

An Essay Towards a Philosophy of Education.¹

I.

From *The Statesman, Calcutta*.

THE DIGNITY OF CHILDHOOD.

This book is Miss Mason's swan song. It sums up the ideas which led to the foundation of the famous Ambleside institution more than thirty years ago and which have been developed as the result of experience during that period; and its author passed away while it was still in the press. The system founded by Miss Mason has admittedly done wonders for thousands of children. It has sent them out equipped with a rich vocabulary, a retentive memory, a store of the most varied knowledge, a desirable mental poise, and a wonderful appreciation of the best in art and literature; in short it has given them a liberal education. Its critics may and do say that it has failed to make mathematicians of them. On the other hand have we not been told that mathematicians are born and not made?

In her last volume Miss Mason sets out her philosophy of education with great wealth and variety of illustration. As she says in her preface "No statement that I have made in the following volume rests upon opinion only. Every point has been proved in thousands of instances, and the method may be seen at work in many schools, large and small, elementary and secondary."

The theme is elaborated in an infinite variety of ways, but it is an essentially simple one. "Children are born

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persons," says Miss Mason over and over again. She rather hints that they are bigger persons than their elders; but at the very least they are just as considerable. Being persons, they should be treated with respect. The most fatal mistake made by obsolete educational methods was to assume that a child was a mere automaton, to be drilled into acquiring a certain quantum of information, generally against its will. The fact which Miss Mason claims to have demonstrated is that the child has such a burning thirst for knowledge that, if the teacher will give it a chance, it will educate itself. And that is the secret of the Ambleside method. The child educates itself, with the teacher acting as a guide during the process rather than a forcing pump, and the results are set forth in a thousand instances in which children have done things easily and naturally which would have classified them as infant prodigies half a century ago. The lines on which Miss Mason worked are illustrated by the following interesting passage on Attention:—

"Attention, we know, is not a 'faculty,' nor a definable power of mind but is the ability to turn on every such power, to concentrate, as we say. We throw away labour in attempting to produce or train this necessary function. There it is in every child in full measure, a very Niagara of force, ready to be turned on in obedience to the child's own authority and capable of infinite resistance to authority imposed from without."

It is not surprising to find the book pervaded by a deeply religious atmosphere. How is it possible to love and reverence childhood without a profound perception of the truth that the pure in heart shall see God? "If we believe," we read, "that knowledge is the principal thing, that knowledge is tri-partite, and that the fundamental knowledge is the knowledge of God, we

shall bring up our children as students of Divinity, and shall pursue our own life-long studies in the self-same school.”

Here is a last arresting passage:— “Human nature has not failed; what has failed us is philosophy, and that applied philosophy which is called education.”

II.

From *The Irish Statesman*.

“Lord God, how many good and clean wits of children be nowadays perished by ignorant schoolmasters.” So

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wrote Elyot in 1531, and in 1925 we are scarcely in a position to contradict him. Education remains what it has always been, a sort of step-daughter to philosophy, unloved at that. A science which deals in perfection must always be intolerant of a science which deals with men. “Change education and you change the world,” is a phrase we are continually hearing, as though man held in his own hands the key to all his difficulties if only he chose to use it. Yes, but can you change education? Or rather you can change education, but can you change men?

We count Miss Charlotte Mason amongst the greatest educators. Writing of her after her death, Sir Michael Sadler said, “Like Thring, of Uppingham, she realised that education is the transmission of life, of the life of the mind, kindled by the fiery particles which lie unquenched in noble literature.” Her work, not nearly as widely known as it ought to be, is yet slowly and steadily spreading, and this book should have the effect of introducing it to a wider public. Already in England her method, originally devised for Secondary School children, has been applied with signal success to the Primary School, and one county at least is practising it in the majority of its schools.

It is not easy to summarise a philosophy of education in a few words, but Miss Mason’s is almost summarised in the quotation with which she begins the Short Synopsis of her aims. “No sooner doth the truth . . . come into the soul’s sight but the soul knows her to be her first and old acquaintance.” That motto could not be bettered. It says everything. She is in the succession of Comenius. She believes in, “All knowledge for all men.” Her book is a recognition of the value of two principles. This is one of them—the importance of the food with which we supply the mind. The second is the importance of the personality of the child. She believed that in education you are dealing with the soul, not with a machine.

Starting, then, from these two principles, she evolves her method. Her method is known, and it has been tried now for thirty years, so that it comes to us in a measure vindicated. She believed in teaching “literature.” The great minds of the past were to be allowed to speak direct, without intermediary, to the child. What the mind of the

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child was ready for it would accept, what it was not ready for no well-meaning interference upon the part of the teacher would make acceptable or do anything except create a distaste. . .

This was only one of her discoveries. Her philosophy contains much else besides. She never forgot that children were persons. “Children are born *persons*. They are not born either good or bad but with possibilities for good or evil.” She believed that they should be taught that

“the chief responsibility which rests on them as persons is the acceptance or rejection of ideas.” Who in Ireland at the present time is going to deny this? To help them in that choice they were to be given, “principles of conduct and a wide knowledge fitted to them.” Altogether a book for teacher and parent alike to buy and to study.

III.

From *The Observer*.

THE PROBLEM OF THE TEACHER.

BY DR. EDWARD LYTTTELTON.

There is a multitude here, and in other lands, to whom this lucid exposition of vitally important principle and of the method of its application will come as a veritable discovery.

But this will depend on our shaking ourselves free of an erroneous view of the nature and working of the human mind. Most people still believe that inside every child is a kind of invisible keg or cask into which knowledge is poured by the teacher in the hope that a certain amount of it may stick. The teacher, it is presumed, has learnt how to do this; for the ordinary citizen it presents the most formidable and bewildering difficulties. It is true that among professional teachers there have always been some who from painful experience learn that this method of pouring in is more complex than it is often supposed to be, and depends in some mysterious fashion on the exciting of “interest” in the child. This, again, is thought to depend on the subject chosen. Hence a vast amount of controversy, every disputant putting [p 704]

forward the claims of the particular subject which his own great mind found to be congenial at an early age.

Meantime a dismal fact, ignored by all teachers as far as possible, persists: undeniable and most baffling to us all. It is that whereas practically all children love learning, and gather knowledge rapidly, joyously, and permanently, something happens between seven and seventeen which in nearly all cases has destroyed the love of knowledge for its own sake. It is to be noticed that the beginning of this sterilising epoch coincides with the calling in of the teacher; and the gradual diminution of interest in the child goes on even if the teaching be what we call thoroughly stimulating, anyhow, zealous, careful, conscientious. Miss Mason has, I am convinced, rightly diagnosed the mischief, and, more than that, has invented a method which, while not difficult to learn, has produced extraordinarily good results. But everything must depend on the theory being thoroughly understood, and it is to be feared that modern life is marked by a disinclination to give patient consideration to any theory: we prefer to jump to practical results.

The child requires no stimulus, because his interest in the natural process of assimilating knowledge never fails. Nature presents him with an environment full of suggestion. Much is added by stories his elders tell him, and he feeds his mind just as he feeds his body, by taking in facts for which he is prepared, i.e., those related to other facts already lodged within, and ignoring the rest—just as he eats what food he likes, but rejects the rest. Hence both eating and learning are pleasurable and natural activities; not a passive otiose recipient, but an apprehension; an active assimilation; and we remember that according to Dr. Mackail education means feeding.

Now the trouble is that when the teacher comes in at about seven years old there begins an ingestion of unpalatable subjects into the child's mind, such as grammar and arithmetic, and perhaps the Latin vocabulary. These, let us notice, are concerned not with what we call knowledge such as the child has hitherto thriven on, but with sharpening the logical faculty, just as if to the tender digestive organs an electrical stimulus were applied. Now, is it not clear to the least analytical of our readers that this clarify-
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ing process will only be useful if the more important question is being attended to all along, viz., the giving of something to digest? Miss Mason saw plainly that this is exactly what the ordinary elementary education has failed to do. My impression is that in the grammar and public schools the omission has been still more serious. Perhaps some good work has been done by the encouragement given to history and science. But very few teachers yet have firmly grasped the principle of the child's natural power of assimilating and rejecting. Every possible effort should be made to allow this double faculty to continue its healthy exercise. This brings us to the Mason method, which is fully explained and illustrated in the volume before us. The most deadly of all our defects in education has been the neglect of the imagination. Miss Mason has not neglected it, but encourages it, knowing that time will correct the mistakes, supplemented by teachers in the teens. How sensible it all is! Up till recently in all schools dominated by the Cambridge influence boys have been starved in respect of knowledge and have had nothing to think about except games. In many elementary schools the results of the new method have been surprising to all except to those who see the difference between feeding the mind and merely stimulating the logical faculty.

Two undeniable gains are already certain. The strain on the teachers will be greatly lightened, because so much of the learning is done by active apprehension on the part of the children, and does not depend on the rare power of stimulus in the teacher. It is a lamentable fact that conscientious keenness on the part of the teachers has brought on the terrible mischief known as "spoon-feeding." The Mason method is free from it.

It is devoutly to be hoped that managers of schools, head masters and mistresses of secondary schools will read this volume attentively, as well as the authorities in the Board of Education.

IV.

From *The Teachers' World*.

This, Miss Charlotte Mason's last book, which she did not live to see in print, in many ways sums up her teaching
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and her message. It is a book of much wisdom, and refreshing alike for its respect for children and for its respect for experience. Miss Mason had studied education too long to be carried away by stunts and panaceas, however seductive. She had the true pioneer's suspicion of seeming short cuts. She knew, like Sir Rabindranath Tagore, that the process of growing can only be done by the grower; and, like Ruskin, that the mind of a child may be trusted to take or reject according to its needs; that knowledge cannot be digested in tabloid form, be the tabloids made never so skilfully; that out of a "whole big book" a child "may not get more than

half-a-dozen of those ideas upon which his spirit thrives,” and that such ideas occur “in unexpected places and unrecognised forms.” “One of our presumptuous sins,” she declared, “is that we venture to offer opinions to children (and to older persons) instead of ideas. The mind feeds on ideas, and therefore children should have a generous curriculum.”

Further, Miss Mason cherished a steadfast belief in the child. She realised clearly what most teachers fail to realise (or, at all events, to embody in their system of teaching), that children are well able to deal with ideas. Therefore, she placed little reliance on the ordinary catechetical methods employed in the class-room. Much of the questioning to which children are subjected is a hindrance rather than a help to their understanding (for Nature designed them to ask rather than to answer questions), and, if it does not spoil their tempers as it would the temper of the most phlegmatic grown-up, this is only because children are so extraordinarily patient—“Patient of contradiction as a child” is the simile Cowper chose when he had to describe the humility of the truly great, and it is one which teachers will do well to ponder. Miss Mason’s method is one of narration, oral and written. She realised that no one can recount anything without considerable mental effort—the mind having constantly to put questions to itself if it would proceed. In other words, she realised that Literature, as Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch told a Cambridge audience, is an art to be practised; and that in History, as Lord Acton told another Cambridge audience, one must “learn as much by writing as by reading.” [p 707]

In teaching literature it would be difficult to improve upon Miss Mason’s method. It places the child and the author in direct contact, without the intervention of a third party; and on its expression side, the narration, it makes appeal to two fundamental instincts of childhood, the desire to imitate and the desire to create. She anticipated Mr. Wells in insisting upon some general history (ancient, European and Colonial) being included in her curriculum. She is still in front of most teachers in including systematic study of pictures and art. If her view that “the approach to science, as to other subjects, should be more or less literary” wins less general acceptance, we cannot, on the other hand, claim that, by other methods we have attained to any marked degree of success in teaching science. The common result of the ordinary methods is that, while the student may acquire some ability to measure, experiment, and observe, he shows a lamentable lack of knowledge of larger principles, broad conceptions, and everyday applications. Miss Mason deplored the “fatal and quite unnecessary divorce between science and the humanities,” and few can quarrel with her declaration that “the only sound method of teaching science is to afford a due combination of field or laboratory work with such literary comments and amplifications as the subject affords.”

But this book is much more than an exposition of any system or method. It is a treatise on education itself—a book of mellow wisdom, clearly and beautifully written, in which no teacher, however widely he differ from Miss Mason in outlook, can fail to find much to arrest him. One could quote from page after page, but three quotations, dealing with marks, motives, and psycho-analysis, must suffice:—

“A school may be working hard, not for love of knowledge, but for love of marks, our old enemy; and then young faces are not serene and joyous, but eager, restless, apt to look anxious and worried. The children do not sleep well and are cross; are sullen or in tears if anything goes wrong, and are, generally, difficult to manage. When this is the case there is too much oxygen in the air; they are breathing a too stimulating atmosphere, . . . the doctors probably

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advise that so-and-so should 'run wild' for a year. Poor little soul, at the very moment when he is most in need of knowledge for his sustenance he is left to prey upon himself! No wonder the nervous symptoms become worse."

"Fear is no longer the acknowledged basis of school discipline; we have methods more subtle than the mere terrors of the law. Love is one of these. The person of winning personality attracts his pupils (or hers), who will do anything for his sake, and are fond and eager in all their ways, docile to that point where personality is submerged, and they live on the smiles, perish on the averted looks of the adored teacher. Parents look on with a smile, and think that all is well; but Bob or Mary is losing that growing time which should make a self-dependent, self-ordered person, and is day by day becoming a parasite who can only go as he is carried, the easy prey of fanatic or demagogue."

"Education implies a continuous going forth of the mind; but whatever induces introspection or any form of self-consciousness holds up, as it were, the intellectual powers and brings progress to a standstill. . . . It may be that the mind as well as the body has its regions where *noli me tangere* is a counsel of expedience; and, by the time we have dealt with those functions of the mind which we know, we may find ourselves in a position to formulate that which we certainly do not possess, a science—should it not be a philosophy?—of education."

These three quotations may serve to show something of Miss Mason's independence of outlook; they probably are not the best that could have been chosen. The value of the book is enhanced by an excellent index.

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An Essay towards a Philosophy of Education.²

REVIEWS (*Continued from page 700*).

IV.

"Most teachers know the main educational principles of Miss Mason, and the useful work of the 'Parents' National Educational Union,' which was founded by her. Many will be glad to read this full and reasoned account of her philosophy." (From *The Journal of Education*).

V.

"Miss Mason deals simply and sympathetically with the child as a self-educator, and with the nature and extent of the co-operation by parent or teacher. She deserves to be carefully read in the home and in the school. Unless her standpoint is accepted there can be no real education, for it is fundamentally true that no one can teach a child anything—the child must be its own teacher." (From *The Glasgow Herald*).

VI.

"The late Miss Mason brought enthusiasm born of conviction to the writing of "An Essay towards a Philosophy of Education." Many of her theories will arouse opposition, but many teachers will welcome the protest which is the very groundwork of it. The teacher's task is *not* to teach how to learn, but to teach *something*. The child wishes to learn,

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and Miss Mason almost says knows how to learn.” (From *The Schoolmaster*).

VII.

“This is a book which deserves to be considered seriously by educational reformers. We welcome particularly the recognition that an educational programme can only justify itself if it can be applied to the whole nation—to the children of the poor as well as those who are better off.” (From *The Church Times*).

VIII.

“Miss Mason’s essay is, indeed, a valuable and serious contribution to Education itself and to the psychology on which true education must rest. It is refreshing to meet this hopeful, definite and imaginative outlook. In so far as it expresses this, the volume is an appropriate memorial to a pioneer. As she says, children have a desire and capacity for knowledge—which education can kill and stifle as well as foster and feed. Here is set out, both theory and practice, the right way, the way along which the ideal of a ‘Liberal Education for All’ can be secured.” (From *Time and Tide*).

IX.

“The late Miss Charlotte Mason was not merely a brilliant teacher, but by her work in connection with the Parents’ National Educational Union she made a powerful attack on public apathy at its most vulnerable point . . . This essay is more in the nature of a statement of faith than a philosophical treatise. As a record of the ideas which came to a great teacher in the course of many years’ practical experience it will be of permanent value to all educationalists. . . . There is much here to help on their way even those who find it necessary to take a sternly practical view of the functions of education.” (From *The Daily News*).

X.

“To appraise Miss Mason fairly we must study the schools she founded and the Parents’ National Educational Union, which she called into being to propagate her system. There is much that is sound and timely in the system. The belief that education is essentially a process of nourishment,

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not of mere spontaneous development; the faith in the child as a person with the rights of a person, especially the right to judge of his own needs in the way of knowledge; the ceaseless emphasis upon knowledge as the educational organ, on recognition of ‘atmosphere’ in the sense of the whole social and spiritual environment as something more than just ordinary pedagogic routine; and the stress upon discipline and sound habits as the goal of knowledge and the measure of its efficiency: all these are valuable doctrines.” (From *The Cape Times*).

XI.

“To those hitherto unacquainted with Miss Mason’s previous work it is clear that a discourse upon the theory and practice of education along lines like this must open up new avenues of thought. She was a woman, not of one idea, but of a large and sagacious mind—one

of those unobtrusive yet powerful thinkers whose real greatness will better be appreciated by future generations than their modesty suffers it to be by their own." (From *The Guardian*).

XII.

"The late Miss Mason was the Prophet of the P.N.E.U. and like all prophets, from Isaiah onwards, she was an enthusiast. . . . The P.N.E.U. has certainly achieved some admirable results and there is much good sense as well as eloquence, in Miss Mason's plea." (From *The Times of India*).

XIII.

"I have finished Miss Mason's book. It seems to me a really *great* book, full of wisdom and understanding, counsel and strength." (From a P.N.E.U. Parent).

XIV.

BY WILLINGHAM F. RAWNSLEY.

Miss Mason's posthumous volume is certainly a great book in many ways and it abounds in remarkable dicta. Its main purpose perhaps is to insist on some facts of which we as a rule have not taken sufficient note, until she showed us the way, viz., that the mind of a child, and quite a
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young child, is capable of taking in and assimilating a great deal, if conveyed to the child pleasantly and if the child brings to the consideration of it a close attention.

Inattention makes, as we all know, the efforts of the hardworking teacher perfectly futile. The teacher labours and the child wearies, but learns little.

Miss Mason's first principle then is to secure a full attention throughout the class, and this she has succeeded in obtaining from the lowest class upwards, and in a way which is permanent for the children through all their school days and after. This once gained, the rest is easy; the children labour and the teacher supervises and is able to manage quite a large class with ease, and with profit to the children.

The mode of gaining attention is this: the children in the lower class listen to some episode read in a pleasant voice with intelligence by the teacher, half a page is enough at first. Then a boy or girl is called on to come out and facing the class to "narrate" what has just been read; the child may stumble or even fail, but no help is given by the teacher, only another child may suggest the word wanted, and no rebuke is given to them, boy or girl, but a little praise for doing its best. Some other child tries, and eventually the task is managed, and then a bit more of the story is read. But *nothing is read more than once*; there lies the secret of the method, for each child knows that what he listens to will only be read once, so that unless he gives his entire attention he is out of the game.

This soon fosters a habit of full attention which lasts apparently through life. So much for Narration, which in the higher classes is so perfect that I have heard a little girl of 10 say off without a single omission or blunder a whole page or more. Attention being secured, and in so pleasant a manner, the next great axiom of Miss Mason's method, that what children crave for,

is knowledge, is satisfied by the provision of really good literature in which knowledge is conveyed in good English; and the children are quite remarkably quick to appreciate this, and reject poor English, and trashy writing at once.

Plutarch's Lives, Shakespeare's Plays, standard works of History, Scott's novels, stories from the Classics of

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Greece and Rome, and many books, provided they are real literature, are read with avidity and if not altogether understood at first, that does not signify, for the full comprehension of what is, in a first reading, not quite understood comes later; and there comes too with absolute certainty the power of expression and of putting thoughts into words in really good English; also there comes without effort correct spelling. This is acquired by the reading whether in class or alone of many hundreds of pages of good English literature and in what Miss Mason rightly calls teaching by "the humanities," doing in fact for the children in their own language what is done for university students in the classics when they read for the School of *Literae Humaniores*.

Hear what Miss Mason says, on p. 191, on the way in which the children's powers of comprehension and assimilation grow: "Children must not be teased or instructed about the use of stops or capital letters. These things too come by Nature to the child who reads, and the teacher's instructions are apt to issue in the use of a pepper-box for commas. We do not say that children should never read well-intentioned second-rate books, but certainly they should not read these in school hours by way of lessons. From their earliest days they should get the habit of reading literature which they should take hold of for themselves, much or little, in their own way. As the object of every writer is to explain himself in his own book the child and the author must be trusted together without the intervention of the middleman. What his author does not tell him he must go without knowing for the present. No explanation will really help him, and explanations of words and phrases spoil the text, and should not be attempted unless children ask, 'What does so and so mean?' when other children in the class will probably tell."

After reading a couple of thousand pages in a term children will be less in need of constant supervision, and will be only delighted to have more and more unfolded to their growing capacity for intelligent assimilation, and they will be able to state what they have read when called on for it months after they have read it.

But all the time the child must labour and not the teacher.

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Hence it comes to pass that, as I have often heard from their own lips, that no teacher who has embarked on Miss Mason's method would go back to the ordinary Elementary School system on any account whatever.

Miss Mason follows Matthew Arnold in dividing all teaching into three heads, the knowledge about God, the knowledge about Man, and the knowledge about the Universe; and attaches the greatest importance to the first of these as being the knowledge of what is the greatest, hence the prominence she gives to sound religious teaching. One thing is always kept in view in selecting the books to be read—viz.: that no snippets of an author should be selected, but a whole volume or poem is given for study so that the children may acquire some knowledge of the author. And beside the reading of books the method has introduced the

study, by means of good reproductions, of the best pictures by the great masters, ancient and modern, thus combining History and Art and opening a new world to the children.

This widening of the mind and the interests which come with it do not at all encroach on the time given to such valuable subjects as needlework, music and drawing, and cooking and such other hobbies as dancing and carpentry and gardening and the learning of poetry and even the writing of it; when all the children are interested and busily engaged in teaching themselves there is no time wasted; the main curriculum is completed in the morning, leaving all the afternoon free for these pastimes.

Here it may be well to quote again from the book. On p. 241 Miss Mason recapitulating says: "The children, not the teachers, are the responsible persons," and Miss Mason from the beginning has always insisted on each child being recognised as *a person*.

"The children do the work by self effort. The teachers give the uplift of their sympathy in the work and where necessary elucidate, sum up or enlarge, but the actual work is done by the scholars.

These read in a term from one thousand to between two and three thousand pages according to age and class in a large number of set books. The quantity set for each lesson allows of only a single reading."

The reading is tested by narration, or by writing on any
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test passage. There is no revision before an examination; too much ground has been covered. But what the children have read they know, and can write on any part of it with ease and fluency in vigorous English and they usually spell well. Some write better on history, some on science; some do best in arithmetic, others in literature, but practically all know the answers to the set questions.

Finally the examinations are not for places or prizes, but just to make sure that the children have really assimilated what they have read. The love of knowledge carries them forward with no need for any added stimulus, and no explanations and elucidations are so helpful as the child's own pondering over his book, except where he himself asks for help.

"That children are born persons is the first article of the educational *credo* which I am concerned to advance" says Miss Mason, and she adds: "this implies that they come to us with power of attention, avidity for knowledge, channels of thought, nice discrimination in books, even before they can read, and the power of dealing with many subjects." "The methods I have indicated," she adds, "are especially suited for large classes. What is called 'the sympathy of numbers' stimulates the class and the work goes with added impetus, each child is eager to take part in narration or to do written work well. By the way, only short test answers are required in writing so that the labour of correction is minimized."

After seeing for myself several of the schools which are fortunate enough to be working on this method the most striking thing to me was the universal look of brightness and intelligent interest which showed itself in all the faces of the children in every class.

As Miss Mason puts it "It is good that the grand elementary principle of pleasure should be discovered in unexpected places, in what is too often the drudgery of the schoolroom." On visiting a class at work it is abundantly evident that there is nothing but delight in their studies and eagerness to get forward depicted on one countenance after another both among the girls

and the boys: and it becomes evident when you come to examine their work closely, that children of every class come into the world with equal

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brains; circumstances may help one more than another and heredity has more freedom to tell in some than in others, but the children are born equal in brain-power in all classes, and only want the opportunity of shewing it, and this opportunity the Mason method of education as applied in Elementary Schools is giving them.

¹ Readers of the PARENTS' REVIEW may like to see from time to time some of the Reviews of Miss Mason's last book, which are published with due acknowledgment to the Editors of the various papers.

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