

22. Instead of fear

For the last quarter of a century, the discussion of education and educational policy in the UK has used the language of fear, almost exclusively. Here are some of the pronouncements made by politicians, inspectors and civil servants that I have noted.

1. "Fear is a great motivator"

This statement was made in response to a question asking whether the speaker was conscious of the amount of fear implicit in OFSTED inspections based on the authoritarian ideology of education, the national curriculum, the national testing system, the invention and imposition of the stifling key stages and the school league tables. His response was "*fear is a great motivator*".

Without doubt, fear can be used in some situations e.g. to make nervous human beings into soldiers ready to kill on command. But its place in creating confident, capable and inquiring learners is, to say the least, dubious. In his famous book, *How Children Fail*, John Holt demonstrated that fear-based strategies in the classroom were much more likely to have a serious long-term inhibiting effect: "... *they drive them into defensive strategies of learning that choke off their intellectual powers and make real learning all but impossible.*"

2. "There is to be no hiding place"

This slogan has been used a number of times recently to indicate that people who question the official dogmas or do not conform unhesitatingly to orders from London, will be 'hunted down'. The people in question range from head teachers who make any kind of protest, to classroom teachers who protest about regimentation, to children who react badly to domination, to parents who question the wisdom of the system. More and more letters written on education to national newspapers claim the anonymity of 'name and address supplied' to avoid retribution.

3. "Might is right" and the "leaders know best"

This idea has been hailed as the mark of strong leadership. Some head teachers who have been held up in public meetings as models to be emulated, are those who go into so-called failing schools and impose their will on the teachers and the children. One observer wondered if he was the only one in the audience who thought the model he was being asked to admire, was that of the officially licensed bully. The consequence is that the bully mentality is legitimised and children absorb the message that 'adults get their way by bullying' and may act on it then, or later.

4. "It is for their own good"

This pronouncement has been made several times to indicate that adults must be in charge and make children learn whatever the adults deem to be necessary learning. The idea that children should have any say in the process, has been put down with the assertion that all this domination and imposition is 'for their own good'. Children gradually get the message: "*Your experience, your concern, your hopes, your fears, your desires, your interests, they count for nothing. What counts is what we are interested in, what we care about, and what we have decided you are to learn.*" (p. 161, *The Underachieving School*)

Alice Miller described teaching based on domination as 'the poisonous pedagogy': those dominated usually became dominators in turn, for 'every persecutor was once a victim'. (see Alice Miller by Chris Shute, Educational Heretics Press, 1994)

5. "We need to employ 'tough love'"

'Tough love' has been used regularly to justify various aggressive and bullying approaches to educational problems. These range from smacking children to using the police force to round up truants.

Those born before 1950 will recognise these five assertions as popular with the leaders of the Third Reich. 'Tough love' was used as a justification for members of the Hitler Youth reporting any non-conformist tendencies or conversations that were witnessed at home. Parents or siblings would then be questioned and the necessary punishment meted out. Hitler Youth members were not to feel bad about reporting their parents - they would be only guilty of 'tough love'. It was, after all, 'for their parents and siblings own good'. 'Fear, being a great motivator' would cause people to behave in the required fashion, in time. 'There must be no hiding place', because, 'the leaders know best'. It was under the banner of 'tough love' that corporal punishment was re-introduced.

If you think this thinking is peculiar to other cultures, watch this space! A committee considering the merits of re-instating National Military Service in the UK in the mid 1990s came out against the idea, but declared that another idea, that of a compulsory national uniformed youth organisation, had many merits, but that the time was not yet right.

Am I alone in thinking that a learning system based on and justified by coercion, backed by fear, insults the intelligence of teachers, parents and children alike? In what is supposed to be a democracy based on co-operation, the use of consent, choice-respecting and characterised by what Nelson Mandela saw as the absence of domination, why do we tolerate a totalitarian-style domination-riddled system of learning heavily rooted in fear? John Holt saw it as the enemy within: *"Meanwhile, education - compulsory schooling, compulsory learning - is a tyranny and a crime against the human mind and spirit. Let all those escape it who can, any way they can."* (*Instead of Education*, p. 226)

Fear, of course, takes many forms. Schools are usually not granted the power of life and death over children. Only fairly recently, schools in the UK were denied the power of physical pain when corporal punishment was disallowed. A successful lawsuit in the European Court of Human Rights gave damages to a family objecting to their children being beaten. Fearing a flood of successful lawsuits, the government hurriedly change the law - one of those occasions when fear seemed to work.

Schools retain the power to cause emotional, mental and psychological pain, however. Because they are places of coercion and not invitation, they can threaten, frighten, humiliate and denigrate at will, practising the arts of regressive education. Even 'progressive education' turned out to be a method of gently manipulating children rather than supporting their growth as autonomous beings. If you do not choose to be there, the result is that *"for all the children some of the time, and for some of the children all of the time, the classroom resembles a cage from which there is no escape."* (Philip Jackson in *Life in Classrooms*)

In the previous edition of this column the fear of the peer group was demonstrated as a potent force for conformity. Clinging on to the outdated idea of organising ageist institutions for learning, means we provide an ideal arena in which the peer group can operate its fear-based mechanisms with maximum, and often devastating effect.

Here are a number of alternatives to the use of fear that are available to parents and to those in educational settings:

1. Invitation

Many of our public institutions use invitation instead of coercion. Shops invite you to purchase their goods. Public houses invite you to drink and eat. Travel agents provide a choice of holidays. Public libraries invite you to borrow books. Schools could also be places of invitation, although education could still be an expectation and a culturally sanctioned imperative. But politicians, police and others, ironically, 'fear' the consequences - believing that children would not find the facilities on offer appealing - a devastating indictment in itself. According to opinion surveys, their fears are somewhat groundless, for over 95 percent of young people said they would still attend school if it was voluntary but noted that this alone would begin to transform their attitudes to the place.

2. Encouragement

One of the findings of recent brain research is that brain chemistry changes under the influence of encouragement. A positive and receptive mind-set is created. But discouragement creates the opposite effect, and a defensive and avoidance mind-set develops.

3. Teaching by request

John Holt suggested that a principle of good education is 'no question, no teaching'. Until somebody has asked a question, nobody should be teaching anything. This hard dictum can be softened somewhat by including teaching by permission. An adult who asks, 'would you like me to try to explain ...' is respecting the learner's right to say, 'not just now, thank you'.

4. Dialogue

Dialogue is another non-hierarchical, non-coercive and respect-laden activity that can start in many ways. A simple, 'what do you think about this, Mary?' is often enough to start a dialogue. Open-ended questions are more likely to stimulate dialogue than closed-end ones. There is not much scope in questions like, 'did you get wet walking home in the rain?'

5. Being an example

People who are making things, doing things, playing instruments, reading, or holding a discussion are all providing examples that may tempt the curiosity of others. If, in addition, they are prepared to answer questions or invite interested people to join in, dialogue and shared activity can result.

6. Seeking permission to be helpful

'Do you mind if I make a suggestion?' or 'can I help?' are quite different in quality to 'step aside, I will take over now'. These interventions indicate some of the difference in attitudes between co-operation and domination. Seeking permission to be helpful is respectful of the other person, whereas asserted intervention is not.

7. Showing some trust in the learners

John Holt tells the story of a child who declared an interest in penguins. Recognising a 'teaching opportunity', he found a book on the subject and handed it over. Later he noticed that the book had been set aside. 'But I thought you were interested in penguins?' he said. The youngster replied, 'yes, but that book told me more about penguins than I wanted to know just now.' John trusted the child and accepted the verdict.

He could, of course, have opted for domination: 'you will never learn unless you persevere,' or 'you should not give up with a book just because it is becoming complicated', or, 'bring it here and I will go through it with you'. But he did not. Perhaps he remembered his own observation about young learners: *"They are afraid, above all else, of disappointing or displeasing the many anxious adults around them, whose limitless hopes and expectations for them, hang over their heads like a cloud."* (*How Children Fail*, p.151)

None of this should be news to parents. Most parents, as well as those teachers who strive to defeat the logic of the system, use the above strategies some of the time, and some use them most of the time. Parents use them when dealing with very young children when they are learning to walk, talk, and develop competence in their home environment. All the home-based educating families I have worked with use these strategies, almost without deviation. It is also the way we usually deal with our friends and acquaintances. What makes us think that respect, sensitivity and courtesy could ever be optional in the case of children?

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