Lending Libraries and Board Schools.¹

AT the Manchester meeting of the Library Association in 1879 I read a paper entitled "The Public Free Library and the Board School," in which I endeavoured to show how the active interests of these two educational institutions might become identical, and that, by a combination of resources, much good might accrue to the people at large, and particularly to the younger members of our great communities. It is now my pleasing duty to report that I have been enabled in some degree to carry out the visionary project I then advocated, and I purpose in this paper to give a few details of the working of the scheme.

The practical proposal I made, in the paper to which I have referred, was "That in connexion with each district school there should be a small collection of books approved by both library and school authorities for the use of the children attending that school; and that those children should not be allowed to use the central or general library, except at the special request of parents or teachers. This arrangement might be supplemented or varied in order to suit the particular circumstances of each case."

Local circumstances rendered it for a time impossible to carry out the scheme in my own town, but, by dint of keeping it well to the front, I am happy to say that we have at length overcome all difficulties, and have now eleven of these branch libraries at work in the most populous parts of our town, where they are undoubtedly doing good service. Although these libraries are for the present small in themselves, and carry out but a part of our scheme, for we have not as yet been able to include the evening reading room as originally intended, it is satisfactory to know that we have made a beginning, and we hope shortly to witness a still further development.

Starting from the principle that free libraries and board schools were alike municipal institutions, that they were supported by the ratepayers, and were thus to a certain extent on the same footing, we felt that they might be used in the manner proposed without any infringement of the law or interference with the special objects for which they were severally established. Further, the school-master directly, and the public librarian indirectly, being engaged in educational work, it seemed natural to assume that the work of these two public officials might be rendered more useful by a direct combination in the endeavour to carry out a great public benefit.

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¹ Read before the Library Association, Glasgow, Aug. 1889.

To effect this, it was suggested that the School Board, acting under the powers they possessed, should grant the use of some portion of the school buildings, together with the necessary furniture, and the attendance of responsible officers; while the Library Committee should supply to the schools a certain number of carefully selected books for the use of the pupils, and possibly even of those who had passed out of the schools but were still in the same neighbourhood. I may, however, say, in passing, that we have found difficulties in the way of carrying the latter idea into practical effect, and this portion of our plan is therefore deferred until we can introduce the evening reading room and branch library system into some of the board schools.

At the outset the co-operation of the teachers was sought, for without their goodwill there was little hope of success for our scheme, the practical carrying out of which was sure to entail additional labour upon them. In this we found no difficulty, in fact, as I shall show presently, the head teachers entered most heartily into the project.

The approval of the Free Library Committee having been obtained, it became necessary to consult the School Board; and, after some preliminary negotiations, a joint committee was appointed, and it was agreed to give the project a trial. The following provisional recommendations were ultimately adopted.

BOARD SCHOOL LIBRARIES.

The Free Library Committee make the following recommendations to the School Board.

1. That each of the Fourteen Board Schools (girls' and boys') in the town are supplied with small lending libraries.
2. That each library consist of one hundred carefully-selected books from the present stock of the library, to be supplemented from time to time as circumstances permit.
3. That each library or set of books remain in circulation, by way of experiment, for a period of not longer than six months.
4. That all books be returned to the Free Public Library at the half-yearly closing, irrespective of the time during which they may have been in circulation.
5. The Public Library Committee suggest that a committee of the School Board shall undertake the selection of the books for the respective schools.
6. That the School Board are responsible for the safety, distribution and return of all books lent for use in these schools, under the existing rules and regulations.
7. That lists of books lent to the several schools be placed in the school rooms, where they may easily be seen and referred to by the scholars.
8. That if any books, not on the list, be applied for, the scholars should be referred to the public library, where they may be obtained in the usual manner.

9. That, as far as possible, it be arranged for each set of books to go the round of the schools in rotation. Books worn out or otherwise unfit for circulation, to be replaced by new copies or other works as may be deemed most desirable.

Subsequently, a code of rules, embodying the main points laid down in the Library Committee's recommendations, was prepared and discussed by both committees, the School Board taking their head teachers into consultation as to the details of the scheme.

We determined to start with eleven schools—five boys' and six girls'—these schools being fairly scattered over the entire district covered by the operations of our library. The selection of the books was regulated by the age, sex, and standard of the children frequenting the various schools, and the lists, when approved by the Library Committee, were sent on to the School Board for their consideration.

The results of our scheme have thus far been entirely satisfactory. In proof of this I give the following extracts from the reports of some of the head teachers as sent to the School Board.

The head teacher of one of the largest schools in the district writes :—

"The books recently supplied are greatly appreciated by the boys. In order to obtain their opinion, I got each of the seniors to write me a letter upon the subject as a home-lesson, and without exception the expression was in favour of the suitableness of the books. I was also pleased to find that the parents are in many cases greatly interested in the library and sometimes read the books which are taken home by the boys."¹

This teacher makes a strong appeal for more books, as at present he has only sufficient to supply standards V, VI and VII.

Another head teacher of a girls' school says that the books are "attractive and entertaining," and that "as far as practicable, the children are allowed to choose their own books," but adds that "the distribution has been limited to the four upper standards, the number not being sufficient for the whole school."

From another boys' school it is reported :

"That teachers, scholars and parents, all appear to appreciate the new books very much. There is a decided preference for those from the free library, which keeps them always in demand."

In this, as in several other schools, the teachers had previously been accustomed to supply their scholars occasionally with books, but it is found that these books remain idle on the shelves now that more attractive books are supplied from the free library. This

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¹ As an appendix to his paper, Mr. Wright read a number of most interesting letters that had been received from pupils expressing the gratification they derived from the new libraries.—ED.

teacher also appends some letters written by the boys of the first class, and these letters, he says, are written without suggestion or prompting.

Now comes an independent opinion from the mistress of a girls' school. She says:

"As the books are nearly all story books, they can be of little value from an educational point of view, however pleasing they may be to the girls. Works of general information, the elements of science, Voyages (to extend their geographical knowledge, &c.) would to my mind be better for the girls, and more like a school library. *The Eminent Women Series, Story of English Literature, Connexion of Physical Sciences, Fairyland of Science, Health Lectures*, or even the *Girl's Own Paper*, would be works I should place in the library, were I able to do so at present."

These hints are valuable, and will no doubt be acted upon in due course.

Some of the opinions expressed raise the question whether we should cater for the very youngest children by supplying such elementary story books, as would be within their comprehension. Lastly, I refer with pleasure to the remarks of the head-teacher of a school which ranks amongst the best under the control of the Board. He says that the books have given great satisfaction to the boys, and, complaining of insufficient supply, suggests that he should be supplied with some illustrated copies of Shakespeare—single plays, such as are published by Cassell.

Now let me add a few comments as to the chief advantages of this system of small branch (school) libraries.

1. The books are distributed throughout the entire district in a much more effective manner than would be possible were they simply drawn from the central library, and this, in a town where there are no branches, is in itself a boon, as it saves the youthful borrowers long walks from the outlying districts for the purpose of obtaining their books.¹

2. The head teachers can, and do, exercise a direct supervision over the class of reading indulged in by their pupils. It is not desired to place any undue restriction upon the general circulation of books and I am of opinion that the children should be allowed some choice in the matter; but we all know that youthful bor-

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¹ It is a moot point whether the scheme shall be extended to voluntary and denominational schools; the chief difficulty being as to the extent of the responsibility of the managers of those schools. The Library Committee have been informed that applications will be made, and when they come they are prepared to consider each application on its own merits, and to grant the books if they are satisfied on certain points.

rowers are accustomed to select books according to the attractiveness of their titles ; and experience has shown that most unsuitable books are taken out by children of tender age. Moreover, it stands to reason that the teachers, who are brought into daily contact with the boys and girls of the schools, and know something of their individual temperaments, can have much more influence upon them than can the librarian or library assistant, whose opportunities for guiding selection in a busy library are necessarily limited.

3. The books selected are often such as can be and are read by other members of the family, and thus the parents' benefit as well as the children, and people are led to read who do not care to take the trouble to go to the central library.

4. The system of school libraries spreads the work of the free library over a larger area and removes some of the pressure from the central library ; which is in itself an advantage, when, as in some cases the library staff is small and the demand for books chiefly concentrated into the last two or three hours of the day.

5. These libraries being in operation, and the principle of the joint action of the School Board and the Library Committee having been established, it will not be difficult to carry out further developments of the project as originally laid down.

At present our income, derived exclusively from the library rate, is not sufficient to enable us to establish branches, with reading rooms, as in some wealthier towns ; but we believe that with the help of the board schools we shall be able to do so at a comparatively small cost.

I suppose it is too much to expect that the library rate will ever be supplemented by State aid, as in the case of the board schools, nor do I know that it would be desirable ; but it may be possible after a time for the School Board to devote some of its funds to the provision of books for these branch libraries, as what we chiefly aim at is the education of the young, and an education that will continue after school-days are over, and when the real battle of life has commenced.

Other developments may follow, but I think enough has been said upon what some may consider an unimportant matter ; and I need only add that I shall be glad to receive hints and suggestions on any of the points raised.

W. H. K. WRIGHT.