

3. "Certain difficulties which seem to attend our method of taking Narration."

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The difficulties I shall deal with have been suggested from conversations with parents, teachers, and others interested in education.

The difficulty which appears to loom largest is that the books are too difficult in long and unfamiliar words and classic names. To a large extent that difficulty is imaginary. We are dealing with young children, and these, with a good teacher, will delight in those very words. Children have an instinctive power by which they are able to sense the meaning of a whole passage and even some difficult words. Any of us can think ourselves back to the time when our older friends at home thought we were such mere babies that we could not possibly understand what they were saying in their confidential chats to each other; but we did, and astonished them afterwards by asking such questions, which proved to them [p 567]

that we had absorbed the gist of their conversation. The following incident will show that classic names are anything but a terror to the young child. A boy of about seven in my school the other day asked his mother why she had not given him one of those pretty names they heard in the stories at school. He thought Ulysses a much prettier name than his own name, Kenneth, and he further thought that the mother of his play-fellow would have done much better if she had called him Achilles instead of Allan.

There is more of reality in the next difficulty—that of starting the story—and when that has been overcome, the difficulty of adding sentence to sentence till the story is complete. For some years past there has been a practice to insist on an answer being given in the form of a sentence. There was difficulty in getting children to do that, and equal difficulty in its continued use, and it often appeared to me artificial and unnatural. In the initial formation of the sentence and of adding sentence to sentence, experience shows that in the Mason scheme the difficulty disappears quite as naturally as the infant's difficulty in first learning to talk. Given a delightful story of fairies, ogres and heroes, every boy wishes to be the hero and every girl the fairy. Add to this a sympathetic and enthusiastic teacher who, without being extreme, throws vitality, vigour and a vivacity into the story, and every child becomes eager to be allowed to narrate. Self-consciousness, the bane of many a life, is banished in the new atmosphere created and adapted at the teacher's will. The great majority of the children, after some practice, will find sentence-making become more and more easy, till it becomes spontaneous and a delight. The others become infected with the enthusiasm, and make real progress.

As in sentence making, so in all school work, that creation of the right atmosphere is of the highest importance in overcoming difficulties and carrying on the work to a successful issue. It is not often that an occasional visitor finds it at its best, and to a superficial observer the suggestion of such an atmosphere may seem a mere fancy.

Another difficulty which it has been thought may arise is the possibility of children becoming wearied and troublesome while listening to others. During the two years we have worked the scheme that difficulty has not arisen. As it bears on this point and the scheme generally, I may be pardoned for introducing a personal reminiscence. I have always been fortunate in my own teachers, i.e., those from whom I have learned and those from whom I still try to learn. The teachers of the child are selected [p 568]

for him; the adult should choose [sic] his own. One of our duties is to acquaint our scholars

with the best teachers for their future lives. My school-master was a man of exceptional ability as a teacher and a student. He had the loftiest ideals of the teacher's office, and he lived as near as may be to his ideals. But it is to the method of my Sunday School teacher that I would refer. From the age of six till nearly fourteen I was his scholar. During that time we studied all the important historical parts of the Old Testament, the four gospels, and the Acts of the Apostles. I would especially remark that, at that early age, besides the moral laws of Moses, we studied many of his ceremonial and hygienic laws, and discussed from those laws how religion bears upon the minutest details of every day life. Those lessons learned in those early youthful days have been invaluable to me ever since. His method was to have the portion for study read once. Each boy was expected to give in his own words part or parts of the reading without reference to the book. Next, each was expected to give what practical application could be inferred from the text, or what truth was conveyed. After that, any boy could question the teacher. Questions ended, the teacher would give approval or correction to the opinions expressed, and, if time permitted, he would give his opinions. But as a rule, we boys had done all the talking. Looking back on those lessons, I can recall them only with pleasure, and that it was illness alone that made me absent. We liked the narration, were interested, often amused, and were rarely wearied. The method was extremely like the Ambleside method, and by a strange coincidence, that gentleman's name was Mason. With some show of reason, I may claim that more than fifty years ago I was a Mason boy. At any rate, those hours were some of the happiest of my boyhood days.

That incident will be helpful also in answering the question: "Will the children remember?" I do not claim to remember every item, but I have a good working acquaintance with the incidents, and a storehouse in that mysterious realm we call sub-consciousness. There is a fear that children will not remember, and there is a reason behind that fear. The reason is that a teacher's reputation may depend on the power of memory of a few children. Every teacher of experience knows something of the uncertainties and vagaries of memory, for under the old system of driving the points of a lesson home by all sorts of methods, the teacher was often surprised to find that in a few weeks many children would fail to remember the salient points of a well-prepared and, as he thought, a [p 569]

well-given lesson. We have here a fruitful subject for discussion, and I will only add that the recorded opinions of teachers who have had years of experience in the new scheme should dispel that fear, for they tell us that the students trained under it do as well in the important examinations as the students from the Secondary Schools.

A difficulty which some have anticipated is the fear that the time will not be sufficient to do all the work set in the term, the particular instance given being the fear that there will not be time to train each child in narration to become efficient. But that difficulty has always existed. I cannot recall any period when I found time to do all the work in a class I had hoped to do. But to my mind that is a good position for a teacher. It ensures steady and persistent effort throughout the term. There is no need for feverish haste, for that means subsequent enervation, and there is no time for slackness, which soon means loss of tone.

This scheme has emphasised the importance of not having large classes. The Sunday School class to which I have referred never had more than ten scholars at one time. For our schools that number is too small. My opinion inclines to the class of about thirty children. That number will be enough for useful, stimulating rivalry and "esprit de corps."

If any are here who are undecided about adopting the scheme in view of the many

difficulties which seem to confront the inception, I would say to them that all the teachers I have met who have tried the scheme are unanimous in their wish never to return to the old system.

And if the difficulties are great, I would say, for the cause of education:—

“Strive, and hold cheap the strain;

Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge the throe!”

MISS GOLDING: “My remarks arise out of the paper that has just been read—certain difficulties which we have come in contact with. I must say that when the ‘Talisman’ was set for Form 3 I was really frightened. I said ‘The Talisman’—‘Oh, the ‘Talisman’—and my heart sank. But I read it and took it with the girls—Form 3—came across the same difficulties that Mr. Jones experienced, tried some of the same methods (using dictionaries was one, but this was no good)—now we have found the best way of dealing with Scott’s novels—read the *whole* book—and no abridgments. If we are going to have Scott read [p 570]

in our Schools—if form 3, 2a, and 2b are going to read Scott’s novels—then I never want to give them an abridged copy again!”

MISS CLARK, of Hatherop: “With regard to narration I should like to tell you my experience. In my School the children have had nothing of the kind. Before and at our last Examination at Easter one little boy who had just come out of the Infant Room was asked to write out a fairy tale that had just been read to him. This he was very keen on doing, and he continued to come out to me with the question, ‘May I have another piece of paper’—‘May I have another piece of paper,’ until he had had three pieces, and the whole of it was covered with the story for which he had 100 marks from Miss Mason. I find that with the other young children the scheme is working equally well. There is one little boy whom people coming into the School for the first time and asking him a question would think almost stupid, but he is not; only he takes a little time to think. When I ask him to tell me something of what I have been reading little Willie stands up, looks up into my face, and tells me just a *little* bit. Then there is a pause—I wait—and little Willie volunteers another sentence or two, but he *is* slow. If, however, I said ‘Oh I can’t wait for you, I must pass on to someone who can tell me the story more quickly’—that child would be squashed and the intelligence that is there, almost hidden, would develop into a slow and stupid child. It is so necessary to give the children time when they narrate, not to hurry them on to get someone else who is quicker. It is only by encouraging them by a little help forward when they are on the right track that we get them to do their work freely—and, in time, quickly. [sic]