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IF I HAD MY WAY

With English in the Primary School

by V. E. HANNA

IN general it seems to me that English in the Primary School is sadly deficient in purpose, plan and pep. There seems to be a theory abroad that in the home language it is unnecessary to apply the usual educational principles which define aims, method, and presentation of the subject.

To remedy this I would gather a band of enthusiasts, efficient, clear-thinking *teachers* from the primary schools, establish a committee consisting of these teachers and of representatives from the highest levels in the Department, and ensure that the opinion of the teachers carried weight in this committee. Their work would be to evolve a general plan to convince teachers that it is necessary to *teach* English, to outline what they should teach and to offer a variety of well-tried methods which may be used to attain their objects.

My idea in evolving such a plan is that it should serve to clarify the minds of many teachers who are "muddling along" in their English teaching, but we must guard carefully against stereotypes, for the end purpose is always to clear the path for inspirational work.

About two other factors that block this path I would, however, not hesitate to employ compulsion. I would see that all teachers in the primary school are obliged (and enabled) to attend periodical refresher discussion groups to brush away the cobwebs of ennui and weariness that kill enthusiasm. My second compulsion would, I hope, lessen that weariness. I should see that classes for English at least are much smaller than at present.

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Surely the ultimate aim in the use of the Mother Tongue is to crystallise thought in language by such clear expression that the thought itself is clarified. If this is so, then the child must be introduced to expression of thought by others. He must learn to read and to analyse the thought behind those words, those sentences, those paragraphs. He must acquire an exact vocabulary, exploring the meaning of every new word, savouring the meaning of every new word, savouring its rightness in a particular phrase and situation. He must learn the forms in which he can express himself clearly. How can he possibly do this when the harassed teacher is struggling with her forty-odd?

I would have my Grades teacher continue her global method of teaching reading, introducing all the variations she chooses, providing only that she does not concentrate on sound recognition above word recognition, on the word above the sentence, on the sentence above the thought expressed by it. It is here that the child can learn the meaning of reading and if he misses this meaning here he may miss it all the way. How can he learn this if the class is too large for the teacher to straighten his own personal difficulty as it arises?

So it is with the teaching of the patterns of expression; the learning "by heart" so essential for the cultivation of vocabulary and of clear style; the separation in teaching of "writing for form", and "writing for expression;" for the inspiration for creative writing. All these require the careful plan, the small class, and the constant refreshment of new methods, new reading.

It is imperative that the teacher should herself be well-grounded in her subject. If possible English should be her Mother Tongue. Whether this is so or not, provision should be made for her to devote far more time (in both training and teaching) to what is after all the tool which will be used throughout life, for good or ill, depending largely on how it is shaped in the Primary School.