

CONCERNING "REPEATED NARRATION."

[In response to a request from the Headmistress of a Public Elementary School we publish the following correspondence.—Ed.]

December 10th, 1927.

DEAR MISS KITCHING,—I write to express my grateful thanks to you for the very kind and helpful letter I received from you in reply to the question about repeated narration.

I think those of us who have never had an opportunity of talking with those who knew Miss Mason personally, or of visiting the Training School at Ambleside, are rather at a loss, for we can only practise that which we find in her works (and that often as we interpret it individually), or that which is handed on to us by word of mouth.

Your letter has cleared up more than one point for me, and I fully realise now the necessity of a continuous and not a repeated narration. I feel rather worried to think that others may have been led astray through having heard the latter in my school, and I am also sure that there are many others who are making the same error.

Could not something be done to clear this up, such as sending round a circular on the subject with the next set of programmes, if not before?—Believe me, sincerely yours,

A. B.

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Parents' Union School,  
Ambleside,

December 6th, 1927.

DEAR ——. Miss X —— has sent me on your interesting letter, and I am venturing to write because I think the more we can co-operate together in discussing points of vital interest and in trying to see each other's difficulties, the better able we shall all be to carry out the P.U.S. work in Miss Mason's way. I was very much interested in a letter which Miss X —— sent me early in November about the visit she paid to your school. She told me she was much impressed by what she saw, and especially by the reading of the children and the way in which they were able to read to themselves from all kinds of books.

The question about narration which has come up is one that very often comes before us, and I am always glad when it is brought up again and again, because it does send us back to Miss Mason's books and to a further search as to what she intended in her use of it. I gather that the point under discussion is the value, or not, of more than one complete narration. We can only get at what Miss Mason intended with regard to narration if we go back to the reason for which she suggested the use of it. In her books, she lays the stress upon attention, and the habit of attention, and all considerations with regard to narration must centre round the question how far any way of using narration—and there are scores of ways—gives each child, either in a home schoolroom or a class, full opportunity to use his power of attention. We may not consider the attention of two or more children, either in a home schoolroom or in a class. The attention given by each individual child must be considered.

I am sure this is your point of view too, but in Miss Mason's practice of her method here, the narration of a lesson was judged by the habit of attention shown *by each member of*

*the class all the time.* I heard a lesson given some months ago by a junior student of the College, who was just beginning her work in the Practising School here, and she allowed four children to narrate the same passage, and each narration was worse than the first, and the lesson was a failure. A child cannot be expected to give full attention to one subject more than once in one lesson. If he gives his full attention once, that piece of work is done once and for all. But if he knows that there is

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the least chance of another effort being required, he will not pay full attention the first time. This is a law of mind which Miss Mason has done her best to establish in the work of the P.U.S. It applies to all of us. If we know we are only going to have one chance, we make the utmost of that one chance. Weekly newspapers relieve us of the responsibility of taking much trouble about the daily paper on matters in which we are interested, with the consequence that our knowledge of the subject which we have considered with divided attention is never as perfect as it might be. The only way to secure the whole attention of every individual in a class is for each individual to realise that he may be the one called upon, and that even if he is not the first called upon, he may be called upon to continue the narration at any part until the one narration is finished. The *one* reading and the *one* narration is the essential if a child is to acquire *the habit of attention.*

I do not think the Group System, which has led to such excellent work in many Public Elementary Schools, should be allowed to stand in the way of the working of a law of mind; all ways of treating narration must be subservient to this law.

It is comparing a mechanical with an intellectual power, but the following seems to me to illustrate the point. A good many years ago I had the privilege of going over that wonderful Observatory at Kohlhof, above Heidelberg, and I was shown a clock with a compensating balance. The clock had a visible movement under glass such as one sees in many mantelpiece clocks, where a little catch falls rhythmically into a cog of a revolving wheel. In an ordinary clock of this kind the catch gains momentum every time it falls, and in course of time the clock cannot be depended upon for the right time. By the action of a compensating electrical balance the catch was pulled back each time to its original position and forced to lose its added momentum. So that it fell each time with its original energy, neither more or less, and the clock kept a true record of time. Just so with a child and his power of attention, only he loses by each repetition (instead of gaining like the clock). A child starts fresh, say, in a history lesson, and with his habit of attention contributes to a good narration. Every time he is drawn back to make a fresh spring upon the same material he falls to with less and less energy until, as we say, "his attention wanders, and he cannot be depended on for a good

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narration at all." Miss Mason used to say that anything short of full attention was waste of time, and that was why she insisted on short lessons and many and varied subjects. For the mind re-asserts itself again the moment it makes a fresh start upon a fresh subject, when the child again pays the one attention, and gives the one good narration, but it must always be a fresh start that calls forth the full powers.

The practice here, both in the College and in the Practising School, is always one continuous narration carried on from one or other of the students or the children, followed, first of all, by the supplying of any gaps from volunteers, which gives everyone a chance, and

then, if necessary, by discussion of points that do not seem to have been made clear.

I had a letter from the Headmistress of a large Secondary School the other day, in which she said, "I do not think there is any difference between our use of narration and yours, except that we have it by way of composition the next day, and you have it immediately." I could only answer that there was a very great deal of difference. Compositions may always be set on subjects, taken from the work, which have been narrated. This is not the repetition of the child's first effort of attention, but a fresh effort to use his mind in another way. The composition probably calls for a summary, or a portion of what the child has read, in depicting a character or in discussing the pros and cons of any point, with illustrations from the general reading of the week.

May I say that Miss Mason's Method is at present suffering from the prevalent idea that her Method *is* narration, and chiefly the narration of English. Her Method covers the whole of a child's school life, in fact the whole of his life; the habit of narration is the means by which we all make anything our own to which we give full attention.

It has been said, on the other hand, that the one effort of attention and the one narration implies that the child must never do anything a second time, which is again a very much mistaken interpretation of Miss Mason's teaching. The second time may, as I have said, come in the way of composition later on; it probably comes again in the end of term examination, and certainly, if the child is interested, frequently in after life. There are also in the upper Forms the interesting sidelights which one book or subject throws upon another, sometimes covering the same ground from another point of view.

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This is a subject on which we need to think clearly, for we are all of us inclined to attack any point of view from the one point with which we have to deal, but we need to take a bird's-eye view of the whole ground covered by any problem, lest we should not see the wood for the trees.

I am quite sure that the visitors you have had at various times have been full of admiration of the work of your children. Mr. Y — — also wrote to me saying how much impressed he was by it, and I should not like to apply your word "unpermissible" to what you have considered it well to do in your school. Miss Mason would not have used the word herself, but in her work with those with whom she came most into contact here she always took any debated point back to the principle at issue, and made us decide whether or not a certain practice could bear the final test of the principle. No doubt able and thoughtful teachers will always interpret Miss Mason's writings in their own way; but this should not prevent close co-operation between those who are immediately concerned in carrying out a trust which has been left to them, and those who are endeavouring to carry out Miss Mason's Method in wider fields of action from their reading of her books. —Yours faithfully,

E. KITCHING.