

"SWITCH ON THE LIGHT"

by Walter S. Grisdale

When he was asked to put the light out he took a chair from the corner, carried it to the centre of the room under the light, carefully climbed onto the chair, took a deep breath and blew very hard at the electric light bulb. . . .

A grade 12 student speaking reasonable English, good Amharic and with good grades in other academic subjects could not use a ruler to draw a straight line, was confused by a pair of scissors and proved a danger to himself with a paper-cutting guillotine. . . .

It is easy to dismiss these tales with a shrug as isolated, exaggerated cases but I believe they deserve more consideration in that in themselves they are indicative of a serious weakness in the present education system. The average 12th grade student is basically a product of an academic system. He can perform adequately within the limits of the subjects he has been taught, provided the questions he is asked are routine and conform to the type to which he is accustomed, and provided he is given sufficient time to prepare his answers. But should the questions be unexpected or unusual in form or should they take him outside the limits within which he has been drilled, his reactions are inevitably faltering and insufficient. This is not a criticism of the student but rather of the system. The question is, what can be added to or changed in the present system to produce an **average** student who would be more adaptable to novel circumstances, more flexible in his thinking, more dynamic in his approach, and who would perform better than the present student under **any** circumstances?

It might well be impossible to answer such a fundamental question, for the answer affects every aspect and every department of a school and every person in it from the Director to the most junior teacher, from the curriculum to the methods of teaching it for each subject, from teacher-student relations to the size of classes, from the nature and extent of equipment and extra-curricular activities to the attitude of the administration. It goes beyond the mere purveying of facts, skills and knowledge as a cloak for education; it conceives of a student as not merely a receptacle but as a person, immature and developing, in need of understanding and training, within a controlled environment, namely a school.

As this question and its implications have to be faced I would like to comment on certain approaches (I would hate to call them 'educational experiments' for the principles involved are certainly not new, the methods used are not fully controlled and they are not sufficiently planned to warrant the term. 'Gropings' might be a better word!) which are at the moment being made at the Prince Bede Mariam Laboratory School with our present grade 12 Teacher Training Programme. The nature of these approaches is governed partly by the fact that these students are potential teachers; partly by the fact that most of them have four years of university education in front of them; and partly by the fact that the ESLC examination no longer rigidly controls and guides our subject curricu-

lum and teaching methods. I do not offer these thoughts as solutions but rather as suggestions, the purpose of this article being to stimulate rather than supersede thinking.

The grade 12 Teacher Training Programme comprises 259 students recruited from all parts of the Empire. 90% of these students are boys, ranging in age from 16 to 21, the rest are girls. They represent a cross-section of the grade 11 classes of Ethiopia. 228 are boarders, the remainder live out in Addis Ababa. They are in the school for nine months, during which time they satisfy the staff of the school that they are university material and will make worthy teachers. The courses they take differ according to their previous educational background and their aptitudes. The order is deliberate, for, left to himself, a student will choose a subject with which he is familiar and which he knows he can pass, but at which he does not excel and for which he has little talent, in preference to one that excites his imagination, and for which, as shown by tests, he has a natural bent. Throughout his school life his progress has been decided by examinations and tests, and so naturally his attitude is determined already: "passing" means more to him than "understanding" — even at this level "security" comes before "adventure". This school-bred timidity is the first problem we have to face. Our present solution, if so it may be described, is to offer a wide choice of subjects and to reduce the status of examinations. Every student taking the Arts course has some science; in the two 'heavy' Arts sections there are three periods of General Science (i.e. the science of everyday life plus some basic training in the care and maintenance of audio-visual equipment) out of forty periods a week; in the other two Arts sections there are eight periods of science. Every student, whether Arts or Science, takes Ethiopian History; two Science sections have Geography, which includes geography of Ethiopia; the other two Science sections take a General Arts Course, two periods a week. (This at the moment is not working as effectively as we had hoped. Improvements in content and organisation have been planned.) Each student must study a reasonable number of subjects, some of which are relevant in that they broaden his understanding of the world in which he lives and in which he will eventually work; others, for example, typing, give a definite skill which will always be useful to him in his chosen profession; yet most of the time he will be studying related subjects essential to his academic progress through the university.

Broadly speaking, the curriculum content is that which the Ministry of Education decrees for grade 12 students, but there are these differences. As Laboratory School students they are no longer sacrificial victims for the ESLC examination and so we have approximately 6 months **more** teaching time in grade 12 than the normal Ministry 12th grade student. Therefore we have the time to expand and enrich the Ministry curriculum. In doing this our first objective is to interest the student in the subject. This can only be done by the student actively participating in the subject — hence in science we make considerable use of our laboratories; in geography we take the student outside the classroom whenever possible; in English and Amharic we deal continually with topics from the Ethiopian scene and the world today; in history a knowledge of the past is used to explain the present.

Behind all our projects, schemes and teaching is the thought that the student we have in our classes now will teach classes of his own in the future and that maybe our example will have some influence on the way in which he carries out his responsibilities and duties as a teacher; so the methods we use and the at-

titude we have towards our students become just as important as the material we teach. A teacher usually chooses a certain method to teach a lesson because in his experience it is the most effective way of communicating his thoughts to the class. We are influenced by this, naturally, but additionally we try to think further ahead, especially in the science subjects, in that we have in mind the world in which our students will have to work. In five years time what type of science curriculum will we be studying in our secondary schools? Who knows? Certainly we can say that, with the present rate of scientific progress, the curriculum will be or should be very different from that of today, both in school and university. In this case, surely, the science teachers we want are those whose minds have been trained so that they are flexible enough in their attitude to science and to science teaching to adapt themselves to the new world of the future. Therefore we are concerned, above all, with developing an inquiring mind, with producing a student trained to observe, record and conclude, rather than one who plods along passing his examinations on the memorisation of outdated facts. We want our students to gladly accept the challenge of new work and new ideas, rather than attempt to cling to the outmoded because this is what they are used to and therefore this is what they think they must have. In Geography we never give notes as such, for this encourages a painless mastication of second-hand facts which, even when remembered correctly, have little value unless applied in their proper context. Instead we teach lessons offering facts as a basis for discussion, with as many examples as possible, always asking the students their opinions, correcting and modifying such opinions when necessary. Students are never asked to "copy" maps, they have to "make" their own. The Geography room has a mass of maps, rocks, work sheets, and reference books; it is a place of work, not one of worship where homage has to be paid to the teacher because he read the book first. We are interested in producing students who want to be actively occupied in working in the subject, not just to pass an examination, but because they want to understand, they want to develop their knowledge and subject skills to give themselves the satisfaction of having a better understanding of our world and their purpose in it. The students organise and effectively control their own library. The Geography room is their room and they use it.

Our methods of teaching English are new to most student in that oral work and word drills are emphasised, the idea being that once they speak and hear the English language correctly then their mastery of it will increase more rapidly. Ability to listen correctly in English is essential, for English is not just another subject, it is the medium of instruction and incompetence in this language can break any student-teacher.

The principles behind the teaching methods practised in this school are to regard this year as the first of a five-year university programme and not the final year of secondary school; where facts are subordinate to controlled ideas and student interest; where basic subject weaknesses are remedied before more advanced work is attempted; where the attitude of the student to his work and his fellows is considered as important as his academic prowess; where in each lesson, teacher and students share an educational experience in a controlled environment from which both teacher and student can benefit; where passivity is discouraged, constructive activity sought.

But this is not enough. Even if throughout the teaching day the student is continually goaded into thinking, and acting on his thinking, there must be a carry-over into his life outside school. This carry-over should be reflected in his attitude

to the problems he meets in his everyday life. He must not be content to sit down and await the beneficence of higher authority; he must not shrug off discomforts and inconveniences as being inevitable. He must learn to co-operate with his fellows to attempt to improve his own lot. This year at the Laboratory school, students for the first time have no \$ 2 per month stipend. This undoubtedly makes life difficult for the genuine poor. They appeal to the office to help them to find money for the minor necessities of life — haircuts, stationery, soap, etc. The school has no petty cash. What is to be done? Grow our hair, go dirty, take no notes? Obviously not. We have raised a little money through the voluntary contributions of teachers. Do we use this to give to the needy? Again the answer is no, for two reasons, one being that nobody likes to become an object of charity; it destroys personal pride and self-respect; the other being that it immediately creates a wealth class structure in the student body. Moreover, if a student can be employed to do work to help himself and his fellows out of a problem situation we still have achieved something of educational value in that the student is introduced to a way of thinking which is going to be of value to him later in his career as a student and a teacher. So we encourage the needy to do a little work for the school. For this they are paid. They earn their money and therefore have every right to spend it as they wish. We encourage students, especially representatives of the student body, to think up schemes which will create money for the needy and with which we can finance projects which would be beneficial to the students as a whole. If the suggestions come from the students, it is better than from the staff, for we are interested in developing constructive attitudes of mind in the students towards work and money. For example, one of our teachers has had students collecting specimens of local flora, pressing them, mounting them on cards, to be sold for Christmas, all in their own time, willingly, and in some cases with interest. There are numerous educational implications to be drawn from this single example, but in this article I am concerned only with the constructive positive attitude of teacher and students in doing this work.

There are other schemes but the point is made. The idea is 'self help'. Let's not ask someone else to do the job, let's do it ourselves and benefit from the work and the accomplishment. Make, not take, is the motto.

Extra-curricular activities are a result of the wishes of the students and are not set up by the staff merely to occupy time. Each activity is run by a student committee under the supervision of an interested member of staff. The students do not just participate; they organise, administer and perform. This is their school.

We, the staff, are interested in them as people; in increasing their appetite for work; in fostering their awareness of their environment; in giving them room to grow and the opportunity to respond to controlled stimuli in surroundings of which they will gain more than a "shop window" knowledge, and where they will not only know "how to" but consciously "want to" switch on a light rather than attempt, futilely, to blow one out.

Other schemes include:-

1. In December we set up our own barber's shop. We have bought the equipment and have two students with experience to do the work.
2. One student with some colleagues wants to run a refreshment stall (tea and buns) at break and during the lunch hour.
3. A committee of students is organising a dance.

4. The Geography Society is planning to organise and stage a General Knowledge Competition for schools and take a percentage of the entry fees and "gate".
5. We plan to take in "mending" and have the girls do some sewing on of buttons for a small fee.

We have many ideas but the present programme has been underway only for ten weeks. And we really want the impetus to come from the students. We can make no comment on money made at the moment. I would like to stress that, although we are interested in helping the needy, our first aim is to attempt to create an attitude of mind towards this problem and education in general.