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Pen-ink - Elements

Primary School Studies—No. 5

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH,
147 COLLINS ST.,
MELBOURNE, C.I.
VICTORIA .

HIGHWAYS OF EXPRESSION

1952

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL
RESEARCH

One Shilling and Fourpence

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Primary School Studies - No. 1

HIGHWAYS
OF EXPRESSION

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL
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HIGHWAYS OF EXPRESSION

Primary School Studies No. 5

DISCUSSION BRIEF

1. 'Freedom is all very well, but children like discipline and work more freely in forms they understand.' This comment and the text of the pamphlet appear to be contradictory. Are they really so?

2. The writer seems at times to disparage the idea of planning one's expression. Is this his real intention? Some form of sequence is essential in communicating an idea or telling a story. How can spontaneity be retained and combined with effectiveness of form?

3. When the standards of oral expression are known to be low in the children's homes, how far can the school go in encouraging higher standards? Is it sufficient to deal only with the children? How can the home influence be improved? Do you know of any school which has made positive approaches to the parents in this regard?

4. The writer says that if we can solve the problem of providing interested listeners, 'problems of grammar and spelling will be solved by the eagerness of the child to make his expression even more interesting'. Do you agree with this?

5. Is it necessary to prescribe a course in grammar? In South Australia it is left to teachers to introduce topics 'seasonably'. If you had the same freedom, how much grammar would you teach, and when? How would you justify it?

6. What methods can be adopted for 'ensuring for each child an interested listener or reader' in respect of written composition?

7. What devices can a teacher use to provide for most of the class getting some practice in speaking during oral English lessons? By far the most frequent use of oral expression is in ordinary conversation. What opportunities exist in the class room for this mode of expression?

8. Puppet plays have been used by teachers of special classes as therapeutic devices, to allow children to play certain roles which either give them scope for self-expression, or help them to get rid of antagonisms or hostility. Would this be practicable in all classes? Would it help any children in your class?

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This is Number 5 in a series published by the ACER as a follow-up of a nation-wide Curriculum Survey. Some of the outstanding results of this Survey were published in 1951 in *English and Arithmetic for the Australian Child*. The present series of pamphlets is designed to lead to discussion of problems raised directly or indirectly by the Survey. They are written by a panel of writers drawn from all States. The authors are anonymous but include teachers, inspectors, lecturers in Teachers' Colleges, and members of University Departments of Education. Each author has been left free to express his own view-point, and the views expressed, and ideas expounded, are not necessarily those of the Council. The Discussion Brief enclosed with each pamphlet takes up other points of view and endeavours to centre discussion on some of the major issues touched on in the pamphlet.

The titles of the pamphlets are:

1. *The Approach to Reading*
2. *The Individual Child*
3. *Ends and Means in Arithmetic*
4. *The Appraisal of Results*
5. *Highways of Expression*
6. *The Purposes of Teaching*
7. *Power Over Words*
8. *Children in Groups*
9. *Priorities in the Primary School*

*In a true profession each practitioner
is at least a potential innovator*

HIGHWAYS OF EXPRESSION

Neville disliked art lessons; he resigned himself to an hour of frustrated effort, pinned his paper to the drawing-board and, dabbing a limp brush into his colour-box, began to paint the scene before him. There was the tuck-shop, dirty-mustard in colour, the asphalt playground in the foreground and the brick school-building beyond. 'Not a very bright picture', Neville thought as he roughed in a bright yellow tuck-shop and, ignoring the frowning bricks, limned a smiling blue sky. 'It needs a bit of life.' He began a group of boys, but had hardly blocked the figures when he realized the whole picture lacked proportion. An absurdly small tuck-shop, squeezed into the centre of the paper, was surrounded by a desert of blank space. Neville tore the paper from the board, crumpled it in a ball and threw it on the ground.

He supposed the new teacher would 'blow his top' like the last one, but, for the moment, the teacher was busy helping another boy. Safe in the shelter of his easel, Neville took a comic paper from his pocket and began a vicarious inter-planetary adventure with Hyper-Super-Boy.

'Where's your painting, Neville?' The comic disappeared by sleight of hand. The boy adjusted his defence mechanism with a scowl.

'Oh, I couldn't do it so I threw it down there.'

The teacher picked up the crumpled paper, smoothed it out on the drawing-board and looked at the painting thoughtfully.

'What's wrong with it, Neville?'

'Oh, it's nothing like the scene and the shop's silly—it's too small, the paper's nearly all uninteresting spaces and I can't fill them.'

The teacher took out a pocket-knife and opened it. He cut a small square picture from the centre of the paper, discarded the rest, and suddenly the proportions were satisfying.

'Now look at your picture. The way you have opposed that rich blue to the sunny yellow shows you have an eye for colour. The grouping of the boys in front of the shop gives life and movement. The space is well filled and the whole effect is attractive to the eye. Many an artist, finding himself dissatisfied with a large canvas, has cut a small picture from a larger one and achieved a result similar to yours. Don't you like it?'

Neville did like it. His subsequent actions were most significant. As the teacher moved on to the next boy, Neville reached in his school-case for a thick book. He opened it and carefully laid the picture between the leaves. Then he held the covers tightly closed

to press out the creases. He pinned another sheet of paper onto his board and began to paint with a new interest. The comic fell from his pocket unheeded.

I wonder how many teachers have the wisdom of Neville's teacher. He knew that almost every form of expression is basically an act of faith in oneself. To publish one's personality in words or paint takes courage; and children making their first diffident, faltering experiments in expression can easily be convinced that their efforts are worthless. The only successful teacher is one who emphasizes the positive features of expression; he selects only the good and ignores the bad, on the little-known principle that children learn not so much by trial and error as by trial and success.

EXPRESSION AND FORMALISM

George, although he has a very high intelligence quotient, detests the written composition lesson.

If you look back into his school career you will soon discover why.

While he was in the first and second classes George enjoyed listening to stories, discussing interesting events, telling his adventures or advancing his opinions on the why's and wherefore's of the multitude of interesting things about him. But when he entered Mr B's class he fell on his face in a grim world of reality.

Mr B apparently regarded Miss Peecher as the great prose artist of her century. You may recall that Miss Peecher (in *Our Mutual Friend*) would write a little essay on any subject exactly a slate long, beginning at the left-hand top of one side and ending at the right-hand bottom of the other *and the essay would be strictly according to rule.*

The rules for expression drawn up by Mr B were as follows :

1. Indent paragraph and commence with a capital letter.
2. Write more than one sentence in each paragraph.
3. Write at least three paragraphs.
4. Before each composition write a plan, e. g.—

A Day in the Bush

Par. 1. Setting out; sights on the way; arrival.

Par. 2. An exciting incident; nearly an accident; all's well that ends well.

Par. 3. Homeward bound; the end of a happy day.

5. All compositions will be marked by the code. (See Chart A.)
6. All errors must be corrected.
7. Errors repeated must be written out twenty times.

The whole strait-jacket system depressed George but rule 7 terrified him. He wrote interesting imaginative stories, but in his enthusiasm, spelling and punctuation sometimes departed from orthodoxy. Because he often used 'their' for 'there' or introduced a redundant 'got' he usually found himself writing long lists of composition errors in his lunch time. The result was an inhibition against writing anything. Naturally enough, when he found that composing long sincere stories brought nothing but corrections, he turned to stiff, insincere, Miss Peecher-type essays which were as brief as the rules would allow, and, if they gave less scope for imagination, were also smaller danger areas.

At the same time George found his pleasure in oral expression curtailed by Mr B's faith in himself as a teacher. Nobody must talk except Mr B. The teacher will teach and the children will listen. If they listen attentively they will inhale the wisdom of Mr B. Not that Mr B was unfamiliar with modern methods. He knew that such 'frills' as lecturesses, dramatization, puppetry, discussion and similar highways of expression had been advocated by theorists for more than thirty years; he even allowed half an hour each week on the time-table for 'oral expression', but grammar and arithmetic, composition errors and spelling took so much time that the class seldom enjoyed even this opportunity to hear the views of somebody other than Mr B.

EXPRESSION AND PERSONALITY

George's reaction to English expression is exactly what Neville's reaction to art lessons would have been if the art teacher had not known that praise is a stronger stimulant than blame. Furthermore, among Australian school children, there are thousands of boys and girls who, like George, are seldom encouraged in school to express their own personalities.

The ACER report, *English and Arithmetic for the Australian Child*, states (p. 28): 'We apparently teach a good deal without achieving with many pupils the practical results hoped for or even assumed. For example, much of what is taught in the study of English grammar has little effect on the pupils' own use of language.'

Presumably the practical result hoped for in teaching the use of language is that the child shall develop the power to use socially effective English. The development of such power is achieved only through exercise. Expression is the exercise that kindles imagination and cultivates that ability to interest and influence other people, which is more important than grammatical accuracy.

Self-expression is a necessity for mental and emotional maturation. The child who is denied outlets for his needs grows up without confidence in his own powers. He may never achieve full adulthood. Probably we do not realize with many children the practical results hoped for or assumed as outcomes of our English lessons because we ignore laws of human development.

The child who is induced by an ambitious parent to walk before his legs are ready for walking may become bandy. The child who is induced by an ambitious teacher to study English grammar before he is mentally and emotionally ready, may become mentally or emotionally bandy in his attitude towards the use of language.

If Shakespeare had known that his compositions would be read by nobody but a censor appointed to correct the spelling, grammar and form, he would probably have taken up butchering and succeeded his father in the business. Similarly the child who knows that he is writing for a reader who is interested only in the mechanics of his work has no incentive to express himself.

THE PROBLEM

The fundamental problem of creative expression in schools is the problem of ensuring for each child an interested listener or reader. If we can solve it, problems such as those of grammar and spelling will be solved by the eagerness of the child to make his expression even more interesting; just as Neville, discovering that his picture had merit, became anxious to paint one with even more merit.

HIGHWAYS TO EXPRESSION

As there can be no expression without some prior impression, the first highways to be followed by a child being introduced to the joys of creative expression are the ways of experience, research and study.

Without entering too closely into the psychological definitions of experience we may accept that of the dictionary: 'practical acquaintance with any matter gained by trial'. A group of children invited to write on 'An incident that annoyed me', or 'Something that amused me', will almost always produce interesting essays because of the personal nature of the experiences they relate.

Other titles for essays on experiences that are universal are :

1. How I spent my birthday
2. A school excursion
3. My friend
4. Likes and dislikes

5. A visit to the dentist
6. Getting my hair cut
7. Doings of my dog (or cat or other pet)
8. The day I made toffee (or a kite or cake)
9. The best film I've seen
10. My day-dreams

It is a revelation to hear a lecture or read an essay by a normally almost inarticulate child on, say, a visit to a newspaper printing room, a technological museum with its modern marvels, his first visit to a farm, or some other experience which has impressed him deeply. The school excursion, if well exploited, provides a fund of experiences which stimulate expression. Similarly a child who has painted a picture or made a model of which he is proud will usually talk about it in a way that ensures him an interested audience.

Len L—, who had never previously been induced to give a lecturette, volunteered one after he had learned to make and throw boomerangs. His learned exposition of the theory of 'leading edge, trailing edge and the pressure exerted by air in motion' kept a class of eleven-year-olds intent for ten minutes. The best outcome was the obvious growth in Len's own confidence. Children who make aeroplanes or weave scarves, develop their own snapshots or go hiking in the bush become living proof of the old teaching adage, 'motivation is everything'.

However, some children seem to prefer to gain their impressions from books. The best lecturettes on wild animals are given sometimes by children who have never been to a zoo. After all, one can learn many things about tigers in a library which cannot be learned by watching them pacing a cage. It is more important to teach children *how* to study and *how* to go about research in a library than to bewilder them with material such as forms the substance of the chapter in a book before me as I write. It is intended to teach *eleven-year-olds* about 'Voice and Mood of Verbs', one of the veils which might well be left unlifted for a few years longer, while school time could be devoted to experiences, study and research through which children absorb impressions.

HIGHWAYS OF EXPRESSION

The arterial highways of expression in schools are discussion and debate, creative activities, problem solving and delivering prepared lectures.

Discussion is a neglected art in many schools above infants' level

because large classes make it difficult to control. Class discussions can be the most important bridge between teacher and child, and a vehicle of spontaneous expression. The teacher should see:

1. That every child participates in the discussion of one topic or another over a period;
2. That one or two children do not dominate the discussions;
3. That topics chosen suit the interest of the children;
4. That he gives a lead where necessary and draws out the diffident;
5. That the tone of the discussion is good-natured instead of institutionalized. (An institutionalized discussion is a routine followed because the teacher demands it. It is artificial, stiff, and on the whole unfriendly.)

Debates should be frequent and only occasionally formal. They should be related to the interests of the children participating. Debaters should think over the topic for some time before being asked to speak.

Everyday expression skills such as the following should be dramatized:

How to introduce.

How to interrupt.

How to give name and address clearly.

How to use a telephone to report fire, call an ambulance, give an order to a tradesman.

How to apologize, invite, acknowledge a gift.

How to tell a story briefly.

How to give a radio talk.

How to direct a stranger to places near the school.

CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

Children write with feeling when they know that their composition says something they want to say. Sometimes we teach children that 'how to say' is more important than 'what to say', but the reverse is the truth. Since we cannot always write about school excursions or similar experiences, it is necessary to devise classroom activities which stimulate in pupils a feeling of purpose in writing.

Mime is a useful activity. Two or three children are selected to go outside the room and decide upon an incident to be presented in mime. They then act the scene before the class, and each pupil, after watching carefully, writes a brief description of the scene and his

version of its meaning. Then the compositions are read aloud until one considered accurate by the mimers is selected and other children with similar descriptions are invited to read theirs. It is a purposeful game of skill.

A similar mime, with some acted questions and answers, may be used as a basis for a playlet in which the children in the audience write their versions of the words that would have been used in the situation.

Making a play by co-operative effort is an excellent stimulant to expression. A story such as, for instance, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, is told by the teacher and turned into a play by children who speak impromptu lines to fit each scene. Onlookers may criticize and interrupt while the scene is being composed. Sometimes several weeks have to be devoted to completing a three-scene play. In one Sydney school the result was so good that a film company made a very interesting film of the class making and presenting their play.

Writing a novel sounds rather an ambitious undertaking for ten-year-olds, but if, say, five composition lessons are devoted to writing five chapters on a theme such as *My Flight to the Moon* or *My Dog Dan*, and children are allowed to illustrate their stories and bind them as a book, a good deal of effective writing can be accomplished without drudgery. Glove puppets are easy to make, and shy children will often express themselves through the puppet without the diffidence that inhibits them when exposed to an audience. Since most published puppet plays are too long for children to present, the adaptation of old stories or the writing of new plays are activities arising naturally from puppetry.

The essential quality of artistic creativeness is that the product shall arise from an inward urge to use imagination creatively. The teacher's role is to devise situations in which children will feel the urge.

PROBLEMS TO SOLVE

Most children like puzzles. Since there can be no expression without thought, it is interesting to stimulate their thinking by asking children questions like these:

1. John and Bob were hiking in the bush. When they stopped to boil the billy, John went to the creek for water, while Bob prepared to make a fire. He selected a tree-trunk as a fire-place, scraped into a heap some dry leaves among those on the ground, covered them with twigs and gathered an armful of

dry sticks to build up a big fire. John just returned in time to stop him lighting it, and to explain that Bob had made several mistakes. What were the mistakes? How do you think John would make the fire?

- Galileo was the first man to observe a planet through a telescope. On 7 January 1610 he observed that the planet Jupiter had three small stars near it in this position:

* * ° *

On 8 January he looked at Jupiter again, and was astonished to see the stars in this position:

° * * *

On 10 January he could see two small stars near the planet, like this:

* * °

This was a puzzle for the astronomer, but he soon worked out a solution. What do you think was the cause of the changing position?

Questions of that type excite children to write answers, and they enjoy the challenge offered the intellect.

THE PROJECT

Projects are activities and experiences of social significance, organized about a central theme.

A well-organized project culminates in a show of work in which the children give lecturettes, act plays, recite relevant poems and generally use many methods of describing their work on the theme.

Children trained in the project method know how to study, carry out library research to find their own facts, organize an essay or lecture, and present it with suitable illustrations.

Oral and written English become to such children well understood tools of expression. They have something to say and they find pleasure in saying it.

A typical Project Culmination Programme is as follows:

6-A Class

My Daily Bath

D. Cherry, Announcer

1. B. Allan
N. Park Explaining the Project Subject
2. B. Wheat Ancient Roman Baths (illustrated)
3. J. Dumbell
M. Goodlad Bathing History (illustrated)
4. R. McLean
J. Park Some Unusual Bathing Customs
5. J. Russell The Order of the Bath—Its Origin (play)
6. M. Buckingham
B. Allen
A. Toms
M. Jones The Necessity for and Hygiene of Bathing
7. A. Williamson
J. Woodforth Cotton Growing and manufacture for Towel Making
8. Six girls Account of Visit to Australian Towel Mills
9. D. Leonard
H. Ellis Water in the Bathroom (illustrated by plan)
10. V. Bennett
Y. Yasson Sydney's Water Supply (illustrated by map)
11. R. Bryant
D. Amesbury Soap Making
12. J. Dolsen
W. Brennan Types of Soap
13. G. Payer
D. Cherry Manufacture of Baths (illustrated)
14. D. Spalding Colour Schemes in Bathrooms
15. J. Fenech Hot-water Systems
16. Conclusion Humorous Poem, *The Wrong Tune*

POSITIVE APPRAISAL

Positive appraisal means the selection of good points rather than faults. For example, when looking through compositions, the teacher reads each one as a piece of creative writing. As he reads he marks such qualities as:

1. Fine phrases
2. Well-balanced sentence
3. Well-selected words
4. Forceful verbs
5. Nice discrimination in use of adverbs
6. Appropriate adjectives
7. Striking opening sentence
8. Exciting climax
9. Precise sequence
10. Clear description

It is very, very seldom that a child's written expression is so lacking in individuality that some praiseworthy feature cannot be found by a perceptive teacher anxious to preserve each child's self-respect and sense of purpose. Then the lesson following the composition lesson can be devoted to appreciative comments and readings of attractive features from some of the essays. It is not necessary to read every composition every week, but organization and tact should ensure that every child is shown his own virtues of expression at least once every three or four weeks. It is not good practice frequently to hold up the same child's work as a good example, because that may increase the feeling of inadequacy in the many who are hard to convince of their own aptitude. Praise is such a strong stimulant that small doses achieve satisfactory results.

The second stage of positive appraisal is instruction in how to improve the work. The teacher might now say, for example:

'This piece of work would have been better if you had:

1. Spelt "recommend" and "separate" correctly, or
2. Set it out in paragraphs, or
3. Varied the sentence beginnings a little more.'

But it is not necessary to comment on every necessary improvement in each essay. One or two such comments make more impression than a page full of blue-pencil marks.

Group discussion is often the final stage of appraisal. The teacher, without specifying individual children, opens a discussion on some of the blemishes which reduced the value of some of the creative writing and leads the children to decide how such mistakes could be avoided next time.

The essential point to remember is that criticism of works of expression is, in a sense, criticism of the writer's or speaker's personality. It is easy to destroy confidence by destructive criticism, and

possible to cultivate it by discriminating use of those teaching skills which stimulate a child to use his latent powers. Dr Margaret Mead considers that the most brilliant thinker probably uses less than one-tenth of his potential brain-power. The teacher's real task is to help his pupil use more of his mental power than he would use without the external stimulus.

FURTHER READING

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