

Wise words

The work of an education pioneer has profound relevance today, says *Julian Grenier*

Mention Susan Isaacs, and most people will probably think of the American murder mystery writer rather than the pioneering teacher, agony-aunt and psychoanalyst from Lancashire who is described, in the Dictionary of National Biography, as ‘the greatest influence on British education in the 20th century’. So how did she come to be forgotten so soon?

Isaacs was one of those women born in the Victorian era with astonishing gifts and, for many years, little opportunity to use them. But, rather like Florence Nightingale, she eventually found a way out: in her case, after finally being allowed to train as a teacher, she was able to show her academic brilliance and transfer to study for a philosophy degree at Manchester University. Isaacs then worked successfully as an infant school teacher, but almost certainly came into her own when she set up the Malting House School, where she pioneered a radical approach to educating young children.

Rather than design a traditional curriculum divided up into lessons, Isaacs allowed each child to follow their curiosity in a rich environment, including a chemistry lab, a large garden and a woodworking area. It is a measure of her intellectual rigour that the children – many sent to the school because of difficulties with their emotional development or behaviour – came up with the most marvellous questions and followed their enquiries with the sort of persistence that would befit a professional scientist.

Yet Isaacs was more than just an extraordinary teacher. She documented the children’s experiences in great detail, and published her findings in two seminal books about children’s development, *Intellectual Growth in Young Children* and *Social Development in Young Children*.

Although it is now commonplace to use naturalistic observation to find out about children’s learning, Isaacs was very much a pioneer of this



approach. She was also a gifted writer – the children come alive in the pages of her observations.

She was one of the first educationists to understand the importance of the work of Jean Piaget, seeing the child’s actions on materials as fundamental to the development of thinking. Yet she also saw some of the shortcomings of Piaget’s stage theory decades before other psychologists, and she also questioned his reliance on clinic-based observations, noticing that children were much more likely to show their thinking and capabilities in an environment like the Malting House School.

Today, any approach to early years education that sees children as competent learners, stresses the importance of an enabling environment to support their exploration and play, and records all this through observation-based assessment, is drawing heavily on Isaacs.

She was also, for many years, the agony aunt for *Nursery World* under the pen-name of Ursula Wise. Her writing strongly influenced child-rearing practices in the post-war period, towards more a more understanding approach to children’s emotional development. Isaacs was also a pioneer in child psychoanalysis and was responsible for the first major theoretical development of Melanie Klein’s work.

Yet there are also many paradoxes in Isaacs’s life. Her commitment to chil-



MORE INFORMATION

Susan Isaacs – A Life Freeing the Minds of Children (Karnac Books) is a major new biography written by Philip Graham, Emeritus Professor of Child Psychiatry at the Institute of Child Health. Drawing together material from the Isaacs archive at the Institute of Education and from unpublished letters and interviews, he provides a comprehensive account of Isaacs’s extraordinary life.

The book captures many of the events Isaacs was involved in: the campaign for votes for women, child-centred education, and the bitter controversial discussions of the British Psycho-Analytical Society in the 1940s.

Graham has little time for Kleinian theory and perhaps this leads him to underestimate this aspect of Isaacs’s work, and his grasp of educational practice and theory is lacking at times. Yet overall this is an invaluable introduction to Isaacs’s life and works.

children went hand-in-hand with a rather cold and aloof attitude. She wrote with great insight about children’s need for warm relationships with parents and other familiar adults, and warned of the damage that forced evacuation during the war would cause to some children’s emotional development. Yet she appears to have been almost indifferent to the suffering of young, homesick boarders at the Malting House School.

Isaacs remained hugely influential in the decades following her death from cancer in 1948. The movement towards child-centred education looked to her as well as to Froebel, Dewey and Piaget through the 1960s and 1970s. But with the turn against child-centred methods, the introduction of the National Curriculum and the literacy and numeracy hours, child-centred approaches became increasingly marginal, and Isaacs has become a rather obscure figure.

All the same, with the final findings of the Cambridge Primary Review, headed by Robin Alexander, now published, politicians and media commentators are struggling to understand how young children can learn through play. Isaacs not only showed that it was possible, but also wrote about it with a powerful directness that is mainly lacking today. ■

