Experiences with
British Infant Schools

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)
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A golden opportunity presented itself in spring quarter 1973. After hearing about British schools in education courses, I could actually visit one. As a student in London, I observed four schools in all—three infant schools, and a grammar school. The Chelsea-Kensington Public Library also furnished me with information. I would like to share my experiences with you...
"I learnt without the painful pressure of compulsion by the sole desire to express what was in my mind."¹

This statement by St. Augustine--over 1500 years old--seems to express the current philosophy of British infant school education most concisely.

All children in the United Kingdom must go to school at age five. So that children are not left home alone or in the streets when Mum works, some areas have established pre-five year old classes. Children get a good meal and companionship in addition to their school work. The five to seven year olds attend infant school. From the age of seven until eleven years pupils are juniors. These two classes comprise primary school.

With the belief that children learn best what they want to learn, as many situations as possible are "disguised" as play. "Plato saw it (play) as the best way to begin children's education, on the grounds that any other way at that stage would involve compulsion, which was unbefitting for a free person."²

While formal schools assume that children will be interested in the same thing at the same moment for the same length of time, infant schools operate learning centers, which are varied, for educators realize that not all children are the
same, that interests are socially learned, and that, given a choice, children will omit much that is of educational value. They are designed to be used with a minimum of adult supervision and direction so that when a child becomes interested in a particular activity he may proceed without delay, before his interest wanes. Movement activities are stressed because it is unnatural for children of infant school age to sit quietly and motionless. The centers are varied in content and method of operation so that many areas of interest are sparked. These activities include gross physical movement such as running and jumping, manipulative development such as handling bricks, sand, and water, impersonation, rule-governed games, and verbal games.3

We believe that the best kind of learning is achieved when people desire of their own accord to produce something for themselves, and by learning we include of course all aspects from learning to live to learning to do arithmetic processes.4

While the child is having fun doing what he wants to do, he is subtly and painlessly learning basic skills and facts.

Much credit must be given to individual classroom teachers, for the many interesting games and centers are planned and constructed by them. There are no system-wide standards or curricula. Nothing is imposed from outside. "In English schools the Head and staff are fully responsible for organizing the curriculum deciding what shall be taught and how it shall be taught."5 Much emphasis is placed on using all available space and resources. "Starting from the child"6 and recognizing assets of the community a tailor-made curriculum is
developed for each school.

The British infant school no longer provides just a preparation for junior school or a utility education for earning a living but it has become an adventure in itself. Children come to school seeking security, new experiences, and recognition. British teachers try to foster these through guidance, enrichment, encouragement, and example.

The mind does not grow...if the pupil is merely choked with facts. There is a sensitive relationship between the emotions aroused through the experiences which a scholar is given and what is called academic learning. The school must stimulate ideas, must create conditions which engender interest and concentration and provide an environment which evokes imagination and creative thought, if the mental processes of the pupils are to develop.
During my stay in London I visited three infant schools. Arranging an observation was not as easy as I expected it to be. Easter vacation is at least three weeks long. There is a waiting list of people wanting to visit British schools, especially those near London. All appointments for the London schools must be made through a central office, which actually discourages many visitors. Therefore, Prior Weston was the only London school I saw. The others, although outside London, could be easily reached by tube (subway), and foot or bus. I felt most welcome everywhere I went.

NELSON INFANT SCHOOL

March 26, 1973

The Headmistress at Nelson listed several goals for the school:

to mold learning attitudes

to further social development

to strengthen conversational skills

to develop work habits

to develop a sharing attitude

to build friendships

to build independency

to learn basic skills

to do all of this in a relaxed atmosphere
To introduce children to school gradually playgroups and half-day nursery groups are planned when staff and space are available.

A child enrolls in full-day classes as soon after his fifth birthday as possible. There are three entry dates for school: summer, autumn, and Christmas. Due to this arrangement some pupils get three years of infant school, while others receive only two years. Often the two-year group is given a smaller class and a better teacher as compensation.

Parents are encouraged to come to school both to visit and to help. Friday morning assemblies often draw not only parents but younger brothers and sisters. Parents come in afternoons to guide playroom, crafts, cookery, and music corner activities. They are not allowed to participate in the regular classroom, for they cannot teach what they don't know.

Newham is a low-income, low-education community. It is not an area most people would pick as a residential site if given a choice. There is a shortage of teachers and a high turnover rate for those who are employed. One of Nelson's eight teachers plans to leave soon. Since a replacement cannot be found, the Head will take over her class for the remainder of the year. Thirty-three to thirty-five pupils is an average class here, though thirty-nine is not unusual.

Teacher training has become more controlled recently. While it used to take two years to earn a Bachelor of Education Degree, it now takes three years. Many of the older teachers do not have any teacher training degree. Some
universities have a four-year diploma of higher education now.

The reception class is small—thirty-one students. The teacher has an aide's help three days a week. I had barely entered her room when Neil cornered me so that he could read to me. He was reading very well with only six month's experience. Each student progresses at his own rate, though, and some students had not advanced beyond single words.

The American visitor crossed the hall to answer questions from six and seven year olds. "Do you have a telly?" queried a British boy. After briefly comparing shows we both knew, cowboys and Indians reigned supreme. The children had visions of the United States as the "wild West" in its days of fame and infamy.

LITTLE EALING INFANT SCHOOL
March 27, 1973

The reception teacher has a very interesting international class of four-year olds. France, Sweden, Malta, and Turkey are a few of the students' original homes. English children form a definite minority. Private and parochial schools will not accept many of these children, but most of their parents cannot afford to send them to private schools.

I spent an entire day with this class and therefore I could see learning at play up close. A full day's activities were not too much for these young children to handle. The teacher admitted that they were just babies, however, and treated them as such.
Morning tea, already prepared to her taste, and delivered to each teacher's room provided a pleasant break in the day.

PRIOR WESTON INFANT SCHOOL

May 11, 1973

Prior Weston was short-staffed on the day I visited. Of the four regular teachers, two were away on courses, and one was in Devon. A man from junior school was substituting. Since this meant that each teacher would have a double class, the physical education teacher took each student one hour a day. The music teacher also helped by planning extra classes. All teachers are known by their first names. Classes are grouped vertically, so that there is a wide age and ability range in each room. For convenience one teacher divided his room of five to seven year olds in three groups: littles, middles, and bigs.

Prior Weston has been built since World War II, so it is built especially along an open concept plan. All rooms open onto a central library/work area. The out-of-doors is included in the normal classroom space. The rooms are filled with animals. The walls are crowded with children's work. The "Hole-in-the-Ground" is a separated below-ground room where music classes and special activities are held. It has a play area on the roof.

It was in Prior Weston that I finally saw traditional lessons being held. It was evident that children did not haphazardly choose to do what struck their fancies. There were daily basic tasks to be done that could not be ignored
or "forgotten". As in the other two schools work was done in unlined copy books. Even writing was practiced without a straight line guide.
English teachers are surely a dedicated lot for pay is very low. I was told more than once that no family can exist on a teacher's salary. The excessive planning of lessons and constricting of aids involves much time and effort that must be grudged at times.

The British infant school philosophy looks good on paper. Teachers seem to be following that philosophy and sending good students on to junior school. Although some books lead a person to believe that infant school is all play and no work, in practice this is not true. A great deal of independence and responsibility are developed in primary school pupils which are not necessarily further developed in secondary and grammar schools. Prescott Grammar School (girls only) is very much like any American junior-senior high school. Students arrive, are lectured at, given an assignment, and leave. It seems that many good primary school talents are lost before graduation from grammar school.

Despite any weaknesses, I would not fear to send a child of mine to a British infant school, for I also know its strengths.
FOOTNOTES


3 Dearden, p. 93

4 Ash, p. 9.


6 Dearden, p. 13.

7 Gordon, p. 7-8.
Little Ealing Infant School
Little Ealing Lane, W5, London
Mrs. Little, Headmistress
March 27, 1973

Nelson Infant School
Napier Road, E6, Newham
Mrs. Sylvia Dodd, Headmistress
March 26, 1973

Prescott Grammar School
Prescott
Mrs. Smith, Headmistress
June 5, 1973

Prior Weston Infant School
Whitecross Road, London
May 11, 1973


