

## Interview with John Adcock

*Roland Meighan's choice for education book of the year 2000 is **Teaching Tomorrow: personal tuition as an alternative to school**, with its vision of a new teaching profession that serves families and their learning plans, rather than imposing government demands on them.*

*Here he talks to its author, John Adcock*

**Roland Meighan:** "In your books you see a close, trusting partnership between parent and teacher as the cornerstone of successful childhood education?"

**John Adcock:** "Yes, but as the child gets older he or she will join that decision-making partnership and contribute increasingly to the plans being drawn up for his or her education. I'm talking here of the early-education stage from birth to 13 or 14 years - and even before that, because most parents welcome advice on coming to terms with the changes that will occur in their lives after their baby is born. My wife and I certainly did! Then, as well as pre-natal support, they will need practical help and a whole range of ideas for encouraging and stimulating the learning processes that begin in their child's earliest days."

**RM:** "Long before he or she reaches the age of five when school starts?"

**JA:** "Yes - except that 'school', in the way that word has been understood over the past 130 years, becomes an increasingly irrelevant concept as we enter the 21st century. But not only irrelevant: with some children - perhaps many - the school, as now constituted, can become an obstacle to much learning. Economic, social and technological change has been so rapid and all-embracing since 1945 that we can now be thinking radically of an education system for young people in which the traditional school plays no part at all. I think we have reached a critical stage in state-provided education and need, rather urgently, as many novel and thought-provoking ideas as we can get."

**RM:** "Getting a hearing for major new ideas isn't easy, as we both know well."

**JA:** "Far from it! For instance, when state schooling for five-year-olds began in the 1870s no practical alternative forms of teaching were available. Now exciting alternatives are here already. The social significance is truly immense - but little media time is given to that. Concern is restricted to ways of keeping the 19th century system on the road! Back in Victorian times, however, many parents and grandparents were semi-illiterate, their homes crowded, their spare time and money non-existent, their teaching resources meagre, and technological help was nearly a century away. A family-based education, as opposed to a school-based one, was a non-starter - except for the rich. Children had to be taken from their homes and taught in schools. And fairly forbidding places most of them were!"

"But the situation of families in Britain today is beyond anything even dreamt of by the average parent of 1870. Today, the possibilities for educating children at home, each according to his need, are infinite. More space, time, money, knowledge and other resources, all combined with limitless, but controlled, support from the multimedia, makes possible an enjoyable, encouraging and personalised study programme, with skilled individual tuition, for every boy and girl."

"No longer do we need classes of 30 pupils, in schools of hundreds, following a politically-contrived, centrally-administered, imposed and externally-inspected national curriculum, based on the targets, tests, performance league tables, and the naming and shaming antics so beloved of the civil servants and politicians in their London-based offices."

**RM:** "So, it isn't the school as such which you object to, but rather what goes on inside it? What the children and teachers are subjected to and what the parents are persuaded to believe is important?"

**JA:** "That's the whole point. And that is what must be made clear. After 30 years working in state education, I know how hard most children work, how supportive most parents are, how conscientious most teachers are, and how seriously most school governors take their duties. Much work is done in schools which is good and it would be ridiculous and hurtful to say otherwise. But it is the institution of school - its rigid social structure - with its physical restrictions, large numbers, time-tabling requirements, disciplinary code, hierarchical set-up, standardised curriculum, tests, inspections and stress that is the problem."

"Think how much more a gifted teacher could do if she were wholly trusted and given free rein to spend her time, her energy, her imagination and her other resources. - as well as her compassion - to devise work schemes for her pupils, aided by their parents, working in small study groups at different times and places as agreed. The school as we know it would become superfluous and the vast sums spent on its upkeep could be released for more valuable, personalised educational work."

**RM:** "But what of the billions. already invested in school land and buildings and in our huge teaching force?"

**JA:** "Some buildings would continue to be used - but not as schools. After conversion some would become vital community resource centres offering libraries, sports centres, laboratories, recreation areas, study sections, cafes, health advisory services, overnight accommodation, multimedia facilities and much more. They would be open to all local residents. Some strategically-placed schools would become field-centres."

"As regards existing teachers, those who wanted to, and who were prepared to retrain, would become personal, professional family tutors to small groups of children and their parents. They would be there to help all those parents who wanted to plan and then see through the early education of their own children."

**RM:** "The education of the child would pass to the family?"

**JA:** "It would pass *back* to the family. For thousands of years the family, several generations of it, educated its own children. Universal and compulsorily-attended schools changed that during a particular and unlikely-to-be-repeated period of economic development in western society in the late 19th century. That period has passed. Now the family, benefiting from the huge opportunities that period eventually gave rise to, can resume its original work. The school will be seen as a blip in recent social history: no more."

"Given the extraordinary resources readily available, the key to the new approach will be maximum trust. Trust at all times. Trust between child, parent and personal tutor. That trust is imperative in all professional relationships, and it will be in the new profession of tutoring.

There will be the recognition that all children and their family circumstances are different: that they are unique, and that it follows that sets of needs are different too, so that the designing of a successful early-education programme for a child will depend on the recognition and acceptance of those differences. Parents are likely to know of these needs in their own children earlier and sense them more deeply than the personal tutor, and parents' input in the construction of each study programme will be essential."

**RM:** "But some needs might be common to a sizeable majority of children?"

**JA:** "Yes, such as the learning of sound health practices, of having opportunities for establishing valuable social relationships, for the acquiring of literacy and numeracy, for internalising compassion and an understanding of others. We know that children differ physically, and that their potential for development in many areas is varied, as is their increasing range of interests. The task for personal tutors and parents will be, gradually and patiently, not only to construct and then amend programmes of study, but to carry them through in many different environments. It will be a challenging role, but one that will be greatly rewarding in the work satisfaction gained. The child will be happily involved, the parent directly involved, and *the* tutor professionally involved."

**RM:** "But all this is demanding much of the tutor. Can she succeed?"

**JA:** "There are two points there. It is, no doubt, asking a lot of the tutor, but just think of what we now ask of a general medical practitioner! The tutor will get the *same* level of training and accept the same level of responsibility as the family doctor - perhaps more. In return, society must give her the same level of resources, respect and reward."

Can she do it? Yes: with help. First through her long, demanding initial professional training, and then, throughout her career, by means of generous study leave. Those teachers who feel they cannot or do not want to undertake this new role should be offered alternative, less taxing, work. But no personal tutor will be working on her own: there will be no classroom whose door will close leaving her with 30 unresponsive pupils. Panels of seven or eight tutors will cover the age range 0 to 13 years and so each will be able to consult with the others and specialise, to some extent, with a chosen age group.

She will be aided by reconstituted university departments of education and by ever more powerful multimedia libraries. Also, her role will be very different from that of the schoolteacher: the bulk of 'lesson' material will be freely available from the multimedia on demand - anywhere at any time. Part of the tutor's skill will lie in knowing what is available, sourcing it, assessing and amending it, and cleverly incorporating it into the programme of study which has been devised for her pupil and accepted by his parents. The parallel with the GP and her patients, group practice, technology and teaching hospital resources, continues to hold good. Indeed, we could be seeing, during this century, a merging or working-together of education and medicine!"

**RM:** "Then, on top of all that, you advocate in your new book, *Teaching Tomorrow*, the payment of a salary to some parents?"

**JA:** "Certainly. To those parents who choose to train for and qualify in the increasingly-demanding and socially important craft of parenthood and who stay at home, full-time, to educate - with the tutor's help - their young children. Yes, and it would be a substantial

amount. There is no more important work in our society than caring for the next generation. We need to ensure that every pound or dollar spent is well spent, and we cannot claim that is the case in the system today."

"If this seems revolutionary, remember that taking children from home to school - compulsorily - was just such a revolution in the 1870s. In 2000 we could be into counter-revolution. We need no longer see childhood education devised for employers' and nations' benefits, but for children's benefit - aiming for a more considerate, less competitive, less grasping, less consumer-based future. Childhood education will be in the hands of parents and tutors rather than those of politicians and their bureaucrats. Politicians may not like that, but in my view, that is all to the good: the less they have to do with our children's education the better!

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*Teaching Tomorrow: personal tuition as an alternative to school (ISBN 1.871526.44.2 published by Education Now) costs £9-95 (or £19-95 in hardback ISBN 1.871526.46.9) p.&p. included, from Education Now, 113 Arundel Drive, Bramcote Hills, Nottingham NG9 3FQ*

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