

The Education of Monica and Vincent

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MONICA IS A young girl of eleven, a bright, pleasant personality who captivates on sight; Vincent at fourteen is slightly older, he is a boy of above average intelligence with a ready wit, a good sense of humour and a capacity for learning that does him credit. They are alike in another way, they are two of the thousands of blind children that we have in this country, they are also pioneers in an educational experiment which could have far reaching effect on blind children everywhere.

The story behind this experiment and the part played by six prisoners at Walton Prison, Liverpool, is interesting and is something of which they can feel justly proud.

It started when Sister Clare, who is a tutor at St. Vincents school for blind children, decided to go to America to find new ideas in this field. She found that they had tried sending blind children to the higher schools with sighted child-

ren and despite the difficulties it had been successful. On return to this country she arranged with the local Education Authority to try this experiment with Vincent, a young boy at the school for the blind where she worked; they agreed to him attending a grammar school near the home and the project was under way.

It was here that the idea was born that prisoners could help in this work. It will be appreciated that the ordinary text books are of no value to a blind child and copies had to be made in braille so that he could follow the lessons properly. This transcribing into braille is a long job and it is work that is usually done by voluntary help and in view of the urgency it was doubtful if the books would be ready in time. The Governor at Liverpool Prison, Mr. S. G. Clarke was approached about this and a plan was formulated. Father Harris the priest at Liverpool Prison agreed to act as Liaison

Officer between the Prison and the School. There were various factors to consider in selecting the prisoners for this work and it was decided to call for volunteers from prisoners who had at least twelve months to do and who considered that they were reasonably educated and capable of learning braille. Six men were eventually selected, issued with braille machines and paper and started work. Two tutors from the school came to give the initial instruction and have continued to coach and check the work.

Braille is a system of six raised dots formed into various patterns which in turn become letters of the alphabet and to transcribe the first essential is a knowledge of braille. To learn anything quickly one must be interested and keen and it is pleasing to note, therefore, that within a month one man was proficient enough to start a text book and two others allowed to start on fairy stories.

The minimum period of a year was advised because it was thought that it would take a year for each man to transcribe one text book but in view of the enthusiasm and earnestness of the men it may well be that they can complete much more than this. As this is still something of an experiment we will have to wait and see but there is no doubt whatever that whether they do one, two or even more books the service is one that cannot be over estimated.

The men work in their leisure time (dinner period, evening and at week ends) and this is I think, one of the reasons they find the work so satisfying, they feel that they are indeed helping these blind children in their own time when they could be doing something for themselves. As one of them said to me "this is one of the most self satisfying things that I have ever done in my life, I cannot remember doing anything that has afforded me greater pleasure knowing as I do that I am helping in some small way these young blind children." The man was so sincere and obviously thankful for the opportunity to do this service that I realised the good it must be doing him and I wondered as a Prison Officer what good it would do him on his release. Would this have any effect on his own well being?

I think as far as the prisoners themselves are concerned this project does allow them in some measure to regain their self respect. They feel that they are again a useful and necessary part of the community.

With the work being voluntary and carried out in their own time, it does encourage a spirit of selflessness. This is something that would be lost if the work was taken on a full time basis, nevertheless it is something that could be seriously thought about as full time employment in prisons. The field would be somewhat limited

because of the educational requirements and the degree of intelligence required but I do not think this would be any real drawback, indeed a small section of our prison population which is now wasted, would be doing a job of work more in keeping with their capabilities.

It is not generally realised that there are only two grammar schools for blind children in this country, one for boys and one for girls, but knowing this, it will be readily understood how important this experiment is and how necessary it is that it should be a success.

I spoke to Sister Clare about the progress of the scheme and the possibility of extending it and we spoke for the first time about Monica. She said "Without the help of the six men from Walton we could not possibly have sent Monica to grammar school. They had a very real part in our decision to extend the scheme and they have not let us down. One of the prisoners concerned has even worked out a system of symbols to help with mathematics." She was impressed with the speed at which the men had picked up the braille and with their enthusiasm. She told me that two of the men had already passed the examination of proficiency in braille and the others were well on the way, really amazing progress considering the work was only started in June, 1962. The six prisoners were allowed to visit the school to see

the children at work and play. To anybody who has not seen the children at these schools for the blind it is indeed an eye-opening experience. The dedicated people who work at these schools spare no effort to improve on their work and new devices and ideas are always forthcoming.

On entering the school one immediately notices the bright colour scheme, the children dress smartly and again colour plays an important part. I asked why the need for so much colour when the effect was lost on the children. I was told very quickly that the brightness and colour reflected from the staff to the children and it was very obvious that considerable thought went into everything that was done at this school. The experiment of sending two pupils to a sighted grammar school typified the general feeling of progress that one felt right through the school.

Many chapters could be written about the work of these schools for blind children but as this short article concerns mainly the project of braille transcribing in prison, I will say only this: these six prisoners at Liverpool have started something so worthwhile, so important to young people like Monica and Vincent, that it must be encouraged and extended so that more and more young children who are handicapped can be given the benefit of a higher education.