

CHARACTERISTICS OF A P.N.E.U. SCHOOL

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A P.N.E.U. School is one in which the philosophy of Charlotte Mason, the founder of the Parents' National Educational Union, is followed, and where programmes of work planned in accordance with certain principles which express the educational aspects of her thought are used.

The general school life is based on the recognition that 'a child is born a person', and that while recognising the part played by authority it should also be realised that this personality 'must not be encroached upon whether by fear or love, suggestion or influence, or undue play upon any one natural desire'. Miss Mason often quoted Wordsworth's words—

'We live by admiration, hope and love,
And even as those are well and wisely fixed
In dignity of being, we ascend.'

The acceptance of these ideas by those in authority frees the children from emotional stress, gives a sense of security, freedom in which to grow, and the assurance that each one is treated individually, with a considerate appreciation of his talents, his ability and his needs.

A study of the P.N.E.U. methods will reveal to the teaching staff that authority 'should be maintained and exercised solely for the advantage of the children', and is vested, not in themselves, but in the guiding principles that govern the life of the school. Their rôle is to present the content of the programmes in an interesting manner and to give the children opportunities to incorporate that content and make it their own. Scope should be provided for creative work in prose, poetry, art and handicrafts and time allowed for outdoor activities, nature study, physical exercises and games. The staff also exercise a certain amount of masterly inactivity, having confidence in the children and becoming friends who are at hand if needed and who are ready when the occasion demands to encourage, and, where necessary, to learn and discover by the side of the children themselves.

The discipline of the school lies in allotting to each subject on the time-table its correct place and time, so that the curriculum can be carried out in a well-balanced manner, the lessons being arranged in such a way that the change from one to another gives mental refreshment, and at times, relaxation. There is also day by day training in simple habits, and in the observation of the school rules, which cover problems created by the geographical or structural plan of the school.

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These should be as few as possible. Class discipline in literary subjects is reduced to a minimum by using a single reading followed by narration. This quickens the attention, arouses interest and, over a given period of time, forms a habit of concentration which becomes the natural attitude of the children to their work. Miss Mason wrote 'The bracing atmosphere of truth and sincerity should be felt in every school'.

The programmes of work are sent out termly, and examination questions on the term's work are received by the school at the end of term. These programmes and examinations are planned by the staff at the Ambleside headquarters, and they are able to judge the success or otherwise of any selected book by observing the answers sent in by a large number of children. The curriculum is a wide one, which covers the requirements of children throughout their school life. Guides to modern teaching methods are suggested. The teaching of science, languages and mathematics is kept up to date, and in literary subjects, books of lasting value are chosen. The programmes also provide a sense of continuity, preventing the work of the school from being affected by staff changes.

The planning of the programmes is based on the threefold division, knowledge of God, knowledge of man, and knowledge of the universe. The study of the Old and New Testaments, narrated directly from the Bible, provides four weekly lessons which give the children a growing awareness of the manifold purposes of God. Miss Mason, in her synopsis also says—

'We should allow no separation to grow up between the intellectual and spiritual life of children; but should teach them that the divine Spirit has constant access to their spirits, and is their continual helper in all the interests, duties and joys of life.'

A knowledge of world history from the beginning of time is gradually built up, and where possible, this is linked with the creative work, in original and unabridged books, art or music, of the period studied, and story books illustrating the life and environment of the people are also suggested. The study of human lives helps to develop a sense of character, while Citizenship provides an interest in the welfare of other people. Knowledge of the universe is found in the study of world geography, and by regular lessons in science, and constant observation of the stars and the vegetable and animal kingdom. From an early age the children are encouraged to speak other languages and, at a later date, to study the grammar and literature. Mathematics play their usual part in the curriculum and individual work in this subject and in languages provides stability unaffected by absence from school. The works of an
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artist are studied each term and the children listen to the music of a great composer.

To Charlotte Mason knowledge was bound up with living. 'It is not instruction, information, nor even a well-stored memory. It is a state out of which people may pass and into which they may return. Matthew Arnold said "Knowledge is information touched with emotion". Therefore, textbooks must be replaced by books into the writing of which the writer has put his heart as well as a highly-trained mind. We try to use living books.' Thus the children form relationships with the minds of great men through the works they have left behind.

Narration, or the recollected re-telling of a passage immediately after the reading, helps the children to digest the meaning, or re-live the story, and by recreating it in their own language, they make it their own. Not only does this unconsciously increase their vocabulary, but it makes revision before examinations superfluous.

In a P.N.E.U. School the children work because they are interested and they do not need marks, rewards or prizes to encourage them. No lists of class places are published, and this results in a spirit of co-operation and harmony among the children themselves.

The P.N.E.U. has always recognised that parents should play their part in school life. In a P.N.E.U. School, informal contacts between them and the staff are welcomed. Some schools have Parents' Associations, others arrange Parents' Meetings, and close co-operation with the parents can benefit the life of the school in many ways and bring pleasure to both children and adults.

Each P.N.E.U. School will possess the advantages and limitations of its own environment. Each will, of necessity, have to consider the child's place in the society in which it lives, and give due attention to the examinations that are necessary to lead on to the most suitable senior school, or, in the case of older children, a career. But in a P.N.E.U. School, though specific training may have to be given at the appropriate time, the experience provided by having used the programmes will stand the children in good stead, and they will leave school knowing that the pursuit of many interests is open to them.

Finally, we should remember that Charlotte Mason was a progressive thinker who devoted her life to children, and who believed that to be adequate, a method of education should 'touch at all points the living thought of the age'. Therefore a P.N.E.U. School should be alive to modern trends in education and the developments in psychology that affect the well-being of young people.