

CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

POLICY CHALLENGE

1996 Education Summer Series

Culture in the Classroom

A Personal View

IRINA TYK





The 1996 Education Summer Series

CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM

A Personal View

IRINA TYK

CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

1996

THE AUTHOR

Irina Tyk is the Headmistress of Holland House School, an independent preparatory school in north London.

She founded, and is a director of, the Butterfly Education project. Irina Tyk believes in the intellectual development of very young children in the structured environment of whole-class teaching. More than 300 children have now attended summer classes run by the Butterfly Education Project since 1991. In 1995 she was invited to run a course on an inner-London housing estate. The outstanding results were widely reported and were the basis for a number of articles in the national press and a television documentary.

In 1993 she published *The Butterfly Book*, a phonics reading course for young children. Numerous articles presenting her views have been published recently by, among others, *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, and the bi-monthly publication, *Montessori Education*.

Irina Tyk has been teaching in primary schools since 1982; prior to that she was a lecturer at the University of Wales. She is an honours graduate of the University of London.

Acknowledgements

Support for this publication
was given by the Institute for Policy Research.

*The Centre for Policy Studies never expresses a corporate view in any of its publications.
Contributions are chosen for their independence of thought and cogency of argument.*

ISBN No. 1 897969 51 1

© Centre for Policy Studies, August 1996
52 Rochester Row London SW1P 1JU

Printed by The Chameleon Press, 5 – 25 Burr Road, London SW18

FOREWORD

Here is something of an educational scandal. At first sight, readers who have no first-hand experience of the culture in our classrooms may well find that Irina Tyk's recommendations are so full of clear, simple sense that they should not need to be said.

But the sad fact is that her recommendations on good teaching practice are far indeed from being followed in the majority of our schools. Very far, in fact, from even being acknowledged as 'best practice' by many in the bureaucratic reaches of the teaching profession in our country today.

The failings of our primary schools, however, cannot just be ignored. It has now become an inescapable fact that average standards in reading, spelling and arithmetic have fallen over the last 20 years. Standards are too low both in absolute terms and by comparison with other advanced countries. These failings are not caused by a 'shortage of resources' – our level of expenditure is comparable to that of our competitors. Nor are they due to the lack of dedication and effort of hard-worked and hard-working teachers.

The primary cause of falling standards is the anti-intellectual, non-competitive and unstructured classroom culture which has been fostered in Britain since the 1960s. That is the scandal. Now this culture is being challenged, and once the recommendations for good practice described in these pages are implemented, things can rapidly improve. Through her work with the Butterfly Education Project, Irina Tyk has shown that it is possible to take children from the most deprived backgrounds and improve both their attainments and their outlook – all in a matter of weeks.

Irina Tyk has no magic formula. She asks only that some very simple principles be followed, and followed now. Based as they are on common sense, on a respect for traditional teaching methods, on practical experience and sound morality, these principles can and should be applied in every primary school in Britain. Children, teachers and the country as a whole would benefit greatly.

Tessa Keswick
Director
August 1996

CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM

KNOWLEDGE IS NOT INSTINCTIVE. Knowledge is an essential requirement for each individual in order to conduct his life successfully. It is the duty of a teacher to provide his pupil with the knowledge of the achievements upon which civilisation depends and with the mental techniques whereby the pupil may further his own knowledge by his own effort. When one talks of knowledge in the context of the classroom, one should bear in mind that it is the responsibility of the teacher to lay before his pupils the glory of that which is already known, as well as the techniques by which all knowledge is discovered.

When is a child ready to learn?

In an effort to free the young child from undue intellectual pressure, it is commonly claimed that there are specific ages at which a child is best able to benefit from specific learning tasks. For example, there is the concept of 'reading readiness' which holds that a child should not be taught how to read until about the age of seven, since it is only at that age that he is likely to possess sufficient maturity and the requisite perceptual and comprehension skills. Furthermore, it is often suggested that requiring a child to learn a formal, rigorous and rational skill at a very early age is likely to be detrimental to his imaginative and personal development. From his very earliest days at school the young child is likely to be faced with the constant message that rigour and rationality are the antithesis of imagination and creativity. It is implied that a child's sense of freedom requires that he not be fettered by the straight-jacket of formal learning, rigorous teaching and the acquisition of conceptual knowledge.

This is wrong. Knowledge is not a straight-jacket; knowledge frees the mind whereas ignorance limits horizons. A child who does not know how to read is obliged to live less freely than a child who can read. Freedom is an intellectual state in addition to its various other manifestations. A child is not likely to discover intellectual freedom purely by instinct. He must be taught.

The concepts of learning-readiness and reading-readiness suggest that decisions about what a child should be taught should always be age-related. The reason why it is

CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM

inappropriate to teach algebra or calculus to seven year-olds ought not to be because they are too young but because they have not yet acquired the knowledge that ought to precede algebra and calculus. Age ought not to determine what you are taught; what you already know should determine what you learn next.

One should teach from rational principles

Knowledge makes sense. Knowledge is the sense which one makes of reality. Everything which a child is taught should be presented in a rational context. When the young child is taught to read, to write and to spell, the underlying rational and integrating principles of these skills should be made clear. The fact that English reading and spelling contain so many exceptions is not a denial of the essential method by which the young child learns to read and spell. There are a relatively small number of reading and spelling rules which encompass the vast majority of words; if one learns these reading and spelling rules, then those squiggles and shapes which appear, to the untutored eye, both meaningless and arbitrary will, to the tutored eye, appear rational and purposeful. Similarly, multiplication tables should be presented as a structured map of ordered numbers which behave predictably and logically.

The knowledge which the teacher requires in order to teach

A teacher cannot teach without knowledge of his subject. No amount of personal rapport with pupils or individual charisma enables a teacher to impart knowledge which he himself does not possess.

One cannot teach young children the 44 sounds of the English language unless one knows the 44 sounds oneself. How many teachers, charged with the responsibility of teaching young children to read, are actually familiar with Dr Joyce Morris' Morris-Montessori Word List which lists all the sounds of the English language?

Not only must the teacher have factual knowledge of the subject which he teaches, but he must also know enough to reveal the rational principles which underlie and bind together the subject.

The pupil must also learn from his teacher how to discover knowledge for himself; he will have to learn techniques and skills for furthering his own understanding of the subject beyond the point that has been reached in the classroom. Too many children are forced to grope in intellectual darkness to reach a level of education which ought to have been provided quickly and efficiently by the teacher in the classroom. A child ought to make his own independent enquiries on the basis of a body of knowledge which he has already acquired from his teacher. Since knowledge is not instinctive, it can only follow from what has already been taught and from those

CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM

rational skills in which the child has already been instructed.

The fact that so many children do obviously learn a great deal without having received proper instruction either in school or at home does not mean that knowledge can be obtained without accompanying rational structures. Fortunately, reality is rational; the perceptual world which the child encounters offers its own rational clues. For all the flights of fantasy to which young children are prone, there remains in most young children a sense of objective reality which happily accepts the perceptual world as reasonable and logical. In too many of our primary schools, the conceptual world is rarely presented to the young child in a reasonable and logical way.

The proper intellectual targets for young children

Learning ought not to be age-related but knowledge-related. Both at home and at school children should be taught what comes next.

In primary school, the great majority of children should be able to read and write fluently by the age of seven. Two years schooling is plenty of time to learn to blend just 44 sounds.

Advanced spelling skills should be in place by nine. The reason why spelling skills may not necessarily develop at the same pace as reading skills lies in the fact that in our language the rules of reading are different to those of spelling. Consequently, to ensure spelling mastery, the rules of spelling should be taught separately. However, when children are taught to read by blending together units of sound, good spelling practice often arises simultaneously. The technique of breaking words down into separate sounds is not so far removed from breaking words down into syllables which is one important step on the way to good spelling.

Children should be expected to know their multiplication tables by the age of eight. Mental arithmetic skills cannot be substituted by pressing keys on a calculator. A calculator may give the answer to a specific sum, but it does not provide one with a number map of smaller and larger numbers and the relationships between them. If children are to learn about measurement, or to learn how to express very large numbers in terms of smaller units, they must first learn their multiplication tables in which large numbers are expressed by multiplying smaller numbers together. Those who favour the memorisation of multiplication tables should not be seen as die-hard traditionalists who want a return to rote-learning, but rather as those who wish to see primary school maths as an essential body of knowledge which follows clearly defined rational principles.

The first educational objectives in primary school ought to be reading, writing, spelling, counting, measurement and the basic arithmetical operations. If all children

CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM

knew how to do these things by the time they left primary school, then an enormous improvement in the nation's educational standards would have taken place. Furthermore, if young children had some grasp of the structures and principles which underlie these technical skills, then they would have learned a great deal more than the skills themselves; they would have started to acquire the methods by which knowledge is discovered.

Whole class teaching is good classroom practice

The more one imparts knowledge to children, the more it is appropriate to teach children in whole classes. Once the teacher is committed to presenting what he knows and how he knows it in the most rational and reasonable way, it is clear that this can be done to more than one child at a time – and, indeed, to more than 10 or 20 children at a time. If one elects to teach very young children to read by the teaching them to blend 44 sounds of the language, then there is no need to abandon whole-class teaching.

However, if young children are expected to learn to read by resorting to guesswork or mere memorisation of all the words which they may encounter, then this lack of intellectual discipline and rigour is likely to be reflected in anti-intellectual and unstructured teaching methods. Children sitting together in small groups, facing one another and very often looking away from the teacher and the blackboard, are adopting a physical posture which make it clear that neither the knowledge on the board at the front of the class nor the teacher from whom the lesson springs are central to the business of the class.

The practice of teaching children in small groups is anti-individualistic since it encourages children to grapple with ideas in groups rather than individually. Groups are easily dominated by the strong; in groups the weak and the sensitive may often find that they have lost their voice. Each child should sit facing the teacher and facing the board so that he may reach out without first having to consult the other members of the group first.

The role of testing in teaching

Teachers must teach so that children will learn. If a child fails to learn, then the teacher has not spent his time productively. Therefore, the teacher must have a mechanism in place which will reveal, with a fair degree of certainty, whether or not his pupils have learned what he has been trying to teach.

There is a bias against testing in primary schools, which largely arises from the inability of many young children to read and write with any degree of confidence. It is

CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM

very difficult to test children if they are unable to read questions and if they are unable to write down what they believe to be the answers.

There is a widespread belief that a child's knowledge of, say, history, should not be dependent upon his ability to read history or to write about it. Reading and writing, it is claimed, are different to history. However, knowledge and an understanding of history are likely to be greatly diminished if there is no requirement to read or write about it. It is very difficult to impart knowledge and to test whether such knowledge has been learned when one is denied the base line of a literate child who can read, write and spell.

The current antipathy towards paper and pencil tests in primary schools largely arises from teachers' perceptions that so many young children find paper and pencil inhibiting, frightening and unfamiliar. They are right. The solution is to teach children to read and to write as soon as possible.

Moral instruction in primary school

The younger members of society are often reproached for their refusal to make judgements on the basis of right and wrong. They have learned this intellectual and moral avoidance from their teachers, their parents and from a whole variety of cultural scene-setters. Why should children believe in right and wrong when they see all around them a kind of moral and intellectual pragmatism which says that everything is equally valid – all cultures, all moral codes, all theories and all practices? How can children exercise moral certainty in an atmosphere of intellectual uncertainty?

There are profound moral implications which emanate from even so early an educational experience as learning to read. Equally, whether or not great importance is placed on the learning of multiplication tables will send out a strong moral signal to the young child. Should history be taught as an objective record of great events and great men or should it be taught by directing the student to develop his skills of empathy? The way in which history is taught carries enormous moral implications.

The teacher's own responses to the work of his pupils can shape a child's sense of morality. The teacher who never judges his pupils' work and who makes it clear that every child's work, irrespective of its individual quality, should be valued equally is expressing a moral principle which says that right and wrong do not exist. The teacher who refuses to mark a poor piece of work harshly removes the moral dimension from his relationship with his pupil. The teacher who allows his pupils to swear openly underlies the view that ugliness of thought doesn't really matter.

When the moral guardians of society alert us to the decline in moral standards, the solution lies not in preaching a particular moral code to the young,

CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM

but rather in placing school children in an environment where they can perceive that a fixed body of knowledge actually exists, and that they need not be excluded from this body of knowledge.

The role of struggle in learning

Achievement usually follows struggle. The role of intellectual struggle has been downgraded in the classroom. Pupils need not understand everything immediately. No harm will be done if the young child finds the going tough and the lesson intellectually demanding.

To make sense of the world and to steer a virtuous path through one's own life are most difficult goals; the purpose of education is to teach the young how to live their lives. Every lesson in the classroom should have as its goal the enhancement of those faculties which the pupil will require to live a virtuous and productive life.

Happiness, *per se*, is not an educational goal. It is the consequence of having achieved the right educational goals. The modern classroom should be a productive and moral space in which happiness will be the consequence of the self-esteem which comes from real achievement. It should not be a type of happiness which fakes reality and induces unearned and unconditional happiness. Indeed, the widespread use of mood-enhancing drugs in today's youth culture mirrors disturbingly the unearned happiness and underived contentment which are so prevalent in primary schools today.

Of course, children should be happy – but their happiness should be rooted in the perceptual and conceptual world.

Why children should not write diaries

Young children should be encouraged to write boldly and to juggle ideas freely and fearlessly. When children write stories, they ought not to be encouraged to indulge in lengthy, albeit accurate, descriptions of the minutiae of their daily lives. Children should write short stories which are big on ideas and small on the humdrum.

There is hardly a child at school today who has not been required by his teacher, at some time or other, to keep a diary of his summer holiday or keep a record of what he did last weekend. The vogue of diaries as a valid teaching exercise embodies many of the wrong educational messages:

- Until one acquires a personal intellectual history, diaries tend to be restricted to a mere record of unimportant events.

CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM

- Diaries are usually episodic; the only link is the fact that it happened to the writer.
- Asking a child to keep a diary and show it to his teacher is an infringement of a child's right to privacy. The teacher is exceeding his brief.

Stories, heroes and the moral implications of ideas

In contrast to the Adrian Mole style of literature, which elevates the ordinary and the ridiculous, teachers should place at the forefront of literature the hero, the exceptional man, the good man, the man who is worthy of our admiration; and hence, the man worth writing about.

Heroes are important for the young. Unfortunately, most young people today acquire a premature cynicism which forbids the existence of the extraordinary. Children now make the sad claim that they have no heroes; in that case, let them invent some heroes and write about them.

Ideas contain a moral dimension and children should be taught to consider their ideas from a moral standpoint. The whole process of selecting and rejecting which ideas might be appropriate for a particular piece of writing is as much a matter of moral choice as it is of aesthetic preference. When a child is required to keep a diary, he is encouraged to believe in the primacy of the ordinary; when he writes about the good and the great, be they fictional or non-fictional, he is encouraged to believe in the primacy of the good and the great.

Against jargon and in favour of the non-conformist

Every effort should be made, both at school and at home, to stop children accepting jargon and indulging in 'crowd-speak'. Encourage children to be different and to speak and write with an individual voice. Let children learn that truth does not respect fashion or convention. Even when the conversation turns to football, TV and non-academic pursuits, children should still be required to speak rationally and responsibly. Words carry moral responsibility.

Teachers and parents should teach children to think and to speak with sufficient lucidity that they will stand firm against mere approximation and lies.

Let the child learn that courteous dissidence is preferable to questionable assertion.

On taking young children seriously

It can be tempting to respond to the relative immaturity of young children by reminding them, over and over again, that they will learn when they are older. Let

CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM

them learn when they are younger.

Children should be taken at least as seriously as adults. Children possess all the defining qualities of a human being; they have minds and hearts, an intellectual and emotional dimension. They are probably more rational than their elders.

Children learn most effectively when they are not stripped of their intellectual dimension on account of their youth. What they do not yet know follows from their ignorance – not from their youthful age. Children have their own minds. It is knowledge which they require from adults.

Our view of the world determines the type of education which we favour

Our understanding of reality defines how we choose to do things. This is a fundamental principle which tends to be overlooked when it comes to the education of young children, both at home and at school.

Adults who perceive the world as a rational and comprehensible environment will seek to provide a rational and objective education for their children; those who believe reality is mystical and irrational will seek an education for their children which prepares them appropriately. Those who believe that life is a series of accidental unrelated events will, of course, be sympathetic to the notion that young children, in their formative educational years, ought to be placed in an unstructured environment which mirrors the episodic nature of the universe.

How to teach children to read

There are many different methods which, it is claimed, teach children to read. However, there is a price to pay for each method. Each method embodies a particular view of the world. The very early exposure to a model of reality has far-reaching effects in the later life of a child. No one understands better than Maria Montessori that early learning extended far beyond one's first school days; she understood that this early exposure to a rational learning method would equip the child for a rational life in the future.

Method matters. Since it is a contradiction in terms to teach on any other premise but a rational one, it follows that children should be taught to read by the most rational method available: that is, the phonic method.

- Reading is a skill that can be taught by the application of rational principles.
- Children can be taught to read very effectively in whole classes.

CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM

- Children should be taught the 44 sounds of the English language and the rules which govern the blending of these sounds. Those familiar English words which defy normal sound patterns should be treated as exceptions which do not lie at the core of learning to read.
- The shapes of words do not provide adequate or sufficient information to read. Initial letter recognition is a curtailment of a child's right to read words from beginning to end without reference to guesswork or uncertainty.
- Memorising lists of words cannot be considered as a reading strategy.
- Children can and should be taught to read at an early age.
- Reading skills can and should be tested.
- The reduction of a body of knowledge to relatively few integrating principles introduces the young child to an early learning model which will be equally effective when applied to other skills and other subjects.

Mixed methods are a fudge

Phonics means pure phonics. It has been suggested that there has been a major change recently in the teaching of reading in that many primary schools now admit to a significant phonic content in their syllabus. This so-called mixed method is, of course, no method at all since pupils are confronted with a series of contradictory messages. Those who defend this compromise by suggesting that most children benefit from a variety of reading methods fail to realise that there is an existing reading method which obviates the need to compromise.

How to improve teaching technique

Every skill requires a degree of technical refinement. A concert pianist knows that the mastery of his art requires strong fingers, the ability to play at speed or very slowly, stamina and an infinite variety of touch on the keyboard.

A teacher requires the same degree of attention if he is to master his art. A teacher's instrument is his voice. It is an instrument which the teacher should treat with the utmost seriousness. Every teacher should be taught how to produce his voice correctly as an integral part of his training. A teacher should be trained to use his voice in harmony with the range of the ideas which he is expressing in speech.

CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM

Subject matter alone is not always sufficient inspiration to keep the attention of the whole class. Just as a conductor knows how to inspire orchestral musicians by using physical gesture and most especially, his eyes, to reinforce his mental image of the music, in the same way a professional teacher ought to be trained to use all his physical resources to communicate his ideas with the maximum impact. Teachers must be taught these techniques.

The techniques of teaching are not instinctive. Nor is an educational culture.

THE CPS 1996 EDUCATION SUMMER SERIES

| | |
|---|-------|
| SPELLING MATTERS how to reverse the decline Jennifer Chew | £5.00 |
| ARITHMETIC: FOUNDATIONS OF MATHEMATICS how to reverse poor standards of arithmetic teaching in primary schools John Marks | £5.00 |
| FUNDING: PRESENT CHAOS AND FUTURE CLARITY Nick Seaton | £7.00 |
| NURSERY EDUCATION FOR ALL: IS IT WORTH IT? Katie Ivens | £7.00 |
| READING by Martin Turner and Tom Burkard | £5.00 |

Please note that the complete series, including this pamphlet, is available at a discounted price of £20 (representing a saving of £9). Please contact the Subscriptions Manager at the address below for details.



A SELECTION OF CPS EDUCATION PAMPHLETS

| | |
|---|--------|
| AN EDUCATION CHOICE: PAMPHLETS FROM THE CENTRE 1987 - 1994 edited by Sheila Lawlor | £10.00 |
| END THE TWO-TIER SYSTEM (available from 15 September 1996) by Stefan Shakespeare | £7.00 |
| THE CASE FOR VOUCHERS (available from 30 September 1996) by Terence Kealey | £7.00 |



A SUBSCRIPTION TO THE CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

The Centre for Policy Studies runs an Associate Membership Scheme which is available at £55.00 per year (or £50.00 if paid by bankers' order). Associates are entitled to all CPS Policy Studies produced in a 12-month period (of which there are at least ten); previous publications at *half* their published price; and (whenever possible) reduced fees for the conferences which the Centre holds.

For more details please write or telephone to:

The Secretary
Centre for Policy Studies
52 Rochester Row London SW1P 1JU

Tel: 0171 828 1176 Fax: 0171 828 7748 e-mail 101626,2223