

EDUCATION IN THE PARENTS' UNION SCHOOL.¹

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I have been asked to describe how education in the Parents' Union School aims at equipping a girl to face the difficulties of modern life. I expect if asked to name what we consider to be the main difficulties of modern life for the young we would, between us, produce a very long list. But I propose taking only three of those with which the modern girl has to contend:

- (1) How to earn her living.
- (2) How to form principles which will guide her aright through the chaos of modern ideas.
- (3) How to live fully.

How to earn her living. When we are faced with the question: 'What shall my daughter do?' I think we look at it from two angles—'What is her vocation? How can she earn an adequate livelihood?' The days are fast disappearing in which boys and girls were forced into professions solely on the grounds of family tradition. We recognise nowadays that our talents are given to us to use and not to bury—that they are there for the good of the community and that only in their use can we reach

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the fullest satisfaction. That idea lies behind the whole programme of work in the Parents' Union School and is presented to the child from the moment she enters the school. History to the six and seven year olds gives to them the inspiration of great lives and the lasting benefits these have bestowed. The children face the faults and failings of the great characters of history and legend, they learn to reverence their qualities and to see something of the working of cause and effect. Form II begins to study citizenship and to see what each individual can contribute to the welfare of the state. Up through the school this thought is developed. It is brought before the children that it is our privilege to serve, and they see the many avenues along which that service may be rendered. The Parents' Union School girl in Form V should be looking at life as the opportunity for using her special talents, be they great or small, for the benefit of the community.

Not only do the books she has used and the ideas upon which her mind has fed give her an ideal of the joy of service, but the curriculum should have enabled her to find out where her talents lie. We are often accused of running the risk of turning out Jacks-of-all-trades and masters of none—our curriculum is so wide and varied and covers so great a number of subjects. In actual fact we may turn out Jacks-of--all-trades [sic], but each Jack aims to be master of one as well. Indeed we believe no person is a master of one unless he is aware of and has reverence for and contact with other 'trades.' The idea still persists that specialisation should begin early in a girl's educational life, and I have had many an argument on the subject. People feel that the child who is to be, say, a sick nurse, should limit her studies after fifteen years of age to the study of hygiene and anatomy, or the child who is to be a pianist should spend the major part of her life practising the piano. Will the sick nurse not be a far better nurse, better able to understand and help her patients if she has developed her sense of beauty by knowing something of music, her sense of wonder by knowing something of the great

outdoor world, her sense of the variety and subtlety of human nature by knowing something of great literature? And will the pianist not be a far better balanced artist and more completely [p 33]

master of her art if she recognises the great stark truths of science and has some knowledge of the discipline of mathematics?

So Miss Mason believed that all the doors of Truth and Beauty should be open to the child and that she should be given opportunity to form contacts with all that holds living ideas—with life itself in all its aspects. And not only because the person who has contacts with every side of life is a better balanced and a more fully developed personality, but also because that person has had the opportunity to find along which path lies her closest contacts and her true vocation. Modern psychology has stressed for us the importance for each person to find his or her true vocation.

But I would make a further claim for the effect of Miss Mason's curriculum and its breadth. There are, alas, many cases where the girl's vocation is clear but circumstances make it impossible for that to be her career. So many conditions of modern life make it impossible for us to express ourselves along the lines in which we could the most fully do so. A girl may be intensely musical and it may be quite impossible that music should be her main business in life. She may have to take up work which to her is of only secondary interest or outlet. But I think all the interests she has formed during her school career, all the contacts she has made with life at many points will help her to adjust herself. There would be no repression of the artist in her—all round her there will be things about which she knows and cares and which she has learnt to understand and to enjoy. They will compensate her, give her an outlet and help her to face happily and to adjust herself sanely to her position in life.

How do we equip girls practically to earn their living? Children who have been in the Parents' Union School for some years are expected to take the Cambridge School Certificate examination in their second year in Form V. It is found that until two, or in some cases three, terms before the examination is taken girls can follow the full curriculum. The two last terms they give more time to the examination subjects. This examination, if passed with credit, gives exemption from matriculation. Girls who have worked for some time in the Parents' Union [p 34]

School learn how to work, and my experience is that they take very good places, as a rule, wherever they go for training or for further education.

The Parents' Union School child can hardly avoid forming the habit of concentration. The little ones, who cannot read themselves, have a fairly long passage from their books read aloud to them once—and only once. They are then asked to narrate the passage read. This principle of one reading and of reproduction from that one reading is carried out throughout the school. The narration with the older pupils may take any form which leads them to digest the material read, unsupported, and not prodded by the teachers, but by their own efforts. This narration tests the pupil's concentration and enables her to test how far she has assimilated what is read. It also tests the books used, for it is found that poor books produce poor narration, and living books with living ideas produce good narration. There is no revision at the end of a term before examinations and no cramming for public examinations when these are taken. The result is interest in the work for the work's sake and lack of strain, and consequently what is learnt is retained and becomes part of the student's very self.

One of my pupils gained distinction in history in the Cambridge School Certificate in a period she had not studied for two years. The principal of one of the English colleges for women told me that the very few girls she had met who knew how to work were Parents' Union School girls.

I would like to say a word about mathematics in the Parents' Union School. We so often hear that our mathematics are weak. I think there have been grounds for this. So many Parents' Union School children are taught in the home-schoolroom by a governess. No governess can teach all subjects equally brilliantly, and if she is literary her teaching of mathematics will probably not reach as high a standard. It is not the fault of the Parents' Union School when our children's mathematics are below standard, but the fault of human nature, which is rarely equally good all round. This difficulty does not arise in Parents' Union Schools, where there is a variety of teachers. Our standard is rather higher than that of other schools, and children [p 35]

up to our programme standard will take a good place if drafted to other schools.

Now I come to my second point. How do we help girls to form principles which will guide them aright through the chaos of modern ideas? Is there not a danger in this seemingly dispersed education which will lead to the dispersed mind? And what could be more dangerous with the world seething with thoughts which make their appeal to the modern young.

Miss Mason teaches that children should learn to differentiate between 'I want' and 'I will.' In little children help is given to them when the 'I want' becomes insistent. The grown-up changes the child's thoughts from the clamouring 'I want' into some active and interesting channel. But the older child must learn by a definite act of will to do this for herself [sic] 'Are you cross? Change your thoughts.' 'Are you craving for things you cannot have? Change your thoughts,' says Miss Mason. And the child learns the joy of power over herself, the sense that she is mistress in her own house and not at the mercy of her passing whims and fancies and moods. She becomes obedient in co-operation with her parents and her teachers, the only obedience which is of any use. It is only the obedience which is self-compelled and not compelled from without which strengthens the will-power and gives the child the sense of her own control—*self-control* and *self-discipline* which will last her through life. This same act of will must be exercised in the acceptance and rejection of ideas. An idea once accepted by the mind grows and bears fruit, therefore it is of vital importance that the mind should reject the wrong idea. The Parents' Union School curriculum aims at giving the child ideas which will grow into principles of conduct, ideas of the eternal truths. Her books are largely chosen for the purpose of training her capacity to differentiate and to see the contrast between the ideas which are of the moment and those which are of eternity. Such a child is being trained all the time for life as it is to-day; she has learnt in her literature, her history, her citizenship, her geography, her science, to question and to reason, to weigh, to appreciate at their proper value the kaleidoscope of passing ideals and aims and the slow and steady progress towards Christian Ideals. She

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is being helped to be unafraid of Truth, however grimly it strips us of our cloaks, to have the long view, the Christian view. For that is the foundation of the whole philosophy of Miss Mason, and on that basis are the books chosen and the curriculum drawn up. On the teaching of Christ they are led to base their lives. It sounds as if I felt this an easy task, and believed that every

Parents' Union School child entered life with Christian convictions and kept those convictions. I know only too well that this is not so. But I do firmly believe that the child whose whole educational background during his school years has been a Christian background, a child who has been shown how through pain and suffering and struggle the Christian outlook has stood because it is Truth, that child has the greatest equipment we can give. We cannot shelter our girls as they leave us and go into the world. They must face for themselves all the questions that surge round them, so many of them alluring to youth, alluring because there is some Truth in them. But I feel that even if some of these ideas, which to those of us who are older are abhorrent, should grip the minds of our girls for a time, we need not really be afraid. If they have been given the picture of Christ's fearless stand for Truth, if they have been helped to see God's hand in the history of man and in the history of their own lives, that picture will remain, even if forgotten for a time, and they will come back to it. One has seen it again and again. If the child has been given freedom to think and given the sense of God the Father's hand outstretched to help and of Christ's message as the message of Truth—however hard and painful to find—they will never lose their way hopelessly. Along their own road they will come back to some at least of what they have been shown, and perhaps to all.

And this leads me to the last point—how does Miss Mason's philosophy of education help a girl to live fully? I have already largely answered this. The width of the curriculum helps towards balance; there is no wild stressing of one side of life to the exclusion of all others, each is given its place and its proper value. The sense of wonder is preserved, that sense that leads us in joy-filled reverence to love and to enjoy things for their own sacred beauty. The sense of courage is developed in fear-

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less facing of truth as it is met with in our reading. The joy of achievement is discovered in handworks of all kinds and in creating, and the thrill of accuracy in science and mathematics. Gratitude to the past and opportunity of service to the future are felt all along in such lessons as Musical Appreciation and Picture Study. Work to the Parents' Union School child is a joy, but not a joy to be reached without effort. Effort in itself is worth while. That attitude helps to a full life, a life ready for whatever comes, that knows how to revel in all joys and how to face quietly and high-heartedly all difficulties and to go out and meet each experience.

When our Lord spoke of giving us life more abundantly, what did He mean? That is what we have to ask ourselves again and again. I believe life should be looked upon as one long opportunity, opportunity to enjoy, to learn, to serve; opportunity not to be seized upon feverishly in case it is beyond us or escapes us, but to be taken quietly, joyously, fearlessly.

I believe that the whole structure of the Parents' Union School education helps towards that abundant life.

¹ An address given to the Dublin Branch of the P.N.E.U. by the Headmistress of the Manor House P.N.E.U. School, Milford, Co. Armagh.