

THE GROUP SYSTEM.

By A GLOUCESTERSHIRE HEADMASTER.

THERE appears to be considerable misunderstanding as to the actual manner in which the class is arranged and the lesson conducted, and more particularly as to the way in which the narration is heard afterwards. Perhaps it would be best to first see why the system was introduced, as one continually hears it said, that it is not part of the "Mason Method."

This is of course true, it is simply a device to curtail the extremely heavy expenditure on books, but it received the approval of Miss Mason; and the Ambleside authorities issued a pamphlet advocating its use in Elementary Schools.

Some critics go so far as to say that the group method is uneducational, but surely this also is a fallacy, or it would not have stood the test of time, for it has been in use in Elementary Schools much longer than the P.N.E.U. itself.

Even in infants' schools to-day we find children of five and six sitting about in little groups (each group with a different reading book), thoroughly interested in helping each other over their difficulties.

Passing on to Form Ib. we find between thirty and forty different readers, including books of poetry, but not more than six or eight at the outside of any one reader, so that anything but group reading is impossible.

With a class of about thirty-two, the teacher divides up into four, five or even six groups and passes quickly from one to the other hearing one child read and another narrate, and the alert teacher need not fear that the class will not be kept at work.

Here also is the opportunity for the visualisation of new words, the omission of which often makes silent and group reading less effective than class reading. While the child reads to the teacher, any words that are not grasped are jotted down in a note book, and by the end of the lesson, a list has been made of words, which probably twenty-five per cent. or more of the [p 261]

class would have failed at. Mistakes due to carelessness are simply corrected and not entered.

At the end of the lesson or some later period these words can be put on the black-board and be quickly visualised by the class; the whole not occupying more than a minute or two, and the teacher feels satisfied that some progress has been made, and the note book is a record of that progress.

From Ib. onwards no formal reading lessons are necessary, and the books set in the P.N.E.U. programme are all that one can expect to get through in a term. "But how is this to be done?" is the question we now have to answer.

Why should the group method which has been so successful in the lowest form and in the infants, suddenly become ineffective or an impossibility? Let us take Form IA. first. Here we have *Tales from St. Paul's*, *Riverside Rambles*, *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Animal Life in the New World*, which can all be used as group readers. In fact the only safe rule to follow as to the suitability of the book for group work is the capability of the child to read and understand it. If it cannot do this, then it matters little whether the book is used as a class or group reader, for the result is the same. The programme again arranges for this and books which generally speaking are unsuitable for the child are marked "to be read by the teacher." In this way the number of

groups in a class will vary, *e.g.*, *Pilgrim's Progress* will or will not become a group reader according to the capability of the children, but at the same time the number of books read by the teacher must not be so great as to deprive the class of the necessary practice in reading.

Form IIb. can use *The Sciences*, *Stories of Rome*, *Heroes of Asgard*, *Children of the New Forest*, and *Sea Power*. I purposely refrain from including either Arnold Forster's *History* or the Geography Readers, because the group study of these is an extremely debatable point and must be left to the judgment of the teacher. Some terms Arnold Forster's *History* might be included amongst the list of group readers, while another term, for example, when the nineteenth century is being studied, it would probably have disastrous results if included.

The Geography again depends largely upon the map reading, but providing the latter is taken before any section begins to use the books as a group reader, the difficulty is largely overcome.

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Form IIa. in the writer's school are at present using *Sea Power*, *Age of Fable*, *Ancient World*, *The Sciences*, *Woodstock*, *French History*, *Citizen Reader*. The books set for literature are sometimes suitable for group reading but not always, while at times the price makes it prohibitive and they must then be used as single copy readers.

Even with these restrictions it should not be necessary to divide a class into less than four groups, so that it should never be necessary to requisition for more than will supply twenty-five per cent. of the class.

Form III. will probably not require the oral reading to the extent of the other forms and while retaining the group formation, the groups will read silently. In some schools the work of this form is mainly private study, and the children adapt themselves to this much more readily, when they have already been accustomed to small groups. Suitable group reading books for this form are *Plant Life*, *Age of Fable*, *Geikie's Physical Geography*, *Indian History*, *British Museum*, *Fighting for Sea Power*, *Golden Treasury*, etc.

Of course one must not expect to find the perfectly quiet classroom; it must be compared with the busy hum of the workshop, and will need the kind but firm controlling hand of the teacher, to prevent it developing into an unruly noise, as concentration under the latter condition would be impossible.

How is the teacher to ensure that the work is understood? Here again our best plan is to carry on the successful methods of the lowest group with their story readers.

Firstly, each small group is placed in charge of a leader, who hears the reading and also the narration. It is surprising how naturally some children take to this leadership, and they are bitterly disappointed if for some reason or other they are passed over. The fact that Tom may be leader to-morrow acts as a deterrent upon his somewhat mischievous spirit to-day, as he well knows the boyish spirit of revenge.

The position of the teacher thus becomes that of a controller of the groups. By passing quickly from group to group hearing a child read and another narrate, as has been before stated, until the passages have been read, the teacher will soon see which group has failed to understand its work.

Take for example Form IIb. working in groups, (a) *Sea Power*, (b) *Stories from Rome*, (c) *Sciences*, (d) *Heroes of Asgard*, and the teacher has found that the children of group (c) *Sciences*
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have failed to understand their work. This teacher will obviously take that book for discussion at the end of the reading, not with the group only, but with the class, for if not the same difficulty will arise the next day, and each day of the week upon which the book is used.

Now groups (a), (b) and (d) are listening to and taking part in the discussion of a subject they have not yet read. This for the moment seems to be quite contrary to Miss Mason's ideals. I use the word "ideals" deliberately, instead of methods, for while the methods may vary considerably according to the circumstances under which we have to teach, the ideals remain the same.

An explanation or a discussion has to come, but when? With reference to oral lessons it says in *School Education*, page 329, "It might be well if the lecture were cut out of the ordinary curriculum, and the oral lesson made a channel for free intellectual sympathy between teacher and taught, and a means of widening the intellectual horizon of children."

It is possible that the teacher, in looking over the work of the day, might have foreseen this difficulty, and have opened with a short introductory discussion which would have made the subject matter intelligible to them; for "The business of the teacher is to put his class in the right attitude towards their book by a word or two of his own interest in the matter contained."—(*School Education*, page 229).

This might, however, in time become a danger, as we are continually underrating the ability of the child, so that after all perhaps the best time to deal with the difficulty is at the end of the lesson in which it has appeared.

The teacher can control the narration to a great extent by having the members of each group numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc., and then, when the reading is completed, whether it has been done orally or silently, gives the order "No. 3's narrate."

When one group has finished reading before the others, the leader asks someone to narrate. A better method still, where the group lesson is followed by a composition, or a written narration, is for the teacher to have written down on four slips of paper, a question for each group, (a), (b), (c), (d). As soon as (a) group has finished its reading, the leader comes and takes the question off the desk and passes it round his group so that they are immediately able to start their written work without waiting for the others.

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To those teachers who are still sceptical, I say, give it a fair trial and then judge for yourselves. Many were at first sceptical over the P.N.E.U. itself, but I don't think any of us would willingly return to the old drudgery.

If the group system is not given a fair trial, it means that not only will the scheme not be able to be adopted by other schools, but that many of us will have to give it up to provide extra books for those who are fortunate enough to be allowed to go on with it.