# THE P.N.E.U. METHOD IN SUNDAY SCHOOLS.[1]

By H. E. Wix.

I feel bound to begin by confessing that I know very little, indeed nothing, about teaching in Sunday School. I have never had any experience of it, so I shall probably make a number of mistakes this afternoon through sheer ignorance. But please be patient with me, and afterwards in the discussion, do not scruple to say where I have suggested impossibilities and so on.

Now one or two people have told me that the present methods of teaching in Sunday Schools do not give complete satisfaction everywhere. The little I know amounts to nothing, so I am not going to criticise or cast reflections on any method, but I understand that there is an extraordinary amount of freedom as regards what is taught in Sunday Schools and how it is taught. So I have been asked to tell you, as clearly as possible, about a method which has been in use now so many years that you might even call it old-fashioned. But its results are admittedly wonderful.

But first perhaps you should know why I, such an ignoramus in these Sunday School matters, should have been asked to explain any method to you who know so very much more than I do.

Some of you have perhaps heard of the Parents' National Educational Union, better known possibly as the P.N.E.U., or of Miss Mason, its founder, or of Ambleside students, those women trained by her to teach according to her principles. It is only as an Ambleside student of fourteen years' experience that I dare to face you. And though I have not taught large classes in Sunday Schools, I have given Scripture lessons to children of all ages up to eighteen, on four days a week regularly. And in Elementary Schools this Ambleside or P.N.E.U. method has been used with



most striking success—and that by teachers not trained at Ambleside. So you see anyone can teach on this method who will take the trouble. The real difficulty lies in its simplicity. The teacher with no P.N.E.U. training finds it so extraordinarily difficult to do little enough, to leave enough to the children.

One hears from many sources nowadays, certain regular complaints about children at their lessons—from other than Sunday Schools—that for instance, the children are not enthusiastically keen about their work—the young ones are perhaps, but as they grow older their attention is more and more difficult to capture and keep, their interest less and less lively and bright. And yet, when, in all our history, did teachers work as hard as now? But many of our ancestors would blush at the results! Another complaint that I so often hear, is about the children's memories. "I make them learn it over and over again, and they don't know it at the end;" or, "I give them lovely lessons, and take no end of pains over them, and yet—well, they don't seem thrilled somehow, and next week they only remember the bits that don't matter." And so the progress cannot be rapid—and yet the time is all too short.

You may none of you ever have these difficulties; but I have been enquiring among Sunday School teachers as far as possible, and these objections do not seem unknown. Afterwards, in the discussion time, I hope other objections or difficulties will come up.

But I feel sure there is a common cause underlying all, or nearly all, the difficulties of the modern teacher. It is that we underestimate the child. In olden days people thought the dryer the lesson, the better exercise for the brain. But nowadays lessons to be up-to-date must be amusing, full of ingenious devices which "amuse while they instruct," and so on. I am sure there is no need to describe these lessons, we all know the type. They go on the principle that children, because of their youth, have weak brains, incapable of assimilating undecorated knowledge.

Now Mr. Fisher, the Minister for Education, said in a speech a few weeks ago, "It is as well in teaching to think of the children as cleverer than yourself, with less knowledge, but more imagination." The word "cleverer" does not quite satisfy me, but we all know what Mr. Fisher means. Now the underlying idea of the P.N.E.U. method I am going to tell you about is just that. A child is a person; with mind,—intellect and spirit,—all there, all clamouring for food and exercise, all ready to grow and expand, if only—such an important "if"—we do not hinder them.

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What a responsibility for us teachers! Have you ever noticed what our Lord says about the bringing up of children? "Suffer them to come unto Me," "Offend them (hinder them) not," "Forbid them not," "Take heed that ye despise not these little ones." It is really remarkable how He is always reminding us of their greatness—and yet, so many of us still have that lesson unlearnt.

I want to tell you as clearly as I can—please store up questions to ask and talk over afterwards!—exactly what the P.N.E.U. method is.

It differs but little for different ages of children. The younger ones learn only the simpler tales of the Old Testament and the Gospel story as told by the first three Evangelists, but after the age of 12 they take the Old Testament in more detail and the Gospel of St. John and the Acts are also studied. Later on the Prophets and Epistles are taken in fuller detail. Young children who cannot read fluently have the Bible read to them, but after eight years old they can generally read for themselves.

Now may I give an imaginary lesson to a class of children of let us say, seven to nine. In such a class I should read the Bible aloud, the children following in their own books, or, the younger ones, merely listening. A very little time ago I took the Parable of the Sower with children of just this age.

First of all I should connect with last week's lesson. This is best done by asking a question or two—broad questions, simply asked to see whether the children remember the story, whether it is all still fresh in their memory. This should take perhaps two minutes. Then a very short, vivid description of the scene of the Parable; the spring of the year, the gay garments of the crowd, the sower perhaps in the distance. (May I interrupt myself here and say that one of the very best ways of getting the children to visualise the scene is to tell them to shut their eyes—then vividly and shortly describe the scene—say for instance: A hot, blue sky, golden corn, with poppies and a sandy path through the field—now children can you see it? The scene they call up is better than a picture, far, far better than the blackboard sketch, and has many other merits.) This introduction must be short, and no things are shown to the children—such as grains of corn, for example. Such things only distract them from the main theme. Then all the children—except those who cannot read at all—open their Bibles, and the teacher reads

the story aloud, slowly and as beautifully as she can, as if it were quite the most interesting
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thing he or she had ever read. At the end of the parable (I should not read the explanation now) the teacher turns to any child: “Tommy, will you begin to tell the story I have just read? See how much of the very Bible words you can remember.” He begins, and after a few sentences the teacher turns to some other child: “Now Mary, what happened next?” and so on till the story is finished. All the children will, if the class is small, get a chance of ‘narrating,’ as we call it, but no child knows when he may not be called on and all will listen eagerly to see if Tommy or Mary leaves out anything. During this “narration” the teacher listens, and cheers on with her visible interest. She does not interrupt, does not even correct, but if a narrator goes wrong, she can turn to another child and say, “Can you remember what happened next?”

The narration over, there comes that so important part of all Scripture lessons, the “new thought of God” to be learnt. The teacher will ask this child or that, “Who do you think the Sower was?” and “What then is the seed?” Perhaps you think this too difficult for such young children? Remember, they are cleverer than their teacher! But the teacher has more experience, and will guide the children rightly, and after some little discussion, she can tell the children that there is something particularly wonderful about this parable, for we have Christ’s own interpretation of it. She will then read it, as before, without interruption, without talk, and at the end, other children will be called upon to narrate this too, just as they did the story itself.

This parable is so full of lessons for us to take to heart and ponder over, that it will be easy for the children to find many, with the very smallest amount of help from the teacher. In some cases, of course, this most important part of the lesson must come from the teacher; but children remember best, ponder over more, what they have discovered for themselves. Again, sometimes it is wise to re-read the Bible portion at the end of the lesson—if for instance there has been so animated a discussion that the sacred words are clouded by the mist of talk. Then next Sunday the teacher might begin: “Last week we read about the Sower and his seeds, can anyone remember one kind of soil the seed fell on?” I know a crowd of small arms would rise, and the wise teacher would choose a child who had been a little silent perhaps last week. For care must be taken in a large class that every child has a turn in course of time.

It is nothing less than wonderful how lessons given in this
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way are remembered from week to week. Children that I have taught often remember, far better than I do, the lesson they had from me—I should say *with* me—a week ago. This is natural, for they did the work; I listened and cheered on; they had to concentrate their whole minds on the story; in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, it would only be read once, and then, in the narration, what concentration is needed! Try for yourselves; read a page or two of an interesting book, and then narrate it to yourself. It is not memory; it is concentrated attention, and if you did it constantly you would be amazed how your powers of concentration would increase. But you read only once, remember!

You will have noticed that except at the beginning of the lesson, there is no questioning. Instead of being continually egged on by leading questions, or irritated by niggly questions, the child tells you the lesson all by himself; certainly no more sure test of knowledge could be demanded. None of us knows a thing till we can tell all about it; if we want to know something thoroughly we, unconsciously perhaps, narrate it to ourselves, constantly answering the

reiterated question, “What came next? What came next?” Do you see how a child’s vocabulary increases who “narrates”? No more set answers to set questions, no more jerky monosyllables, but a good, flowing account of what was read in good English—you remember they narrate “in the Bible words as much as possible”—and what finer English is there? Then also you will have noticed that there were no fascinating objects for the children to look at. They know what corn is like and any country child has seen a sower sowing. But they should visualise the scene. And Mr. Fisher said, you remember, that a child has more imagination than a grown-up. If an illustration or explanation of something is needed, we use the bit of india-rubber, the ruler and pencil that are lying about, and a few words and the children’s imagination fills in the rest. And what about pictures? A good one—Millais’ “Sower” is beautiful—may be sometimes a help, but what child wants a picture of Daniel in the Lions’ Den, of Saul escaping in the basket, and so on? Unless of course he has been taught from some “watered-down” version of the story which doesn’t give enough details for his imagination to picture it all. A child who can tell you the whole story, vivid touches and all, needs no picture; he can *see* it. Indeed many a child I have known much disappointed by pictures. I once showed Watts’ “For he had great possessions,” and the child’s comment was, “But he was a young man, and beautiful; that man is quite
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old.” But I would all the same use pictures sometimes, after the lesson.

Perhaps it will have struck you that a lesson given on this method must be short. It must; none of us can work at one subject, to the top of our bent, for long at a time, and Scripture lessons in the P.U. School last only twenty minutes. A child cannot concentrate his mind for too long, and short lessons produce, firstly more knowledge, and secondly, more power of attention than the longer and necessarily slacker lesson.

But I understand that Sunday School lasts for about fifty minutes or a little less; so that the rest of the time would have to be filled up. Well, here I have a suggestion to make, not my own, but I am very warmly in favour of it. Why not use the rest of the time in reading aloud to the children some interesting and well-written book? Say “Pilgrim’s Progress,” a life of Livingstone, an account of present-day mission work—a well-written account, nothing “goody-goody” nor watered down for the children, but some good, bracing narrative. And always have narration, just as I have tried to explain. If only—a big IF, I fear, you can manage it, it would of course be splendid to let the elder ones read quietly to themselves. But that is a detail that it is too soon to discuss.

Poetry could also be read in this time, for few things open the doors of the spirit and the thoughtful mind as poetry does, provided it is of the best and the field covered is wide. There are in these days such splendid collections of real treasures that the responsibility of the teacher is greatly lessened.

I would like to add a few hints. This method is so simple, based on such simple rules that therein lies perhaps its greatest difficulty. But if we can bear in mind that we wish the children to learn how to learn, that will be a help. If we wish to teach a baby to walk, the baby must himself do the walking and it does not help him a bit if we walk. But it is a help for him if we are there ready to cheer him on and save him from just the hardest tumbles. So we must leave the work to the children, and their brains, their minds, their spirits, will grow by exercise, and grow as they should grow, for we under God’s guidance shall be able to help them into the right way. So here is the first thing to remember. Let the children do the work. That is, let them narrate,

do not question. Don't interrupt and don't hurry the child.

Then again (I am not now speaking from personal experience,
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but from someone else's), let those children narrate who are keenest. Do not force the shy and retiring; they will all become keen soon.

Again, do not expect flowing narration at once; it is difficult.

Again, do not read too much at a time, particularly to begin with. Slow and sure is very specially the case in beginning this method. As nothing is ever read twice, no time is ever lost. So that two or three pages of a book or some twenty verses or so of the Bible are enough.

Again, no revising is done before examinations. I have brought with me some examination answers written by children of the Elementary Schools. These have been set by an "outside" examiner on the work learnt during the last three months, and have been answered by the children without revision and entirely unaided.

Now I expect you are wondering if we work entirely without the help of books, for I have never mentioned them! Of course we do not. The teacher's part is to prepare his lesson with all the thoroughness possible. If you want me to suggest any books, I can very heartily recommend you Dr. Paterson Smyth's "Bible for the Young" Series. I believe the Church of Ireland Sunday School books are splendid; I have only one myself and it happens to be by Paterson Smyth, and is certainly a living book and therefore a tremendous help.

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[1] A Paper read at a meeting of Sunday School teachers.