

8. A superstition called socialisation

A study of factors contributing to the development of people of high achievement was undertaken by H.G. McCurdey at the University of North Carolina, USA. It was reported in George Leonard's book *Education and Ecstasy*. Such people often come to be known as genius. Three factors were identified. One was a high degree of individual attention given by parents and other adults and expressed in educational activities and accompanied by abundant affection. A second factor was an environment rich in, and supportive of, imagination and fantasy. **The third was only limited contact with other children** but plenty of contact with supportive adults.

McCurdey concluded that in mass compulsory schooling, based on formal methods and rigid organisation, we have a long-running experiment in reducing all the above three factors to the minimum. The result is the suppression of high achievement.

Bertrand Russell started his own school at Beacon Hill when he decided that none of the available schools were the kind of places fit for his children, or anybody else's for that matter. He himself had been home-educated. In retrospect, however, he declared that his Beacon Hill school was not as successful as he had hoped. One reason he gave was that he **seriously over-estimated the amount of time children need in the company of each other**.

15,000 hours is a long time to be forced to spend in the company of a selected number of your peers, yet adults persist in declaring that it must be worthwhile socialisation. It may be socialisation, but the **quality** of it is highly suspect. Here are some recent newspaper items that touch on the theme.

Report one: Children now expect bullying to be a regular feature of school life. A national survey commissioned by Family Circle magazine showed that eight out of 10 have suffered at least one sustained attack. On average, the first bullying experience can now be expected at the age of eight.

Report two: A report commissioned by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust showed that weapons are now carried by one in ten school students. We can be relieved that UK is still behind in the international league tables, however, since in the USA knives and guns are carried by far more students than this. But the trend is upwards and complacency is not justified.

Report three: Primary schools are to be issued drug guidelines by the Head Teachers Association. Solvent-sniffing is now found to be common amongst children as young as 7. The HTA claimed that schools were choosing to sweep the problem under the carpet by not informing the police, in order to protect the reputation of the school. The peer group in primary schools is now a key source of information about the drugs scene for children in school. Later, as the youngsters grow older, it will supply information about such things as smoking, alcohol, ecstasy tablets, junk food, and expensive teenage fashion.

Report four: The Secretary of State for Education has launched a crackdown on truancy. He sees it has a 'disengagement from education'. The crackdown was proposed as a measure to combat social exclusion. "*Exclusion from what?*" you might be tempted to ask. "*Weapons, or drugs, or bullying?*"

One of the great supporters of school as socialisation was the USA educationalist John Dewey, but he wanted schools to be **democratic** in style, with high levels of participation and power-sharing, not the totalitarian style based on domination and imposition. The domination model of most of our schools was not part of his plan. He saw the best kind of school as a larger-scale version of the learning approach of the best of the pioneer families of USA.

Yet there is still surprise when a family decides to opt out into home-based education! "What about the social life?" they cry. A reply based on the evidence rather than superstition is, *"Exactly! It is well worth avoiding!"* Another reply might be that we are a nation of slow learners who cannot work out the significance of report, after report, after report, on the negative socialisation of schooling.

Home-schooling families actually create a much higher quality of social life in their practice of family-centred education, in three ways. First of all they use the home as a springboard into the community using libraries, museums, places of interest in both town and country. In the process they rub shoulders with people of all ages. Whilst this is going on, their schooled counterparts are confined to classrooms with a limited range of peers and a limited range of adults.

Secondly, they locate and join groups such as Scouts, Guides, and Woodcraft Folk, as well as groups or classes in judo, swimming and other sports, or natural history and other pursuits.

Thirdly, they seek out other home-schooling families and do things in co-operation. They may be on an occasional basis, or as in the case of more and more groups, on a weekly basis. London thus has The Otherwise Club meeting two days a week for families to join in if they wish.

But another issue related to the socialisation superstition is discrimination against loners. At parties I have often found myself talking on the side to another person who finds the social attention-seekers getting rather wearing and the endless flow of social trivia getting increasingly boring. I have found that loners often turn out to be more interesting, composed and reflective people and, indeed, some of the most prolific contributors to ideas have been of this disposition. So if your child seems content with their own company - and yours - it is not an automatic cause for concern. Indeed, UK housing policy has just come to terms with the fact that more and more people choose to 'go solo' and this has created a growing demand for single dwellings.

Loners in school can often become the target for bullying because the normal expectation generated by the socialisation superstition, is that you will allow yourself to be taken over by the peer group. This assumes that the artificially created peer group of school is actually worth joining. In the boys grammar school I went to, I judged it was not, and preferred to make my own circle of friends away from the school. Being useful at sports, however, kept me in touch with the peer group without having to be taken over by them. Others were not so lucky.

A head teacher friend provides a final angle on socialisation. He says that the main reason the parents ask for the school to keep its school uniform is because it is protection against the lethal combination of market forces and peer group pressure, which force young people to ask for expensive trainers and other fashion-led items of clothing!

(A version of this appeared in the Roland Meighan column of *Natural Parent* magazine, Nov/Dec 1998)