

23. Are children people?

(Or, Are we content with an education policy of Domination! Domination! Domination!
Or, Is 'education' entitlement or enslavement?)

Whilst my photocopying was being completed I saw a notice on the wall of the Kall Kwik Print shop. It said: "*Customised: we listen, we understand, we find the solution that's right for you*".

I thought this would make a splendid slogan for the next learning system to replace the present learning system of compulsory, coercive schooling followed by the dreary steeplechase of university courses. Its slogan appears to be: "*Standardised: you listen, we only understand coercion and dominance, you accept the solution we decide*." The slogan in the shop, on the other hand, assumes that people deserve a personalised service, not a standardised one.

Most proponents of the approach of imposing their ideas about what young learners should learn and how they should learn it, are content to indulge in the abuse of human rights to do it. The young learners are not seen as people, but something rather pre-human, to be manipulated, scared or bullied. They are akin to asylum-seekers from the land of childhood.

If compulsory state-controlled learning is such a good idea, why are adults exempt? What would be the reaction to a law requiring adults to attend for 15,000 hours required learning in a confined space, over each twelve year period of their lives? A recent Gallup Poll for the Campaign for Learning found that most adults want to learn new things, provided that it is NOT in anything looking or feeling like a school. The memories of school are still open wounds, it would seem.

Sir Christopher Ball in *Guardian Education* 20th March 2001, wrote, "I suppose there are two reasons why, against all the evidence, we continue to tinker with the reform of formal education, and try to make the unworkable work. The first is that children do not have a vote. The second is that no one has proposed a plausible alternative to schools. If I were tyrant for a day, I would extend suffrage to include everyone over the age of 11 -and encourage 'home schooling'".

The first abuse of human rights implicit in mass coercive schooling is **detention without having broken the law**. In a democracy, it is an abuse of human rights to do this. Yet children are detained for 15,000 hours of their young lives in a day detention centre called school. Their only offence appears to be that they are young.

As one home-schooler put it, that children do not go to school by choice but by compulsion, is a massive indictment of our democracy. This detention has been described as a long drawn out course in practical slavery, using totalitarian-type institutions. In what is supposed to be and claims to be a democracy, such an approach shames us all.

The second abuse of human rights is that of **an imposed curriculum rather than a catalogue curriculum**. It is a basic human right to control what goes into your mind. The outlawing of subliminal advertising is one way in which this right is protected. When this right is abused, we rightly talk of indoctrination or brain-washing.

Education in a democracy means working *with* people who have choices. Indoctrination is working *on* people who have no choices. **Any** imposed curriculum is 'working on people' and it denies their right to choose and devise their learning plans. Encouragement, support, advice and the provision of accurate information are all legitimate ways of helping in the formation implementation and review of such learning plans.

Imposition is the approach to be expected in a Totalitarian State of either the 'right wing' or 'left wing' variety. Both Hitler and Stalin, therefore, required a national curriculum and all its trimmings. Religious States require an imposed theological curriculum. But a democracy is supposed to be different, tolerating variety, diversity and choices, provided that human rights are respected. All rights require responsibilities in turn, of course - in general, this means whatever behaviour and action that is needed to ensure that the rights of other people are respected and protected too.

There are other abuses of human rights to be found in 'education'. One is **ageism or age-apartheid**. The imposing of 15,000 hours of compulsory peer-group attendance on someone is reprehensible. The expectation that spending this time in the company of equally immature persons will somehow lead to maturity is laughable. It actually leads to the tyranny of the peer group where behaviour, tastes in clothes, in drugs, in attitudes to other generations are defined by the immature for the immature. (This was the subject of a previous column here, 'How many peers make five?')

A fourth abuse, in some cases, is **sexism** - being required to attend single-sex institutions is another infringement of human rights. Several countries in Europe declare such institutions as immoral and illegal, e.g. Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Belgium. I was addressing a Humanist meeting a few months ago when an enraged member of the audience proclaimed that this was rubbish. There were people in the audience from these four nations, however, who joined in to declare that it was, indeed, the case that single sex schools were illegal in their countries. As in the case of corporal punishment, we need the civilising influence of other European countries to help bring our rudimentary and somewhat faltering democracy into more maturity.

Those willing to impose their ideas of standards on others will sooner or later talk about 'for their own good'. The fallacies of this argument have been regularly exposed in the work of Alice Miller (in *For Your Own Good*), Chris Shute (in *Compulsory Education Disease*) Rosalind Miles (in *The Children We Deserve*) and in John Holt's writings (in *Freedom and Beyond and Escape From Childhood*). Ironically, this imposition is sometimes claimed to be the entitlement of children. I propose that the only legitimate entitlement is that children be treated as people with human rights.

The problem with most discussions about education is that the essential coercive and indoctrinational cultures, and the implicit abuse of human rights, of mass schooling are ignored. School, based on the current model of compulsory attendance, is itself a bully institution.

Next it employs a domination-riddled curriculum - the compulsory National Curriculum or in other countries, some other form of adult-prescribed curriculum. This is 'delivered' by the increasingly favoured domination-riddled pedagogy of teacher-dominated formal teaching, which in turn is reinforced by the domination-riddled compulsory testing system.

All this requires a domination-riddled inspectorate. The unwritten, but powerful message of this package, is that 'adults get their way by domination'. Jerry Mintz, a radical writer in USA, notes one of the outcomes:

"American kids like watching violence on TV and in the movies because violence is being done to them, both at school and at home. It builds up a tremendous amount of anger ... The problem is not violence on TV. That's a symptom ... The real problem is the violence of anti-life, unaffectionate, and punitive homes, and disempowering, deadening compulsory schooling, all presented with an uncomprehending smile."

There are at least three types of long-term outcome. Some of the 'successful' pupils grow up to be officially sanctioned bullies in dominant authority positions as assertive politicians, doctors, teachers, civil servants, journalists and the like.

A majority of the 'less successful' learn to accept the mentality of the bullied - the submissive and dependent mind-set of people who need someone to tell them what to think and do. But in their private life e.g. as parents, they are likely to adopt the bully approach. Rev Dr. Jan Fortune-Wood has just written a book, *Without Boundaries*, outlining a different approach - consent-based, non-coercive parenting.

A third outcome is the production of a group of free-lance bullies who become troublesome and end up in trouble of varying degrees of seriousness. Every bully, declared Alice Miller, was once a victim. The disease is **caught**.

I suggest that we begin to debate how to replace this morbid and obsolete model of mass schooling with an alternative model of a personalised learning system that respects the democratic values of choice and diversity. Such a system will need to take account of current research, such as the findings about multiple intelligences, multiple learning styles, accelerated learning systems, and the insights of the new brain sciences research as well as the trailblazing activities of the home-based educating families.

Here is a practical three point plan for the next Secretary of Education that I offer for consideration.

1. Close down the Department of Education and Employment and all its domination-riddled apparatus including OFSTED, Curriculum and Standards and its totalitarian model of teacher training. At the same time, return 'Employment' to Trade and Industry where it belongs, because it has distorted thinking about education for long enough.
2. Hand over all schools and staff to the Public Library Service with the brief to augment their existing invitational reading and information services to develop a comprehensive service of classes, courses and learning experiences in local community centres for personalised learning. The approach of the Public Library service, after all, is already the customised one. They will need at least two kinds of teacher, the 'sage on the stage' offering subjects courses, and personal tutor/teachers to be 'guides on the side' supporting personal learning plans, along the lines suggested by John Adcock in *Teaching Tomorrow*.
3. Open a new **Department for the Encouragement of Learning** to signal a radical change in philosophy from mass coercive schooling, to open, all-age, local community centres for personalised education designed to support life-long learning

for the multiple educational purposes of employment, citizenship, parenting and personal development.

These developments will need to be monitored and researched and I recommend that suitable people be recruited from the home-based education movement and also the Open University, since these two groups have been operating the most modern and successful forms of learning for twenty-five years or so now.

In the meantime, the best we can do is to strive to treat children as people, even if the school system lets them down.