

Letter by H. W. Household

County Education Office

Shire Hall, Gloucester

3 November, 1924

Dear Sir or Madam,

At several P.N.E.U. schools within the last few months I have found the method of narration misunderstood and wrongly used. As other schools may be making the same mistake I venture to call attention to it.

The attempt is being made by reading very short passages to get the children to remember and reproduce the very words of the book, as though it were the words that are all important. Now the object of narration is to compel the child to perform the “act of knowing,” by which knowledge is acquired and assimilated. If a child has to tell the substance (as distinct from the words) of what it has read, it must (1) concentrate its attention on the reading and (2) sift out its knowledge and arrange it in order, thereby making it its own. But the labored repetition of words is an act of memory and not an act of knowing, and may be (and indeed is too likely to be) mere parrot repetition without understanding. There is no sifting out of facts, no arranging of them, no choice of appropriate language, no sign that there is in the mind any picture of the facts—only a string of words that may mean very little to the child if it has made no effort to comprehend. Though a child will often remember and reproduce the exact words of striking passages, and may fitly do so on some occasions, it should not be the aim of the teacher to train it to do so. The passage, to be read once only, should always be too long to admit of reproduction by verbal memory.

It will be helpful if I append some notes by one who was trained by Miss Mason and who has taught, and visited a number of P.N.E.U. schools.

“Narration is not the oral or written remembrance of the words in their due order. It is the expression of what the child mentally visualized while he listened, or read, or looked. Indeed a too close verbal accuracy should be taken as a danger signal. It will soon die a natural death if the teacher will help the children to concentrate on the consecutive mental pictures. Naturally, words and expressions will unconsciously be borrowed from the books and used as the most fitting way the child can express what he wishes to convey.

“Not only is narration not verbal memory, but reading and narration do not constitute the whole of the lesson. They are the kernel but not the whole fruit. There is the introduction and connection with the last lesson; there is the intelligent use of map, blackboard and pictures; there is the time after the narration for discussion. If a part of the lesson for any reason has to be omitted, this part may never be the narration, for narration is not, as so many people think, a test of the knowledge gained, but an integral part of the acquisition of knowledge, and the means whereby the ‘food of the

mind' (i. e. knowledge) is digested. At this stage questions are useless-a help to the lazy and a hindrance to the thoughtful-what the child needs is time to digest it quietly for himself. This he does through narration. If the lesson has been misunderstood, narration will show where, and *when that is finished* it is the teacher's part to start a discussion in order to clear up misconceptions, etc."

I would also add the following note after consultation with those who knew Miss Mason's views.

In the upper standards silent narration is used more often than oral narration; though the latter should not be entirely abandoned, for the habit of beautiful and thoughtful speech is of great value, and it is well to ensure that proper names and unfamiliar words are rightly enunciated-though of course there are other ways of doing that.

As an occasional substitute for oral narration the older children may also with advantage write short notes from memory-a précis in fact, written without reference to the book-after a suitable lesson; and occasionally, where the matter is difficult, they may analyze and tabulate with the book before them as described in the second paragraph ("Other Ways of Using Books") on p. 180 of *School Education*. * Again, the broad "Tell me what you have read," which introduces narration, may well give place with these older children to more definite tasks; and thought-provoking questions (to be answered not orally but in writing) may be set-questions such as can only be tackled in the light of knowledge gained in recent lessons. Care of course is required in setting questions, because we have been in the habit of asking far too many-so many that the child becomes dependent on the questioner, and seldom performs the act of knowing without which it does not become master of the knowledge, which it only half assimilates. The questions set in the terminal examination papers sent from Ambleside may be taken as models. In this connection pages 179 to 181 of *School Education* should be studied (though, I am afraid, marginal notes must not be made in books, unless they belong to the children).

As I have frequently said, that book should be in every school, and should be constantly studied by all the members of the staff in order that the principles which underlie the method of narration may be understood.

This memorandum should be read and discussed at every staff meeting, and if any difficulty is felt with regard to any point in it I should be very glad if I might be allowed a further opportunity of explaining it.

Yours Truly,

H. W. Household, Secretary

*“Other Ways of Using Books” on p. 180 of *School Education*

—But this is only one way to use books: others are to enumerate the statements in a given paragraph or chapter; to analyze a chapter, to divide it into paragraphs under proper headings, to tabulate and classify series; to trace cause to consequence and consequence to cause; to discern character and perceive how character and circumstance interact; to get lessons of life and conduct, or the living knowledge which makes for science, out of books; all this is possible for school boys and girls, and *until* they have begun to use books for themselves in such ways, they can hardly be said to have begun their education.

This letter was typed by me from a PDF file from Internet Archive on this date of June 20, 2019.

Source: “Notes for the Conference of July 18th, 1925 on P.N.E.U. Methods” from County Education Office, Shire Hall, Gloucester [1925].