1952

Priorities in the primary school

Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)

Primary School Studies — No. 9

PRIORITIES IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
FREDERICK STREET, HAWTHORN, E. 2.
VICTORIA.

PRIORITIES IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

Primary School Studies No. 9

DISCUSSION BRIEF

1. Who decides at present what the priorities are in primary education? What say in the determination have you had and do you now have, as teacher, as citizen, and if appropriate, as parent?

2. What, in your opinion, are the principal causes of the variation in status between schools? What can an individual school do to alter the status it has in a community?

3. Do you agree that the school determines the child's pattern of intellectual and emotional development? If not, what is its place in the factors which determine this pattern?

4. At what points (if any) do the 'present' needs of children conflict with their 'future' needs?

5. When we say that as a child grows older, he 'becomes more capable of loyalty and co-operation', what do we mean? Is this a result of growth and physical maturity, or are these traits a result of the consciously directed experiences, or the examples, which adults give him?

6. To which do *you* give highest priority: to know the children you teach, or to know what and how, to teach them?

7. Why should the school be responsible for health? How would you apportion responsibility between school, home, and community?

8. If the influence of a fine teacher is 'neither tangible nor measurable', how do you know it exists? It must surely show itself in some way, or we cannot claim that it is real. In what ways would you expect it to reveal itself? And how do you separate the effect of the teacher from other influences?

9. Is it true that there *is* an 'overall' acceptance of the 'modern theory of primary education' (see p. 9). For what proportion of your school day are the children

(a) physically active, in school and outdoors?
(b) mentally active in creative work?
(c) emotionally and spiritually active in appreciation or the making of decisions?

10. What degree of freedom have you to decide what you will teach? Do you prefer such freedom, or prefer to work within limits carefully prescribed for you, either within the school or by some agency outside it? Do you agree that 'Obedience is freedom from the intolerable fatigue of thought'?

11. There is a fundamental disagreement between the views of the North-Eastern Junior Schools Association and the ACER, as these are expressed on page 14. Each has certain implications for school practice. Which view is closest to your own opinion? Which involves the greatest departure from your current practices?

12. The concept of 'reasonable mastery' is a complex one. In your school, what is considered 'reasonable mastery' of money operations for an 11-year-old child? How many children attain it? Does it vary from year to year? Why is it considered 'reasonable'?

13. Many will disagree with the writer in his suggestions of the place of arithmetic (p. 17). In particular, is there not some arithmetic essential for children to know at almost all levels? e.g., measurements, money, numbers and their varied manipulation? Can you distinguish, in your own courses, what this 'immediately valuable' arithmetic is?

This is Number 9 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.*

They ask me why I teach and I reply,
'Where could I find more splendid company?'

MD—8/63—W.J.B.

PRIORITIES IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

THE ROLE OF THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

The discussion of 'Priorities in the Primary School' is a perennial one and the variety of titles which disguise it is a proof of the ingenuity of educational writers and editors. A century ago, Herbert Spencer debated a similar problem and answered to his own satisfaction his own question—'What education has the most worth?' A good word, too, that word 'worth'! Let us keep it in mind. But the present phrase is 'Priorities in the Primary School', and it will serve very well as a peg on which to hang statements made many times in earlier years, and, in the last two decades, made more confidently with the support of experimental evidence.

How may one determine the priorities for a primary school? Is there, in fact, any conclusive method of ascertaining these priorities? There is no such method available as yet. One could ask the children, or their parents, or the man in the street. One could also ask the psychologist, the educational sociologist or the philosopher. They would have their answers, answers which are, in the main, personal opinions, some formed and maintained over many years of experience, others held casually and subject to modification and restatement. The world in which the children are growing up is, with all its innovations and amazing projects, stresses and tensions, a significant determinant. If children are, amongst other things, to be prepared for living in our world, then we must try to anticipate the demands which their world and their fellows will make on them.

It is necessary to ponder the significance of the primary school from time to time, as educational events of the last few decades have tended to direct attention to other phases of education. With infant classes drawn away at the lower levels and the highest grades transferred to secondary schools, left with teachers holding relatively low academic qualifications, hindered by old buildings and deteriorating equipment, primary schools have become, in many countries, the 'poor relations', rather dowdy, somewhat apologetic and tolerated in some quarters as probably necessary but scarcely important enough to occasion much concern. This low rating of the primary school has made it all the more difficult for the school to shake off some of the unfortunate educational traditions which it inherited at the time

when the elementary school was assigned the task of ridding the community of the handicap of illiteracy. Too many men and women still recall elementary schools only as rather depressing and discouraging places, and it is not surprising that they should support the idea that there are far more important institutions than primary schools.

It is likely that the primary school in Australia and America has not such a stiff battle to overcome neglect and prejudice as has the primary school in European countries, not excluding Britain, but, even if this assumption is correct, the first task for the primary school is to demonstrate that it has a unique and fine purpose to fulfil, and to secure for itself a prestige and status equal to that claimed or enjoyed by any other type of school. We should need little prompting to be reminded of the fact that, during the next few years, the primary schools will contain the great majority of our school-going population.

There, for better or for worse, will be shaped very soon the essential attitudes of an exceptionally large section of our youth, attitudes which will, in the long run, determine the moral standards of the community. Nor can any teacher ignore the fact that the primary school is the place where the pattern of each child's intellectual and emotional development is determined by the combination of all the human and material resources which comprise the school.

The primary school exists in its own right because it is called on to perform a dual task which cannot be delayed or performed by any other social institution—to help children develop and to provide them with the tools for future development. Is this role important? Or does it excite only casual interest? Does it attract the admiration and secure the encouragement which it surely deserves? The very fact that all children must pass through the primary school should make us anxious to ensure that it is a place where teachers, curriculum and physical resources are the best possible and made available on generous terms in both metropolitan and rural areas. We cannot afford to let the primary school become a Cinderella amongst schools.

THE CHILDREN IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

In this discussion I am assuming that the Primary School is the school attended by all children in the 5 to 11 + group. Before any teacher can make a worthwhile contribution in the primary school, he must have a thorough knowledge of the characteristics and needs of children of these ages. The 1931 Hadow Report on *The Primary School* put it in this way—'Its criterion must above all be the re-

quirements of its pupils during the years when they are in its charge, not the exigencies of examination or the demands of the schools and occupations which they will eventually enter. It will best serve their future by a single-minded devotion to their needs in the present, and the question which most concerns it is not what children should be —a point on which unanimity has hardly yet, perhaps, been reached —but what, in actual fact, children are' (p. xv).

During these years children are growing rapidly between five and seven and somewhat less rapidly between seven and twelve. Their bodies are pulsing with expanding strength and increasing energy. Given freedom from disease and accident, and sufficient suitable food, children are at a stage where there is marked physical development. They grow as they live; they are active, they are capable of innumerable actions and positions as their bones and muscles strengthen and become more obedient. These vigorous, restless little humans are always impatient to be on the move, to run, to climb, to play, to jump, to feel new power in arms and legs and to gain further control over the physical environment.

There is a corresponding intellectual development over these years, five to eleven. Any child with reasonable mental ability is eager to learn, not necessarily to learn all that is put in front of him in an arbitrary fashion in the schoolroom, but eager to learn what he can do with his own hands and legs, eager to extend his knowledge and experience of his environment, eager to learn about the activities of other living creatures, including children like himself. The young child is not necessarily logical; he is often the reverse. Nor does he naturally perceive relationships or draw valid conclusions. He has no intuitive grasp of quantity or space or time, but he is ready to explore, and out of the multitude of experiences which may come his way he gradually learns what the adult world is pleased to call *knowledge*. No child has ever been born with the knowledge that $2 + 2 = 4$. That is a quantitative convention and formula which he will eventually accept as expedient and useful if the appropriate experiences and activities are sufficiently impressive and intelligible when he meets them. The teacher of young children will find that they have many interests; their enthusiasms are many, but not always discriminating and stable. Yet it should not be held against them that they are not selective or methodical; after all, they are only learners. They are engaged on the greatest mission in life, namely, learning to live. It is natural, therefore, that they should explore all the world about them, and that they should try to understand all that they see and hear and do. They are, in effect, trying to put their jigsaw world together, to make a coherent pattern which

they can use and which will make them feel more secure in an adult world.

There is also a change in the attitude of the young child towards his fellows and towards society at large, imperfect though his understanding of society may be. There is a growing awareness and appreciation of the relationships which may exist between individuals. The child of five or six is, like his younger brother, essentially an individualist, but as he grows older, he becomes more concerned about his role as a member of a group and he likes to be one of a team or pack; he also becomes more capable of loyalty and co-operation, is prone to hero-worship and is more sensitive to the complementary nature of leadership and obedience. As the evidence provided by psychological research is interpreted with greater confidence and reported in clearer language, all those who deal with children will be given aids which will assist them to view with more sympathetic insight those changes which we call 'growing up'. They will also be able to understand the drives and anxieties and thoughts which cause children between five and eleven to behave as they do, at home, at school and at play. Let there be no doubt about this point—whether or not children learn at school depends on all the factors which have been noted or implied, and it may well be that the teacher's understanding of the nature of the child he teaches is the crux of the whole problem.

Is this then not one of 'the priorities of the primary school'? Teachers must know children, like children, enjoy their strange and unpredictable ways, and aim sincerely to master the procedures by which children may be helped to develop and learn. 'Perhaps the most important part of teaching is the power to observe what is happening to children.' This is A. L. Stone's conviction after he had given more than usual thought to the needs of children aged seven to eleven. His *Story of a School* is well worth reading.

LET THE CHILDREN LIVE

If these are the children who come to us day after day in the primary school, what are the most important things which should happen to them there? We have an opportunity to help boys and girls to develop into decent, confident and resourceful citizens, but the time at our disposal is limited, our classes are often too large and there are wide differences in the socio-economic environments and the mental abilities of the pupils. Teachers cannot avoid deciding 'the priorities in the content of courses of study in primary education'. This is not a matter which can be neglected or left to chance. Let us concentrate on doing well those things which can be done best

by us and undertaken only in schools. There are some things which, if not attempted in the schools, will almost certainly be outside the experience of the great majority of children. 'Only in the school are certain bodies of knowledge made available directly to children and certain skills taught, in the belief that they are essential to the child's well-being when he leaves school.' (*English and Arithmetic for the Australian Child*, p. 23.)

Let me ask my own question again. What are the most important things which should happen to children in our primary schools? What should absorb most of the children's time and the teacher's time? The answers to these questions must not be restricted to an enumeration of the contents of primary school courses.

The first responsibility of the teacher is the health and happiness of the pupils. The school should aim to maintain the health of healthy children and to discover and, within certain limits, help to remedy physical disabilities. The school should be a healthy place and nothing in the school or in its activities should cause any deterioration in children's health. Proper lighting, heating and ventilation, suitable furniture, adequate playing area and hygienic toilet facilities are essential to the preservation of good health. Attention to posture, remedial treatment, regular exercise suited to the child's stage of development and a variety of games and dances are also necessary. There is no need for an overloaded programme of physical training, especially in a land like Australia blessed as it is with much fine weather and abundant sunshine, as children will usually find many opportunities for games and physical activity out of doors and out of school hours. It is rather that, by regular and suitable exercise, the school should correct the tendency of schooling to be a sedentary and desk-confined process and, in addition, teach children how to play in a spirit of true co-operation. For a proportion of children the school must compensate for deficiencies in the home environment, lack of playmates and inadequate training in the elements of sportsmanship.

The other important thing that should happen to a child at school is that he should be happy. Contentment, cheerfulness, serenity, security, confidence, satisfaction with living, an increasing realization that life is good—these are aspects of the happiness which the child should achieve at school. Something of this inner well-being may be secured through the formal and informal instruction received by the child, but, on the whole, happiness for any child at school will depend on personal relationships, on the character and personality of the teacher and the school environment generally. It is not within the scope of this discussion to consider the selection, qualities, quali-

fications and preparations of teachers, but it is stressed that the child must be given the right people as teachers, otherwise his attitude to school and even to life itself may be such as to neutralize any educational benefits planned on his behalf. The influence of a fine, effective teacher is beyond assessment; it is neither tangible nor measurable, but it is vital and real.

There is one further aspect of this growth of the active, healthy child which is equally important. It is partly a matter of character training and partly a question of social training. Because a child is learning more and more to associate and co-operate with others, there are many traits and habits which he should be helped to acquire at the primary school stage. Cleanliness, neatness, honesty, sincerity, punctuality, reliability, these and other aspects of character and behaviour will be by-products of the school if it sets high standards of conduct and has teachers who personify the moral values which are held in high esteem by the school and the community which it serves. Then again, since a child is a citizen who will associate with his fellows in an endless variety of personal and commercial relationships, he must start to learn how to adjust himself to community life. Readiness to serve, co-operation, tolerance, understanding others, integrity in all dealings with others, loyalty, patriotism—here are additional attitudes and characteristics which the school must, in fairness to the child, aim to foster naturally and in good faith.

These objectives, the health, happiness, character, personality and social adjustment of the child, are the top priorities in the primary school. It is true that they may be incidental to the life of the child at school and that they depend, not so much on formal courses of instruction, as on the tone of the school and the influence of the teachers. Needless to say, the objectives must be deliberately sought by teachers and they are likely to be achieved more positively if the curriculum of the school is planned with a thorough appreciation of the child's everyday needs and the lessons of educational experience and experiment.

A CURRICULUM BASED ON ACTIVITIES

Once a school has given genuine attention to the quality of its staff and to the values which it will seek to uphold, it may turn to the material task of planning its curriculum. A school curriculum finally determines the organization and management of the school.

The majority of teachers probably accept 'the modern theory of primary education' which, says John Newson, is 'based very largely on the observation of what children do and like, and attempts to use

this knowledge to develop their whole nature. . . . The 'activity' theory holds that the technique of teaching should involve children doing things, making things, moving about, acting, singing, painting, hammering, sawing, mixing and even shouting. What is done must use the natural interests of the child as its inspiration; or, in other words, the object must be to teach him the same accomplishments as the traditional theory maintains—plus several others—and to teach him by using his natural characteristics of activity, curiosity, energy and desire to talk.' (*The Child at School*, p. 44.) There is an overall acceptance of this theory as a theory or as a statement of principles, and it is, therefore, remarkable and disturbing to find that in schools throughout the world it is denied every day by the actual practices of the classroom. The reason? Indifference, laziness, lack of imagination, lack of application, scepticism, fear—these are some of the possible reasons why teachers fail to apply worthy principles in their actual teaching. It is possibly even truer that most teachers have either not been trained to carry this modern theory of primary education into the schools or, having been so trained, find themselves in schools where there is neither support nor approval for the plans which they would like to put into operation. Many teachers do strive to make their practices match their theories, and so it is with some degree of optimism that I claim that the second group of 'priorities' in the primary school consists of the *activities* which enable young children to explore their environment, to enjoy adventures in imagination and to feel the thrill of creation as they make pictures, music, stories, models and actions. The accent is on *activity*. The activity curriculum has to be devised so that it is a response to children's desires, so that it provides a satisfying and continuous series of experiences and so that the resultant knowledge offers a basis for further mental and emotional development. The variety in the scope and plan of these activities is unlimited. To my mind, the child is being deprived of experiences essential to his mental and emotional development if, in the primary school, he is unable to participate in *activities* based on his environment, *activities* which stimulate his imagination, and *activities* which give him an opportunity to *do* something with his body, his hands, his legs, his voice —and his mind. It may be objected that these *activities* are really the old 'subjects' masquerading under more pretentious names and that nothing new or significant is being said. That may be so in some respects, but it should be noted that even when the 'old' names are used it is possible for a radical and provocative view on primary education to be in the minds of the users. For example, the Advisory Council of Education in Scotland states in its report on 'Primary Education' (p. 29) that 'the three fundamental subjects are physical education, handwork and speech'. Old names, but a startling new

emphasis. No, the terms I have used are not intended to deceive or to impress; they suggest rather the essential experiences which should happen to boys and girls in primary schools. They insist on *activity*, the activity of the child, and they underline the importance of planning a curriculum at the child's level. The test of the curriculum level is the amount of purposive activity in which the child may engage.

Health Education and *Social Studies* emerge as the first two specific activities which may be regarded as demanding regular reservations on the time-table. Although *Health Education* is given a first priority it does not require more time than any other activity; in fact, it requires less since it includes much that is incidental and informal, much that calls not for organized activity by the pupil but rather for watchful supervision by the teacher. *Social Studies* will now include and combine what was previously called 'social training' and also environmental studies; the latter studies will involve activities based on topics or projects or centres of interest leading to local surveys, local geography and history, civic studies, and citizenship, local, national and international. It will be apparent, of course, that geography, nature study and science should be closely associated throughout the primary school curriculum. Moreover, *Social Studies* as a programme may be expected to include both environmental and imaginative activities.

The third set of activities requiring a place on the time-table are those *Imaginative Experiences* usually associated with literature, history, drama and music. Reading or listening to readings of literature, reading or listening to history stories, listening to readings of or witnessing drama and listening to music provide vital emotional experiences and also serve to give a child cultural knowledge which, although possibly very elementary, is important and satisfying. Any teacher could well afford to set aside 'appreciation periods' on his time-table so that his pupils could read or listen to stories, prose, poetry, drama and music, both vocal and instrumental. The presentation could come from the teacher, fellow pupils, visitors, recordings or the radio.

The fourth aspect of the curriculum is that devoted to *Creative Activities*. These should occupy a considerable part of the child's time so that he may engage in a number of different creative activities such as drawing, painting, dancing, verse-speaking, singing, making music with instruments, writing stories and poems, writing and performing plays, puppetry, modelling and a variety of crafts.

These then are four priorities in the primary school, four groups of activities arising out of a recognition of children's natural needs and

interests and designed to promote their health, happiness, confidence and mental development.

MINIMUM ESSENTIALS

Another matter of general interest is suggested by the question—Is it possible to set down for each of these activities a minimum amount of knowledge which should be known by the child at the end of the primary school stage. On the whole, experience suggests that it is not possible to prescribe any knowledge selected from the fields of art, craft, literature, history, geography, nature study and the rest, which all children should be expected to master by the time they are ready to move on to the secondary school. All efforts which have been made in recent years to specify such minimum knowledge have resulted in courses of study couched in such general terms that they have been of little practical use. What is important is that children should have a variety of *satisfying experiences* in a number of subjects or activities, that these experiences should have resulted in *the acquisition of some definite knowledge or skill,* and that, above all, they should have excited such interest and wonder that the children entering the secondary schools are eager to continue these experiences and ready to absorb knowledge in a more systematized form. It is finally the knowledge, the skill, the discretion, the fidelity, the professional attitude of the teacher which will determine whether the education of the child aged five to eleven is of some 'worth' to the child and to the community. Does the community trust its teachers sufficiently, or would it prefer that some authority, presumably wiser and more trustworthy, should prescribe in detail what its children should be taught? If the community desires its Departments of Education to issue directives it must be prepared for rather arbitrary courses of study, courses which may ordain that each child aged nine must be taught and must learn a number of facts about Boadicea (but not Joan of Arc) and the life-history of a fly (but not the adventures of the swallows which nest in the eaves of the school each year), and the chief industries and products of the State (but not the story of the big dam being built five miles from the school) and—the list will be a very long one, rather formal and conventional and, when committed briefly to print in an official publication, probably rather uninspiring. In actual fact, most educational authorities now help teachers by indicating the sort of experiences and knowledge appropriate to children of various ages and by suggesting possible methods and techniques which are worthy of teachers' consideration. They are not anxious to be prescriptive and dogmatic; it is left to teachers to select what they shall do— and to

make substitutions if they wish. Freedom becomes a reality; initiative is a privilege and a responsibility!

THE PLACE OF THE THREE R's IN AN ACTIVITY CAMPAIGN

The reader has probably already registered an objection that nothing has been said concerning the priority of the three R's—language, number and writing. It is not that these subjects are being ignored; the view is that they are, in the main, to be regarded as skills to be employed by children as they proceed to acquire the real education which ensures their maximum personal development. The claim of the *activities* to a substantial share of the school time is strongly defended. Without certain skills, however, no child is able to engage in any activities to his own satisfaction. There are many skills which children acquire readily and naturally from the earliest days of life, but there are other skills, skills which may be regarded as secondary or artificial since they have been evolved by man during the course of his cultural and economic development and which cannot be readily mastered as reliable media of expression and communication unless there is a considerable amount of formal instruction. It is necessary for the teacher to intervene and he will be able to help children learn to read, write and deal with numbers if he can employ these skills successfully himself, understand the stages by which young children take over the skills into their normal behaviour, appreciate their difficulties and be patient in using proved techniques of guidance.

It is not to be inferred that skill in tool subjects is unimportant in the primary school and that they should be taught only if there is time after the *activities* have been dealt with to the teacher's satisfaction. Since they are essential to the child's confidence and efficiency in dealing with people, since they are necessary to the enjoyment of the activities, and since they are basic to the education of all children, a substantial part of the school programme time must be reserved for training in the effective use of language (speaking and listening, reading and writing) and of number (counting, the four fundamental operations, tables, and calculation associated with simple everyday problems). When should training in skills commence? How much should be attempted during the years spent in the primary school? What time is necessary? What are likely to prove the best techniques? These are the questions for which every primary school teacher must find answers. A balanced primary school education can result only when the hours at school are reasonably shared by *activities* and the *tools of learning and communication.* It will, moreover, be realized that a rigid distinction between activities and

tool subjects is not desirable or, for that matter, really possible. If the activity is dramatization, an essential language skill, speech, must be one of the media employed by the actors; if the activity is listening to a story, another language skill, recognition of words and comprehension of sentences, will be called into play; and if a craft activity involves measurement then the skill of calculation and, maybe, the use of tables will be required. Teachers will also agree that children cannot participate in group activities or learn certain complex skills unless they have previously acquired competence in a variety of basic skills. There are definite stages or priorities in the learning of essential language and number skills.

The ACER Curriculum Survey revealed that, in Australia, 'there are wide variations between the states in what is included in courses of study for English and arithmetic'. (*English and Arithmetic for the Australian Child* p. 26.) This lack of agreement is not peculiar to Australia; it is a world-wide phenomenon. On the other hand, there is strong support for the claim that 'there is a minimum body of knowledge in the basic subjects which every normal child should have acquired before leaving the primary school'. (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 15 June, 1951, p. 485.) A sub-committee of the North-Eastern Junior Schools Association (England) was even more specific when it stated that 'in English and arithmetic there should be an agreed basic minimum which it is hoped every child would know at the end of the term or year'. (*Basic Requirements of the Junior School*, p. 26.) The ACER is a little less exacting and dogmatic when it says, in *English and Arithmetic for the Australian Child*, p. 28, that 'it appears desirable to set out the minimum essentials to be mastered by all Australian children during the period of compulsory schooling'. This period is not, of course, the period of primary education. The anxiety to have a 'minimum body of knowledge' approved has not, so far, produced any noticeable agreement in actual practice. Courses of study, teachers' syllabuses, published curricula, all testify to the divergence in the content of English and arithmetic in our primary schools. The differences are admittedly not as great as in some of the other subjects, but they are sufficient to prompt the conclusion, as far as Australia is concerned, that if one state should happen to be proved right or nearly so, then other states are wrong, very wrong in some details.

If children are to master certain skills and knowledge related to those skills by the end of the primary school stage (or by the age of 14 or 15, according to the ACER), what criteria shall we apply so that we may decide on these skills and knowledge? The objective criteria are limited, but the ACER submits (*English and Arithmetic for the Australian Child*, p.9) a sound, but possibly incomplete

summary of the general tests which may be used to gauge the worth and relevance of any primary school curriculum. There is a certain amount of evidence which tells us how much a normal child may be expected to learn by the age of 12 (or 14), and research also gives us some idea as to the time which should be devoted to the instruction. It is apparent that the teaching of various skills is often premature, that time and effort are wasted by trying to make most normal children learn them before they are six or seven or even eight years of age. But further research is necessary before we can establish with confidence 'fundamental information on what to expect of children of certain ages, so that within this framework of knowledge the greatest possible variation can be encouraged'. (*English and Arithmetic for the Australian Child*, p. 28.) What is the age at which boys and girls should be taught long division? Possibly there is no such age, but it is almost certain that there is an age before which this topic should not be presented to normal children. If presented earlier, they will learn slowly and with difficulty, and the rate of learning will vary greaty as between individual pupils. If taught later, the pupils will learn more rapidly and will progress at much the same rate. They can be taught in groups, rather than as individuals. All research and experience during the present century suggest that any formal language and number teaching before the age of six is unnecessary and, on the whole, fruitless. Teaching of language and number should be introduced slowly, stage by stage, after that age and the stages should be determined (after testing) by the amount which, say, 80 per cent of the pupils in an age-group can cover and reveal, reasonable mastery' over during the school year. Attainment levels should be set by the majority of normal children, not a small minority of superior pupils.

It is argued, therefore, that the tool subjects should not and need not be given the absolute priority which they have often enjoyed in the school programme of the past. *They have an important place in the scheme of things, but it is not an exclusive place.*

THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH

Since language is a skill of universal significance and a tool constantly employed by the teacher and pupils in the activities of the primary school, it is entitled to special recognition. In addition,, English is a source of satisfaction and pleasure; it therefore ceases to be a mere instrument and becomes an integral part of a creative activity or an imaginative activity. It has a personal and intrinsic value. For these reasons, English as a skill and as an activity

subject must be given a clear priority in the primary school. As far as time is concerned, the various aspects of English may be expected to occupy about one-third of the time-table each week. In language skills there should be included speech (speech-training, listening to good speech, oral composition, oral reading, verse-speaking, recitation and dramatization), reading (with the stress on silent reading, for comprehension, interpretation and appreciation) and writing (composition, spelling, grammar, handwriting exercises and creative work such as stories, descriptions and poetry). Vocabulary development will be an aspect of all language work. The time allotments, methods and actual content will vary according to the ages, abilities and interests of the pupils, but the pattern of language work remains much the same throughout the primary school. It calls for conscientious, stimulating and skilful teaching, and teachers and pupils should be as clear as possible as to the objectives to be reached at the end of the final primary-school year.

If English is the most time-absorbing unit in the primary school, are there priorities within the subject? These priorities have already been suggested in the preceding paragraph—speech, reading and writing, in that order, with vocabularly as a pervasive element. I am with the Scots and, therefore, in tolerably good company, when I stress speech or spoken English. Paragraph 165 of *The Primary School in Scotland* reads thus: 'We are able to speak before we can write; the occasions in social life which necessitate the use of speech greatly outnumber those which call for writing (one investigator estimates the ratio as almost 30:1); we have a beautiful language worth speaking well. These are weighty reasons why training in oral expression should be regarded as a matter of first importance and why it is the duty of the school (not least in the nursery and infant stages) to lay the foundations on which good speech, in the fullest sense, may be built up. The teacher should at appropriate times and in all subjects train her pupils in the correct use of spoken English, and should emphasize the necessity for clarity and adequacy of expression' (p. 41). Needless to say, the excellent speech of the teacher is an unanswerable argument and a fine example for boys and girls. Imitation and habit are the determinants in oral language, unless there is some physical abnormality. It is doubtful whether formal class lessons in speech training will remedy common faults; they must be tackled as individual problems. In selecting material for reading for primary school pupils, the teacher should keep in mind the pleasure likely to be experienced by children, suitability as models of good writing, and value as an introduction to the best children's and adult literature. Teaching techniques will be concerned with comprehension, interpretation and related vocabulary problems. Written English depends so much on motivation and

opportunity for pupils to write on what they know or feel strongly about, as well as on the teacher's patience and guidance, that it is an aspect of language teaching which will inevitably absorb a considerable proportion of the time allotted to the subject and demand much thoughtful planning by the teacher.

PUTTING ARITHMETIC IN ITS PLACE

Finally, what of arithmetic? It is a practical subject yet few branches of knowledge are, in terms of their basic concepts, more abstract. It is easier to specify a school curriculum or a class syllabus in arithmetic than any other subject, yet there is unlimited scope for heated arguments as to the appropriate age to introduce children to various topics in arithmetic and as to the methods to be used in exposition and demonstration. A great deal of time has been wasted in the primary school trying to make normal children assimilate arithmetical concepts and processes for which they had no use and of which they could have no understanding. Many children have been able to achieve a satisfactory standard in arithmetic in the primary school only by devoting inordinate time to formal lessons and repetive exercises. Arithmetic is important, but it is not important beacuse of any association with the needs and lively interests of the child at the primary school. Kenneth Richmond puts the matter clearly when he says, perhaps a little too baldly, that 'the inclusion of Arithmetic in the curriculum is demanded by the needs of society rather than by the felt needs of the child'. (*Purpose in the Junior School*, p. 198.) That is not entirely true, but it does suggest that, under no circumstances should arithmetic dominate the planning and timing of any primary school curriculum. The teaching of arithmetic through all sorts of stratagems can be rather adventurous, but it is doubtful whether the extra time required is justified unless it does help the child to gain some insight into the ultimate meaning and value of mathematics. The two Scottish reports, *Primary Education and The Primary School in Scotland*, make some very pertinent observations on arithmetic. They are well worth reading and debating. It is of interest to note that the latter report states that 'The profession of work in the primary department should normally include what is outlined below:

Numeration and notation to millions.

Addition and subtraction of numbers.

Short and long multiplication and division of numbers.

Application of the above rules to money, weights and measures.

Addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division of vulgar fractions with small denominators.

Simple proportion.

Practical questions and problems. Bills' (p. 87).

Compare this proposal with the view of some twenty head teachers of London primary and secondary schools. They considered that the 'average' child going on to a modern secondary school should, at the end of his primary school course, 'have an accurate and ready knowledge of the multiplication tables up to 12 times, be able to work simple sums involving the four rules with numbers up to 200 and money up to £5, and be familiar with the use of and relationship of (a) inches, feet, yards, and miles; (b) ounces, pounds, hundredweights, and tons; (c) pints, quarts, and gallons; (d) seconds, minutes, and hours; (e) days, weeks, and years. He should be able to tell the time and have a knowledge of the calendar, use a simply ready reckoner and table-book, have an elementary understanding of speed as an integration of time and distance, be able to name simple geometrical shapes and distinguish a right angle, and have a knowledge of such simple fractions as are involved in the use of money and measurement with a ruler'. (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 15 June, 1951, p. 485.) By the 'average' child, these head teachers meant the entrant to the modern secondary school who was No. 70 in a list of 100, and assumed his intelligence quotient would usually be between 85 and 100. This child represents pupils at the lower level of the normal group and possibly the standards are a little lower than we would set for the normal pupils of 11-12 years who leave the primary schools each year to enter one or other of our Australian post-primary schools. In its appendix to *English and Arithmetic for the Australian Child* the ACER while *stressing its experimental nature* puts forward 'a suggested course in arithmetic' and indicates what knowledge and skills are typically expected to be acquired by a pupil aged 12 or thereabouts. This course, which is based on current Australian practices and is moderate by some standards, still requires more from primary boys and girls than the Scottish committees or the London head teachers. Scottish inspectors would postpone the teaching of decimals until the pupils reach the secondary schools, but this 'typical' Australian course includes a fairly complete knowledge of the elements of decimal fractions, as well as of mensuration, percentage, simple interest, profit and loss, discount and commission. It there still a possibility of reducing the content of the course and giving some of the time saved to practice aimed at producing complete mastery of the four simple rules? Could the rest of the

time saved be better employed in the child-centred activities which were stated to be the priorities in the primary school?

PRIORITIES AND THE TIME-TABLE

This discussion of priorities may be conveniently summed up by indicating their relationships with a very important piece of school apparatus, namely, the time-table. If one is to be consistent in following through the previous arguments, one arrives at a programme plan similar to that set out below. The times suggested for the various units or blocks are aggregates, to be subdivided according to the age of the pupils and the demands of the activities or exercises proposed.

Weekly Time Allotments — Pupils aged 10-11 years

	Hours
Health Education (health, hygiene, physical training, folk-dancing, games, swimming)	4
Social Studies (social training, civic studies, citizenship) and Environment Studies (local geography and history, nature study, science)	4
Imaginative Experiences (literature, history, drama, music)	2
Creative Activities (drawing, painting, dancing, verse-speaking, singing, making music with instruments, writing stories and plays, dramatization, puppetry crafts)	4
Skills—	
Language: Speech 2½ hours; reading 3½ hours; writing 2 hours—8 hours; Arithmetic 4 hours	12
Religious and Corporate School Activities	1
Total	27

(It should be noted that English is included not only under Language Skills, but also in Imaginative Experiences and Creative Activities. Religion may also be included in these units.)

It is assumed that no teacher would attempt to preserve the divisions which may be implied in the above classification; the discovery of centres of interest and of natural methods of integration will lead to unification of the curriculum as opposed to formal compartments of subject instruction.

THE HIGHEST PRIORITY — THE CHILD

However carefully a school programme may be planned and no matter how conclusive may be the arguments for these or other

priorities, the practising teacher knows only too well that there are scores of other tasks which weave in and out of his normal procedures. There is the child who is physically or mentally handicapped; there is the child whose progress at school is impeded by an unhealthy home environment.

They cannot be fitted neatly into the scheme of things. For them there may be other priorities and special needs. The thoughtful teacher knows also that he must have the means of discovering quickly the slow or dull or bright children in his class and show his initiative in adapting his courses and his methods to suit them whenever possible. He must also have the knowledge which will enable him to diagnose and deal with the normal difficulties of normal children. These are the elements of real teaching and constitute the factors which, apart from any theoretically planned curriculum, condition effective guidance and learning in the classroom. So once more we come back to the central figures in the school, the pupils and the teachers. Their personalities, their abilities, and their relations with one another will always dominate the school scene.