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1960-09
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https://hdl.handle.net/10539/24264
Behr, A.L. (1960, September). Our primary schools. Symposium: A Journal for Education in Southern Africa, pp. 8-9.

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Our Primary Schools

by A. L. BEHR

1. Introduction:

Secondary school education has been the subject of several investigations in the post-war years. No fewer than four commissions have reported in recent years on secondary school education in South Africa. These commissions were the Wilks Commission, Natal, 1945; the De Villiers Commission, Union, 1948; the Pretorius Commission, O.F.S., 1951; the van Wyk Comsion, Transvaal, 1955.

There has been no thorough investigation into the problems of primary school education since 1937. The primary school has been largely ignored. Such changes that have come about in the primary school have come about only in order to meet the needs of the secondary school.

What is true of South Africa, is true also of other parts of the world, particularly Europe. There have been fewer research investigations on the problems of primary school education, than on other aspects of education.(1)

Lord Hailsham drew attention to this anomaly in 1957 when he wrote: "The primary school is the foundation on which all else is built, and if we neglect our primary education we should be very largely wasting our efforts in pursuing the later stages."(2)

2. What should be the task of the primary school?

The main task of the primary school should be directed towards ensuring that each child develops an integrated and unique personality.

The primary school must equip the child with the techniques of thinking and reasoning. A certain body of factual knowledge should be given, but only such factual knowledge as will activate thinking and investigation. The importance of a body of factual knowledge in the primary school lies not in the facts themselves, but in the stimulus which they give to particular modes of thought.

The primary school should cultivate the seeking habit of mind by creating opportunities for the child to observe, to explore and to interpret. The challenge to achieve and actively to enquire into the various phases of our environment seems as possible of attainment by most individuals as is the opposite mental basis of passive acceptance without enquiry.

Modern life demands not merely a minimum of scientific knowledge, but an enlightened curiosity and insight into the objective evaluation of observed facts. This surely the primary school should offer. The primary school child, particularly in Std. IV and V, could be taught to test hypotheses empirically and to draw inferences from observed relationships.

The primary school should provide ample opportunity for creative self-expression in the manual and the histrionic arts.

One of the fundamental tasks of the primary school is to foster a philosophy of tolerance. This should be done by bringing together children of differing social, political and religious backgrounds. It must deliberately create an atmosphere whereby children are made to understand that there are viewpoints other than their own.

At all times the child should be made aware of his responsibility towards other children and towards his class and his school as a whole, thus inculcating a social sense and a social responsibility.

The primary school must develop sound work attitudes and self-discipline in its pupils. It is not sound policy to rely on methods and techniques that are directed only towards arousing the child's immediate interests. The child should be made to realize that there are certain more remote ends worthy of attaining and requiring an effort that may not be immediately rewarding. It is that willingness on the part of the child to accept drudgery now for some worthwhile future good that we should attempt to inculcate.

To what extent is the primary school in South Africa achieving these aims?

3. Some aspects of the primary school situation in South Africa at the present time.

Despite variations in practice between the provinces there is a great deal of common ground in educational policy affecting White pupils.

About 90 per cent of all White children attend government schools. The others attend private schools, usually of a denominational character. which are free to choose their curricula but are subject to inspection by government inspectors. For many years Std. VI was included in the pri-

mary school course. Now it has been transferred to the high school. Std. VI was looked upon as a preparation for the secondary school, and even now the primary school course is regarded as a preparation for the high school. This has had a stifling effect on primary school education.(3) As recently as 1952 the Superintendent of Education in Natal stressed "the need for adapting the work in the senior classes of the primary school to form a basis for future secondary work."(4) What is true of Natal is true, too, of other provinces.

The primary school continues to gravitate in the shadows of the intellectualism of the 19th century and the instruction in these schools is still too much on the traditional lines of class teaching.(5) From a perusal of the annual reports published by the different provincial educational departments one gets the impression that our primary schools are on the whole largely concerned with formal instruction in the three R's. The emphasis is on teaching techniques that will ensure that pupils attain the best possible degree of competency in the mechanics of reading, writing and arithmetic; the pupils are also equipped with a body of more or less coherent facts of an historical, geographical and scientific character. The self-creative subjects such as drama, mime, music, painting are regarded as frills and wasteful of time in an overcrowded time-table.

The teaching in many instances does not provide opportunities for the pupil to display initiative and self-activity. Inspectors complain time and time again that "teachers tend to do too much and the pupils too little". In second language teaching, pattern sentences are learned off by heart and repeated mechanically.(6)

Here are some extracts from the reports of inspectors of Education in the Transvaal for the years 1952-1957: "In arithmetic the mechanical work is good, pupils know the skills of computation, but analytical reasoning leaves much to be desired. In language work there is not much evidence of that originality, of which even the very young are capable . . ." "Too much of the written work consists of mere transcription . . ." "Cases of individuality of expression in composition writing stand out like oases in barren deserts of copy work . . ."(7)

Over and over again the complaint is made that initiative is stifled, that pupil activity is neglected and that teacher direction and guidance predominate. Of the cultural subjects it is said that although the factual knowledge is well up to standard, pupils themselves do very little. In fact, "in many instances not only the notes but also the sketches are cyclostyled for the pupils."

In order to combat some of the difficulties subject advisers have been appointed in certain provinces. These advisers are concerned in the main with subjects such as music, needlework, arts and crafts and visual education. They visit schools "in order to stimulate interest and ensure the maintenance of satisfactory standards."(8)

More recently new syllabuses for the different subjects of the primary school have been drafted in all the provinces. To ensure that "the contents of the syllabuses are correctly interpreted and to throw light on the spirit in which the teaching should be approached"(9), explanatory pamphlets and manuals have been compiled for the guidance of teachers. In some instances certain specific methods have been laid down and these, teachers are expected to follow "in order to eliminate confusion as the pupil proceeds from one teacher to another and from one school to another."(10)

These detailed syllabuses and notes for the guidance of teachers carry with them the force of authority and many teachers will naturally be inclined to follow the "suggestions" given slavishly. The result must of necessity be regimentation and a further stifling of initiative. In the long run it must ultimately lead to stereotyped teaching of the worst kind.

Our primary schools are being denuded of graduate teachers, and are being staffed more and more by personnel who have had but two years of training.(11) A two-year course of training is quite inadequate to equip the teacher with the necessary academic training and insight into the educative process, as well as the problems inherent in guiding and directing the young and immature pupil.

4. Conclusion.

The primary school must operate in a free and relaxed atmosphere. It should not be bound too much by rules, regulations and restrictive syllabuses imposed from without by some central authority. Learning will not proceed satisfactorily if the child's emotional life is disturbed and if the school atmosphere is tense. The mental health and the intellectual progress of the child will depend upon the way the school adapts itself to the developmental level of its pupils and

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his resentment against authority and on to society. In observation of these children, it often appears as though they are seeking to get rid of a guilt feeling (due to a sense of unworthiness at being unwanted) by making others responsible for controlling their destructive impulses. It is as if they are seeking someone powerful enough to control them and condemn them for their wrongdoing — deliberately seeking self-punishment in order to draw attention and thus compensate for the feeling of rejection.

In the second case, i.e. by depression and anxiety, it is accompanied by feelings of unworthiness and self-reproach. Here the child feels insecure for he has lost his base — the support on which he relies. In these cases, certain anxiety symptoms are common, e.g. disturbance of digestive processes, constipation, diarrhoea, incontinence due to anxiety, sometimes stammering, and psychosomatic complaints like asthma, or more frequently a general moodiness or fearfulness.

D. M. Levy has stated that the essential motivation of the rejected child is a hunger for love, resulting from "starvation" from lack of love. If this is so, then it seems that these results of rejection will only be managed when the child regains hope and feels safe and secure again. Then he needs desperately to build up some firm, loving relationship with some *one important person.*

I mentioned earlier that we must not underestimate the complexities of the child. We need not be afraid of complexity if it is understood; indeed we have noticed that Man has in the long run suffered more from hasty oversimplifications than from confusion over complexities, for oversimplication has led him to assume that he has mastered the problem, when in fact, without being aware of it, he has found only refuge from present difficulties in slogans, formulas, techniques and barbiturates.

We must also not fall into the over-simplification of putting ALL the blame on parents for the neurotic ills of their children. This is not only unfair to parents, but is a disservice to the children because it tends to obscure the importance of the child's own drive and needs, and to regard him merely as a piece of inactive plastic material. We must remember, then, that there are inherent difficulties in mental adjustment which are liable to cause trouble, no matter how good the home.

Further, if the parents are always working on the assumption that something they have done has made the child anxious, they will constantly be on the look-out for some recent and specific action of their own as its cause. As a result, they become tense and anxious themselves, and become terrified to exert any parental influence at all in the development of their children.

In this way, they too can reject the child, and thus foster the very things they are trying to avoid.

I feel that the really important factor in all handling is the "*general attitude*" of the parents, and the way in which the *ordinary details* of life are conducted. I feel further that the crises and decisions which occupy so much time in parents' questions are of far, far less significance than the overall pattern of inter-reaction with their children.

If I am asked by parents as to the best way of handling our new knowledge, I say to them — "First get to know your child as a unique individual, then learn to enjoy him as he progresses along his developmental path to maturity, and finally let him enjoy you, as a human being who is living the pattern of life, dynamically in close collaboration with him."

I feel if we do this, the fear of rejection will lose its intensity.

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adjusts itself to the demands of the processes of growth and maturation.

The imposition of a rigid programme and a tight syllabus means that all children are forced forward at the same pace. This will result in failure for some and failure in the initial stages of learning can inhibit future learning.

Is the time not propitious for educationalists in South Africa to look afresh at the primary school as an entity in itself and make a thorough investigation of its scope and function?

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(1) Wall, W. D.: "Education and Mental Health", Unesco, Harrap, London, 1959. p. 84.
(2) "The Teachers' World", No. 2478, Vol. XCII, May 1, 1957. p. 1.
(3) Report of the Superintendent of Education, Natal, 1952, p. 13.
(4) Ibid, p. 17.
(5) Report of the Overseas Commission, Transvaal, 1955.
(6) Report, Director of Education, Transvaal, 1957, p. 10, 1955, 37.
(7) Reports of the Director of Education, Transvaal, 1952-1957.
(8) Report of the Director of Education, Transvaal, 1957, p. 10
(9) Report, Superintendent General of Education, Cape, 1958, p. 5; Report, Director of Education, O.F.S., 1955.
(10) Department of Education, O.F.S., 1955.
(11) Reports, Director of Education, Transvaal, 1955, p. 9; Superintendent General of Education, Cape, 1958, p. 13.