

## One family's declaration of education

**Anyone can have a home-school. We are a home-schooling family of four; mum dad and our two children aged 4 and 6. We have made our own leaflet which explains what we do at our home-school. This is why we decided to make it.**

When our first child was born and therefore began his 'education', i.e. he became interested in making sense of the world and learning all those skills a human needs to know, nobody asked what school he was at, what curriculum we followed, did we do formal 'work' or how many hours we studied each day. It was taken for granted that he would learn the most important skills of talking, walking and interacting with his fellow humans without the need for any set hours, workbooks or curriculum. He learned because human creatures are born with a natural desire to learn and a deep curiosity about everything they encounter. Anyone who has a child will have experienced this powerful drive in their infant, first hand.

A copy of the above leaflet can be obtained from the Education Now Office, 113 Arundel Drive, Bramcote Hills, Nottingham NG9 3FQ

However, the reaction of family, friends and the public we encountered daily began to change as he reached so called 'school' age, and by his fifth birthday we were constantly asked what school he went to. Despite the questioning becoming increasingly tedious, I answered as patiently as time permitted. This was particularly difficult in the supermarket checkout queue when I knew that the checkout operator really wanted to hear the reply "*so-and-so primary school*," and was totally unprepared for my reply, "*We are at school NOW because we learn from everything we do.*"

One positive outcome was that it prompted us to focus our thinking and to consider what we were doing all day, everyday, that had 'nurtured' our children so well that they are loving and well adjusted, can read fluently, have a huge vocabulary, can

interact confidently with all sorts of people, and have a passionate desire to find out about everything they encounter by asking all those questions, questions, questions!

At the same time we were all learning to use our new computer, and the arrival of some free software, *Serif PagePlus4.0* was timed perfectly. During a 'surfing' expedition on the World Wide Web we found that in America, the idea of presenting your home-school in a way that can be easily understood like a 'proper' school is quite common. So the idea was born for a leaflet which would serve several purposes. It would give us the opportunity to practice our computer graphics skills, help us to clarify our thoughts about our educational 'philosophy' and it would provide us with a leaflet with which to answer to all those questioners - including our LEA, who loved it!

I would like to be able to say that the name *Planet Learning Zone* came from some deep intellectual idea about the whole world being our learning zone and that we see learning as a whole and not fragmented etc. etc. But in truth, the name came from the film *Toy Story*, and a trip to *EuroDisney*. We were eating in the *Planet Pizza Restaurant* at *EuroDisney* when my son said that he thought the design, with its wonderful play equipment, vibrant colour scheme, space-age lighting and crazy creature sculptures would be a brilliant idea for the design of a school environment.

"*We could call it Planet Home-school and our teacher could be Buzz Lightyear*," he said. To which I added, "*And we could all Blast Off to learning to infinity and beyond, as Buzz would say*". The idea stuck. We have since changed the name from *Planet Home-school* to *Planet Small School* and now to *Planet Learning Zone* as we do not like the word school with its connotations.

Currently, our *Learning Zone* is centred on our large converted garage and spills over into the whole house, garden and the outside world, both physically and through the World Wide Web. One day we would love to have a Planet Pizza style, wonderfully designed, student friendly, learning zone, open to all. Wouldn't it be wonderful if all schools looked that way?

The experience of creating our leaflet has been fun, 'educational' and very useful in prompting us to describe and write down our thoughts and intentions clearly. I would recommend it to any home-schooling family. You could make a hand written version quite easily and photocopy it. And should your LEA need convincing that you are providing a suitable education for your children they can have a copy too.

*Julie Ashton*

*The New Bungalow, Trafford Cres., Runcorn, Cheshire WA7 4AR,  
☎ 01928 580670*

## "Looking for a Brand New Beat": making the case for Community Arts

When I was nine, the school music teacher made me stand up in front of my class mates and whistle a tune she first played on the piano. After the first four notes she told me to sit down. She went on to the next one in line to find out if they were one of the gifted few allowed to join the school choir and receive special tuition. I was not to be one. As a result, I then believed that I was neither musically talented nor that I could sing in tune. My ability to sing had been destroyed at the outset by the very person whose job it was to nurture it.

My school experience has a familiar ring to a lot of people. If it was not in the music class, they may have had a similar experience in poetry appreciation, or in art. Alienation from the creative process often happens at an early age and is perpetuated by later experiences, leaving people with the feeling that Art is not part of their lives, and is done by other, more talented people.

This state of affairs is not something peculiar to Britain. All western and northern industrialised countries have demonstrated this same tendency: to lodge the power to create and define the Arts (visual, performing and plastic) in the hands of an economic and cultural elite, producing arts institutions and an official culture that primarily reflects their own interests.

When I finally bought a guitar and taught myself to play and later to sing, it was with the help and encouragement of friends and family, and nothing to do with any organised institution. (At the age of twenty-five I was the lead singer of a band and was writing my own songs.) This is another common experience for many people. Despite the tendency to institutionalise, intellectualise and commercialise culture, many of us do actually develop an interest in the Arts and, against all adversity, participate in all kinds of creative activities. We find that every community has its break-dancers, silk-painters and poets. That people get together to sing, act, dance and to tell stories. There are many Uncle Johns who have a pile of self-written stories under their beds, or Auntie Barbaras who can sing a mean version of some Gilbert and Sullivan classic.

The Community Arts Movement grew up in this country in the 1970s because there were people who believed that these skills, talents and activities deserved to be valued, nurtured and developed. Despite the apparent mass availability of culture (magazines, TV, film, pop music, theatres) in the marketplace, its definition and creation was falling into the hands of fewer and fewer people, and the majority of creative activities were going on largely unnoticed and under-represented. It attempted to re-establish the link between people and culture, to stimulate and inspire new types of activity, and to value and promote latent or hidden skills and talents in communities. It developed into a widespread and influential activity.

### What exactly is Community Arts?

- Community Arts can be anything from a community festival to a book, from a video to a dance, from a mosaic to a mural, or even a combination of all these and more.
- Community Arts activities are generally grouped together in the form of projects with an agreed outcome in mind which will usually involve some sort of product or performance made by a community group.
- Projects normally involve an artist or arts worker, professionals who make a living from sharing their skills with people.

As the Movement has grown it has become increasingly professionalised and has appeared to lose some of its youthful idealism, so much so that many writers argue that the original intentions of the Movement have become so diluted, and the range of activities called Community Arts so diversified by the need to accept money from a broad range of sources, that it now makes no sense to talk about Community Arts as a Movement.

### Community Arts is dead. Long live Community Arts

Part of the problem rests in the fact that the Movement has been reluctant to both shout about its successes or clearly define its activities. This vacuum has enabled a lot of bandwagon jumping by those who want to lay claim to the concept. Another part of the problem lies in the fact that the core principles of Community Arts are that it should encourage greater *access* and *participation* in the Arts. Two principles, which in form at least, are easy to copy. As a result, orchestras now have community outreach programmes, theatres run community accessible workshops, and Galleries and Museums have culturally specific programming. New developments have seen many non arts-based organisations adopting Community Arts methods as well. Town planners now use Community Arts to involve local communities in the development of new initiatives. Youth clubs, hospitals, day centres and community centres throughout the UK use participative arts to involve groups and communities in creative activity for many reasons.

Everyone is in on the act. And while every attempt to make the arts more accessible is to be generally welcomed, not all these developments serve to bring communities any closer to changing the cultural status quo.

I would argue that, far from being dead, there is a greater than ever need for Community Arts. While we have seen a huge increase in the number of groups applying for one-off grants, the number of organisations offering **sustained** support over a long period of time to Community Arts activity in communities has diminished. This tendency if left unchecked will result in the situation that those who are best at shouting about their needs will get the most resources and support. These inevitably will not be those who need them most, nor those who have the greatest commitment to the democratisation of culture.

### Waving not drowning

If we do not keep shouting about the need for Community Arts there is a real danger that it could disappear. The Community Arts Movement has always argued that it exists to help communities find their voice. It now badly needs to find its own. While we need to be flexible enough to fit into the 'flavour of the month' funding, we also have to remember what it is that is important about Community Arts and to start shouting about it ourselves.

Community Arts offers an alternative view - that the Arts can be a broad-based activity available to everyone; that given a chance to make art collectively in a way that is self affirming, empowering and democratic, people can take back the means to create their own culture. More than anything else, Community Arts is about change. It works at a local level with issues and themes that are relevant. Through being involved in Community Arts activities people should be empowered to find their own authentic voice to express their aspirations and concerns creatively; to do nothing less than to create their own culture.

*Mark Webster*

*Mark was a founder member of Walsall Community Arts Team. He is editor of **Finding Voices, Making Choices: creativity for social change** (Pub: Educational Heretics Press), a book of essays by practitioners who have worked with Walsall Community Arts Team.*

## In conversation with ... Jenefer Joseph

**An exceptionally high level of commitment and concern for the education and welfare of young children has dominated Jenefer's distinguished professional career.**

**Throughout her work as teacher, teacher-educator, writer, and early years consultant, she has been unstinting in her efforts to promote an understanding of the crucial importance of the first few years of life. She emigrated to Britain from her native South Africa 39 years ago, since when she has also worked in other countries including India, USA, the Cameroon, Australia, and Malaysia.**

**Janet:** Jenefer, what do you think shaped your philosophy regarding the education and welfare of young children?

**Jenefer:** Before I'd even thought about a career, I was fortunate enough, as a teenager, to baby-sit for a family who were most enlightened and knowledgeable about young children. I was able to see the very positive effects their understanding and loving care had on the development of their children. Perhaps more than anything, it was their absolute respect for the children as individuals, and their acceptance of the children's initiatives, views and ideas, that impressed me, and has stayed with me ever since. When I studied to become a nursery school teacher (1947-49) these ideas were consolidated by the gurus of the time - Margaret McMillan, Lillian de Lissa, Susan Isaacs, Arnold Gesell, Froebel. Piaget's work was just beginning to filter through, and, of course, greatly affected my thinking, as did John Holt's.

Another major influence has been the fact of being able to work in so many different countries. It has helped me to acknowledge, accept and welcome cultural diversity, and to recognise that parents everywhere want to do the best for their children. But they all need help, at various levels, to achieve this, and so working with parents is also a cornerstone of what I have tried to do. Working overseas has also strengthened my belief that the best educators are those who see child-centredness as being inextricably bound up with a truly democratic approach.

**Janet:** Do we start formal schooling too soon in the UK?

**Jenefer:** Yes! In view of one's knowledge and understanding of young children's social and personal development, and their needs and capabilities, 6 or 7 would be more appropriate. It would also fit in with the rest of Europe (and most of the world). But, of course, we would then have to ensure that, until 6, provision was made for the highest quality nursery school education to be offered to all children. As things are at present, I despair, in particular, over the plight of most of our four-year-olds. It is simply unacceptable to have these very immature children in reception classes of 30 and over, usually with adults who are not necessarily qualified to work with such young children. My heart bleeds for these children who, evidence is showing, suffer from anxiety, become bed-wetters, and 'don't want to go to school any more'. My heart also goes out to the teachers, most of whom are unhappy to find themselves caught up in a system giving them no option but to try to make the best of a deplorable situation.

**Janet:** Why has PLAY become an unacceptable idea?

**Jenefer:** I think there are three main reasons. Firstly, because it is still widely misunderstood as being a merely frivolous, recreational activity (which is, indeed, what most adult play is about). But in fact, for children, play has a very different meaning, purpose and significance, and we adults have to 'take it seriously'. Secondly, because of the emphasis placed by the National Curriculum on

the spontaneity intrinsic to true play is too often eliminated in schools. It is as though the designers of the NC suffered from the delusion that by accumulating a great number of facts we will end up with an understanding of reality. Thirdly, the more spontaneously and freely children are encouraged to play, the more creative and imaginative they are likely to become. But these qualities have been relegated to having much less importance. I should add that play has never been 'unacceptable' where there is good nursery education. On the contrary, it forms a core part of quality provision.

**Janet:** What do you consider are the pros and cons of present Government policies for young children?

**Jenefefer:** On the plus side, we have to acknowledge that for the first time this century, a Government has put early childhood education and care on the map. More money is being made available; Nursery Centres are being promoted; and there is a new plan to help reduce the adult:child ratio in reception classes to 1:15 (though quite how this can be achieved, with so few appropriately trained personnel available, is hard to see). On the minus side, I have two major concerns. The first is that teacher education courses are far too biased towards subject specialisms, and there is still not enough, if any, emphasis on the study of how children learn and develop - something which is making for considerable insecurity in students, as they recognise how their lack of understanding in this area is inevitably hindering the quality of their work. My second concern is even more worrying, as the menacing influence of Woodhead's OFSTED is reflected more and more in DFEE decrees. OFSTED is now to have greater powers in early years education and childcare across the board, to 'regulate, inspect, investigate and enforce', based on the Early Learning Goals now being modified. Because Woodhead, with Blunkett following behind, calls for a more structured, formal and prescriptive curriculum, one can be forgiven for thinking that Blair's first welcome call for 'Education, Education, Education', has now been changed to 'Schooling, Schooling, Schooling'.

**Janet:** What are your hopes for the education and welfare of young children in the next century?

**Jenefefer:** (i) Compulsory school starting age raised to 6, and a thoroughly good nursery school programme made universally available. (ii) Provision to be wholeheartedly made for young children to learn largely through their play. (iii) The concept of 'child-centredness' to be re-visited and re-explored, not in any 'looking back' way, but with a view to clarifying it and implementing it in the light of contemporary research into children's learning. (iv) A ratio of 1:13 to be the norm for groups of children between 3 and 6. (v) The study of learning and teaching, to be re-instated as a core element in teacher education.

All these form part of a vision of education and care which I have for our future young children. It's a vision which recognises that "*at the heart of the educational process lies the child*". This Plowden statement has become a cliché, and so is too often dismissed as such by policy makers. But clichés become clichés because of the truths that lie within them. My hope is that this precept is returned to as a starting point for policy makers and educators alike, so that, as I believe, young children in the future will not only embrace a scholarly relish for lifelong learning, but will have the creativity, imagination and adaptability to make the most of whatever the 21st century brings.

**Publications include:** Hurst,V & Joseph,J (1998) *Supporting Early Learning: The Way Forward*, Open University Press; Heaslip, P. Hurst, V. & Joseph, J. (eds) (1992) *First Things First: Educating Young Children*, EYCG Childhood Education.

## Gridlink - an on-line learning system

Gridlink is a small organisation which has developed distance learning methods specifically aimed at those pupils who are unable to attend school, or whose parents choose home education. We meet the requirements of the National Curriculum up to and including GCSE. We use computers to provide the best and most productive distance learning approach, but our teaching and communication is on a very individual basis, with a high degree of one-to-one tutor involvement.

### How does Gridlink work?

Each pupil on the Gridlink system receives individually-designed lessons from specialist tutors, following an agreed weekly timetable. Pupils send their completed lessons to their tutors at an agreed time, and the tutor provides detailed feedback on every lesson, which is returned promptly to the pupil with the next assignments.

We use a range of resources, selected to cater for individual needs. These include up-to-date National Curriculum textbooks, worksheets from teacher resource packs, CD ROMs, cassettes and videos. We also encourage our pupils to research from other materials when appropriate.

Tutors and pupils keep in regular contact by e-mail or by phone. This contact enables the development of a good pupil-tutor relationship based on mutual respect - a major factor in the enhancement of self-esteem as observed in our pupils.

### Benefits of flexible working with Gridlink

Because Gridlink provides an individual service, we can select the most suitable materials, syllabuses, and exam levels for each student. Exams can be taken whenever the student is ready, and National Curriculum tests can be used at any time to assess their levels in the core subjects. Each pupil's needs are addressed without the constraints which inevitably apply in an organisation which educates children in groups.

Pupils on Gridlink study the subjects they most need - this may be just one, or up to eight or nine. The weekly timetable may be only two hours, or could be up to fifteen hours. The programme for each student is arranged by negotiation with the student and their parents, and can be extended or reduced at any time. There is no fixed time or length of session which the pupil must keep to, so Gridlink is ideal for students who choose not to work a conventional school day.

### How we work - some pupils' experiences.

*"I like to start work as soon as I get up, because I get tired later on. I switch on my computer and collect my work by e-mail. I do Maths one day, English the next, and Science the day after."*

*11 year old pupil, unable to attend school because of illness.*

*"I send my work to Gridlink by e-mail, once a week. The teachers mark it and send the new work for the following week. I stick to a regular time-table that lets me get on at my own pace - I have taken two GCSEs already and expect to complete the rest next summer."*

*16 year-old overseas pupil not within travelling distance of a school.*

*"I find my best time for working is after tea, and sometimes I work as late as nine o'clock in the evening. I can even send my work to my tutors at this time, because using e-mail means that they don't have to be there to receive it at the same time that I send it."*

*14 year old pupil with ME*

For more information e-mail us at:  
gridlink@rmpc.co.uk  
or by phone/fax on 01404 42445

## Working out with SWEEP

Two years ago, after six years as a secondary school teacher, I identified myself as 'disaffected' and quit. Luckily I found work with Countec Ltd., Milton Keynes Education Business Partnership, developing work experience placements for 'disaffected' Key Stage 4 students (14-16 year-olds). It has grown into a busy programme called SWEEP, the *Supported Work Experience Extended Placement* programme.

It is well documented that about one in ten young people leave school with no qualifications. For them, school life is a series of humiliating, frustrating and ultimately troublesome experiences. Nationally, it is realised that the true cost of school disaffection is unbearably high, and alternatives are eagerly sought. It has been refreshing to find, among ordinary employers in Milton Keynes, a wealth of enthusiasm and expertise in the business of preparing for working life those most obviously unsuccessful in school.

In the past year, over 200 local employers have hosted young people on SWEEP. These employers are mechanics, florists, supermarket managers, hairdressers, computer technicians, landscapers, playgroup leaders, football coaches and farmers, to list a few. For SWEEP they neither pay nor are paid, and their motivations are mixed: maybe the profit of a free pair of hands, better knowledge of a youth market, professional development for junior staff supervisors, good PR, etc. Most simply want to play a role in educating today's young people for tomorrow's complex world. All have something to teach. Some have powerful memories of themselves as young people out of school. Many are better able than school teachers to engage a young person's interest because they stand in the real world. And because each placement is carefully selected to match the young person's expressed work preferences - recorded on application form and at application interview - excuses for failure are scarce. They experience responsibility. Every stage in the process is closely supported and monitored by the SWEEP officer (currently me).

Half of all SWEEP applicants are already outside school, on the books of the pupil referral unit or other 'education other than at school' (EOTAS) provider. All these are receiving formal education part-time, some as little as three hours per week; one-third are girls.

Generally, the kids enjoy it. 69% continue beyond the Initial Placement, a one-week 'taster', on to Extended Placement of 1-2 days per week for five weeks; 32% go on to a Further Extended Placement of 10 weeks; 14% hold the placement down for six months or more. Such evidence of reliability and commitment to work itself presents compelling reading in a young person's letter of reference. In evaluation returns, all young people say the SWEEP placement helped them "*feel more adult*" and "*feel more successful*". Over 90% say it helped them "*get better at talking and listening*", a major programme of study in the English national curriculum. There will be further development of SWEEP next year e.g. integrating Key Skills accreditation.

17 schools and EOTAS providers in Milton Keynes have referred young people to SWEEP, and paid the flat £50-per-placement fee (totalling £250 for a full year in placement), hoping it will provide the experience of success. It doesn't always. SWEEP is not right for all 14-16 year-olds. If they are not ready for work, they can choose full-time school or truancy. What is important is that they **choose**, and that they experience the consequences of their choice. SWEEP provides a valuable

option and it forces young people to think hard about themselves and their future.

*Tom Bulman*

## The Whistleblowers: Edward de Bono

77 Victoria Street, Wolverton, MK12 5HQ Tel: 1908 15090

*Thinking is the ultimate human resource. We need to do much more about it. We can do much more about it. But we need to want to do more about it.*

Edward de Bono

**Dr. Edward de Bono is widely regarded internationally as the leading authority on creative thinking and on the direct teaching of thinking skills. He has written numerous books with translations into 34 languages and has been invited to lecture in 52 countries. Nearly every week he is in a different part of the world talking to government leaders, educators and heads of industry and business**

Born in Malta in 1933, Edward de Bono was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford where he gained an honours degree in psychology and physiology, and then a D.Phil. in medicine. He also holds a Ph.D. from Cambridge and an MD from the University of Malta. He has held faculty appointments at the universities of Oxford, Cambridge, London and Harvard. His medical background in biological information systems helped Dr. de Bono to develop new and far-reaching insights into the workings of the human brain. In 1969 his key book *The Mechanism of Mind* was published (Viking/Penguin) which described how nerve networks act as self-organising systems which allow information to organise itself into patterns. This showed that creativity was a necessary behaviour in a self-organising system. The leading physicist in the world, Professor Murray Gell Mann, said of this book that it was ten years ahead of mathematicians dealing with chaos theory, non-linear and self-organising systems.

The book also indicated that perception and attention were most important. This was later confirmed by David Perkins at Harvard who showed that up to ninety per cent of the faults in thinking were not faults of logic at all but faults of perception. From this basis, Edward de Bono developed the deliberate and systematic tools of creative thinking (lateral thinking) and the operative word 'po' (to signal provocation). As a practical design came the CORT programme (CORT Thinking Lessons) first published by Dr. de Bono's younger brother Peter 25 years ago and now the most widely used programme internationally for the direct teaching of thinking as a learnable skill.

An enormous amount of research has been carried out on the effects of these lessons and it has been shown repeatedly that they have a powerful impact on the lives of both children and adults. Dr. de Bono insists that many youngsters who are bad at the academic game (which involves taking in, storing and sorting information so that it can be given back in tests or examinations etc.) turn out to be very good thinkers - if they are given the chance to develop thinking skills. Those who are not, often develop low self-esteem because they are seen to be 'dumb' in schools. They drift into crime, commit suicide or just coast through life. A youngster who is given the opportunity to develop basic thinking skills quickly develops self-esteem and finds that he or she can 'think' and now cope with, and organise,

life. Instead of being a cork floating on a stream - an individual is now in control.

Dr. de Bono believes that nothing is more important for society than the teaching of constructive thinking to all youngsters.

See: Edward de Bono: *Teach your child how to think?* (Viking/Penguin 1993), *Parallel thinking* (Viking 1994), *Serious Creativity* (Harper 1992)

The following is an extract from an article written by Edward de Bono for the Times Educational Supplement in 1972:

The type of thinking traditionally taught emphasises the following aspects: comment, description, analysis, classifying, putting in place and relating. All these are different aspects of what we regard as the highest form of intellectual activity: scholarship. This idiom involves accurate treatment in depth of a focused area, eschewing speculation and relating in detail to other works.

Another dominant aspect of the type of thinking we encourage is criticism. Next to scholarship we esteem the critical intelligence as the desired product of our education system. Though the critical mind has a distinct role to play in society, it may be that we esteem it too highly for criticism is one of the easier forms of intellectual effort and one of the more limited. The critical intelligence cannot of itself generate the new ideas that are required for progress and even just to deal with changing circumstances.

The dominance of the critical mind may be seen in the results of a simple experiment. Different groups were asked to make five comments on a wheelbarrow design. The comments were mainly negative because the critical mind compares what is offered with what is expected and complains about the discrepancy. It is the creator who makes it his business to go beyond the expected.

Entirely negative comments were made by 83.5 per cent of a group of business executives; by 80 per cent of a group all of whom had IQs over 148; and 82.6 per cent of a group of teachers. But when the problem was given to a group of 12-year-old children a large number of creative comments were mixed in with the critical ones (for example, can turn a sharper corner excellent for tipping especially into a ditch, useful for scooping stuff out of a pile, cannot strain your back, etc.) The critical creative ratio was 2:1 for the children; 20:1 for the business executives; 20:1 for the high IQ group; and 27:1 for the teachers.

The third type of thinking traditionally taught is the concentration on the past. Since the past is always increasing in amount (both through investigation and also through the sheer passage of well-documented time) there is less and less room for anything else. There is nothing wrong with any of these three types, but they do not cover the whole of thinking or even its most useful aspects. This type of thinking could be characterised as 'passive' since it is directed more towards contemplation than action.

In contrast 'active' thinking is directed towards action. Active thinking includes: purpose, decision, judgment, projection, planning, guessing, interaction with other people, managing, organising, modelling, design, problem-solving, creativity. This type of thinking is concerned with bringing something about rather than with passive description, analysis, classification, criticism, relating and putting in place. While education

continues to restrict itself to the passive aspects of thinking anyone who needs to use active thinking in his life (anyone outside the academic world) is bound to be dissatisfied with what he has learnt about thinking."

*Paul Scott - musician and educator*

For information see E. de Bono's web site: <http://www.edwdebono.com>  
or write: Cavendish Information, 10 Cavendish Road, Oxford OX2 7TW

## **The Free Child: a Conference at Summerhill School, 23rd to 26th July 1999**

*"The function of the child is to live his own life - not the life that his anxious parents think he should live, nor the life according to the purpose of the educator who thinks he knows best ... "*

A.S. Neill, founder of Summerhill School,  
quoted in the programme for the '*Free Child*' conference.

It cannot be denied that mass public education has improved the lives of millions of people throughout the world. There has been, however, a human cost. Schools that are supposed to educate, and therefore liberate us from ignorance and poverty, sometimes lead children to misery and even to suicide.

We have all heard of Japanese children who, fearing that bad exam results will bring shame on their families, have simply jumped off tall buildings. In the West we also hear occasional reports of children killing themselves because they have been bullied at school or cannot take the pressure of increasing workloads. Rare though they are, such reports are just the tip of an iceberg, a tragic iceberg of fear, low self-esteem, conformity and resentment. The frequent oppression of children in mainstream schooling has led to a range of responses in different parts of the world. Home schooling has provided a solution for some families; for others, 'free' and alternative schools, where children and their views are given respect, have provided the answer.

The conference at Summerhill on the subject of the *Free Child* was an opportunity for educationalists, parents, and children to come together and share their different experiences of democratic education. They came from as far afield as Japan and Palestine - in all about fifteen countries were represented.

For many who came, the way the conference was run (by both teenagers and adults) required some mental adjustment. To give delegates a sense of really being at Summerhill School, and to provide a means of fine-tuning the weekend, most mornings started with a school 'meeting'. At one point 'beddies officers' were elected to patrol the buildings after 'quiet hour' and make sure that those who wanted to sleep could do so (unlike the Summerhill pupils, some of the grown-ups had some difficulty respecting the rights of their fellow guests).

Among the many who came to speak to the conference and take part in workshops were:-

- Gerison Lansdown, Director of The Children's Rights Office who spoke about the United Nations Charter on Human Rights, and about how a lack of democracy in British schools leads to both poor performance in school and to a lack of participation in democratic processes by adults. Quote: "*You cannot teach democracy in an undemocratic environment*".
- Zoe Redhead, principal of Summerhill School, who described recent Ofsted inspections, and who raised the issue of whether schools should be allowed to negotiate the criteria by which they are inspected.
- Derry Hannam, an Ofsted-trained school inspector and an advisor to the Advisory Group on Citizenship (Crick Report), who spoke about the lack of pupil participation in

English schools. Quote: "*Does England have some deep and unique difficulty with democracy in its day to day functioning as a society? ... Why do we find it harder than other Europeans to regard young people as young citizens rather than just future citizens? ... Have we no confidence or trust in our teachers or our children or each other?*"

- Children and parents of the Tokyo Shure School described the 'unkindness' of the regular school system in Japan. Keiko Okuchi described how she and others had started Tokyo Shure in response to this. Mizuho Koike spoke about how members reach consensus about timetables and school management. Hiroshi Watanabe said that Tokyo Shure had taught him to listen to others, and that he now saw the school as 'his place'.
- Dorothea Fuckert, a practitioner in children's mental health in Heidelberg, described the personal and social development of the 'free child'. Like A.S. Neill, she saw it as important to make the distinction between 'freedom' and 'licence'. Quote: *"If education is a preparation for life, then a free education is a preparation for a free society, and a dependent education is a preparation for a dependency society."*
- Roland and Janet Meighan, described learner-based education systems as distinct from teacher-based ones. Quote: *"What we need are learning centres rather than schools. We should scrap the Department for Education and Employment, and set up a Department for the Encouragement of Learning"*.
- Hussein Ibrahim Issa, spoke about the Hope Flowers School in Bethlehem. At the moment the school is supported by Christian and Muslim families; the hope is that Jews will also attend one day. Over the years the Israeli authorities threatened to bulldoze the school; now the Palestinian authorities hinder the school because of its links with Jewish schools. Girls and boys are taught together, and are encouraged to address social issues indirectly through drama. Hussein sees the school as giving an education for 'Peace and Democracy'. He lives in constant fear of his home being fire-bombed. Last year he spent two days in gaol. Quote: *"I would rather suffer for democracy than religion"*.
- Jesse Mumm, spoke about the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos Puerto Rican High School in Chicago. This started in 1972 in a church basement, and is now part of a cultural centre that includes day care provision, a library and a museum. The school itself has about sixty students who have classes in business studies and culture. The F.B.I. have tried to link the school with the Puerto Rican independence movement, and the building was raided in 1985 (which resulted in no charges being brought, but which did do \$30,000 worth of damage). Now the school is hoping to get state and business funding as a 'Charter School'. The neighbourhood is one of the poorest in the United States, with major drug and crime problems. Quote: *"The school is the one safe environment the students have"*.

That Summerhill should have hosted an international conference such as this is entirely appropriate. For years the school has inspired teachers, parents, and children in almost every corner of the world. But it is not universally loved, either by the media or by central government. After an Ofsted inspection in March, the Department for Education and Employment issued a 'Notice of Complaint' in June, stating that *"the school must ensure that all pupils engage regularly in learning"*. Depending upon appeals procedures, and unless the school is prepared to completely overturn its whole educational ethos, Summerhill could be forced to close.

*Report by Robert Powell*

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**For further information about the conference, visit the Summerhill School web site: <http://www.s-hill.demon.co.uk>**

**Flotsam and jetsam**



### **Independent schools closures watch**

The UK Government is trying to close Summerhill school, apparently because of its alarming democratic tendencies. The inspectors did not like the idea that children could choose whether to go to lessons. The OFSTED ideology of education requires compulsory lessons. The Summerhill Appeal fund has been launched to take the case to the European Court of Human Rights. (The UK Government has only won two or three of about thirty cases taken to this court, so do not expect good odds from any bookmaker on a result in its favour.)

Other more serious candidates for closure that might be considered are: Eton school where a boy hanged himself earlier this year in a dormitory, and Stowe school where a girl hanged herself just before the start of 'A' level exams.

### **Honey, I shrunk the school holidays...**

Oliver James, a clinical psychologist, wrote in the Observer (17th July 99) regarding the proposal to shorten the school holidays: *"This is the about the silliest and most misguided idea in a long line of New Labour educational corkers. The main education policy seems to be to make as many of our children as mentally ill and uncreative at as young an age as possible...*

*As things stand, this summer holiday is the one point in the year when the minds and emotions of children escape the brain washing of childish creative potential that is so much schooling today. Is the goal of education any more than to produce uncreative and subordinate clones ready to function as work force fodder for the selfish capitalism that Mrs Thatcher imported from America? ...*

*Giving children a long annual break from educational harassment may be the only thing that keeps many from breaking down completely."*

### **Play - the mother's milk of the intellect**

*"The childhood brain is fundamentally different from that of an adult. In the first half dozen years or so, starting from a sparsely connected network of neurones, it builds up a dense pattern of connections, which is then that person's stock in trade. Thereafter, in older children, this network is thinned out, pruned down and refined to become, in fact, less dense than at, say six years.*

*Learning the three Rs involves the second development and cannot be done properly until the first is in place. Wasting time on them merely delays or damages the initial build-up of the necessary dense network. This is achieved by the instinctive process of play as seen in all mammals. It is the mother's milk of the intellect. To attempt to rob children of this, the most important part of being a human, is to cripple their growing minds."*

Dr. P.R. Richmond, letter in *The Observer* 4th July 99.

### **Thumbs down for homework**

Studies from the University of Durham and from the Institute of Education in London suggest that too much homework bored children and could put them off lessons for the rest of their school lives. There was no evidence that it boosted academic performance in the classroom. And more frequent homework - more than once a month - led to lower test scores in reading mathematics and science. A DFE&E spokesperson dismissed the research in favour of OFSTED's own reports. (Reported in the Guardian, 2nd July 99)

### **Exclusion-mania strikes North Wales school**

Officers frog-marched former head teacher James Whippe from the building of Colwyn Bay comprehensive school. After clashes with the Governors, he was suspended in 1995 and later retired on health grounds. His two daughters were later

suspended for supporting him. The family cat is now thought to be apprehensive about exclusion? (See report in the Guardian 9th July 99)

### **Tribute to Colin Ward**

A collection of essays entitled *Richer Futures* edited by Ken Worpole (Kogan Page at £12-95) has been published as a tribute to Colin Ward who describes himself as an educational heretic. *"What would Ward do if he were David Blunkett?" "Resign!"* Ward sees the only hope for education as creativity from below, not direction from above. He shakes his head at the *"strange authoritarianism of a small faction of bureaucrats who have always yearned for more control."*

### **RSA goes off the rails?**

In place of an adult imposed curriculum of subjects, the RSA proposes the 'radical rethink' of replacing it with an adult imposed competencies-led or skills-led curriculum. On the other hand, you could get really radical and propose a **learner-driven** learning system, based on a catalogue curriculum ...

### **Socialisation watch**

Most children with stammers get bullied persistently at school and many are scarred for life by the experience. (British Psychological Society report). Researchers Hugh-Jones of Leeds University and P. Smith of Goldsmith's College found that stammerers suffered name-calling, threats, rumour spreading, theft of belongings and physical aggression.

### **OFSTED watch**

A study by Cedric Cullingford, *The Effects of OFSTED Inspections on School Performance*, shows that an OFSTED inspection lowers examination performance: the nearer the inspection is to the exam period, the worse the results. OFSTED has a negative effect on pupil success in gaining higher grades in that year. The National Audit Office came to similar conclusions in its study. The Chief Inspector of Schools dismissed the results as *"pointless, misleading and stupid"*. (This echoes an oft-heard verdict on OFSTED itself).

### **Purposes of education watch**

Richard Ingrams writing in the Observer (11th July 99): *"... Most parents nowadays think of education purely as a means of getting a well-paid job at the end of it, whereas if it has any point at all, it ought to be teaching children to despise people like Chris Woodhead."*

### **Your country needs YOU!**

*"Wanted: stressed out, underfunded local authority with national standards crisis seeks highly qualified mathematics graduate for a 'neither cosy nor easy' job without meaningful security. 'Irredeemably poor' appointees may be sacked; unsuitable trainees denied staff status; five-year review period insisted upon. Salary: uncompetitive and basically non-negotiable. Rigour and consistency essential. Applicants should be prepared for constant denigration from those in authority. No excuses or mediocrity tolerated. Write without confidence to ..."*

(Peter Preston, *Why most bright kids don't want to teach*, The Guardian, 11th of August 97)

*Educational Beachcomber*

### **Book Review**

#### **Charlotte Mason: 'A pioneer of sane education'**

by Marian Wallace Ney,  
Educational Heretics Press at £9-95

*must transform things, and find the structure of his own actions on the objects."*

The value of this book lies in the ideas it contains which are still vibrant and radical. Any serious attempt to describe humane education - and this book is certainly that - deserves to be celebrated, even if one would not necessarily agree with everything it contains.

*Chris Shute*

\* \* \* \* \*

From a letter to Times Ed. Supplement 5/8/99 by Dr. R. House

*"In view of Ofsted's new responsibilities for childminders, playgroups and nurseries, it would be too easy to get side-tracked into an unproductive demonising of Chris Woodhead and his growing empire. Such a personality focus would divert us from the issue at stake ... Ofsted's colonisation of childhood is just the latest example of a state-driven control-freakery running rampant through our culture and institutions, obsessed with measuring, assessing and controlling. It is control-freakery, moreover, in which any notion of creative richness through diversity, pluralism and difference is sacrificed to the imposition of (to quote the education minister Margaret Hodge) 'consistency across the country'... The damage that will be done to a generation of children's souls by being brought up in an adult-centric environment ... where no one is assumed to be trustworthy - can scarcely be dreamt of."*

Charlotte Mason lived and wrote before the first World War, in roughly the same tranche of time as Edmond Holmes, and she saw similar defects in the education being offered to children in that authoritarian, class-ridden age, when most people assumed that children could only learn by having information pushed into them like sage and onion stuffing into a Christmas turkey.

Marian Wallace Ney was a remedial reading teacher, who went on to create innovative educational projects among Native Americans, migrant workers and emotionally disturbed children. Her daughter attended a PNEU (Parents National Educational Union) school in Edinburgh. Charlotte Mason had been one of the pioneers of the PNEU, and Marian Wallace Ney studied PNEU methods.

If, like me, you enjoyed reading John Holt and A.S.Neill because they used the vigorous language of everyday conversation to present their ideas, you will not find Ney's text gives you the same pleasure. It was written as an academic dissertation at Hofstra University, and suffers from all the faults of that genre - technical words used without explanation, verbs dragooned into the passive voice etc. I had to read it in short bursts to avoid feeling lost. Yet I have to say that when I had made the effort, I found much which was valuable.

Charlotte Mason was looking for an approach to education which engaged directly with the child's mind, and allowed him or her to grow up without the distortions of mind and spirit from which come narrow-mindedness. She assumes that both authority and spirituality are inseparable from good education, though she pleads for a proper balance between adult control and the child's freedom of action. At the same time, she builds a powerful case for many ideas which still seem radical today, and for which I value this book. She recognised that children do not benefit from having their thoughts structured by adults, and that it is folly to start requiring adult standards of precision from youngsters before they have had time to pass through the stage of mental development which is characterised by free play and unfettered exercise of the imagination. Far from being a trivial phase of a child's life, this period is the indispensable foundation of a healthy intellect.

Ney dwells at length on Charlotte Mason's methodology, which is founded on the belief that most children in schools are passive, and that any successful attempt to draw them into learning must involve the students becoming attentive to everything they hear, see and read. This attentiveness can be aroused by expecting the learners to 'narrate' back to the teacher whatever has been presented in the lesson. Mason insists that the children have to be prime movers in choosing what they will study. She decries the use of text-books, preferring to put in front of even young children real books: *"How injurious then is our habit of depreciating children; we water their books down and drain them of literary flavour, because we wrongly suppose that children cannot understand what we understand ourselves"*. And again, the child *"must be active,*

#### **Alternatives in Education Fair**

Saturday 25th September 99

Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1

10-30 - 5-00 entrance £2-00

Stall and seminars on Small schools, Steiner Education, Home-based education, Montessori, Education Now etc. Cafe and crèche available for details phone 01972 510709

Organised by Human Scale Education

#### **Spinning away ...**

Education Now has been 'on the web' for some time as part of the Educational Heretics Press site at:

**[www.gn.apc.org/edheretics](http://www.gn.apc.org/edheretics)**

but is now has its own web site, under development, at:

**[www.gn.apc.org/educationnow](http://www.gn.apc.org/educationnow)**

#### **Reminder**

The next *Learning Exchange* and AGM/Meeting for members of *Education Now* will take place on

**Sunday 26th September 1999**

at Friar's Walk Learning Centre, Burton on Trent

The *Learning Exchange* will focus on ***Centres for Learning***

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# The worst change in the UK education system

The worst change in the UK education system  
in the last 20 years.

So many changes, so few words to address them. Though on the other hand, have there really been any changes. I wish to argue that the worst change in the education system over the last 20 years is that there has been no real change at all.

Things have been introduced into the system over the last 20 years, supposedly drastic, sweeping changes' that will 'revolutionise' education and improve it for everyone, raise standards and counter truancy. The National Curriculum came in so that we could be sure that wherever you lived you were getting the same 'quality' of education; Key Stages and testing were designed to monitor progress and make sure all children reach their potential; getting children into school younger and making them take 'school' home with them; standardising the training of teachers and centralising inspection services attempts to create uniformity of experience for children. These things have all just been tinkering round the edges of a system that does not respect children as learners. The system has as its basis the idea that children are there to be formed and moulded into the compliant citizens and workers and enthusiastic consumers

Moves in the 60's to make our education system more child centred never truly took off, and the experiment petered out through lack of commitment and misunderstanding of the nature of child led learning. (As G.K. Chesterton might have put it; it is not that it has been tried and failed - rather it has been found difficult and left untried.) Professionals use this 'failure' as an argument for the continuation of a system that does not, for many children, even achieve its superficial aims of literacy and numeracy. A system that professes to know all about the nature of how children learn but appears not to act on this knowledge; research is done and evidence presented, but the relevant

government department continually chooses to follow its own agenda for the young people of this country and ignore advice or evidence that contradicts them.

During 18 years of Conservative government differences of opinion were ridden roughshod over, people who disagreed were simply disregarded. Now what we have is far more subtle and dangerous. The present government's policy of 'social inclusion' aims to simply bring everyone into the fold, with the same result that there will be no publicly expressed differences of opinion. This policy filters down through all areas of society, including the education system. They saw that to their delight the education system already did what they were after; it produced people who knew the same thing, held the same attitudes and were quite comfortable with being told what to think. If it is done for long enough, and hard enough, the

ability to think that there are other ways of thinking will disappear. People will no longer be able to imagine that learning could be about something real, rather than just the enforced absorption of a government dictated view of how society should be. So they just do MORE of what was already being done; more control of curriculum; earlier entry into formal schooling (catch them young); more homework, inflicted on younger and younger children (infringing on children's precious free time); more uniforms (that give the outward appearance of conformity to go with the conformity of thought); more government dictats about method as well as content; more assessment and inspections; just more.

There have been no REAL alterations to the way the education system operates. The worst change is the complete lack of change. Please, please, give us some change.  
Martine Archer.