

EXAMINATIONS AND THE P.N.E.U.

MISS MASON'S METHOD OF EDUCATION
IN A BOYS' PREPARATORY SCHOOL.¹

By A. V. C. MOORE.

I HAVE been asked to say something about the practical side of Miss Mason's method in a boys' preparatory school and so I propose to put before you some of the results of my own experience in running a preparatory school on P.N.E.U. lines for just over six years. I must first of all mention that previously I had taught in several preparatory schools and had felt so discouraged by the general apathy of the boys and by the poor results not only of my own teaching, but of that of others, that I decided, with the help of my wife, an ex-student of the House of Education, Ambleside, to start a boys' preparatory school which should be quite definitely a P.N.E.U. school, that is to say, a school governed as much as possible by Miss Mason's method. By Miss Mason's method I mean her philosophy of Education as expounded in her books. On reading her books, one could see quite clearly that her method was, in theory at any rate, comprehensive and magnificent and that in her discovery of vast forces of mind in children she went to the heart of a problem that must have perplexed so many teachers. Briefly, the problem may be stated as follows: "Why is it that although all children have in them a wonderful desire for knowledge up to the age of about six or seven, yet after that age this desire tends to disappear?" I maintain from practical experience that Miss Mason has not only solved this problem, but has built up a wonderful method of education by which children's minds may grow naturally in the right direction, and that she has made it possible for parents to watch this growing of their children's minds and to take an important part in it. It is not my intention to try and expound Miss Mason's philosophy. To understand this one [p 442]

must study her books carefully; but if I can mention some of the fallacious notions about the P.N.E.U. that I myself have come up against in my small experience, I may perhaps be able to help one or two who are anxious to start work similar to mine, or to clear away doubts in the minds of any parents who view the P.N.E.U. methods with a certain amount of distrust, owing to its mismanagement in some quarters.

The most damaging notion that I found in the minds of many people was that the Common Entrance Examination to Public Schools was a serious obstacle to the P.N.E.U. method, or rather, what was more serious still, that the P.N.E.U. method was a serious obstacle to the Common Entrance Examination. Would the boys be able to pass this dreaded examination for certain, and would they pass it well? As I could not in the early days answer this question practically, all my boys being too young for the examination, I had to wait a few years until I could. I can now say quite definitely that P.N.E.U. boys do *not* find the Common Entrance Examination an obstacle but rather take it easily as being an examination on only a small portion of their mental equipment. I would like to explode once and for all the fallacious idea that the P.N.E.U. method makes it difficult for a boy to get into his public school. A properly trained P.N.E.U. boy has little chance of showing what he knows in the Common Entrance Examination, which is an examination for which boys certainly can be and often are crammed.

In addition to Languages and Mathematics which are the chief Common Entrance subjects, and which Miss Mason recognised to be of great importance in the school curriculum, I have in my school the following P.N.E.U. subjects for which a definite programme of work is set and sent out each term by the Director of the Parents' Union School and which cannot possibly be crammed: Bible Lessons, English History, French History, General History, Literature, Citizenship, Geography, Natural History, General Science, Picture Study, Drawing, Singing, Musical Appreciation and Handicrafts. My hours are not any longer than the usual preparatory school hours, and I do not neglect games and athletics but am very keen indeed on these. I have been asked: "How do you possibly find the time to fit in all these things?" The answer is that the periods of work are short, never longer than half an hour: that the boys show an astounding keenness in all school work and a wonderful power

[p 443]

of concentration due to constant narration of a passage after only one reading: that there is continual variety and the boys do not get tired: that there is no revision: that the interest and concentration gained by what I may call the chief P.N.E.U. subjects, are also brought to bear upon what I may call my Common Entrance subjects, Languages and Mathematics, and consequently much less time is required for these than one would have imagined. There is no real evening preparation, by which I mean preparation of some lesson to be heard the next day in school hours, but boys of the two upper forms have this time for extra lessons in any Common Entrance or scholarship subject that needs special attention. This evening work is mostly written work done by the boys without help but corrected immediately. I have been asked by some people: "How will your boys be able to take to a couple of hours' preparation at their public school, if they have done none at their preparatory schools?" The answer is that my boys spend a very large portion of their school hours doing work for themselves without any assistance, and that they are thus more than qualified to deal with a couple of hours' preparation, and also that their evening work is very much in the nature of preparation except that it is not allowed to upset the next day's lessons. A great deal of time is wasted in many schools over so-called preparation of a lesson to be heard next morning. Let me take as an example an English History preparation. A boy may be given a chapter of history of five or six pages, and half an hour to deal with it. His plan is to go over it several times until he thinks he knows it, or he may not bother about it at all, and trust to his good fortune on the morrow. When the time comes for the lesson on the next day, the master may question his class orally to find out whether they know their preparation. He will be expected to assign a mark to each boy who makes an answer, although his questions cannot possibly be of the same difficulty. The lesson will have to be long, to allow of all this procedure. If there is any time left after the master has read out the marks and dealt out impositions to those unfortunates who have been found guilty of skipping their prep., he may perhaps teach the boys a little on their particular piece of history, and the boys may or may not listen. I am aware that I am describing a very bad way of conducting a lesson, but my experience has been that it is not an uncommon one. As opposed to this I would describe a

[p 444]

P.N.E.U. history lesson of half an hour, with *no* preparation beforehand. A chapter of history is read aloud round the form or perhaps silently, and then one boy is called on to tell what he has read. He does this to the best of his ability; the others are listening eagerly and are longing to

fill in anything the boy has left out, and this they are allowed to do when the boy has finished narrating; it is sheer joy to the teacher to see the keenness. If there is any particular point or any special date which the teacher wants to emphasize, he does this after the boys have dealt with their lesson first of all themselves, but he is very sparing of his remarks and makes no attempt to teach the boys. They get their knowledge for themselves from their books. There are no marks at all during the term, but only at the exam. [sic] at the end of term as a help to testing progress. Marks seem to be a necessity in most schools in order to get the boys to work, but they work for the marks and not for knowledge. There is no need for marks with the P.N.E.U. method as the interest is aroused without them. At the end of each term an examination is sent out by the Director of the Parents' Union School. The astonishing way in which boys of all forms pour out their knowledge can only be believed by those who have seen it.

Another fallacious notion is "that P.N.E.U. is only meant for girls, or for small boys up to the age of nine or ten, but after that age it is too soft: that boys need a real preparatory school to put some manhood into them in order to prepare them for the hard life of their public schools. [sic] I am unable to understand how a well-balanced mind, filled with real vigorous life and joy in knowledge, can do otherwise than produce manliness. A boy who grows up with a love for knowledge, for pictures, poetry or music may be less savage than he was before, but need not be less manly. Miss Mason's method does not exclude games, physical training, boxing, etc. Her method embraces a profoundly deep training of body and mind, and does not in the least mean interference with the athletic training of a boy. It would surely be very difficult, if not impossible, to devise a scheme of education more comprehensive than hers. What about beauty in the life of the small schoolboy? Is he to think only in terms of football matches, sweets, motor-cars, cinemas and jazz-bands? Is not the life of a child of two years old full of beauty and wonder? Is he to be starved of this beauty and wonder when he begins so-called "lessons"?

[p 445]

What about the beauty of music, of pictures, of poetry, and the beauty of the earth and the heavens in the life of a schoolboy? Children love to sing and should not be given trash to sing. They love to hear good music. They love pictures, and should be gradually made acquainted with the best. One has only to see the real joy of a child of two or three years old in wild flowers to realise the appeal that the beauty of the earth makes. Is all this love of beauty to be starved because a boy is at school? Miss Mason's method of education includes all these things.

The P.N.E.U. method is often recommended for difficult or so-called backward children, that is when other schemes have failed. One hears it said as a last hope: "Why not try the P.N.E.U.?" This sometimes gives the impression that it is rather tame and soft for normal children. Of course this notion is all wrong. The training of the will power, the habit of concentration, and the development of the reasoning powers, the many avenues of interest opened up,—all these things are naturally helpful to a backward boy, but they are in a greater degree still helpful to average and clever boys. The clever boys obtain a stability of outlook and a balance of mind of extreme importance to them when they begin specialising rather early at their public schools. A boy of slow development will probably get more from this method than any other method, but I do want to point out specially that, in my own experience, I have found that average and clever boys gain in every way tremendously from the education provided by

the P.N.E.U.

The question is sometimes asked: "What is the best age for a boy to begin his P.N.E.U. education?" The answer is: "As soon as he is born if possible, but at any rate, as soon as possible!" Miss Mason's book, *Home Education*, deals with the whole of education from infancy until the age of nine. It would be good if an endeavour could be made to plan the whole of the educational life of a boy in this method in one continuous chain, at any rate up to the time a boy reaches his public school.

I am myself so convinced that Miss Mason's method acts on the minds of boys as a marvellous force for good that I am anxious to see it taken up in preparatory schools as a whole. There are many difficulties in the way, one or two of which I shall point out, but, to my mind, one of the best ways of

[p 446]

overcoming these difficulties is for parents *and* Public Schools to make a demand for P.N.E.U. teaching, and a growing demand will help to create the supply.

As regards the difficulties of starting the method in preparatory schools, there is, I feel, at present not very much interest in the matter. At the conference of Preparatory School Headmasters, held before Christmas, a discussion was opened by one member on "P.N.E.U. methods, their meaning and possible application to Preparatory Schools." By the way the speaker opened this discussion, one could see that he himself had grasped fully the main points of Miss Mason's teaching, and that he realised fully the great importance of it, but the discussion itself revealed little interest in the matter. In the short account of the Conference, as given in the *Times Educational Supplement* of December 31st, everything that took place was mentioned except this discussion on the P.N.E.U., which was not even referred to! This lack of interest is natural, since each headmaster runs his school in the way he feels best and he does not like the idea of any outside interference. The Common Entrance Examination can be passed without any knowledge of the P.N.E.U. The majority of preparatory schools are flourishing and are quite successful in the Common Entrance Examination, and in the winning of some scholarships in Public Schools. What need is there then for any alteration? I do not wish to belittle the work done in preparatory schools. Much of it is very excellent, but I do feel that in the teaching of English subjects, the adoption of the P.N.E.U. curriculum would be a great gain to them, and would not hinder progress in languages and mathematics, but rather help these on, and I am sure that the astonishing interest and joy in school work, and the power of concentration shown by boys whose minds have been fed on this curriculum would amaze many a headmaster. The effect of a much wider mental outlook is very great upon the way in which boys tackle the difficulties of Latin, French, Greek and Mathematics. I myself find the power of narration of great use in the teaching of French and use it also in the teaching of Latin and Greek. The interference with the liberty of the preparatory school master by the P.N.E.U. authorities is so small compared with the tremendous progress the method ensures that it need not be considered at all.

I gather that apparently some headmasters wish to be able

[p 447]

to have the P.N.E.U. programmes of work and to make as much or as little use of them as they wish, and when this request is refused, they look upon the P.N.E.U. as a sort of secret society possessing a wonderful magic in the way of teaching, but giving it only to a few initiated;

whereas the P.N.E.U. are only longing to spread their knowledge. They are naturally afraid of their method being only partly used without reference to Miss Mason's profound teaching, and such misuse of the method only brings it into discredit and does a great deal of harm. As this is such an important point, I will now quote Miss Mason's own words on the matter from her book, *An Essay towards a Philosophy of Education*:

"We do not invite Heads of schools to take up work lightly which implies a sound knowledge of certain principles and as faithful a practice. The easy tolerance which holds smilingly that everything is as good as everything else, that one educational doctrine is as good as another, that, in fact, a mixture of all such doctrines gives pretty safe results,—this sort of complacent attitude produces lukewarm effort and disappointing progress. I feel strongly that to attempt to work this method without a firm adherence to the few principles laid down, would be not only idle but disastrous. 'Oh, we could do anything with books like those,' said a master; he tried the books and failed conspicuously because he ignored the principles. We teachers are really modest and diffident and are not prepared to say that we are more capable of handling a subject than is a carefully chosen author who writes especially upon that subject. 'Yes, but,' says a young and able teacher, 'we know better how to reach the minds of children than does the most eloquent author speaking through the dull pages of a book.' This is a contention of which we have finally disposed. We have shown that the mass of knowledge, evoking vivid imagination and sound judgment, acquired in a term from the proper books, is many times as great, many times more thoroughly visualised by the scholars than had they waited upon the words of the most able and effective teacher. It is not that teachers are not eminently capable, but because information does not become knowledge unless a child perform the 'act of knowing' without the intervention of another personality."

Another great difficulty is that of securing competent Assistant Masters. Girls' schools are more fortunate, as they can obtain trained teachers from Ambleside, but in boys' schools there seems to be an idea that training is unnecessary. If anyone could start a training college for P.N.E.U. men teachers, where they could thoroughly investigate Miss Mason's principles, I am sure he would be doing a great and very useful work. There is a notion in the minds of some people that P.N.E.U. children are little prigs, because they know so much and have too good an opinion of themselves. I must admit that here there is a real danger, and this is one of the reasons why it is *absolutely necessary* to have teachers who have gone to Miss
[p 448]

Mason's books and studied her philosophy, in order to set about practical work in the right way and with the right spirit. When the method is misdirected it *is* possible that little prigs may be produced.

I venture to express an opinion that if we of the Preparatory Schools could, as a body, genuinely apply Miss Mason's method of Education in our schools, we should be able to present to the Public Schools boys more alert mentally and ready to work, and we should thus make the heavy task of the Public Schools easier. Too much is heard nowadays of the failure of the Public Schools and not enough about their splendid work, but what about the education

given by the Private Schools who have the boys at a most impressionable age, and then send them on to Public Schools? Who knows what wonderful powers of good are lost to the world, through the mental starvation of children between the ages of six and fourteen?

To take one example only of what is being done at the Public Schools, I would like to mention the very considerable progress in musical education. Would not the careful training of our preparatory schoolboys in a proper musical atmosphere make the task of the Public Schools' Music Masters lighter and more productive of good results? The P.N.E.U. curriculum has one of the great composers down for study each term. In my school the boys hear some music by the set composer each week, they also have class-singing twice a week, and one lesson a week in sight-singing and general musical knowledge.

Finally, the holidays are rather a problem that needs tackling. Some boys go back a long way during holidays owing partly to the cessation of a regular life and discipline, but chiefly owing to too much feeding of the body and too little feeding of the mind. Under our present system of boarding school education, parents hand over their boys to the schoolmaster for nine months in the year and have them at home for three months of the year. They sometimes complain that the holidays are too long, and they are glad to get the boys back at school again. Now some sort of mental feeding is necessary during holidays, if boys are not to lose some of the results of the term. P.N.E.U. members could do some good here. No doubt it would be hard work for the parents, but yet it would be worth while. The P.N.E.U. method of education offers a comprehensive scheme for both term and holiday, a scheme interesting to both children and parents. Many parents would

[p 449]

enjoy reading some of the books their children have at school, and thereby forge a link of interest of invaluable worth in bringing up their children. They might endeavour to get a greater amount of regularity into the holiday life and give some time for reading books set for holiday time, or others of their own choice. The children must notice so often that their parents are not interested in the things they are being taught at school, *e.g.*, music, pictures, and literature generally, and they are bound to suffer. The influence of mind upon mind is the greatest factor in education, and in holiday time the influence of the parents' minds on their children is of the greatest importance. I speak as a parent as well as a schoolmaster. For small boys of the class which fills our Private Schools and eventually our Public Schools, this is an age of too much restlessness, too much entertainment of a lazy nature, too much motoring, etc. The Preparatory School boy is an exceedingly difficult being to deal with, without some comprehensive scheme which shall feed his mind on the right lines without interruption and sliding back. The P.N.E.U. offers such a comprehensive scheme for parents and children. I would urge all those who have not made a study of Miss Mason's method to read her books, especially her last book, *An Essay towards a Philosophy of Education*.

I conclude my paper by humbly doing homage, as a teacher, to the memory of Miss Mason, a great educational genius, who has given joy and fulness of life to thousands of children and who is to help many, many more thousands of children in the future to have life more abundantly.

¹ A paper read at the P.N.E.U. Meeting on January 3rd, 1928, in connection with The Conference of Educational Associations at University College, Gower Street.