

Primary Directions Series

Primary Education – At a Hinge of History?

A series of thick, expressive orange brushstrokes that sweep across the middle of the cover, creating a sense of movement and energy. The strokes are somewhat blurred and overlap, giving them a hand-painted appearance.

Colin Richards

**Also available as a printed book
see title verso for ISBN details**

Primary Education— At a Hinge of History?

For Carol who gave me the time, space, encouragement and, above all,
love to enable me to find an independent voice.

Primary Directions Series

Series Editors: Colin Conner, School of Education, University of Cambridge, UK
and Geoff Southworth, Department of Education Studies and Management,
University of Reading, UK

Assessment in Action in the Primary School

Edited by Colin Conner

Primary Education—At a Hinge in History?

Colin Richards

Primary Education— At a Hinge of History?

Colin Richards



First published 1999 by Falmer Press
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Falmer Press
Routledge Inc., 29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003.

Falmer Press is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

© C.Richards, 1999

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without permission in writing from the publisher.

First published in 1999

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-203-48750-8 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-79574-1 (Adobe eReader Format)

ISBN 0 7507 0986 3 cased

ISBN 0 7507 0985 5 paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data are available on request

Every effort has been made to contact copyright holders for their permission to reprint material in this book. The publishers would be grateful to hear from any copyright holder who is not here acknowledged and will undertake to rectify any errors or omissions in future editions of this book.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
<i>Series Editors' Preface</i>	viii
1 Introduction: Primary Education—At a Hinge of History?	1
Part 1 Primary Education: Towards a Recent History	5
2 The Plowden Report: Reappraised	7
3 Primary Education 1974–80	11
4 The 'Primary School Revolution' Demythologized—An Appraisal of the HMI Primary Survey	26
5 Primary Education 1980–87: An Analysis of Changes and Trends	29
6 Primary Education: Issues in the Early 1990s	46
Part 2 The Primary Curriculum	51
7 Changes to the English Primary Curriculum: 1862–1988	53
8 The Place of Subjects in the Primary Curriculum: A National Perspective	67
9 The Implementation of the National Curriculum in Primary Schools 1988–93	74
10 The Implementation of the National Curriculum in Small Primary Schools 1989–97	81
11 The Primary Curriculum 1988–99	92
Part 3 Primary Pedagogy	99
12 Teaching Methods: Some Distinctions	101
13 'The Three Wise Men's Report': A Critical Appraisal	105
14 Whole Class Teaching: A Reappraisal	109
15 Teachers' 'Subject' Knowledge: Some Distinctions and Requirements	115
16 Subject Expertise and Its Deployment	118

Contents

Part 4 Primary Teacher Education	125
17 The National Curriculum for Primary ITT: A Key Stage 6 Core Curriculum?	127
18 Primary Teacher Education: High Status? High Standards? —A Personal Response to Recent Initiatives	132
Part 5 End-piece	141
19 The ‘Professionalization’ of Primary Teaching Under New Labour	143
<i>Author Index</i>	145
<i>Subject Index</i>	147

Acknowledgments

Some chapters have been published previously, though all have been modified for inclusion in this book. They appeared in print as:

- Chapter 1 ‘At a hinge of history?’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 19–4–96
- Chapter 2 ‘Individuality, equality and discovery’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 20–1–97
- Chapter 3 ‘Primary education 1974–80’, in RICHARDS, C. (ed.) (1982) *New Directions in Primary Education*, London, Falmer Press.
- Chapter 4 ‘Demythologising primary education’, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, **12**, 1, 1980.
- Chapter 5 ‘Primary education in England: An analysis of recent issues and developments’, in CLARKSON, M. (ed.) (1988) *Emerging Issues in Primary Education*, London, Falmer Press.
- Chapter 7 ‘Changing elementary/primary curricula: The English experience 1862–2012’, in MOYLES, J. and HARGREAVES, L. (eds) (1998) *The Primary Curriculum: Learning from International Perspectives*, London, Routledge.
- Chapter 9 ‘Implementing the National Curriculum at Key Stage 2’, *The Curriculum Journal*, **4**, 2, 1993.
- Chapter 10 ‘Curriculum and pedagogy in key stage 2: A survey of policy and practice in small primary schools’, *The Curriculum Journal*, **9**, 3, 1998.
- Chapter 16 ‘Subject expertise and its deployment in primary schools’, *Education 3–13*, **21**, 1, 1994.
- Chapter 17 ‘A Key Stage 6 core curriculum?’, RICHARDS C., HARLING, P. and WEBB, D., Association of Teachers and Lecturers, 1997.
- Chapter 18 ‘Primary Teaching: High Status? High Standards?’, in RICHARDS, C., SIMCO, N., and TWISTLETON, S. (eds) (1998) *Primary Teacher Education: High Status? High Standards*, London, Falmer Press.
- Chapter 19 ‘Editorial’, *Education 3–13*, **26**, 1, 1998.

Series Editors' Preface

We were delighted when Colin Richards agreed to include this book in the **Primary Directions** series. Colin has considerable experience of primary education from a broad range of perspectives and what is included here is a scholarly and thorough review of the past, present and future of primary education. We believe that this book will become an essential resource for all those who wish to understand the ways in which primary education has changed and the ways in which it might be changing in the future. As he explains, the book is based upon both previously published material and unpublished material originally given as talks or lectures.

As specialist adviser for primary education within Her Majesty's Inspectorate and through active links with the research community, he was able to present a broad, balanced and often positive impression of developments in primary education. However, he began to realize that this was in direct contrast to the 'official' view being expressed by OFSTED. No longer subject to the restraints of OFSTED he has been able to

...write what I want both about government policy and about the past, present and the future of primary education, but also of challenge to current government approaches.

As far as the National Curriculum is concerned he suggests that we now have the most demanding primary curriculum anywhere in the world, with more direction, structure and expectation and he argues that revisions to the National Curriculum should be based on a systematic, comprehensive evaluation of 'what is happening at the chalk face'.

Colin offers the book as an opportunity for primary practitioners to make sense of the recent past and

...dispel many misconceptions and misunderstandings about primary education as it faces an uncertain future...Who knows, it might even make a small contribution to the re-education of at least some contemporary critics and proponents of reform.

He accepts that it was and still remains very difficult to give primary education a voice in educational decision making at the national level. This book makes a substantial contribution to that debate and will be of relevance to a wide range of readers—to students in training, to teachers on inservice courses, to lecturers, researchers and to policy-makers, in fact to all those who wish to understand the history and principles upon which primary education has developed.

*Colin Conner and Geoff Southworth
February 1999*

1 Introduction: Primary Education— At a Hinge of History?

To its cost or benefit, primary education in England is at the centre of political attention. It is seen as crucial to achieving the government's target of driving up educational standards. It is the subject of many initiatives. It is the focus of many criticisms. Yet almost all of its critics and leading proponents of its reform, whether in government, the DfEE, QCA, TTA or OFSTED have little or no background experience in primary education to draw on except presumably as pupils (though not always in the state system) and, in some cases, as parents. They have no first-hand experience of the culture of the primary education they are trying to reform, no empathy with hard-pressed, demoralized primary teachers struggling with an almost impossible job and no understanding of the recent history of primary education with its stresses, pressures, opportunities and enduring myths.

This book provides perspectives on the developing culture and context of primary education since the publication of the Plowden Report in 1967. It analyses and comments on a wide range of issues, many of which are current concerns and remain perennial to the pursuit of primary education. It provides a constructive critique of the development of the National Curriculum and of OFSTED; comments on developments in primary teacher education from the viewpoint of a concerned 'returner' to higher education; and contributes to contemporary debates about primary teaching methodology and the future of primary education from the perspective of someone who, very immodestly, wants his views heard.

The book is based partly on unpublished material, originally written as talks or lectures, and partly on published work; all the chapters have been modified to varying degrees and all, except the historical pieces, have been up-dated. Some of the chapters are contributions to the history of English primary education. Others contribute to current debates and introduce concepts or distinctions to carry that discussion forward. Still others are deliberately speculative and to a degree polemical raising issues about the future of primary education in the medium term. Each chapter in the book is prefaced by a short section in which I put the chapter in the context of developments since 1967: and highlight the significance of the issues it raises.

The main title of the book is taken from this 'Platform' piece published in the Times Educational Supplement in April 1996. I felt it was important to record how primary schools had coped reasonably successfully with the

introduction of the National Curriculum and the multitude of other changes consequent on the 1988 Education Reform Act and, very importantly, how they had begun to re-examine many of their long-established assumptions and practices such as topic work, the class-teacher system, grouping practices and other aspects of primary pedagogy. I wanted to paint a picture of a sector 'on the move', self-critical, sceptical towards the 'verities of the past', responsive to change and 'at a hinge in its history'. However, I wanted to draw attention to the deep malaise and demoralization within primary schools. I also wanted to warn against the gathering forces of reaction whose view of primary education was more informed by the realities (and aspirations) of the nineteenth century rather than the late twentieth century and who could turn that 'hinge' backwards to the certainties of a latter-day elementary education rather than forward to confront the challenges and uncertainties of primary education in the early twenty-first century.

I hope that this book will help primary practitioners make sense of the present and recent past and that it will also dispel many misconceptions and misunderstandings about primary education as it faces an uncertain future 'at a hinge in its history'. Who knows, it might even make a small contribution to the re-education of at least some contemporary critics and proponents of reform.

I don't know where the idea of a 'hinge of history' originated but I first used it in 1979 when giving a talk to primary headteachers on developments in the 1980s. I remember making much of the crucial importance of the date on which I gave the talk and then speculating, I believed authoritatively, on a wide range of probable developments. Almost none of my speculations proved correct! My only success was to predict the crucial significance of the date 8 May 1979, the date of the general election which brought the Conservative Party to power. As with hinges which open or shut doors, so that day opened up a wide range of unimagined possibilities and initiatives and shut off others. To use a fashionable cliché it proved 'a defining moment' in the recent history of the education service.

I believe that 17 years on, primary education is again at a 'hinge of history' where possibilities can be opened up or shut down, where policies and practice can move forward or regress. This 'hinge' is not tied to a general election, though one is in the offing. There is a very real paradox. At the very time when primary education is poised to move forward after a decade of far-reaching change, there is a danger of failure of nerve, a possible fateful hesitation, a danger of reversion to the certainties of nineteenth-century education rather than confrontation with the challenges and uncertainties of twenty-first century primary education.

Primary schools generally (though not universally) have achieved much in the decade since 1986. David Bell in the *Times Educational Supplement* (9 February 1996) highlights the successful introduction of the National Curriculum and the implementation of more sophisticated assessment procedures at a time of falling

budgets and rising class sizes—achieved without damaging the very positive, motivating atmosphere of so many primary schools. A dispassionate evaluation of evidence from OFSTED and other sources reveals other improvements: the successful introduction of LMS; the development of more effective curriculum coordination and planning; the fostering of closer, more productive links with parents; more systematic approaches to school and staff development. Other improvements could be cited. There is *no* inspection evidence to suggest that these have been achieved at the expense of standards in the so-called but mis-named ‘basic skills’; indeed, there is evidence of improvement in children’s basic knowledge, understanding and skills related to time, place and the physical/biological world.

Of possibly longer term significance is the questioning of long-established assumptions and practices. In some (though again not all) schools, primary education is being seen, not as an end in itself or merely preparatory to secondary education, but as part of a reasonably consistent, continuous and coherent educational experience offered to pupils from 5 (or earlier) to 16. In some schools, distinctive curricula go well beyond the basic requirements of the National Curriculum. In some, the ‘mixed economy’ of separate subject work and topic work is being reviewed (though rarely replaced) and separate treatment given to particular aspects of the programmes of study. In some, generalist class teaching is being complemented (but again rarely replaced) by forms of semi-specialist teaching to make better use of the curricular expertise available on the staff. In some, teaching methodology is being ‘opened up’ to scrutiny; discussion about the relative merits of class, group or individual teaching (a relatively unimportant pedagogic issue) is being extended to a much more valuable examination of the range and quality of teaching techniques to be employed whatever the context. Such questioning of assumptions and practice is necessary if primary education is to move consciously forward, rather than consciously or unconsciously back, into the twenty-first century.

YET, despite some improvement in policy and practice, despite some encouraging signs of a healthy professional scepticism towards the verities of the past, there is a deep malaise within English primary education—a malaise shared by so many heads, teachers, advisers, inspectors and HMI. There is a feeling of dispiritness, a sense of being ill-used by government and by government agencies such as OFSTED; a feeling of being misunderstood and unappreciated by local and national politicians; a sense of being victimized and scape-goated by unsympathetic media and others anxious to denigrate rather than objectively evaluate educational achievement. A decade or more of derision is in danger of corroding the professionalism of so many heads, teachers and inspectors.

This negative tone is captured for me in this year’s Annual Report from Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools. The dismal picture it paints of English primary education is not one which I recognize. In my view, it contributes to a deepening, not an alleviation, of the malaise afflicting primary education. It needs to be contested.

The lowering of morale and loss of self-confidence occasioned by this and other examples of negative comment, are particularly regrettable at a time when the rhetoric of the Dearing settlement offers schools the possibility of reclaiming the curriculum and making it to some extent their own through the exercise of professional discretion.

That rhetoric needs to be accepted at face value. The discretion it offers needs to be seized and worked upon in school after school despite countervailing pressures such as testing, performance tables and OFSTED's increasing preoccupation with inspecting a core, rather than a broad entitlement, curriculum.

At this hinge of its history, primary education is indeed at a 'defining moment'. Building on the achievements of the last decade and rising to the challenge of discretion, post-Dearing primary schools could develop broad, challenging curricula, perhaps with elements of tailor-made enrichment, which involve a liberal view of what is basic to a child's education and which are taught through a wide variety of techniques in a range of contexts. Or they could lose their nerve and end up providing a curriculum dominated by the 'basic basics' which fails to challenge the multiple intelligences of their pupils and which is delivered by a pedagogy more suited to the nineteenth rather than the twenty-first century.

Will the next decade see the continuing development of a genuine primary education or the re-emergence of neo-elementary schooling?

Part 1

*Primary Education:
Towards a Recent History*

2 The Plowden Report: Reappraised

The publication of the Plowden Report (Children and their Primary Schools) in 1967 represented a major landmark in the history of English primary education. It represented the high point of political and public interest in primary education in the 50 years following the Second World War. It brought primary education into the limelight. It represented primary education as part of the 'cultural revolution' of the 1960s. It embodied a spirit of optimism, expansion and confidence, far removed from the educational recession and professional depression of the decades that followed. It promised, though was not able to deliver, the end of primary education's 'Cinderella' status within public education. To many, it represented the zenith of the beneficent influence of 'child-centred' education both in terms of official orthodoxy and professional practice. To many others, it represented a pernicious influence which was to weaken educational standards and quality for decades to come. 'Represented' is key to understanding its significance. The Central Advisory Council did not, could not, legislate; it did not make policy; it did not provide resources; it did not administer primary schools. It did, however, represent and articulate the importance of primary education to a degree that no other official reports before or since have done. Throughout the last 30 years it has remained the most quoted text in the canon of primary education. Its influence on professional opinion cannot be denied; its influence on policy and practice is more uncertain and contentious. Only now can its effects be assessed with any degree of objectivity, as this brief appraisal, written in 1997, attempts to do.

English primary education badly needs appreciating in two senses of the word—a favourable recognition of its achievements and a sensitive understanding and appraisal of its strengths and weaknesses. *Children and their Primary Schools* (the Plowden Report) provided both for primary education in the 1960s. Its celebration of achievement may have been over the top; its appraisal may have been flawed in important respects; and the trends it identified may have failed to materialize, but it stands as a significant landmark in the history of primary education and one which inspired many primary teachers.

It was the Consultative Committee of the Board of Education which, in 1926, first officially recommended the establishment of primary and secondary education as two distinct stages to replace the notion of elementary education. It was the Committee's second report in 1931 (*The Primary School*) which established a