

## A METHODOLOGY ADAPTED TO SO-CALLED WEAK PUPILS

Br. Maurice De Coen

### I. Secondary education

It is a major responsibility of every society to provide a good education for its young people. It must prepare them to lead lives that are free, balanced, wise, lucid, effective, interdependent and happy in the world of tomorrow. To this adventure, Catholic teaching adds the spiritual dimension. It must provide them, therefore, with a whole range of knowledge and basic skills that every individual needs in order to make his way in life as an independent person. An independent adult has the following roles to play in life:

1. the adult
2. the citizen
3. the producer
4. the consumer
5. the participator in cultural and leisure activities.

It is clear that a mastery of one's own language is of capital importance in each of these roles!

A properly conceived educational approach presupposes:

1. progress from a state of deficiency to a performing situation: the child passes from a state of ignorance and absence of skills to one of knowledge and ability to achieve under the guidance of adults;
2. an optimistic view of human nature: every child is capable of making progress;
3. that adults responsible for this guidance are motivated and competent.

Those responsible for education should, therefore:

1. Draw up an educational system in which responsibility is assumed for each child who is led on till he is fully developed. This development is based on a series of successes, implying genuine effort and victory over difficulties, and can never be the result of a process involving failure, suffering or surrender.
2. Provide the necessary means: the infrastructure, staff and suitable material conditions (buildings, organisation, programmes, regulations, timetables, schedules, equipment, well-trained and well-paid teachers).

The role of the teacher in this process is of capital importance, both as an instructor and as an educator. In practical terms, he has no control over structures or institutions,

except possibly through his membership of professional organisations. He can, however, have some say in the matter of content by communicating his views to those responsible for drawing up programmes, and subsequently by studying them and making cuts. His role is particularly important when it comes to assessment, because he is the one who evaluates and makes decisions, and in the area of methodology because, as a real educator, shrewd psychologist and expert in didactics, he is the one who makes all the elements of a balanced, consistent and up-to-date education accessible to the pupils. These last aspects become particularly important when teachers are asked to take charge of pupils who are considered to be weak.

### II. The success of so-called weak pupils

What follows refers only to pupils who are in year one of the "renove" course and who obtained their certificate at the end of their first year in secondary school. It has been calculated that, depending on the school, 30%, 40% and even sometimes 50% of these pupils fail, or are channelled directly into vocational courses if they come from poor or immigrant backgrounds. The complaints of the teachers are well-known: "They don't understand, they don't work, they haven't got the basics, they don't know how to pay attention, they're not interested..." This is not meant to be a criticism of the teachers: they work in difficult circumstances and most are very devoted and genuinely want to help these underprivileged children. It is in order to make their work more effective that we propose the following approach.

The reasons for the difficulties experienced in school by children from the backgrounds mentioned above have been studied by sociologists who explain them in terms of four factors: biological determinism, cultural deprivation, cultural and linguistic discontinuity and psycho-social factors. We will not attempt to analyse these factors here. Suffice it to say that they are very complex, that no single one completely explains the phenomenon of failure in school, and that the conclusions drawn by the sociologists call rather for changes in society. This is not what concerns us in this article. I am aware that various approaches are advocated in order to cope with these problems: class projects, setting by ability, intercultural studies, skill-learning, all of which have been the object of serious study and are without doubt very useful. At a more humble level, at the chalk-face, and with regard to all subjects, I believe that every teacher can obtain good results from so-called weak pupils by the use of suitable methods.

I have some practical suggestions to make based on long experience in the use of methods for teaching French at the Ecole Normale Moyenne, and in classroom teaching in immigrant areas in the Ecole Moyenne d'Application.

What I have to say is based on the following assumptions:

- that these children who have learnt little in school are neither lacking in memory nor in intelligence;
- that everything has to be thought out and organised in class and at school in such a way that success becomes possible, in the knowledge that families in most cases can be of no help.

- The first step suggested is to study each point in the programme successively - and this is not easy as often programmes are not sufficiently detailed - and see:
  - how to **communicate** this piece of information, this skill:

- choice, formulation, progression;
- how to **make it understood**: induction, illustration;
- how to **fix it in the memory**: visualisation, schematisation, synthesis, study, revision;
- how to **make it is used**: applications, exercises;
- how to **ensure it is exploited**: integration into a wider context of knowledge.

In practice, this means it is necessary:

- to see the pupil from a positive point of view and believe he is capable of making progress;
- to begin from where he is;
- to include some form of incentive in each lesson: explain the problem, single out the main difficulty, show the pupil how mastering the subject will be of use to him;
- to set out the goals: by the end of the lesson the pupil will know how to...
- to adapt explanations to the subject and to circumstances; to use exercises as a follow-up, to put things into a context, and to use team-work...

The following approach gives good results:

- Do one thing at a time: write (copy carefully a text which contains a specific point to be learned), ask questions, explain. Read out loud what is written on the board;
- Base yourself on examples: make use of analogy to show differences: for example:
  - \* He took some boiling water to make his coffee. (verbal adjective)
  - \* He took some water boiling on the stove to make his coffee. (present participle)
- Illustrate: underline, box in, use arrows and colours;
- Get pupils to express what has been learnt in their own words, using different expressions;
- Use numerous graduated exercises (at least a third of the lesson): imitation exercises, to assimilate the difficulty; re-search exercises, to fix knowledge in the memory by using rules; transposition exercises, to encourage communication: for example, leaving out verbs in headlines and advertisements; the use of apposition in describing a person - Mrs Thatcher, the Iron Lady -; the use of the infinitive in commands, instructions for use, recipes, etc;
- Begin homeworks in class, show how to go about them, and that "they are possible to do".

- The second step consists in adapting one's assessment. This kind of pupil is very much more interested in marks than one thinks, especially when closely supervised work leads to good results. The following points are relevant:

#### 1. Tests.

Many pupils fail because they are put off by exams: they do not answer questions they know; they waste time in doing a question that suits them but which they cannot finish on time; they misunderstand questions and go off at a tangent; they rely more on their memory than their judgment. That is why the teacher should be careful:

- in his choice of questions (concentrate on what is essential);
- to set out questions clearly and explicitly, even giving a model answer to start pupils off;
- include variety (cover different aspects of the same subject);
- with regard to length (give enough time).

#### 2. Correction

- Set a reasonable standard and always in terms of what has been taught. (It happens sometimes that when an essay is being corrected pupils are given marks for "making characters speak", although they have not yet been taught the difficult and complex skill of composing dialogues).

- Allocate marks according to the importance, difficulty and length of the answer expected.

#### 3. Remedial teaching

This has to be included in the programme. Realisation is not a cure. The pupil does not come to school to discover what he is worth, but to make progress. Remedial teaching should include explanations, exercises, revision and should lead up to the offer of a "second chance" with the marks obtained counting for the weekly total.

- The third step may seem paradoxical but it is essential if we really wish to help these less gifted pupils. We have to be **demanding**. We have to set up tight working structures.

- Work should always be checked: this kind of child does not work for future benefits, nor for nothing. This holds true for both classwork and homeworks.

- Each new point learnt should be tested. This can be very rapid.

- Every mistake that is pointed out must be corrected in class or at home.

- Give out the total of marks obtained at least once a fortnight. These pupils need to know how they are faring.

- Attach importance to being careful, to punctuality.

- Encourage pupils to make rough drafts. Practise in class.

- Make them think and constantly ask themselves why? how? There are many areas in the programme which lend themselves to these intellectual gymnastics which stimulate the mind. They can be asked also to work out the meaning of sayings that are complex, ambiguous, humorous like, for example: "Thank you, Lord. I shall die cured." (S. Guity), or "Yes, I know", said the executioner, "it's a really rotten job, but everyone's got to live."

- The fourth step consists in paying attention to vocabulary. Too often, pupils and teachers do not speak the same language, the spark is not communicated. The teacher must be careful to use only terms that are understood by the pupils and to adjust his language to their level of understanding without, however, resorting to baby talk. It is, for example, very useful to rephrase a more complex and difficult statement by using known synonyms and more simple turns of phrase. In this way, the understanding and assimilation of the exact word become more accessible.

As part of this same process, the teacher should organise himself so as to introduce systematically some new words each lesson. Specific vocabulary lessons could usefully complement this work. Such lessons could take the form of exercises in certain lexical areas, semantic puzzles, looking for the correct word, etc.

- The fifth and last step is to make abundant use of:

1. Concrete means: illustrations, card indexes, dictionaries, stencils, documents, mass media, computer programmes.

2. Allies

- friends : tutors, staff;

- parents : support teams which offer complementary contacts and help in cases of discouragement, absenteeism, and various conflicts.

3. Colleagues with whom you can run mixed courses (common topics, linked learning areas...)

As can be seen, the teacher's work is very demanding. His reward will be the progress his pupils make and the results they achieve. It would be more just on the part of the Ministry to provide these teachers with working conditions suited to their task: lighter timetables, smaller classes. As teaching begins to pay dividends everyone will benefit. In a case such as this, quality would really pay. ●