

Getting Heads Round the White Paper

"Schools' policy 'Stuck in Time Warp'" declared the Guardian newspaper headline on Friday August 29th. The report featured the Morpeth Secondary School, chosen *"as the showcase of educational reform"*. The head teacher, Alastair MacDonald, declared that the ministers of education had an outdated view of education. *"They are fixed around 1978-80 in terms of what is happening in schools."* After the Prime Minister's photocall visit to the school, the head teacher told reporters that he was worried that *"... the advice Mr. Blair is getting is coming from a narrow group of people ..."*.

One of *Education Now's* own head teacher members - Peter Humphreys - is equally concerned about the ideas set out in the White Paper. He writes ...

The government agenda on schooling is laid out in direct, confident fashion, appealing to a broad spectrum of opinion. There is much of the same, but also the odd chink of light.

For example,

- teaching about democracy in schools
- National Grid for Learning - connecting schools and removing barriers to learning
- research and development into schools of the future.

These points are interesting in that they are mentioned at all, but as yet they are insufficiently developed to get too excited about.

Primary education appears considerably short-changed. Its function is seen to be the development of literacy and numeracy within a focused reductionist curriculum. More prescriptive teaching is likely to deskill teachers by reducing their role to that of mere 'instructor'.

Limited, but more important thinking, is focused on the secondary phase. Equipping the student with the tools for learning appears to be of concern, but where is there reference to the wealth of research into the learning process and whole brain understanding? The key-stage schooling structure remains an unquestioned legacy that has little to do with effective learning. There is a reference to 'fast tracking' pupils but it centres on the 'gifted'. Choice and specifically learner-choice is not mentioned, but then the paper says democracy will be **taught** but not necessarily practised!

I have other concerns:

- unrelenting pressure and policing is to continue
- reliance is still placed on pseudo-scientific, 'objective', performance data
- a 'minimal competency' overtone emerges particularly

emphasised in the primary phase

- little emphasis on the identification and development of talents, richness and diversity of experience
- the cramming of children's lives leaves little time for self-directed activities and leisure; pressure and stress increase for all ages of learner; the rat race begins earlier and earlier.

Overall the White Paper represents more thinking than we have had for some time, but the same tired, familiar themes come through. The debate moves on only a little.

New management ... same old coercion?

The persistent message of the White Paper is, 'We have ways of making you learn what we want you to learn'. For those of us working for a more humane education system, this raises a series of questions. What of the young people in these schools of 'excellence', have they no voice, no aspirations, no part to play in what is to be **done to them**? Are they to be remorselessly *"stretched"*? We read nothing of the importance of their happiness, their enjoyment and satisfaction in learning, and with it their growing self-motivation, responsibility, independence, and management of their own learning.

Apart from a brief passing mention *"that different children move at different speeds and have different abilities"* (p.13), this document fails to acknowledge the individuality of learners - their differing personalities, experiences, learning styles. Instead, the drive is to raise imposed standards: *"We are setting high and demanding targets which the vast majority should be aiming to achieve"* (p.33).

Yes, there is recognition of recent initiatives, e.g. early years forums, 'excellence' centres and work related learning, but overall we get the message of 'rehashing the Tory left-overs!' *"We have consistently made clear that there will be unrelenting pressure on schools and teachers for improvement."* (p.11) It is new management ... same old coercion. What an uninspiring vision for the year 2002!

Janet Meighan

The Freedom of the Press?

'Freedom of the Press' has come to be misunderstood as the right of newspapers to pick and choose what they want to report. This has, in practice, become 'power without responsibility', as the destructive activity of newspapers in wrecking the teaching profession in UK has shown.

But this is not the only, or the original, interpretation of the idea, which was the freedom to set up and run a small press and distribute new and alternative ideas in newsletters, pamphlets and books. *Education Now* and *Educational Heretics Press* stand in this great tradition of grassroots publishing and grassroots democracy.

Members of *Education Now* who have tried repeatedly to penetrate the screen of censorship of British newspapers have had only a little success, but there are small victories. Chris Shute had a short letter published in *The Times* a few weeks ago:

"Back to the bad old days?

The current outbreak of enthusiasm for 'old-fashioned' teaching methods and rote-learning leaves me bemused. When I began teaching in the early Sixties we abandoned that way of working precisely because a great many conscientious teachers had come to the conclusion that it didn't work ... it was clear to educators in those days that the old methods, by concentrating on compendious memorisation, produced not creative thinkers, but efficient regurgitators ... we now have computers to do any regurgitation that may be necessary."

Chris is also appearing regularly on a *Cable TV* programme as an educational contributor.

In a *Guardian* competition for curriculum reform ideas, Roland Meighan was awarded a prize for the concept of the Catalogue Curriculum. No details of the idea were published, perhaps because they were too radical to mention in politically correct company, for the case opened with:

"Why do we have totalitarian-style schools in what is presumed to be a democracy? We could have democratic-type schools if we wanted. But the curriculum would then have to respect some of the key features of democracy - the rights of the learners to have a say, choice, and variety. Democracy in schooling requires 'no curriculum without representation'.

To get us started, I propose the idea of the Catalogue Curriculum ... "

News and Review readers know the rest of the argument.

There may be a breeze of change at the *Times Education Supplement*, following the appointment of a new editor. In truth TES has been for the most part, the Times **Schooling** Supplement. But recently, there have been a few cautious mentions of alternative ideas. Even the name of A.S.Neill was mentioned both in an editorial and in a report from the Pacific Rim, where some local educationalists want to know about his

ideas in the hope of rescuing their regimental system from its fascist tendencies.

Indeed, a letter from Roland appeared in TES on the subject of the Pacific Rim myths:

"David Reynolds appears to have discovered that the mass schooling systems of the Pacific rim are obsolete too ... Training students to be good at the shallow learning of selected mechanical tricks of institutionally imposed syllabuses, does not produce the more important deep learning, the kind we need more and more in the future. Indeed shallow learning systems tend to eradicate the potential to develop deep learning, as the most recent brain activity research shows, on the 'if you do not use it, you lose it' principle.

The international tables are, in the end, comparing one kind of obsolete learning system with another. It is a bit like having a 'best typewriter' contest in the middle of a voice-driven word-processor and computer age. I propose we ignore all the obsolete systems and design and establish the next learning system instead, re-cycling such buildings, resources and staff as prove to be adaptable."

It was, however, good to see a member of *Education Now*, John Bastiani, given substantial space (including a full facial photograph!) to comment on the government White Paper in TES, 22/8/97. His piece 'Poor Relations' notes that parents are still seen as external props to education rather than an integral part of it.

Building Blocks for Global Learning

A conference focusing on the personal and social education of children aged 3-7

The Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick
6th-8th March 1998

As this century draws to a close, people's lives all over the world are being linked together in ways that seemed unthinkable a few years ago. Young people, and those adults who participate in their education, need to adjust to this new world and the conceptual, ethical and practical challenges it creates.

The conference will consider the development of communication skills, self-esteem, empathy, co-operation and conflict resolution and the positive commitment to oppose prejudice and discrimination. It is concerned with the development of skills and attitudes that are not essential for successful learning but also serve as foundations for global awareness and the ability to participate actively in democratic citizenship.

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Highly virtual and virtuous

Just the name of the article, *Learning in a Virtual High*, caused me some excitement. It suggests a school in space. In fact, it could be the starting point for a very stimulating drama lesson. Imagine a school without walls, a place that exists only when students choose to bring it into being. A place where learners in small groups use video conferencing facilities to talk to each other about the topics they are working on. Should they feel the need to discuss any of their learning with an expert, they would dial up an appropriate tutor from their directory and ask for advice. Experiments would be carried out in virtual reality and different locations would be 'visited', just like old-style school trips.

A wide range of courses and assessment options could be called up on computer. Students could enrol themselves at a virtual college or university or select an appropriate assessment procedure when they felt ready - all of which would be available 'on line'. If we were to get very far fetched we could imagine such learning being an exciting and enjoyable process.

The amazing thing is that the above story is almost true. **Virtual High School in Vancouver** is a real life example of modern and creative educational provision.

Learning in a Virtual High

In Canada students are creating their own education at the Virtual High School in Vancouver. Students decide for themselves what interests them and what subjects they want to follow.

They choose their mentors or learning consultants from among their learning community of 20 adults and 30 students. If one of them wishes to learn something not available in their community they find people outside to help.

"We believe that there is an innate responsibility for every learner to create their own learning as they know their own passions best", says Greg Dean, who is 16. "We trust every person's innate curiosity to guide their learning and that comes with many responsibilities as well. It's not an easy job."

Virtual High grew out of the Wondertree model which started when Ilana Cameron asked her father after one week in normal school to be her teacher and make a school at home. From his work over the next eight years, with his daughter and 12 other children, Mr. Cameron has put together what he calls a new *metaphor for learning*. *"This new model", he says, "is a significant shift towards global and individual unity. It is based in opportunity and possibility rather than in expectation, and is generated by adults empowering children without denying or blocking the integrity of the unconscious mind of the child."*

One of the blessings of studying at the Virtual High is that students can pursue their own programme in their own time. The learning centre is open 24 hours a day, so if someone is absorbed in a particular problem or train of thought they are not obliged to break off at the sound of a bell. Working with computers, they also have access to information on whatever subjects they want.

Greg Dean says: *"We were prompted to set up our own learning*

environment because we believe that in moving out of the industrial age there will be less and less opportunity to be given a job, to be given our living, so we figured we had to learn to make our own living, our own jobs and become entrepreneurs".

These young people are a testament to their own approach to learning. It would be difficult to find a more rounded set of individuals with an understanding of their place in the universe.

Source: Positive News (Issue 10, 1996)

The message of Vancouver's Virtual High is universal. With frightening speed new technologies give us fresh opportunities to manage our lives and learning more effectively. Video conferencing is already cheap enough for businesses to use, and directories are already being put together. 'On line' courses exist. The internet gives access to an immeasurable array of global resources. Voice recognition technology provides an easy way to record information. Soon it will no longer be necessary to know the code of written language to communicate ideas in writing to others.

Still, there are limits. Right now I've had enough of sitting at my computer so I'm off to do some shopping. This is one activity I definitely do not want to do in virtual reality. Call me old fashioned, but I like it just the way it is!

Sharon Ginnis

For copies of the research and development report on the Virtual High and for information on the Wondertree Foundation for Learning, contact: Virtual High, PO Box 38083, Vancouver, BC, Canada, V5Z 4L9 **Tel** 001 604 739 5941 **Fax** 001 604 739 6903

Cyber Schools in Alberta

In Alberta, Canada, 7,000 students are registered on home-based education programmes.

Families may devise a programme of their own or they may choose to use Alberta distance teaching materials. The families who choose to link up with cyber schools are able to access on-line lessons and services via the Internet, and make use of 'chat lines' with members of staff or with groups for discussion purposes.

Some of the arrangements are of a flexi-time nature whereby students meet every two weeks in face-to-face sessions for tutorials, group work or to make presentations.

Similar schemes are to be found elsewhere, e.g. in parts of USA and in Australia.

Training teachers for an obsolete system

There are two basic roles for which teachers are currently trained. One is that of **crowd-control steward** since a great deal of time is spent dealing with large groups of conscripted learners. As Colin Ward once explained, "*Much of our expenditure on teachers and plant is wasted by attempting to teach people what they do not want to learn in a situation that they would rather not be involved in*".

The other basic role is that of **crowd-instructor**. The currently favoured method of trying to achieve learning is that of the formal instruction of groups in classes of anything from 30 -50. Enthusiasts for this crowd-instructor role ignore the evidence about its inefficiency. The short-term recall of learners after formal instruction averages 10% with a usual range of 0% to 20%. The long term recall averages 5% with a usual range of 0% to 10%. As a young teacher I simply refused to believe the evidence and threw myself into a whole host of strategies to prove the figures wrong. The pre and post-test results showed again and again that the research was correct. This set in motion my life-long interest in learning systems.

The next learning system, which is only a few years away, and indeed could be in place in months if we had a mind to do it, is unlikely to need either of these roles very much. We are, therefore, training teachers for an increasingly obsolete system and creating a cohort of new, young museum-pieces.

Three other learning systems get better results. These are not the only ones; there are other approaches that help us match the thirty different learning styles we have found in humans.

The first of the three is **purposive conversation** between two and up to eight people. This is one of the reasons that home-based education is so remarkably successful, in getting the learners, on average, two years ahead of their schooled counterparts and in some cases, up to ten years ahead. Between 40% and 60% of the time is spent in purposive conversation which replaces the crowd instruction method. We now know this after over 20 years of research in UK, USA, Canada, Australia and elsewhere.

A second effective learning approach is that of **teaching something to someone else**. This is one of the reasons why people are so easily fooled by formal teaching methods. Because the teacher remembers up to 90% of the material, it is easy to assume that the learners do too. They do not. When they fail to do so, the disappointed teacher cannot face the idea that it is the method that is poor and is likely to blame the learners for being 'lazy' or 'stupid'. It is, of course, the teacher who could be accused of being both lazy and stupid for not reading the research on learning. The explanation for the much-vaunted Pacific-rim results is in the small print: learners do two hours work with their parents before school and two or more afterwards, to shore up the inefficiency of the crowd

instruction method. If they followed the example of home-schoolers and cut out the bit in the middle, they might do even better.

A third successful method is that of **learning co-operatives** using the discipline and skills of democratic pedagogy. I was startled to find a considerable leap in standards when I first used this approach in teacher education courses. So were the external examiners and inspectors who, never having encountered this approach, knew nothing of its theory or practice. As well being successful in the standard tasks of memorising and reproducing institutionally approved material, the students also developed resourcefulness, flexibility, curiosity, skill in learning, readiness to unlearn, research techniques and enhanced personal confidence.

They found that they annoyed their alienated fellow learners on other PGCE courses, by their enthusiasm and joy in learning. Colleagues were also known to comment sourly that when the students from the learning co-operative attended any of their lecture sessions, they "*asked an awful lot of questions*". Home-schoolers exhibit the same extra gains, and one reason is that the families too, operate as learning co-operatives for periods of time. When students from the learning co-operatives visited families educating at home, they immediately found common ground. So when the famous Harrison case was in court in 1981, they supported the family during the hearing and produced a simulation that they could use in classrooms based on it.

The obsolete teachers being produced, are, in the final analysis, being trained as indoctrinators. We need to move from working **ON** children, which is the approach of the indoctrinator, to working **WITH** children, which is the approach of the educator. It is time to ignore Blunkett and Woodhead and the others who have enthusiasm for the mind-rape approach of the massive and expensive apparatus of National Curriculum, testing systems and aggressive inspection, and learn instead from the astonishing success of the home-schoolers, about how we might construct a more humane, dignified, and cheaper learning system. Along with this will go a different, enhanced and more professional role for teachers.

Roland Meighan

Exploring the Margins: Lessons From Alternative Schools

Spring 1997 issue of *Theory into Practice*

A quarterly publication of The Ohio State University College of Education

"Whether they be public, private, or home ... alternative schools exist because of some dissatisfaction with conventional wisdom. It is important to study alternative schools because one way to see one style of education is by examining others." Bruce Uhrmacher

The articles describe a variety of approaches to alternative schooling including Waldorf, global, Native American, Amish Mennonite, home and progressive.

Copies may be ordered from the TIP Office:
172 Arps Hall, 1945 N. High St, Columbus, OH 43210 Tel 614 292
3407 Fax 614 688 3942 Individual copies \$10.00

"People serious about schooling must, on occasion, leave the ordinary and explore unfamiliar educational territory."

The Trailblazers ... part nine ... Daniel Greenberg

Dan Greenberg has been a central figure in the development of Sudbury Valley School since its foundation in 1968. As a full-time and then freelance teacher of the History of Science at Columbia University in the 1960s he, together with his biologist wife Hanna, became determined not to put the creativity and curiosity of their own young children at risk by sending them to conventional schools.

With an initial major financial commitment by the Greenbergs, Sudbury Valley School opened in 1968 in an old convent building of archetypal New England beauty on the outskirts of the town of Framingham, Massachusetts. For twenty years the school was a lone pioneer, but the 1990s have seen a rash of 'SVS type' schools opening across the USA, Canada, and Australia, while Sudbury Valley itself has become over-subscribed and is planning to expand from its current 200 students aged from 4-19. The school has no Principal or Head as day to day governance is in the hands of the School Meeting. Dan Greenberg has been a member of staff (not usually referred to as 'teachers') throughout.

He has a deep commitment to democracy and it is surely no accident that SVS began in New England where many towns, including Framingham (which has over 50,000 inhabitants) choose to preserve the direct democracy of the Town Meeting rather than be ruled by a representative body. He regards conventional schools as analogous to prisons, products of the fundamentally anti-democratic tendencies of the industrial revolution, which required its machine-minders to have been instructed in the basic levels of the '3R's'. True to the zeitgeist these could readily be standardised, measured and tested in schools where freedom of movement was curtailed and obedience to regimentation of behaviour and thought was required. None of which, in Greenberg's view, has very much to do with 'learning'.

While accepting that this phase was probably historically inevitable, he believes that to continue to model schools in this way is grotesquely inappropriate. With machines capable of running themselves we now need people who are self-motivated, responsible, intelligent, creative and imaginative. This requires learning how to make constructive use of freedom which is in fundamental contradiction to the incessant coercive instruction of most conventional schooling. Tellingly, he asks why it should be that so few adults have hobbies or interests that bear any relation to what they learned from their national curriculum at school?

Children, he believes, must have time, and lots of it, just to sit back and think, freed from over-exposure whether it comes from television or teachers. He believes that children of different ages must be free to mix and to learn from and with each other. Children should be free to choose the adults with whom they wish to learn - at SVS this is taken to the logical conclusion that

staff have no security of tenure but only full or part-time contracts that are reviewed annually by secret ballot of the School Meeting where the students are in the overwhelming majority. Thus at SVS there are not only no compulsory classes, but no classes at all except for those requested by students, though only one student is required to create a class.

For someone who has spent a 'career' in the institutionalised absurdities of state schools, albeit as a dedicated advocate of pupil participation in decision making, a conversation with Dan Greenberg is like taking a cold shower. His capacity to uncover and challenge one's assumptions is 'shocking' in the most beneficial sense of the word. He does not claim to have fully resolved the mystery of HOW children learn but surely he is right in insisting that it is the responsibility of adults to provide an environment that is most likely to enable it to happen. He would claim to having some understanding of what this environment is like and that SVS is well on the way to constituting it. Longitudinal studies of the life stories of its ex-students suggest that he may well be right, though for the writer, it is an open question as to whether SVS students are representative of American young people as a whole, or whether they are a self-selected group most able and likely to benefit from the SVS approach.

Returning from visits to schools like Sudbury Valley, Sands or Hadera with their confident students, one is depressed to face again the world of the over-prescriptive, subject fragmented national curriculum, adult coercion over dress and behaviour, bells and 50 minute lessons, no choice over teachers or classes, standardised testing, and ever-present pressure and fear of failure. The world desperately needs its Danny Greenbergs - its just a pity that it takes so little notice of them!

"It takes forever for people to grasp that the future is already here and that they have been living in the past."

"The public (state) schools remain one of the last bastions of autocratic rule in our society...There is in fact no rule of law."

"Our view was always that everybody in the school, aged four and up, should have an equal access to power. Many years ago, we reached that state."

"This school has a strong tradition that there exist rights belonging to every individual member of the school community, and that these have to be protected in every way possible."

Daniel Greenberg

FURTHER READING

Announcing a New School (1973) - a personal account of the early days of Sudbury Valley School by Dan Greenberg

Legacy of Trust (1992) - a study of the life stories of ex-SVS students

The Sudbury Valley School Experience (1992) - a very readable collection of essays and anecdotes

The Kingdom of Childhood (1994) - a fascinating collection of interview transcripts, recollections and reminiscences of thirty-one ex-SVS students.

All the above are in print and available from Sudbury Valley School Press, 2 Winch Street, Framingham, MA 01701, USA.

Also 'OK - You're certified' in *Education Now News and Review No.11* for my own personal account of a visit to SVS.

See also Gray, P. and Chanoff, D.(1986) 'Democratic Schooling: What happens to young people who have charge of their own education?' *American Journal of Education*, Feb 1986, pp 182-213.

Any internet search will unearth a mass of material if requested to search for Sudbury Valley School including extensive philosophical statements by Dan Greenberg.

Derry Hannam

Children for Social Change: education for citizenship of street and working children in Brazil

by Anthony Swift, price £11-95
Educational Heretics Press, 1997

This book tells the story of the love, respect, and support offered to street and working children by education activists from the Salesian College in Sacramento, a poor district of Belem, a city in northern Brazil. The children, living in appalling poverty and risking violence and death on a daily basis were encouraged to set up co-operatives to increase their income and to prepare them for work. The new supportive organisation allowed them to develop a critical awareness of the social relationships experienced in their families, streets, schools and community. They were able to question and to find answers as to why they had to work on the streets while others attended school and had careers to look forward to. The children were encouraged to reflect on their alienating existence of opportunism, aggression and criminality, and to draw lessons from it to assist in breaking the cycle of social violence.

Inspired by Padre Bruno Sechi and volunteer educationalists, all from poor backgrounds themselves, they began to run a restaurant to provide them with a small income. Then, in the context of the Brazilian military dictatorship at the time, the restaurant of small vendors chose to call itself a republic to emphasise its commitment to thoroughgoing participative democracy.

Anthony Swift traces the development of the Republic to the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first youth group starting to work with children in the streets, pointing out that the organisation must keep a true course as it adapts to the ever changing economic reality, from capitalism under military dictatorship, to the individualistic neo-liberalism of the free market era. The promotion of opportunism over community interest, and of competition over solidarity, has changed the nature of, and solutions to, the exclusion of the poor from mainstream society.

I value this book for recognising that the best educators are committed to the welfare of mankind. To paraphrase Father Camilo Tones, the Colombian revolutionary priest, 'the teacher who does not identify with each of his students is guilty of mortal sin' - or of failing them.

A reading of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* may be the only background most readers have to Brazilian education and it might have been helpful to have paid a little more attention to the Hegelian Marxist 'fear of freedom' connection and the invigorating ideas of liberation theology that clearly inform the words and actions of most of the activists mentioned in the book.

It may be inferred that Swift provides the practical manual and illustration to Freire's more abstract dialectical educational theorising. But I feel that the revolutionary task of transforming society to eliminate poverty, as well as of educating the poor, is downplayed in favour of a softer welfarism. I find far more biting Freire's comment that "*if the humanisation of the oppressed signifies subversion, so also does their freedom, hence the necessity for constant control*".

I read *Children for Social Change* on plane journeys to and from Tamil Nadu, India where I visited the nascent community college movement there. While India is different in many ways

Campaign for Learning *update*

Sir Christopher Ball (Royal Society for the Arts' Campaign for Learning) concedes that for the UK to become a learning society, a culture shift will be necessary.

However, this would be no greater than the shift witnessed in holidays: regarded at the beginning of this century as only for children and the rich, it is now accepted that governments will legislate to ensure that employers provide paid holiday leave. The analogy is clear and encouraging: culture shifts do happen - the UK can become a learning society.

Consequently, the Campaign sees itself as a catalyst, organising, for example, the colloquium '*Bringing theory to life*' in Autumn 1996. Sir Christopher Ball singles out three themes from the conference:

- Learners need to be helped to become 'callers' and not 'called' (to use a telephonic analogy)
- Learning is messy. As Jane Gear says, "*Sometimes learning is simple, linear, conscious and brief, sometimes it is deeply unconscious and extraordinarily complex*". Teaching is (usually) organised but learning is intrinsically 'messy' - its organisation lies within ourselves
- People learn best in a low threat, high challenge environment.

The following suggestions for how teachers and parents can help learners emerged from the regional seminars:

A nine-step approach to learning

1. **Create a safe environment**
2. **Remove self-limiting beliefs**
3. **Identify learning styles**
4. **Create positive outcomes** - expressed as manageable and achievable goals or chunks
5. **Identify steps to achieve outcomes**
6. **Take steps** - include application and practice - much of what we learn involves adapting to new challenges
7. **Review progress regularly** - feedback and support from mentor
8. **Achieve results** - build self-esteem - learn from mistakes in a blame free culture
9. **Start again!**

Adapted from report by Toby Greany in RSA Journal, May 1997.
For further information about the Campaign for Learning: contact;
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Tel 0171 930 5115 Fax 0171 930 8556

from Brazil, I found myself identifying unusually with the author's apparent emotional state as he wrote this fascinating book. In India, too, I found dedicated educators - some Jesuit priests not Salesians - who were deeply committed to the elevation and education of the poor. I came increasingly to recognise and understand the spirituality of the educational experience. It is a realisation, not often stressed in teacher education, that the act of educating through love and mutual respect has the power of radically transforming the mind of the teacher as well as of the learner.

Frank Reeves

Book Review

The Next Learning System

by Roland Meighan, price £7.95
Educational Heretics Press, 1997

I am delighted to review this book because Roland is a friend and someone who has inspired my thinking for a number of years. It has been published at a particularly interesting time in the history of education. We have a new Government and new initiatives (if that's not too grand a term) in the fields of education, training and work. We have over twenty years of research into the effectiveness of home based education. There are occasional indications in the media that educational heretics, such as Roland, are no longer alone.

First of all, this book offers a positive message. I am tempted to draw parallels with science fiction - in this case the Bionic Woman: "we have the knowledge, we have the technology, we can rebuild and improve". I am not intending to trivialise the book's serious and academic content; in fact Roland himself uses a fair amount of sharp wit to keep the reader amused and alert. In this respect *The Next Learning System* is a lively read which cleverly presents an incisive, not to say damning, critique of the current school system in an enjoyably jargon-free style.

Second, the messages of the book are timely. Take the recent report on the Government's new 'Welfare to Work' scheme published by the Children's Society, in which Susan Bender writes: "*Tackling disaffection in children as young as five is the key to improving school-leavers' job prospects... Work needs to be done in schools - starting with infant classes - to combat exclusion, dropping out and disaffection, if youth employment figures are to improve.*"

It seems that Susan Bender understands the negative effects of our present schooling system on our future citizens. Roland illuminates the matter further by pointing out that schools are largely, with a few honourable exceptions, totalitarian institutions and cannot prepare our young people to live in a democratic society. The logical conclusion is that we can't have a self-motivated democratic society unless we educate for democracy. The key question is, how do we do this?

The Children's Society report argues that "*the National Curriculum concentrates too much on quantifiable, graded results at the expense of equipping young people with social and technical skills*". Roland's analysis and proposals go much further. He suggests a catalogue curriculum that gives learners real choices about their education. He argues that a flexible approach to learning will, in turn, create responsible, responsive and flexible citizens. Ironically, these are the outcomes of schooling sought by most people in business and social welfare, if not by those in politics and education!

The Next Learning System contains examples of alternatives to traditional schools. In fact there are lists of projects and organisations such as The Brambles Centre, a group of families 'home educating co-operative'. There doesn't seem to any shortage of solutions to the mass schooling problem - the examples show how realistic Roland's proposals are.

The contentious bit of Roland's theory concerns the *organisation* of the next learning system. For example, his suggestion that mass schooling is no longer appropriate caused more than a little disquiet at a seminar I attended last year. No

doubt someone somewhere is still worrying about what to do with all the unemployed teachers if all schools were closed!

In truth, much of the resistance to his ideas is rooted in scepticism and fear rather than logic and reason. To counteract this negativity, Roland describes key research into learning styles and brain science and relates its findings to the practice of home educators. I found this information fascinating as in virtually all respects home educated children are academically advanced when measured against their schooled peers.

The Next Learning System is a resource for educators; it is full of ideas that could be used to construct a new, more efficient, more equal and enjoyable education system. We have the knowledge, and the technology, we can rebuild if we can just find the courage. This is an inspiring book, from an inspired thinker. Maybe the connection I felt tempted to make with the Bionic Woman wasn't such a bad idea for even as I write science fiction is becoming science fact. This genre of stories is just another example of Einstein's assertion that "*imagination is more important than knowledge*". If we all start to imagine the kind of education Roland envisions perhaps we can make it happen. I hope so.

Sharon Ginnis

The Resources Cupboard

The *Development Compass Rose* is an idea created by teachers working with The Development Education Centre. It is an excellent idea which helps students draw comparisons between different societies and is a good starting point for discussing development issues. It is based on a traditional looking compass, but the normal North, South, West, East headings are replaced with the words *Natural, Social, Economic* and *Who decides?* These headings help students to focus on the underlying commonality between what appear to be quite different situations. It can be used to explore issues in your own locality or in other parts of the world.

This pack can be used with students across the age range - it has been used successfully with 11 to 19 year olds at the school where I teach. It works well in obtaining students' responses to a video, photo packs or as preparation for an Advanced Level essay. It is to be recommended, like the Development Education Centre itself, which is like an 'Aladdin's Cave' to anyone interested in education.

The Development Compass Rose is a 34 page A4 book
with a collection of colour photographs.
£8.80 plus £1.50 p&p

from The Development Education Centre, Gillet Centre, 988
Bristol Road, Selly Oak Birmingham. B29 6LE

Forest of Dean and Wye Valley Learning Centre

Mary Ann and Paul Rose are turning ideas into reality - hard not virtual reality that is! The following extracts from their recent letter provide yet another example of the move towards alternative provision. The future of education, as predicted and promoted by *Education Now*, is already taking shape in pockets of practice such as this. We wish them well. They describe their plans as follows:

1. The Learning Centre Idea

The philosophy behind the Learning Centre is to provide a structured yet flexible approach to education based upon the needs of the individual child, with the guidance of a professional tutor working closely with each family. To meet the criteria set by the Department for Education and Employment for a school may be counter to this philosophy. Indeed, the very object i.e. to provide an alternative to schooling, may be lost. At the moment it seems that our best way forward is to establish the kind of learning centre which, although commonplace in the USA, is still scarce in Britain. According to information from *Education Now* there are about fifteen similar centres spread across the country.

Our proposal would support families who choose to take responsibility for their children's education by offering

- individual programmes of study for children and guidance for parents
- extensive teaching equipment including books, a variety of reading and maths schemes, workbooks and information technology
- a base where learning can take place in a Christian environment, and with a total of not more than 20 children in the Centre at any time
- a flexible approach to study with the option of attendance on a part-time basis
- emphasis on the responsibility of the whole family through the active co-operation of parents in encouraging learning
- regular discussions, assessment of progress and planning of future work, with the tutor
- opportunities for extension studies in languages, sport, music and the arts
- a holistic approach to education with opportunity for social interaction between children and adults in the Centre, leisure activities and an emphasis on the development of skills enabling children to study by themselves.

2. Tutoring

As a trained and experienced teacher, I would take responsibility for the majority of tutoring at the Centre. My B.Ed training covered the Middle Years (8-13 yrs). Since 1979 I have taught in secondary, junior and infant schools, held positions of responsibility for language development and music, worked in the Gloucestershire Centre for Environmental Education and (since the birth of my two children) worked part-time in Special Educational Needs and on Supply. My interests include gardening, walking, arts and crafts. I hold the ASA Teacher's Certificate for Swimming.

My husband, Paul, and I would offer basic tuition in several instruments. Paul works in the information technology industry and will be happy to develop educational software and give instruction in basic computing skills. Specialist subjects like languages would be bought in by using tutors from outside the Centre. We intend to take advantage of the group rates and expertise available at local sports facilities and places of interest.

Parents would be expected to help at the Centre on a rota basis, and of course any skills which they could contribute would be warmly welcomed!

3. The Premises

At the time of writing an old village school is for sale nearby. The accommodation would be ideal, providing enough space for a home for our family and a separate area for the Learning Centre in three or four rooms with access to a secure garden. Clearly, the Centre would need to pay for itself, but we intend to keep costs to the minimum. As tutors, neither Paul nor I would take a salary, so fees are to be calculated on the basis of covering the running costs and the repayment of a loan for the Centre.

From our estimations so far, we expect fees to be no more, and in some cases considerably less, than those charged by other private educational establishments locally, with no 'hidden' costs.

Mary Ann is keen to hear from anyone interested in the project: "the more interest we have, the greater our chance of success". She and Paul can be contacted on 01594 861107.

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(for USA, \$35 including airmail Post)**

© Education Now Publishing Co-operative Limited 1997.
113 Arundel Drive, Bramcote Hills, Nottingham NG9 3FQ

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Printed by Mastaprint

Disciplined teachers, disciplined children

This is the second *News and Review Supplement* to feature outcomes from the major conference **Democratic Discipline, Democratic Lives**, organised by *Education Now* and held at the Co-operative College earlier this year. First, extracts from Dr. Audrey Osler's opening address ...

* * * * *

I'm going to begin with some quotations from children who attend schools in two West Midlands cities:

"Give pupils more encouragement, talk to them." (Year 6)

"Teachers should care more." (Year 6)

"If teachers can respect pupils as humans, then pupils will take note of what the teachers are saying." (Year 10)

"Create a counselling club and train pupils to be the counsellors, because most find it hard to talk to teachers about their problems." (Year 10)

"They should ask each child what they think, how they feel ... to show they care for them and to help them with any problem they have." (Year 9)

I imagine that none of us would have any problems with the values that lie behind what these young people are saying. They are asking for support, for encouragement and for respect. They are asking to be listened to and are making practical suggestions about how conflicts might be resolved peacefully. They show an interest in justice and fairness, to be achieved through a judicial process. They are, in effect, asking to participate more fully in school development. The concerns which these pupils are raising have attracted support at the highest international level, and we can turn to international agreements to find both a framework and support for our work in promoting children's participation in school governance.

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

To illustrate this point I would like to remind you of some key points from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to which the UK is, of course, a signatory. Children's rights, as covered in the Convention, have been categorised as the 3Ps: **Protection, Provision and Participation**.

Within the Convention children have the right to express their views and to receive appropriate information and education to enable them to participate in decisions about their own lives and futures. Effectively, children have citizenship rights:

Article 29: aims of education

- *the duty of the government to direct education at developing the child's fullest personality and talents and promoting respect for human rights and fundamental*

freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations

- *the duty to ensure that education encourages respect for the child's parents, own cultural identity, language and values, own national values and those of others*
- *the duty to prepare the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of the sexes, and friendship among all peoples*
- *the duty to ensure that education encourages respect for the natural environment*

This article makes it clear that we have a responsibility not only to develop "*the child's fullest personality and talents*" (a phrase similar to this appears in the aims of so many schools), but that we also have a duty to promote "*respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms*".

The clause relating to "*responsible life in a free society*" implies a pedagogy which encourages the development of participative skills that will enable the child to take their place within a democratic society. The Convention is, of course, the most widely signed piece of human rights legislation ever, ratified now by all but three states world-wide.

UN Commission on Global Governance

This Commission published its report in 1995 to mark the 50th anniversary of the United Nations. It gives a set of guidelines which can be used to assess the development of human rights and democracy in schools. It concluded:

"We believe that the world's arrangement for the conduct of its affairs must be underpinned by certain common values. Ultimately, no organisation will work and no law upheld unless they rest on a foundation made strong by shared values. These values must be informed by a sense of common responsibility for both present and future generations."

The Commission proposes a global ethic expressed as a set of rights and responsibilities:

The rights of all people to

- a secure life
- equitable treatment
- an opportunity to earn a fair living and provide for their own welfare
- the definition and preservation of their differences through peaceful means
- participation in governance at all levels
- free and fair petition for the redress of gross injustices
- equal access to information
- equal access to global commons.

At the same time all people share a responsibility to

- contribute to the common good
- consider the impact of their actions on the security and welfare of others
- promote equity, including gender equity
- protect the interests of future generations by pursuing sustainable development and safeguarding the global commons
- preserve humanity's cultural and intellectual heritage
- be active participants in governance
- work to eliminate corruption.

These could be turned into a checklist for democratic school practice. Let me give one or two examples.

1. The right to a secure life. The institution is responsible for the security of its members. This may mean supplying measures which limit freedoms. Security is both physical and psychological. In either case it is a question of feeling safe. Aggressive behaviour, whether by staff or pupils, causes feelings of insecurity.

What measures does the school take to make sure all its members feel secure? Are there mechanisms for noting feelings of insecurity? How do members voice their concerns? What procedures are in place to take action when staff or students report insecurity?

2. Participation in governance at all levels. This is a question for both staff and for pupils and their parents. In many countries schools councils and year councils are statutory requirements. Participation is more likely to be perceived as worthwhile and genuine if the decisions concern the allocation of real resources. This implies that the committee, council or co-operative has some funds to spend.

Does the school have formalised pupil participation? What priority is given to ensuring the efficacy of structures? Does the system for electing delegates ensure equal chances for all pupils without discrimination? How can this be achieved? What resources are allocated by the decision of pupils?

3. The right to free and fair petition for the redress of gross grievances. It is to be hoped that schools will apply standards which are as high as in other judicial systems. Children, as well as adults, have a right to equality before the law.

If a member of the school staff, or a pupil, or a parent, feels that injustice has been done, are the steps for appeal made widely known? Are they used?

4. The responsibility to contribute to the common good. This active obligation to work to further the aims of the community presupposes that the aims are made known and that they are shared. That is, each member feels ownership of the goals of the institution. The aims will need to be re-visited periodically to take into account changing circumstances and changing cohorts of students and to allow new members of the community to contribute to the process of re-formation.

5. The responsibility to promote equity, including gender equity. In view of the right to equitable treatment, the institution is obliged to have policies that help to ensure equity. At the same time individuals have the responsibility to do their best to promote the policies. At minimum that implies that all staff and students are familiar with equal opportunities issues and the policies that derive from them.

6. The responsibility to be active participants in governance. Institutions are obliged to provide structures for participation.

Individuals have a responsibility to be involved. Involvement can take many forms, and at its most basic may simply imply voting for a representative.

The relationship between school discipline and human rights

I would like to return to the West Midlands primary and secondary pupils whose words I began with. Their views were canvassed as part of a research project looking at 'good practice' on school exclusions, a project conducted on behalf of the UK Commission for Racial Equality. We asked children to say what they thought would improve discipline in schools.

They suggested that teachers should

- listen to pupils
- take trouble to sort out the underlying causes of disputes instead of just dealing with the immediate effects of violent behaviour
- recognise bullying, racial and sexual name-calling and abuse as real problems among pupils
- care more
- investigate before they punish
- show respect for all pupils.

The school management/head teachers should

- find ways of canvassing pupils views through suggestion boxes, questionnaires, assemblies, school councils, pupil newspapers
- invite parents to attend lessons and experience school for themselves
- train pupils in non-violent conflict resolution
- train pupils as counsellors
- discipline racist teachers
- ensure pupil representation on the board of governors.

Their answers reveal that they see discipline as closely related to teacher-pupil relationships, and school structures which either allow them to participate, or prevent them from participating, and to a school ethos which seeks out their viewpoints, or which excludes them from the decision-making process. Their responses are important because they were not being asked how the school might develop more democratic structures, but simply how school might promote better discipline. Overall, they were concerned that school should be a more just place, a more democratic place.

The evidence from these young people suggests that even those who have relatively little direct exposure to democratic participation are able to recognise its advantages. They clearly make the link between participation, good discipline, justice and fairness.

The evidence suggests that teachers intent on introducing greater democracy at school would encounter considerable pupil support.

* * * * *

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Students refuse to go home

We attended the Conference on Tuesday 13 May 1997. This was as a result of two student bursaries being offered to students at Park Hall School. Neither of us had been to a conference before and we were picked from a group of 30 sociology students. All our names were put into a hat and we were the lucky ones! Quite democratic and appropriate for a conference entitled '*Democratic Discipline, Democratic Lives: educating citizens for a changing world*'.

The programme started at 9:30 with a **keynote address** by Professor Clive Harber. He started off by talking about the '*Changing World and Changing the World: education for democracy and non-violent South Africa*.' The main thing that we can remember from his speech was that he made people empathise with the situation and touched all our hearts. Although the main purpose was to shock and to make us aware of the violence experienced by teachers and pupils in South African schools, he also managed to go one step further and made us feel and really understand what the people were going through. This speech really did make us think. It was pitched at the right level for a varied audience and was very thought provoking, making a lasting impression.

After this talk we were assigned to a base group to discuss our ideas and responses to the talk. In smaller groups we also talked about the key issue of democracy in the classroom and how it differs from society to society. One of us was in a group with a professor and a national student representative from Denmark, the other with a university lecturer and an African post-graduate student. They could have made us feel awkward, but they seemed really interested in our point of view and we did a lot of the talking. We felt our contributions were valued and important. Throughout the conference we met various students from different types of schools such as the Flexi College, state and public schools. There were students from Denmark, Israel, Japan and England who all had different experiences to share and they all said how much they had enjoyed the conference.

While at the conference we were given the choice of which **workshops** to attend. We decided to go to one held by Derry Hannam on **schools councils**. This gave us all a platform to share our own experiences of a year council with others. Of particular interest was an example from Wolverhampton Grammar School where they experience participation through an active schools council. Their Head teacher also attends every meeting which gives the Council real status and clout! The Danish students also held a workshop that supplied us with information about the effects of their councils on education in Denmark.

The conference opened our minds to the possibilities of democracy. We realised that it is possible to make a difference. On our return to Park Hall School the next day, we told the year council about our experiences such as how a council should look at the real issues like our education and what happens in the classroom and how to improve our own learning experiences. It shouldn't just

discuss the disco and the state of the toilets. Everyone was flabbergasted at our enthusiasm, but it had the desired effect. Our Assistant Head of Year, Mr Crump, raised the points we had made at the Head of Years meeting that evening, namely that we wanted a whole school council and representation on school committees. Amazingly we haven't been ignored, but listened to. **It looks like we will have our schools council next year and staff are already discussing student participation on the committees** like the charity committee. All this as a result of attending a conference on Democratic Education.

In conclusion, the conference was a fascinating experience. The Co-operative College was a wonderful place. We had never been to a place like this before. What a lovely environment to work in. When it was time to leave, at 4pm, we persuaded our teacher to stay until the end. The conversation went something like "*Well you're the teacher. If you want us to go we will, but we're really enjoying ourselves.*" How could she refuse? We arrived home after 11pm! We all had an excellent day.

Jennifer McCluskey and John Cross aged 15

Nine hour train journey worthwhile !

We (me, Neill Ghosh and Christopher Greenfield) attended the Conference on the 13th, after a long journey which started at Sidcot at 5.45 am !

First of all, we joined our '**Base Group**' meeting in which about ten of us, including teachers, students and Civil Servants from South Africa, discussed the **speech** which had been given by Professor Clive Harber from Durban. Our base group split up into three small groups, each of them discussing the speech from different points of view. The group I was in compared the violence and suppressed system of South Africa to the systems in Britain and other developed countries.

After lunch, there was a wide range of **workshops** for us to join. I joined '**A Democratic Classroom**' organised by a Sociology teacher Lesley Browne from a school in Birmingham. She introduced her way of teaching her 'A' level class. She teaches 'A' level Sociology in a most democratic and unique way. Before the students begin the course, they are given the opportunity to decide the style of learning and teaching to be adopted. **One** possibility is a **traditional** course where the teacher has the authority.

The **second** possibility is a **consultative model**, whereby the tutor retains control over a proportion of the sessions but the students choose what they would like to do for the rest of the sessions. The students decide how much control the teacher possesses.

The **third** option is the **most democratic** system in which the students discuss and organise their own timetable and the whole course. The students decide their programme, using the teacher as a resource and facilitator. The students who choose this option often invite speakers

to the class and organise their own presentations or coursework as well as independent work.

The last option is an **autonomous study** programme using the resources and study folders available. The students who prefer to work on their own or those who have a particular interest in a particular subject tend to choose this method of learning. After deciding the method of learning adopted, the students draw up a contract for the whole class including the teacher. Lesley told us that the democratic way of teaching is very time consuming but very worthwhile. She had evidence of the positive outcomes from the results of the 'A' levels. Democratic responsibility, as opposed to sitting back and receiving, means that the students have to change - to contribute and participate.

It is surely much easier for the teachers to suppress the students with power in the class rather than in the democratic teaching method which requires much patience, time, co-operation from the students and effort. However, I believe the key success of it all is *the development of transferable skills*, which was often seen in the democratic ways of teaching.

I have received many ideas from different people with different backgrounds and returned some of my own ideas and experiences to others. I saw much determination and confidence in every individual who attended the Conference to support democracy in education and the society. So, after all, the nine-hour train journey to Loughborough and back was worthwhile!

Fumi Ide

Fumi is a Lower Sixth Student at Sidcot School, North Somerset

Dramatic democracy

What follows are some exploratory thoughts on Drama and Democracy which arose from the Drama Workshop at the *'Democratic Discipline, Democratic Lives'* conference in May.

I want to propose that democracy has richer and deeper meanings than many customarily assign to it. Rather than being viewed as the occasional opportunity to vote, I feel it could be about the way we engage with one another, on a day to day basis, to shape society in a spirit of openness and respect. I suggest that the qualities needed for us to work towards a more fulfilling democracy are learnt in a variety of ways and contexts, participation in Drama being particularly effective.

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." Shakespeare

"The self is a great actor." Indian saying

These statements suggest that even before becoming involved in a Drama group we are involved in our own 'drama'. We are taking part, at all times, in a continuous improvisation, our actions linked to our feelings and emotions. From birth we are learning about our inner world, our relationship with others and our relationship with the world in which we find ourselves. Involvement with drama provides opportunities to explore, in a social context, our own and our society's 'dramas' and to examine the quality of our engagement with the world.

During a Drama session we may participate in a number of ways

1. We participate 'inside ourselves', bringing our own internal democracy to the group.
2. We participate out of role (in role as ourselves) discussing, negotiating, imagining, devising, etc..
3. We participate in role, either experimentally through

improvisation or through the discipline of script. We play with and shape realities for participants to feel, if there is no audience, or for an audience to experience.

4. As an audience we view and become involved with other realities. We watch others and we watch ourselves watching.

Drama uses a wide range of approaches, conventions and techniques. It caters for many learning styles and has many learning outcomes. The following statements were made by 15/16 year-old students after the completion of a play which marked the end of their 18 month GCSE course. They indicate areas of learning of particular relevance to participation in democracy in its fullest sense.

"I have learnt a lot whilst doing the play and going to rehearsals such as thinking of other people's needs before my own, having respect for myself and others. Also if something is bothering me, to keep a straight head and think positive. At the end of the day limits only exist in the mind."

"I realise now it's not easy to have a great team spirit like we did but I feel we supported each other really well and that was the key to success. I have through the play discovered what my class mates are like under pressure, and how they react to different circumstances. I've found there is a lot more to people than first meets the eye, and that you can't judge people from first appearances. I've learnt how to support my team mates beneficially and detected the feeling of being supported. It's made me discover myself and find an opposite side to myself".

"I've learnt that drama is not only fun but it is hard work but at the end you build up confidence and feel proud, happy and great about yourself."

"We were all very nervous before going on stage but overcame our nerves by moral support. If somebody said they felt terrible, about ten different members of the cast would say reassuring things to them."

"I can speak up now and say what I think."

The following are some of the reasons why I feel participation in Drama can enable individuals to contribute more effectively to democratic processes and society

- **Group work in Drama can nurture respect and care for self and others.**
- **Group work in Drama invites a win/win approach enabling the development of power with people rather than power over people.**
- **Drama approaches develop imagination, adaptability and risk taking.**
- **Drama facilitates the development of skills and approaches needed for participation in groups and societies.**
- **Drama explores a wide range of human experience, including the area of feeling and emotion.**
- **Drama as a medium is constantly shifting, changing and adapting like society and democracy. New ideas are resulting in new theatre forms e.g. Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre.**

In conclusion, work in Drama helps us gain, in a group context, understanding and awareness of ourselves, of others and our world. These qualities are, I feel, essential to the spirit of an open and democratic society.

Josh Gifford

