PRIMARY EDUCATION

The Key Concepts

Denis Hayes

PRIMARY EDUCATION:

THE KEY CONCEPTS

Written for students, practitioners and policy makers, *Primary Education: The Key Concepts* is a clear and accessible guide to the most important ideas and issues involved in the education of children at this crucial and formative time in their lives.

Alphabetically arranged and fully cross-referenced to ensure ease of use, entries include both curriculum-specific and generic theoretical terms, such as:

• Assessment
• Objectives
• Coping strategies
• Differentiation
• Behaviour
• Special needs
• Time management

Written by an experienced teacher and lecturer, *Primary Education: The Key Concepts* is a concise yet comprehensive text that takes into account the everyday realities of teaching. Readable and user-friendly, it is a first-class resource for the primary practitioner at all levels.

Denis Hayes is a lecturer in teacher education at the University of Plymouth, and has seventeen years experience of teaching primary school age children. His recent publications include *A Student Teacher's Guide to Primary School Placement* (RoutledgeFalmer, 2003).

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INTRODUCTION

Background

The idea of bringing children together for the purpose of formally educating them has its roots deep in history. Some historians claim that English education began with the arrival of Christianity to Kent in AD 597 and the subsequent establishment by St Augustine of the cathedral church at Canterbury. By the end of the seventeenth century the newly formed Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge was encouraging church parishes to set up their own schools. The movement was extended throughout Wales by the Reverend Griffiths Jones through a large number of 'Circulating' schools, staffed by peripatetic teachers, principally to teach children (and adults) to read in the Welsh language. There followed a series of voluntary schools, often led by teachers who were little better educated than the pupils.

In addition to the formal church-based initiatives, pioneers such as Robert Raikes, the founder of the Sunday Schools' movement (in 1780), Charles Gordon, who built 'ragged schools' to educate and provide sustenance for the destitute, and Charles of Bala in Wales were convinced about the inseparability of education and social action. The first publicly funded schools in the UK were founded in the mid-nineteenth century to give a basic education to children from poor families and teach them to read the Bible. Over succeeding years, control of education gradually switched from the Church to the state, though provision was uneven. Between 1846 and 1848 the Welsh Education Committee and the Cambrian Society were formed, which evolved into national schools. In Scotland, the 1867 report of the Royal Commission on Education led to the Education Act of 1872 that resulted in improvements in primary education for every child in Scotland and not merely for the labouring classes, as implied in the equivalent English reforms of the time. In the period running up to the setting up of the Northern Ireland state in 1920, education became one of the battlegrounds between Ulster unionism and Irish nationalism. Before partition the overwhelming majority of Irish schools were under denominational control, even though they were financed chiefly by the state.

Following the 1870 Elementary Education Act in England, education was gradually provided free of charge for all pupils, though the government's obligation was at this stage merely to 'fill the gaps' where voluntary provision did not exist. Reforms were slow in being implemented and even at the commencement of the twentieth century schooling was inconsistent and attendance spasmodic. By 1926 the Hadow Report was recommending that the 'primary' phase of education in England should conclude for pupils at age 11 and secondary schooling commence. There were many important Education Acts over the following years, including the highly influential 1944 Act, but it was not until 1989 that a national curriculum was introduced into maintained schools (i.e. schools that are funded out of general taxation) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Although most of today's primary schools are similar in physical layout, they have not always existed in such a form. Separate classrooms of the size and shape we recognise today did not become common until the late 1800s. In many elementary schools prior to the end of the nineteenth century, children of all ages were put together in a single large room with one teacher and a variety of helpers, some of whom were older pupils. Many of the teaching approaches commonly used by primary teachers today, such as grouping pupils by ability and encouraging children to talk about issues, were largely unused until the mid-1900s. Most teaching was dominated by instruction, memorising and reciting facts, learning to read in unison from words written on the board and learning to write by copying from an original.

The evolution of formal schooling gave rise to the concept of a body of knowledge that had to be mastered (a 'curriculum') and words like 'pupil' and 'scholar' were introduced to describe those who attended school, and 'master' or 'mistress' for those who taught them. Today, it is normal for children in primary schools to be referred to as pupils and young people in secondary education as students. Agreement about the need for a general education for children up to the age of 11, subject-specific teaching up to the age of 16 and selection of specialist subjects thereafter has become deeply rooted in the national system. However, during the last decade of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, primary schooling became more subject focused, with the introduction of standard lessons of fixed duration located within a predetermined timetable. Despite the additional resources that have been allocated to primary schools in recent years, there is a concomitant increase in the number of children that are educated at home and through alternative forms of independent schooling.

The majority of primary schools in the UK are for children aged 4 or 5 to 11 years; in Scotland, the primary age profile is from 4 to 12. Children aged between 4 and 5 years are educated in foundation classes in mainstream primary schools, where teachers follow specific curriculum guidance that emphasises social as much as academic development. A smaller number of schools are designated infant (ages 5 to 7) or junior (ages 7 to 11). A very small number of schools are deemed middle (ages 8 to 12 or 9 to 13) or first (ages 5 to 8 or 9). At the start of the twenty-first century the vast majority of primary schools cater for children aged 5 to 11, after which they move on to secondary education. Small village primary schools in sparsely populated areas may have only a handful of teachers, one of whom is a 'teaching head' (i.e. with part class responsibility). Smaller schools often have to be organised so that there is more than a single year group in the same class and tend to be more flexible about teaching arrangements and timetables.

The governing body ('school board' in Scotland) for each school consists of elected parents and staff members with representatives from the local community. The members have a special responsibility to represent and communicate with parents and deal with matters as diverse as:

• Appointment and dismissal of staff
• Repair and maintenance of school buildings
• Approval of head teacher's spending proposals on books and equipment
• Use of school premises outside school hours
• Discussing matters of interest to parents such as homework, bullying or school uniform

Increasing recognition has been given to the vital role played by parents as the 'first educators' and as co-educators with teachers. Head teachers and school governors are anxious to improve community links and satisfy parents, and many primary schools are categorised as community schools to emphasise this priority. In some parts of the country there are large numbers of schools that were founded by the established church, where governors have more control over religious education (RE) and, therefore, the spiritual and moral ethos of the school. Foundation schools are broadly of two types: Aided and Controlled. The Aided schools are more closely attached to the Church/Mosque; their representatives on the governing body are in the majority and responsible for monitoring the teaching of RE. In Controlled schools, links with the Church are less tightly bound. Over recent years there has been an increase in the number of foundation schools based on different world faiths. However, the principle of segregating children on the basis of religious belief has created active debate on the possible destabilising effect that this policy might have on society.

Despite the additional funding made available to schools in recent years, teacher recruitment and retention is still an issue in some parts of the country (notably where housing and living costs are high). Teacher shortages at the end of the twentieth and start of the twentyfirst century have meant that newly qualified teachers' job prospects are better than they were in the past. However, the falling birth rate in the UK is resulting in the need for fewer primary teachers. For this reason and (more particularly) the heavy workload they carry, only about half of all newly qualified teachers are in permanent posts after five years' service.

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ABILITY

Ability is variously defined as competence, power or talent, and indicates a capacity, expertise or proficiency in a defined area of learning. Ability is also affiliated to concepts such as flair, skill, aptitude and intelligence. At one time it was believed that ability was fixed, and people either possessed it or did not. However, it is now generally accepted that far from being innate (i.e. fixed at birth) ability develops in response to the environment in which children are nurtured (i.e. the specific and particular human and material influences affecting them). Educationists have come to acknowledge that a number of other variables influence progress and attainment, including adult/child relationships, the child's motivation, **creativity,** personality and peer pressure. The concept of a single fixed ability has been modified to encompass an understanding that people are capable of increasing their capacity for certain kinds of intelligent behaviour and attainment over time, providing the conditions are suitable.

Many teachers and adults working in school tend to categorise people according to their perceptions of their abilities and identify pupils by using labels such as 'good' or 'naughty' or 'clever' or 'fast' or 'slow'. Some educationists argue that ability labelling is unnecessary and may actually damage children's learning owing to its potential negative impact on pupils and the way that it influences teachers' **expectations**. An alternative approach to ability-based teaching is posited on a belief that pupils' capacity to learn has no limits, providing they are given relevant work, imaginatively presented and rooted in their interests.

While primary teachers carry out an initial **assessment** of children when they enter school to gain a better understanding of their **knowledge,** understanding, **skills** and potential, the process carries with it a danger of stereotyping pupils. Teachers may build a mental image of a pupil's ability that fixes what they believe a child is capable of achieving. Although assessments at all stages of primary school are helpful for teachers in setting work appropriate to the needs of the child, they can also establish arbitrary boundaries for **achievement**. Pupils then carry the 'limited ability' label throughout their school life so that teachers do not expect them to achieve anything of note, and the negative image continues into secondary education. As a result, pupils do not fulfil their potential and may become disenchanted with school or accept their lowly status.

Exceptional ability is frequently equated with **giftedness and talent**. Gifted pupils are defined as those who excel in academic subjects such as mathematics and English. By contrast, talented pupils excel in subjects like physical education, art and drama. Some gifted children struggle to complete their work on time because they want to try out their own methods or simply like to spend time pondering issues. At the start of lessons, teachers clarify their **expectations** for pupils of different abilities, taking account of the fact that all children are stimulated by opportunities to consolidate their learning through open-ended **activities,** problem-solving tasks and investigations. If pupils are all engaged

in the same task, teachers take account of the child's ability when evaluating the quality of the work and providing **feedback**.

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ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability has been central to the educational reforms that have been introduced in recent years, particularly since the highly significant Education Reform Act of 1988 that heralded the arrival of a national curriculum in England and Wales. As a considerable amount of public money is allocated to education and it has importance for the economic prosperity of the country, education providers (teachers, lecturers, etc.) are accountable to the taxpayer. Although some educationists argue that teachers should be much freer to exercise professional choice about what they teach and how they do it, teachers have had to adjust like other professions to the new demands placed on them by their clients.

The monitoring of teachers and schools takes various forms but is broadly considered with regard to financial accountability and professional accountability, the former rooted in value for money and the latter in pupil progress. Financial accountability is ultimately invested in the school governors/school board, the body that has responsibility for safeguarding the interests of the school. The role and purpose of governing bodies is to monitor education provision, advise and support the head teacher about key decisions and make a public response to inspection reports about the school. Governors themselves are also accountable to the parents and local community through the local education authority.

A problem with accountability is that of choosing the criteria for successful teaching to which a teacher can be held accountable. Most discussion has settled on pupil **achievement** as the chief measure of teaching success, but the relationship between achievement and teaching quality is inconclusive. Educational research is unable to show significant differences between teaching methods and their impact on cognitive and affective learning. The aggregated grades from national **testing** of pupils at age 11 years contribute to school performance tables, which are used for a yardstick for accountability to the local community. However, there has been considerable disquiet among teachers about whether test scores should be used as an indication of teachers' **ability,** as many other factors such as home circumstances and the work of previous teachers influence pupil performance.

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ACHIEVEMENT

Achievement is important in all areas of life and people are often judged on their public successes, particularly in academic and sporting fields. Children revel in the thrill and excitement of winning a race, being awarded a certificate for good work, earning a star after helping the teacher with a job or colouring in a square on a chart for finishing another **reading** book. It is less fulfilling for children whose achievements are limited, who struggle to finish the race, complete the work or compete with their illustrious classmates. An emphasis upon matching tasks and activities against pupil capability ('differentiation') to ensure that children succeed with their work cannot conceal the reality that there are winners and losers in school life as elsewhere. Adults involved in educating primary-age pupils have to be sensitive to the fact that pupils are not participating in an adult game known as 'school' but trying to understand life's complexities and their own place in it.

Achievement in learning is the ultimate goal for everyone involved in primary education, but identifying the nature of the achievement is problematic. In its simplest terms, pupils achieve when they gain measurably good results in their academic work. Most children are willing to persevere with their work for three reasons: to gain satisfaction from it, to contend with their friends and to please the teacher. Children are motivated to a different extent by each of these three factors, depending on the relationship they have with others and the interest they possess in the subject matter. Some children are strongly self-motivated and show a relentless determination to do well and find fulfilment in completing a task to their own satisfaction. Other children are highly competitive and view every piece of work as a challenge to outperform everyone else. While competitiveness can act as a spur to achievement, it can also lead to an unhealthy and strained classroom climate if it becomes the dominating factor. Educators have an essential role in encouraging pupils to feel proud of their achievements and to affirm children's successes warmly, while allowing a degree of competitiveness without tolerating rancour.

Achievement plays a big part in motivating pupils to learn and progress. It is good for children to do well and for their successes to be appreciated by adults and their peers. Many children work extremely hard and strive to attain their goals; they rightly receive recognition and praise. Nevertheless, children who equate achievements with evidence of their personal worth will become dissatisfied when the cheering fades, certificates crinkle, sparkling reports become an archive and others receive more approval. To base

the worth of individuals solely on certificated or measurable successes while overlooking their personal qualities runs the risk of burdening children with the need to gain further achievements as a means of recognition.

In reality, success is judged not only through identifiable and visible outcomes but in how the outcomes affect the child's character, aptitude to cope with life, confidence and attitude to others. For young children in particular, both the winners and losers deserve praise: winners because of their victories, losers because of their tenacity and determination. Achievement is kept in perspective when the genuine efforts of every child are recognised and acclaimed, regardless of the child's place in the order.

Less able children will normally need more time to reach the same point in their learning than more capable ones. A small number of capable children are slow and methodical in their work, not because they lack the **ability** but because they are conscientious and anxious to avoid making mistakes. Some less able children complete work quickly because they can only engage with the concepts at a relatively superficial level and need to be encouraged to try more demanding tasks. More able children need opportunities to extend their **thinking,** rather than merely doing more of the same activity. Teachers try to ensure that every child gains initial success before progressing to tasks that require greater determination and knowledge to complete.

While pupils need to be encouraged to achieve the highest standards of which they are capable, low-attaining children need help if they are to avoid spiralling into an attitude of negativity towards learning. Some pupils seem to find everything a constant struggle, unable to compete, fearful and defensive lest they receive criticism from adults and always struggling to make an impression. It is unsurprising if, after a few years of this experience, they decide that they are not prepared to make an effort to try any longer. Such children prefer to put their efforts into other more disruptive behaviour over which they have some **control.** Treating children as individuals and sensitivity with regard to their emotional as well as their academic needs plays a major role in preventing these unhelpful attitudes from taking root. Caring adults in school help alleviate children's anxieties by being calm when dealing with their fears, sensitively encouraging pupils to confront their doubts and view the route to achievement as an exciting challenge.

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