

## 12. The superstition of school 'standards'

'Standards' has become one of officialdom's favourite words. But the idea of standards in schooling is both ambiguous and subjective. I will illustrate this with a story. My colleague was in a primary classroom watching a child do the standard achievement tests. The boy was busy colouring in balloons - the more he coloured in the time allowed, the test decreed, the higher his achievement. He had coloured in three, whereas others had coloured in ten or eleven. He spoke to my colleague, sensing a sympathetic ear: *"They say I am slow, but I say I am thorough."* But who says speed is more worthy than thoroughness?

For some 'standards' means remembering the information designated by adults as 'essential' and therefore enshrined in syllabuses set by complete strangers. Training students to be good at this shallow learning of the selected mechanical tricks of institutionally imposed syllabuses, does not produce the more important deep learning, the kind we need more and more in the future. Shallow learning requires pattern-receiving, whereas deep learning requires pattern-making. Recent research on the brain notes that the brain we are born with is 'wired' or 'programmed' for pattern-making and so young children learn their mother tongue naturally by using this facility and not by the pattern-receiving activity of formal instruction. The brain has to 'rewire' to cope with a regime of constant pattern-receiving and can lose its previous strengths in the process.

Observers like John Holt have concluded that children are less capable as independent learners after years of schooling than they were at the outset, partly because their pattern-making facility has been eroded. If he is right, we parents need to start thinking carefully about the experiences our children are having.

Indeed shallow learning systems do tend to eradicate the potential to develop deep learning, on the 'if you do not use it, you lose it' principle. The reverse, oddly enough, does not apply. With deep learning habits in your repertoire, you can do shallow learning more or less at will. With this in mind, some will define 'standards' as standards of deep learning. Thus Edward de Bono is well known for his advocacy of helping children learn to think straight as the first priority, and this is part of his reason for declaring all schooling systems known to him as disasters: *"I have not done a full survey or review of education systems around the world so that the views I express are based on personal experience. I would say that all education systems I've had contact with are a disgrace and a disaster."* Is this a Red Alert for us parents when our leaders keep telling us we must keep up with the others? On the other hand, the character CJ, in *The Rise and Fall of Reginald Perrin*, used to declare, *"I never got where I am today by thinking."* Which vision do we want for our young, thinking people or gullible ones?

Standards and standardisation are closely related ideas. The philosopher John Stuart Mill warned us of the trap: *"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; in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by a natural tendency to one over the body."* Now, this kind of schooling has always appealed to totalitarians. We entered this century with this kind of system and now the government proposes to enter the next with it, more or less, intact. Yet the Chief Inspector of Schools, Edmond Holmes was describing this kind of system as 'The Tragedy of Education' in 1911, and was fired for saying so.

Another objection to the current definition of standards is that most of the required shallow learning is junk knowledge. I define junk knowledge as, 'something you did not need or want to know yesterday, do not need or want to know today, and are unlikely to need or want to know tomorrow'. If you do need or want to know it at sometime, possessing the deep knowledge of such things as questioning, researching and evaluating will enable you to learn it. Indeed, we are all fated to live all our lives in ignorance of most of what is around us because the world of knowledge is now so vast and it is changing all the time. Without the research skills and some personal confidence derived from practising them, we cannot even make sense of what is necessary to our immediate well-being, and are forced to rely fatalistically on 'experts' who often fail to agree amongst themselves.

Those willing to impose their ideas of standards on others will sooner or later talk about 'the basics'. But the survivor of a concentration camp had this to say on the matter of basics: *"Reading, writing and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human."* His eyes had seen the results of a 'high standards' education system - gas chambers built by learned engineers, children poisoned by educated physicians, infants killed by trained nurses, women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates. The *manner* of learning is as critical as the learning itself. Learning literacy in a bully institution makes you a literate bully.

But learning to read as early as possible, has become the latest superstition. The contrary view is that learning to read before you have learned to think effectively, just leaves you in a state of gullibility, a sitting duck for propaganda, the simplistic ideas of the tabloids and a multitude of spin doctors. This is why Robert Owen, industrialist founder of the first infants school, thought that ten years old was early enough to start the mechanics of reading. By that time the young would have had enough experiences, conversation, debate and exploration to have learnt to think straight. But we do not have to be inflexible about this. Pat Farengo, in his address to the London home-education conference in April, explained that his daughters had all learnt to read at different ages, one early, one about the common age of seven years and another several years later. Being a home-based educator, he was able to have the flexibility to stay cool about these individual differences.

Another basic we are asked to accept is the superiority of ruthless, competitive behaviours. Our leaders keep telling us that the next century requires this of us and have insisted that it be the first aim of schooling. Nat Needle, a US writer responds: *"... if the 21st century becomes the story of human beings around the world pitted against each other in a struggle for well-being, even survival, this will only be because we failed to imagine something better and insist on it for ourselves and our children."*

In contrast to the view that the victors in the 'strong versus weak' battle deserve our adulation for setting the pace for the rest of us, Needle reminds us of another view. It is that the strongest are those who devote themselves to strengthening the weak, to keeping the whole community afloat, to ploughing their gifts back into the common field through service to others. He concludes, **"I don't care to motivate my children by telling them that they will have to be strong to survive the ruthless competition. I'd rather tell them that the world needs their wisdom, their talents, and their kindness, so much so that the possibilities for a life of service are without limits of any kind. I'd like to share with them the open secret that this is the path to receiving what one needs in a lifetime, and to becoming strong."**

This extract from the current Living Green journal adds to this an alternative to relentless consumerism - the virtues of 'living lightly' - by saying: **"try to live simply. A simple lifestyle freely chosen is a source of strength. Do not be persuaded into buying what you do not need or cannot afford. Do you keep yourself informed about the effects your style of living is having on the global economy and environment?"**

In the first part of this century, Bertrand Russell observed: **'We are faced with the paradoxical fact that education has become one of the chief obstacles to intelligence and freedom of thought.'** Since the model of education he described is the same as the one we still have, in all key respects, we parents and grandparents have to ask whether we are having imposed on us entirely the wrong standards.

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