

# Education and the evolutionary crisis

**The acrimonious debate that continues to rage about how our nation should educate the next generation seems to herald the need for a radical re-examination of all that we believe about learning, schooling and education in a post-modern world. In *The End of Education* (1997), Neil Postman has observed that what education desperately lacks as we prepare for life in the third millennium, is a purpose story. Our own nation's preoccupation seems to be focused on beating other countries and promoting shame as the psychological spur to creativity and achievement.**

This continuing dispute is perhaps an indication that we have entered an evolutionary crisis in human affairs, a crisis which now presents our species with the most significant challenge in its history. Despite a century of unrelenting development we seem to have created for ourselves a series of nightmare paradoxes. While we now have the capability to produce adequate food for every man, woman and child on the planet, a large proportion of the population is constantly close to starvation. While we can traverse the world by aeroplane in a matter of hours, the speed of traffic in many of our largest cities is no faster than it was a thousand years ago, and despite the adoption of universal schooling, few countries in the world are happy with the nature of their children's learning.

When faced with a significant challenge to its survival, a species has a stark choice - continue as usual in the belief that the problem will go away or can be changed, or adapt to the new circumstances which now prevail. Most of us now experience complexity, ambiguity, uncertainty and confusion as never before in our lives. Perhaps it is such a choice that we now face. The combined pressures of these uncomfortable phenomena in a turbulent and fast changing world are producing stress at unprecedented levels. Qualifications, exam success and length of formal education seem to be of little relevance - even the highly literate and numerate among us have found ourselves in the painful clutches of unmanageable workloads and unrelenting pressures, feeling guilty about what we have not yet done and frustrated and ashamed of our sometimes desperate efforts to get on top of things. Whatever our formal educational achievements, we seem not to be coping well. Perhaps the chilling truth is that we have not been educated for the world we have inherited, but for one that has already passed.

Fortunately, as human beings we come into life with enormous reservoirs of imagination, creativity and ingenuity. It is with these adaptive capabilities in mind that the curriculum of the early years has been developed. Our best nursery classrooms demonstrate how this adaptive intelligence and capability can be nourished and effectively developed. Later in the schooling system we abandon this vital foundation and settle for a narrow

regime of cognitive development, with precise targets and defined standards. The adaptive intelligence we are born with is thwarted.

It is now questionable whether state directed education through the present schooling arrangements can be sustained for much longer. As the curriculum narrows and natural learning is further stifled, the more intellectually and creatively adventurous will begin to break away, using new learning tools and technologies to provide the education which instinctively they know they are going to need. Such breaking away has long been a feature of the schooling process, with the deeply disillusioned taking to the street corners with nowhere else they feel they can go or are wanted; and the more cautious staying within the system but struggling to create their own learning pathways into the future.

As computer technology continues to develop, offering increasingly sophisticated and user friendly alternatives to collective learning in classrooms, the locus of control in education may quite rapidly slip away from the state and the school, and be taken up by the learners themselves. The computer and its attendant technologies may well help to bring about the shift from state directed schooling to learner directed education.

Perhaps those who currently hold political power do not have the will to exercise it in the face of this evolutionary crisis. Knowing perhaps that they possess neither the adaptive capability, nor the political will to bring about fundamental change in their own lifetimes, they lose the sense of survival urgency, preferring the smaller scale politics of adjustment and shifts in emphasis, presented with a radical rhetoric. The crisis of fast and accelerating change means that many different futures now arrive within each generation. Perhaps those now in and beyond their middle years do not have the survival instincts to abandon inherited traditions and entrenched positions. 'The Titanic' may truly be a film for our times.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for us as educators is to keep the spirit of educational development alive as we struggle to manage competing pressures and expectations. It is interesting that in the search for international comparisons to inspire us, our politicians singled out performance levels on the basic skills as the hallmark of real progress. Perhaps they would have been wiser to look to Norway where there has been a radical rethink

of the purpose story. In 1994 the Norwegian Department of education declared six main goals for schooling:

1. a person searching for meaning
2. a creative person
3. a working person
4. an enlightened person
5. a co-operating person
6. an environmentally friendly person

What a stunning contrast there is between this life enhancing recipe for learning and our own government's utilitarian and low aiming declarations. In our own country we seem doomed to be locked in an unnecessary dispute between the beliefs of the educators and the aspirations of politicians. The learners themselves, excluded from the developmental process look on with bemused resignation seeking their own counsel and building their own values. Yet it is the young learners who eventually will force radical change. Truancy may yet be the saviour of the nation. For by staying at home and pursuing National Curriculum targets with on-line tutor support, children will not only be able to learn with their preferred style they will be able to do it at their own pace and freed from the often inhibiting social and psychological pressures that for many children make learning in crowded and busy classrooms so difficult and frustrating'. At the same time, they will be able to pursue the life curriculum so feared and despised by those with power. In *Vanguard Management* (1992), David Orr observed:

*"Education in the modern world was designed to further the conquest of nature and the industrialisation of the planet. It tended to produce unbalanced, under dimensioned people tailored to fit the modern economy. Post modern education must have a different agenda, one designed to heal, connect, liberate, empower, create and celebrate. Post-modern education must be life centred."*

Perhaps the most radical and most successful educational innovation this century has been the creation of the Open University. Against all the odds and received wisdom it defied the nostrums about learning at degree level - that it required previous qualifications, attendance at an institution, dependence on teachers and face to face tuition. It says something about our nations attitudes about education that it cannot decide whether the Open University is a triumph or an embarrassment. It is now no longer safe to assume that what is true for adult learners is not true for children. Most of a child's learning is managed by itself using its powers of observation, deduction, imagination, ingenuity, intuition and ambition. We may find that when presented with opportunity, first rate materials, belief in their life given powers of self direction and lots of encouragement, young people will demonstrate in some abundance their awesome intellectual power, their intrinsic ingenuity and creativity and their sheer yearning to learn. Even our young children manage information technology with an ease and a panache that has puzzled their parents and teachers.

In the past the emphasis was on accumulation, gathering information and knowledge almost for its own sake. In the future it will be ingenuity, vision, imagination and enterprise that will characterise the well educated, for as Eric Hoffer says:

*"In a time of drastic change it is the learners who inherit the future, the learned find themselves in a world that no longer exists."*

Patrick Whitaker  
Educational Consultant and writer

## Steve - A Story of Home Education

by Elizabeth James ISBN 090-7616-631  
published by Able Children (Pullen Publications) Ltd  
13 Station Road, Knebworth, Herts. at £4-95

In the musical *'Fiddler on the Roof'* a villager asks the rabbi of Anatevka if there is a special blessing for the Tsar. By way of reply the rabbi intones, *"The Lord bless and keep the Tsar - far away from us ..."* I feel the same about Mr. Woodhead, which is why I am glad to see this book appear. The time is coming when homeschoolers will be so numerous that someone will decide that the time has come to inspect them. I do not delude myself that one book about a successful home education will cut much ice when the 'professionals' start casting about for Assessment Procedures to use on home-schoolers, but it might be the first of many, and the beginning of a serious attempt to describe in detail how children educated out of school do, in fact, come through the experience well prepared for adult life.

*'Steve - A Story of Home Education'* could be very useful to anyone who is thinking about taking their children out of school, but hesitates to embark on a journey which seems to have no map and no milestones. Elizabeth James tells the story of her son's life out of school without triumphalism or philosophical longueurs, setting out the important areas of adult concern in short, accessible chapters. She does not try to tell other parents how to do it. Indeed, there is very little of 'methods' and 'approaches' in the book: Steve learns in his own way, pursues his own goals in his own time. His parents appear to have succeeded in supporting him without ceaselessly reminding him of their (entirely honourable) worry about the kind of young man he might be turning into. Yet Steve, who contributes to the book in his own words, seems to be mature and well equipped to handle adult life.

Every child is an individual, and no book can accommodate all the paths a person may take towards enlightenment, so it is perhaps natural that some readers will find their situation far removed from Mrs. James'. Steve is 'gifted' and he has access to a wide range of tutorial help. Mrs. James has resources not available to all parents. It would be wrong, however, to assume that Steve and his mother are a fortunate exception to a more general rule which holds that 'ordinary' parents are not 'clever' enough to educate their children. The core of this book is not the number of GCSEs and the like Steve managed to obtain, but rather how his attitude to the challenges he faced changed for the better when he left school: how he tackled French, which his school teachers said he was 'no good at', and gained a Grade A; how his Latin teacher said *"I've never taught anyone like him"*; and how, when asked how he was going to adapt to Sixth Form College entrance - his choice - said, *"Look, I know it's going to be difficult, but it's something that just has to be done!"*

As well as a clear portrayal of her work with her son, Mrs James gives a large and serviceable list of important addresses and factual information about the business of home-schooling, (worth the money for that alone), as it reminds us that home education need not mean isolation from any kind of systematic tuition, still less from the normal range of public examinations. Read this book, then, not as a text-book or a source of authority for what you may be intending to do yourself. Rather, let it convince you that parents - any parents - who love and respect their children can safely withdraw them from school and trust them to develop into sociable, independently-minded adults.

Chris. Shute  
Former teacher, presently writer on Education

## Book Review

## Can the Monkey Let Go of the Nuts?

**Do education policy makers have the insight and imagination to shift from their present position and learn from the experience of some successful commercial organisations?** In *News and Review*, Issue 15, Sharon Ginnis describes a visit to the Bulmers Staff Learning Centre in Hereford. A crucial feature of the centre is that staff *"access the education and training they want and need. The company is convinced that employees will, of their own accord, seek training to do their jobs better"*. This puts me in mind of two contrasting understandings of learning, one implied in Sharon's account, and another, very different one, being used by those who are influencing schooling in this country. I would like to explore the contrast briefly.

Bulmers is a commercial organisation and so has to achieve profit. It is safe to assume that their approach with the learning centre would not survive if Bulmers were not confident that it was having a positive influence on their survival in a competitive environment. And Sharon confirms that this is so: *"Staff use its resources effectively and the company has seen a rise in productivity, believed to be a direct result of the increased interest in education and training"*. There are other examples from industry of companies recognising not only that ordinary individuals generally have a desire to learn and become better at what they do but also that learning individuals are productive people; the kind you want in your work force.

Rover cars offers one such story (Burnes, B. (1996) *Managing Change* (2nd ed) Pitman). Until about 1986 the Rover group's priorities had been predictable ones: profits, products, procedures and people in that order. In 1986 a new chairman, Graham Day, was appointed and his approach was to completely reverse the list of priorities; now people were to come first followed by products, procedures and profits. Clearly profits were still crucial but the company began recognising that outstanding products would be a result of developing outstanding people. Rover began an assisted learning scheme with every employee provided with £100 a year to spend on personal development. One senior manager put it this way: *"We want to change the emphasis from training - people having something done to them, to learning - people doing something for themselves"*. Judging from Rover's success of the last ten years, a 'learning company' is a successful one.

Here then are two examples of organisations which have not only survived but have succeeded in a strongly competitive environment. Both organisations believe that a large part of their success is based on the development of a work force of increasingly confident learners, and moreover, **learning has to do with giving individuals the resources they want and need to learn with as they want and need them**. Unfortunately, those developing UK education policy at government level do not appear to have any understanding of how effective it can be to give individuals responsibility for their own learning.

I am reminded of events at a conference dinner I attended about six years ago. The conference was organised by the government funded project 'Enterprise Awareness in Teacher

*Education'*; an initiative intended to introduce a positive view of a market economy to student teachers. There was no main speaker, rather a number of guests were asked to speak from their tables for just five or ten minutes. What has stayed in my mind is a senior representative of the Department of Trade and Industry giving a call for schools to find ways of developing the kind of flexible, confident learners which presumably companies like Bulmers and Rover are trying to develop themselves. He was followed by a senior civil servant from the Department of Education and Science, (now DfEE) explaining that for too long the emphasis had been on the individual, we now needed to refocus on the content of the curriculum and what children should be required to learn. I was surprised, first by two such contradictory messages coming from representatives of the same government, and then second, by the aggressively regressive nature of the comments from the representative of the DES. These comments were shocking not just because they cut right across the realities of what I know learners need but because they flew in the face of hard information from representatives of industry about what U.K. PLC actually needed to survive.

The Conservative government was unable to entertain the kinds of freedoms necessary to create genuine learning communities because of both its deep seated need for control and an equally deep seated sense of education as a mechanistic process; get schools to do the right things to children and then the right kind of people, and society, will eventually come out. Unfortunately, the present government seems caught with its hands in those same two pots and like the monkey who couldn't get his hand and the nut out at the same time, it will have to learn to let go before we see the learning society we've so far only heard about.

The monkey seems currently to be listening to the wrong advisers, however. Both Ofsted and the DFEE, for example, are being strongly influenced by the findings of those working in what is termed School Effectiveness Research (SER). SER takes a severely mechanistic line; learning is defined in terms of prespecified and standardised outcomes, teaching is equated with efficient organisation, structured lessons and academic emphasis. Describing some of his own recent SER work Professor David Reynolds of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne identifies a number of factors as potentially important in creating school effectiveness. They include:

- *parental involvement ... to ensure that in cases of difficulty, the parents will, if it is appropriate to do so, support the school against the child;*
- *academic push or academic 'press' ... entering a high proportion of pupils for public examination to ensure they remain 'hooked' in their final years.*

There has been considerable criticism of SER approaches. One critic, Professor John Elliott of the University of East Anglia, for many years involved in education research but not in SER, recently published a strong critique of the values underpinning this work. He wrote: *"I can't imagine a highly reductionist research paradigm, which searches for a 'mechanism of*

*effectiveness' amongst all this complexity, having much of a future". And he questioned the future of schools as SER workers see them: "They (schools) may have to reconstruct their role in society as the co-ordinating centres of electronically based learning systems and networks which are flexible and open to inputs from learners faced with the task of constructing their own futures".*

It is crucial that groups like *Education Now* continue to outline a strong and coherent alternative value base for educational provision. There is much which education policy makers could learn from the enlightened self-interest of organisations such as Bulmers and Rover. Creating effective learning environments is a matter of survival for them, they have a very strong incentive to get it right! The monkey has to be smart enough, and brave enough, however, to let go of the nuts.

*Kevin Holloway, University College Bretton Hall*

## New New York

Three years ago New York City's *Julia Richman High School* with 3,000 students was closed down. Michelle Fine, Professor of Social Psychology at City University, New York, explained some of the background: *"For the past 15 years there has been tremendous dissatisfaction from students and teachers and parents with large neighbourhood high schools. Everyone knew they were not working."*

Within three months, six new high schools were opened as a federation of small schools, the new *Julia Richman Education Complex*. An elementary school is to be added. Other small schools are being developed in nearby renovated office buildings - a bit like the *East Midlands Flexi College* which operates in office premises in Burton-on-Trent.

The time-scale is important. *Education Now* is often asked how long it would take to move to a new modern, flexible, democratic and personalised leaning system. Instead of the expected answer of ten years, they get replies of 'three months to one year'. If New York can 'mini-school' in three months we can move to flexi-education just as quickly.

*"It's the same kids in the same building,"* said Heather Lewis, co-director of the *Centre for Collaborative Education*, an association of New York City small public schools. *"When the building re-opened, the modern weapons scanner ordered for the old school was put away in a closet. That's an indicator of the change that can happen."*

The size of an effective high school is now taken to be 300 to 500 students in New York. But changing over does not cost much money and may even be managed within the existing budget. Politicians were won over on this point when they finally accepted that the old system was obsolete.

Deborah Meier is a pioneer in the smaller schools' movement in New York City. She sees large schools as imposing anonymity: *"No-one can learn responsibility towards others when those 'others' are anonymous."*

Existing large school buildings would seem to be a barrier to such changes, but the policy-makers came to see that several schools can inhabit a large school much in the same way that

several enterprises can operate within one large office building. In New York District Four, 50 schools now share 19 buildings.

Other cities are following New York's example: Seattle, Pasadena, and San Francisco, whilst Chicago now has 60 small schools, 18 of them started this year. Michael Klonsky, co-director of the *Small Schools Workshop* at the University of Illinois, Chicago reported: *"The research shows that if you create any kind of more intimate learning environment, where kids become more visible, that's the key. Regardless of what it is called, building a small community is the key."* Some critics suggest that small is not the only issue. A set of conditions must be in place for learner-friendly environments to flourish. Our own Clive Harber made this the subject of his book *Small Schools and Democratic Practice*, when he pointed out that small can be extremely ugly if it is not democratic in values and participative in organisation. Smallness increases the likelihood of democratic practice but does not guarantee it.

Report abstracted from *Options in Learning* No.17 from the Alliance for Parental Involvement in Education, USA.

## Book Review

### Finding Voices, Making Choices: creativity for social change

edited by **Mark Webster**, price £9.95

Educational Heretics Press, 1997

**A thought-provoking book, this, which shows creativity at work in unusual places and discusses the significant part that the Arts can play in vitalising impoverished urban communities.**

The authors are all in the Community Arts Movement, which could be described as a form of community work that aims to help people help themselves through involvement in the Arts. Their starting point is that everyone is creative, everyone is an artist. But neither schools nor arts institutions encourage much participation in the Arts. In fact the opposite tends to be the case: people are made into passive *consumers* of art, and creativity is stifled.

When a group of workers, including at least one artist or 'arts worker', goes into a depressed housing estate (for example), ordinary people are invited and encouraged to become involved in activities ranging from singing in a Gospel choir to making a video or putting on a play. Through participation in such projects, local people are able to develop a sense of their own worth, learn about possibilities for change, maybe even gain enough confidence to participate in their community.

A significant part of the book tells the story of how 'the Community Arts process' has enabled people in actual communities to improve the quality of their lives. In one area, relationships improved as a result of using drama to explore such themes as racism and domestic violence. In another, a partnership between local people and the council led to the improvement of the buildings around the old village Green, in a project called *'Dreaming the Green'*. More of this would have been welcome.

Alongside these case studies the authors provide a theoretical basis for Community Arts work and attempt to answer some awkward questions. How do you avoid the charge that you are just a bunch of *"arty parachutists"* dropping in and moving out again? Do you value *process* (getting people involved), above *outcome* (a finished, professional looking performance or

product)? When money is provided by government agencies, do you dare "*bite the hand that feeds you*"?

The book is nicely produced, the introduction sets the scene effectively and there is a useful further information section. The authors manage to avoid too much jargon, not easy when writing about social/community work. There is a useful discussion about the fickleness of the "*Funding Fairy*" in the last two chapters. Sadly, despite careful proof reading, the digital printing system introduced last minute textual errors which necessitated an errata slip.

But the last thing I would want to do is end on a sour note. The book provides a lively introduction to a subject that fits well into the *Educational Heretics Press* series. After all, the root meaning of *heresy* is choosing for yourself - in deviance of authority. The title of this book, therefore, goes to the heart of the matter: find your voice, and gain the confidence to choose for yourself.

*John Hort, formerly Lecturer in Social Work  
Nottingham Trent University*

### **Dyslexia, voice-driven computers and literacy**

I would like to welcome our new dyslexic production editor, Geoff Harrison, by writing about dyslexia.

When I was training teachers a few years ago, I used to invite trainee teachers to visit home-educating families to see what they might learn from such an experience. One visited the Harrison family where all four children, two boys and two girls, had been clinically diagnosed as dyslexic, in varying degrees of severity.

The trainee teacher herself had a first-class honours degree from Oxford. Yet in her written evaluation of her day spent with the family she wrote that **these dyslexic children made her feel completely uneducated**. How could this be? She would be described conventionally as highly educated because she was highly literate.

She wrote that for every academic skill she possessed, they had three or four practical skills. They could, amongst other things, grow their own food, make their own clothes, cook and bake, keep bees, dismantle and rebuild cars and service them, put a roof on a house, build walls, install central heating systems, milk goats, and keep hens. They could also talk to her about her political studies of pressure groups because they were active in groups such as *Friends of the Earth*.

Geoff and Iris had adopted an unusual approach to the dyslexia of their children. It was '*accentuate the positive and ignore the negative*'. They had a learning approach that concentrated on activities that children could do with success and left aside reading and writing to develop later.

Years later, all are competent, composed and flexible adults whose company is most agreeable. They can turn their hands to a variety of ways of earning money. They can all cope with reading and writing with varying degrees of achievement. One is fluent, and three are competent, despite a warning from the Aston University Unit that one, possibly two, might never learn to read.

### **Voice-driven computers to the rescue!**

Recent technology has, however, come to the aid of many dyslexic people. Voice-driven computers have been shown to be effective in 90% of the cases in the research undertaken by Aptech Ltd, who have developed the software in this country. Indeed, the arrival of voice recognition technology is likely to move us gently and inevitably into a new oracy age. This technology breaks the domination of print literacy. Of course, books and other reading material will still be useful and will not disappear, but their domination is gone. Machines can read and write for us, when we choose and according to the situation.

But, I have seen reports on the suitability of dyslexic adults for voice recognition access which completely miss the point of the new technology. The reports are rather like a horse-riding instructor advising on how to ride a bicycle. It seems plausible at one level, since both are modes of transport, used by solo riders, and activated by controlled body movements.. But the logistics of the two systems are quite different. Learning about whips, trotting commands and knee pressure signals are not relevant to riding bicycle.

In the same way, the conventional approach to dyslexia by trying to improve mechanical proficiency is not valid for voice-driven computers. Such computers deal with the mechanical operations that dyslexic people find troublesome, such as letter sorting, spelling, sequencing etc. Drawing attention to these in a report is, therefore, irrelevant. Since I am now using a voice driven computer myself, such reports are as irrelevant as telling me to go on a typing course. The point is that the computer relieves of just such a chore. This article was written, (or should it be 'voiced'?) using *Dragon Naturally Speaking* software supplied by Aptech, specialists in voice-based systems and contactable by telephone on 01661 860999. I find it to be a kind of magic when you see your voice turned into accurate print, and I am not dyslexic. For those with dyslexia, it must seem like a liberation.

### **Is literacy now a superstition?**

The response of the trainee teacher about 'feeling uneducated' mentioned above, raises some important issues. Has literacy, in the form of reading and writing, become an obsession or even a superstition? The time and effort spent on teaching reading flies in the face of the facts that it usually takes about 30 hours to learn, **provided that it takes place in a learner-friendly environment**. This figure comes from Paulo Freire's work with illiterate peasants in South America where he logged the progress of cohort after cohort of reading classes. Those home-schoolers who have also logged progress, report similar results. If it takes longer it may be because **inhibitions have been built in by the learning situation**. Moreover, the more time devoted to forcing the pace, the greater the opportunity cost, because the skills the dyslexic family had gained, that so impressed the trainee teacher, are, cuckoo-fashion, dumped. In any case, illiteracy is a common experience: we are all illiterate when we arrive in foreign countries. Yet we cope, using our intelligence and benefiting from the help and tolerance of the locals.

What is the outcome of all this pressure?

George Trevelyan observed that "*education has produced a vast population able to read but unable to distinguish what is worth reading*." His point is supported by the finding that the best-selling newspapers are tabloids with a reading age of about 11 years. Surveys have shown that this holds even for teachers.

To some extent, the decline of the use of print for information and entertainment has already started and has been replaced by TV and radio. The development of advanced telephone technology, including the arrival of mobile telephones, has already had the effect of moving activities away from the print literacy skills into more use of oral skills. An obvious example is the growth of telephone banking. Next, the arrival of book-reading technology for blind people, is equally usable by the sighted with reading difficulties. There are more developments to come, such as the use of virtual reality and the next generation of wallet-size computers. Thus, the move from an era of the domination of print-based literacy into a new era where oral literacy will be more central, is already under way, even if its significance has not yet been widely recognised.

*Roland Meighan*

The Burntlands Consultancy, Upper Rochford, Tenbury Wells, Worcestershire WR15 8SH specialises in tuition for dyslexics by dyslexics. Tel. 01584 781 341. Operating as a not-for-profit service, their charges are modest, and an initial consultation and demonstration at Upper Rochford, minimum duration one hour, costs £50.

## Flotsam and jetsam

### Socialisation report 1

Enthusiasts for the idea that school 'toughens up' young people, will welcome the news that children now expect bullying to be a regular feature of school life. A national survey commissioned by *Family Circle* magazine showed that eight out of 10 have suffered at least one sustained attack. On average, the first bullying experience can now be expected at the age of eight.

### Socialisation report 2

More news for the 'toughening up' lobby: a report commissioned by the *Suzy Lamplugh Trust* showed that weapons are now carried by one in ten school students. UK is still behind in the international league tables, however, since in the USA, knives and guns are carried by far more students than this.

### Socialisation report 3

Primary schools are to be issued drug guidelines by the Head Teachers Association. Solvent-sniffing is now found to be common amongst children as young as 7. The HTA claimed that schools were choosing to sweep the problem under the carpet by not informing the police, in order to protect the reputation of the school. The peer group in primary schools is now a key source of information about the drugs scene for children in school. Later it will supply information about smoking, alcohol, ecstasy tablets, junk food, and expensive teenage fashion.

### Socialisation report 4

The Secretary of State for Education has launched a crackdown on truancy. He sees it has a 'disengagement from education'. The crackdown was proposed as a measure to combat social exclusion. "Exclusion from what?" you might be tempted to ask. Weapons, or drugs, or bullying? (Yet there is still surprise when a family decides to opt out into home-based education! "What about the social life?" they cry. The reply is, "Exactly!")

### The three R's are becoming obsolete?

A letter in the *Times Educational Supplement* written by Colin Hardy makes the following points:

*"An advertisement doing the rounds of most of the educational publications invites teachers to take their class on the visit to a Victorian classroom ... The worrying thing is that the current national curriculum would not be that out of place in such a setting. The subject content would be perfectly familiar to any Victorian teacher, as would the current fixation with literacy and numeracy standards, the three R's. Is this the education to best equip our children to tackle the challenges of the 21st century? Take a look in any modern office ... When was the last time you saw a hand written document of any length? Yet handwriting, (and spelling and grammar) still loom large in the English curriculum even though mundane mechanical recording skills are being performed by word processing desktop publishing and increasingly, word recognition processing. Even reading is of declining importance as libraries and museums digitise their books and most current text comes in digitised form, all of which can be accessed via a speaking word processor ..."*

**If the system's 100 years out of date, you don't tinker. You start again.**

Colin Hardy might be inclined to agree with this headline that appeared in the *Observer* 1st February 1998. It was, however, referring to UK company law, not schooling, but if the cap fits...

### GCSE examinations to be abolished?

The head teachers of leading independent schools have called for the abolition of GCSE examinations. The idea was mooted at their annual conference in Brighton.

### Channel 4 blows the whistle

A two-year study undertaken by the Channel 4 TV programme *Dispatches*, concluded that pressing children to learn the mechanics of reading and writing too early was dangerous. The Hungarian Professor Joseph Nagy said when interviewed, "If we push a child to learn too early, he will hate the exercise and he will hate the school because he cannot do it". Parents who have watched the natural stage-by-stage development of their children, understand the point being made. You cannot run before you can walk.

### The problem of over qualified students

The *Institute of Personnel and Development* reports that one in four firms is wary of taking on graduates because they are over qualified for the available jobs. An explosion in the number of graduates seeking work is forcing students to apply for jobs for which they are over educated. According to the report graduate jobs are failing to keep pace with the rapid increase in student numbers whilst most students have ever larger debts to repay because of the loan system.

### Parents not fooled by hype

In a study, *What parents really want*, Professor Cullingford asked parents for their view on current educational ideas ranging from the national curriculum to league tables. "Instead of being seduced by new reforms and powers given to them, the parents were angry and cynical. The consistency and the amounts of their answers was incredible." The most scathing comments were about league tables with various parents describing them as a 'ridiculous' and 'gimmicky'.

### Voice-driven computers help dyslexics to read

Research from Devon County Council showed that a sample of 14 year-olds registered great improvements in reading using computers which print words straight from speech. An average of ten hours spent on the computer resulted in average gains of 13 months on standardised reading tests. The Devon report says that the students have been able to improve in areas of both creative writing and curriculum-based work.

### **The Sound of Music 2: the Re-awakening of Maria**

Oxford Gardens Primary School is awash with singing. The register is sung, instructions are sung, parts of lessons are sung, and impromptu singing is encouraged. Regular singing raises self-esteem, improves communication between teachers and pupils, and makes pupils more focused. It improves behaviour and academic standards. (This should not come as a surprise, since any change that makes an environment more learner friendly is likely to have the same effect.)

at her Montessori nursery school, to sucking her sleeves and screaming at leaving one of us. That school went on to wrongly characterise her as being borderline dyslexic (she was just frightened of the teachers - she's been since tested as being a year above average in reading and writing), at which point we yanked her out of that school and then sent her to one of her own choosing, a caring, but highly academic school. Although the new teachers were kindly, we discovered, in the main, that Caitlin was doing well on tests, but wasn't retaining what she was being taught. She also was getting exhausted and was frequently ill. She'd leave home at 8:10 am and arrive home at 4:30 and then have to deal with an hour and a half of homework. She had no time for friends, for after school activities, to ride a bike or to be a child. The class was working at such a pace, that if she enjoyed, or didn't understand something, there was no time to do more or work longer on it.

In our experience, the 'social' aspect of school was often competitive and Caitlin tends to shrink at competition. Almost every day she'd come home with a complaint about someone who'd bullied or harassed her. And she was a popular child! Now that she's home-schooled, she sees many different children (and adults) in different circumstances. We also disagreed with the school's credit-merit-debit system, which was public and amounted, in our view, to public applause or chastisement. Why not bring back dunce caps, while you're at it? Caitlin is very gifted in drama, and the drama offered at the school did nothing to stretch her. Now she's doing drama workshops at a

## **In conversation with ... Bryan Hubbard and Lynne McTaggart**

*Educational Beachcomber*

real London theatre taught by actors.

**Bryan and Lynne are married and are the editors of three lively, thought-provoking publications - *Natural Parent*, *What Doctors Don't Tell You* and *Proof*. There have been two recent major events in their personal lives. One has been the adoption of Anya, from Russia, when she was four months old. The other has been the decision to educate their eight-year-old daughter, Caitlin, at home.**

**Janet:** Why did you decide to educate Caitlin at home?

**Bryan:** We were coming quickly to the conclusion that the way the State educates children is fundamentally flawed. It assumes the *tabula rasa* idea - that our children are empty vessels that can be filled with knowledge. The more knowledge they have, the more they will know and so, by implication, be more successful in their lives. But when you try and recall the things that you were taught at school, it's surprising just how little people can remember, but these forgetful people are still functioning perfectly well in the world. Mathematics for me was a closed book; calculus, for instance, passed me by completely, but I seem to be faring pretty well without it. I'm also fairly shaky about large chunks of history, science, geography - you name it! School taught me to be frightened, and to respect authority. I've had to unlearn all of that, and to be bold enough to find things out for myself. So, the key to home-schooling is to learn to be free of fear, and to help the child find out for him or herself. When it's a discovery you've made, then you remember it for a long time. Without fear and with the ability to know how to find things out, a person can go a long way.

**Lynne:** We'd tried two private schools in London, and we found both a deadening experience. Within her first term at what we'd considered a fairly liberal primary school, our child had gone from being confident, self-motivated and highly social

**Janet:** *Natural Parent* is a metamorphosis from *Mothers Know Best*. So why did you start *Mothers Know Best*?

**Brian:** It's part of the overall philosophy of our company to empower people with information which can be difficult otherwise to obtain. Parents, in particular, are fed so many 'lines' from doctors, teachers, health visitors, gurus, and so on. So instead of adding our voice to that clamour, we try and give people facts so they can make up their own minds.

**Lynne:** We found in our own experience that much of what we were being told by the experts was in fact wrong. Doctors in high places offered ignorant advice about health issues. Most 'experts' didn't have enough scientific information about the side effects of vaccination or the milestones of childhood development to satisfy us. I remember trying to find out, "*How long should humans breastfeed?*" and not being given any sort of satisfactory or scientific answer. To figure it out, I remember studying the feeding habits of other mammals at the New York Natural History museum. We also found that most parenting magazines gave ultimate authority to the views of the 'experts', which, it seemed to us, were often designed to get children to stay in line and not to foster their development as individuals. There are many new questions I have about development, as everything I was told to expect about our second daughter, who is adopted, seems to be wrong. So, firstly, we launched the title to get answers to our own questions. And then, to offer the facts we've found to like-minded individuals.

**Janet:** How did the *Natural Parent* metamorphosis occur?

**Brian:** Our principal business is publishing newsletters. But when we launched *Mothers Know Best*, it soon became apparent to us that the newsletter was the wrong format for talking about parenting issues. It cried out for a magazine approach. Some people also took offence at the title: there were those who felt it was parents who knew best, while others felt that mothers didn't know very much at all! *Natural Parent* as a title better reflects the content. We had to decide whether to give up on parenting as a subject. But we felt it was so important, and that parents weren't getting serious and intelligent commentary, we decided to carry on.

**Lynne:** We just needed more room to say what we had to say! Also, mothers and fathers need lists of resources, which we could include with more space. Now we have room for large features and many sections so that it can represent an entire way of life and cover all the main issues that concern parents in health and education. For instance, our latest issue carries a special double report on miscarriage and loss (a part of parenting that is never covered), which we'd never have had the space for if we'd stayed as a small newsletter. We can 'roadtest' organic products (like toothpaste), offer book reviews, and have a homeopathic section. Within the space of a magazine, there is something for anyone who cares about holistic parenting.

**Janet:** What reactions have you encountered in encouraging people to think critically about such matters as medicine and education?

**Bryan and Lynne:** It depends who you ask. For those it's targeted at - that is, you and me, the interested layperson - the reaction has, in the main, been one of gratitude and relief (aside from a few notable exceptions!) People are so encouraging. We feel we are doing genuine good - that we are making a difference - and that we're giving others the tools to make a difference too.

*Natural Parent* is available by subscription from:  
4 Wallace Road, London, N1 2PG (One year costs £24-95)

#### **Ethical Investors Group Rewards Education Now**

*"At the end of our financial year we distribute at least 50% of our profits to groups and charities such as yours. Each client who effects a policy through the group receives a vote and at the end of each financial year the group distributes the funds in accordance with the votes. Your organisation was voted for this year and our cheque for £60 being your share of the distributable fund is enclosed."*

Many thanks to the group and to the person or persons who voted for *Education Now*.

*Ethical Investors Group is at Milestone, Greet Road, Greet, Cheltenham GL54 5BG (telephone 01242 604550)*

#### **What makes a good teacher?**

UNESCO Associated Schools Project

This book is a collection of quotes from all over the world and here are some sample quotes:

*"I like a teacher who helps me think and get answers for myself."* Bongani Sicelo, age 9, Zimbabwe.

*"To become a good teacher you not only teach the children but you also learn from them."* Tapsola, 12, Burkina Faso.

*"A good teacher doesn't come drunk to his classes in the morning and doesn't hit his pupils or sleep in the classroom."* Maurice, age 12, Gabon.

*"They shouldn't be very strict and angry, because it makes children afraid of them and unwilling to go to school."* Jana, age 11, Czech Republic.

*"You need to be kind, trusting and friendly to me ... you must listen and understand us all ... never lose your temper or ignore us ... I like a smile and a kind word."* Rose, age 9, New Zealand.

*"A teacher should do something to save the world."* Tomás Teniak, age 12, Slovenia.

Contributed by Arthur Acton

#### **New Dyslexic Editor joins News and Review Team**

May I introduce myself as your new production editor: I am Geoff Harrison from the Burntlands, I am extremely dyslexic, but since I have been using voice recognition technology, I am quite literate now. I hope you will enjoy my first edition of *News and Review*. This edition has been edited by voice, speaking into a microphone. Any comments would be extremely helpful to me.

Geoff Harrison, The Burntlands, Upper Rochford, Tenbury Wells, Worcestershire WR15 8SH

#### **Japanese government deserts traditional education**

Michael Fitzpatrick writing in the *Times Educational Supplement* reports the following:

*"Economic stagnation and the promise of a future dominated by information technology have triggered government demands for sweeping education reforms."*

*The present system, geared to churning out the homogenised yes-men and women who have served Japan so well in the past, has no future, the usually conservative government has decided ... Parents rushed to take their children out of the soon-to-be-liberalised state schools and into private schools."*

*It seems that while the government considers that the current regimented, over-exam-centred learning system is damaging Japan's young and its chances of competing in a global economy, parents think differently. The recent favouring of private schools indicates that parents believe that the traditional approach will keep their children off the streets and edge them into a good job."*

*The government (egged on by industry, which wants more individualistic employees) also faces a battle with civil servants over the reform proposals ...*

*The government feels it has now made the right moves, if a little late in the day, to ensure Japan's international competitiveness ... Whether this can be squared with the highly competitive and*

*conformist outlook of the majority of Japanese remains to be seen - 1998 will be a difficult transition year."*

## More Sound of Music ...

### Education Now Song Sheet No.1

The Chief Inspector of Schools,  
He had 1, 000 assistants,  
He marched some schools to the top of the league,  
And he marched some down again.  
Those that were up were up,  
And those that were down were down,  
And those that were only half-way up,  
Were neither up nor down.

(sung to the tune of *The Grand Old Duke of York*)

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# The pick of *News and Review*: the Founding Director's choice

**I have chosen to present, in an edited form, so that they are more suitable for general use, the two articles which appeared in the pull-out supplement of Issue 18 of *News and Review*.**

### Three End Games

Mass Education, the Academic Curriculum and the Dominance  
of Print Literacy  
by Roland Meighan, pp 2 & 3

### 2020 Vision

by Janet and Roland Meighan, and Michael Moynagh, p 4

- Learning would be undertaken in much more flexible institutions than at present.
- Open Learning Centres would replace day schools.
- Central concern of such centres would be learning not teaching.
- The role of the teacher would change to that of learning coach, learning consultant, or learning 'travel agent'.
- Interactive learning systems would have replaced a great deal of classroom teaching.
- Courses to develop experts would still be needed, but rather by the Open University model.
- Finance would have become much more diversified.
- More flexible learning arrangements would have replaced rigid Key Stages, prescribed curriculum, conventional school, subject-based learning.

- Greater value placed on creativity, adaptability, flexibility and re-learning as key skills.
- Greater emphasis placed on the multiple purposes of education above the 'One Right Way' philosophy.
- Replacement of narrow nationalistic considerations requiring competitive attitudes by global and European co-operative ones.
- New language to define the new learning systems would be used e.g. Learning Centres not 'schools'; Personal Learning Plans not teaching schemes and key stages.

In **End Games**, Roland presented a matured and definitive version of some of the ideas he has been saying for so long. It is interesting to note that other issues that concern him were also included in the report **2020 Vision** compiled from the consultation days initiated by the **Tomorrow Project** and **Education Now**. The **2020 Vision** reveals an awareness of the need to find the next steps from where we are now in our education system, to where we ought to be in 2020. This does not necessarily mean that we tear down the whole edifice and expect a new, improved order to be there the next morning.

I also consider that Flexi College is trying to fulfil these principles and, after 10 years, is beginning to mature in its operation. It was always the intention that Flexi College should be of use within the general system of education and should not be restricted to a minority of people who could afford private education. This is why we have tried to keep the cost to parents so low, and in some cases so that they actually pay nothing. As we approach the time of application to the government for status as a Foundation School we shall continue to hold to the principles outlined in these papers, confident that the time is approaching when such ideas can be incorporated practically into the public system of education.

I hope that the re-editing and re-issue of these two papers in this form will be of more use to those of us who are treading this path.

*Philip Toogood*

**3. The central concern of such open learning centres would be *learning not teaching***, although some formal teaching would be available on request. Such centres would help create a culture of learning which would include everyone and build learner-confidence and self-esteem

**4. The role of the teacher would change to that of learning coach, learning consultant, or learning 'travel agent'.** The teacher as access-agent to scarce information is already redundant and the logic of this would have become irresistible. Present teacher training was, therefore, largely a preparation for obsolescence.

**5. Interactive learning systems** such as CD-ROM programmes, opportunities for purposive conversation, self-programming groups and tele-conferencing would have replaced a great deal of classroom teaching. The danger of excessive individualisation would be offset by opportunities to learn in democratic groups and develop 'team-player' co-operative skills.

## 2020 Vision

Twenty educationalists met at the University of Nottingham one Saturday in October 1997 and a month later on a Saturday in November. The educationalists were from a wide variety of backgrounds and they had agreed to be involved in an exchange of ideas on the theme of Education in the Year 2020, organised by the *Tomorrow Project* in consultation with *Education Now*.

Some common ideas emerged from the discussions in small groups and also in plenary sessions about education in the year 2020, when, it was agreed, the climate of uncertainty due to continuous change, would not have gone away. 'Continuous adaptation' was here to stay. The common ideas included:

**1. Learning would be undertaken in much more flexible institutions than at present.** Not least amongst the reasons was the escalating effects of modern computer and communications technology which freed us from any specific location for learning. 'Everywhere and anywhere' learning would have become a reality, and flexi-time learning commonplace.

**2. Open learning centres would replace present-day schools.** Some saw these as being open from 8:00 in the morning until 8:00 at night and open every day of the year. Others even thought there might be 24 hour opening. Such centres would support a non-ageist provision without excluding opportunities for some age or gender-based activity. Thus early childhood centres with a focus on young children and their families, would be available. The general model would be that of the public library, not the custodial model of our present schools.

**6. Life-long learning expectations would place a premium on the development of computer skills in adults.** Voice-driven computers would have become generally important here as well as for some specific needs such as those of dyslexic adults and children.

**7. Courses to develop experts would still be needed,** but the Open University model would have dislodged the obsolete 'three-year course for young adults' model of current universities. This is based on a preceding, and also obsolete, 'Grand National Race' concept of schooling. Young people are required to fall at each hurdle, losing self-esteem in the process,

and often being turned-off learning, so that 'winners' can be identified.

**8. Financing would have become much more diversified.** Some funding out of taxation would be used to support particular requirements for experts, or particular innovative social concerns such as parenting skills, democratic skills, personal health skills, and even 'green' living if environmental survival, (the 'doomsday' scenario,) continues to grow as a issue. Industry would support activities particular to the needs of commerce. Individuals and families would provide some finance. LETS schemes would provide another element for personal learning exchanges. There would also be some voluntary learning exchange elements. The net result would be better results for less money than at present. (Home-based educators have already shown that their route to a university place can cost half as much as a conventional school route.) The current technology of swipe cards can incorporate all the above elements of finance, and record and monitor it.

**9. Democratic control and democratic value-systems would have replaced present authoritarian control.** The open learning centres would be run by elected representatives of the partners in learning - learners (parents and children), staff (paid and voluntary), and other interested parties such as local industry and local community. Real choice according to the

needs of learners would be a key feature of the next learning system. This freedom would be subject to the democratic values of human rights and responsibilities.

**10. One group's summary** was that (a) 'time-lock' learning ideas such as key stages would have disappeared in favour of the flexible, irregular patterns of personal learning plans, (b) 'school' would have given way to flexible learning arrangements, (c) 'prescribed curriculum' would have given way to a catalogue curriculum with learner-driven elements, state-targeted elements, and industry targeted elements, (d) the precedence of a 'content' of shallow subject-based learning would have given way to the precedence of the deep learning of a questions-based, problem-solving approach. The home-based educators present proposed that their practice already involved many of the above features so that they were something of a test bed for the success of these approaches.

**11. The fear of diversity based on an expectation of disorder would have given way to an awareness that all solutions are temporary** in a constantly changing environment. Thus adaptability, creativity, flexibility and re-learning are key skills.

**12. The multiple purposes of education would have been recognised** in contrast to the one right way tendencies of present times e.g. education for 'saving' the country's economy.

**13. The movement away from nationalistic concern to European and global ones** would have led to the replacement of the calls for learning competitive attitudes and replaced them with calls for co-operative behaviour.

**14. A new language would have developed to define the next learning system** e.g. Open Learning Centres, not schools; the Catalogue Curriculum International, not a national curriculum; Personal Learning Plans, not teaching schemes and key stages.

*Report written by Michael Moynagh (Tomorrow Project)  
and Janet and Roland Meighan (Education Now)*