

## The Teaching Of Geography

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THE programme for this morning's Conference is "A Discussion on the Teaching of Geography," and, as the privileged opener of the discussion it is my duty to endeavour to state in general a few of the basic principles and objectives of Geographical teaching, and, in particular, the methods adopted by the Parents' Union School to carry them out. It must, however, be borne in mind that the object of the discussion is to encourage teachers using P.U.S. programmes to bring up their difficulties so that they may be fully and frankly discussed to the benefit of all concerned. I hope, therefore, that what I have to say—whether provocative or unacceptable, whether doubtfully acceptable or generally accepted—may provide points for healthy and helpful debate.

With this in view I am going to throw out this challenge: "That the Geography in the Parents' Union School satisfies all the requirements of modern geographical theory and of the Board of Education in Elementary Schools, and that if all the Syllabuses—geographical and related—be fully explored and honestly and loyally completed, the Geography teaching will be as full and modern, as scientific and descriptive, as utilitarian and educative, as interesting and natural as if it were based on the Board's Suggestions or on the principles contained in the recent Hadow Report."

You are all probably aware that a good deal of criticism has been levelled against the methods of teaching Geography and the Geography books used in the P.U.S. (And here I ought to interject the remark by way of explanation to those in the Conference who are not teachers in Elementary Schools that the background of my remarks is the Elementary School.)

This morning I want to meet criticism by proving the truth of my challenging statement.

We will first of all deal with the broad underlying principles of geographical teaching—i.e., the theory on which schemes are built. Then we will discuss Schemes. The Hadow Report says:—  
"However useful geographical information may be, its value must rest on its use as an instrument of education, i.e., as a means of developing the growing interests of the pupils. The main objective in good geographical teaching is to develop an attitude of mind and a mode of thought characteristic of the subject."

The Board's "Suggestions" says:—

"It provides frequent opportunities for encouraging a child to reflect upon his immediate surroundings, for stimulating thought and imagination about the world in which he lives, and so helps him to realise how, as civilisation advances, communities come to depend upon one another for the necessaries and comforts of life."

Now let us examine the principles as enunciated by the Founder of this Union. She said:—

"Geography is, to my mind, a subject of high educational value. Its peculiar value lies in its fitness to nourish the mind with ideas, and to furnish the imagination with pictures. The child's geography lesson should furnish just the sort of information which grown-up people care to possess."

You will see there is a very close parallel between Miss Mason's ideals of thirty years ago and the aims of Geography teaching to-day.

Leaving the foundations, let us proceed to build the theory, and for this purpose we cannot do better than take the Hadow Report as the plan. Here it is:—

“The course in Senior Schools will pre-suppose a certain minimum of preliminary study during the age period from seven to eleven. It is reasonable to assume that under average conditions the average child by the age of eleven will have acquired:—

“(i.) Some simple notions, by direct observations, of the sun, wind and weather, and of the seasons.

“(ii.) Simple ideas, again from direct observation, of actual scenery or of suitable photographs, of the principal features composing landscapes, and of their representation on maps.

“(iii.) Some knowledge of the prominent physical features of the British Isles, of two or three outstanding features of our climate and of the major industries, together with a few of their principal centres.

“(iv.) Some simple ideas, mainly from descriptions and pictures, of the shape of the earth, of the distribution of land and water, and of the clearly defined climatic areas such as the Arctic regions, the desert areas, the Steppe lands, the forest belts, including the wet Tropical land.

“The general character of the work should be descriptive.”

That is the minimum in the plan. Does the P.N.E.U. Geography allow the average child of eleven to acquire that minimum? Let Miss Mason herself speak:—

“The children should be taught to observe the position of the sun in the heavens from hour to hour, and by his position, to tell the time of day.” “The child gets his rudimentary notions of geography as he gets his first notions of natural science in those very important long hours out of doors. Let these talks and walks cover all the home scenery and interests you are acquainted with, so that, by-and-by, when he looks at the map of England, he finds a score of familiar names which suggest landscapes to him—the woody, flowery islets of the Thames, the smooth Sussex downs, the York or Devon moors—and always give him a rough sketch-map of the route you took in a given journey.”

“Geography, geology, the course of the sun, the behaviour of the clouds, weather signs, all that the ‘open’ has to offer, are made use of in outdoor walks.”

“Supposing that between the child’s sixth and his ninth year half-a-dozen well-chosen standard books of travel have been read with him, he has gained distinct ideas of the contours, the productions, and the manners of the people of every great region of the world.”

“English children should have such a familiar and intimate knowledge of the geography of their own country as would make a railway journey a delight and make the landscape, industries and associations of the country, familiar conceptions to children.”

“Children should be familiar with the Map of the World before the geography of any division of the earth’s surface is studied in detail, and perhaps the period from eight to ten is a good time in which to lay this foundation for geographical knowledge.”

And lastly,

“Let the pupil be ‘at home’ in any single region: let him see, with the mind’s eye, the people at their work and at their play, the flowers and fruits in their seasons, the beasts, each in its habitat; and let him see all sympathetically, that is, let him follow the adventures of a traveller.”

I think I have quoted sufficiently from Miss Mason’s theory to prove that she omits no essentials contained in the modern theory of Junior Geography teaching. In fact there is striking

similarity not only in idea and conception but in phraseology. What a wonderful insight Miss Mason must have possessed!

The next stage in our discussion is to pass from theory to practice and so examine the schemes which carry out the theory. Now the *Ambleside Geography Readers* are not intended to be a scheme or even the greater part or more important part of a scheme. If I read Miss Mason aright I think she intended them to be supplementary to actual Geography teaching, and I do believe that it has been our misuse of those *Readers* which has incurred most of the criticism against P.N.E.U. geography.

In the Preface to Book I., Miss Mason said:—

“It is hoped that these reading lessons may afford intelligent teaching even in the hands of a young teacher. The first ideas of Geography should be conveyed viva voce. At this stage, a class-book cannot take the place of an intelligent teacher.”

And again in Book III.:—

“The general outlines of the geography of England are, it is supposed, already known by the class, as this is a subject better adapted for oral teaching than for a class book.”

Throughout all the books the greatest stress is laid on lessons of “map-work” *before* lessons of reading from the Books. From Book I.:—

“Geography should be learned *chiefly* from maps, and the child should begin the study by learning ‘the meaning of a map’ and how to use it.”

From Book II.:—

“The map questions on each lesson should be worked through before the lesson is read. Their form may be varied.”

From Book III.:—

“The questions upon the map of the county should be answered before the lessons upon it are read: the children will thus be prepared to read with intelligent understanding.”

The same thing occurs in Books IV. and V., in the latter of which we find that “the reading of the chapter afterwards will be intelligent and informing.”

Let me summarise these quotations, for they are most important:—

(a) P.N.E.U. Geography provides for constant map-work of varied forms.

(b) P.N.E.U. Geography admits of oral teaching.

(c) Both these precede the reading from the Geography book which gives the sort of Geography to feed the mind, is descriptive, and is supplementary to the scientific oral teaching. This is further borne out in the Preface to Book III., where the writer says:—

“The physical geography of the country is taken up as common information without the precision of statement which belongs to scientific teaching. It is hoped, however, that the data gathered in this way may serve as a basis for such teaching.”

Maps—plenty of them—varied in form—and map exercises and questions—with the actual oral teaching must come first. Then the after-reading of the *Ambleside* books and the many “extras” and “related work” scattered about the programme. And lastly, reproduction by means of memory maps, answering map questions and writing composition.

The programmes of P.N.E.U. Geography are conceived to provide a very wide and very full range. Their true balance is not realised until the whole P.N.E.U. programme of all subjects is taken. You cannot pronounce judgement on P.N.E.U. Geography by simply investigating the syllabus placed under the “title” of “Geography.”

It is impossible, in the time I have at my disposal, to do more than illustrate from the work of one Form. Take last term's Form IIb. Geography—the "Related Subjects" first and finally the work under "Geography."

Firstly, the Nature Observations and Nature Note Books lessons provided the possibility of some simple astronomy observations. And what more beautiful skies could we have had than those of this term! Children have been fascinated in watching the comparative movements of Venus, Jupiter, Mars and the Moon, and in observing the increase and decrease of their brilliance. These lessons have also allowed the observation of the increasing altitude of the sun during the term with its earlier rising and later setting, and the taking of weather observations. Secondly, the set portions of the book, *Round the Empire*, related to Ocean Trade Routes and Ocean Cables. There was plenty of scope here for world maps and children learnt a very fair amount of world geography on the one hand, and the importance of the British Empire on the other.

Thirdly, the Nature Book, *Madam How and Lady Why*, was just some delightful physical geography—the work of water and ice and the moulding of scenery—told in a delightful way and made interesting to children. It gave much scope for generalisations from local geography and appropriately coincided with the temporary return of the Ice Age.

Fourthly, the English and French History, with the book *With Clive in India*, gave the opportunity to know something of the Geography of India, Canada, the United States and France. R. B. Westmacott has a happy sentence:—"Thus Geography and History join hands, and from the union emerges a living story of the lives, the struggles and aspirations of a nation." This was so in all these four countries.

Fifthly, Scott's *Redgauntlet* increased our knowledge of the Geography of the Solway Firth district—its tides and sands.

Sixthly, under the title "Work" the syllabus says "Cardboard modelling: make four models." It is always possible in the handwork lesson to make something in wood, or clay, or cardboard, or paper, to aid the Geography lessons. I have a few with me:—

- (a) A cardboard model to record wind and weather.
- (b) A woodwork model to show and record altitude of sun.
- (c) A cardboard and plasticine model of the south-east corner of England—useful for last term's Geography.
- (d) A cardboard and plasticine model of Gloucestershire.
- (e) A plaster of Paris model of Gloucestershire.

Having glanced at Related Subjects let us now turn to the subject itself—i.e., "Form IIb. Geography." There is a "ten minutes exercise on the map of the world every week." That is most wide. An enterprising teacher thinking ahead for twelve months could arrange a syllabus of thirty short lessons in "World" Geography which would meet all the expectations of modern theory in this respect. To quote from the Hadow Report:—"Modern teaching tends to the presentation of some world aspects concurrently with the study of the British Isles."

Again, we have "Know something about foreign places noticed in the current newspapers." Plenty of latitude for varied treatment. Personally I had a sort of miniature pillar box in the class room in which children during the week placed cuttings from newspapers. Half an hour on Thursday afternoons was devoted to clearing the pillar box. The time was not sufficient. The most important cuttings were placed in a portfolio for future reference and the most

appropriate pictures, maps and diagrams were placed on the walls of the class-room—and of course there was a map of the world. Pictures of typical English scenery from *The Daily Telegraph* illustrated some of the Geography lessons as did also the Empire Marketing Board's posters.

Finally, we come to the *Ambleside Book III.* which last term dealt with the South-Eastern corner of England. As a teacher's reference book for the map work and oral teaching I would recommend Mackinder's *Britain and the British Seas*. Lord Avebury's *Scenery of England* is also very helpful. In the counties studied last term you have chalk formations, river gaps, gardens of England between the Downs, typical chalk scenery, lines of communication, town nodality—all of which could be dealt with systematically in the time set apart for map work and then you give your children the beautiful descriptive pictures in *Ambleside Book III.*, which they love. They find there the joy of adventure, the call to the imagination, the absorbing link with History. The language of the book becomes theirs. In the recent Termly Examination there was a question, "Describe the coast of Hampshire," and hardly a child in the class I have in mind failed to reproduce the epithets "curious and crinkly." I think that word "crinkly" conveyed more to the child's mind than all the teacher's talk on sunken or drowned valleys and coasts. Let us ask again with Miss Kitching:—"What child after doing the *Ambleside Book III.* would ever forget the pictures that crowd up as the word 'Hampshire' passes through his mind, or 'Kent'?"

Well, ladies and gentlemen, I have briefly indicated the possibilities in one term's Geography to children between nine and eleven. What I have said might equally be applied to the work of other Forms and other terms.

Perhaps it is expected that I should say a word or two about the Time-Table and Geography. In this respect I would suggest "Make the *Ambleside Reader* the climax of the week." Keeping to our Form IIb., commence the week by allotting a lesson on Monday morning to the map work and oral and scientific teaching. That is the introduction to the week's work. In the afternoon arrange your outdoor walk for Local Geography and Nature work. Sometime on Tuesday morning take your "ten minutes' lesson on the map of the world," and in the afternoon record your weather and Nature observations of the previous week in Nature Note Books. The Geography of Wednesday might well be the "Physical Geography in *Madam How and Lady Why*" in the morning (it is volcanoes this term), and the Geography in the handwork lesson in the afternoon. Devote half-an-hour's lesson on Thursday morning to Empire Geography—*Round the Empire*—and the same time in the afternoon to "Newspaper Geography." Then you are ready for the *Ambleside* books on Friday morning. I have not mentioned the word "Narration." It is a fundamental and must not be omitted whenever it is possible to use it in one of its several forms. To round off the whole week's work in Geography I would suggest that some written work be given on Friday afternoon.

Now I see that the time allotted to me has more than passed away, but my opening of the Discussion would not be complete without giving some indication of some of the maps which might be used on the one hand to supplement the Atlas work of the children, and, on the other, to illustrate the teaching of the outlines of Geography before reading the *Ambleside* Books.

Maps for Form II.:—

(a) World map for Newspaper Geography.

(b) World map for World Geography, e.g., The Volcano Line of *Madam How*.

- (c) World map—Ocean Trade Routes.
- (d) Home Geography—Local map.
- (e) North England—Physical and Railways.
- (f) North England—Rainfall.
- (g) North England—The Lake District.
- (h) North England—The Factory Towns.

Maps for Form III.:—

- (k) Alpine Passes and Communications.
- (l) Italy—Physical and Communications.

In conclusion, I hope the discussion will be vigorous and helpful, and that anyone with difficulties will not fail to bring them up. There are plenty of people present who are both capable and desirous of answering them.

Some discussion followed on maps and their object, and the amount of time to be spent upon them. The general opinion was that rough sketch maps were most desirable, and stress was laid upon the value of the ten minutes "Map of the World" lessons every week.