

NOTES AND QUERIES.

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III.

I HAVE read your letter with much interest. May I say that we quite understand that you do not see your way to adopt a new system in a school which is already doing successful work on the lines for which it was started? Miss Mason was herself entirely averse to offering a "system"—a set of good plans (or even of bright ideas!) which used in and for themselves should produce certain results, and for this reason she did not care to send the programmes for payment *only*, but only on condition that they should be carried out in the light of the Philosophy of Education which has been her contribution to the cause of education. That she should use certain methods to carry out her work is a *sine qua non*, but the methods do not belong to a system which can be bought and administered like a "cure" (which may or may not work) but are the outcome of principles which have resulted from certain "findings" as to the laws of mind. To discuss the method as if it were a system leads nowhere, for a system is cut and dried and the material upon which it is used must be made to fit; whereas a method is the result of principles, living organisms, which have powers of growth, expansion and adaptability.

In answer to the objections of your colleague:

(1) *"I subscribed for the material for one year so that I could see what value it had to offer to us. I may be wrong in my action, but I was unable to get any particular value from it."*

A subscription for a year's programmes is of no value, as I have already indicated. There is no intrinsic merit in Miss Mason's method apart from the principles on which it is based.

(2) *"I do feel that the emphasis on 'living books' is important. I should be sorry indeed if our classes were not also stimulated to a wide use of such books. I do not feel, however, that this feature is a 'Mason feature,' despite the fact that it is made the centre of their system."*

Any schools can get living books and most of them do, but

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the supply of books is regulated not by the children's needs but by the prevalent idea that a child's need is intensive rather than extensive, and also by the fact that though most school authorities are willing to be generous in matters of hygiene and apparatus, books do not as yet take the important place they should occupy. Also, the idea is still uppermost that a teacher, trained to be a specialist in one branch, has extracted the elixir of the subject of which he is master and is able to feed his pupils with it, pigeon-like, without effort on the part of the children. It is the *principle* that counts as regards "living books." Any good teachers know what they are and can get them without difficulty, but they do not supply books to the child as the food upon which he is to feed and *grow*. They rather incline to books of the tabloid order from which to supply the information by which the pupil may know what is necessary for examination purposes or for his future career.

(3) *"You probably remember my questioning of any single system as a supposed educational 'cure-all.'"*

We do not advocate any *system* as an educational "cure-all." Miss Mason's *method*, springing from vital principles and some knowledge of the laws of mind, seems to meet the needs of children at all points. A "school which is open-minded to the best of everything" is apt to become a patch-work of good plans without any unifying principle.

(4) *"May I add that even in England there are very strong opponents of the Mason method and many who think it very restrictive."*

That there is opposition goes without saying. No educational method that implies such a *volte face* from time-honoured practices could be suffered to make way uncriticised, but the opposition comes from those who do not distinguish between a *method* based on philosophic principles and a *system* which merely advocates devices that have been found useful.

I add a few notes on the questions put by one of your teachers, but what I have already said applies in general to each of the questions, Nos. 2 to 9.

(1) *"Under this system how are children taught to read?"*

Miss Mason sketched in her first volume, *Home Education*, a method she had herself found successful, but she often recommended others, e.g., that contained in *The Happy Readers*, and we also use *The New Beacon Reader* (English edition, Ginn). Miss Mason avoided the use of coloured

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letters and all apparatus other than a box of letters or words. She used to tell her students here, "Teachers must in this, as in all other matters, mix their work with brains," for children differ, and a method which helps one child may seem a stumbling block to another. A good teacher usually has a method she prefers, and Miss Mason was quite willing to leave it to the teacher as long as the child learnt to read! The age at which a child should read is also a matter of difference of opinion. Children should read well at 8½, but many read much earlier, some at 6½. Reading, however, is a mechanical art, and before a child is eight he should have become acquainted with many books. A child needs more mental food up to six or seven than he can get for himself, so should have books read to him and should learn to *narrate* what he has heard.

(2) *"When and how are the forty-five combinations and the multiplication tables learned? When does formal arithmetic begin?"*

I enclose a paper, *The Teaching of Mathematics to Young Children* (by Miss I. Stephens), which was written at the request of the Board of Education and under Miss Mason's supervision, but most children get some sense of number before six years of age.

(3) *"How can the Mason system be used successfully in a group made up of three or more classes, all the children of which are below the fourth grade? There seems so little time for narration in proportion to the amount of reading it is possible to do, and the children are not yet able to write easily."*

Narration must be considered from two points of view. It is the teacher's test of a child's knowledge either orally, or in writing, but is also the process by which child or adult gains knowledge and makes it his own. It is expressed silently, orally, or in writing. "We narrate and then we know," said a little girl to a Government Inspector. She had been brought up in a large school working out the P.U.S. programmes and was accustomed to narration in the three kinds above mentioned. Every child cannot narrate aloud every lesson, nor is it necessary. The teacher's part is to see that the children are trained to work by *one* reading with narration to follow. The teacher may test it in various ways, some of which are indicated in a paper (see answer 7) by the headmaster of a large boys' school; but a slavish adherence to the letter rather than the spirit even in this matter of narration will only court

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disaster. Clever children will sometimes memorise an astonishing amount and will not understand what they have read or narrated. Here again the teacher must test the narration by a wise question which will lead to a discussion and will see to it that next time the passage is too long to allow of verbal memory.

(4) *“The Mason system insists that there shall be ‘no second readings.’ Is there not literature that a child delights to read, not twice but many times? Is a second reading always fatal to interest?”*

There are two kinds of reading. In desultory reading (both for pleasure and profit) a second, third or twentieth reading is necessary if we are to enjoy, or profit, by all that a great author has to say, but when a young scholar is at work “reading” (in the University sense) *in order to know*, he must perform *the act of knowing*. One often hears it said of quite a young child—one knows it from sad experience!—“Oh, he never forgets anything he has heard!” Why? Because a child *wants to know*. The inclination that comes to us, his elders, to procrastinate because we may get another chance, does not occur to him, so he uses his natural power of attention once for all and *he knows*. The effort of the ordinary teacher is directed towards getting and keeping the attention of the pupil, whose power of attention is dissipated in many ways as soon as he gets to school. The boy knows that he will be prodded by the teacher, that notes and summaries and revision in “prep.” will offer another chance and so he lets the first chance slip and the chances are then ten to one that he will ever know! Miss Mason found that this principle was the same for child or adult. We can all pay attention when we want to know and we make the knowledge our own by letting the mind work with its “What next? What next?” until the whole is narrated either silently, orally, or in writing.

(6) *“If a child is never to be interrupted or corrected, how are wrong impressions removed?”*

The answer to question six follows here. Question, or correction, while the child’s mind is working stops the flow of thought. As a child narrates (unless he is glibly memorising) you can almost watch his mind working. A sudden question produces a blank look and the mind is “off!” The narration of a lesson may quite well be taken up by one child after another in quick succession, continuous narration of the pages read

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*once*. The teacher’s opportunity comes when the narration is done. The children, if invited, will correct each other, and the teacher, by a judicious question, will be able to clear up or discuss any point of difficulty, not quite understood, which has appeared in the narration.

(5) *“Is a child ever permitted to memorise a poem that cannot be committed after a single reading? Is our idea of a treasury of memorised verse also a fable?”*

The above answers refer to what may be called mind-work for want of a better phrase. Memory work is a different matter; such work must be word-perfect and the habit is acquired by fixing the attention on details rather than on the whole. Tables, declensions, etc., must be learned “by rote,” as we say. In the learning of poetry both mind and memory work must be made use of. Our children have anthologies and are allowed to choose what they would like to learn, or, the teacher may select two or three poems for reading and offer them for choice. The child listens to the whole poem. If for narration, he will hear it once and then narrate. (This is the answer to question 8). If for memory work he will learn it line by line, or phrase by phrase until he knows it.

(7) *"In a large group are children never bored by the narration of others, especially of those slower at narration?"*

Yes, of course the children will be bored if the teacher is not prepared for this difficulty. Mr. Husband's paper (see *Parents' Review*, September, 1924) indicates ways in which this difficulty may be met. As soon as the children can write they will have full scope for working at their own pace, but it is also well that they should learn to help each other and realise that intellectual life, either in school or in the world, has its duties to others.

(8) (Answered above) *"What is meant by 'telling' Lycidas?"*

(9) *"If there is to be a total absence of praise, blame or marks how is a child to judge his efforts, or set up a standard for himself? Are the judgments of adult minds of no value to the child?"*

Again the underlying principle must be borne in mind. The teacher's aim should be that the child must *know* that he may *grow*; if he learns to walk by means of crutches or artificial stimulants he will become dependent on them, and his growth will be retarded. If he finds that school work is chiefly accomplished by listening to the teacher, or by making a special

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effort to "go one better than his neighbour," he will miss the life-giving stimulus of knowledge itself which only feeds him as he takes and assimilates it for himself. Children of outstanding ability make their own way in spite of the stumbling blocks that we teachers suffer to lie about, but the ordinary child is lulled by the teacher's voice into inertia one minute, or stung the next into a spasmodic effort which only ends in satisfaction at having attained as a goal, not knowledge but marks, or place or prize. Of course the boy has to take his place in school as he does in life; but our mistake has been in letting him think that a place either in school or in life is the thing to aim at. The judgment of his teacher is exercised rather in the teacher's own attitude towards knowledge. The child, who sees that his teacher shares his delight in knowledge of all kinds, looks at his work in a different light. School work is not then a continual struggle to scramble within the limits of a teacher's forbearance and to do what has to be done, but a happiness which brings him interests of all kinds in common with his teacher whom he also looks upon in a new light; and where most subjects bring some kind of pleasure others are accepted (if with some distaste) as the discipline of life is accepted by those who know its joys, while the teacher sees in his pupil a companion with whom his own interests may be shared.

(10) *"Is the curriculum of the Mason system usable, without change, in American Schools? What place has the literature, art, history and government of America in such a programme?"*

It would of course be necessary to make some slight modifications in the programmes as they stand for use in American schools, but the answer in the main is that there is a common foundation of world-knowledge which is the birthright of everyone and the P.U.S. programmes are based upon this. There is still an ample margin left for special knowledge belonging to local conditions. Most schools work for longer hours than those of our time-tables and Secondary Schools both here and in America will, we hope, see that boys and girls can get a liberal education in common knowledge as well as the special knowledge for local conditions; and with this foundation the specialised knowledge required for any one Public School Certificate Examination or Public Entrance Examination can be acquired in say a year at most, at the end of a pupil's school career, thus leaving him free from the trammels of public examinations until he

has received “a liberal education.”  
E.K.