

## An Experiment in Listening

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One of the greatest difficulties experienced by mentally defective children is found in their speech contacts with normal people. The defective soon gives up any attempt to listen to what is said and takes refuge in apparent deafness when he does not *want* to hear what is said to him. This protective mechanism is used to such an extent that, to a casual observer, he might appear totally deaf. Any work with defectives must begin by breaking down this defensive "deafness" and building up a habit of listening.

A small group of defectives, after some months of training, had arrived at the stage of "willingness to listen" and it so happened that their arrival at this stage coincided with our removal into a school building with a wireless installation.

There were 40 children in the school, all under 16 years of age, and resident in a certified institution. Of the 34 children who attended school for the whole day, 5 were classified as feeble-minded, 22 as imbecile, and 7 as idiots. The remainder were so low grade that, owing to difficulties of staffing and accommodation, only part time attendance was possible. These children had come from other colonies or homes, but mainly from Occupation Centres. Twelve had not previously attended a school.

The school syllabus, which was extremely simple, included a two hour period for handicrafts, and it was in this period that we began listening to the wireless. In the autumn of 1934, after six months of more or less "casual" listening, we began to listen regularly to the Nature Talks for Schools; then we listened to Talks on Gardening. By the time winter came, the older children wanted to hear all the Broadcasts to Schools, including French, German and talks to Sixth Forms! This was probably because the wireless has such an element of the unexpected, and the children never knew what might happen next. During such talks, the children were going on with their handwork just as they did during the musical programmes. To the Nature Talks, and to some of the Friday afternoon stories, they paid much attention, and would make little remarks, both during and after the broadcast.

The criticism has been made that in the programmes for Broadcasts to Schools, much of the matter is above the heads of normal children; we have found the contrary to be the case. The Nature Study talks were well within the comprehension of the older children and the Friday morning series, "Music and Movement for Very Young Children," have been excellently adapted to the needs of a group of children who have thoroughly enjoyed this activity.

In the conduct of this experiment, until the past few weeks, little or no comment has been made by the staff on any broadcast heard (careful note has been taken of the children's reaction). The children have found out for themselves that certain broadcasts come on certain days; the regular "listeners" can be found seated near the loud speaker at certain times, and they will sometimes say on Thursday morning, that it is "evensong after play this afternoon," or they will get ready a ball and some chalk before 11.30 on Friday mornings in case it is needed for "Music and Movement."

In January of this year, we began to listen to a twenty minutes' broadcast suitable for Infant Schools. Rhythmic movements to music, marching, and running to crotchets and quavers, and movements showing understanding of simple ideas of time, were undertaken by a small group of children who answered Miss Ann Driver (the broadcaster) as naturally and spontaneously as though she were in the room.

Some of the Talks in the English Literature series were understood by a small group of children. And after a talk by Mr. S. P. B. Mais *On Writing Letters*, he

asked the children to write letters to him and not to be afraid of saying "I." Immediately he had finished, one child got up and said: "I want to say I've got a mummy and a daddy and a sister and a brother and I've got a book and I like Miss X and the sun's shining and that's all," adding: "That's a letter. Send it to that man."

The History Talks have been listened to by some children. Here, I think the main interest was in the frequent dramatisations which were simple and easy to understand.

The morning service has now found a place in our Time-Table and it is to be hoped that this will be some preparation for the time when more children are ready to attend the local church.

The Weather Forecast is listened to by the whole group. I was puzzled at first by its popularity. But all children, even M.D.'s are interested in words. The lowest grade children appear to enjoy "collecting" words, and the daily repetition of certain phrases pleases them very much. When the announcer says "I will repeat that at dictation speed," instead of writing it down, which is obviously impossible, the children *say* the words after him. The critical faculties of the older children seem to be developing and when one day the announcer omitted to say "Good Morning," there was much comment on the omission. On another occasion the rain was beating against the windows and there was a strong wind. The announcer described that day's weather as "bright and warm," whereupon "Sez you!" came a voice from near the window. Although no announcement is made, the children always know when "a new man" comes to the microphone.

Running commentaries on any event are very popular, from Royal Weddings to tennis at Wimbledon, and the most popular thing of all is the description of races such as the St. Leger and the Derby. That the children have a very vivid mental picture of these events has been shown by their attempts to draw them many months after they have actually happened. At the end of this year's school broadcasts, without any previous preparation, I asked for drawings of things heard. Children who had not previously shown any aptitude, made attempts to record talks from "Greens in a Bowl" (salad) to a tennis tournament. The drawings were numerous—crude but recognisable—and some children who felt their drawing capacity inadequate to express what they wished, "dictated" their drawings to the one who drew best. The responses to a question of "What did you like best" were surprising and described talks heard over a period of months.

The regular listeners number 10, and lest it be thought that these children are grouped immobile round a loud speaker for long periods, it should be stated that they can choose whether they listen or not. I was doubtful at first whether this was taking away opportunity for movement. I am satisfied, however, that young children and defectives, can and do, of their own choice, sit still for fairly long periods, if something holds their interest. On a summer afternoon I have watched a child, surprisingly absorbed in a History Dramatisation, immediately it was over jump up and run out. I think these things can safely be left to the children.

The use of Wireless has proved very valuable with certain cases. For the blind and partially sighted, it is invaluable. We have one child attending school all day, who is badly handicapped by very defective sight and a cleft palate. He is our greatest authority on wireless.

The lower grade cases respond to music with a very definite rhythm and it would appear possible that given a very gradual introduction, wireless might be used in Occupation Centres. In any afternoon programme there is usually an abundant choice and a large amount of music of every kind available. The children can clap to it, move to it, sometimes dance to it.

For all defectives there is some stimulus which will set them on the path towards development to the full extent of their capacity maybe, and for some of these children, certainly for many in the Group described, it is the wireless which has provided that stimulant.