

The Work and Aims of the P.N.E.U. and Parents' Union School.¹

By Mrs. CONYERS ALSTON.

THE P.N.E.U. was founded in 1888 by Miss Charlotte Mason, a lady whom the London *Times* described, at the time of her death last year at the age of 81, as "a pioneer of sane education." Sir M. Sadler also said "Miss Mason had a genius for education." She was always an educational enthusiast. It was her ambition from girlhood to be a teacher (which is, after all, the finest profession in the world), and in 1861 she became Headmistress of the first Infant School in the British Empire. Later, she was Mistress of Method and Lecturer in Physiology at Chichester Training College. If you have not read any of her books, I earnestly commend to your notice *Parents and Children, School Education, Home Education*, and a pamphlet *A Liberal Education for All*. Having found from practical experience the great help and inspiration her teaching and methods have been, I am naturally anxious to communicate my enthusiasm to others. The day will come, I believe, when Miss Mason will be reckoned among the great educational reformers.

The P.N.E.U. was founded in response to a demand from thoughtful parents who desired to co-operate with the teacher in the education of their children, parents intelligent enough to realise that the knowledge necessary for bringing up a family does not come by instinct—as I verily believe a great many parents still think. It is truly amazing how helpless most parents are in this matter of

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bringing up children. Perhaps they are not altogether to blame, for we still educate boys and girls, as H. Spencer said of the education of his day, as if for a state of celibacy, instead of as the potential parents of the future. And the more helpless parents are, the more they worry the heads of the school. They send their children to school and shake off all responsibility from henceforth. All the child's shortcomings are shunted on to the school, even although the child has probably been brought up without any definite line of action up to the age of 7 or 8, subject only to the whims and humours of his parents or nurse. I really think most teachers must often in their hearts echo Thring's words: "I am sick of parental jaw." If only parents, as a class, had a little intelligent understanding, a little more knowledge of the child mind, how much friction might be saved! Do parents always help the teachers to whose care they hand over their children? This is the kind of thing that happens. A girl of fifteen is allowed to go home for a week-end. What that child needs is rest and a quiet spell of home-life to counteract the too often over-stimulating effects of school. And the parents' idea of giving her a holiday is to organise a continuous festival of picnics and parties, with the accompanying late nights, of course. And the child returns to school jaded and tired and restless for more excitement. That is hindering, not helping.

Now one of the objects of the P.N.E.U. is to promote a better understanding between parents and teachers—each to find out what the other wants. Also, "To create a better public feeling on the subject of the training of children, and with this object in view, to collect and make known the best information and experience on the subject.

"To afford parents opportunities for co-operation and consultation so that the wisdom and experience of each may be profitable to all.

“To stimulate their enthusiasm, through the sympathy of numbers acting together.

“To secure greater unity and continuity of education by harmonizing home and school teaching.

“The Union aims at giving opportunities for the study of educational problems and a meeting ground for intercourse between parents, teachers and all who are interested [p 307]

in education. It offers to its members a theory and practice of education (evolved by Miss Mason) which are found to be most successful in families and schools of every grade. Among its central principles is that a religious basis of work be maintained.”

The motto of the P.N.E.U. is “Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life.” This is perhaps one of the best definitions of education we possess. In the days when the rod was considered the most effective measure for dealing with children, and education was considered a mere matter of imparting information, the word atmosphere had only one meaning, but we now realise that we are all influenced unconsciously by the thoughts and feelings of those surrounding us, and the unconscious influence in education matters even more than the conscious influences. *Miss Mason did not believe in bringing down a child’s world to a child’s level.* And the child, you may have noticed, has no great desire to live in a specially adapted world of baby-chairs and bibs and pinafores. A child wants to do the things the grown-ups are doing—hammering in nails, sweeping floors, building walls—in the intervals of play. Let the child take his place in the activities of the home and see how happy he becomes. He loves to feel he is being of use, which is much better for him than letting the whole household revolve round him or—worse still—handing him over to ignorant servants whose ideas of bringing up go no further than “don’t do this,” and “don’t do that,” accompanied by promiscuous smackings. *We must give children outlets for their self-activity.* That is the basis of Froebel’s and Madame Montessori’s teaching. Froebel said: “*Never destroy the child’s impulse to activity by rejecting his help as hindering or intrusive.*” A child wants to lace his boots—“Oh, nonsense,” says the mother or nurse, “I can do it much quicker.” And so she lays the seeds of laziness in the child. Better let the child spend an hour lacing his own boots than destroy the *impulse* that makes him *desire* to lace them himself.

The child has to live in the world and the best preparation we can give him is to let him grow up naturally amid his own natural surroundings in an atmosphere of what [p 308]

has been termed “wholesome neglect,” which means that if the atmosphere of the home is wholesome, mentally, morally and physically, *undue interference on our part should not be necessary.* And let us remember that the best school in the world can only build on the foundations laid by the home, and whether our children help to raise or lower the tone of the school depends on the kind of home *we* make for them.

Education is a discipline. By that we mean good habits of mind and body “formed definitely and thoughtfully.” Good habits formed when young remain with us through life—habits of truthfulness, cleanliness, courtesy—they become a matter of course. Habit, too, eases life by making certain activities—like walking, washing, dressing—mechanical, and so leaving the mind free.

Miss Mason says of parental discipline that:—

“Where a child’s parents fail, the poor soul has one further chance in the discipline of life; but we must remember that, while it is the nature of the child to submit to discipline, it is the nature of the undisciplined man to run his head in passionate wilfulness against the circumstances that are for his training; so that the parent who wilfully chooses to leave his child “to be broken in” by the schoolmaster or by life leaves him to a fight in which all the odds are against him. The physique, the temper, the disposition, the career, the affections, the aspirations of a man are all, more or less, the outcome of the discipline his parents have brought him under, or of the lawlessness they have allowed.” (*Parents and Children*).

Education is a life. What does that mean? That great teacher, Edward Thring, said: “Transmission of life from the living, through the living, to the living, is the highest definition of education.” The word *life* was constantly on Thring’s lips, just as we find the same word being constantly used by Sanderson of Oundle. In a school sermon Wells quotes Sanderson as saying: “Here boys must find themselves in the great stream of true life. They must find themselves in the land of great vision, of faith, of service. No beating or marking of time here. No easy static state. No satisfaction with conventional static comfort. Here they will join in this great world-life. They came from their homes to join the great world-life here,” and so on. It is *life* that matters. Our teaching must be alive or we are merely wasting time.

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All true education enriches life through the impact of ideas. It is through ideas that the mind grows. It isn’t learning *in itself* that matters. It is the ideas we derive from learning or knowledge that matter. The fact that Sir Thomas More was executed in the year 1535 is not in itself of any educational value, but when a child has learned to love and admire Sir Thomas More, to listen to him joking and playing with his family and talking with Erasmus, by reading such a book as Miss Manning’s *Household of Sir Thomas More*, and when he thrills with indignation and sorrow at the wickedness of his execution, then the knowledge of his death does become of educational value and Sir Thomas More from henceforth lives in his mind as a symbol of Courage and Truth.

Again, a child may learn that Nelson was killed at the Battle of Trafalgar, in 1805, and the fact may remain as mere lumber in his mind, but when his heart beats faster at the hoisting of Nelson’s famous signal and he is moved, perhaps even to tears, at the account of Nelson’s death, the Battle of Trafalgar becomes then a living informing idea. He realises that brave men do not live for themselves, and that Sacrifice is the stuff of which true men are made.

In geography again, a child may learn that Mt. Everest is 29,000 ft. high and be no better for the information, but when he hears or reads about the hardships of the brave men in attempting to reach the summit, Mt. Everest becomes more than a mountain. It becomes a source of ideas.

In educating we ought never to drift away from the spiritual aspect and significance of things—otherwise we are merely turning out machines. At the same time we must avoid preaching. It is better to let the significance of facts speak for themselves.

In education we are apt to forget the normal child’s *appetite* for knowledge. It is there all the time, until we kill it. The only things that kill it are ignorance, cramming—and school.

It is indeed enlightening to study the attitude of the great poets, from Shakespeare

downwards, towards school. The poets almost invariably liken school to prison, an illuminating criticism on an institution primarily intended to develop freedom of spirit.

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William Shenstone, for instance, writes:

And now, Dan Phoebus gains the middle sky
And liberty unbars her prison door;
And like a rushing torrent out they fly.
Heaven shield their short-lived pastimes, I implore.

Wordsworth pays tribute to the education nature gave him but not to his schoolmasters.

Southey, again, says of his schooldays:

The days of childhood are but days of woe,
Some rude restraint, some petty tyrant sours
What else should be our sweetest, blithest hours.

Of the pleasure of learning he, like Wordsworth, has nothing to say. Blake—what does he say?

But to go to school on a summer morn,
Oh, it drives all joy away!

Cowper, too, is distinctly averse to school and condemns parents for giving to others the work that it should be their privilege to do.

The poets are all on the side of the children and freedom and the life of out-of-doors. Schools and schoolmasters, indeed, in literature, have a bad time. Dickens, Lamb, Charlotte Brontë—what miserable pictures of school, what a stifling school world they give us!

Schools are better now but it is still true of many that:

“The hungry sheep look up but are not fed.”

Another principle of the P.N.E.U. is:—

Education is the science of Relations.

The child is a many-sided individual. To develop fully he must come into contact with the world at a thousand different points. He has relations with and interest in an infinite variety of things and thoughts. It is impossible to teach a child all about anything, but it is our business to bring our children into touch with as many aspects of life as possible. We must keep alive the natural interest in the physical world by means of nature study. We must keep alive a child's joy in physical exercise by giving him opportunities of climbing, swimming, dancing and games. We must make handicrafts a definite means of education and above all—and this is the point I want

to accentuate—

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we must bring him into contact with the whole activities of mankind by giving him an unlimited supply of living books. And how? The answer is simple enough. We eliminate the text book except when essential, as in Grammar, Latin, French and Mathematics. It is quite possible to teach all other subjects through the medium of good literature. Miss Mason made the discovery that a fact or idea expressed in good language and in its right context—no snippets—makes a lasting impression, even on a child's mind. She discovered that good literature appeals to the child, even when the child comes from the illiterate classes.

It is the text-book that makes the child dislike learning. Why? Because the text-book is information detached from life.

And now we come to the P.U.S.

The P.U.S. was started a few years later than the P.N.E.U. (1890). It was started first with the object of introducing better methods of teaching into the home and small private schools, and now, so excellent above all expectations have Miss Mason's methods proved to be, that we have hundreds of public elementary schools and private schools, as well as a certain number of secondary schools, all over England, following these methods.

Now, in what way does the P.U.S. differ from the ordinary school, keeping in mind that we have two main objects in education? First, to make boys and girls good citizens; secondly, to give them joy in life and in work, a joy that will remain throughout life, so that as the years rush by, we shall grow richer and stronger in thought and in deed.

I believe the P.U.S. can do this. How?

1. Let us take Citizenship first. One hour a week is devoted to the study of Citizenship. *Plutarch's Lives* are included under this heading in the syllabus. Other books used are Arnold Foster's *Citizen Reader*, *The Complete Citizen*, by Richard Wilson, *Ourselves*, *Citizenship*, by E. R. Worts, *The Golden Fleece* by Morris and Wood.

2. *Interest is substituted for competition*. The idea of the necessity of competition dies slowly. Yet Sanderson of Oundle proved up to the hilt that if work is made

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interesting boys will work without competition. The spur of competition was introduced by the Jesuits and it is time we outgrew this primitive appeal to the non-social side of the child—"Every man for himself."

3. *There is no cramming*. Children read *once* and then narrate. A Headmaster at the Middlesbrough Head Teachers' Association said: "The mind never gives full attention to anything it has the chance to re-read or re-hear. This is a trick of the mind and you cannot control it. You cannot will the mind to give full attention." By only reading *once*, the children are able to cover an immense amount of literary ground, because they have so much more time at their disposal.

4. *No Homework*. Children who work hard from 9 to 1 have done enough actual study for the day. In the afternoon they need physical exercise and they also do their history charts, nature books, and practising (if they learn a musical instrument), and in the evenings they read or are read to. Here are some of the books we have read in this last year: *Woodstock*, *Kenilworth*, *The Monastery*, *The Abbot*, *The Legend of Montrose*, *Westward Ho!*, *Don Quixote*, *Feats on the Fiord*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Last of the Barons*, *Miss Manning's Household of Sir*

Thomas More, besides three Shakespeare plays, one book of the *Fairie Queen* and Milton's *Shorter Poems*.

Picture Study. One great artist is studied each term, six reproductions of the artist's pictures being given to the child, and although only 20 minutes in the week is spent on picture study, a child has very clear ideas at the end of the term of the artist's work, and thus familiarity with great works of art, as well as with great literature, is developed.

History. Miss Mason had great faith in the educational value of history teaching. When I was young I used to attend Professor Earl Barnes' lectures on the *History of Education and on Child Study*, and he was for ever impressing upon us his belief that History should be the central subject of study in education, comprising as it does all the activities of man. In this country of South Africa we surely must all agree that not half enough time is given to the study of history. I asked a school girl of

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12 what history she was doing and she replied, "South African." "But surely you are doing other history as well?" I asked, and she replied: "No, only South African." At the same age the P.U.S. school children are doing English and French History, Van Loon's *History of Mankind*, Ancient History, and (under Citizenship) Plutarch's *Lives*; also (under Geography) Colonial History through Parkin's *Round the Empire*. They also keep Century Books and make History Charts. The P.U.S. children are really acquiring some clear ideas of the Rise and Fall of Civilizations, of the growth of countries, and of all they owe to those who have gone before.

In *Nature Study* they not only learn from books but they are encouraged to observe. They keep nature note-books and they have not only to use their eyes, but their ears, and are encouraged, for instance, to recognise the songs as well as the habits and appearance of birds.

In *Geography* the children use a very interesting series of readers written by Miss Mason. They also do maps and read such books as Mungo Park's *Travels*, Hakluyt's *Voyages*, Blaikie's *Life of Livingstone*, *Voyages of Captain Cook*, *Our Empire Story*, *Household's Sea Power* and *Fighting for Sea Power in the Days of Sail*, *Dufferin's Letters from High Latitudes*, and by such books geography becomes a live thing, instead of mere lists of names.

Literature is related to History and Geography and covers a very wide field. One play of Shakespeare's is read each term, not analytically, but for the joy of the thing. Children are also encouraged to write verses on given subjects and to make little plays and scenes from something read in the history, geography or literature lessons.

It is my belief that the Girl Guide and Boy Scout Movement and the P.N.E.U. are our great hope for the future of civilisation.

¹ A paper read at Rondebosch, S. Africa, 1924.