The Whistleblowers: Charlotte Mason

Most educational theorising, from the beginning of compulsory schooling up to the present day, has suffered from the almost universal assumption that children do not really want to learn things deemed to be important, and can only make a success of their education if someone rather cleverly seduces them into absorbing it.. I suspect that this idea has a lot to do with teachers' century-long struggle to be seen as a profession, paid over the odds for special knowledge which they are supposed to have and without which children will stay ignorant all their lives. Charlotte Mason, who lived through the later years of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth - roughly the same era as Edmond Holmes, the perceptive Chief Inspector of Schools - insisted that education which merely filled up children's minds with rote-learned information was worse than useless. The mind, she believed was never intended to be a storeroom. The National Curriculum, and the programme of teaching and testing which goes along with it, would have seemed to her like a sinister surrogate for true educational values, since it presupposes that children have no part to play in their preparation for life beyond listening passively to what the teacher says to them, memorising as best they can, and periodically laying the content of their minds up against the master-template in the teacher's source-book.

Mason was middle-class educator writing for middle-class home-educators. Nowadays this would probably be held against her, since we have come to regard schooling as a social equaliser, and the common experience of classroom life as a means of raising up working-class children to the same 'level' as everyone else. She addressed herself to the many modestly well-off families who used governesses and tutors to educate their children. However, the ideas she promoted are not only applicable to that limited section of society.

She wanted to create a curriculum which could be offered to any child by any adult. At the root of all her thinking was the notion that the learner has to be at the centre of their learning. She used to say that it is the child who makes his or her education, not the education that makes the child. We must, she said, maintain 'the respect due to the personality of the child, which must not be encroached upon, whether by the direct use of fear or love, suggestion or influence, or by undue play upon any one natural desire..... Therefore, we are limited to three educational instruments - the atmosphere of environment, the discipline of habit, and the presentation of living ideas (emphasis mine, CRS)' So, no gold stars, house points, prizes, detentions or browbeating for doing or not doing the tasks set by authority. She wanted to see children moving through their world examining it, and establishing a unique personal relationship with it. "Education', she wrote, 'is the science of Relations; that is, a child has natural relationships with a vast number of things and thoughts..... our business is not to teach him anything, to help him make valid as many as may be of 'those first-born affinities that fit our new existence to existing things.'

Mason rejected the fundamental beliefs of her generation - and ours - about children. She did not believe that they are born awkward and idles, not wanting to learn and needing to be supervised to ensure that they do not 'waste time'. She knew that they are primed from the first moment of their lives to learn everything within their ambit which they find 'interesting'. She realised that the failure of so many children to thrive intellectually in schools was not evidence that they needed teaching, but that teaching was destroying their natural drive to become active, vivd thinkers. To remedy this, she founded the Parents' National Educational Union. Through it, she provided people who wanted to educate their children well with a curriculum and a method which could be used with any child.

The first strong idea which she propagated was that children need books. Not books written to instil accepted ideas, not books of exercises and carefully chosen, graded texts, but the finest books expressing the most valuable ideas in the best form. She saw no reason why small children should not be allowed to read difficult writing, even if it challenged their understanding. She would have had no time for our beloved reading schemes, with their implied insistence that every child must read Red Book 1 before they can tackle Blue Book 3. She knew that if a seven-year-old found Beowulf gripping or, as I did, 'Fox's Book of Martyrs', that was what that child should be reading, and to the Devil with key-stages, word-lists, graded material and the satisfaction, so seductive to clever adults, of seeing children working to a grown-up's wonderful plan.

She also originated a radical, and at first sight dangerous, idea: that children do not need teachers to 'help' them learn or to teach them how to study. Instead, the teacher's main task, in her opinion, was to create the conditions in which children could use their natural ability and drive to learn from their own choice of books. She insisted that teachers need not question or test their pupils. If they have had the opportunity to read their book, narrate its contents to show that they have grasped it, and then to decide for themselves what they wish to do with it, she believed that the teacher's role was fulfilled. Where the children meet difficulties in understanding more complex ideas, the teacher would naturally help them to clarify their thinking, but no more than that. Having watched home-schooled children doing more or less what Charlotte Mason prescribed, I find it easy to accept that this approach to learning is effective.

Charlotte Mason's ideas about education have still not had the attention they deserve, not because they are bad or impractical, but simply because they challenge an understanding of childhood which is dearer to our collective heart than we are willing to acknowledge. We enjoy the power and the sense of superiority which our adult status and experience allow us to exert over our children. If they can handle their own education, what will become of our plans for them, our pride in what we can make them learn and do? Mason rejected this preoccupation with adult control and intellectual despotism in words which deserve to be inscribed over the door of every Training College: *"The whole intellectual apparatus of the teacher, his power of vivid presentation, apt illustration, able summing up, subtle questioning, all these were hindrances and intervened between children and the right nutriment duly served.*

A snare which attends the really brilliant teacher is the exhausting effect upon children of an overpowering personality. They are such ardent and responsive little souls that the teacher who plays the Pied Piper with them should beware: the undue play of the personality of the teacher is likely to suppress and subdue that of his scholars.

We may not pose before children, nor pride ourselves on dutiful getting up of knowledge in order to deliver it as emanating from ourselves."

Chris Shute

Book Review

Natural Learning and the Natural Curriculum
by Roland Meighan
Educational Heretics Press in Association with Natural Parent
pp.115, price £10-00
ISBN 1-900219-19-0 £10-00

In his latest book, *Natural Learning and the Natural Curriculum*, Roland Meighan once again reminds us of children's incredible, innate capacity for learning and he issues dire warnings concerning the schooling system in its present form. It would not be an overstatement to say that Professor Meighan believes we will stunt that capacity for learning and the ability to think independently if we continue down this route of 'crowd instruction' (p.69).

Natural Learning and the Natural Curriculum takes us on a stimulating thought journey from Part 1: 'Natural learning and the natural curriculum' (including 'Natural learners'; 'Wanted! A new vocabulary for learning'), to Part 2: 'Parents' (this includes 'Reluctant educational heretics'; 'Parents as researchers' and 'Grandparent power?') and on to Parts three to six, which cover 'Teachers' (considering, for example: 'What is a good teacher?'); 'Superstitions and Myths' (such as 'The superstition of standards') and 'Visions of the next learning system' (which includes interviews with John Adcock and Sir Christopher Ball, and 'Learning centres instead of school?').

Meighan debates exciting ways of providing more appropriate learning opportunities, through both home education and neighbourhood centres, where teachers would be learning advisers and ICT facilities would support the community of learners. I say, community of learners because these would be places where everyone involved would be seen as a learner. And importantly, the teachers/ learning advisers should be, according to Meighan, who paraphrases the words of Robert Owen, 'fit company for learners' (p.69).

Further, Meighan argues that there should be a 'transformational approach' to learning – one which
'encourages dialogue and experimentation…is more radical and proposes that to educate the human being is not merely to make … a knowledgeable, productive member of society (transmission), an engaged citizen (transaction), but also to encourage each person to discover a deeper meaning for his or her life.' (p.113)

I cannot say why I found I was holding my breath as I read on through the book – perhaps I'm just a pessimist – I do so want (for my five grandchildren and their peers) an exciting, meaningful education and I know what's happening isn't going to be that, even though some (probably mainly girls) will cope with it all. Maybe a second reason was that I always worry that home education and learning accounts would be difficult for families to manage under stress, especially those disadvantaged by poverty and those who have, through their own inadequate schooling, been deprived of cultural capital. Further, I want to be convinced that as many fathers as mothers stay at home to educate their children.

However, the learning centres are really appealing to me – it's an idea that I've long held dear, especially in my own field of early childhood, and since I believe that's where real learning goes on if it's truly child-centred, I also believe it's a good model for learners of any age.

Of course both home education and learning centres make sense in relation to Meighan's argument for better adult:child ratios – and this fits with Vygotsky's social theory of learning – children need 'more knowledgeable others' with whom to co-construct their worlds – they could be other children, at least if there were a mix of age groups, and again families and learning centres often offer those opportunities to both the learner and the 'teacher' more so than is possible in most of our schools at present.

The last section of the book, a 'Postscript' entitled 'The Boulevard of Broken Dreams', rightly congratulates those teachers (and some whole schools) who have managed to maintain oases in a desert. But Professor Meighan's main message here is 'WE CAN SCRAP IT and devise learning arrangements and places that are more convivial' (p.118). His constancy to humane and sane principles is to be admired.

Natural Learning and the Natural Curriculum is a good read, a comprehensive, thoughtful text, and clearly a labour of love, but it isn't only that – it also contains a wealth of 'hotlinks' to other useful resources, books as well as websites.

Meighan uses the famous quote from Laotse, the Chinese philosopher,
'Of a good teacher, they say, when the task is done, we did this ourselves' (p.67). Perhaps when we have achieved a humane, transformational education system, at home, in learning centres, and a host of other settings, we will think we have done it ourselves - but it will really be because we learnt from Roland Meighan and a few other 'heretics'.

Tricia David,
Emeritus Professor of Education, Canterbury Christ Church University College, UK

Book Review

Natural Learning and the Natural Curriculum.
by Roland Meighan,
Educational Heretics Press, 2001, price £10-00

You can quarrel with the title (perhaps especially with the use of the word 'curriculum'), but you would be hard put to counter many of the pithy and forceful arguments in this little book. The chapters are really separate articles written for the magazine *Natural Parent*, so they don't always seem totally contingent one upon the other, though they are grouped under section headings and include a revealing interview with Sir Christopher Ball (principal author of 'Start Right'; the 1994 RSA report on the early years of learning). What is contingent, connected and utterly convincing, however, is the enthusiasm which runs through this book. Make no mistake, this book is subversive and intended to be so, particularly in respect of modern British ideologies on the ways children learn. It is a book which is very much on what one might call 'the child's side'. It is, of course, typically Meighan, in the way it bubbles along with neat little aphorisms and humorous reminders about what learning REALLY is, of how, from birth, we are programmed to be curious, interested and absorbed in much that is around us; and that the opposite is, in fact, 'un-natural'.

It is journalistic, of course, given its origins, and occasionally even a trifle too smart. It is also anti-school, as currently conceived. You can't easily put it down, however, and it is likely to be read and largely understood and remembered (rather a rare experience for an education writer, I would have thought!) It's a book I would certainly like novice teachers to read. In short, it is a lively and entertaining; a 'go' at most of what we hold dear in formal British (and sometimes failing British) education. It may irritate a little and paints a rather jolly picture of home schooling and of 'natural learning', but one, which those of us who recall learning something in a hobby or at home with friends, will instantly recognise. Whether it is ever possible to see the home-schooling or 'flexi-schooling' movement as an effective alternative to the large-scale needs of society is not really discussed, but this book is into raising sharp, important issues, not necessarily solving them. We should not dismiss the principles espoused by Meighan, even if irritated because the points at issue are those about natural learning and about the ways in which institutionalised schooling so often kills interest, motivation and talent stone dead. It is very clear that, for many children in the western world, formal schooling too often replaces natural learning with weary routines of little consequence and even less meaning. Witness the fact that so many secondary schools throughout the world have a large cadre of apparent failures (usually boys) by the early teens. What is it that causes this? The author has some short, slightly impatient answers.

So, within this small book the educational heresies abound. Be careful, therefore, of your blood pressure, especially if you are connected with the educational system and draw a salary from it! This book will cause a few eyebrows to raise and a few hearts to palpitate. Indeed the whole book will be fundamentally at odds with the sorts of things the former, recent Secretary of State, David Blunkett, seemed to be wanting to do. This is not a book about 'standards' or testing. Indeed it exposes the weaknesses of 'telling and testing'; it looks at the superstitions surrounding appropriate views of literacy, it criticises certain commonly held beliefs of teaching; it uses anecdote and story to demolish much that goes on in classrooms. It is also intensely political, in that it takes a line which is highly critical of current British approaches, sniping at what Sir Christopher calls, the rigid and over-loaded curriculum' and at the inefficiency and authoritarian manner of what Meighan calls 'crowd instruction' (a specific teaching/leadership style). I don't know whether it is possible to verify all the comments, and one should be careful of taking assertions quoted by famous people (Like George Bernard Shaw) as sufficient 'evidence', perhaps; tempting though it is to do so. But I certainly enjoyed and recognised the one (attributed to the National Training Laboratories in the USA) that ranked the efficiency of learning systems and assigned a mere five per cent retention to the usual process of being told. Such a statement certainly fits my prejudices and experiences as a teacher and lecturer over the years. As for the little boy with the balloons, "They say I am slow, but I say I am thorough"; this is a story that depicts much that is fundamentally misguided about our attempts to test and corral children by what adults call comparative achievement tests. It shows how fatuous such things are.

I thoroughly enjoyed the section on superstitions. I shall ask my own students to read it. I liked being reminded of Robert Owen, too. With all the modern talk of dispositions and of learning responsibility in school, it might be wise for Estelle Morris to read the early 19th century work of Robert Owen again on encouraging habits of mind. As for Trevelyan's comments, what a delight. I look around me on the bus and see the total domination of the tabloid press, those magazines of current culture and superstition which are hardly 'newspapers' worthy of the name. I see the cultural hegemony of the media (largely American) and I wonder whether we teach children to think for themselves at all. This little book will probably convince you that we don't! It is, as I have said, typically Meighan, short, quick-witted, enlightening through story and anecdote. What fun it would be to have it on PGCE courses. After a lifetime of writing and campaigning, one thing is sure. Roland Meighan will not get an OBE from 'the establishment' for producing this one!

Philip Gammage, de Lissa Professor of Early Childhood, University of Adelaide

Harrison and Harrison - a landmark in Education Law

The Law is a notoriously blunt instrument for settling disputes between ordinary, decent people about how they should conduct their family life. It expects human behaviour to fit into simple, broad categories, and it likes to see everyone conforming to a single standard of behaviour. That is reasonable enough when it comes to protecting citizens from

each other's malice, but it can be a bad principle on which to conduct education. Our Law on education comes from a time when ordinary people generally did as they were told by those above them, not only in criminal matters, but even in the details of their daily life. Class deference allowed the Government to dragoon children whose parents could not afford private education into schools which were desperately poor substitutes for Eton and Harrow. It is difficult to imagine that the School Board Man would have visited any of the great houses of England if some young scion of the nobility had cut his lessons or not been sent to school at all. But for ordinary people to take responsibility for their children's education was perceived, until very recently, as downright social insubordination, and punished with a harshness not unlike that visited, in some less progressive parts of the world, on women who refuse to accept the lower status forced on them by custom.

Geoff and Iris Harrison faced this problem a little more than twenty years ago. Neither of them were even remotely 'irresponsible' parents. They had at the time three children of school age. They had been ordered to send them to school, and they had decided not to. The reasons for that decision are only relevant if you belong to that complacent group of people who believe that school is the only place where a person can be validly educated. The Harrisons liked their children and wanted to be the prime movers in their upbringing. They had done a good enough job of initiating their youngsters into life up to the date of their arraignment in Court, and they wanted to continue a process which they knew was beneficial to the children.

They were found guilty by the Magistrates of failing to send their children to school. It is worth remarking that this was, on the evidence, the only finding the Court could bring in, and the Magistrates tried to palliate the very real feelings of shame their decision must have aroused in the Harrisons by granting absolute discharges in every case.

The case went to appeal at Worcester Crown Court. The Judge, Roy Ward, was evidently a man able to think 'outside the envelope'. He began by distinguishing clearly between the Harrisons and that kind of feckless parent who is indifferent to education and doesn't care whether their child learns or not. He made it clear at the outset that the Harrisons were responsible and caring people.

He noted that the Harrisons used an autonomous approach to education. Their children learned what interested them at their own pace. I have heard this method described as 'conniving at truancy' by people who cannot believe that learning can ever be 'valid' unless it is supervised, and 'looks like' hard work. This Judge, however, was able to perceive that the children were always occupied, always doing useful, creative things. He did, in fact visit the home, and saw them at work. It is, perhaps, true to say that not all professional people of his age and background would have been able to brush aside their own understanding of education, acquired when they were themselves children, and accept a completely different definition of it. Fortunately this judge possessed clear sight and a humane spirit.

The Judge's chief criticism of the Harrisons' conduct was that they had not been ready to allow LEA officials to 'vet' the children's education. He found their conviction that this would put undue pressure on them 'hypersensitive'. The LEA could not, he thought, 'wait until the children are past school age in order to see whether the finished product justifies what has passed for education. It is then too late.' (Ironically that is exactly what happens in the case of thousands of conventionally schooled children, except that, for them, the monitoring process operates with full ferocity, and still fails to reveal that much of their education is thoroughly bad.)

The Harrisons had expressed the conviction that for one human being to 'assess' another is degrading. The Judge thought that was a step too far. It is not hard to understand why: we live in a society which is obsessed by evaluation, standardisation, judgement and appraisal. We assume that things are better for all this testing, and in any case there is a burgeoning industry based on nothing more than creating new, more 'efficient' procedures for carrying it out. We can only hope that our democratic culture can be expanded to support people who have thought carefully and concluded that the majority view is wrong.

The outcome of the Case was that the Harrisons' children were recognised as efficiently educated. They have gone on to live happy, fulfilled lives, in the main. It is worth noting that the traits of character which have contributed most to that result were not the ones which schools customarily take notice of. Schools like to lead blocks of children through preordained teaching, and then judge them by how much of it has stuck in their heads. This cannot fail to produce boredom and frustration in at least some of them. The Harrison children remained confident of their ability to get on with life successfully because no-one stood over them and told them they could not, either because they had not learned this or that subject, or because they had not agreed to fit in with the bizarre control mechanisms of the average school.

Chris Shute

One Award For All – Press Release

People 1st, a campaigning organisation run by disabled people with learning difficulties. Their education contact, Simone Aspis, campaigning for inclusive education, has produced a paper examining whether a single 'stand alone' award is possible to counter the proliferation of government qualifications which are inappropriate for many young people, including those with learning difficulties. The paper is published in the light of a forthcoming Government Green Paper – their blue-print qualification structure for 14-19 year-olds. Its proposals include having an overarching Foundation, Ordinary and Advanced 'baccalaureate' type certificate which young people can work towards whilst completing other qualifications.

Simone writes, *"The Government still wants to maintain the status quo with continuing to provide a raft of academic and vocational qualifications, which are targeted at specific groups of young people."*

She argues that, in contrast, the Duke of Edinburgh Award is 'one award for all', and is unique in that it is taken by young people across the intellectual and physical ability spectrum, and from different social and cultural backgrounds. Young people devise their own individual education plans, which include their preferred assessment procedures to report on and validate their actual achievements, vocational and academic. It is the only award that acknowledges young people's individual skills and knowledge, and is held in high esteem by both young people and employers.

Contact Karen Barton at the Bolton Institute, Chadwick Campus, Bolton BL2 1JW for *'One Award For All'*, hard copy, disk or taped version. Tel: 01204 900 600. Email: k.barton@bolton.ac.uk

Congratulations!

Clive Harber has been given a personal chair at the University of Birmingham. Professor Harber's inaugural lecture will take place on:
Thursday May 16th 2002, 5-15 p.m.
at the School of Education, University of Birmingham. It will be entitled:

"Schooling can seriously damage your health: education as violence, education for peace."

All members of Education Now are invited but *please inform Clive* on 0121 414 2638 if you are attending – to make sure the room is big enough.

"…A sort of professional rape": exposing the violations of "modernised" education

Dr **Bob Jeffrey** and Professor **Peter Woods** have greatly illuminated the noxious impact upon teachers of the hyperactive "modernisation" of modern mainstream schooling, with several published books (listed on the "WASTE" website at www.wasteedu.org). In 1996, their seminal "Feeling deprofessionalized…" (*Cambridge Journal of Education*, 26 (3), pp. 325-43), which forensically exposes the enormous damage perpetrated by the OFSTED inspection regime. Their recently published "The reconstruction of primary teachers' identities" (*British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 23 (1), 2002, pp. 89-106) focuses on *primary* education, but the Government's widely trailered "modernisation" of the *secondary* sector suggests that this latest article also has great relevance for secondary teachers.

"Primary teachers", they maintain, "have had to reconstruct their identities in response to the reconstruction of the education system… The result has been… the 'real self' being largely withheld from the new personal identity and the sense of vocationalism being set to one side" – with an accompanying "assault on child-centred philosophy", and "the diminution of elementary trust".

The authors graphically refer to the "continuous onslaught on teacher adequacy" that educational "modernisation" entails, with teachers either abandoning their child-centred, "holistic" approach to teaching, or else clinging on to those values, but at the considerable personal expense entailed in holding to such a contradictory professional position. Primary teachers are quoted throughout the article - some graphic examples:

- "My immediate reaction to the Ofsted inspector's questioning of the children was that it seemed like attack, attack, attack…."
- "They're here all the time, pushing for more and more and making you feel that you can't achieve, questioning your capability… You can't work like that because there's got to be a sense of trust."
- "[I felt like I had to] chop the top of my head off and show somebody what's in it… The assumption is that teachers are inadequate… I just want to do my job – the job I used to love."
- "I felt degraded by [the inspection]… it was very much *a sort of professional rape*…"
- "As soon as that stuff outweighs the love of teaching, then that's the time when you are going to say 'What's the point?'."

The authors refer to the "assault on teacher autonomy…, leaving teachers with a feeling of powerlessness… They are under almost continuous surveillance"; to "consumerism [having] replaced care"; and to the "strongly traumatic negative feelings induced by the assigning of the new social identity – those of guilt, shame, fear, shock etc.". Thus, "The personal identity of work… has become designed to meet the instrumental purposes of audit accountability. Teachers' real selves are held in reserve…".

The article usefully highlights **strategies for survival and resistance**, indicating that complete disempowerment by, and subjugation to, "the surveillance culture" is *not* inevitable. For this reason alone, this article is essential reading for all mainstream school teachers.

Richard House

Sunday 21st April 2002
Learning Exchange
'Shared Values'

The next **Learning Exchange** will take place on **Sunday 21st April** at **Burleigh Community College**, **Loughborough.** The event will begin **at 11.30 with a brief business meeting.** This will be followed by the **Learning Exchange at 12.00.** A lunch break will be taken prior to the afternoon discussion.

The theme ***Shared Values*** was proposed by members at the last *Learning Exchange* to stimulate exchanges between members about their work, their activities, their concerns and the educational values all these enshrine. One or two members have agreed to start the exchange along these lines.

Members and friends of *Education Now* are invited to this event, which is **Free of Charge.** (A voluntary collection will offset cost of drinks and hire of room) Members and friends are asked to bring their own lunches, although drinks will be provided.

(If you would like to attend contact Janet Meighan at 113 Arundel Drive, Bramcote Hills, Nottingham NG9 3FQ or on 0115 925 7261)

Notice for News and Review 35

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Bob Jeffrey can be contacted at: School of Education, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK

Education Now Feature Supplement

Damage Limitation: reducing the harm schools do to children

Just when you think life holds no more surprises, something odd happens. Recently, I was in the middle of

giving a talk on natural learning to a large group of parents and grandparents when they suddenly burst into applause - this has never happened to me before. What was it that had touched the nerve? Well, I had just read out a statement about what schools do to children:

"Schools have transformed learning from one of the most rewarding of all human activities into a painful, boring, dull, fragmenting, mind-shrinking, soul-shriveling experience."

These parents and grandparents were very unhappy about the system of mass, coercive schooling and what it was achieving, and many of them came to talk to me afterwards about their relief at hearing someone articulate their misgivings. The problems with mass coercive schooling, they agreed, are that it is, (a) mass not personalised, (b) coercive not invitational, (c) schooling not education.

During the lecture I had reminded them about Winston Churchill's verdict. Churchill has just been voted in a popularity competition as the 'greatest Englishman ever', (although my vote would have gone to Tom Paine), and so he might be thought to be someone with wise opinions. He proposed that:

"Schools have not necessarily much to do with education ... they are mainly institutions of control where certain basic habits must be instilled in the young. Education is quite different and has little place in school."

Churchill did not reflect further, that this meant that schools were (a) an obsolete institution, (b) counter-productive in a democracy, and (d) an abuse of three or four human rights. Tom Paine as author of *The Rights of Man* and of the original USA Constitution, would probably have done so, had he been in Churchill's place.

Natural learning and how it is hijacked

I arrived at Charmouth in Dorset on a sunny Saturday afternoon in May last year, and went down to the beach with Janet to take in the scene. It was the start of a week-long festival and conference for home-based educating families and about 1500 people of all ages would be in attendance. I was due to start the conference with a keynote presentation on *'Natural Learning and the Natural Curriculum'* but I was not yet clear how to set the scene. But for now, relaxing on the beach just seemed to be a good idea.

We gazed with interest at the scene in front of us. Two young surfers were developing their skills on their miniature surf-boards on the incoming waves. Beyond them two young canoeists were in action

Two younger children were enjoying jumping the waves as they petered out near the edge of the beach, the smaller one sensibly retreating if a slightly larger one came in.

Three adults went in front of us and paused at a pictorial display on local fossils, enjoyed talking about it for a minute or two and then went on their way. Along the beach a young boy of about eleven years was working with what appeared to be his grandfather on the fossil beach. Somebody else was reading a book.

Other people of all ages were swimming, paddling and making sandcastles. One young group had not yet got the sand mix right and their sandcastles kept crumbling. But with trial and error they solved the problem. Parents were on hand everywhere generally keeping a watchful eye but not interfering unduly. A rock pipit appeared close to us and we spent a little time observing it and talking about its appearance and behaviour.

Everyone seemed relaxed and happy and nobody was infringing the rights of others to be doing their thing – a miniature display of democracy in action, as diversity and variety were cheerfully celebrated. It was also a demonstration of natural learning and the natural curriculum and it illustrated the sub-title of my talk to open the conference: *'anybody, any age; any time, any place; any pathway, any pace.'*

But then we began to speculate what a guardian of 'unnatural learning', an OFSTED inspector perhaps, would have to say about the same scene. Well, as regards the surfboarders, there was no sign of professional imput. No trained teacher was present to set appropriate tasks, attainment targets and tests. The same applied to the canoeists who did not seem to be working to a graded plan of skill development.

The young ones were enjoying jumping the waves but was this preparing them for their baseline assessment? The adults were rather casual about the fossil display as no follow-up work appeared to be in evidence.

The grandfather and child were from quite different 'key-stages', if key-stages had yet been devised for grandfathers. The book and newspaper readers seemed very casual about their chosen tasks and put down their book or newspaper whenever they felt like it. And was the book on the approved list for study anyway?

A decent teacher would have had a rock pipit workcard for when the bird appeared so that appropriate written work could be undertaken. There was no sign of a literacy hour or a numeracy hour to be seen. It was all rather amateur.

So, out of the conversation with Janet, the beach scene could be seen as an interesting example of natural learning in action. I had my introduction: 'on the beach'.

The rise of the 'miserable rule-followers'

Almost everyone starts out with hopes and even high hopes of going to school. Children may anticipate entry into a world of interest, stimulation and development. Teachers may anticipate a worthwhile, satisfying and positive occupation. Parents hope for the blossoming of their children. Grandparents may anticipate happy grandchildren growing up positively in the world.

But it all seems to go wrong somewhere. Firstly, teachers end up reporting that "*We are just miserable rule-followers …*". This is the verdict of a teacher in South Africa, reported by Clive Harber in *State of Transition*, London: Symposium Books, 2001. But it could be anywhere in the world, given Edward de Bono's verdict that **all the schooling systems he has encountered in the world are a disgrace**. I have to agree, for all the ones I have encountered are also a disgrace, although some are larger disasters and some are smaller ones. Only a few are trying to be more democratic and are generally less constipated in their approach, having a just a few echoes of natural learning. Not surprisingly, the *'miserable rule-followers'* are currently leaving teaching in droves and in disgust, and many who stay explain that they would leave if they could.

Then, children have their hopes dashed too. As early as age six they can already be reporting that they are aware that their minds are being highjacked. They recognise that their concerns, their interests, their agendas, are already being systematically squeezed off the school's agenda. But they feel powerless to do anything about it and are already, at six years of age, reconciled to having to conform to a script written by remote others. They, too, become *'just miserable rule-followers'*. (See research by Ann Sherman in *Rules, Routines and Regimentation*, Nottingham: Educational Heretics Press, 1996)

Next, many parents may have their desires thwarted. They may begin to report that school is not doing the kind of things they had hoped. They may find they have handed their children over, in good faith, to a bunch of strangers, hoping for the best, but getting something undesirable – a deadening of the spirit. Some can take action and educate at home as a better option, others are forced by circumstances to become 'miserable rule-followers'. Some can try damage-limitation. Some persevere hoping to find treasure in the wreck.

'The Boulevard of Broken Dreams'

This is, in the words of the song title, *The Boulevard of Broken Dreams.* High hopes gradually – and sometimes very suddenly – becoming shattered. Schooling may then become what has sometimes been described as a long-sentence of suffering, endurance and general low-level misery. Some learn to put up with it, and even exploit it, better than others.
We should congratulate those teachers, and even whole schools, who manage, despite the odds, to keep some kind of oasis going in the general desert. But it is the long landscapes of desert that I am writing about.

One of the propositions of my new book, *Natural Learning and the Natural Curriculum*, is that this fate of becoming 'just miserable rule followers' is one consequence of abandoning **natural** learning and the **natural** curriculum. In its place has been imposed false and shallow learning and the false, largely junk curriculum of the state – unnatural learning and the unnatural curriculum.

Paul Goodman described this as *Compulsory Mis-education* in his book. Chris Shute calls it *Compulsory Schooling Disease* in his. The Chief Inspector of Schools, Edmond Holmes, writing at the start of the 20th century, called it *The Tragedy of Education*.

The question of damage limitation: and can 'organic' toxin-free learning be a reality?

Every parent is a home-based educator until children reach the age of 5. After that, all parents are still home-based educators, although some are full-time, whereas others use schools for part of the time, during the weekdays, on those weeks the schools are open. For those who either choose to use schools, or necessity forces them to, I want to open up the question of damage limitation.

I had to face this question when, some years ago now, my son reached the age of 5. His mother, Shirley, was an experienced infants teacher, and I was an experienced secondary teacher and teacher educator. With our insider knowledge, we both understood the serious limitations of compulsory mass schooling, state or private, and set out to offer him a home-based education alternative. Ironically, he elected to try school, so his parents had to turn their attention to mounting a damage limitation programme.

Why was this necessary? A few years ago I wrote an article entitled 'Schooling can seriously damage your education'. I now think I was too cautious and should have entitled it, 'Schooling **will** damage your education'. **The only question in my mind is how much damage will be done and in which dimensions.**

There is **some** good news about schooling, however, as Everett Reimer indicated when he wrote, *"some true educational experiences are bound to occur in schools. They occur however, **despite** school and not because of it."* Some teachers manage, despite our domination-riddled schooling system, to swim against the tide of restrictions and regulations, and create episodes of genuine humanity and genuine learning. I tried to be such a teacher and so do many others.

As my son put it, the good news was that he was able to find *"bits of treasure in the wreck"* of the schooling system, because of such teachers. But it is in the end, an illusion that makes us think something can be done to make schools educational, whereas the default position is always anti-democratic domination.
It is also true that the homes of some children are despotic or neglectful, so that even a coercive school provides a respite. Schools also provide a respite for parents from their children, so that they can pursue their careers, or voluntary work, or hobbies, or sports, or whatever.

Compulsory mis-education

But the long-term effect of mass, compulsory coercive schooling is **damage**. As the New York prize-winning teacher, John Gatto put it, he was employed to teach bad habits. These ranged from bad intellectual habits, bad social habits, bad emotional habits, to bad moral and political habits. Neither the 'successful' pupils nor the 'unsuccessful' pupils escaped. For starters, he identified seven of these bad habits.

John Taylor Gatto recognised that what he was really paid to teach was an unwritten curriculum made up of seven ideas. The first was **confusion.** He was required to teach disconnected facts not meaning, infinite fragmentation not cohesion. The second basic idea was **class position**. Children were to be taught to know their place by being forced into the rigged competition of schooling. A third lesson was that of **indifference.** He saw he was paid to teach children not to care too much about anything. The lesson of bells is that no work is worth finishing: students never have a complete experience for it is all on the instalment plan.

The fourth lesson was that of **emotional dependency** for, by marks and grades, ticks and stars, smiles and frowns, he was required to teach children to surrender their wills to authority. The next idea to be passed on was that of **intellectual dependency.** They must learn that good people wait for an expert to tell them what to do and believe. The sixth idea is that of **provisional self-esteem**. Self-respect is determined by what others say about you in reports and grades; you are *told* what you are worth and self-evaluation is ignored. The final, seventh lesson is that **you cannot hide**. You are watched constantly and privacy is frowned upon.

The consequence of teaching the seven lessons is a growing indifference to the adult world, to the future, to most things except the diversion of toys, computer games, 'getting stoned' as the height of having a good time, and, for some, involvement in petty crime, hooliganism and violence**. School, Gatto concludes, is a twelve-year jail sentence where bad habits are the only curriculum truly learned. School 'schools' very well but it hardly educates at all**. Indeed, Paul Goodman entitled his book *Compulsory **Mis**-education*. But all this is good preparation for being gullible to the other controlling institutions, such as universities, but especially television. This theme is developed further in Gatto's book, *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling.*

In contrast, home-based education can be seen as analogous to organic farming – a system with the toxins avoided. Our desire for a 'damage limitation', however, meant 'building up the immune system' to fight the toxins of the schooling system.

Other parents were puzzled as to why we saw what they regarded as 'good' schools, which today would no doubt get OFSTED approval, as **'educational impoverishment zones'.** *"A good uniform means a good school"*, they declared. *"And probably a bad education based on uniformity"*, we responded. John Gatto had an explanation for this puzzled response: *"It is the great triumph of compulsory government monopoly mass-schooling that ... only a small number can imagine a different way to do things."*

So what did our policy of damage limitation look like? The first item was a principle: we would never pretend the school was right when it was wrong. If it proved necessary and with our son's approval, we would take the trouble to challenge the school when it was in the wrong, even if this meant we were labelled 'nuisance', 'interfering', or 'bad' parents. Part of this principle was never to shirk a dialogue with our son about what was happening in school and its implications. Thus, when a teacher, unable to find a guilty party, punished the whole class, we pointed out that this was a common fascist procedure, but also why the authoritarian system pushed teachers into this corner.

The second item was a positive programme of activities to offset some of the bad habits John Gatto identified. To some extent, we just continued the programme of activities used between the ages of zero and five years, providing a learner-friendly environment that was personalised and democratic, stressing fun and happiness. This involved construction toys, board games, electronic games, watching TV programmes together, playing games in the garden or park - business as usual in fact.

In addition, we located out-of-school clubs and activities such as Judo groups, holiday soccer coaching courses, holiday table tennis events, and provided transport for groups of friends to go skating in the evening. One 'bit of treasure in the wreck' was the Local Education Authority's Saturday morning orchestra facility. This encouraged young musicians to gain experience with their own or with loaned instruments, in beginner ensembles and, eventually, to the senior orchestra. The LEA also had an Outdoor Centre in Wales and an Arts Residential Centre which were sources of worthwhile week-long courses.

The local naturalist society had regular Sunday outings to gardens, arboretums, bird watching sites ranging from woodland, to moorland, to seashore - even to sewage farms where we could view birds such as black terns – all in the company of enthusiasts. On occasion, we found ourselves at the Gibraltar Point Field Station for a weekend of investigation where father gained 'brownie points' for being the first to notice a rare red-backed shrike. The *I Spy* booklets were a useful cheap resource but another favourite purchase was the magazine, *The Puzzler*. We found that one of those magazines for young people which builds into a junior encyclopaedia was well worthwhile.

We organised our own day trips to seaside, to parks with fun-fairs, to houses, to cities and museums, to sporting events ranging from the local soccer and cricket teams to the world table tennis championships. There were

National Car Shows and the Birmingham Show to experience. We involved ourselves in a local amateur dramatic society that welcomed children to help out backstage. Also, the family, including grandparents, would often come along to meet the families, when I was researching home-based education. There were package holidays abroad, to Sweden to visit friends and also to Spain.

Perhaps none of this seems all that remarkable, and families across the social range do some selection of these things, according to their means and inclinations. But we consciously saw all these activities as opportunities for purposive conversation and mutual learning and an antidote to the effects of schooling. We could try to provide holistic and integrated learning to offset the fragmented approach of the school, and use any opportunities to practice the democratic skills of negotiation, consultation, accommodation, and co-operation - the skills that authoritarian schools usually discount and discourage.

What was achieved? Well, perhaps partial success could be claimed. Just choosing to be at school, rather than being there by coercion, transformed the experience for our 'home-education truant'. At seven years, our son was telling us that, *"school did not get to him like the others, because he had an escape tunnel ready and waiting"*. At eleven, he went to the Open Day at the secondary school where 300 children from the feeder schools in the district were in attendance, but he was conscious of being the only one making a decision whether to go or not. **The others were conscripts**. Later, we saw the head teacher where my son informed him that he was giving the school a term's contract to see how things went. I came to realise that my son regarded the school in the same way that an anthropologist regards a tribe being studied – he was in the role of a participant observer.

The switch from school to further education college was eventually a considerable release from the domination of schooling. Independence of spirit and mind were better able to flourish.

On the other hand, moving away to university meant that this institution just had a field day. The intellectual dependence Gatto talks about now asserted itself in the form of courses and modules requiring replication of approved material and rejecting any alternative or independent analysis as a threat to the authority of 'experts'. We could only hope that some of our efforts at building up an intellectual immune system would pay off.

During twenty years working in universities, this is what I observed happening as a matter of course, and pointing it out in committees was never well received. But it led me into devising a democratic learning co-operative approach as an attempted antidote.

Is a damage limitation policy really necessary? And does every parent using schools need one? John Stuart Mill in On Liberty *(1859, p177) observed that:*

"A general State Education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another, and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the dominant power in the government, whether this be a monarchy, an aristocracy, or a majority of the existing generation … it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by a natural tendency to one over the body."

This seems to me to be (a) just as true now as in 1859 and just as anti-democratic, and (b) just the opposite of an 'organic, toxin-free learning' outcome. In the film Iris*, Iris Murdoch is portrayed as saying that the most important freedom is freedom of the mind. She lost this because of a wasting disease – Alzheimer's. Children are likely to lose it during schooling in exchange for becoming a dependent learner.*

Roland Meighan

Roland's new book *on Natural Learning and the Natural Curriculum*, (£10-00 from Educational Heretics Press) has been well received. Here are some of the comments:

"… the author offers ideas and solutions which are truly revolutionary … an inspiring read!"
from review in HELP Vol. 3, No. 5 Nov/Dec 2001

"… he sets out his commitment to the principles that children are natural learners and that school stifles their inborn thirst for knowledge and understanding … it's strong stuff … we would do well to think about what Meighan has been saying for all these years."
From review by Gerald Haigh
in *Times Educational Supplement*, 19th Oct. 2001

"Thank you for a copy *of Natural Learning and the Natural Curriculum*. I read it at a sitting. It is a wonderful book. Well done!"

Sir Christopher Ball, Chancellor, University of Derby

"*Natural Learning* (is) an excellent jumping off point into the world of alternative education."
Steve Rosenthal, *The Educational Revolution,* 33, 02

NOTICE

Three of future Feature Supplements of *News and Review* will develop the theme of damage limitation, exploring the parents' point of view, then the perspective of the learners, and thirdly, the teachers' angle on what they can do in classrooms. We invite contributions for consideration of 500 to 1000 words in length. Those from younger readers on the second theme, the perspective of learners, will be especially welcome.

Educational Heretics Press has plans to produce a book edited by Janet Meighan on this theme, later this year.

CHAMPS - The Learning How to Learn Course.

It is said that 90% of what we know about how the brain functions has been discovered in the last ten years. And knowledge is increasing at such a pace that John Abbott and Terry Ryan are able to say, in their book 'The Unfinished Revolution', that "90% of what we will know about the brain in three years time will have been discovered in the previous three years." The brain contains some 100 billion cells, about twenty times the population of the whole world. Learning takes place when connections are formed between brain cells, and just one experience can link up thousands of cells. If we have lots of experiences in a supportive and encouraging context we build up a rich network of connections, and future learning becomes easier. The implications of such knowledge for schooling, and for education in general, are considerable and the questions raised urgent.

The CHAMPS CD engages with these questions in a direct, attractive and very accessible way. It outlines a course that gains and holds one's attention. The intention throughout is that students should focus on the process of learning, and should "think about their thinking". An important outcome of the course is that teachers and learners develop a common framework and vocabulary relating to how learning is taking place.

The course sets out the six stages that have been identified as important in learning - Confidence, Homing in on the facts, Action, Memorising, Proving that one knows, Sitting back and thinking - and the acronym provides the title. At the start one is introduced to the astonishing structure of the brain, and to the way in which the three parts of the brain interact with each other. Thus, for example, we now know much more clearly than before the way in which the 'Middle Brain' (Limbic System) controls the emotions, and acts as a kind of central switchboard determining the information that goes through to the Neo-Cortex ('Thinking Brain'). Negative emotions restrict such passage just as positive emotions facilitate it and so, at times when feeling fearful, insecure or vulnerable, we may say "my mind went blank" or "I just couldn't think". It is demonstrable that encouragement, security, a supportive and optimistic environment, colour and confidence are among the many factors that facilitate learning.

The functioning of the two sides of the brain is explored, the Right Side being primarily concerned with patterns, creativity, intuition, melody, the whole picture - and the Left Side with numbers, speech/language, step-by-step logic, the words of a song and thinking about detail. Some people tend to use one side more than the other but the two halves can complement each other, and the discussion of the ways in which teachers can encourage the study of topics so that they are illuminated by complementary approaches is stimulating.

It was Howard Gardner who said that "the important question is not how smart you are but in what ways you are smart", and his work on Multiple Intelligences is now widely known. CHAMPS explores Multiple Intelligences in interesting and imaginative ways, and if they are applied the spin-off could be a significant extension in the range of learning experiences that young people have. Ideally students will be given a number of ways to think about and explore a topic, which is what Howard Gardner referred to as 'Multiple Chance Education.' When this is linked to our understanding of Preferred Styles of Learning (Visual, Auditory and Pysical) then the case for a broad and varied range of learning experiences becomes very powerful indeed.

So, who will use CHAMPS? It is intended for the 10-16 year olds and they will gain greatly from it, as will teachers, parents and adults in general. Each of the six stages has information, examples of possible practice, quizzes and suggestions for open-ended work that students can do. But in addition there are NOTES both for teachers and for parents that can be brought on screen if required. Thus, for example, in the section on 'Your 8 Intelligences' the teacher's NOTES, after emphasizing that "learning is a consequence of thinking", give an outline of Bloom's Taxonomy followed by examples of questions that exemplify the different levels of thinking. The challenge here, as in the course generally, is to provide opportunities for breadth and depth in learning.

And how will CHAMPS be used? Clearly students, teachers and parents will gain personally from using it. INSET days could involve the staff of a school in sharing views about the implications of the ideas both for their own teaching and for the school curriculum as a whole. But in addition it could provide a powerful element both in a school's self-evaluation, and in that of an individual teacher. To what extent, for example, has the teaching responded to pupils' preferred learning styles, or engaged with the full range of intelligences that will be found in each class?

CHAMPS makes one optimistic. Learning about learning in the light of the quite astonishing knowledge of the brain

that has emerged is exciting. It is good news, and not only for those in schools, for research shows that “one never gets too old to make connections.”