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‘The Tragedy of Education’ Revisited, as Education Now is Fifteen

So, *Education Now* is fifteen years old. When Philip Toogood founded *Education Now* in 1988, it was on the principle *of ‘lighting a candle is better than grumbling at the darkness’*. There has been plenty of darkness. We never thought, as young teachers, we would live to see:

- a parent sent to prison because the children were too unhappy at school to attend
- a teacher sent to prison for cheating on examinations
- head teachers dismissed for cheating
- a school that refused the SATS ‘fined’ £3000 of their annual allocation until they caved in
- cases of teachers taking their own lives because of the oppressiveness of the inspection service OFSTED
- a teacher setting fire to a school, joining the ranks of pupils who do so
- police patrols to round up school refusers.
- a proposal that headteachers issue £50 fines to parents
- about a third of all teachers wishing to leave teaching as soon as possible
- 31% of young parents with pre-school age children having so little trust in schools that they are considering home-based education. And 61 % of these not long after experiencing the system for themselves, saying they have little trust in the education system to provide a decent education. (Vauxhall Centenary Parents Survey, 2002)

Any one of these facts taken individually might not signify much, but taken together they indicate that something is fundamentally wrong with the current learning system which is based on ‘children in captivity’ type schooling, using coercion and heavy with domination.

A radical change is needed to a modern learning system that is personalised, based on invitation and encouragement and democratic in three aspects - its organisation, its monitoring procedures and in its adoption of the more natural ‘catalogue’ curriculum approach. Actually we already have a learning institution in our midst based on these principles. It is called the public library system. So we already know how to make such a system work, and some schools are attempting to work to these principles as are most home-based educating families.

‘*The darkness’* was caused by the 1988 *Education Reform Act of England and Wales*, also referred to as *The Great Leap Backwards*, because it re-established the discredited idea of a National Curriculum, endless testing and aggressive inspection. The first National Curriculum had eventually been discarded after the Chief Inspector for Schools, Edmond Holmes, wrote a book declaring it *The Tragedy of Education* in 1921.

The present learning system is the result of the *Great Leap Backwards* of 1988 when the Thatcher government, after a power struggle in the Cabinet between traditionalists in the Department for Education and futurists in the Department for Employment led by David Young, took us back in time to the kind of schooling system of the early 1900s. This was the system Holmes saw as stultifying teachers, debasing teaching and learning, inducing cheating by linking funding to test results, and weakening imagination, creativity, and flexibility, whilst promoting *“a profound misconception of the meaning of life”* by replacing improvement through encouragement and co-operation with ruthless competition and the allocation of blame for ‘failure’.

If Britain wanted to have an education system fit for a new century, he concluded, it would have to stop telling children what to do and compelling them to do it, since this produced only passivity, lassitude, unhealthy docility or, in the stronger, more determined spirits, 'naughtiness'. Teaching had become a debased activity.

"In nine schools out of ten, on nine days out of ten, in nine lessons out of ten, the teacher is engaged in laying thin films of information on the surface of the child's mind and then after a brief interval he is skimming these off in order to satisfy himself that they have been duly laid"

The view of Holmes, as well as being similar to that of the 31% of young parents mentioned earlier, was echoed by Bertrand Russell:

“There must be in the world many parents who, like the present author, have young children whom they are anxious to educate as well as possible, but reluctant to expose to the evils of existing educational institutions.”

(*On Education*, 1926, page 7)

The 'voice' of *Education Now* has varied over the years. At first it was the magazine. It then became the small conferences. Then it became the short Special Reports publication programme. These gave way to an expanded production of books especially through partnership publishing. Currently the 'voice' of *Education Now* is its *News and Review* and its *Learning Exchange Days*. The themes and issues that *Education Now* has examined through its various voices, over the past fifteen years, have included: *Personalised Education, Choice in Education, Democratic Education and Education for Democracy, Learner-managed Learning, Education for Creativity, Early Childhood Education, Small Schools* and *Home-based Education.*

Education Now is fifteen years old this year – exactly the same as the Tories’ Education Reform Act. The co-operative has done more than ‘*light a candle*’. It has kept alive educational ideas and practices that have sustained the significant minority who, like Edmund Holmes, saw the alternative pathway of teachers as ‘guides on the side’ with minimal use of the ‘sage on the stage’, of learner-directed learning rather than teacher-directed, of the catalogue curriculum not the London civil servant devised curriculum. The co-operative has delared that home-based educators usually work this way and, therefore, deserve support as exemplars, rather than obstruction. Unexpectedly, however, the approach of David Young may be being revisited too. David Milliband is talking of the need for

'a more interactive system with more personalised learning'. Perhaps the work *of Education Now* is now bearing fruit?

One story of otherwise, (continued)

Perhaps you remember the story I narrated (*News and Review*, No. 31) describing a non-conformist approach to education and results with at least some schooled youngsters. The story concerned pupils in a London comprehensive school some years ago. Yet I offer the argument that such work could hardly be repeated in the current climate of surveillance and even repression. Yet we ought to continue to do something. Recently, when some members of a local group read the tale, quite a stir of interest occurred. The number of home-based educating families appears to be growing steadily in Sussex and Kent, many of these saw the possibility of real alternatives.

Youth work

Charlie Cooper hit one nail on the head in his piece *Making schools more learner friendly* in *News and Review*, No. 38. Run schools like Youth Clubs, he said. If only, I say somewhat pessimistically. There does not seem to be much chance of the vast majority of institutionalised and ossified school systems even to think of doing that. On the other hand, by direct action within the Youth Service, you can make good progress *right now*. Difficulties are no reason not to make a start though.

One resource limitation arises when the young home-educated family members grow up and become independent. Suggestions to carry on such work with other people's children, often result in astonished looks. At least one comment was, *"Whatever for – are you joking?"* Certainly, you tend to hear such comments from many who could contribute skills working with youth, including ex-home educators and 'scrap heap' members (retired people). The loss of possible projects this represents is sad.

Nevertheless, we find radical educators arising in every generation offering a much wider challenge – Paul Goodman, Ivan Illich, A. S. Neil, Michael Duane, McKenzie, Rudolph Steiner and earlier, Ferrer in Spain and even William Godwin in England with his withering views on what State Education would produce – plus many others.

We must continue the attempt to offer some alternative havens and service to at least some of our young people and children. Home education is still possible at the moment, but governments can be very vindictive indeed about personal freedoms. Remember, *"The price of freedom is eternal vigilance"*.

Yet home-based education apart, large numbers of suffering and damaged youngsters grind through the spontaneity destroying Key Stages of the standard system. These important but often vulnerable main stream young people may be bullied, may live in relative poverty and may experience difficult family attitudes, which fail to provide the education they yearn. Many of them yearn for it before their spirit is broken. A considerable number may have stressed-out parents who are not interested in helping them and who leave them to the swings and roundabouts of the schooling system, 'without appeal'. Unfortunately, many end up as the damaged people that Gatto and the other critics describe. So I ask the question, *"Why are so few of us working with these young people?"*

One reason may be the evidence that if you do not conform; if you dare to treat young people as autonomous persons; if you try to encourage them to become self-starters; you are eliminated from the system, in effect blacklisted. This springs from the official negativity and downright opposition to any 'successful' alternative projects that threaten the status-quo.

A further major trouble we all inherit, and it would seem to be a growing threat of enormous proportions, is that we have allowed the organisation of human society to centralise into modern Nation States with widespread and growing amounts of technical surveillance. These pernicious, central power-wielding governments form extremely destructive bureaucracies, ossified institutions and mad-house ideologies. I do not apologise for the polemical 'mad-house', as the evidence is very much near our hearts in the system of schooling we criticise.

Don't you dare remove my chains!

So having been influenced by all this, but not being a parent, I asked what could be done for at least some school hurt young people. These thoughts followed on from the radical group of lads and the 'deschooling within the school' achievements of the earlier period, (that article in *News and Review* No. 31). The result was direct action right along the lines mentioned by Charlie Cooper. But not within schools. I have tried that and been subtly blacklisted. All the mechanisms exist to do that.

Authorities feel a terrible threat to what they crave – the maintenance of their power, and as they hold the power, you 'have to watch it' as the saying goes, if you try alternatives. Authorities feel safe and in control, bound in their 'chains of office' and will oppose you.

Nevertheless, this short account commemorates the actual success of the *Thanet Electronics Club* (the 'TEC') for Youth, which achieved much more than just 'electronics', great though the progress there was. The TEC began in an interesting way. While rummaging around the 'junk' in a government surplus store in Ramsgate, two youths approached me and asked, *"Excuse us Mister, do you think these relays might switch the mains in a burglar alarm we could make?"* The resulting technical conversation covered Ohms Law, current density, and contact sparking, much to the interest of the lads. *"Can we meet you again? The club you talked about that you had in London sounds fantastic. Can we start one?"* And we did.

Problems as well as successes accrue

Nineteen years later from this event, after some hundreds of young people passed through, the work of the TEC Group finally ended (three years ago). At the moment, the restart of such a project in this region is unlikely in the present climate.

The more physical power you relinquish and the less authoritarian your input is in this kind of work, the more potent your moral lead becomes. It is as though you get into the soul of some of the (especially) boys - such is their craving for a role model. The responsibility is absolute.

At various episodes in this clubwork, without actual overt opposition to the school ethos in the locality, criticism of what was happening in schools would inevitably raise its head and trigger questioning and argument among the youths as to 'why school is so absolutely crappy' (paraphrase of a common comment).

Authorities in schools became critical. Heads suggested pupils left such 'clubs', since interference with schoolwork seemed to accrue. They meant 'discipline' problems from boys arguing. One teacher stated when we met, *"It is wrong of you to work in a County Youth Centre encouraging insubordination!"*.

Finally, the Youth Service required the vacation of the lab-workroom for 'drug counselling' and suggested we had a cupboard downstairs. This effectively ended the clubwork there, and no further premises were ever found. I relished the rest after all those years, but fully intended to start the project again – it never did, for the serious reasons I have outlined above. But we really ought to start up these direct action groups.

Postscript. Much of this article concerns the story of the TEC, a self-run group set up by and for youths to do their own thing. If this little article is dedicated, it is dedicated to these few hundred

youths who associated with this project over the eighteen or more years of its existence. The story above is the only record in print that exists which celebrates the achievements of these mainly boys who shared with me their struggle to emancipate themselves. Thank you lads; may others take up the story and continue what you started.

Ken Smith

Steve Biddulph, (1998) *Raising Boys*, Thorsons.
Chris Shute, *Compulsory Schooling Disease: how children absorb Fascist values* Educational Heretics Press.
Jaques Ellul, *The Technological Society.*
Frank Furedi, (1998) *Culture of Fear.* Cassell.
Alex Comfort, *Delinquency and the Modern State.*
Dr. Ken L. Smith for 'Education Now'. October 2002, Dec. 2002

Beach Combing

'Home Education' has always been a slightly misleading term because much of what happens takes place well away from home. It can also conjure up various false images for non-home educators which may be perjorative: a lone child sitting looking bored at home, kept away from the world and with no friends; or a house full of children creating mayhem and a distraught parent trying to cope. As home-based educators know, neither is the case. Perhaps a metaphor, inspired by the memories of the summer, and an article in *Natural Parent* ('The boulevard of broken dreams', by Roland Meighan, Sept 2001) might help.

For my family, home education is quite like beachcombing. Imagine, what I hope is a familiar scene for many, a small child on a beach. Their curiosity, sense of fun and desire to explore leads them quite naturally to run and jump, draw pictures in the sand, poke about in rock pools, run in and out of the water, fly kites, build sand castles and look under rocks.

When my daughter is playing on the beach, she is connected to the world with all her senses. What she learns comes naturally and at her own pace. Some days she picks up rocks and finds out what is underneath. Other days, picture making is the subject, or playing with other children and working out the rules of the game. She learns through all her activities because **experiencing the world** is the natural way to develop understanding.

Looking under rocks

While at the beach, my daughter often picks up rocks to see if anything interesting is underneath. As we explore the pools and rocky coves, we turn over rocks and shout to each other to *"come see…"*. Sometimes the things under my rocks I find really interesting, but she will give it a quick glance and move on, and vice versa. Other times she and I will study what is revealed, trying to figure out what it is and why it is there. My greater experience and knowledge can be useful in providing explanations of what is under the rocks but sometimes it is new to me, so together we talk about the characteristics it has, and sometimes we come up with our own name for it. She often spots things that I do not because I am too busy trying to remember the names of things and looking at the world with tired eyes. Her fresh eyes do not have the expectations, filters, and need to explain which mine do, so she can actually see what is there, not just what is 'supposed' to be there.

The beach offers many different rocks to look under. My daughter is not constrained to look under only the rocks that I think are important or interesting. I can say, *"In my experience this type of rock often has great things under it"*, and she will often give me the benefit and come and look. Sometimes she agrees and sometimes she says, *"What's so great about that?"* Of course, while we are at the beach we are not confined to looking under rocks. We can do all the things that make beaches such wonderful places.

But, *schools* are not beaches

In contrast with the beach, schools are strange, artificial places. In the past, someone, somewhere decided which rocks everyone should look under and, equally, which ones they should not. Rather than go to the beach and look under them, however, it is much more efficient to bring the rocks to a central place - the school. Unfortunately, this means that children are now stuck with looking under old rocks, collected a long time ago by someone else, which are not in their natural place and so lack their normal relationship to the wider world. From these rocks the children are told to imagine the vibrant world outside.

If the child asks why they must study these old rocks, they will be told that this is important 'learning', that it will make them clever and successful. Some children find it hard to understand how turning over rocks they have not chosen, in which they have little interest, which are old and have bits on, will be useful in their lives to come. If they persist in this questioning they will be disciplined and quickly given the label 'troublemaker'. So they have to be compelled to attend school where they are sentenced to many years of 'hard-labour' amidst the dusty rocks. Some schools do try and smarten up their collection of rocks, even getting new ones in, or using audio/visual techniques to show what they look like in their natural setting. But it is a long way from actually being on the beach with the wind in your hair and sand between your toes. The child may day-dream about the great times - the fun, the joy, the kites and the sandcastles, the sea and the sun - of the last holiday, when life was full of excitement, rich with experience, and much was learnt.

Lots of ways to learn and play at the beach

Whilst some children are at their enforced rock-turning in schools, the home-educators are at the beach. Whatever the weather there is usually something to see and do and most days the 'beach-combers' come down to enjoy the ever-changing scene the real world offers.

Because people are different, beachcombers have a variety of styles they employ when they are at the beach. Some parents feel they (and their children) need some structure for at least some of the day. You will see them diligently at work with their kids, turning over a succession of rocks. Others will have a particular interest in one area of the beach, or a specific activity and encourage their kids to enjoy and explore their passions with them. Others are more relaxed and see their role as simply getting everyone to the beach with the basics (challenge enough sometimes!). Once there, it is over to the kids to sort out what is on the programme today. However, after some serious relaxation they are always ready to join in a game of catch, to help launch a kite, to explore the pools and turn over some rocks when they are asked to.

As an adult I have experience of beaches and know some things about them that I am keen to point out and share with my daughter. Together we explore, finding new things, old things, and washed-up things. At times I make suggestions about where to go on the beach where interesting things may be found. Mostly though, we explore together, with my daughter leading the way. Of course my partner and I are seen as responsible for making sure we have drinks, food, buckets, spades, kites, surf boards, frizzbees, balls etc. when needed! Often the best times, when most fun and interaction occurs, are when there is not much structure or too many restrictions. And it is great when we meet others and develop the world's best game of frizzbee or cricket, or play together in the sea.

Whatever the different ways of playing at the beach, most beachcombers will always find time to simply enjoy being there. The children will have time to explore as they desire and to meet and chat with the other folk on the beach that day. Learning becomes fun, exciting, and rewarding, as children explore and question their world. The learning is from experience and observation, firmly rooted in the real world. Yet, life is not perfect and home-education is not always easy - we do not always manage 'to get to the beach' - life intrudes with its demands, I am

tired, my daughter is having a bad day, or whatever. Like every family we have our ups and downs, but the beach is always there, waiting for us to visit it again.

On occasion the beachcombers take time-out away from the beach to experience other environments. Some days a cliff walk takes them further afield, on others the fog rolls in or the rain pelts down and it is good to stay warm indoors. Life is a beach: a rich and wonderful environment full of opportunities to play and learn – to experience, and thus to know. Who wants to go to school when you can 'go to the beach' instead! Do not call me a 'home-educator; call me a beachcomber! (Anyone for another ice cream?)

Martin Wise

Making a difference:

improving schools with lifelong-learning

Can the idea of lifelong-learning help make classrooms better places for both children and teachers? With an increasing number of L.E.As putting this phrase on their notepaper and with Government establishing a minister with responsibility for the subject, it certainly looks like a concept whose time has come. Whilst for politicians, the idea has usefully been linked to the economic benefits of education - `learning is the key to prosperity` - many educators are aware that it also carries a number of other values and aspirations that can appeal to teachers looking for an alternative agenda to the one that that currently dominates.

Central to the notion of lifelong-learning is a willingness to question conventional, and often arbitrary, barriers; it is the learning that matters rather than the name of the subject or the sector. A few schools are experimenting with a more integrated curriculum - for example, those trialling the RSA`s *Opening Minds* initiative - but even where this is not the case, teachers, working in partnerships, should be able to find ways of developing cross-curriculuar links in their teaching. War Poetry, for example, may be studied both in English and History or Pollution both in Science and Geography. Such an inter-disciplinary approach provides a powerful demonstration to students that knowledge cannot be neatly packaged to fit the school timetable.

Schools and individual teachers could also do a lot more to put the lifelong-learning ethos into practice by seeking, in spite of the well-known difficulties, to overcome the barriers which exist between classroom learning and life learning; Billy Caspar talking about his kestrel in Barry Hines` novel, *Kes*, still remains a vivid, albeit rather ancient, example of lifelong-learning in action.

Questionnaires and interviews provide obvious means for finding out about pupils`interests and more might certainly be done to enable children to present to parents and other members of the local community, the knowledge and expertise they have gained through pursuing their hobby. In lessons also, teachers who are aware of children`s informal learning, are better able to make the academic material they are teaching, meaningful and relevant.

Another type of barrier that reduces the effectiveness of schools is institutional. Recent research which indicates that many new entrants into secondary education make little or no progress in their first year or two, suggests that policy-makers and educators responsible for the curriculum (this is probably a task beyond the capacities of the single teacher) need to do more to strengthen the curricular links between children`s learning in their primary schools and the learning they undertake at the beginning of secondary school; if a child starts studying the Battle of Hastings in Year 6, they should be able to deepen and extend their understanding of the topic in Year 7.

A further barrier which the concept of lifelong-learning aims to address, arises from the traditional division between academic and vocational learning. Structural solutions have been tried - for example, the career-academy in the US, in which the curriculum is organised around work-based themes, or the city-technology college model here. But, on a more modest scale, teachers can bridge the gap between classroom and work-place by regularly focusing, through the questions they ask and the work they set, on the practical relevance of academic issues and questions; the topic of population growth in Geography, for example, may quite easily be related to whether a business should expand into new markets.

Schools and teachers motivated by the principles of lifelong-learning can then, through overcoming various barriers, improve education for their students. It is important, however, to make one last point. Only if teachers are also viewed as learners, so that their work in the classroom is recognised as contributing to the development of a body of professional knowledge, will schools become real learning communities, fully enabled to implement and take advantage of a lifelong-learning agenda.

Mike Peters

Happy 10th Birthday to *The Otherwise Club*

The Otherwise Club's roots go back thirteen years to the home of a family with a long-term vision of providing a community centre for home educators. The group quickly expanded beyond the capacity of a family home, and in February 1993, new premises were found in Kilburn, London. It was here that *The Otherwise Club* began in its present form. We currently have in the region of forty families with each family paying membership fees towards the cost of renting premises, regular workshops, educational visits and holidays together.

Many of *News and Reviews* readers will already know how and why the club was founded so I will pass over that. Instead I would like to write about three rules of thumb that I have learnt from the last ten years at club. The first rule of thumb is to be eternally patient. Children take adults censure to heart. You may not mean to be hurtful but a young person can feel it that way. Please, always (and we are all human) try to take a breath before saying something negative to a child or young person.

The second rule is to be ever flexible. You may decide to do X craft. When the children arrive they do Y activity with your ideas and craft materials. Often, If you are truthful, their ideas are better than yours were. And even if the children's activity is not actually better, it is truly better because it comes from the people who are supposed to be benefiting from the activity. If you want to do X craft do it for yourself. Do not try to justify making others do it by saying it is good for them. In fact a further ramification of this rule of thumb is *"Always beware of anyone telling you to do something 'for your own good'"*. The last rule of thumb, I am afraid is self-explanatory and practical. Never turn down money!

We would like to thank The Meighans, *Education Now* and the *Centre for Personalised Education* for supporting the club enthusiastically through thick and thin over the past ten years. It is this sort of support for the club in particular but for home-based education in general that is invaluable and enables projects like ours to thrive. We are very excited and proud that this project in alternative education has touched so many people's lives over the past ten years. *The Otherwise Club* remains a unique project in alternative education and looks forward to its next ten years. *Leslie Barson*

The Centre for Personalised Education
Home-based Education Research Funding

We would like to thank all those who responded to the request for contributions towards funding this research project. The money received so far enables the next stage of the research to take place.

Home-based education in the UK has until now survived on one-off pieces of research often undertaken as part of Master Degree or PhD studies. The costs have therefore been absorbed by the individuals concerned. But sustained, in-depth research cannot be undertaken in this way and costs money. The 'free' research has been valuable but has left large gaps in our knowledge and weakens the ability of the home education movement to defend itself againsts attacks. Journalists giving endless anecdotal accounts just does not do it. Therefore, the research fund still needs help – all contributions are valued. Please send to: CPE, 113 Arundel Drive, Bramcote Hills, Nottingham. NG9 3FQ.

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Membership of *Education Now* costs £20 per year (joint with CPE £25). In return members receive four issues of *News and Review* and information about new books, *Learning Exchanges* etc.

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Centres for Personalised Education

The South Downs Learning Centre

Children taking charge of their own learning? Can it be possible? **YES.** We've been developing the **Self Managed Learning** approach over many years – and it works. The *South Downs Learning Centre* is a new venture, initiated by the *Centre for Self Managed Learning* in Brighton, which is based on these principles. **Self Managed Learning** does what it says on the label – it helps people to be more self managing. Young people become more self confident, more able to take charge of their own lives and more likely to pursue satisfying careers.

Many people have taken their children out of school because they do not feel that their children are getting the chance to learn the things they want in the way they want. Other children stay in school but want a chance to take more control of their own lives. We can support both groups of parents and children. The Learning Centre provides programmes during the week for children being home educated and also weekend groups for those in school.

The Centre opened in October last year with a group of 12 to 15 year-olds (the initial target age-range is 7 to 16 year-olds). There is no imposed curriculum and students agree their own learning goals with the group and with their parents. The group meet one day a week in a Community Learning Centre and for the rest of the week students work in whatever location suits them – often at home – but students also go to tutors, do attachments such as to the RSPCA, play music and visit each other. Most students intend to do some GCSEs but they are learning a whole lot more than the ability to pass examinations.

The *South Downs Learning Centre* is developing an active community where people feel part of something worthwhile.

Ian Cunningham

(For more info contact Ian on 01273 703691 or cunningham@pavilion.co.uk)

The Stables Project, York

The Stables Project, now in its second year, is a small centre working essentially with young people. We are housed in an old stables block converted into two studio spaces with small darkroom, kitchen, workshop, computer room and yard. We are city based, experiential, and determined to respond creatively to modern conditions.

Our first intention was to work with 16-25 year-olds with a focus on orientation in life but were soon joined full-time by 4 fifteen-year-olds, and regular part-timers up to 60 years-old. With this first group of 10-14 people we established our particular culture: we all wanted to study, both individually and within interest groups and support each other in documenting our work. The creation of portfolios has since become almost a religion! Through studying human physiology, psychology, history of art and earth sciences, we began to find our own approach to learning wthin wide age-range groups. We were clear we wanted to explore a host of crafts. We built a wooden lathe that has been used in various furniture and desgin projects. Afternoon courses have included car mechanics, basketry, lamp making, puppetry designing and making blinds for the studio windows. Friday morning sees us all cleaning the building, reviewing and previewing each week's work, conducting group meetings and regular mentoring sessions.

In summer we presented our puppet theatre as work in progress to local school children, then worked with two artists on projects inspired by the people and places in our immediate locality. We finally opened our doors to our neighbouring public as a gallery, exhibiting final pieces, called *Insite*. During the holidays a group of 20+ year-olds went to work with gypsy children in Romania.

Our discovery of *The Centre for Personalised Education Trust* provided us with timely support, both practically and morally. We have begun to collaborate with other local initiatives and care professionals, have won a substantial grant for this year's community arts project, and have attracted more students. We are now busy consolidating and expanding. We welcome contact!

Linda Fryer

(Tel: 01904 675 522 or email:stables.project@btclik.com)

The Isle of Wight Learning Zone

The *Isle of Wight Learning Zone* (IWLZ) is a group of about 30 home educating families offering support, resources and social contacts. Of course, that is the very basic essence of what we are actually all about. The group was conceived on a July evening in 1999 when a few home educators got together to discuss, as they had for some time, issues like dealing with the LEA and the possible need for a small school. We left that meeting with the germ of an idea that in September '99 became IWLZ, with the grand total of six families. We had identified that while we were all coping well enough on our own, children and adults alike might benefit from activities that brought in new people, new ideas. We also felt that there were other families out there, unhappy with school or who wanted to home educate but who needed someone to talk to, someone to give them support, encouragement and inspiration.

Three practical ideas helped tie us together as a group. The first was that when we did something creative, broadly educational or just plain fun with our children, we could offer a few places to other children in the IWLZ. The second was a newsletter that would help publicise these activities and keep members in touch. The third was regular committee meetings at a child friendly venue, which helped us thrash out the beginnings of a constitution. These meetings were where we met new members and really got to know old ones, and where many friendships have been formed. Within two months, we had embarked on the first of many wildly ambitious projects, a play written and performed by the children, which was performed in public. Weeks started to fill up with workshops and socials, children enlarged their social contacts and began to participate in many new activities, and the committee expanded. The number of families increased rapidly, until it stabilised at about 30. Big projects like the first play have both pulled us together and challenged us all. Over the last year, we have organised camping and walking trips, socials, many workshops, a cardboard boat regatta, an adventure weekend, a science access course, an art exhibition and a choir, to name just a few events. A core of hardworking committee members work on producing the newsletter every two months and a bulletin of events in between. An events co-ordinator keeps track of workshops and events, people deal with publicity, committee meetings, the LEA, letters, grants, new members, money etc. in their own time, as well as keep the energy flowing round the group. But it is the members who set up a workshop or event (or who attend them) who actually keep the IWLZ going. From the very start, we have built in the principle of acceptance, inclusion, non-judgement. Its OK to send a child to school, its OK to have special needs in the group, its OK to fail within the *Learning Zone*. In this environment, many children have flourished, trying new things all the time, gaining friends, learning new skills.

But I think the adults have gained as much. At *Zone* workshops or socials home education is the norm, we are not the odd ones out. Other parents offer support without judgement when we falter or question. We have had opportunities to share our interests and our ideas without ridicule. That is not to say we do not have lively debates, even heated ones, but these happen when people care deeply about things. They are a bit like family disputes, they have to be thrashed out in order to move on again. *The Zone* has proved itself, after 3 years, to be a robust, optimistic group full of energy, positivity and love. I look forward to the next three years.

Reb Alexander

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The Whistleblowers: Bertrand Russell

The world of education has always had a problem with Bertrand Russell. Shakespeare summed it up pithily in 'Julius Caesar' with his description of Cassius*: "He thinks too much. Such men are dangerous"*. Brought up without schooling, and the irrational pressures which so often go with it, he became one of the few true polymaths of the twentieth century. His natural intelligence, fostered by an education which allowed him to examine his world without endless reminders from adults that he was too young to understand it, allowed him to become an authentic seeker of truth. It also endowed him with the intellectual resilience to challenge and refute many of the conventions which govern our dealings with children.

It is easy to understand why such a man should be able to write powerfully and attractively about education without having the slightest influence on government policy or the way teachers work. The role of intellectuals and academics in British education has always been an equivocal one. They have their place - in Universities, where they pursue arcane knowledge and bring prestige to the wider nation by their largely incomprehensible research - but if given too much of a say in the workings of ordinary schools and colleges they threaten to undermine the accepted preoccupations of ordinary teachers - teach-and-test, strict class control, rote-learning and 'Call me Sir'. They tend to ask questions with uncomfortable answers, and to insist that children are far more complex and capable than our rather contemptuous treatment of them would suggest.

Russell was, perhaps, the best example of this kind of intellectual. From the very beginning of his adult life he saw education in counter-cultural terms. *"There can be no agreement,'* he wrote, *'between those who regard education as a means of instilling certain definite beliefs, and those who think it should produce the power of independent judgement."* Since the very beginning of compulsory schooling, teachers have been servants of the government, charged with producing young adults who will conform, with the minimum of complaint or question, to a set of social and intellectual norms. They are still judged by the docility of their pupils, and by their ability to cram knowledge into the youngsters' heads, whether it interests them or not. Russell's view was very different. *"The first thing...to kill in the young is imagination. Imagination is lawless, undisciplined, individual and neither correct nor incorrect; in all these respects it is inconvenient to the teacher, especially when competition requires a rigid order of merit."* He rejected the founding idea of schooling, that the locus of all child-rearing is the teacher and his special knowledge. He insisted that *"it is by what we do for ourselves that we learn"*.

Russell respected children, mainly, I suspect, because he took the trouble to look at them and observe their behaviour without the insidious preconception that they are naturally full of faults and shortcomings which only adults can 'remedy'. He insisted that children should be happy during their childhood, and took pains to eliminate from the lives of his own children the coercive, moralistic training by which so many parents act out their belief in Original Sin. He summed up his intentions in words striking in their simplicity*: 'Happiness in childhood is absolutely necessary to the production of the best type of human being'*. Anyone who has experienced the strained, joyless atmosphere of many schools, and observed the amount of time teachers spend in repressing the healthy, natural impulses of their pupils will understand how radically Russell's vision of education challenges what is on offer in 21st century Britain. We still see education as a grim assault-course, full of testing obstacles and hardships endured for the sake of the benefits they might confer in later life. Russell denounced this view because he recognised that it lay at the root of an essentially dehumanising process whose hidden goal was the training docile citizens who would not challenge the right of the Government to force them into poverty or war if it suited it.

It is, perhaps, strange that Russell, who never set foot in a conventional classroom during his childhood, did not strongly advocate what we now call home-schooling. He felt that ordinary, working-class families were not in a position to give children a clean, safe environment for learning. He grew up at a time when millions of English people lived in a squalor which it is hard for us to envisage, and survived on minuscule wages, so he can probably be forgiven for suggesting that children would be better off in properly organised boarding schools. It is clear from his writing that he wanted to see educators making a more serious effort than most of them were doing to create educative environments in which individuals' needs could be properly balanced against the culture of what he called the 'Herd'. He had seen how Maria Montessori brought children together to do interesting things without rewards and punishments on which so many schools rely, and he wanted to extend these opportunities to most ordinary children. Since he believed that *"...the right discipline consists not in external compulsion, but in the habits of mind which lead spontaneously to desirable rather than undesirable activities"*, he felt sure that schools could be organised in ways which fostered calmness, confident thinking and a positive, happy disposition.

He used this base of ideas to create his own school, Beacon Hill, in a large house, which had once been a semaphore station. It was set in a landscape which offered plenty of space for play and fine views of Suffolk. It was in many ways ideal for children. It would be pleasant to record that he had the same success with it as Neill did at Summerhill, but unfortunately he found that money was always tight, he could not find enough teachers who shared his non-coercive vision of education, and, like Neill, he attracted too many problem children, who were never permanently cured by his methods because they re-imbibed the destructive attitudes which their parents instilled in them, albeit unconsciously, when they went home for the holidays. His wife kept the school going for some time, but he left it after a time to concentrate on his mathematical and philosophical work. This should not prejudice us against his thought. Every educational theorist discovers weaknesses in his position when he puts it to the test of practical experience. That is natural, because large visions are much harder to construct and maintain, with their wealth of detail and complexity, than the simplistic, one-size-fits-all mechanisms favoured by cost-conscious civil servants and media-savvy politicians.

Russell is important because he never departed from his view that education is supremely a human question, and cannot be carried on where children are not seen as human beings with individual needs, but only as cogs in the national wheel, who must learn to take a place in life which has been decided for

them by others who care nothing for their humanity except in as far as it can be used to achieve spurious nationalistic ends.

Chris Shute

Bertrand Russell: 'education as the power of independent thought', by Chris Shute, Educational Heretics Press, costs£8-50 (p.&p.incl.)

Book received

The Happy Child: changing the heart of education

By Steven Harrison, Sentient Publications, Colarado
ISBN 1-59181-000-0

This book grew out of the deep explorations and discussions that occurred in the founding of a learning community – *The Living School* in Boulder, Colorado. In facing the complex questions of child-rearing, education, autonomy and relatedness, and the fragmentation of society, it was obvious that no matter what we had come to understand, no matter what the admirable models of alternative education, from Waldorf to Summerhill we could find, the challenge that we were facing to create a learning community would take us into uncharted territory … But soon enough there was the exhilarating realisation that the recognition of unknowing is in fact the very quality we are trying to embody in the learning environment … Unknowing is the expression of the driving curiosity that we see in the children around us. They are completely comfortable in a state of continuous learning where we adults often seek conclusion.

(It is a USA book so you may have to go to Amazon to obtain it)

Alternative Approaches to Education

By Fiona Carnie, Routledge Falmer, ISBN 0-415-24817-5 price £16-99

The book is designed to give parents and teachers information on the alternative education options available in the UK. It covers three main areas:

1. Outside the state system: small schools, Steiner Waldorf schools, Montessori schools, democratic schools, and schools with other alternative philosophies.

2. Doing it yourself: setting up a small school or learning centre, educating at home, flexible schooling.

3. Alternatives within the state system: how some state schools are finding different ways of working.

Research Studies in Early Childhood Education

Edited by Cathy Nutbrown, Trentham Books, ISBN185856-270-8, price £16-99

The book is designed to help students researching in the field of early childhood education and also practitioners who want to put research findings to use.

From Book Reviews

Bertrand Russell: 'education as the power of independent thought'

By Chris Shute, Educational Heretics Press, price £8-50

"When I realised that Bertrand Russell was born in the late 1800s, I was amazed by his insight and understanding. Even in 2002, we have people with the Victorian belief that children should be seen and not heard, yet here in Bertrand Russell we have a man who had a forward-thinking view of life, children, education and society as a whole. Chris Shute writes with respect about Bertrand Russell; on page 3 he writes, *'I shall try to show in this book that Russell believed in learning as a life long pursuit, from which no-one should be excluded by any factor which could be controlled and eliminated from their life'*. I believe that Chris Shute managed to do just that and I will be quoting from this book forevermore."

Jo Borthen in *Education Otherwise*, No. 148, October 2002

John Holt: 'personalised learning instead of uninvited teaching'

By Roland Meighan, Educational Heretics Press, £10-00

"The father of a five-year-old child asked my advice recently – his little girl cries in bed because she can't learn her spellings. He's a police officer, so I advised him to go down to the school and arrest everyone in the staffroom. But like many parents he feels powerless in the face of pedagogic confidence. How can this sort of thing be right? What does it have to do with education?

For that matter, what would John Holt have thought? His first book, *How Children Fail*, published in the early sixties, explained exactly why children cry about school in bed, and went on to make the blindingly obvious point that it doesn't, educationally, do much good … Holt wrote nine more books, increasingly critical of the way schools were developing. Now we have a national curriculum with public exams at 7, 11, 14, 16, 17 and 18 – and just in case any child wants out, there's a truancy patrol luking down the shops. Holt, who died in 1985, must be spinning in his grave …

"In his conclusion, Meighan distils from the books 16 'principles for the reconstruction of learning' that will strike cords with anyone working in schools. The idea that 'imposed testing subverts education', for example, becomes more believable by the day."

Gerald Haigh, *Times Educational Supplement*, Oct 11, 2002

On the recent death of Ivan Illich

Professor Edith King of Denver University wrote a Trailblazer for *Education Now News and Review* on Illich and some of her comments are worth repeating as a tribute:

Ivan Illich reached the pinnacle of his popularity and influence in the 1970s with his books on deschooling society. Then, teachers, school administrators, and parents were continually quoting his writings even though he was one of most virulent detractors of formal schooling and public education in recent times. In a highly controversial book, *Deschooling Society*, published in 1971 in the USA, Illich postulated the notion that all nations, not just advanced industrial societies, should abolish their school systems.

This champion of deschooling attempted to unmask the hidden curriculum in schools which he labelled as the tacit teaching of superficial social norms, values and dispositions that produced massive consumer mentality. Illich wrote:

"The hidden curriculum teaches all children that economically valuable knowledge is the result of professional teaching and that social entitlements depend on the rank achieved in a bureaucratic process. The hidden curriculum transforms the explicit curriculum into a commodity and makes its acquisition the securest form of wealth. Knowledge certificates - unlike property rights, corporate stock, or family inheritance - are free from challenge. They withstand sudden changes of fortune ... Everywhere the hidden curriculum of schooling initiates the citizen to the myth that bureaucracies guided by scientific knowledge are efficient and benevolent. Everywhere this same curriculum instils in the pupil the myth that increased production will provide a better life."

Flotsam and Jetsam

Young parents give their verdict

Nearly one third of parents who are expecting a child or have children aged under 5, say that they are considering teaching their child at home. Nearly two thirds of these parents say that they do not trust the education system to educate the youngsters properly.

Vauxhall Centenary Parents Survey, 2002.

Eat your way to a free book

"A child would have to eat Monster Munch or Wotsits every day for more than six months to obtain a book worth just over a fiver for the school ... the scheme, by Walkers crisps, is a marketing wheeze for selling junk food."

Tim Minogue, the *Guardian*, 6th January 2003.

Getting back to Shakespeare

"Young children would find learning to read and write much easier if we still spelt many words as Shakespeare did, e.g. hee, mee, shee, wee ... Scholars continued to debate and to write in Latin until the middle of the 17th century. They felt that only by making this uncouth, mongrel language of Shakespeare conform to Latin spelling patterns and grammar could it if be made acceptable for intellectual use. What fools learned folk sometimes be."

Marcia Bell, *Times Educational Supplement*, 13th Dec. 2002.

Advertising, advertising, advertising

"In just one week recently, my children came home from their state primary school with marketing material for three separate brands. (They were Ariel, Persil and Cannons Health Club.) Marketing through school does seem to have shifted a gear. A few years ago it was just a case of collecting the 'computers for schools' (or similar) vouchers. Now there sometimes seem to be new company brands lurking around every corner of the school curriculum."

Siobhan Hockton, *The Observer*, 15th December 2002.

Schools and those fascist tendencies ...

"... The latest initiative (headteachers power to fine parents) contributes to a sinister picture of a state determined to tell its citizens how to bring up their children. To my father, it sounds alarmingly familiar. Brought up in Italy under Mussolini, he was at primary school doing the war. The fascists, he said, used school to reinforce their messages about respect for authority and steely self-discipline ... Police kept records of parents of truants, and sometimes fined them."

Cristina Odone, *The Observer*, 15th December 2002.

Damage repair?

"Most of my life, I have been, convalescing from the long illness of youth."

Barry Humphries, *The Observer*, 1st December 2002.

Testing to bankruptcy?

"Schools and colleges have paid out a massive £185 million in exam fees this year. The estimated sum is solely the cost of entering pupils for GCSEs, A-levels or their vocational equivalent. This does not include the hiring of invigilators, buying new desks, paying for off-site premises to hold exams, extra administration staff and full-time examinations officers. Nor does it include the cost of key skills qualifications, mark schemes and practice papers, late-entry surcharges or the fees for re-mark requests. If the costs of running national curriculum tests - £33 million this year - are added, the total comes to nearly quarter of a billion pounds." Julie Henry, *Times Educational Supp.*6th Sept. 2002.

Catalogue curriculum, U.S.A. style

New York City has turned eighty schools into learning centres where children and families are free to select from a large menu of activities. The Beacon Centres, as the programme is called ... are open after school, weekends and doing summer vacation.

Education Revolution, No.36, Autumn 2002.

The classroom obstacle course

"The classroom is at the heart of the sense of dismay felt by many pupils and teachers: an obstacle to be overcome by the motivated, a source of defeat for those who are already struggling. Uncomfortable, noisy, chairs. Rows of desks decorated with graffiti and hardened chewing gum. Unforgiving linoleum floors. Walls painted in drab colours. Harsh lighting ... a classroom is an environment you must fit yourself into rather than one designed with you in mind." Will Woodward reporting on the Design Council report on school design, *Fit for Purpose*, the *Guardian*, 4th Nov. 2002.

When the university pay *you* top-up fees …

A university has paid £30,000 in an out of court settlement rather than contest his claim for breach of contract. Mike Austen complained about overcrowded lecture halls, being turned away from seminars because they were full, assignments set by tutors which contained grammatical errors. The *Guardian*, 1st August 2002.

Peer group watch

One in four teenage schoolchildren admit that they have committed a crime in the past twelve months. The most common profile was a white male living in London aged 14-16 who had been excluded from school. Only 11% of those in London had been caught compared with 43% in Wales and 44% in the north-east. The *Guardian*, 20th May 2002.

Testing to destruction?

"According to a review just published of research into testing ... Bristol University found that repeated testing lowers pupils self-esteem and started a downward spiral of less effort, lower motivation and even lowered results."

Wendy Berliner, *Guardian Education*, 5th December 2002.

Human Rights watch

"Together we have come to realise that for most, the right to learn is curtailed by the obligation to attend school."

Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 1971.

The 'Big Issue' shoots itself in the foot

"I am writing to say that I am really angry at the article about home-education in the Big Issue. I was one of the young people quoted and I would like this opportunity to refute some of the nonsense that Ms Coyle and Alan McLean wrote ..." Many home educators have decided to boycott the Big Issue until an apology is printed.

Schoolhouse Times, Autumn 2002.

What the 'Big Issue' did not say

"I have come into contact with home-schooled children for some years now. Home-schooled university students in my lectures were invariably more sociable, inquisitive and, in the end, very successful. But in my voluntary Youth Science club, the occasional home educated children were a delight with enthusiasm, self-confidence and interest. As a life-long educator at all levels, I am delighted to see a rapid growth in people pulling children out of the, on the whole, disastrous schooling system, and doing some real educating."

Schoolhouse Home Education News, Autumn 2002.

Educational Beachcomber

Education Now Damage limitation: Parents: trying to survive the schooling system

My attempts to survive the system

1. Look for the good things

My **first child, Otto,** went to school for **2** years so I saw the good and bad of the school system. Actually, there was only one good thing about it and that was the 6 hours free childminding I got every day (good for me anyway). I saw a lot of bad, but the main things that mattered to me, and still matter, were lack of respect for children, lack of kindness, and the many incidents of injustice that I witnessed. It makes no logical sense that children should be considered LESS sensitive than adults, yet schools (and most parents, sadly) operate on this assumption. It is considered OK to humiliate a 5-year-old in front of 30 other people, but how would we adults feel if it happened to us? Personally, I would feel devastated for days, yet children are expected to shrug it off, and if they do not, well, they are 'sulking', which is further cause for public humiliation. And we wonder why, when they are big enough and articulate enough, children rebel. Society blames it on their hormones. Looks to me like they are getting their own back, making themselves heard at last. Seems fair enough to me. Good luck to them.

Anyway, back to the subject. Although I joined *Education Otherwise* (EO) when Otto was 4, home education seemed very scary. So many home educators seemed to me to be such saintly and self-sacrificing people, completely focused on their children. This was the impression I was getting from EO newsletters, plus I had met a home educator who was very nice but also fitted this description. I did not think I could be like that; it would be like giving up my own life. I get bored playing with children.

2. Con yourself – 'this one is better than the rest'

So, school it was. I persuaded myself, as so many parents do, that the school I had found for him was better than the rest. But over the years, I realised that no matter what a school said about itself at its open day, your child's well being, or otherwise, depended mainly on the personality of the adult whose care they were in, i.e. their teacher for that year.

3. Make a grand gesture - then retreat

Being a hot-headed person, I occasionally made the grand gesture of marching out of the school dragging Otto behind me, on account of some injustice I had witnessed (not to my own child they never treat your child badly in front of you). But then, after a couple of days attempting the 'kitchen table' style of home education and losing my temper with Otto a lot along the way, I would decide I was probably going to do more damage to him than the school and I would take poor Otto back with my tail between my legs.

4. Tell a teacher the truth – and later apologise

I remember one occasion in Otto's classroom, when a four-year-old boy proudly showed the teaching assistant the Lego house he had made (back in the days when children were allowed to play in school). To my amazement, she violently smashed the house to pieces in front of him, shouting furiously, *"THIS IS NOT A HOUSE YOU LAZY BOY! HOUSES HAVE ROOFS"*. I in turn went berserk with her, announced that no son of mine was going to remain in such an environment and marched out of the school with Otto. After a couple of hours at the kitchen table, head in hands,

despairing at the thought of being a full-time single parent again, I slunk back into the classroom, swallowed my pride and apologised for shouting at her in front of the class *"That's all right"*, she said kindly, *"I could tell you weren't feeling well"*.

I wish 1 had known then what I know now: that children learn *anyway* (without the kitchen table scenario), and that home education is such good *fun*, even for us mothers. Best of all, I have also found it can be done with very little **self-sacrifice.** I really wish more people realised that because then more people might do it.

4. Shop around?

When Bobby came along I was in a stable relationship and felt confident enough to try home education if that was what he wanted. He wanted to try nursery though. The first nursery he tried was a bleak place, run by cynical, unhappy adults who, I noticed, would even lie to the children to get them to do what they wanted them to. I stayed with him there every day, and one day I added up the time the children spent sitting quietly 'on their bottoms'. It was one and a quarter hours out of a two and a half hour session. It took me a couple of mornings to decide this was not a good place for young children, that no-one here was on their side. It took Bobby a week. I still feel satisfaction that I was able to tell the teachers (politely this time, but in full detail) exactly what I thought was wrong with the place, including the lying.

But Bobby did not want to give up on the idea of nursery. He wanted to try another one, so we did. This was a much kinder place, and I think Bobby might have stayed for longer, but the headteacher of the school it was attached to would not let Bobby have a part-time place because he was 4 and, well, *"rules are rules"*. I argued and she bent slightly. She said he could go part-time for the first week, then full-time. Bobby let me leave him on his first (and last!) full day. I came home and cried a bit, then did a dance of freedom round the kitchen, then sat down to PLAN MY FUTURE CAREER. My fantasy of myself as a rich, successful Shirley Conran superwoman type person was short-lived however. When I picked him up at 3.30, he announced indignantly that he was never going back there. Too much time 'on his bottom' again. Nurseries love that phrase do they not?

So home education it was. Around this time, 1 was going to a playgroup run by Barry. I told him that I had decided to home educate Bobby, but was feeling isolated from my circle of friends who had put their children in nurseries. Well, not only did Barry reveal that he was a home educator himself, but also that his partner ran a home education group nearby. The next day I went there. I immediately felt completely welcome and at home and have been going there ever since. It was the first time in my life I had been surrounded by so many like-minded people. Four years on, we still go there every week. I do not know who enjoys it more, Bobby or me. I do not know about him, but like to think it has taught *me* how to socialise, which, strangely, 7 years at the 25th best school in this country (see 2002 secondary school league tables) did not.

Jane Dent

(First published in *Choice in Education* 56, Nov, 2002)

Damage limitation or damage repair?

School does not only impinge on school hours. Homework takes out hours available for 'damage limitation' work. There are books to be read, spellings to be practised, maths to be checked, projects to be investigated - sometimes with only a few hours notice. (‘Go to the Library in town tonight and ...' is not an unusual command, even for children too young to get there without adult help.) Schools even send home worksheets for parents to complete with their children, apparently on the basis that all parents need help with basic skills and have to be forced into learning with their children.

Sure, you can limit the damage by explaining to your children what it is that you do not value about school work, with discussions of individuality, equality, rights and choices, but it is the children who have to face the wrath, sarcasm or other punishments of the teacher the next day if it is not done.

Perhaps that is the secret of damage limitation: it is an act of democracy, not 'spoiling children by giving them everything they want’. Instead, it is giving them an equal voice in the choices and decisions of here and now living, not the vague promise of a ‘maybe’ voice at some time in the future, to be earned if in the meantime they learn to be dependent on the narrow world of school.

To build self-esteem in a child who is getting very different messages from home and school is an extremely difficult task. As an example, when my 10 year-old was trying to learn a piece of music for a school concert the teacher insisted on her playing what I knew to be a wrong note (b natural instead of b flat) - she just did not know who to believe or which note to play. I challenged the school with a short note to the teacher pointing out the error as tactfully as possibly with the result that the teacher gave up rehearsing the piece and awarded an ‘effort stamp' to the other child involved who had not disagreed with her judgement! It took a lot of work to restore my child's belief in her ability to play music after this incident - this becomes damage repair not damage limitation.

Sometimes the teachers' own actions demonstrate much more eloquently than my words how pointless their rules and requirements are. The teacher who insists that each boy has to be separated by at least three girls - in a class of 9 boys and 21 girls, or the one who criticises a whole class for not learning their spelling lists when she has taken away from them for marking the books those spellings were written in, both serve very well to highlight the futility of it all.

Damage limitation was not previously a term that I had consciously considered. I wanted us to *be* a family - something I am very conscious of resenting school-time taking away from us. What is important is that we want to do whatever we do, there are no orders and no pressure (and definitely no worksheets) and the emphasis is on choices and enjoyment. Our activities are in one respect 'business as usual', a natural extension of pre-school activities, but they become real family learning events – I had never heard of a turnstone until recently, for example (and I am learning to resist the temptation to assume that others do not know and need my instruction!). Most of our activities could be 'fitted' to curriculum subjects if we wanted to. We do not usually, but sometimes chose to just to prove that we are learning, and in a much more interesting way.

In a very important respect, our activities have one big difference from other families doing the same things, where intense pressure is put on the children by their parents to ‘succeed' in some way. I see four and five year-olds falling off bikes from which parents have removed stabilisers on the grounds that children are too old for such baby things - my children still enjoy riding their first bikes, looking rather like clowns, although they do have their 'grown up' ones as well - I have no wish to hurry their childhoods away. My 8 year- old by her own choice took piano lessons and recently her first piano exam. All three choose to take swimming lessons, but they decide whether or not to take distance badges. I am happy that they are learning to choose how to enjoy themselves. Other parents continually ask how soon the children will be doing the next grade, the next distance badge, and seem to be forever pushing their children to get on, go faster, be better than everyone else. Their children take piano lessons because they (the adults) 'really wanted their children to be able to play the piano'. Why? Where are the children's voices in all this? It seems clear that the idea of doing things for fun, when children and adults are ready and willing, and with more or less equality between adults and children, which seems natural in my family is quite alien to others.

Perhaps that is the secret of damage limitation: it is an act of democracy, not 'spoiling children by giving them everything they want’. Instead, it is giving them an equal voice in the choices and decisions of here and now living, not the vague promise of a ‘maybe’ voice at some time in the future, to be earned if in the meantime they learn to be dependent on the narrow world of school.

It is a sad reflection on the state of democracy that there are personal costs as well as benefits in trying to have a family life. I am told I 'should' send my children to *Breakfast* and *After School Clubs* so I can get a job that pays more money, and I am considered 'odd' and even 'feckless' for not being prepared to do so, especially when one effect is a long list of 'can't affords'. To do so would mean losing the togetherness and opportunity for talk that our family meals entail, to say nothing of the unhealthy nature of the fatty, sugary food provided at these Clubs. There would be even less time for all the activities we cherish and which limit the damage of school, and yet we are told it 'would not matter' if we had to give up all those things which at heart make us a family

Next, my role as classroom assistant

I see four-year-olds spending most of their time either sitting on the floor at the teacher’s feet, quietly taking in her words, or completing worksheets. The child who needs to be active and the one who wants to tell you what she/he thinks are ‘naughty’ and punished, sometimes by losing previously earned reward stars or other public humiliation in front of the class. I have gone home and cried sometimes when I have seen this happen. Children who are still learning how to hold a pencil, or how to correctly form letters or numbers have their efforts rubbed out before their eyes and told to do it again. And, yes, I have heard a teacher shouting at five-year- olds demanding to know why they were late for school and telling them they must make sure it does not happen again. How many five-year-olds have responsibility for getting themselves to school on time – or can even tell the time for that matter? And how many parents realise that much of the work on craft items brought home has actually been done by the adults and not by the children?

As a mere assistant in all this, I am as much a prisoner as the children are – neither of us can escape the system or change it, so what can I do? I try to make a difference in lots of small ways. I can talk to the children as equals and join in their play if they want me to. If behaviour needs to be checked for the sake of others or to protect against damage I can talk directly but privately with the child concerned. I can use explanation and reason, not threats.

By giving myself, my listening, my time, my talk, and respecting their individuality and abilities I try to restore to the children a little control and freedom over their actions – and with it the possibility of confidence and self-esteem.

My sessions are probably noisier than most teachers seem to want, but what of it – I can shut the door. And I can find ways to allow the children choices in what to do. We can make time by going more quickly through what the teacher has set. I can find ways to help them succeed when children are finding set tasks too impossibly difficult. Or we can do what the teacher has set but surround it with plenty of talk, not necessarily 'on task' talk. Or I can cut a few corners or go over time so that the children can complete craft activities for themselves.

By giving myself, my listening, my time, my talk, and respecting their individuality and abilities I try to restore to the children a little control and freedom over their actions – and with it the possibility of confidence and self-esteem. It equates to how I would want my own children to be treated by their teachers (while recognising that they probably are not). I am not so much the spy within as the heretic within. Given the fluid nature of schools where classes change in composition regularly I will probably never know if I have succeeded. I do still find myself wondering about the fates of the first children I worked with like this nearly 25 years ago. I can see no reason, pressures of National Curriculum not-with-standing, why teachers should not also treat children as human beings of equal worth. That is surely a fundamental human right?

Kim Evans

Identifying the problem

"Education as it has come to be practiced in our society is the destruction of the child. Born into curiosity and driven by the innate need to learn, children are herded into prison-like institutions, forced through threats to unnaturally sit in hard chairs and memorise the most preposterous bits of disconnected information. They are coerced through punishments and rewards to perform on tests, behave according to arbitrary rules, and not communicate with each other. Their teachers are themselves victimised, forced to play a particular character, to behave and react in particular ways, and to present pre-packaged information in which the teacher has no real interest. This truly bizarre situation is not only failing to produce creative individuals, it is sinking into the abyss of its own violence."

From *The Happy Child: changing the heart of education*
by Steven Harrison ISBN 1-59181-000-0,
Sentient Publications 2002

Correspondence

Thanks for your information about *Education Now*. I particularly liked the feature on damage limitation. Since taking early retirement and redundancy I have done some part-time work for Family Learning in Norfolk. I find myself in the rather incongrous situation where the government (through the Basic Skills Agency) is paying me to run courses to tell the parents about the literacy and numeracy strategies - which I do, but perhaps not quite in the way they intended. I try to get the parents to think about what children are being asked to do, how they learn best and yes, damage limitation. Again and again I find I am greeted with a real sense of relief that at last they are being 'given permission' to acknowledge the things they were feeling all along – that the hoops through which their children are being asked to jump are misguided, that it is 'okay' not to force endless homework on them, that learning should be fun, and so on … It is of some comfort to know that there are like-minded people around, though the number of despairing teachers I meet in the different schools I go into now is quite overwhelming. The most worrying aspect of it all is the seemingly inexorable march of further uniformity.

Linda Brown

This was the first time I had received any literature on what you do and I was so moved by what I read that I burst into tears at the breakfast table. It is great to know that there are other people out there who think the way I do. I am a teacher with 22 years behind me trying to work in an acceptable way. I am currently working in a new school teaching 3-5s. The school offers flexi-schooling and supports home-schoolers … I have pulled my eldest son out of his secondary school where he was being bullied and talking about suicide.

Alison (full name and address supplied*)*

Playing the role of the 'good parent'

The general theory that most secondary schools and plenty of primary schools work to is that parents are potential problems. The task for a school is seen as diagnosing which kind of problem. Is this parent an 'interferer'? Or is this one a 'neglecter'? Or is it one that can be neutralised into a 'spectator', admiring or otherwise. Four features of the 'good parent' expectation have been noted in the research. The school staff can become negative if any of these is neglected.

1. They should be well informed about the school – not easy given the ambiguity of the clues of brochures, meetings, the grapevine of parent conversations, etc.
2. They must show a strong interest in the school's version of education – which may be low on happiness and high on league table results.
3. They need to read accurately the school's idea of the good parent.
4. They must maintain the impression that they accept and support the school's views.

The last two are not easy. Successful parents avoid the label of 'interferers' whilst actually interfering a great deal by buying private tutors, extra book and on-line courses. Schools with high league table rating are usually those with the highest incidence of private tutor purchase. The staff hope it is their activity that makes the difference, but the research suggests otherwise.

On the need for parents to become researchers

Twenty educationalists including home-based educators, head teachers, industrialists and researchers, met at the University of Nottingham in the Autumn of 1997. They spent two days exchanging ideas on the theme of education in the year 2020. One thing everybody agreed on straight away was that the climate of uncertainty, due to continuous change, would not go away. **Continuous adaptation was here to stay.**

In this situation, parents who are wanting damage limitation will have to become active members of the learning society themselves, and become constant researchers. By this, I do not mean writing research papers, but asking questions and sifting evidence and any offered answers. Tolstoy suggested that the only real objective of education was *to create the habit of continually asking questions*. (Governments and business are not always disposed to agree, finding passive, gullible minds more acceptable.)

There is another reason why parents need to become researchers. A few years ago, a student on a Master Degree in Education course became wearied by the constant procession of research studies presented week after week. He asked me to tell him what, in my opinion, all the studies told us in the end. I asked for time to think about it. Next week I gave a verdict. *"What they tell us,"* I declared, *"is that we do not know how to do it. We do not know how to educate children in a complex and changing world. If we knew, we would not have to research it any more. All the research is doing is trying to find useful clues."*

This statement still holds good. But we do have more and better clues than before, especially from the home-based educators. But it means that parents do not have to believe over-confident teachers and educationalists, just as patients do not have to believe over-confident nurses and doctors. We need to sift the evidence for ourselves.

But, asking questions may lead to unexpected conclusions and actions. Those reluctant educational heretics, the home-based educators, decided that they could make decisions based on their own experience and the available evidence, even if they were at odds with 'professional' opinion. They may have even come to the same conclusion as George Bernard Shaw who proposed that *"all professions are conspiracies against the laity"*; well, some of the time anyway, if not most of the time in some cases.

One danger of parents thinking for themselves is that they may be regarded as eccentric. We can take comfort from the words of Bertrand Russell when he said that we should not fear to be eccentric in thought, because *every idea that is now taken for granted, was once said to be eccentric*. It is not the case, however, that being unorthodox guarantees that you are right. There are many possibilities for error, and plenty of unorthodox ideas are dubious, or prove to be just plain wrong.

Becoming a researcher is a permanent state, because in the situation of continuous change, solutions are likely to be temporary expedients. The task might often be to decide the lesser of evils rather than achieve any certain answer. Or the task may be to replace familiar skills with new ones. The computer field illustrates this well. When I wrote a book with my Amstrad 8256, I thought learning all the new skills was well worthwhile. Before long I needed to learn again to work with a PC and Word for Windows. Now I have learnt the new skills needed for my voice-driven computer.

One shortcut for parents to become well-briefed in educational ideas is to be found in the use of quotations. For example, when Mark Twain said that he *"never allowed schooling to interfere with his education"*, he drew attention to a number of propositions. One is that schooling and education are not the same thing, and can often be entirely opposed. Another is that your own private investigations, conducted in your own time and in your own way, can be valid education. Indeed, one of the reasons why schooling and education can be in opposition is that the questions and concerns of the learner can gradually become replaced by the official questions and concerns imposed by others and, even more oppressive, the officially approved answers.

For a second example, take the quotation from George Bernard Shaw when he says: *"What we want to see is the child in pursuit of knowledge, not knowledge in pursuit of the child."* This quotation alerts us to a fundamental objection to a national curriculum or any adult imposed curriculum. It turns learning into a 'child-hunt' where knowledge hounds the child rather than a 'knowledge-hunt' where learners are encouraged, supported and advised in their seeking out of knowledge. Because I found quotations to be such a powerful aid to thinking, I compiled a book of quotations on education. People tell me it is useful to stimulate discussion, question assumptions, and expose myths and superstitions.

Another shortcut is the use of analogies. When people say that we should learn and memorise things which may be useful to us in the future, we can try to think of other examples of when things are done now in the hope that they may be useful later. The activity of squirrels comes to mind. They collect nuts, bury them and then try to locate them later. Are we being asked to believe that children should collect adult-designated nuts of information, then bury them in their memory, in the hope that they may need to dig them out later? Is this the most effective way to spend time?

For another analogy, Edward Fiske, former New York Times Education Editor, concluded that getting more learning out of our present schooling system was *"like trying to get the Pony Express to beat the telegraph by breeding faster ponies"*. An analogy like this alerts us to the ancient nature of mass schooling and its growing obsolescence due to slowness to adapt. Perhaps tinkering with the system is like getting the stagecoach to go faster by strapping roller skates on the hooves of the horses, when what is needed is a new kind of transport altogether, such as a railroad.

Although it is helpful to locate useful sources of information, I think it was Winston Churchill who said it is better to read wisely than widely. You could read every newspaper every day, but I doubt if it would be worth the effort, and it is better to choose one that does not insult your intelligence. One useful source of information is *ACE Bulletin* from the Advisory Centre for Education, set up to advise parents, (at Unit 1B, Aberdeen Studios, 22 Highbury Grove, London N5 2EA (Tel: 0207 354 8318).

Finally, the title of 'parents as researchers' is, perhaps, misleading. It might well read 'families as researchers' since adults and children alike will need this mentality to cope with our ever-changing world and our own slow-to-adapt schooling system. In addition, **purposive conversation** among family members and others, about these and other matters, is one of the most effective ways of learning known.

Roland Meighan