogarth.
- GARDNER, D. (1969) *Susan Isaacs: The First Biography*, London: Methuen.
- GRAHAM, P. (2023) *Susan Isaacs: Freeing the Minds of Children*, London: Karnac.
- HEMMINGS, R. (1972) *Fifty Years of Freedom: A Study of the Development of the Ideas of A. S. Neill*, London: Allen and Unwin.
- ISAACS, S. (1930) *Intellectual Growth in Young Children*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- ISAACS, S. (1933) *Social Development in Young Children*, London: Routledge.
- KING, P. & STEINER, R. (eds) (1991) *The Freud–Klein Controversies 1941–1945*, London: Routledge.
- KLEIN, M. (1921) 'The development of a child: the influence of sexual enlightenment and relaxation of authority on the intellectual development of children', in *The Writings of Melanie Klein, Volume 1, Love Guilt and Reparation and Other Works, 1921–1945*, London: Hogarth, 1975.
- LAMPE, D. (1959) *Pyke, The Unknown Genius*, London: Evans Brothers.
- MEISEL, P. and KENDRICK, W. (eds) (1986) *Bloomsbury/Freud. The letters of James and Alix Strachey, 1924–1925*, London: Chatto and Windus.
- PINES, M. (2004) 'Susan Isaacs', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- SKIDELSKY, R. (1969) *English Progressive Schools*, London: Penguin.

27 St Albans Rd
 London NW5 1RG
 UK
 e-mail: pjgraham1@aol.com