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ABSTRACT

Observations of American instructors and students in England, as well as English publications, reveal that English primary teachers treat writing as a way for children to share their personal experiences, and they correspondingly emphasize freedom of expression, fluency, and the retention and development of imaginative responses. Teachers enrich and supplement children's experiences by collecting objects for the students' examination, using various media, fostering classroom projects, or reading imaginative literature aloud. They avoid textbooks and formal lessons, teach mechanics only upon request, and rarely place grades or extensive comments upon the papers. Instead, the children's work is dignified through inclusion in class booklets or wall displays. English children, although they informally master mechanics as well as American students, manifest a more spontaneous eagerness to write than their American counterparts, and they produce numerous works of high quality with style and coherence derived from the integrity of their imaginations and perceptions. (JM)

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Writing In English Primary Schools

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At the 1968 NCTE convention in Milwaukee, Stanley Kegler, in discussing dangers facing those engaged in revising the English curriculum sounded the warning, "Beware the Redcoats!" He was referring, of course, to the rapidly growing interest in British education resulting from the Anglo-American Conference on the teaching of English held at Dartmouth College in 1966. Professor Kegler's admonition was that we investigate carefully these imported ideas of what English teaching should be before we clamber aboard yet another bandwagon heading noisily for the Promised Land.

Unfortunately, few American teachers have any solid idea of the nature of schools and education in England and are, consequently, pitifully ill-equipped to make the careful judgments which Professor Kegler urges. Typically, when an American teacher

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thinks about English schools, she conjures up Dickensian images of gloomy old buildings in which frail, pale-faced boys quake as they "recite" to intimidating Gradgrinds. She may also have some vague concepts about competitive examinations which, at some ridiculously early age, determine a child's academic future.

As the instructors assigned to a group of University of Connecticut students participating in an exchange program with Keswick Hall College of Education in England, we were afforded a unique opportunity to study English education first hand. Our students taught in English schools of all types: rural and urban, large and small, old and new. We traveled throughout the country and made visits to a variety of schools and colleges. We had long discussions with teachers at all levels, pre-school through graduate school, and with pupils of all ages and backgrounds. Most important, we spent long hours in English classrooms observing teaching and learning in progress.

From all these experiences we have tried to construct a description of the teaching of writing in English primary schools. Aside from our own observations we have drawn upon those of our students as they recorded them in journals kept during their stay in England, and upon a number of English publications on this subject (A. B. Clegg's *The Excitement of Writing*, the National Association for the Teaching of English's *English in the Primary School*, and Frank Whitehead's *The Disappearing Dais*, among others). Thus, while we cannot claim the objectivity of a controlled study, we believe the experiences upon which this description is based are varied enough to permit valid, if somewhat broad generalizations.

First, a few comments on how the English do *not* teach writing: they do *not* divide the writing process into smaller discrete segments such as spelling, handwriting, punctuation, usage, etc.: they do *not* teach small classes, nor do they teach in neat, quiet, orderly classrooms; they do *not* have formal, teacher-directed lessons followed by student drill; they do *not* mark every piece of student writing, nor do they cover student papers with a mass of correction and comment; and, above all they do *not* use textbooks, workbooks, drillbooks, or duplicated worksheets.

Instead, almost all writing is derived from the personal experiences of children and the emphasis is on freedom of expression rather than correctness or stylistic convention. The teacher's primary role is to provide stimulation by supplementing and enriching the child's direct experience. To the extent that their limited budgets allow, they make use of a variety of media—film, filmstrips, records, tapes, pictures, television and radio, as well as books—to provide a wide range of vicarious experience. But mainly they use things. An English primary classroom often looks like a combination junk yard and museum of natural history. The walls and floors are lined with pottery and clay models (most made by the children), old bottles, boxes, toys, plants, and a veritable menagerie of small animals. One school we visited had the remains of an old automobile parked outside for the kids to climb about in, and we were told of others which had made similar use of abandoned World War II fighter planes.

At the Infant level (ages 4-8) the children are constantly manipulating these objects, using them as the basis for talk and writing, but always in a seemingly informal, natural way. For example, a child may spend some time playing with a rabbit, watching it, stroking it, feeding it, and then be asked to write a story about the rabbit, or a poem, or a description of what the rabbit felt like or did. Or two boys experimenting with some empty bottles in a tub of water may write an explanation of what happened when they pushed the bottles beneath the surface and why the bubbles rose. It is important to remember that the children participate in these activities independently or in small groups of their own choosing. The teacher provides and suggests but rarely directs.

Fluency is the most important goal, and nothing is done which might discourage the flow of words. Unlined paper is used so that the children can illustrate their writing as they wish. If an infant needs a word, he gets it from the teacher or from one of the other children. Corrections are made very seldom, and only after the work is finished. Spelling, punctuation, and other mechanics are taught individually as the child requests help. Grades and other symbols of success or failure are virtually non-existent. The children's work is dignified by its inclusion in a class booklet or by

display on a wall. Writing is treated as just another way to share experience with other people, and much writing is addressed to other children rather than to the teacher.

The result of this approach is an almost unbelievable eagerness to write. It was not uncommon for a six or seven year old to show us a thirty or forty page booklet which he had written and illustrated. Much writing by these young children is spontaneous, written because they wanted to try to capture on paper some experience which had excited them and to share it with their classmates. The amount and quality of this voluntary writing is amazing to an American observer. In spite of (or perhaps because of) the poor spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, there is a smoothness indicative of developing style and a coherence derived from integrity of imagination and perception. The words hang together not because of a deliberate adherence to rhetorical principles but because of the natural unfolding of imaginative and sensory experience. (Note for example how all the imagery and metaphor in the sample provided later relate to the "coming out" of the tulip.) The vocabulary, also, is surprisingly advanced for such young children, much more so than that of American children of comparable age.

This extensive vocabulary is, to a large extent, the result of the organizational structure of the Infant Schools. Classes in England are large, sometimes having as many as forty to fifty children. In many schools children of different ages are in the same class (the English call this "vertical grouping"). As described earlier there is a great deal of independent and small group activity, talk, and mobility. Because it is impossible for the teacher to attend personally to every child, the children become dependent upon each other. Children with questions or problems often turn to a classmate for help. The older and brighter aid the younger and slower. Aside from the obvious social advantages of such a situation, there are educational advantages as well, particularly in terms of vocabulary development. According to the teachers with whom we spoke, children seem to learn new words more easily and naturally when they hear them spoken by other children. Also, although the teacher does not direct the class very often, she does read to the

children stories and poems she believes are imaginatively exciting and enjoyable. The children learn early to delight in the sound and selection of words. They frequently beg to have these stories and poems reread. Often these pieces of literature serve as the basis for student activities: drama, dance, music, art. This type of physical involvement with the words of the story seems to fix more firmly the relationship between word and object or concept.

Nine, ten, and eleven year olds (Juniors) continue to write largely from personal experience. Children at this level are expected to write freely on any given topic derived from direct or vicarious experience. Much of this writing is directly related to the subjects they are studying, but in a way that American teachers seldom attempt. For example, one class we visited was studying geography by corresponding with crew members of an English merchant ship. The class had charted the course of the ship and recorded its progress in individual log books. As the ship approached each stop, the children studied the country and port city and then addressed questions and comments to the mariners with whom they were corresponding. Thus, each week every child produced several pieces of imaginative writing as he entered in his log book fictional accounts of each day's activities and also composed one or two letters in which his writing was more formal and factual, based on reading and research.

Sustained projects of this type are quite common in English junior schools, and they invariably entail great quantities of writing. Often these projects stretch over the entire year and form the core of the curriculum. A class may devote a year to a study of Old English churches in such a way that all the traditional elements of the curriculum are related to this one topic. As they study the origin and importance of a church, they study history; as they study its design and construction, they study science and mathematics; as they study its ornamentation, they study art. In such a scheme it becomes impossible to study English in any way other than through its use. Talk, writing, and reading are the tools of study, not the objects of study. There can be no place in this kind of teaching for formal lessons on the topic sentence, or outlining, or introductory clauses.

Even in those schools which are more traditionally organized, that is where the individual subjects are treated separately, we found little evidence of formal instruction in composition. In fact, many teachers reject even the term "composition" because it implies a process of putting together according to fixed rules or patterns. They insist on the term "writing" since it implies only the use of a particular medium of communication. Likewise, they reject the teaching of formal grammar as an aid to writing (or for any other purpose for that matter; formal grammar lessons are just not taught in the majority of English schools). They rely instead on instruction that is individual and tied directly to student need. Wide use is made of "topic books," notebooks in which, over a period of time, a student assembles a collection of his own stories, poems, reports, and art work all dealing with a single topic. The aim is to get children to write copiously on subjects in which they are intensely interested and about which they have considerable knowledge. Again, "correctness" of mechanics and style is considered secondary in importance to student interest, ease of expression, and quantity of production.

Obviously, a brief description such as this cannot do justice to the exciting education taking place in English schools. For an American perhaps nothing short of a personal visit to English classrooms will serve to convince him that this approach really works. However, we would like to offer as evidence two pieces of writing done by children taught by these methods. Although these particular passages have been taken from *The Excitement of Writing*, we can attest to finding writing of similar quality in abundance in primary schools throughout England.

Boy age 6

We have got some tulips They are yellow we have got a red one coming out. when they are fully out they are like a cake stand with a handle at the top. Our red one is not fully out yet our red one will be a beautiful one it has a bit of orangey yellow mixt in it. It is like a bonfire with the red in the middle and the yellow round the side like flames shooting up in the air when they are ready to

come fully out there petals open slowly and then they are fully out.

Girl age 9

On open market day there is a hurrying and scurrying a hustle and bustle a gossiping nineteen to the dozen you can hear babies screaming their heads off while their mothers chatter and shout. I hope you don't go home with a headache like I do. People are rumageing to find good bargains you see people dashing, pushing, shoving. If you try to get to one stall you end up at another. Sometimes people will gossip all morning. You go from one stall to another and come back and there they are still chattering.

The children who wrote these passages come from working class families in a relatively poor coal mining area. At home they rarely encounter verbal stimulation of any sort. By American standards they would probably be termed disadvantaged.

One final word to the doubters. We found, generally, that the improvement in use of mechanics between the Infant and Junior levels was much more pronounced than is evident in the two passages included above. Without the aid of spelling books, weekly lists, and quizzes, children learn to spell. Without workbooks, exercises, and rules, they learn to punctuate and capitalize. Without the benefit of sequentially structured instruction, behavioral objectives, and programmed workbooks, they acquire the mechanics of written expression as well as, if not better than, their American counterparts. And they thoroughly enjoy themselves while doing so. Most important, they retain and develop the freshness of vision and imaginative response that American children begin to lose as soon as they learn to write "correctly." Joy of expression, of sharing experience is not replaced by fear of making a mistake, of "saying it wrong."

With results like these why "Beware the Redcoats"? If we must have a slogan, let it be one of more recent origin—"We're Backing Britain."