

Why Dick and Jane are learning fascist tendencies
Or
Why Dick and Jane are learning the bully mentality
Or
Why Dick and Jane are learning the habits of domination

and

the curious absence of democracy from our school system.

My newspaper tells me that Cherie Booth Q.C., wife of prime minister Blair, has taken an interest in the issue of bullying, saying that bullying permeates British culture and all aspects of daily life.

Nelson Mandela's choice for Education Minister, Professor Sme Bengu proposed that democracy means 'the absence of domination'. Since most schools in South Africa had domination running through them as if they were a stick of rock, he set about devising a policy for democratising schools.

Visitors from societies that have been totalitarian see the same domination-riddled pattern in the British school system. When I asked Professor Eugenia Potulicka from Poland what she would say in her report about UK schools and our education system, she said. "*Oh, I shall tell them it is totalitarian.*" She went on to say: "*The 1988 Education Act is a very dangerous development for it has politicised schooling in the direction of fascist thinking. It is the worst development in Europe at the moment.*"

These three people alert us to some worrying features that begin to influence children from an early age. One mother reported that her daughter never did a mean-spirited or unkind action until she had been in school a few weeks. I have mentioned previously Ann Sherman's research which showed that children by the age of six are aware that they are being schooled into regimental, rule-bound attitudes.

Many readers will be familiar with the proposition that '**power corrupts**': those who gain power too often use it to control and manipulate for their own ends. They may be less familiar with the idea that '**powerlessness corrupts too**', by creating a fatalistic and alienated mentality in the general population. Democracy can be seen as an attempt to deal with both problems, firstly, by having laws based on human rights to control those elected or appointed to positions of power, and secondly by trying to share power amongst the people.

A notable feature of democracy is the principle that those who are affected by a decision have the right to take part in the decision-making. This is expressed in slogans such as '*No taxation without representation!*' If we apply this to education, we get, '*No learning and therefore no curriculum without the learners having a say in the decision-making*'. In the traditional approach to schooling, however, there is a chronic fear of trusting students and sharing power with them, and a general fear of opting for the discipline of democracy. So, if they are not experiencing and learning democracy, what takes its place?

If you do not have some form of democracy, you are bound to have something worse. This could be any of the standard tyrannies of dictatorship. There is a wide choice of forms of

domination: totalitarianism, fascism, theocracy, monarchy, bureaucracy, male chauvinism, or global capitalism.

An approach that indicates levels of democracy in operation in a school is that of Lynn Davies in *Beyond Authoritarian School Management* where she develops a series of performance indicators of democracy in education covering such areas as the structure of school management, decision making arenas, practice opportunities in democracy, and preparation for active citizenship. Most schools in UK get low scores, and often nil, on these performance indicators. This supports the argument of Carl Rogers when he pointed out that schools, for the most part, despise and scorn democracy: "*Students do not participate in choosing the goals, the curriculum, or the manner of working. These things are chosen for the students. Students have no part in the choice of teaching personnel, nor any voice in educational policy. Likewise the teachers often have no choice in choosing their administrative officers...*"

On this last point, in a recent article in his 'Thinking the Unthinkable' column in NASUWT Career Teacher, John Adcock asked why we appoint head teachers rather than have a local school body representing the learners, parents and teachers to elect them?

Carl Rogers went on to say: "*All this is in striking contrast to all the teaching about the virtues of democracy, the importance of the 'free world,' and the like. The political practices of the school stand in the most striking contrast to what is taught. While being taught that freedom and responsibility are the glorious features of our democracy, students are experiencing powerlessness, and as having almost no opportunity to exercise choice or carry responsibility.*"

Ironically, in many countries including our own, that sustain the illusion that they are very democratic, democratic educational practices are rare and indeed meet with sustained, hostile and irrational opposition. Instead, it is now the case the conscripted learners are to be taught 'democratic citizenship' - that is having democracy preached at them rather than actually doing it. As one colleague, Derry Hannam, remarked, "*Learning about democracy and citizenship in school is a bit like reading holiday brochures in prison.*"

Democratic practice, in society or in education, is rarely proposed as an ideal state but, paraphrasing an observation of Winston Churchill, the worst system of organisation and order available - except for all the alternatives. Thus the shortcomings of democratic practice, such as the consumption of considerable time in debate, dialogue and decision making, the 'camel is a horse designed by a committee' jibe, are all admitted at the outset whilst maintaining that democratic practice is still the least of several evils.

The point that democracy is a preferable state rather than an ideal, is made in a passage in E.M.Forster's famous essay 'What I Believe', written in 1939, (in *Two Cheers for Democracy*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1962):

"Democracy is not a beloved republic really, and never will be. But it is less hateful than other contemporary forms of government, and to that extent deserves our support. It does start from the assumption that the individual is important, and that all types are needed to make a civilisation...

Democracy has another merit. It allows criticism... That is why I believe in the press, despite all its lies and vulgarity, and why I believe in Parliament... Whether Parliament is either a

*representative body or an efficient one is questionable, but I value it because it criticises and talks, and because its chatter gets widely reported.
So two cheers for Democracy: one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism. Two cheers are quite enough: there is no occasion to give three."*

It is possible to extract from the above quotations and ideas, some propositions about a democratic education. It will attempt to:

1. admit variety rather than uniformity
2. permit critical thought rather than belief
3. operate power-sharing rather than authoritarian imposition
4. promote flexibility rather than rigidity

There are two more important aspects. One is the difference between moral and immoral democracy, the other is the difference between shallow and deep democracy.

Aristotle noted that there could be the rule of the untutored mob voting for any fashion or whim that took its fancy - this is immoral democracy. Moral democracy, on the other hand, is underpinned by the value system of human rights. This is important in answering those who have maintained that democracy is dangerous because it allows the operation of any values any majority cares to adopt, however barbaric. Democracy, as interpreted here, follows the classic analysis of Tom Paine and others in assuming the base values of equal human rights as articulated in the Thirty Articles and similar declarations. It does not occupy a values vacuum.

The distinction between shallow and deep democracy is important in education. Shallow democracy only allows limited power-sharing and restricted participation in decision-making. Shallow forms of democracy only allow a small amount of power to be shared, often under limited license, which those in power can withdraw at will, and often confine to only marginal activities. As an example, some schools organise schools councils. They are usually allowed limited time and limited scope, and if they try to extend their range of tasks, they are reprimanded or shut down. Teachers retain a veto and use it whenever it suits them.

Such shallow democracy can degenerate to such a sham as to be counter-productive in leading to cynicism, fatalism, and a belief that 'democracy does not work'. Sham democracy certainly does not work.

Deep democracy allows more and more power-sharing, and in the end, the setting of the agenda itself. Deep democracy is not simply about the number and range of items where power is shared. It is also about the levels of decision-making. It is not just being involved in more items on a longer agenda, but also having the opportunity to decide the agenda itself. Thus in education, learners may be allowed to make choices from a catalogue curriculum - this is shallow democracy. When they move on to construct the curriculum itself, or devise the catalogue, they are engaging in deeper democracy. Thus A.S.Neill's school Summerhill, UK operates democratically in its organisational culture but the formal curriculum is teacher-directed. In contrast, Daniel Greenbergh's Sudbury Valley School, USA, both aspects are democratic - indeed there is no timetable of organised studies until the learners set to and devise one, which they invariably do.

In systems based on dominance, one person, or a group of people makes and implements the decisions about what to learn, when to learn, how to learn, how to assess learning, and the nature of the learning environment. These decisions are taken in course planning committees and accreditation boards often before the learners are recruited as individuals or meet as a group.

This kind of thinking leads inevitably to an imposed National Curriculum and other compulsory features. It is the general approach favoured by totalitarian systems whether right-wing fascist or left-wing communist. The spirit of this approach can be summed up in the slogan: *You will do it our way! (Or suffer the consequences)*

But the present non-democratic approach to schooling has been described by John Holt as regimental: "*School is the Army for kids. Adults make them go there, and when they get there, adults tell them what to do, bribe and threaten them into doing it, and punish them when they don't.*"

One growing reaction to this domination-riddled approach has been the rapid growth of home-based education, especially in USA, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and UK. Democratic practice and its five consequences are more likely to be encountered in home-based education than in the mass, coercive schooling system, because power is usually shared with the learners who have more and more say in the decision-making. Consequently, they usually develop confidence in managing their own learning in co-operation with members of the family and others. The USA researcher, Brian Ray, concluded that home-based education tended to produce much better citizens.

School, based on the current anti-democratic model of compulsion and domination is a *bully institution*. Next it employs a *bully curriculum* - the compulsory National Curriculum. This is enforced by the increasingly favoured *bully pedagogy* of teacher-directed formal teaching. Currently this is reinforced by the *bully compulsory assessment system*. This system is enforced by a *bully inspectorate*. The unwritten, but powerful message of this nasty package, is that: *'adults get their way by bullying'*.

Then, the peer group usually copies the school domination model and so the tyranny of the peer group is born. The media, TV in particular, has an endless stream of bully role-models for us to applaud and imitate. Cherie Booth is right - bullying penetrates all aspects of daily life.

There are at least three types of outcome. 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. A third outcome is the production of a group of free-lance bullies who become troublesome and end up in trouble of varying degree of seriousness.

In contrast, in democratic education the learners work as a co-operative group for they have the power to make some, most, or even all of these decisions since power is shared and not appropriated in advance by a minority of one or more. Many home-educating families work this way, though not all.

Some of the consequences of democratic practices that have been found in the research are:

- (a) that there is likely to develop a sense of community amongst a group of learners;
- (b) there develops a working partnership between appointed teachers and learners;
- (c) appointed teachers develop trust in the capability and creative ability of their fellow humans who come to them in the role of students;
- (d) dialogue becomes an essential activity rather than an optional feature, and unmandated or imposed learning is not seen as legitimate.
- (e), there are bonus skills such as increased personal confidence, higher self-esteem, and enhanced discussion and research skills.
- (f) Standards of formal work usually rise in the long run.

But in the absence of such an approach, Dick and Jane, from an early age, are not learning the discipline of democracy, but something else...

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