

The Parents' National Educational Union and our Sunday Schools.
BY MISS G. SWINBURNE, M.A.

(Adapted from a paper read at a meeting of Sunday School teachers in Melbourne, Australia).

In Victoria, recently, a strong effort has been made to raise the standard of the instruction given in our Sunday Schools. In connection with this movement I have been able, upon several occasions, to bring the principles of the Parents' National Education Union to the notice of organisers and teachers. An article upon the subject appeared several years ago in the PARENTS' REVIEW, but I found it necessary to explain the basis and the underlying ideas of the P.U.S. methods before dealing with the application of them. For this purpose attention was drawn to Miss Mason's books and pamphlets and summaries of her conclusions were drawn up. The present paper deals mainly with the practical side of the question.

The aim of Miss Mason's teaching is to keep alive in the children their natural desire for knowledge and to train them so that they shall gradually become independent of the teacher in acquiring what they wish to know. Sunday School teachers who realise the futility of attempting to teach the Bible and its meaning with three-quarters of an hour a week at their disposal, will understand how important, how absolutely essential, it is, that young people should [p 2]

be able to read the Bible intelligently for themselves. It is at this point, however, that Sunday School teaching too often fails, with the result that the young people cease studying the Bible when they cease attending school. This is especially the case with those who have no opportunity for instruction in their own homes, and who must be made free of the sources of religious knowledge if the work they have done in class is to have lasting value for them.

Miss Mason bases her method of teaching upon the necessity of rousing the pupils' interest,—not as the sugar coating to the pill of a disagreeable task, but because interest is essential to attention and to memory. Adults can force their attention to a "dull" book because they have interest in the object for which it must be mastered, but children cannot understand the benefits that may come in the years ahead of them and must be supplied with immediate motives for their tasks. The fictitious interests of rewards and punishments and examination results have been used to stimulate industry, but these things create unworthy ideals, and for years teachers and parents have become increasingly dissatisfied with the conditions they have produced. In Sunday schools considerations such as these have very little influence, and great changes are needed if we are to secure the goodwill of the scholars towards their work. The only interest which is worthy for us to put before our pupils is that which lies in the work itself and which the children can discover for themselves as they master their tasks.

The idea of interest is of course not new, but Miss Mason reverses the usual procedure for using it. Most teachers provide a dry, concise text book for the use of the scholars and themselves undertake to supply interest in the lesson by anecdote and illustration. Working upon this plan the pupils begin to feel unconsciously that all books upon serious subjects are dull, and when they are away from the teacher they do not attempt to find pleasure in any subjects which they have studied at school even though they may have enjoyed the class lessons. In Sunday School, the Bible is often placed in the position of the dull text book. The lesson is taught out of the Bible. The passage is read aloud, verse by verse, some scholars

stumbling, some hurrying; the spiritual idea is found (by the teacher), and a [p 3]

short sermon is preached upon it, or perhaps the children are questioned. The questions tend to follow the teacher's line of thought, but do not bring continuity of idea to the children. The teacher relies for the central interest of the lesson upon a story which may illustrate the moral precept to be found from the Bible passage, but has no other connection with it. Lessons such as these may teach religion and morality, but they do little towards teaching the Bible which is the foundation of religion. The Bible must be known, if religion is to be a living reality, continually growing in breadth and strength. The fact is that the Bible remains a closed book, and worse still, an uninteresting book to pupils who have been in our schools for years.

Miss Mason changes the relative positions of teacher and book. She entirely discounts as a means of imparting knowledge the oral, educative method. Children may be able to answer one by one the careful, watered down questions, but they will be unable at the end to give any connected account of the lesson. Children should acquire knowledge for themselves from books which are well-written and which will reveal to them the interest of the subject they are studying.

In Miss Mason's classes the teacher sets a certain part of the book to be studied as the task for each lesson; a brief introduction may be necessary to explain a difficulty or connect the task with previous work, but as soon as possible the children begin to read. Each child reads the whole passage silently, once and once only, and when all have finished the teacher calls for volunteers to narrate the lesson. Each narrator speaks as far as possible in the words of the book and is allowed to finish without interruption. At the end the other members of the class make corrections and supply details. The teacher insists upon a grasp of the subject matter and narration in proper order of events, but details are given in accordance with the various abilities of the children.

Our memories naturally select for retention certain impressions from all the myriads that are recorded day by day. This power of selection is a very great safeguard, and must be recognised in our method of education. Every one must be trained to remember what is important, but we may

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choose from the details surrounding the important event, those that are most interesting to the individual temperament. Any detail which strikes the imagination serves to recall the whole circumstance. For this reason, the books which find a place on Miss Mason's syllabus are books which make a wide appeal to the readers because of the vividness and detail with which the main incidents are described. In using these books the children become eager to know more; they ask questions and find the answers for themselves.

It will be readily understood that the attention necessary to fix a passage in the memory after one reading cannot be maintained by any child for very long. The lessons therefore should be short; insistence should not be laid on the amount of ground covered, but on the accurate, intelligent mastery of what is attempted. No child should feel that work can be slurred because it will have to be gone over again, anyhow. Miss Mason sets no homework, but reading of lighter books, and takes no revision before the quarterly examination. The teacher must not be the constant intermediary, inserting her own personality between the child and the people who live again in the pages of the book, her duty is to enable the child to become directly

acquainted with them—to introduce them to one another, with perhaps a a [sic] hint of their chief interests in life, as a gracious hostess might do. That done, her position is one of “masterly inactivity” until the end of the narration, when she performs the function, usually assigned to the concise text book, of “ordering” the knowledge which the children have acquired. A short time only is necessary to number causes, underline a few outstanding words, to see that a general idea has been grasped. This is the oral part of the lesson; its use is to order knowledge and not to impart it. Occasionally the whole period of a lesson may be spent in oral teaching, but only at the end or beginning of a series of lessons which may need unifying or introducing. No new work is undertaken in the oral lesson. Some passages in every book are unsuitable for narration, and when these are to be studied various exercises may be set upon them, but the silent reading by the pupil is always the central activity of the lesson.

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Some children find narration difficult at first, but it is amazing how quickly they become accustomed to it and do what is required of them naturally and with ease. If a child is hesitant, the teacher asks it quietly about the lesson while the others are employed in some other way, and gradually brings it to confide in its own powers. Do not force diffident children, do not expect too much at first, are important practical precepts.

Children who have been trained to read so that they grasp the meaning of a passage as a whole, use a wide vocabulary. They gradually learn the meaning of a new word by seeing it several times in the context and after a time it slips almost unconsciously into their narration. This power is very important in Bible teaching where there is always a language difficulty to be overcome. The ability to understand a passage in which one or two unknown words occur, is a most important one. No marks are awarded in the Parents’ Union School, but all work which reaches a definite standard is marked “Satisfactory.” At the examination there is no meticulous percentage with a mark for every point, but every pupil whose progress is quite satisfactory is awarded full marks, the others are divided into four classes. For every lesson, and for every term there is a definite programme in the Parents’ Union School, and the programme allows so much time for the study of each event or character that the children are able to truly realise the life of the past. The quarterly examination is taken as a natural part of the work of the school and is conducted in the ordinary lesson time with no extra preparation or worry. The work is undertaken for its own sake; one of the highest duties of the teachers is to show her own deep interest, her conviction that knowledge is intensely worth while.

In all these directions our Sunday Schools need reorganisation. We cannot hope for a better standard in the schools, and an improvement in the general tone, until the good will of the scholars is more actively aroused, and the teachers approach their work with greater confidence and sense of control.

Miss Mason believes that all knowledge should have a spiritual foundation—that all mental activity affects the

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spiritual life and all spiritual development affects the mental life. Mind and soul must grow together, for together they form the eternal spirit by which we live. In the Parents’ Union School time is provided for a Bible lesson everyday. On some days in each week the Old Testament is studied and on the others the New Teatsment, [sic] opportunity is also given for committing passages to memory. The children who are old enough read the allotted passage

silently, those who are younger listen while the teacher reads aloud to them. The lesson then proceeds as has been described above. The Bible should be, and if properly used, could be, the one great means of religious education, but it is an ancient book, a foreign book, and has been written in concise form; other books, therefore, are necessary to enable the children to visualise truly, to relate the Bible histories to knowledge gained from [sic] other sources, and to unify the various conceptions which too often result from disjointed study. These books are used in the closest relationship to the Bible, they do not replace it, they explain it, and provide for the children answers to their own questions. It is a tremendous advantage for the children to use these books for themselves. Every teacher must have felt disappointment at the result of a Bible story which she has told with very great care. She has searched for details, reconstructed the scenes of old, and told the story with interest, but who remembers it a fortnight afterwards? She does, but what of the class? She has done the digging, she has had the thrill of discovery, but she has merely swept along by her flow of words a number of listeners who sat more or less hypnotised with inactive brains. These interesting details the children should discover for themselves, with brains alert.

The Bible bears such a close relation to daily life, that the oral part, or application of the lesson becomes [sic] more important than when we are dealing with other subjects, but the principle of the whole lesson is the same—the pupils shall acquire their knowledge from a book which is the source of knowledge, and shall feel the satisfaction of a definite task well done. Within from five to ten minutes of the beginning of the lesson the class should settle down to silent work; this takes a little training, but not so much as [p 7]

might be expected, and sometimes the most unruly boy will turn his attention to the work most readily. It is more difficult to train a class to conduct narration properly, but this, too, can be done. We do not generally expect enough of Sunday School scholars; in reality they like employment and it is our business to provide it for them.

During the oral part of the lesson teachers should be very careful in their use of illustrative stories, and should beware of labouring the moral. Our minds are so diverse that what may illuminate one may distract or hinder another. The children may not be able to explain the moral teaching of the Bible, but if we do not intrude over much they will understand, and will feel the presence of Him who called the little ones to Himself.

Pictures are a great help to children, but any that are used must be good. If such a picture is not procurable, it is better to show illustrations of the scenery only, and to leave the actions or events to the imagination.

Much has been said of the scholars—what of the teachers? It is with reference to the teachers that Miss Mason's methods are most particularly suitable for Sunday School work. The first object of the whole scheme was to raise the standard of education for children who were taught at home by parents or by untrained governesses. A training college was also established at Ambleside, but it is not necessary to obtain a certificate to work in the Parents' Union School. The syllabus is at the service of any one who will adopt the scheme as a whole, that is, who will read Miss Mason's books and obey the rules of the school and the practical directions for teaching.

Every system of education is formulated as the result of a certain definite attitude towards children; therefore no teacher should adopt a distinct procedure, without adopting the

corresponding ideas of the child's nature and capacities. It is this that is meant by adopting the scheme of the P.N.E.U. "as a whole,"—not the finicking imitation of every smallest detail. In spite of this necessity, the P.N.E.U. method lightens the burden of the teacher with regard both to preparation and to the actual teaching period. Many earnest men and women feel that they cannot undertake a Sunday School class in these days of much pressure

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and no leisure. They feel that cannot control the class, and at the same time throw heart and soul into the lesson; should they fail ever so little, either in themselves or in influence upon any one member of the class, the afternoon seems a complete failure. In the Parents' Union Schools the teacher is still the centre of the lesson, but she is not the only influence that matters. She learns how to use on one hand, the wisdom of great men, on the other the powers of the children themselves. She puts these into co-operation and leaves them to work together. During the period of silent reading the teacher's personality controls the class, her attitude of enthusiasm inspires them, her sympathy and help are ready if any unforeseen difficulty occurs. "Masterly inactivity" is Miss Mason's famous phrase to describe the teacher's work during this, the longest part of the lesson. The preparation of the teacher in the Parents' Union School must be even more careful than that which is necessary when using other methods. She must know perfectly the task which the children will be set to master, and she must study it so that she may foresee any difficulty which may occur, for any general difficulty must be explained in her introduction to the class. The need for simplicity and brevity in her comment to the class means careful selection and arrangement to her mind, and ability to direct the children's comments as she wishes. Every syllabus issued by the P.N.E.U. prescribes books for the teacher as well as for the scholar, and these books enable her to read widely and progressively as the course of lessons proceeds. These books would probably be in any teachers' library of moderate pretensions.

Courses of training for Sunday School work are already organised, but they occupy two years, are rather alarming to those who are not of studious temperament and demand a great sacrifice of time. We feel tremendously at present the lack of some way by which volunteers can be directed at the outset, so that they may take charge of their classes with confidence that they are working in the right direction.

Study of Miss Mason's books, and a few meetings with older teachers for discussion of practical problems should enable young people to make a beginning, but it must be emphasised that it would be a beginning only. Continuous

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study is essential to good work. The more widely a teacher reads, the more will she feel her need for reading. Great scholars have revealed for us the treasures of Bible literature, and as whole realms of thought open before the student, reading becomes a delightful pursuit. The monthly teachers' meeting should afford opportunities for discussion. It is too often occupied with formalities and business and routine, or where discussion is attempted it is slack and futile, it is indeed scarcely possible that it should be otherwise when the teachers are of widely different training, take different attitudes to the children and teach by different methods. We need a common basis for our work and need it urgently.

Certain practical considerations must be taken into account before Miss Mason's scheme is applied to Sunday school classes. It will be evident that the appointed lessons must

be carefully graded, and that scholars must be classified according to ability rather than according to age. The boys in the class that I am teaching at present vary so greatly in reading ability that it is not always possible to allow them to work silently, but with a previous class I introduced the method with success. I had no other books available for the boys, but I used sometimes to read aloud, or tell them simply what I had read. The cost of books is a question that must be faced, but there are many devices for the determined. If half-yearly courses were arranged, the same books would serve two classes in one year, and could be handed down to others in the following year. If suitable arrangements are made in the class-rooms there should be no difficulty about keeping the books in order. If a boy misuses a book, the remedy is not to remove from him all opportunity of doing so again, but to give books which he will respect for their own sake. Where it is quite impossible to provide books for all, the teacher can read aloud from a class copy.

Seeing that we have one lesson a week, instead of five, it may be necessary to alter some details of the P.U.S. plan. Repetition might be learnt at home and other out of school work required, for besides its uses as instruction homework forms a valuable link between Sunday School and home. I believe that the headquarters of the Union are preparing a syllabus suitable for the one-a-week class.

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Finally, I would utter two words of warning.

Do not begin to use Miss Mason's methods until you are convinced that they are sound in theory and practice.

Do not expect instantaneous and miraculous results.

One of the first teachers who introduced silent reading and narration in a large class of an elementary school, was worn out and discouraged at the end of six weeks. She arranged an exchange of classes until she was rested. After returning to her original class she was completely successful with the new way of teaching and the children have ever since co-operated with her enthusiastically.

I have attempted to put the whole matter briefly before you. If I have seemed to speak too little of the deeper spiritual purpose of our Sunday School work I would ask you to understand that this paper has been concerned largely with the practical means by which we may lead our boys and girls to a knowledge of God, by teaching them to find that knowledge for themselves, in the words of God and in the life of Jesus Christ.