
Changing views on primary education.



Summary of a talk given on 9th August 1978 by Professor Alec Ross, Professor of Educational Research and Director of the School of Education, University of Lancaster, U.K.

The period since World War II has seen the rise of what has been called the "progressive" movement in primary education. This approach has been contrasted with the traditional approach which was characterised by a more formal organisation, by teacher-directed lessons and by an emphasis upon instruction in the basic skills. Schools organised on these lines have been described as places of "cells and bells" i.e. places in which children worked in so many separate classroom boxes (cells) and changed subjects at a given signal (the bell). The "progressive" schools have a less structured programme, are child-centred and may be "open plan" in their architecture with 3 or 4 teachers organising the learning of perhaps 120 children in one large space. The report Children and their Primary Schools (H.M.S.O. 1967) produced by a committee headed by Lady Plowden praised the approach of the "progressives" and has been taken as marking the high water point of the movement. Not all aspects of the modern approach have received unqualified acceptance; the more free ways undoubtedly produce more noise and some claim that in the teaching of a second language children should be able to hear clearly how sounds are articulated. In practice many teachers mix their styles of teaching; they have informal periods and have formal periods, varying the line according to the demands of the subject.

The most frequent criticism has been that the "progressive" ways are less likely to lead to high performance in the basic skills. A research by Dr. Neville Bennett published as Teaching Styles and Pupil Progress (Open Books 1976) suggested that this was so and received world-wide publicity on that account. Some aspects of Bennett's work have been criticised, however, on the basis of the methods used to handle this data though in fairness it should be said that he has as many knowledgeable defenders as he has opponents. It would be wise to wait for the results of further studies before accepting one already being undertaken.

Since Britain has largely abolished the 11+ examination there is no longer a check on the standards achieved by the children as they proceed from primary to secondary school. Furthermore modern theories of educational planning call for regular "monitoring" of the "output" (as it is called) of the educational system. The creation by the Department of Education and Science of an Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) has to be seen in this light. This calls for testing a sample of children at regular intervals right across the system and will provide information about the standards being achieved in the key areas of numeracy, literacy, scientific concepts, moral values, aesthetic awareness

and so forth. The research needed to produce the measures to be used has now been commissioned and when the tests have been produced it may well be of interest to teachers in Malaysia to see how Malaysian children perform in relation to the norms which will be established. The Department of Education and Science is anxious to make it clear that this is not to be a means of comparing school with school, class with class, and child with child. It is a means of establishing in general terms how the system as a whole is functioning. The teachers are anxious to know what skills will be tested in the measures for, as with every test, much depends upon the content validity of the items included.

The second volume of the Plowen Report demonstrates empirically what many teachers had always believed, that the progress of the child is influenced to a not inconsiderable extent by the support provided in the home. In the area of language home support is of particular importance. A Language for Life is the title of a report published by H.M.S.O. in 1974 known by the name of its chairman as the Bullock Report. This deals with language throughout the curriculum and demonstrates only too clearly that the teacher of language relies upon the quality of the linguistic experience available outside the formal classroom periods. Now that – for reasons which remain as valid today as they were when the decision was taken – the medium of instruction in primary schools has become Bahasa Malaysia, teachers of English in Malaysia must use every opportunity to enrich the English vocabulary background of the children, for English remains as one of the important official languages of the international organisations and it is expected that Malaysian citizens will continue as in the past, to make their distinctive contribution to world thinking on the many problems facing future generations. Bahasa Malaysia is the window into the nation's soul; English is a window on to the world.

Language, whether it be the national language or a second language is, however, something more than a means of communication in the instrumental sense. It is also a means of creative expression and today's primary school teacher will seek to encourage the creative use of language. One of the "discoveries" of the "progressive" movement has been that children are capable of writing poetry and prose of considerable creativity. Some formally organised schools have been accused of training their children to write "creatively", no noun appears without its cliché adjective, no verb is left without its qualifying adverb. The sun is always 'scorching' and it always beats down 'harshly'. Nevertheless the principle encouraging the lively use of language and of widening the vocabulary is one to be affirmed, for if children in their younger years begin to feel that language is a means of expression of their feelings, ideas, sentiments and a way of interpreting the world around them as well as a means of straightforward communication, they are more likely to develop that sensitivity to words and their overtones which is the work of the literary artist.

The teacher of English at the primary school phase shares, with his or her colleagues, the dilemma of how to respond to the varying demands being made. There is a case for more freedom but a concern that there should also be structure. Communication in the narrow sense is important but so too is the creative use of language. Standards must be maintained (if not improved) but what do we mean by standards? Standards of what? And how are such standards to be tested? How can the teacher ensure that more is done for children who do not have the advantage of a supportive home background? None of these questions will produce a single agreed answer yet of one thing we can be sure; the teacher of primary school children has charge of the children at a formative period in their school life. No matter how splendid the secondary school to which the child in due course goes, nothing can compensate for a primary education which has been warped, mishandled and misdirected. The primary school years are those in which the child's future is shaped; at seven so much is still possible whereas at eleven many doors have already been closed. We should seek to keep as many doors as possible open for as long as possible and that means providing for children an enriching, illuminating, rewarding and above all, thoroughly enjoyable period of primary education.