Primary Education in England —
Results of a National Survey

Vincent Rogers

A comprehensive survey of early education in England reveals steady improvement in reading along with several weaknesses.

The English, too, are caught up in the testing and accountability movement—although a recently completed study\(^1\) adds some interesting new wrinkles, which should be of interest to Americans. The study, the first of its kind ever to be undertaken in England, included 1,127 classes of seven-, nine-, and 11-year-old children drawn from 542 English primary schools during 1975-1977. The schools, classes, and children were chosen at random, and the sample included inner-city, rural, and suburban schools as well as schools of differing size.

The purpose of the study was to obtain information about the organization of schools, the range of work done by children, their performance on certain standardized tests, and the degree to which children's work is matched to their abilities. The information will be used by local education authorities, teachers, heads, and advisors to encourage consideration of how their work might be improved.

One aspect of the study, which is absent from most American surveys,\(^2\) is the importance placed on direct observation of children's work by Her Majesty's Corps of Inspectors (HMI's). These men and women—mature, experienced, ex-teachers and primary heads—actually visited schools, observed teachers and children, and thus added a more personal, subjective dimension to the study. Specifically, HMI's were able to comment on how children were using and developing problem-solving skills, observational techniques, and so on, as well as the nature of the school's social and physical environment.

It is also important to point out that England's famous open, child-centered, activity-based


\(^2\) The recent case studies of science education sponsored by the National Science Foundation are a step in the right direction. See: Ron Brandt and others. "Thanks, We Needed That." Educational Leadership 36(5):354-55; February 1979.
primary schools were included in the survey along with other, more formal schools. Thus the data is a reflection of the quality of English primary education in general and not of a particular type of schooling.

Findings

Among the more significant findings were the following:

1. Sharing, cooperating, assuming responsibility, making choices, working with groups, and concern for the welfare of others and for the school environment were “widely and effectively encouraged” in almost all classes. Nine out of ten classes had what the HMI’s described as a “quiet working atmosphere.”

2. England’s 11-year-olds scored significantly higher on standardized reading tests when compared to 1955 results. This is further evidence of a consistent rise in English reading standards during the last 25 years.

3. All classes of seven-year-olds used a graded reading program of some kind. None relied entirely on children’s experiences, teacher-made materials, and so on.

4. Virtually all classes of nine- and 11-year-olds as well as two-thirds of the seven-year-olds used various texts with grammar, composition, spelling, and language exercises.

5. Math scores for 11-year-olds were higher than their predicted scores, although it was not possible to compare with 1955 since math tests were not given at that time.

6. In the great majority of classes, content, method, and resources were prescribed—little use was made of spontaneous incidents.

7. Children were generally grouped for instruction in math, reading, and writing according to ability.

8. Reading and math scores for nine- and 11-year-olds were significantly lower for inner-city schools. The HMI’s also observed that inner-city schools did less well in matching assigned work to the abilities of inner-city children—it was often too hard or too easy.

9. While didactic teaching was the method teachers used most often, best results in the math and reading tests were obtained in classrooms where a combination of didactic and exploratory methods were used.

10. Among seven-, nine-, and 11-year-olds, higher scores were obtained in reading and math tests when the full-range of curriculum was taught—including art, music, dance, science, and social studies—rather than in classrooms that focused narrowly on the “3R’s.”
Weaknesses

In addition, the HMI’s expressed concern over the following weaknesses they observed during their school visits:

1. Academically able children were often assigned work that was not challenging enough for them. In addition, such children were rarely given special, individual attention.

2. There was in general a lack of careful and detailed observation on the part of children as they worked in art, science, and social studies.

3. The teaching of art was superficial. More in-depth work was said to be needed, with particular attention paid to the mastering of skills and techniques employed in a specific medium.

4. Social studies teaching was largely fragmented, disjointed, and superficial.

5. More three-dimensional work was said to be needed in all areas of the curriculum.

6. Techniques learned in math, such as graphical or diagrammatical forms of presentation, were rarely used in other areas of the curriculum. Indeed, there was little emphasis on the relationship between subjects in general.

7. Children were rarely asked to carry out a writing task that involved presenting coherent arguments, exploring alternatives, drawing conclusions, or making judgments.

8. Children at all ages needed more opportunity to apply what they had learned in math, science, and other areas to everyday, practical situations.

In general, then, we have a mixed bag of results. There seems to be a commitment among England’s primary teachers to help children become competent in the basic skills and to become well-behaved, thoughtful, and considerate human beings.

The survey does not reveal a literacy crisis of the sort often alluded to in the British press and media—but neither is it a whitewash or coverup. The weaknesses revealed by the personal observations of skilled observers ought to be of more concern to thoughtful educators and citizens than the comforting test score results.

One can only wonder what an American study of similar scope and methodology would reveal.

Joseph V. Strunka
Assistant Professor
California State College
Bakersfield

LETTERS
(continued from page 536)

native” Horizon High School in Bakersfield, California.

Horizon High School’s student body is composed of 160 eleventh- and twelfth-grade students (and two sophomores at present), who chose to opt out of their regular high schools on the basis of wanting a more individualized program. These students are not “disciplinary problems” in the normal sense of the term, but could be categorized as “independent learners” who prefer less structured settings. Furthermore, Horizon High has eight faculty members (nine if you count the principal who teaches on occasion) or a teacher-student ratio of 1:20. Since many students are placed in independent programs, the teacher-student ratio is closer to 1:10 or up to 1:15 for those students who take the regularly scheduled classes.

It seems to me that Reckinger has attempted to make a case for “alternative schools.” Maybe we need to ask, “Why aren’t we doing the kinds of personalizing of instruction often found in alternative schools in the ‘regular schools’?” and then offer alternatives as to how this can be done. If we forget the latter and push for alternative schools, how long will it be before we start seeing articles that focus upon the need for alternatives for the alternative alternatives!

Joseph V. Strunka
Assistant Professor
California State College
Bakersfield

Vincent Rogers is Professor of Education, The University of Connecticut, Storrs.