

The Life of Susan Sutherland Isaacs

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Susan Sutherland Isaacs was a British psychologist and psychoanalyst who rose to prominence during the nineteenth century progressive educational movement. Isaacs is best known for her publications on the intellectual and social development of children, as well as her theories regarding the education of children through free play. Furthermore, Issacs served as the first principal of the Malting House School, one of the earliest progressive schools to incorporate the theories of psychoanalysis within its curriculum (Graham, 2009).

Isaacs was born on May 24, 1885, in Lancashire, England, to Mariam Sutherland, a milliner, and William Fairhurst, a Methodist preacher and local journalist. At the age of twenty-three, Isaacs enrolled in a two-year teaching program at Manchester University. She was admitted to an honors philosophy program, from which she graduated with the highest academic distinction.

Following graduation, Isaacs studied the psychology of children and spelling at Newnham College in Cambridge, which inspired her to continue researching child development and education. In 1914, she began to teach psychology at the University College in London. It was during this time that Isaacs first took an interest in psychoanalysis (Graham, 2008).

Isaacs' interest in psychoanalysis influenced the trajectory of her career. Intrigued by the application of psychoanalysis to her life, Susan sought treatment for several months under University College colleague J.C. Flugel in 1920. The following year, seeking to further her understanding of psychoanalysis, Isaacs sought further treatment under Austrian psychoanalyst and close Freud associate Otto Rank (Graham, 2011). Upon her return to London, Isaacs' career continued to flourish as she embraced the psychoanalytic principles she had learned. In 1921, Isaacs became an associate member of the British Psychoanalytical Society. She also published her first textbook under her first married name, *An Introduction to Psychology* (Brierley, 1921; Willan, 2009). In 1923, Isaacs became a full member of the British Psychoanalytical Society which provided her authorization to officially become a practicing psychoanalyst (Graham, 2008).

In 1924, Isaacs' knowledge of child psychoanalysis led her to become the first principal of the Malting House School. The Malting House School was an early, progressively run nursery school in Britain. Speculator Geoffrey Pyke enlisted Isaacs' help in the creation of a school with the underlying philosophy of creating a less structured educational environment (Graham, 2008). Influenced by the writings of educational psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, Isaacs and Pyke created guidelines which centered around a combination of psychoanalysis and principles established by other progressive schools of its time. For example, teachers were instructed not to use commands when speaking to students (Graham, 2008). In October of 1924, the Malting House School opened with Susan Isaacs serving as the school's first principal (Graham, 2008). The school's structure

was based heavily on the philosophy that children primarily learn through active play. Isaacs believed, if left to their device, children's curiosity led them to become playful investigators, learning about the world around them through exploration. Children were provided the freedom to explore their surroundings at will, and teachers were seen as co-investigators whose primary purpose was to not only observe but to support students in their discovery. The school was considered an academic success, although it closed for good in 1929 due to financial difficulties (Graham, 2008).

Following her departure from the Malting House School, Isaacs shared the lessons and theories she developed during her tenure. Isaacs returned to London where she authored a book based off of her many observations, *The Intellectual Growth of Young Children* (Isaacs, 1930) followed by *The Social Development of Young Children* in 1933 (Isaacs, 1933). She continued to publish other writings regarding childhood development with an underlying premise emphasizing the importance of creative play and imagination on the intellectual development of children. Isaacs also began contributing to an advice column for the British magazine, *Nursery World*, in which she offered advice to parents and nursery nurses under the pseudonym Ursula Wise (Willan, 2009).

Isaacs continued to make an impact on the British school system. Between 1933 and 1943, she served as the director of the first Department of Child Development at the Institute of Education, University of London (Sayers, 2001). Isaacs' theory of child-centered education was influential in the shaping of future British childcare policy. Her books were integrated as a standard within the curriculum of teacher-training colleges. Isaacs' work continued until her death in October 1948.

Further Reading

Graham, Philip. (2008). Susan Isaacs and the Malting House School. *Journal of Child Psychotherapy*, 34(1), 5-22.

Graham, P. (2009). *Susan Isaacs: A life freeing the minds of children*. London: Karnac Books.

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