

HELEN KELLER AND THE LANGUAGE-TEACHING PROBLEM

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If the Society for the Scientific Study of Education—formerly known as the Herbart Society—would but consent to look into the methods whereby Helen Keller acquired her remarkable command of English, the results might, in the course of a few eons, come to have some perceptible effect upon the absurd performances now going on all over America in the name of “language work.” Probably the most interesting character of the present century from an educational standpoint is this blind and deaf girl whose name is a synonym for marvelous achievement in the face of stupendous obstacles. But what she has accomplished is of less importance to the school world than the manner in which she was enabled to accomplish. It would be well for the rising generation if every grade teacher could be persuaded to read with care Helen Keller’s *Story of My Life* (Doubleday, Page & Co.), and then to study also the “Supplementary Account of Helen Keller’s Education,” to be found in the same volume, written by John Albert Macy, now editor of *The Youth’s Companion*.

Miss Annie Sullivan, teacher of Helen Keller, had herself been blind for many years, although she later regained her sight. During the six years which she spent at the Perkins Institution for the Blind, in Boston, she had been in the same house with that other famous blind deaf-mute, Laura Bridgeman. She had thus become especially fitted by previous experience for the unusual work to which she was called. That she was, moreover, by nature a great teacher, whose name will be honored side by side with those of the world’s most famous educators, is conceded by all who know how great is the work she has done.

With the kind permission of Mr. Macy I give here a number

of short extracts from his valuable account of Miss Sullivan's work, in the hope that many teachers of more favored children may thus be led to a thorough study of the original account, as well as to a practical application in their own work of the methods used by Miss Sullivan in the training of Helen Keller.

Helen Keller was born June 27, 1880; Miss Sullivan came to her March 3, 1887. Thus the little pupil was less than seven years old. It was however full time that she have a teacher, for, having no means for the communication of her desires, she was becoming less and less manageable. She was to all intents a savage little animal, without affection or understanding. Often kicking, screaming, and striking became her sole means for asking for what she wished; but with the gift of language, gentleness displaced violence.

The story throughout is intensely interesting. The gains were at first obtained solely through imitation, Miss Sullivan spelling the words *doll* and *cake* into Helen's hand and trying to get her to associate the spelling with these objects. Helen imitated the letters very well, but did not for some time acquire the associations. I quote from Miss Sullivan's letters:

March 11, 1887. Helen knows several words now, but has no idea how to use them or that everything has a name.

March 13, 1887. She has learned three new words, and when I give her the objects, the names of which she has learned, she spells them unhesitatingly; but she seems glad when the lesson is over.

March 20, 1887. Helen has learned several nouns this week. "M-u-g" and "m-i-l-k" have given her more trouble than other words. When she spells "milk," she points to the mug, and when she spells "mug," she makes the sign for pouring or drinking, which shows that she has confused the words. She has no idea yet that everything has a name.

March 28, 1887. She knows twelve words now.

April 3, 1887. The hour from twelve to one is devoted to the learning of new words. *But you mustn't think this is the only time I spell to Helen; for I spell in her hand everything we do all day long, although she has no idea as yet what the spelling means. . . .* On March 31 I found that Helen knew eighteen nouns and three verbs. Here is a list of the words. Those with a cross after them are words she asked for herself: *Doll, mug, pin, key, dog, hat, cup, box, water, milk, candy, eye (x), finger (x), toe (x), head (x), cake, baby, mother, sit, stand, walk.* On April 1 she learned the nouns *knife, fork, spoon, saucer, tea, papa, bed,* and the verb *run.*

April 5, 1887. Helen has taken the second great step in her education. *She has learned that everything has a name, and that the manual alphabet is the key to everything she wants to know. . . .* This morning, while she was washing, she wanted to know the name for "water." When she wants to know the name of anything, she points to it and pats my hand. I spelled "w-a-t-e-r" and thought no more about it until after breakfast. Then it occurred to me that with the help of this new word I might succeed in straightening out the "mug-milk" difficulty. We went out to the pump-house, and I made Helen hold her mug under the spout while I pumped. As the cold water gushed forth, filling the mug, I spelled "w-a-t-e-r" in Helen's free hand. The word coming so close upon the sensation of cold water rushing over her hand seemed to startle her. She dropped the mug and stood as one transfixed. A new light came into her face. She spelled "water" several times. Then she dropped on the ground and asked for its name and pointed to the pump and the trellis, and suddenly turning round she asked for my name. I spelled "T-e-a-c-h-e-r." Just then the nurse brought Helen's little sister into the pump-house, and Helen spelled "b-a-b-y" and pointed to the nurse. All the way back to the house she was highly excited, and learned the name of every object she touched, so that *in a few hours she had added thirty new words* to her vocabulary. Here are some of them: *Door, open, shut, give, go, come,* and a great many more.

P. S. I didn't finish my letter in time to get it posted last night; so I shall add a line. Helen got up this morning like a radiant fairy. She has flitted from object to object, asking the name of everything.

April 10, 1887. I have decided not to try to have regular lessons for the present. I am going to treat Helen exactly like a two-year-old child. It occurred to me the other day that it is absurd to require a child to come to a certain place at a certain time and recite certain lessons, when he has not yet acquired a working vocabulary. I sent Helen away and sat down to think. I asked myself, "*How does a normal child learn language?*" The answer was simple: "*By imitation.*" . . . *But long before he utters his first word, he understands what is said to him. . . . I shall talk into her hand as we talk into the baby's ears. . . . I shall use complete sentences in talking to her,* and fill out the meaning with gestures and her descriptive signs when necessity requires it; but I shall not try to keep her mind fixed on any one thing. I shall do all I can to interest and stimulate it, and wait for results.

April 24, 1887. The new scheme works splendidly. Helen knows the meaning of more than a hundred words now, and learns new ones daily. . . . If I say, "Get your hat and we will go to walk," she obeys instantly. The two words, "hat" and "walk" would have the same effect; *but the whole sentence, repeated many times during the day, must in time impress itself upon the brain, and by and by she will use it herself.*

May 8, 1887. I am beginning to suspect all elaborate and special systems

of education. They seem to me to be built up on the supposition that every child is a kind of idiot who must be taught to think; whereas, if the child is left to himself, he will think more and better, if less showily. Let him go and come freely, let him touch real things and combine his impressions for himself, instead of sitting indoors at a little round table, while a sweet-voiced teacher suggests that he build a stone wall with his wooden blocks, or make a rainbow out of strips of colored paper, or plant straw trees in bead flower-pots. Such teaching fills the mind with artificial associations that must be got rid of before the child can develop independent ideas out of actual experiences.

Helen had signs for *small* and *large* long before I came to her. . . . The other day I substituted the words *small* and *large* for these signs, and she at once adopted the words and discarded the signs. I can now tell her to bring me a large book or a small plate, to go upstairs slowly, to run fast, and to walk quickly. This morning she used the conjunction *and* for the first time. I told her to shut the door, and she added, "and lock."

Since I have abandoned the idea of regular lessons, I find that Helen learns much faster. *I am convinced that the time spent by the teacher in digging out of the child what she has put into him, for the sake of satisfying herself that it has taken root, is so much time thrown away [italics mine]. It's much better, I think, to assume that the child is doing his part, and that the seed you have sown will bear fruit in due time.*

May 16, 1887. It is wonderful how words generate ideas. Every new word Helen learns seems to carry with it the necessity for many more. . . . Helen is eager to tell her mother everything she has seen. *This desire to repeat what has been told her shows a marked advance in the development of her intellect, and is an invaluable stimulus to the acquisition of language. I ask all her friends to encourage her to tell them of her doings, and to manifest as much curiosity and pleasure in her little adventures as they possibly can.* This gratifies the child's love of approbation and keeps up her interest in things. . . . Thus her vocabulary grows apace, and the new words germinate and bring forth new ideas; and these are the stuff out of which heaven and earth are made.

May 22, 1887. Helen is a wonderful child, so spontaneous and eager to learn. She knows about three hundred words now *and a great many common idioms*, and it is not three months yet since she learned her first word.

We have reading-lessons every day. Usually we take one of the little *Readers* up in a big tree near the house and spend an hour or two finding the words Helen already knows. *We make a sort of game of it* and try to see who can find the words most quickly, Helen with her fingers, or I with my eyes, and she learns as many new words as I can explain with the help of those she knows. When her fingers light upon words she knows, she fairly screams with pleasure and hugs and kisses me for joy, especially

if she thinks she has me beaten. It would astonish you to see how many words she learns in an hour in this pleasant manner.

June 2, 1887. Helen begins to spell the minute she wakes up in the morning, and continues all day long. If I refuse to talk to her, she spells into her own hand, and apparently carries on the liveliest conversation with herself.

I gave her my braille slate to play with, thinking that the mechanical pricking of holes in the paper would amuse her and rest her mind. But what was my astonishment when I found that the little witch was writing letters! . . . One day she brought me a sheet that she had punched full of holes, and wanted to put it in an envelope and take it to the post-office. I asked her what she had written to Frank. She replied, "Much words. Puppy mother-dog—five. Baby—cry. Hot. Helen walk—no.—Sunfire—bad. Frank—come. Helen—kiss Frank. Strawberries—very good. . . ."

Helen is almost as eager to read as she is to talk. I find she grasps the import of whole sentences, catching from the context the meaning of words she doesn't know.

She has a perfect mania for counting. She has counted everything in the house, and is now busy counting the words in her primer.

June 19, 1887. Helen will be seven years old the twenty-seventh of this month. . . . *She knows four hundred words besides numerous proper nouns.*

[Mark this, Oh Famous Educators, who are wont to talk publicly, but foolishly, about the size of the vocabulary of the average citizen! And these four hundred words were learned *by spelling each one*, and wholly without the aid of eye and ear associations!]

In one lesson I taught her these words: *bedstead, mattress, sheet, blanket, comforter, spread, pillow*. The next day I found that she remembered all but *spread*. The same day she had learned, at different times, the words: *house, weed, dust, swing, molasses, fast, slow, maple sugar, and counter*, and she has not forgotten one of these last. . . . She can count to thirty very quickly, and can write seven of the square-head letters and the words which can be made with them. . . . She discovered a hole in her boot the other morning, and, after breakfast, she went to her father and spelled, "Helen new boot Simpson (her brother) buggy store man." One can easily see her meaning.

July 31, 1887. Helen's pencil-writing is excellent. I am teaching her the braille alphabet, and she is delighted to be able to make words herself that she can feel.

She has now reached the question stage of her development. It is "What?" "Why?" "When?" especially "Why?" all day long. . . . I know now that these questions indicate the child's growing interest in the causes

of things. The "Why" is the door through which he enters the world of reason and reflection. On the whole, her questions are analogous to those that a bright three-year-old child asks.

August 21, 1887. She remembers all that I told her about it [a drive], and in telling her mother *repeated the very words and phrases I had used in* describing it to her.

August 28, 1887. . . . The readiness with which she comprehended the great facts of physical life confirmed me in the opinion that the child has dormant within him, when he comes into the world, all the experiences of the race. These experiences are like photographic negatives, until language develops them and brings out the memory images.

September 18, 1887. I kept a record of everything she said last week and I found that she knows [that is, used; she would not use all her words in any one week!] six hundred words. This does not mean, however, that she always uses them correctly. Sometimes her sentences are like Chinese puzzles; but they are the kind of puzzles children make when they try to express their half-formed ideas by means of arbitrary language. She has the true language impulse, and shows great fertility of resource in making the words at her command convey her meaning.

October 25, 1887. She has begun to use the pronouns of her own accord. This morning I happened to say, "Helen will go upstairs." She laughed and said, "Teacher is wrong. You will go upstairs." This is another great forward step.

FROM MISS SULLIVAN'S PUBLISHED LETTER IN THE PERKIN'S INSTITUTION REPORT

October, 1887. Only those who are with her daily can realize the rapid advancement which she is making in the acquisition of language. . . . Neither the length of the word nor the combination of letters seems to make any difference to the child. Indeed, she remembers *heliotrope* and *chrysanthemum* more readily than she does shorter names. At the end of August she knew 625 words.

I now thought it time to teach her to read printed words. [This refers to a previous date.] I took an alphabet sheet (with raised letters) and put her finger on the letter "A," at the same time making "A" with my fingers. She moved her finger from one printed character to another as I formed each letter on my fingers. She learned all the letters, both capital and small, in one day. Next I turned to the first page of the primer and made her touch the word *cat*, spelling it on my fingers at the same time. Instantly she caught the idea, and asked me to find dog and many other words. Indeed, she was much displeased because I could not find her name in the book.

December 12, 1887. Helen is as eager to have stories told her as any hearing child I ever knew. She has made me repeat the story of Little Red Riding-Hood so often that I believe I could say it backward. She likes stories that make her cry—I think we all do; it's so nice to feel sad when

you've nothing particular to be sad about. I am teaching her little rhymes and verses, too. They fix beautiful thoughts in her memory. I think, too, that they quicken all the child's faculties, because they stimulate the imagination. Of course, I don't try to explain everything. If I did there would be no opportunity for the play of fancy. *Too much explanation directs the child's attention to words and sentences, so that he fails to get the thought as a whole.* I do not think anyone can read, or talk for that matter, until he forgets words and sentences in the technical sense.

January 1, 1888. The Christmas season has furnished many lessons, and has added scores of new words to Helen's vocabulary.

For weeks we did nothing but talk and read and tell each other stories about Christmas. Of course I do not try to explain all the new words, nor does Helen fully understand the little stories I tell her; but constant repetition fixes the words and phrases in the mind, and little by little the meaning will come to her. I see no sense in "faking" conversation for the sake of teaching language. It's stupid and deadening to pupil and teacher. Talk should be natural and have for its object an exchange of ideas. If there is nothing in the child's mind to communicate, it hardly seems worth while to require him to write on the blackboard, or spell on his fingers, cut-and-dried sentences about "the cat," "the bird," "a dog." I have tried from the beginning to talk naturally to Helen and to teach her to tell me only things that interest her and to ask questions only for the sake of finding out what she wants to know. When I see that she is eager to tell me something, but is hampered because she does not know the words, I supply them and the necessary idioms, and we get along finely. . . . What would happen, do you think, if someone should try to measure our intelligence by our ability to define the commonest words we use? I fear me, if I were put to such a test, I should be consigned to the primary class in a school for the feeble-minded.

March 5, 1888. Miss E. came up to help me make a list of words Helen has learned. We have got as far as P, and there are 900 words to her credit. [The letter does not state what the total list numbered; but when we recall that Miss Sullivan spelled into Helen's hand all day often, we may be sure that the computed list is much less in number than the words actually known by the child.] I had Helen begin a journal March 1. I don't know how long she will keep it up. . . . Just now she finds it great fun. She seems to like to tell all she knows. This is what Helen wrote Sunday:

"I got up, washed my face and hands, combed my hair, picked three dew violets for Teacher and ate my breakfast. After breakfast I played with dolls short. Nancy [a doll] was cross. Cross is cry and kick. I read in my book about large, fierce animals. Fierce is much cross and strong and very hungry. I do not love fierce animals. I wrote letter to Uncle James. He

lives in Hotsprings. He is doctor. Doctor makes sick girl well. I do not like sick. Then I ate my dinner. I like much ice cream very much. After dinner father went to Birmingham on train far away. I had letter from Robert. He loves me. He said, Dear Helen, Robert was glad to get a letter from dear, sweet little Helen. I will come to see you when the sun shines. Mrs. Newsum is Robert's wife. Robert is her husband. Robert and I will run and jump and hop and dance and swing and talk about birds and flowers and trees and grass and Jumbo and Pearl will go with us. Teacher will say we are silly. She is funny. Funny makes us laugh. Natalie is a good girl and does not cry. Mildred does cry. She will be a nice girl in many days and run and play with me. Mrs. Graves is making short dresses for Natalie. Mr. Mayo went to Duckhill and brought home many sweet flowers. Mr. Mayo and Mr. Farris and Mr. Graves love me and Teacher. I am going to Memphis to see them soon, and they will hug and kiss me. Thornton goes to school and gets his face dirty. Boy must be very careful. After supper I played romp with Teacher in bed. She buried me under the pillows and then I grew very slow like tree out of ground. Now I will go to bed.—HELEN KELLER.”

This from a child not yet eight years old, who just one year before knew not one word of verbal speech! Few normal children of eight years can equal this composition, and the schools may well take heed of Miss Sullivan's just criticisms upon their wooden methods.

May 15, 1888. It is as easy to teach the name of an idea, if it is clearly formulated in the child's mind, as to teach the name of an object. It would indeed be a herculean task to teach the words if the ideas did not already exist in the child's mind. If his experiences and observations hadn't led him to the concepts, *small, large, good, bad, sweet, sour*, he would have nothing to attach the word tags to. . . . The child learns from many experiences to differentiate his feelings, and we name them for him—*good, bad, gentle, rough, happy, sad*. It is not the word, but the capacity to experience the sensation that counts in his education.

We visited a little school for the deaf. . . . In every classroom I saw sentences on the blackboard, which evidently had been written to illustrate some grammatical rule, or for the purpose of using words that had previously been taught in the same, or in some other, connection. This sort of thing may be a necessity in some stages of education; but it isn't the way to acquire language. Nothing, I think, crushes the child's impulse to talk naturally more effectual than these blackboard exercises. The schoolroom is not the place to teach any young child language, least of all the deaf child. He must be kept as unconscious as the hearing child of the fact that he is learning words, and he should be allowed to prattle on his fingers, or with

his pencil, in monosyllables if he chooses, until such time as his growing intelligence demands the sentence. Language should not be associated in his mind with endless hours in school, with puzzling questions in grammar, or with anything that is an enemy to joy.

October 1, 1888. When traveling, she [Helen] drinks in thought and language. Sitting beside her in the car, I describe what I see from the window. . . . In this way she learns countless new expressions without any apparent effort.

From the day when Helen first grasped the idea that all objects have names, and that these can be communicated by certain movements of the fingers I have talked to her exactly as I should have done had she been able to hear, with only this exception, that I have addressed the words to her fingers instead of to her ears. . . . While not confining myself to any special system of instruction, I have tried to add to her general information and intelligence, to enlarge her acquaintance with things around her, and to bring her into easy and natural relations with people. *I have encouraged her to keep a diary.* [An extract from this has been already given.]

FROM MISS SULLIVAN'S REPORT READ AT CHAUTAUQUA

July, 1894. During the first two years of her intellectual life I required Helen to write very little. In order to write one must have something to write about, and having something to write about requires some mental preparation. . . . Too often, I think, children are required to write before they have anything to say. Teach them to think and read and talk without self-repression, and they will write because they cannot help it.

Helen acquired language by practice and habit rather than by study of rules and definitions. Grammar with its puzzling array of classifications, nomenclatures, and paradigms, was wholly discarded in her education. She learned language by being brought in contact with the living language itself; she was made to deal with it in everyday conversation, and in her books, and to turn it over in a variety of ways until she was able to use it correctly. . . . I think much of the fluency with which Helen uses language is due to the fact that nearly every impression which she receives comes through the medium of language. . . . The constant companionship of good books has been of supreme importance in her education. . . . It is not necessary that a child should understand every word in a book before she can read with pleasure and profit. . . . I am convinced that original composition without the preparation of much reading is an impossibility. Helen has had the best and purest models in language constantly presented to her, and her conversation and her writing are unconscious reproductions of what she has read. Reading, I think, should be kept independent of the regular school exercises. Children should be encouraged to read for the pure delight of it. The attitude of the child toward his books should be that of unconscious receptivity.

The following extracts are from Mr Macy's own notes upon Miss Sullivan's methods:

Helen Keller is supposed to have a special aptitude for languages. It is true rather that she has a special aptitude for thinking. . . .

When at the age of fourteen she had had but a few lessons in German, she read over the words of "Wilhelm Tell" and managed to get the story. *Of grammar she knew nothing and she cared nothing for it. She got the language from the language itself, and this is, next to hearing the language spoken, the way for anyone to get a foreign tongue, more vital and, in the end, easier than our schoolroom method of beginning with the grammar. . . .*

She was taught by a method of teaching language to the deaf, the essential principles of which are clearly expressed in Miss Sullivan's letters. . . . And it can be applied by any teacher to any healthy deaf child, and *in the broadest interpretation of the principles, can be applied to the teaching of language of all kinds to all children.* [These italics are mine.]

The style of every writer and, indeed, of every human being, illiterate or cultivated, is a composite reminiscence of all that he has read and heard. Of the sources of his vocabulary he is, for the most part, as unaware as he is of the moment when he ate the food which makes a bit of his thumbnail. . . . The child mind gathers into itself words it has heard, and they lurk there ready to come out when the key that releases the spring is touched. . . .

All use of language is imitative, and one's style is made up of all other styles that one has met.

The way to write good English is to read it and hear it. Thus it is that any child may be taught to use correct English by not being allowed to read or hear any other kind. In a child, the selection of the better from the worse is not conscious; he is the servant of his word experience.

Whoever makes a sentence of words utters not his wisdom, but the wisdom of the race whose life is in the words, though they have never been so grouped before. . . .

The educated man is the man whose expression is educated. The substance of thought is language, and language is the one thing to teach the deaf child and every other child. Let him get language and he gets the very stuff that language is made of, the thought and the experience of his race.

No better subject-matter for close study and discussion by teachers' reading-circles could be found than this "Supplementary Account of Helen Keller's Education," which is a most important contribution to the problem of teaching the mastery of the mother-tongue to all children. Just as soon as the truths here formulated shall have come to be generally recognized, there will be a linguistic renaissance throughout the school world.