

Memories of a P.N.E.U. Education

By Christine Verspaandonk

I was fortunate enough to attend Mrs. Norton's P.N.E.U. School in England for two years from the ages of eleven to nearly fourteen. At the time I loved it and even as a teenager could see that it was the best education I ever had. Now that I have children of my own I appreciate even more the richness of what we learned, as well as the enjoyable but disciplined atmosphere that existed in the school. It has been especially interesting to me now, to read Charlotte Mason and find out the underlying ideas to my experience.

When I was there, the school consisted of about forty-eight children between the ages of five and thirteen. The five year olds were in a separate room for lessons with a different teacher (it was always someone who was a mother), as they needed the individual attention in learning to read. The rest of us (about forty children) were taught, by Mrs. Norton, in a big room built on the end of the house. In spite of the large number, I never remember the least disorder or unwarranted noise. This does not mean that it was silent as, with six or seven different forms to teach, Mrs. Norton was always teaching somebody. In fact, it was a very good opportunity to learn concentration, though it was often hard not to listen to the more exciting lessons of another class when one was supposed to be finishing a French exercise.

Although we were separated into different classes we worked at our own levels in subjects like Maths or languages. This meant that we were able to truly understand a concept before we were required to move on, which is particularly important in these subjects. This built up a feeling of confidence as we looked back on our progress.

The mornings were devoted to the more academic subjects, while the afternoons were a time for enjoying Nature walks, Shakespeare reading, PE, crafts, handiwork, projects, art, music and drama. The younger ones went home at 3:30, but the older ones continued for another hour. Although these seem like long hours, you must remember that the afternoons were more relaxed and we had no homework whatsoever. Also, we had every Wednesday afternoon off (except occasionally to rehearse a play) and we had generous holidays.

Academics

For my age group we had the following subjects that I remember. Maths (we used books by H. E. Parr), Grammar, French (started at nine), Latin (started at eleven), and Shakespeare. Every now and then we would be required to write an imaginative essay and also poetry, which was great fun. We studied poems too, both for enjoyment and finding out about their form and composition. We also memorised various poems.

In Literature we would read a book each term. Some of the books were, Rosemary Sutcliff's *Simon*, Cynthia Harnett's *The Wool Pack*, *Box of Delights* by John Masefield, *Emma* by Jane Austen and *One is One* by Barbara Leonie Picard. Sometimes we would read together but more often just on our own. We could only read one chapter at a time so the suspense of the story was really strung out. In addition, we also read (this time often with Mrs. Norton) *The Iliad of Homer* and *The Odyssey of Homer* by Barbara Leonie Picard (Oxford University Press) and following these two, *The Aeneid* by another writer but the same publisher. These are very good prose retellings of the old stories and are very exciting to read. The younger classes had other books read to them -- The six to seven year olds listened to *Tanglewood Tales*, the next class had *Pilgrim's Progress* and this was followed by *The Heroes of Asgard*. I do not remember exactly what the nine to ten year olds read but I have a suspicion that it was *Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*.

In history we read *From Ur to Rome* (I do not know the author) for ancient studies and studied another book for British history. Mrs. Norton would read this aloud to us and, as with all our narrative studies, we would write an essay on it the following day. I also remember drawing quite a lot for this subject. We would copy illustrations of historical artefacts -- this taught us more about the period, captured our interest and gave us practice in accurate copying, all at the same time. This was something that we enjoyed a lot.

Geography and Citizenship were also read to us. Citizenship covered biographies of different significant people -- when I was there we read about Florence Nightingale and Baden-Powell amongst others. And of course there was music and art appreciation as outlined in *For the Children's Sake*. I remember studying Rembrandt,

Botticelli and Monet and some of their works remain vividly in my mind. We also had Bible and Science. In the latter we studied biology and had nature walks -- there was no chemistry, physics or experiments.

Afternoon Work

The mornings were always stimulating and intense. We loved the work (with a few personal exceptions -- mine was French), but the afternoons were fun. Our lives were enriched by a variety of projects, art and craft, drama, music and physical activities.

Once a week we took a nature walk in the beautiful English countryside surrounding us. We were also encouraged to bring in interesting nature finds through the week. We then drew in our nature notebooks.

We were always doing lots of drawing, painting etc in the afternoons. Towards the end of my time there, I was fortunate enough to be taught oil painting by Mrs. Norton's husband who was a painter and had his own studio in the house. The positive attitude to each child's own level was really exhibited to me in art. I do not have a natural aptitude for art, but I was always encouraged to do my best and improve at my own rate. This meant that I really enjoyed art and was proud of my accomplishments. In fact I consider that I did my best drawings at the school. (In contrast, when I left for a school in Queensland, I took art as I had enjoyed it so much, but quickly realised that the art teacher was only interested in those who were naturally talented and so I gave it up.) A school that can assist students to improve in, and enjoy, subjects that they don't necessarily have aptitude for is truly educating the individual child.

We covered a variety of crafts and handwork as well. From a couple of old school reports I still have, I see we did soap carving, embroidered wall-hangings, collage work, scenery painting, prop making (for example fairy wings for Shakespeare), tapestry pictures, wool weaving, knitting, crochet, lino prints, pen and ink cards, and clay -- I'm sure there were others that I have forgotten. The exposure to many crafts often carried over into out of school time as we were inspired to continue some of them in our own time.

The afternoons were also a time for joint projects which gave the older children the chance to develop leadership skills and everyone the opportunity to work together. One term, we were divided into four teams, and each group was required to knit squares, sew them together, and make a rug to send away to a charity. Those who could knit already taught those who could not, and while we worked we talked together. Another time, it was a crocheted square rug. Boys were all part of this too, and in fact, both times it was a team led by a boy who finished first. Another project we enjoyed was when each group had to make a "Tree Book". Every child wrote, or dictated to an older child, a story about a tree as part of a whole work. We also illustrated our chapter with a tree picture done in one of a variety of art/collage forms.

Shakespeare

One of my fondest memories of that time is the Shakespeare we studied and acted. Each term we read a different play, concentrating on the comedies. Each Friday afternoon, after the younger ones had left, those children of nine and up would read a speech each in turn. After a little while, Mrs. Norton would ask us to explain the passage, giving us any needed help with difficult words. Our understanding was further tested the following Monday morning when we wrote the scene in our own words. From this Mrs. Norton could see whether we had understood what we had read, and if we did not, we would study the scene again until we did.

The high point of Shakespeare was acting out a play each summer. This was one that we had studied recently and as there were several older children there at the time, we acted whole plays -- *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night*. Everyone's talents were utilised in this -- those with artistic talents drew scenery, others adapted costumes or drilled lines, and of course we all acted. Mrs. Norton had a wardrobe of fantastic costumes, which really made us feel the part. We were expected to learn all our lines which was excellent memory training as well as giving us a storehouse of Shakespeare -- as we drilled each other's lines, we often ended up memorising whole scenes. This was all quite demanding, but definitely within our grasp and we loved it. We always had an incentive in the coming performance, so all this work never seemed pointless. We acted the play in the garden and enjoyed every minute of it. I have very little dramatic ability, but though I could easily see that others were better at acting, I was encouraged to do *my* best and as a consequence could feel

proud of my accomplishments.

Other Performances

At the end of the Christmas term we put on a Nativity play. This was performed outside the school gate in the Village Square. It was held after dark and we all carried candles -- it was quite an atmosphere, especially in the cold of an English winter. It was not a scripted play, but an opportunity to sing. We would all dress up as angels, shepherds etc and sing a variety of Christmas carols. The older children were required to sing a solo each, no matter what their voices were like, which could be quite daunting.

In the spring term, we worked on a different play and items for a concert for the parents. Part of this was an extended period of singing some of the songs we had learned through the year. In addition the upper school (nine years old and over) put on a play and the junior students put on a different one. I remember one year that the younger children put on a play of Snow White written by Eleanor Farjeon. Most of it was in rhyme and everyone loved it, especially seeing seven six-year-old boys marching along as the dwarfs chanting, "Silver and Gold, Silver and Gold, We toil all day for silver and gold ...". I have never found this play, but I keep looking for it. The seniors acted out *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* one year and *Through the Looking Glass* the next. This was immensely enjoyable. We started out by reading the book, and then we had to go through it marking out dialogue to be used in the play. In this way we had a real feel for the whole story, as well as learning a little about the processes involved in adapting a book to be acted. We drew and painted all the scenery backdrops (this time we acted indoors) as well as making props and helping with costumes. Mrs. Norton cast the actors and each time I played the Red Queen. This was done deliberately I am sure, as I was something of a follower and Mrs. Norton was always trying to make me more assertive. I really enjoyed bossing everyone around and yelling, "Off with his head" at intervals.

Assessment

As I have mentioned previously, there was continual assessment to see that we understood the work. This was in the form of oral narration for the younger children, and written narrations for those nine years and older. In addition, we had formal exams twice a year which the older children wrote themselves and the younger ones dictated to several volunteer scribes.

The biggest difference between these exams and those of other schools, is that they were entirely unrevised. We were never allowed to reread our lessons, unless we had shown that we had not understood it previously. In fact, my outstanding memory of Mrs. Norton's words are the phrase, "If you understand it, you will remember it". This was proved in the pages and pages we could reproduce, whether five years old or thirteen. It also took away all the pressure that is usually associated with testing. In fact we relished exam time -- it was a chance to show how much we knew, as well as an opportunity to tell about books that we had enjoyed. In contrast, I remember spending hours (even days) at other schools prior to exams, going over work again and again just to make sure that I could recall every remote fact in case it was asked. To me this seems like a waste of time, as a child's mind is not being nourished whilst this is going on, and it can often confuse the child's thinking. We can all probably remember last minute cramming that only muddled us in the exam.

The other big difference was that the questions were designed to allow us to exhibit what we did know and understand, rather than catching us out in what we did not know. "Tell all you know about the Battle of Salamis", or "Describe your favourite work by Rembrandt" and other such questions were not intimidating and inspired long essays or narrations. The examiner could still see what we had understood and, if necessary, what we had left out, so it was a true assessment.

We had papers in Bible, Handwriting, Dictation and Spelling, Composition, English Language, Literature, British History, General History, Citizenship, Geography, Science, French, Latin, Picture Study, Art and Mathematics -- quite a comprehensive assessment. If you were at a different level for one of the subjects, such as Maths, you were given the paper that was appropriate to your level. These papers were sent away to an external examiner who marked them and then sent us a report. The reports did not have percentages or marks as such, but a word assessment such as excellent or good. There was also an additional comment for some papers and some general remarks about your work overall. Mrs. Norton also did a report on other subjects such as

Repetition, Oral Languages, Map Work, Nature Notebooks, Music Appreciation, Singing, PE, Crafts etc as well as general observations about our schoolwork and development.

In Conclusion

There was definite order and discipline in the timetable. This gave us great freedom, as we were not overwhelmed with choices as to which subject we *felt* like doing and could therefore concentrate on getting the work done. There was also discipline in the general atmosphere. We were expected to do our best, to learn (at our own rate and level), to concentrate, be polite and always to try. Mrs. Norton often reminded us of the PNEU motto: *I am, I can, I ought, I will*. This discipline established good study habits in us all and I found these a great help in later studies.

The atmosphere was also one of great encouragement. Comparisons were never made between the children or with an arbitrary level that we were failing to meet. This meant that, although we could easily see that we had differing abilities and achievements, we were not discouraged from enjoying subjects we were not as good at, or from being proud of our accomplishments. At the same time we were encouraged to progress in our understanding and work.

We were introduced to a great breadth of subjects and interests, which widened our horizons, and with no "twaddle" or busywork we were never bored. Only the best, the well written, the challenging and the worthwhile was offered to us.

I hope I have been able to give you some idea of what it was all like. It is hard to find the right words to convey the overall feel of the place. Suffice it to say that my time at Mrs. Norton's was quite unique in my education and was by far the most enjoyable. We were not tricked into learning, nor enticed with colourful puppets or worksheets. Instead, we were treated as intelligent persons and, in being given well written and interesting books, were encouraged to love learning for its own sake, thus beginning the process of self-education.

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