

## THE GROUP SYSTEM.

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In a leaflet published by the Parents' National Educational Union, there is an extract from a letter written by Mr. H. W. Household. This letter contains another written by the beloved Founder of this Union. The leaflet is marked "Leaflet E," and has for title "The Group System in Public Elementary Schools following the P.U.S. Programmes."

I am bringing it to your notice and propose to read from it as an introduction to this paper. It starts thus:—

"The very heavy cost of equipping P.N.E.U. Schools with books has made it imperative that some means should be found of reducing the expenditure. The addition of new Schools to the long list of those now following Miss Mason's programmes would otherwise become impossible.

The problem of reducing the cost has engaged Miss Mason's attention for some time past and she has been watching the experiments which have been made in a number of our Gloucestershire Schools. As a result she has recently given the following advice to the Head Mistress of a School in Norfolk, and she was kind enough to send me a copy of the letter.

'I think,' she says, 'I see how your School might be supplied with books at really a small expense.

I am sending you programmes of Form I., II. and III., which would probably cover your School.

The correct thing is for each child to have a copy of each of some half-dozen books, more or less, according to the standard she is in; but where there is real difficulty about expense a little organisation will reduce the cost.

For example—in Form III. (your Standard VI. and VII.), as much of the reading is silent the class might be divided into five groups, each group reading a different book; in that case, the Form could be worked with six copies of each book, that is, the class-books might be provided for something like 3s. 6d. *a head* in this form.

The books for the use of the teacher only (in class), cost as you will see about two guineas (in Form III.) but all of these are permanent, while the three for literature change with the period of History being studied.

The same methods of working would apply in Form II. where silent reading is done.'

You will see that nine of the books (in Form III.) are read aloud by the teacher, so that only a single copy is necessary."

Even in P.N.E.U. Schools, there was still often over much class reading, when the brighter children are of necessity kept back to the pace of the slower. When the class is broken up into three, four or five groups this cannot be. Nor is it any longer possible for the Teacher to intervene unduly between the child and the book.

[p 380]

That is a part only of the Leaflet, the remaining part is equally helpful and there are copies to be obtained—"Leaflet E."

The idea is, of course, one of economy or rather of saving in initial expenditure and will have been carried out according to plan in many Elementary Schools—the plans varying in different schools. Where one plan may be excellent under certain conditions, the same plan might not be even workable under others.

The school I am going to talk about is close to the road in the busiest and narrowest street of the town, on one of the main London-to-South-Coast roads, with much through traffic, especially in the summer when windows must be wide open—charabancs follow each other closely throughout summer mornings—in addition to local traffic. It is an old building (more than one hundred years old), with its rooms and staircase very awkwardly arranged for the running of a school and so, of course, our plans and arrangements have to be such as will meet these difficulties, and many of them would not be necessary in a better arranged building.

I intend to talk especially of the bigger girls—the girls who work in one room—Forms II. and III., about seventy-five girls. One class of Form IIb. girls with a few IIa. girls work under one teacher and in the same room, without a screen between, another class of IIa. and III. work together under one teacher.

The two teachers have a rule that only one shall be reading at once. We cannot manage with the two reading aloud together, the room is not large and the two classes quite fill it. Also the *upper class*, which consists of about forty girls, twenty working IIa. syllabus and twenty working Form III. syllabus, can do very little work as one class, it has to be grouped for reading aloud to IIa. only and to III. only several times a week; there are girls in this upper class from ten years old to fourteen years and they must be read to in at least two groups, for one reason because the books for IIa. and III. are not the same except in a few instances and even then it is always better to read to them as separate classes. Whilst reading aloud to III., then IIa. must be working silently and also on the other side of the room IIb. must be working silently. Again, whilst the teacher of IIb. is reading aloud Forms IIa. and III. must be working silently. So it is necessary for rather a lot of silent work to be done in order to get all the "reading aloud" satisfactorily performed.

[p 381]

The silent work includes needlework, drawing, composition and some "silent group work," of which I shall have more to say later. The books from which we read aloud and of which we have *one copy only* in the school, for these two classes are: *Pole to Pole*, Mrs. Marshall's *History of English Literature*, *Age of Fable*, *Plutarch*, Quennell's *History of Everyday Things*, *Who is my Neighbour*, *Life and Her Children*, *Tales of a Grandfather*. These books are all read aloud by the teacher and are not studied in groups. There are also poetry readings and readings aloud by the teacher from "group books" which I shall come to later. We get only one set of pictures which are placed in separate frames and hung together in a certain place, the frames have removable backs and the pictures are studied by one girl at a time, one girl using one picture alone, after an introductory talk by the teacher on the artist and his work early in the term.

Then, for the following books groups are arranged: *Winners in Life's Race*, *Indian History*, *Ourselves*, *Plant Life*, *Fairyland of Science*, *Arnold Forster*, *History of France*, *Citizen*

*Reader, Sciences, Hellas, Stories from the History of Rome, Geography Reading.* Of all these books we have five copies each. That means with five copies each of the books I have just mentioned (instead of thirty-five or forty copies for one each in the class), we so arrange the work that each girl has the use of one copy of each of those books to herself for an allotted time.

Of books like *Arnold Forster* and the *French History* which are sometimes used by two Forms and needed by more than one Form at once, we need ten copies instead of five. The groups are arranged for about five girls to work together, this being a fairly comfortable number to work according to the type of desk used. Dual locker desks are too heavy to be moved about for group work, and four or five girls can sit comfortably facing each other without spoiling the arrangement of the class for other kinds of lessons.

Each class is divided up into these small groups, *e.g.*, in the upper class the twenty IIA. girls and the twenty III. girls are divided into four groups for IIA. and four groups for III. So that there are *eight groups of five girls* in the one class under one teacher.

The groups are numbered 1, 2, 3, 4—IIA.; 1, 2, 3, 4—III., and the list of books which are set for groups are lettered

[p 382]

A, B, C, D, E, etc. Separate Time Tables are made for this part of the work.

Several "Group Times" are indicated on the Class Time Table, *e.g.*, one half hour for Tuesday morning, 11.30 to 12; another for Wednesday morning, 11.30 to 12; another for Wednesday afternoon; another for Thursday morning; another for Friday morning; another for Friday afternoon.

For the first group time set in the week for Form III.:—

Group 1 will take A books (*Fairyland of Science*).

„ 2 „ B „ (*Health Reader*).

„ 3 „ C „ (*Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*).

„ 4 „ D „ (*Geography*).

For the second group time set in the week, the groups move down the list one book:—

Group 1 will take B books (*Health Reader*).

„ 2 „ C „ (*Chaucer*).

„ 3 „ D „ (*Geography*).

„ 4 „ A „ (*Fairyland*).

This movement goes on each time so that only one group is using one set of books at a time, but each group gets a turn with each set of books—once or twice in a fortnight—that means each girl has her own use of each of these books for one and generally two half hours in the fortnight:—

1st WEEK.

2nd WEEK.

GROUP WORK FOR ALTERNATE WEEKS.			
A	FAIRYLAND	FAIRYLAND	A
B	HEALTH READER	WINNERS	G

C	CHAUCER	OURSELVES	H
D	GEOGRAPHY	GEOGRAPHY	D
E	ENGLISH HISTORY	ENGLISH HISTORY	E
F	QUENTIN DURWARD	QUENTIN DURWARD	F

1st WEEK.

2nd WEEK.

	1	2	3	4	GROUPS.	1	2	3	4
	A	B	C	D	Tues. Morn.	A	G	H	D
	B	C	D	E	Wed. Morn.	G	H	D	E
	C	D	E	F	Wed. Aft.	H	D	E	F
	D	E	F	A	Thurs. Morn.	D	E	F	A
	E	F	A	B	Fri. Morn.	E	F	A	G
	F	A	B	C	Fri. Aft.	F	A	G	H

FORM III.

JANUARY 1931.

LADY BOSWELL'S GIRLS' SCHOOL.

[p 383]

I might here remark that I think *five copies* is quite the minimum number with which to work, and with about seventy-five girls to use the books, a double number of those books used by more than one Form is necessary.

The girls quickly get to know their own group times and very rarely is there a mistake made as to which book they should be using. If by some chance a group has a wrong book, the other leader is there at once and you see the two leaders go to the time table, consult it, and the books are immediately handed over, without any need of reference to me.

Leaders put books and atlases, etc., ready before leaving the class for recess or dinner hour, so lessons proceed with no disturbance between short periods.

Groups are fairly equally distributed over the week, one each half day or only one for some days and one girl in each group makes herself responsible for having read sufficient of the book for the group lesson. She takes the book home to do this and she comes to me for some explanations and pronouncing of new names before the time of the lesson. This preparation

work the girls share amongst themselves. Each is supposed to do her part in this, and the one who prepares for one group reading takes the lead in that reading and narration. When a girl returns to school, after being absent, she generally finds out how much has been done in certain books whilst she was not there and takes the book home, to do alone what she has missed.

One girl in each group takes the leadership of the group in general, she sees her group supplied with books, etc., giving way to another's leadership in single subjects where another has prepared a certain lesson. The groups are carefully graded, the quickest girls working together and the slower ones together so that with the twenty IIA. girls we get four small classes, each class working at a different rate. The slow girls work slowly but more satisfactorily together. I find they are shy if placed with brighter girls, whereas they will read and narrate very readily if with others who work at a similar rate, and the groups who get through certain books more quickly than others are ready to do extra work in other directions.

The members of each group read and narrate to each other. Reading and oral narration are carried on side by side in all group work and sometimes written narration follows. The [p 384]

teacher is passing from group to group all the time. Each girl knows she must be responsible for getting through the pages set for the term in all subjects. They each have a programme and record book in which the work for the term is entered during the first day of the term for every book, and each girl enters pages as she reads them and so keeps a record as she goes. They can always tell me the last page of any book I have been reading, when I am ready to read the same book again.

A most important side of group work is to give the necessary help at the right time. As before mentioned, the teacher passes around all the time the groups are working and helps with explanations and pronunciation and the leaders who prepare for a group lesson come to the teacher for help. But this is not enough. With most of the books it is not satisfactory to leave it entirely to the girls. A reading by the teacher must be taken periodically from each book, and the parts to be taken need careful choosing.

The time given to this help is necessarily limited, and so care is needed in choosing what to do. The girls themselves will generally give a lead and let the teacher know when they are up against a difficulty.

I come now to the "Silent Reading Group." This again, is arranged through necessity. I have mentioned elsewhere how carefully time has to be arranged to allow sufficient periods of silent work from two-thirds of the girls in this one room, to give the opportunity of reading aloud by the teacher of the remaining third. This is where it is necessary for a few "group times" to be employed silently. For instance, when Form III. is enjoying a reading from the teacher, Form IIA. must have a silent group. They are only "groups" in so far as the girls use the particular set of books allotted to them for that particular time. They must be silent groups because the girls have to sit in the same class as those listening to the teacher's reading.

It might appear from this as though the "groups" would be listening to what is being read aloud, and sometimes they do! I often notice interested and longing looks in the teacher's direction (for after all, they all love being read to, and it is by far their most favoured type of lesson). But they carry on, they know that S.R. is always bracketed with W.N.—Silent Reading, Written Narration—and the habit of concentration is getting more and more established. This

habit

[p 385]

of concentration in groups is particularly marked in all group work where groups work aloud side by side.

Although we try not to have groups working all over the room at once, because of the difficulty arising over the use of the group books, yet, because of the shortness of time and the precious half hours of silence for reading that each teacher tries to give the other, there are times when we must have these seventy-five girls all working in groups at once.

And then there is a “hum,” but decidedly a working “hum” and one of the surprises of the system is the concentration of each member of a group attending to her own group, and taking no notice of other groups around her—they offer no distraction to her—all her attention is with her own group. I feel I must stress the fact here that the group work is taken very seriously by the girls and that great efforts are made to understand and to follow what is read, and when a passage comes along from which they are getting nothing, they make it their business to let their teacher know that they are in need of help. Generally a group leader will come and say, “We cannot understand this page,” or “We are not getting on very well with so and so—will you help us?” They are generally quite happy if a reading is then taken and will work on afterwards, alone.

It was not through choice, but of necessity that we decided to try group work with the P.U.S. Programmes and we have always wished for more books—it would be a great pleasure if each girl could have her own copy of certain books, particularly of books with good diagrams. It seemed, at first, that some girls were not getting much from the groups, the quicker girls were better off, but the slow ones seemed very slow and appeared to be getting very little. At that time we arranged the groups with one or two good workers with indifferent ones, the good ones to help the weaker ones, but we do not arrange them so now. As the habit of reading with intelligence and narrating grows with them, the efforts of the girls become more continuous and give better results.

We still find that they answer questions better, and give fuller narrations in general, on the books that are read aloud to them by the teacher, and so if we had enough copies of some books to go round we should take more readings as class work; and possibly expect correspondingly less effort from the children! For an important result of this group work is, that [p 386]

these girls are learning to get knowledge by means of their own efforts from the books, often without the teacher’s help, or with just enough suggestion to unfold sufficient of the page in order to show there is more to be got from it, and that it is worth while to give the application to get it. This is an experience they could not get to the same extent, if they were all using the same book at the same time, and waiting on the teacher for leadership. In the latter case it is easy for the teacher to help the whole class each time they use that book, whereas with many small groups the teacher cannot help all at once, and the groups must put up a struggle over a difficult place and may have to wait for the help they need. If the groups are carefully arranged with due regard to each girl’s ability, and each girl’s shyness or otherwise, the girls will really try to understand and will go over it again and again. They do this in a less self-conscious way in a group than if with the whole class. We frequently find one girl expounding to the others—just to her own group, and discussions being carried on with much difference of opinion—and the

large dictionary being fetched from the cupboard, before the difficulty is taken to the teacher for solving. These are healthy signs and we get many of them, and such struggles generally mean progress.

There is the less satisfactory state of things we sometimes get, when a group is losing interest because of not understanding, or because some one girl is taking advantage of the group formation, and the free talk, to start "gossip." I mention this because it occurs and needs to be watched for (occasionally there is a girl in the class who cannot be trusted to work in groups), but this has to be met and dealt with under any system. But if interest flags because the group is not understanding and this is allowed to go on it will need a good deal of putting right. The group may report "everything all right," whilst one feels that there *are* difficulties which should have been mentioned and that the girls are not taking the trouble to get down to them, but are complaisantly slipping over them. The finding of these things and the putting of them right is part of the very valuable training that this group system is able to give.

Sometimes we cannot help them, time will not allow of a reading, and occasionally a book will go right through a term, worked entirely in groups—if it is apparently going well it has to be left to them. Often there are several requests and only one half hour, so that a selection has to be made.

[p 387]

I asked the girls of IIA. and III. to write me their opinions as to which method they learn most from, reading in groups, reading silently, or being read aloud to by the teacher. Most girls stated that they preferred the teacher reading aloud to them, that they got more from it and understood much more easily. Of course, they *do* answer better and give better written narration and answer written questions better from work the teacher has read to them.

Of the other two methods, there is a difference of opinion. Most prefer the group work, but there are always a few who prefer to read alone and who *will* read alone when they are given the opportunity to do so. Several are fond of working in two's, we often see them reading and narrating in two's, and when asked why, they will say they are getting on more quickly that way and so they are left to carry on. I cannot do better than quote the girls' own words:—

"I would rather work in groups than read alone, because if you work in groups and come to a hard piece, there is generally one person in the group who can explain it."

"I like working in groups because it is more interesting than reading all the books to ourselves. Also you can hear the different things the girls say about the work that you might not have thought of yourself. Most of the books can be read easily in groups. 'English History' is the book that I think is the easiest of the books to be read in groups, as it has more stories in it, which makes the work easier. *Ourselves* is a harder book and I think it is best read altogether in groups although we have to read it to ourselves. ... *Winners* is not very easy to work in groups this term, but it has helped us a great deal to have the teacher help us with it a little. If it is an easy book we are reading, we often read about seven or eight pages, but if it is harder we only read about three pages. ... The work for groups has not been too hard this term."

Another opinion about *Ourselves* after I had allowed one group to use it as a group

book:—

“We don’t get on very well with *Ourselves* in groups. I think it would be much better to read it to ourselves like we used to, or let one girl read to the whole group after preparing it at night ... this term we have had a lot of nice work in groups.”

And another:—

“The book I can understand better by myself is *Ourselves*. Molly sometimes tells us she cannot understand what she has read and so some of us others try to explain it to her, and then she understands it. Joan is a very good narrator—she often sends a lot to my mind.”

From one of the slower girls:—

“I think I like working in groups best, perhaps there would be a word which I could not understand, then one of the girls could tell me. Catherine is a great help and explains things best. There are one or two books like *English History and Sciences* that I think want explaining. ...”

[p 388]

A fairly new girl to the school:—

“Sometimes in groups a girl does not understand a thing she has read, and the others can help her out. ... I have never been to a school before where they read in groups, but I think it is a good idea, as it makes girls feel responsible for themselves.”

“I think the groups are very nice because you can help each other and sometimes we get rather hard chapters, when we do get a hard one, we talk it over and then we get the meaning of it, then we make sure it is clear by narrating it.”

A few who prefer silent reading:—

“I like working in groups very, very much, but I like silent reading best. When I read alone, I can get more from the books than I can in groups. By reading to myself, I can explain things much better and understand better in my mind than if telling in a group. If you are reading a book in a group and there is something which you cannot quite understand, you all put something to it, but when reading to yourself you have to think all the more and so get into a habit of thinking things out for yourself.”

“I like reading by myself better than in groups. The best book I like reading in groups is *English History*, but I don’t like having *Quentin Durward* in groups nor *Ancient Crete*, because I can’t understand them so well. I like reading *Quentin Durward* by myself so that I can understand it better...

“I think I can work best when I read a book alone, because in some books there are things you cannot understand, and when you have read it over two or three times to



yourself you can see the meaning of it. You cannot do this in groups, because the others want to get on and finish a certain part. I like it best when you read to us, because when you come to a difficult piece you explain it so that we can understand and we know that it is right without worrying over it.”

“I like the groups very much, although I think I could get the work just as well, and a little bit better when I am reading to myself, because there is no one there to tell me to stop.”

The girls seem to get the idea that group work, trains responsibility and self-reliance, and I think this training is undoubtedly a result of well-arranged group work.

One of the great disadvantages of our large classes is the impossibility of reaching the individual, as we know he could be reached if the classes were very much smaller; this is something we have to face and to make the best of, and to get as near the ideal with forty or more, as though we had only fifteen or twenty.

If you allow yourself to think of one session divided amongst forty children, it gives very few minutes each, even if the teacher put up an impossible merry-go-round the whole time, but when considered in “groups” it becomes a more possible undertaking. It certainly helps towards reaching the individual in large classes, and to understanding the varying needs of different children.

If groups are arranged according to these varying needs—

[p 389]

slow workers working together, and going slowly, and understanding as they go, and not feeling shy of each other as they do if placed with quicker girls; and quicker girls working together, and pushing on at their own pace, doing much more than the slower girls; if grouping which allows for the varying powers and rate of learning of the different girls is aimed at; then the teacher, moving from group to group and noticing each group’s work and rate of progress, will find it easier to grasp what *four or five* are doing than what *forty* are doing.

Often individuals are reached in a group who would get passed over in class work. If each child does not get as much attention from the teacher as the teacher would like to give, the child gets *some* from the others in her group, and she certainly gets more opportunities of making her “individual effort” in this way than if class work only were being done. Her own effort is called out in many ways. She is expected to get knowledge herself from her books, and she knows from her past experiences that she can do this. She gets many opportunities of reading aloud to other girls and sometimes to the teacher. Also she gets many opportunities of telling in detail what she has read, of telling it to other girls and again sometimes to the teacher. In silent reading periods she is beginning to learn what it means to read to herself in such a way as to know what she is reading about. It is in making her own effort in many ways each day that she is learning the habit of self-reliance.