

MISS MASON'S INSPIRATION IN 'THE FIRST STEPS OF EDUCATION.'

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In these days, when life demands such a high standard of attainment for any career which a boy or girl may wish to follow, parents and educators are united in desiring the best possible education for their children. Both are anxious to neglect nothing which will help the child, from the very earliest moment when he starts to learn. It is most interesting to study the way pointed out to us by Miss Mason and to see how, from the very beginning, it helps us to fit a child for life with the best possible equipment.

I have heard it said by the Headmaster of a famous boys' school: 'Men of ability are plentiful as blackberries—men of character are few, and it is the men of character who count.'

Years ago Miss Mason realised the importance of character-training, and her whole plan of education is so balanced that from the start proper care is given to develop the individual and fit that individual according to his ability to be a worthy citizen.

It is a pleasure to speak to-day of my actual experience in teaching very little children according to Miss Mason's principles, in the hope that those wishing to start little children along these lines may be helped by what I have found.

Before discussing the all-important first steps, I would like

[p 94]

to make one emphatic statement about the final results of this way of education, because nearly every mother wishing to start her children along these lines asks, 'Where will it lead? Can we afford in these times of competition and stress to follow such a wide and delightful programme of work as that set before us in the P.U. Schools?'

The answer is decidedly 'Yes.' Children educated in the P.U.S. are able, if it is deemed necessary, to take school certificate without undue cramming. They can gain scholarships to the University, and are intelligent, well-read, interesting children, with broad interests and minds eager to explore the worth while things which life has to offer.

Let us turn therefore to the first steps which are so vital to the success of the whole, and where the mother can play so important a part.

To-day the advance has been made by most people of treating a child as an individual, and they are less inclined to 'talk down' to the children. If we can combine with this understanding of a child's ability, a willingness to enter the child's world, and see with him the wonder and adventure of discovery which greets every step of the way, we shall be more ready to give that scope for the imagination which is part of the heritage of childhood.

Compared with the rest of a natural lifetime, the period of childhood seems a short while, but nobody attempts to under-estimate the importance of those years. Why are they so important? I am anxious to take the long view before embarking on the details of early education. In these first years a child is learning more, in proportion, than he will learn in so short a time afterwards; and only those who teach very little children realise how big a step it is to learn to read and write. Besides this there is the 'Why' and 'Wherefore' of all he sees and hears around him. He also lays the foundation of habits of obedience, concentration and neatness which will serve him ever afterwards. He brings a perfectly fresh, untried mind to bear on all he learns, but all the more powerful because it is not tired. The first lessons and

impressions never seem blotted out, however many new scenes and perplexities may crowd the path

[p 95]

of life, and we are told that the farther we travel from them the brighter these days shine. By seeing that these first years are a happy natural growing time, we give our children their most valuable heritage—one that can never be taken away.

It has been of the greatest interest to be in close touch with a pre-school class in our own school, which works according to Miss Mason's principles and uses the playroom leaflet. This class has been called into being for children who have no playmates at home, and where it is not possible for the mother to give that valuable two hours in the morning to teaching the child herself. Miss Mason did not advocate that children should begin to work on the P.U.S. programme until they were six years old; therefore the experiences gained from the pre-school class may be useful to mothers who wish to start their own children.

At five years old the child has as great an ability to learn as he will have at six or seven. Nobody would force a little child to walk before his legs were strong enough. If they were so foolish they would see dire physical results. The right moment comes when the child is ready to walk—and walk he does. With his mind it is really the same. Great harm may be done by setting a child to routine work when he is too young, although the results may not be apparent at first and only show later, when listlessness takes the place of natural keenness. We have wonderful material upon which to work—an eager enquiring mind, and we must see that it receives the right knowledge on which to grow. We must learn to be patient, and not expect visible results too early. We must not attempt to pour knowledge into the child's mind, but rather guide that mind to work on what the child sees around him.

The desire for knowledge will best be satisfied in the early days by the outdoor world. Parents desiring to interest their children must learn all they can about Nature—names of wild flowers, wild animals, birds, trees, insects and so on. The children are keenly interested and naturally observant. This love for nature will be a never-ending source of joy to the children, and when they have outgrown many other interests, they will turn to this as to an old friend.

[p 96]

One afternoon this term I took a group of little children for a walk, and before we started I read a list of twenty-five things to them which we hoped to find. For example: an acorn in a cup, a horse-chestnut leaf with seven fingers, a bird's feather, etc. As soon as one little girl heard 'feather' she said, 'I know where there is one, just outside the gate; I saw it on the way to school,' and out she raced and came back with a minute sparrow's feather. No grown-up would have noticed it, but of course the children are nearer the ground, and so see things more easily! We were out for less than an hour and found all twenty-five things.

Much can be learnt from a walk. A stream will represent a river, a sand castle a mountain, a pond a lake, etc. We make this introduction to geography by sand trays and pictures. We also encourage the children to bring wild flowers and fruits they have found and to tell us about birds and wild animals they have noticed, as the very small children do not go for afternoon walks. The ideal way is to study all these things out of doors.

The creative instinct is clamouring for outlet, and is a splendid way to encourage individual development. The little people love to chat about what they are making. They retire into a world of their own invention, and if we can follow them there they will be far more ready

to share their interests. I always find it an excellent plan to work *with* the children, then they do not feel as if they are being watched. One can then be ready to give a helping hand where required without appearing to supervise all the time.

One little girl of four made a lovely picture of a black cat and said, 'Now I'm going to make it pink cheeks.' Her mother let her go on without interrupting and saying black cats do *not* have pink cheeks—because any observant child knows perfectly well they have not—and this one was probably a fairy princess enchanted. The same thing with a little girl who made a mouse and then began to chalk it all colours of the rainbow. She was asked why the mouse was so coloured and said, 'Oh! it is a circus mouse.' She had seen in it all the gaudy colours of the circus. Of course this imagination sometimes leads to the most wonderful tales like that of the little boy who most solemnly

[p 97]

assured me that he had been skating this term and had fallen through the ice and been eaten by a whale. We have then to make it *quite* clear that we understand that this is an invented tale which just seemed true at the moment, as a dream sometimes seems real, and then the child, who really does know it is an invented tale, is ready to take this means of escape and is often quite relieved that we understand.

Sometimes children are unable to make things at first without constant help. They do not easily settle down to amuse themselves, and although they love listening to tales it is not possible to read to them all the time when we want them to be quiet. One mother told me she was quite hoarse by the time bedtime came, but there was an invalid lady in the house and it was necessary for John to be quiet—and he would *not* amuse himself. We found that producing large sheets of kitchen paper and letting him draw and paint on them was a huge success. He seemed unable to control his pencil or chalk on small-sized paper, but took courage when he found there was plenty of room and made a cave, a windmill, a soldier, etc., on a large scale and gained confidence as he went on. Actually in teaching drawing we have found this idea valuable. It makes the children bolder and it is easier for the child to see his mistakes when they are on a large scale. We teach form by putting a spray of beech leaves or a twist of byrony [sic] on a sheet of white paper, and letting each child have a model, and see how like the real object he can make it.

Most children can deal with plasticine, chalk, pastels, crayons, wool and raffia work on coarse canvas, and they love to cut out and make scrap-books, and all these occupations encourage them to be neat with their hands. It is interesting to see the choice of colour each child will make, and they like to see and admire each other's work. Cut-out paper patterns are good also, and lovely pictures can be made without any drawing, but cutting the coloured paper and pasting it on to brown or black paper.

The children occupy themselves with coloured bricks, dominoes, simple puzzles, etc., and this links with an introduction to number, and number games. Counting different objects in the

[p 98]

room, learning to recognise the numbers, making houses of bricks, using a different given number of bricks for each house, playing shops with counters or cardboard pennies and measuring the number of times the length of a ruler will go along the edge of a table or window-sill.

There are so many ways of teaching reading that I cannot say much on this subject in the time allotted to me. I will tell you briefly how we lead up to learning to read. The children get familiar with the letters and their sounds. They make letters in chalk, crayon, paint and pencil, and play games like 'touch something in the room beginning with "B" or "C,"' etc. They learn to recognise words made up of three simple sounds and draw pictures named Mill, Hill, Hat, Bat, etc. Then when they are quite sure of the sounds they begin with the most attractive little reading books, pictures and words all chosen because the words can be found out from sounds. This gives the child confidence and he feels he is reading by himself and is eager to get on. As unfortunately our language has many words which are not written at all as they are sounded, we must train the child's powers of observation and learn the look of certain words. The reading puzzles are of the greatest help here. These are well-known nursery rhymes, one sheet the whole rhyme, and an envelope containing all the separate words in the rhyme which the child builds up as a puzzle.

Writing is much helped by using the writing patterns, which the children enjoy making. These should be done by them on large-sized paper. The patterns are made from the shapes of the different letters. They help to make the child's hand steady and controlled and are a variation from letters all the time. The children delight in listening to well-written fairy tales and much enjoy acting them. They enjoy hearing about children of other lands, seeing pictures of foreign countries, people and animals. They will look at maps and begin to recognise the different shapes of land, and love to sail imaginary ships from one land to another by what they consider the nearest sea route. They get some idea of history from pictures of other times showing what ships used to be like, what people used to wear, what their houses were like, etc. [p 99]

All the interests should be as varied as possible, but there should be an unhurried, peaceful atmosphere. The time for these special training occupations should be about 9.30–12, with half-an-hour's break at 10.30 out of doors, and a rest before the mid-day meal. The child should be allowed to talk about what he is making, and given as much easy choice as possible, so that he takes a pride in what he does as his own work. A little locker or box in which to keep materials, and a cupboard for toys which the children are encouraged to keep tidy themselves are useful training.

Miss Mason is so inspiring in what she tells us about environment. If we see that the children's room is light and bright with a few well-chosen pictures, the children will take a pride in helping to keep their room lovely. They can find flowers and leaves on their walks and keep one vase always looking fresh all the year round. We had a table in a sunny window and an array of little clay pots made and painted by the children. Each child grew something different found by himself; thus we had a sprouting acorn, conker, laburnum and sycamore growing on moss, and they delighted in watching their own and each other's and keeping the moss fresh and well watered.

Children vary immensely in ability at the age of five, just as they do at any other age, and when I say a child should not start routine work until he is six I do not mean that he should be kept back from learning to read or doing simple sums, when he can do this without the slightest effort or worry. Some children seem to pick up things in a wonderful way, and as long as they have plenty of outdoor occupations, diversions and periods of rest this will not hurt them. For example, I have a 1b number lesson with children ages 6–7 in the same room in which

the pre-school class is playing number games, building bricks, etc. One little girl aged five loved to sit and listen to the number lesson, and taught herself to recognise numbers, write them and do simple sums.

There will not be time to mention all the things which children can make or learn, but the playroom leaflet is a help here and can be obtained from the P.N.E.U. office. We can put before the children such an interesting range of occupations

[p 100]

that they will do them because they really *want* to, not because they must. This plan does not make a child selfish or wilful; he loves to share his interests, and these early days described as the 'I' age will certainly be happier if the interests are shared—if 'I want the red crayon' is followed by 'Oh, John can have it first.' And 'Isn't *my* picture lovely' by 'Peggy has made a beautiful picture too.'

It is difficult to set an exact time for any particular lesson, as it will be quite apparent when the children want a change; and there should be plenty of scope for movement, so that in the quiet periods they will be less likely to fidget. I should say that no occupation should last longer than twenty minutes, and some ten minutes or a quarter of an hour. Each day should be so varied that there is a certain period for tales, reading, writing, handwork, geography, history, games, singing and poetry.

There is a natural discipline that comes from interest in the thing to be done, and a child will see quickly that he must be quiet to enjoy a tale, must sit still to do a careful painting and must take his turn with the other children and not get all the attention. He is eager not to 'hold up' the interesting thing to be done, and will not (for example) deliberately leave a door open, if we are waiting to begin until that door is shut. A lot of 'don'ts' are merely an invitation to most of us to do—a perverted desire for knowledge! and idle threats are useless. If there are certain clearly-understood *Do's* which if not obeyed bring a natural consequence, it will be far better. Children are keenly alive to justice and understand what is reasonable, right and kind. They really enjoy being helpful, unselfish and tidy, but it does not always come naturally to them.

For almost any real naughtiness there is a cause which, if removed, will do away with the need for punishment. Take the example of the little girl this term who was often slow to get ready for outdoor break, lost her shoes or her scarf or her lunch, and always on a Monday or Thursday. I found that these were skipping days and most of the children love skipping, but she was afraid of the big rope, and afraid that the others would laugh at her. As soon as she understood that nobody forced her to skip, she ran out to play as quickly as the others, and

[p 101]

before long plucked up courage to learn and now skips as well as the others.

There undoubtedly are cases of real naughtiness which it would not be kind to pass over, and which need dealing with as justly as we can; but the ideal we work towards is that of interests which keep a child so happily occupied that he does not think of being naughty.

Children have a delightful sense of humour, and often a fit of temper, obstinacy, or 'the sulks,' can be driven away in a flash, if we can make the child laugh and thus change his thoughts quickly.

I have not actually mentioned the hymns and prayers which little children love to learn, or the Bible stories which they delight in listening to; there is no doubt that little children have a

knowledge of God and the Angels which is quite beautiful and simple. It is my experience that they teach me more than I can ever teach them. In the words of Miss Mason, 'Perhaps it is not too beautiful a thing to believe that as a babe turns to his mother, 'though he has no power to say her name, as the flowers turn to the sun, so the hearts of little children turn to their Saviour and God, with unconscious delight and trust.'