

Knowledge and Narration.

BY DAISY S. GOLDING.

It is not with the knowledge and training of an ex-student of the House of Education that I shall say a few words on *The Wisdom of the Insistence of Narration*.

What I say is the outcome of my experience. Perhaps it would be wise to remind ourselves that narration can take many forms. It can be oral or written reproduction of the whole or of part; it can be comparison of, or contrast between, some person or event occurring in the reading and some person or event of which the children already have cognisance; it can take the form of drawing, the writing of notes, or the making of a summary; and to your minds will occur other forms which narration can take.

Two of the main principles of the P.N.E.U. methods are:—

1. A reading, *once*—and
2. Narration.

The *once* reading is necessary if we are to work faithfully along the lines of the P.N.E.U., and if we are to make possible of realisation the extraordinary claims of the scheme. I often think how much less burdensome would have been my work at College had I then known of the great discovery of our Founder, Miss Mason, whom we remember with gratitude at a Gathering such as this; for where the children are, there will her spirit ever be. I should in faith have given the method a trial—and faith works wonders!

The other principle that I mentioned,—that of narration—is doubly necessary. Not only is it necessary if we

[p 424]

are to work faithfully along the lines of the P.N.E.U., but it is necessary also (and by experience we have proved it) if we are to obtain any beneficial result from the *once* reading. The two go hand in hand. Reading again, and again, and yet again will leave something in the mind; but we who have worked the P.N.E.U. scheme have found that reading only once, if that reading is followed by one of the many possible forms of narration, leaves a great deal. Every child does not remember everything; nor are we meant to despair if some forget much; no, not even if some remember nothing. One day the awakening comes: (I have seen it!) something appeals; and from that time the child's awakened interest triumphs over self-consciousness, over apathy, over everything.

You will forgive me for quoting personal instances that are in my mind. It is only so that I can substantiate what I believe about it all. This particular experience illustrates the necessity of narration. About two years ago, I had a very keen class working the Form III programme. Having found the programme very full the previous term, and not wishing to omit any, even of the optional, books, the girls suggested that they should give up for something else the time set apart in school for novel-reading, and that they should read the novel at home. They carried out their suggestion, written answers on the subject-matter being asked for from time to time in school. When the examination papers were worked, they failed to answer the "novel" question successfully; in fact many did not attempt to answer the question at all. Talking over the matter with the girls and their teacher, I found that had the question been set on a part with which they had dealt in one of their written answers, the result would have been more satisfactory, and they would have answered the question with joy. "Now," I said, "you have

yourselves found the solution to the whole problem. This shows that you must in some way or other arrange to narrate what you read out of school. Never again must you continue with the reading until you have narrated the foregoing part." Many of them after this, I fear, worried father, mother, a sister or a brother to hear their narration. Others came earlier than usual to school, (and they always come early. I suppose we only

[p 425]

get a weekly average of two or three late children, the number on the registers varying from 215 to 250. They would not come so early if they were not interested and happy in their work). As I said, some would come earlier than usual, and these would get another girl in the class to hear them "tell back." I dropped in several times after this, and asked them if they were remembering about the necessity of narration; and each time the answer was, "Yes." I soon realised that this narration of work read at home had become a point of honour with them; and the same feeling now pervades the whole of the senior school, i.e., Forms II, III, and IV (when we have any girls working to *that* programme). If I ask them now if they are forgetting they do not take me seriously; but smile whimsically as though to say, "As if!"

I never take part in a Conference such as this without realising how fortunate are those children who have intelligent parents, and who have the benefit of the companionship, out of school hours, of those interested in their education. As I expect you know, ours is an Elementary School in an urban industrial district; our children are not so favoured; but even the parents of some of our children become interested in spite of themselves. One father said to me only a week or two ago, "I read every book my little girl brings home"; and an older brother of another child worried his sister to bring home the "Story of Mankind" again and again; as, having dipped into it one night when she took it home to read from, he did not want to lose his chance of more.

There may be some here who teach in Elementary schools, and who have not yet tried the P.N.E.U. scheme. Perhaps they feel that the large numbers with which we have to deal must make the work of *oral* narration in lower classes very difficult. We get over the difficulty by letting the children sometimes narrate in pairs, or in groups; the teacher passing from group to group listening to one, encouraging another, setting right the mistake of a third; so that by the end of the lesson every child will, by narration, have made her own whatever appealed to her during the reading. In cases where children seem afraid to speak, we have found that the necessary impetus has been some

[p 426]

times given by letting them narrate in pairs; but each child in so loud a voice that the teacher can hear each and all. In this way the child becomes accustomed to the sound of her own voice.

Last term my Form III. girls used the time in school for reading and oral narration, and did many of their written answers at home. The work at home was entirely optional: in fact it was the outcome of their own suggestion. Great was their joy when I gave them permission to take home their school exercise books so that the continuity of their written work should not be broken. I suggested that the home-written answers should be accepted in pencil (the pens in their homes being a little worse than the proverbial Post Office pen!) Having some knowledge of their homes, it will ever be a source of wonder to me that they were able to produce work of as high a standard (in style and neatness as well as in intelligent reproduction) as that which they would have given under supervision in school. If the home-written answers were not in

pencil, I could not tell, even on close inspection, which of them *were* written out of school. I *do* feel that training such as those children are giving themselves will make them better able to use well their leisure time after they have left school. I hope so, any way; and even if some cease to love the good things, (for environment plays such a great part in the moulding of a child's life), yet there will, I am sure, ever remain *some* who will "hold on." All, in any case, must be the better for the vision of the best which they have had.

I want to say something about the application of knowledge. Examples have come within my experience which show that it is possible for children to have a vast store of knowledge without, what is far more necessary, the power to use it when required. The teacher's intelligent handling of the work will prevent this. She must not regard English History as English History; French History as French History; and so on: but must herself realise that one throws light on the other; and that the greater the number of viewpoints, the saner will be the conclusion which is reached. To take one example:—in the reading of Miss Mason's book, "*Ourselves*", if a passage referring to the inborn love of power and the dæmon of self-ambition is being studied,

[p 427]

the wise teacher will so have guided her pupils along the many ways to Truth, that they will find that the term's reading of other books, and sometimes another term's reading of other books, will have provided them with illustrations of the subject-matter in hand. If they can give examples from their reading, then certain it is that the significance of the passage has "gone home."

We might well pause a moment to reflect on the serious responsibility of the teacher not only to *give* the best to, (which this scheme enables us to do), but also to ask the best possible from, each child. It is true,—terribly true,—that children respond to the demands that are made upon them. If little is asked, they give little; if much is asked then more is given. I have held this as one of my maxims for years past, and grieve when I see a child's energies and abilities going to waste. Never, until a few months ago, have I heard a child give expression, in her way, to the same truth. One of my teachers was telling her girls that she was a little disappointed over the length, or rather the shortness, of their written answers. Without hesitation one of the girls (12 years of age) answered her. I forget her exact words, but the gist of what she said was this:—"If you want us to write longer answers we can do it. Tell us how many lines you want us to give you; and we will give you what you ask."

One word to any who have what seems to be a difficult class. I say "difficult" advisedly; for "hopeless" is a word which no teacher worthy of the name will ever use in reference to a child. My word to you is, "Keep right on! One day interest will awaken; and the child will never be the same afterwards." I have a class of girls in mind now, a few of whom, even this last term, seemed apparently enthusiastic over none of their work. They would narrate (most of them) if you asked them; but they did not seem anxious to do it. Even in the examination which I took orally that I might judge each child's ability and promise, one or two did not offer to answer any question. We all worked the Canterbury programme. These children had worked Form IB. Right at the end of the examination, I gave them the special Canterbury question set for Form I. I think it was, "What would you see in Canterbury Cathe-

[p 428]

dral if you went there?" Knowing that I was coming, they were soon telling *me* what to look for;

and after a few moments there was hardly a child left in her seat. They were gathered round me: one telling me of one treasure, another supplementing it by a more detailed description; and yet another, herself a fair little maid of six years, in piping childish treble said, "And you mustn't forget to look for the "fair face of Joan."