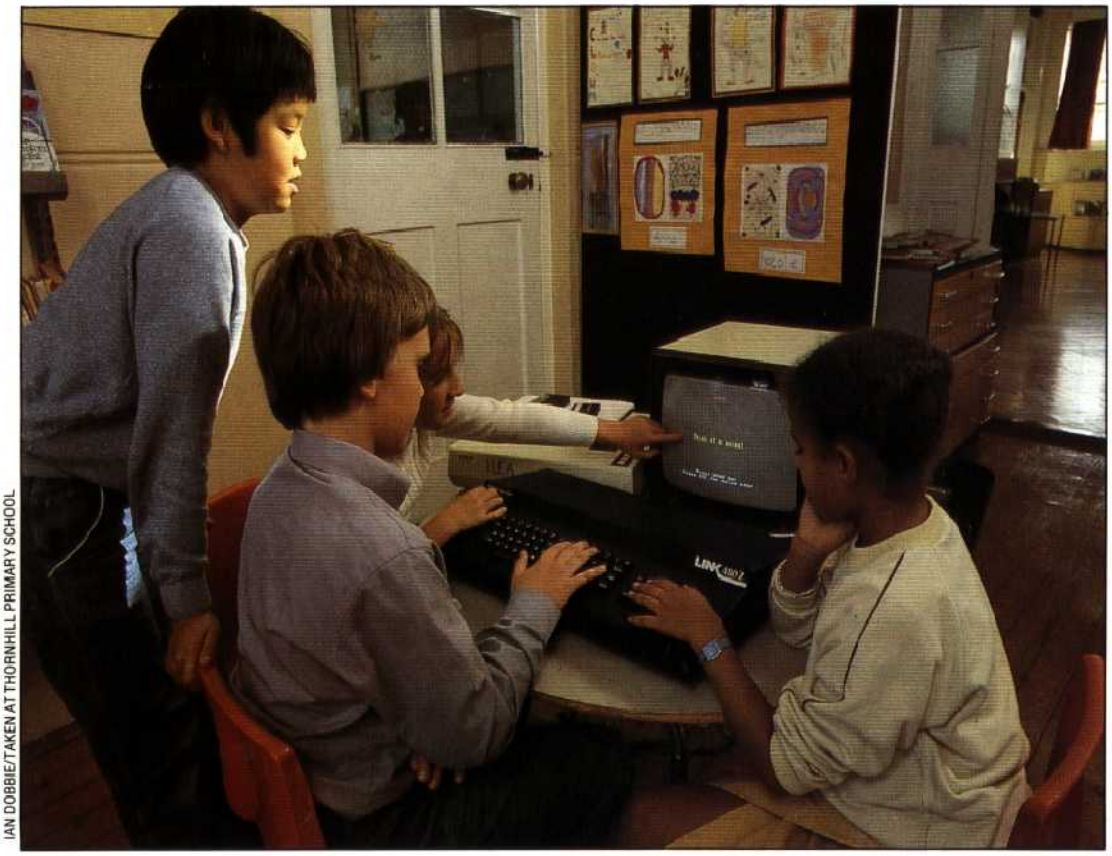
School On Screen



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Computers in Primary Schools
Britain is preparing for the future with an educational policy to introduce computers to children in their first years at school. The idea is not only to familiarise school children with new technology, but to use the computer to teach a wide range of subjects — from biology to foreign languages. It is an ideal and patient teacher as it only moves on to new ground once a problem has been mastered, allowing both slow and fast learners to work at their own pace. The computer has a wider use as a learning aid — simply by using it the child discovers how a problem is analysed and solved

The classroom has now caught up with the computer age and an exciting choice of educational programs is on offer

Every one of Britain's 29,000 primary schools will soon have a computer and many secondary schools already possess one. Nowadays, computers are not simply on the curriculum under 'Computer Studies', but are being used by teachers for teaching numeracy and literacy, helping slow-learning children, and teaching foreign languages.

There are many educational programs for home computers on the market, but teachers frequently complain about their poor quality. The reason for this is that few programs have been written that observe both educational and computing disciplines.

Computer programmers rarely have teaching experience, and teachers, many of whom are new to programming, have sometimes been responsible for the most rudimentary of programming mistakes.

Although a teacher's program is likely to work in his or her own classroom, the moment it is sent out to another school problems arise. The actual program, whether stored on cassette or disk, is usually not sufficient by itself: good explanatory documentation should also be considered equally essential.

Without this, students may be unable to operate the program. 'Well of *course* you have to type LOAD!' might be the programmer's response to the problem, but to a computer novice all such details must be spelled out.

More seriously, good programming calls for an anticipation of all the mistakes that a beginner might make. This is as important as ensuring the program is a successful teaching aid. Good programming means more than 'de-bugging' the program to the point at which it does what it should when the right key is pressed. It also means ensuring that the program doesn't do anything it shouldn't when the wrong key is pressed. This is the hardest part of program writing. The program must be able to recover from the most careless of errors by a child, and still leave him thinking the computer is easy and fun to use.

Despite these problems, there is a wide range of educational programs suitable for home and school use. Computers are wonderful educational tools, and in choosing software for your children it is useful to understand the different ways in which a computer can be used.

A computer can be used to instruct a child in almost any subject. If the program is good, the child is likely to be fascinated by it and motivated to learn.

The usual type of educational program is best described as 'drill and practice'. Children are