

The Mason Method of Teaching.

BY E. PERCIVAL HORSEY, B.A.

(Headmaster of St. Mary's College, Harlow).

Three articles reprinted from "The Harlovian," the Magazine of St. Mary's College.

I.

A REMARKABLE EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

I HAD at times heard vague rumours about a new departure in education associated with the name of Miss Mason, and recently the report of a speech made at a Conference of Teachers stimulated my curiosity, and induced me to make further enquiries. I discovered, to my surprise, that the advocates of Miss Mason's theories were a large and constantly growing body, banded together in an influential Union, and that they made on behalf of their system claims so astonishing as to seem almost incredible.

During the term business took me to Stroud. I had read a few days before a description of the working of the Mason system, in the village of Painswick, close by, and I resolved to seize the opportunity of seeing it in actual operation. I accordingly called at the school, stated my business, and asked the Headmistress, Miss Kirkland, if I might listen to the lessons. She received me most courteously, for, as I soon realised, one of the special features of the Mason system is the enthusiasm it arouses in its supporters and the keenness with which they welcome fresh disciples.

[p 397]

The children in the school were nearly all daughters of agricultural labourers, a type not usually considered as very promising from an educational point of view. However, I was at once struck by the bright, intelligent, and happy expression of the pupils. I began by listening to a class of tiny tots aged six to eight. The governess read to them an interesting description of Peruvian bark, its history, and uses. She then asked who would repeat the substance of what she had just read. Up went a forest of hands. One youngster was called out and, to my amazement, she gave an astonishingly accurate reproduction of what she had heard, intonation, grammar, and vocabulary all being equally remarkable. In the meantime the other children of the class were in a wild state of excitement in their eagerness to be allowed to take up the story, so much so, that the teacher had to stop number one and allow other pupils in turn to go on with the narrative. The teacher then asked who would tell a fairy story they had heard a month ago. There was the same eagerness to come forward, and the story was told with nearly as accurate detail as in the former case.

I then went to a class of girls about a year older. Their teacher was reading to them Andrew Lang's description of Ulysses' return to Penelope, to which they were listening with rapt attention. As in the other class, volunteers were called for to re-narrate the story, and this was done with the same astonishing fluency, accuracy, and good choice of language.

After this, I went to the top division of the school, most of the pupils being about 11 or 12 years old. These were reading to themselves from Mrs. Creighton's "History of France." As a test, I asked the Headmistress if they could repeat a passage taken a month before. She said, "certainly," and asked me to choose. I picked on the defeat of Attila the Hun, and once again found the same extraordinary features as in the other class. Another division had been given a copy of Botticelli's picture, "Tobit and the Angel." After they had studied it a few minutes, the picture was taken away, and the class asked to describe what they had seen. In the meantime I

had the picture, and the girls mentioned, from memory, several features, which, I am ashamed to say, I did not notice, until my attention was

[p 398]

thus drawn to them. The children seemed really to appreciate and admire the artistic merits of the picture, though I suppose they see nothing in their own homes better than crude almanacs, or coloured plates from magazines. Before leaving I said I would like to give a book to the school library, and asked the girls to choose one. No-one would guess their choice. Remember, they were mostly ploughmen's children. Well, what they wanted above all, was a second copy of Marshall's "History of English Literature," a book written on the same lines as the author's "Our Island Story."

A system which can produce love of books and pictures such as the above, in the daughters of farm labourers, needs no recommendation from me. I cannot, within the limits of this article, describe the principles on which the system is based. I may, perhaps, try to do so in a future number. I have, however, decided to introduce Miss Mason's methods, wherever possible, into St. Mary's College, and am looking forward with keen interest to the results of the experiment.

II.

In a former issue I gave an account of the extraordinary results of this method that I witnessed in a school at Painswick, and declared my determination of introducing the system into the lower classes of this school as soon as circumstances would permit. The two great obstacles in the way were staff difficulties, and the impossibility of obtaining the necessary text books during the war. These two obstacles no longer exist, accordingly the full programme of the Parents' Union—the organisation which promulgates Miss Mason's theories—will be taken next term by Forms I., II., and III.

The Parents' Union kindly sent Miss Wix, their assistant organising secretary, to Harlow, to give a lecture to our staff and a demonstration lesson to a class. The staff have also (through the courtesy of the Headmistress, Miss Dell) had the privilege of spending a day at the L.C.C. School, Brixton, a school of 400 pupils, where the method has been practised with remarkable success for two years. There they noted the same features which struck me so forcibly at Painswick, the cheerfulness and enthusiasm of the teach-

[p 399]

ers; the brightness, happiness, and intelligence of the pupils; and finally, the truly amazing character of the work done. Lest I may be thought to be exaggerating, I give a specimen below. Mr. L\_\_\_\_\_ chose from a large number of prints a copy of Van Dyk's "Children of King Charles I." The pupils were allowed to examine it for three minutes, and were then given twenty minutes to write their impressions. Here are those of a child of 12, not, by the way, one who comes from a refined home, but the daughter of a costermonger.

Picture Studies are delightfully interesting. The one that is being studied now is called "Children of Charles I," which was painted by Van Dyk. In the picture are three children, the tallest is on the left hand side, it is a girl, and she is wearing a bonnet, and her hair, which is cut in a fringe, is showing. Her dress is fastened down at the front, and which touches the ground. Round the neck is a large collar reaching down to her

shoulders, and with pointed lace at the end. Her left hand is resting lightly on a beautiful large dog, its face raised trustfully and knowingly to its little mistress. The child's face is happy and contented. The centre child is wearing no hat whatever, she has a necklace around her neck, and her dress is resting in soft folds. Her face is one of pensive sweetness, and is looking with dreamy eyes towards the dog. She has rather short curly hair, which frames her face, and makes it look even more chubby. The child on the right, another little girl, has got her hair quite concealed in a little lace bonnet, it is pulled low over her ears. She also is looking towards the dog with unconcealed admiration. She is standing on a raised stair, with her chubby baby hands clasped in front of her, for she is the smallest child in the room. A large dark plush curtain is hung behind the three children, and in front of them is a lovely carpet, puckered up in the centre. A bunch of flowers is resting on this carpet touching the stair on which one of the little girls is standing; the stair is bare of all carpet. In the background are some tall, waving trees covered with tiny leaves; the sky is clouded and grey, and looks rather stormy.

What is the system which enables such a child to do work of this character? This is not the place to give lengthy explanations of educational theories. Those who are interested should obtain Miss Mason's books. I may, however, print the resumé of the theories given in a pamphlet published by the Parents' Union.

*Statement of Theory.*

This is, briefly, how the theory stands:

A child is a person, with the spiritual requirements and capabilities of a person.

Knowledge "nourishes" the mind as food nourishes the body. A child requires knowledge as much as he requires food.

[p 400]

He is furnished with the desire for knowledge (i.e., curiosity), with the powers which enable him to apprehend knowledge with little aid from without—such as imagination, reflection, judgment; with innate interest in all knowledge that he needs as a human being, with power to retain and communicate such knowledge, and to assimilate all that is necessary to him.

He prefers that knowledge be communicated to him in literary form, and reproduces such knowledge touched by his own personality; thus, reproduction becomes to some extent original work.

The natural provision for the appropriation and assimilation of knowledge is adequate, and no stimulus is required; but some moral control is necessary to secure the act of attention; a child receives this in the *certainty* that he will be required to recount what he has read. This manner of education, it will be perceived, is entirely self-education; every step in their progress depends on the children's own efforts, they are delightfully conscious of progress and eager to go on; school work, whether for teachers or children, has no longer the weariness of treadmill exercise. Again, a child requires to go his own pace; if this is prevented, a serious obstacle is placed in the way of the natural desire of knowledge. This requirement is met by the act of narrating that which he knows, not that which another person demands in answer to questions.

Children have a right to the best we possess; therefore, their lesson books should be, as far as possible, our best books. They weary of talk, and questions bore them, so they should be allowed to use their own books for themselves; they will ask for such as they wish for.

They require a great variety of knowledge—concerning religion, the humanities, science, art; therefore they should have a wide curriculum, with a definite amount of reading set for each short period. The teacher assumes a higher status and a far more interesting role; he affords direction, sympathy in studies, a vivifying word here and there, guidance in the making of experiment, etc., as well as the usual teaching in languages, experimental science, and mathematics; he is enabled to deal with individuals instead of classes.

Pursued under these conditions “Studies are for delight,” and the consciousness of daily progress is exhilarating to both teacher and children. Let me add that the principles and methods I have indicated are especially suitable for large classes; what is called the “sympathy of numbers” stimulates the class, and the work goes on with an added impetus; each child is eager to take part in narration or to do writing work well. By the way, only short test answers are required in writing, so that the labour of correction is minimised.

I may be asked why, if the system does all its believers claim, it is not more generally followed? As a matter of fact, it is making its way rapidly. In four years the number of children being educated in “Mason” Schools has grown from 2,000 to 20,000.<sup>1</sup> In Gloucestershire alone, where the

[p 401]

system has been taken up enthusiastically by the County Council, there are 36 schools conducted on “Mason” lines. But there are undoubtedly difficulties to be overcome before it can become general. There is the scepticism and opposition which a new idea always encounters; there is the necessity of persuading teachers to abandon their old theories; and, above all, I believe, there is the heavy expense of books which the method entails. As the Board of Education considers half-a-crown a child, per year, sufficient expenditure on books in Elementary Schools, it will be readily understood how serious an obstacle to the general adoption of the system the heavy expense on books must be.

I have little doubt that the “Mason” system will prove a great success here. The first essential for success has already been attained; the staff are absolutely convinced by what they have seen and heard. We all confidently hope that the same wonderful results that we have seen at Painswick and Brixton will be repeated at St. Mary’s College.

III.

We are all delighted with the result of the first term’s work in connection with the Parents’ Union. Our experience more than justifies our most sanguine hopes. The system requires among other things (1) that a very large and varied amount of reading shall be done; (2) that no matter shall be read more than once; (3) that all the matter read in school shall be immediately re-narrated verbally by the class; (4) that a written examination shall be held at the end of each

term. The staff were a little nervous about the result of the examination. They found it hard to believe that such a large amount of matter, read only once, could possibly be retained, but to their astonishment nearly everyone, even boys who had been regarded before as hopelessly dull, wrote full and accurate answers. The very young boys of Form I., who cannot yet manage a pen properly, were each allowed to dictate to an older boy, and in some cases covered two large foolscap pages in answer to a single question. The explanation of the remarkable results gained is probably as follows:—When a pupil knows he must immediately re-tell what he has read, he approaches his work

[p 402]

with an entirely different mental attitude from that passive indifference which the average boy feels for his lessons. The re-telling, too, of what he has just read strengthens the powerful impression he has already imprinted on his own mind, and so the work done is permanently retained. Anyone may test this for himself by reading a leading article from a newspaper, and repeating the substance immediately to a friend. He will be surprised both at the different manner in which he tackles the article, and at the strong grip of the subject he retains afterwards.

Another factor which explains the success of the system is the very wide and interesting range of reading matter dealt with. Form III for example have this term studied:—  
*Scripture.*

(1) The life of Samson; (2) The life of Samuel. Acts, chapters 1—10.

*Reading.*

“The Pilgrim’s Progress,” “Robinson Crusoe,” “Old Mortality,” “The Merchant of Venice.”

*English History.*

The Stuart Period (From Charles II.—Anne).

*French History.*

The reign of Louis XIV.

*General History.*

The Greek Vase Rooms at the British Museum.

*Citizenship.*

Plutarch’s life of Lysander.

The English Navy and Army.} Arnold Forster.

Civil and Criminal Courts.}

*Geography.*

Six Counties of England.

Round the Empire.} by H.W. Household.

Our Seapower.

*Nature Study.*

The life history of a Sponge and a Jelly Fish, by A.Buckley.

The Study of 24 Wild Flowers.

The Study of 12 Animals.

The Study of the Solar System.

The life of a Garden Snail.

The life of a Worm.

[p 403]

*Picture Study.*

Six Pictures by Fra Angelico.

*Drawing.*

Drawing, Illustrations for Nature Note Books, History Books, &c.

This is in addition to Arithmetic, Algebra, Handiwork, and a certain amount of French.

The variety and extent of the work, far from confusing or over-straining the pupils, seems to stimulate and refresh them. Certainly I have never before known boys so keen and happy in school hours.

During the term Form III. visited the Biritish [sic] Museum to examine the Greek vases and other exhibits, which throw light on the home life of the Greeks and Romans, about which they had been reading. The keenest interest was shown, and as a result of the visit many excellent drawings were made in the "Century Books," in which the boys keep an illustrated record of their reading.

---

<sup>1</sup> The number of pupils is now (March, 1922) 40,000. There are more than 100 Private Schools and 200 Elementary Schools affiliated to the Parents' National Educational Union.