A FEW ROOTS.[1]

By H. E. Wix.

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WHEN flowers are full of beauty and fruits delicious and satisfying, we may be inclined to forget that it is from the unseen roots that the main nourishment and strength must come.

In Parents' Union School work we love and admire the flowers of narration and the fruits of thoughtfulness that result, but what of the roots from which these spring?

We can of course learn of them from *Home Education* and *School Education*, and certainly no one would venture to teach in the P.U.S. without first reading these books. To read once, however, is not enough; we must go back to them again and again. In the forefront of the modern editions of these books there is in smallish print a "Short Synopsis of P.N.E.U. Philosophy." It is a wonderful summary worth reading again and again to get one's work-worn vision cleared.

First we have the well-known: "A child is a person." This is a truth which is acknowledged by many educationists and they have applied it, but with a difference. Nowadays, for example, the child is the unit in most up-to-date schools; individual work is fashionable and the publishers flood us with individual apparatus. This, however, was not Miss Mason's meaning. She even expected all the children in one class to follow the same programme of work and to get it done.

"A child is a person"—that is, he is someone to be treated by grown-ups with respect, as a person of sense and understanding. We cannot, therefore, discuss a child in his presence any more than a grown-up; we may not give him chaff when he asks for bread; we may not praise him for shoddy second-best work; we may not in any way lessen his self-respect; we must always treat him as a reasonable being. We may not dominate him by our own will, but must encourage him to grow straight and true and strong, not to be a mere
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parasite, who always follows the most attractive talker of the moment, and can never stand alone.

Sometimes one hears of teachers regretting that the P.U.S. Programme is so full that there is no time for them to teach; that is, to pass on to the children their more mature scholarship or their wider and fuller appreciation of the book or poem being studied. The programme is purposely made so full; Miss Mason did not "hold with" teachers teaching. We are too anxious that children should know and understand all *we* understand. This is neither necessary nor right. If we remember that a child aged say, eleven, can hardly be able to understand as much of *King Lear* as his teacher aged forty, perhaps it will comfort us when we see the time flying and we have not yet had a minute to tell him something of all we think and know about it. (Even Milton's many allusions cannot all be explained to children and the joy of the poem still remain.)

Next from the Synopsis: "We are limited to three educational instruments—the atmosphere of environment, the discipline of habit and the presentation of living ideas"; that is, put shortly: "Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life."

An Atmosphere. Since even the best of schools must be a little artificial, the private teacher has an advantage here over the school teacher. Indeed the governess has always a greater opportunity of understanding the underlying principles of P.N.E.U. if only because in

the daily life of the home she is in less danger of forgetting them, for the school teacher's mind naturally is filled with lessons and other scholastic activities.

Just as in "A child is a person" so here also we find that other educationists teach that education is an "atmosphere," but they interpret it differently. Madame Montessori, for instance, is most particular that the atmosphere shall be just right, it must, so to speak, be kept at an even temperature; nothing must be allowed to disturb it. For example, a naughty child is put apart and treated as if ill.

But Miss Mason did not mean that. She meant that the normal everyday atmosphere of the home was a most important educational instrument, and that we ought to make use of everyday things and happenings. For example: Mother is ill. The children must talk quietly and trot about on tip-toe. What an education in self-control and consideration for others! Or it is the maid's afternoon out: the children will help to lay
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the table, brush up the crumbs, and even perhaps wash up. Even such normal events as meal times, visitors, bedtime, teeth-cleaning, arranging flowers—all make for a fine education so long as they are part of the normal day. Atmosphere to be educative should be normal, or the child will not be able to withstand the ordinary buffetings of life which he will have to meet sooner or later.

In school the same applies. We are to turn to our use all the ordinary events,—the unexpected visitor, the medical inspection, the new girls and boys, the examination week, the Parents' Union School's Examination, too. All these, if used well, will help to train the children to meet after-school life.

The Elementary School atmosphere has a tradition to break. The teachers are still a little inclined to dominate the children, there are too many children who put their arms up to speak, who begin every sentence with "Please Sir" or "Please Miss." Yet we do not want the kind of school where it takes ten minutes to get the children started at a lesson.

A Discipline. Miss Mason believed intensely in the power of habit. She believed that one of our most important duties was to see that the children formed good habits of body and of mind. Here perhaps the private teacher again finds it easier to see down to the root. The children have to learn to shut the door habitually, to put their toys away, to eat with their mouths shut, to go to sleep quickly.

But in school too it is obvious that the discipline of habit is most necessary. The children must learn to sit up well, to hold their pens properly, to keep their books tidy,—all these are physical habits. Then they must learn to work steadily and quickly, to listen carefully, to narrate, to be punctual in mind as well as body, to overcome difficulties, to reason out problems. All these are largely matters of habit, and our part is to start the desire to form the habit, to see there are no backslidings and to encourage the weak and faint-hearted. It is not part of our work to undermine the will by offering marks or prizes.

Sometimes one hears that children are finding this or that book too hard. In these days when not only books but pictures and even the very children themselves are graded, it seems to be the rule that no back must be asked to bear more than it very easily can. But, as discipline, it is very good that we should have difficulties; excellent that one or two books in each Form should be a little hard, and that the children should
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realise it—and realise why it is a good thing, good for their brains and for their humility too.

A Life. This is too big a subject to do more than touch on it.

Education is a matter of the spirit and not of the body. Bodily training is absolutely

necessary—games, dancing, physical exercise, handicraft—but education is properly a spiritual matter. We, as educationists, must provide food for the mind (and for the spirit too), and the food proper to mind, is ideas. We have to provide a copious banquet—much and various—and see to it that each child gets what he needs, rejecting for himself what he has no use for. It is for this reason that the programme is so full.

But we must not feel "rushed." If we do, the children will too, and then our educational atmosphere is all wrong, just as if we let ourselves feel worried. There may be two reasons; we may be really attempting too much and then the only cure is bravely to knock off something. Or we may be expecting each child in the class to take in as much as his neighbour—or worse still, as much as we can. We must remember, it is for each child to take what he can. … Sometimes there seems too much of one subject—for example, history. When we plan out our term's work into weeks—I imagine all P.U.S. teachers do that—we find the amount of history more than can be "got through." Generally a little re-arrangement of the time table will ease matters, for there may be rather less than usual in some other subject. Sometimes we have frankly to do as much as we can and leave the rest. It is very sad when this is necessary, but we must be content to do whatever is best for the children.

Or it may be that examination week overwhelms us, and therefore worries and fusses the children. It *is* possible to allow these examinations to bother the children all through the term! However, the management and organisation of examination week does need care. In the large classes of the Elementary School, written examinations in so many subjects entail an immense amount of marking, especially as P.U.S. children are not content with answers of a few words only! There are several ways of lessening this very real difficulty. For example, a class can be divided into sections and each section can take a different subject. The teacher naturally will arrange that children do not twice consecutively take the

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same subject in examination week. Or, it is possible for only one section to take written work in any one subject, allowing the rest of the class to take it orally. The summer examinations can probably always be taken orally. Whatever plan we devise, the children must not be cheated of the splendid training afforded by the taking of an examination quietly, unemotionally and honestly. In some schools, the older boys and girls write down the answers of the youngest children at their dictation, a very sensible arrangement, affording excellent training for the older children.

As I have already said, Education must fit children to be ready to live in Life as they find it after school days are over. Their normal horizon is very small; their knowledge of human nature very limited. From history they learn much of the great and famous or infamous, and from the story books set they learn much of more ordinary human nature.

Miss Mason was perhaps the first person to realise the educative power of good novels; nowadays story books are read in every school, but they appear under such strange names—as supplementary readers, continuous readers, libraries, and so on. They are chosen mainly to amuse, the idea being apparently to make the children enjoy desultory reading, which, in itself, is not highly desirable.

In P.N.E.U. programmes the story books are set with the definite purpose of increasing the children's knowledge of human character, and it is for this reason that such authors as Scott and Dickens so often appear rather than Herbert Strang or John Buchan, both of whom are admirable story tellers and will be read and enjoyed in holiday time.

Scott in particular is said to be difficult to read; Miss Mason said once that one may trust a child to know what to skip—but I have found one cannot trust a publisher! I think if we remember *why* Scott is set, we shall get on better with his books.

It is often found difficult, where the classes are large, to obtain sufficient copies of these novels so that each child may have a book to read. One does not want to order three or four dozen copies of any novel; it would indeed be wrong to do so. This matter was very fully and capably dealt with at the Cirencester Conference by Mr. Parkin, of Stonehouse, whose paper appeared in the August number of the *Review*.

There is not time this afternoon to discuss the Synopsis

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further, but in these last few minutes I would like to touch on one more point. Let us beware of thinking that P.N.E.U. teaching will definitely improve this or that "faculty" in our children. P.N.E.U. is *not* "a splendid way of training the power of concentration"; Picture Talks do *not* "train the power of observation"—any magazine illustration could do as much!

If P.N.E.U. work is not to us and our children an open door into fuller living and greater joy in the world around and within us with the added understanding that this brings, then we have not grasped the meaning of the Philosophy of Education which Miss Mason left us.

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[1]An address given at a meeting of Teachers in Leicester.