EDUCATION IS A LIFE.

By H. E. WIX.

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TO nearly all of us here in this large gathering the words "Education is a life" are familiar, and all that Miss Mason meant by this saying we know well. It is good, however, even for those who know, to go back to fundamentals from time to time; we may find some aspects of them not quite as familiar as we thought.

"Education is a life" is the saying and the belief of an idealist, and all of us who are Miss Mason's followers are necessarily idealist. This is a word with two meanings—either it means a person who believes in the power of the idea as an active educative force, or it means a dreamer of idle dreams, of impossible Utopias.

This last definition comes, naturally, from the materialist. I imagine the materialist has existed ever since man first developed speech, but surely he is especially active just now? The daily newspapers, and the educational press, are full of his criticisms and suggestions, and many of them are excellent.

He tells us that what education really needs is reorganisation. Not only should the schools be re-organised, but the classes in them as well. Children must be graded most carefully according to their ability—dull children must be taught apart from the brighter children, so that each can go at his own pace and in his own way.

For a long while the materialist has been telling us that education must be more practical, must aim more definitely at fitting each child for after school life, must be more carefully adapted to suit the various types of child. No one is daring enough or extreme enough to ask for "vocational training" in school. Vocational training, mercifully, has a bad name, but we ought, according to the materialist, to give a "bias" to the teaching during the last years at school. Should this use of the word "bias" be new to any of you, you will be interested to hear a dictionary definition of it. A bias is "a lop-sided bowl or basin"—other meanings are given, but that one is too excellent to spoil; the more you think of it the better it is.

Of course, even we of the P.N.E.U., hardened idealists as we may be, will agree that much of this which I have outlined is good; such practical work, for example, as woodwork and metalwork for boys, and cookery for girls, is excellent. We want our children to know these things.

But when we consider the so-called practical methods used in teaching ordinary school subjects, we find that they take up a great deal of time. For example, it takes considerably longer to cover a map of England with cut-out pictures illustrating the various industries of the country than to learn them with the aid of a book or two and a map; it takes more time to dress models in historical costume than to study the development in pictures, or even to copy the pictures into some such book as our P.U.S. Books of Centuries. One of the results, therefore, of introducing all these practical methods is the cutting down the curriculum. Children must learn what the teacher believes to be good for them, what experience has shown him will be useful for them afterwards. Why waste precious time on teaching the children subjects which they will

never dream of pursuing when once their school days are over? Let the curriculum be simplified, let as much as possible be learnt practically, let the children be carefully classified, and have the schools systematically organised so that each grade of school has a clear objective, and the result will be—a good educational system.

And how reasonable it all is, how eminently sensible, and how efficient such an education should be. I wonder if, in fact, it would be? Plans which are perfect on paper sometimes fail to work; too much organisation is apt to kill the soul.

Let us contrast with this our idealist belief: "The only educable part of a person is his mind," or, again, "That only becomes knowledge to a person which his mind has acted upon"—not, you notice, "which his hands have made," nor "his eyes have seen"—no, merely "which his mind has acted upon." These are indeed the statements of an idealist!

Not that Miss Mason ignored or belittled the claims of handicraft, games, walks, physical exercise, or any of the practical subjects. They are all, she said, most valuable adjuncts to education and, as any teacher in P.U.S. knows, a considerable portion of each day is allotted to them, but they are not, Miss Mason considered, actually "education" as she understood it. [p 463]

If knowledge is therefore what the mind has acted upon, it seems to follow that the mind must have plenty of food, and the provision of this would seem to be our main task as educators.

Instead, then, of deciding what things we consider children ought to know in order to be able to work well later on, Miss Mason tells us to "set the child in the midst of us" and to try to find out what his needs are. She discovered for us that his needs are legion, even though he be a rather dull child, and furthermore that, if only we give them a wide enough choice he can—I imagine, unconsciously at first—retain what his mind needs and reject what is not wanted. So the slow child and the brilliant child are catered for equally.

It is as if a number of children are set to run across a field to see how many daisies each can pick. A quick child will gather a huge bunch, another child will have a good-sized posy at the end, while another again may only manage to get three or four flowers. This slow child may well have derived more pure enjoyment from the picking of so few daisies than even the child who gathered the biggest bunch. Anyway, he picked them himself, he stooped down for them, and saw—who knows how much? Just imagine the foolishness of the teacher who should press into his hand a bunch of picked daisies to add to his own precious few!

If the only life-giving food for the mind consists of ideas, where can we get them? We have all too few ourselves; how see to it that our children shall have more and so live more abundantly than we?

What is an idea? I fancy no one quite knows, but Miss Mason, I think, held that it was a living entity, born of mind, and even, strangely enough, born of two minds. No idea comes to fruition through the unaided action of one mind only. I suppose this is why no one person ever seems to invent anything.

We get ideas from intercourse with others, through conversation, from lectures, from books, music and pictures. Just as all books or all pictures are not good, so all ideas that we get from them are not good; we must choose those into which the writer or painter has put his best and most intrinsic work.

Will all be well then, if we as educators provide for the children's minds a liberal and

varied diet of the right kind?
[p 464]

No—there would appear to be many dangers in the way and it seems to me that this is one of the facts which differentiates P.N.E.U. from the many excellent educational theories that abound. In most of them one has to keep the rules and carry out the suggestions and the results will come. Now, it is perfectly possible to follow the programme of the P.U. School accurately and in all good faith—yet for the children at the end not indeed to be hungry, but possibly to have a form of mental indigestion. P.N.E.U. is no easily learnt system, grasped in an hour or two and applied with equal success by everybody. It is a matter of life and its roots grow deep.

It is impossible here and now to pursue these roots down to their origins, but I would like to suggest a few lines for thought.

Firstly, it would seem that a spiritual mind in the teacher is a necessity. Deeps call to deeps, spirit cannot be born of the flesh, life is of the spirit. "Great thoughts of great thinkers illuminate the children and they grow in knowledge." But sympathy with these great thinkers is necessary in the teacher; and he must realise that knowledge of God is the foundation of all knowledge. As Miss Mason put it: "Fundamental knowledge is the knowledge of God, and while we are ignorant of that principal knowledge, science, nature, literature and history, all remain dumb." Of course they do, for everything that we learn adds to our knowledge of God Himself. For this reason, if for no other, we dare not circumscribe the child's curriculum or limit it to what we consider likely to be useful to him when school days are over.

Then again, so much depends on the motive. Miss Mason says that we all work the better if there is an implied "must" in the background, and this fact is perhaps universally recognised—but so often the motives which are supplied are just those which rob the education of its life-giving powers.

For instance, we can deaden the child's desire for knowledge by giving him marks and prizes—the child works hard simply to get to the top of the class, to beat his school-fellows, to get the prize. When such titillations have been removed and the child can no longer get marks for his work, what remains? There has been no life-training in enjoyment of knowledge or of work for its own sake. "School subjects" are dropped with a sigh of relief; there is nothing to be gained by pursuing them further. The same attitude of mind is noticeable towards
[p 465]
daily work. Too many persons nowadays work merely for the reward; they do the least amount possible for the earning of the reward—marks, prizes, salary, or what you will. The thing that matters is the pay; "Let's get through with the work as quickly as possible, never mind if it's not very well done, no one will notice the details, no need to put too much energy into it as long as you can just keep your job and draw your wage." Enjoyment in work for its own sake is old-fashioned; nowadays it is a necessary evil, to be "got through" quickly in order to have plenty of free time—one can enjoy one's free time for there is so much to amuse one, but—enjoy one's work! Not very often. I do believe the blame for this lies with those schools where the knowledge offered has been so dull, so undesirable in the eyes of the children, that all sorts of stimuli have had to be used. Some of them are so palpably thin that I believe the children must often laugh at them in their sleeves!

Even to work for examinations can be semi-starvation. We have to accept the evil of

examinations up to a certain point, but mercifully, few children are now expected to take any before the first school's examination. When an examination, however, is the aim, so much that is interesting has to be dropped, so much that one longs to explore has to be left; it is not in the syllabus; it will not help us to satisfy the examiners. Even in P.U. Schools it is quite possible to hold up the terminal examination as a bogey in front of the children and so ruin the whole term's work—turn the good food rancid, so to speak!

Then again, in some instances, children will work hard in order to give pleasure to their teacher because they do love her so much. Miss Mason warns us many times against the exhausting effect on the child of an over-powering personality in the teacher and the parasitic habit of mind which results. In extreme cases it may even make a girl incompetent to conduct her own life; her personality cannot develop, nor her will grow strong. It is girls such as this who never learn to say "No"—who take the line of least resistance, sometimes with dire results. Boys are doubtless less suggestible, but they are by no means immune.

Closely allied to this danger, though not so unhealthy, is the attitude of mind in the teacher who says, "*I'll see* to it that you *shall* learn it properly." He is thus taking upon himself just the very burden which, as a training for life, the

[p 466]

children should bear. To learn or not to learn is their responsibility and their privilege; by making the effort for themselves they gain in strength and stature every time.

You may possibly hardly agree with me in the importance I attach to my next point. I think teacher and taught must learn and adventure and enjoy their work *together*. The teacher is not and should not be a wonderful learned super-being on a pedestal, but a student, still learning, still happy in the learning, still filled with wonder at the beauty of it.

This is the attitude towards knowledge that keeps us young. Too many of us stop learning, from laziness sometimes, and then we begin to grow old and out of date, out of touch and sympathy with the children and young people we live among. Miss Mason says, "No one can employ leisure fitly whose mind is not employed actively every day." How very true that is! How many persons there are whose minds are dull stagnations, from mere lack of use! They never do anything which requires real effort of mind. Many of them doubtless passed through school with the surface of their mind but lightly stirred, but others have, from one cause or another, slipped into stagnation. One of the greatest benefits which the P.U.S. programmes have bestowed has been on the teachers—they have revived in them the desire to learn, they have made them realise their ignorance (a lesson we all need to learn), they have made students of them again, learning humbly and happily alongside their pupils.

Again, the teacher who wishes to understand P.N.E.U., has to realise that he is not *in* authority, but *under* authority, just as his pupils are. His *knowledge* of that authority is greater, for his experience is wider and longer, but he may not set himself above authority any more than the children may. It is good that the children should realise this; it adds to their self respect, makes them realise the full meaning of "law-abiding." And what a heavy load is lifted from the teacher who has learnt what it means to be under authority!

Now, let us look more closely at that saying of Miss Mason's which has already been quoted once: "That only becomes knowledge which the mind has acted upon." This, of course, means "narration," and includes much besides. For instance, to quote again: "One of the chief functions of education is the establishment of such ways of thinking in our children as shall

issue in good and useful living, clear thinking,
[p 467]
æsthetic enjoyment and, above all, in religious life." And again: "Few of the offices of education are more important than that of preparing men to distinguish between their rights and duties." "To think fairly requires knowledge as well as consideration." Then there are also those two "necessary articles of our equipment, opinions and principles."

Now all this cannot possibly be attained merely through wide reading and narration. It has been said of P.N.E.U. method, that by it the teacher is reduced to a mere cypher. On the contrary, the responsibility of the P.N.E.U. teacher is immense. Perhaps in the home schoolroom it is difficult to realise how much the children gain through the free discussion during the daily walks and at the dinner table. School life, being at its best a little artificial, has to make room for those discussions, and I am inclined to think that their importance is not always sufficiently realised. Before the lesson is over the teacher must see to it that "the vital idea" has been given—the thought that will remain in the mind and set it wondering. Here lies a great responsibility for the P.N.E.U. teacher; it is not for him to tell the children what to think, what opinion to form—far indeed from it, but he has to see that the living spark is there and is vivifying the lesson.

If we omit all this and are content with good narration, children, and indeed the teachers too, are apt to feel that they know all there is to know. The pages have been read and have been well narrated. The child feels delicious satisfaction in a task well performed. If this is constantly repeated, pride of knowledge can become a real danger. A P.U.S. child is reported to have said in answer to a question: "We narrate and then we know," an excellent answer, but perhaps only a half truth. For we must also *think* and *wonder*, form opinions, reason, compare and contrast—in short, let our minds act upon the knowledge which we have gained. Such "thinking over" with a wise teacher's inconspicuous help, makes for the humility without which there is no true knowledge.

And in those sentences which I quoted just now, Miss Mason gives us clues to point the way in such discussions: "Rights"—"duties"—"justice in thought"—"opinions"—"principles." See how all these things are "of the spirit"—all deal with right thinking.

Education is a life—it is not an easy task, and cannot be "talked out" in half-an-hour. The atmosphere in which
[p 468]
children are to be brought up should, Miss Mason warns us, be perfectly natural—or the child will not be learning to "live in life." Directly artificialities are introduced—"rose water and cushions," Miss Mason calls them—we are putting the child in a hot-house, where he cannot grow strong and hardy, able to withstand the buffets he must meet.

But there is just one more thought I would like to touch on. We must see to it that there are spaces in the child's life in which he may grow in silence and in calm. Modern life for some of us grown-ups is so full; it becomes more and more difficult to find time in which the heart may commune with itself and be still. How hard it is to keep a quarter-of-an-hour a day for meditation and self-recollection! The tear and the hurry of life sweep us along; we must see that they do not sweep the children along. They must have leisured moments of calm; they must have the power to enjoy sitting still and thinking quietly. It is, perhaps, only in times of silence that the soul can really grow.

Davies touches on this lightly in his charming poem:

“What is life, if full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare?
No time to stand beneath the boughs
And stare as long as sheep and cows. …
No time to see, in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars, like skies at night. …
A poor life this, if full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.”