

What follows is a lecture I delivered in 1992 to audiences in thirteen towns and cities from Newcastle to Plymouth and from Norwich to Swansea, revising as I went. The Small School published the fifth revision. Now, nine years later, I have revised it again for Human Scale Education and it is published in the hope that you, the reader, will see that schools do not have to be as many of them are.

This knowledge brings with it a responsibility: to see that they do not remain as they are. How you respond to this challenge, the task to which HSE is dedicated, will depend on your situation. Were we face to face I could address that question. As it is, I ask you to read this lecture with Tolstoy's question, 'What must I do?' a constant companion.

In the nine intervening years we have had a change of government. Many of us hoped that this would lead to a more enlightened approach to education. But as Labour embarks on to its second term schools are still being judged by attendance and test statistics, teachers still have their hands tied with red tape and head teachers still take to the bottle. So, although at first sight, some of the examples I give have the flavour of ancient history, nothing much has changed. That said, there do seem to be emerging the tips of a few green shoots that could herald a more promising future.

...as if children matter...

SCHOOLS for TOMORROW

I address you, not as a politician or a union rep, but as an ordinary teacher aware of the anger, despair, frustration and fear felt by many parents and teachers as a consequence of what is happening in many of our schools. Does this sound extreme? I run workshops for those interested in setting up small schools and among those attending are teachers in the state sector who are not prepared to send their children to the schools in which they teach. If the teachers don't have faith in our schools, who can?

It is tempting to focus our anger on successive Secretaries of State. But they, poor dears, are not miserable sinners; merely deluded do-gooders whose 'improvements' go sour in their grasp. To save them, and our children, education has to be taken out of their hands and put back into the hands of teachers and parents. After all, we don't expect the Health Secretary to dictate to doctors the treatment they should give. The doctor is expected to

decide, in discussion with the patient, what is best in each individual case. Likewise teachers ought to be able to decide what is best for their pupils.

Summary of the Argument

It is my argument that the nature of education is such that there never has, never can, and so never will be agreement on what its content ought to be, or how best it is to be carried out; that a concern with values leads us to focus on the individual child, her needs and potential (an approach which has an impressive history) on the personal quality of the teacher, and on the organization of, and relationships within, the school; that poor motivation is the greatest hindrance to learning, and therefore the teacher needs the freedom to choose the method and content most likely to improve it. I also believe that a mix of provision is healthier and stronger than uniformity of provision. I want to add to the mix the small school, of which the Small School, Hartland, is an English example inspired by the Danish model.

This broadening might create a problem for those who have a horror of faith schools. Legislation which would allow small schools to receive government funding is also likely to make it possible for Moslem, Jewish, Seventh Day Adventist and the new Christian Evangelical schools, as well as Steiner/Waldorf schools, to get support. I welcome such diversity. That is why I spent eighteen months establishing the *Third Sector Schools Alliance*, to broaden the range of provision supported by the state.

Two other developments that would be welcome are the breaking down of large schools into a number of mini-schools sharing the same buildings, as is now happening in the US, and flexi-schooling, which means parents making a contract with a school for particular services. (Information on both of these may be obtained from *HSE*.)

Prison or Flower Garden?

There seem to be two camps in education, Progressive and Traditionalist. These labels are misleading, and such a polarization does everyone a disservice. If I were forced to declare myself I would probably opt for Progressive. Yet here am I giving a lecture that will last well over an hour, a teaching method condemned by progressives. Conventional wisdom has it that students' attention span is miniscule and that they need visual stimuli to hold their attention. My own experience, however, is that if a lecturer has something of worth to say, and says it well, then attention can be held for an

hour or longer. (I introduce slides about three-quarters of the way through this lecture to get a change of pace.)

Nothing New

Researchers from Exeter University, who observed the Small School for three years, seemed very disappointed that we had not discovered any new teaching methods. I don't believe there are any. We think, for instance, the current argument about how to teach reading to be a modern one. Tolstoy was discussing the alternatives in the 1860's. He advocated knowledge of all methods and the application of the one that is best suited to the individual child. The intervening 130 years have not made that conclusion seem unreasonable. (And yet teachers are made to feel guilty for sharing it.)

Much of what is called 'progressive' has just as honourable historic antecedents as that which we call 'traditional'. So I do not feel that I am arguing for anything new. I merely restate a case, a case that has not been getting a fair hearing. And if you are no better informed than some of those who today command considerable coverage for their thoughts on issues educational then some of these ideas may well appear novel - heretical, even.

Why should you be better informed? In the late 80s a BBC editor told me there was not enough popular interest in education for them to make programmes about it. That changed for a while, though it was the government's views that tended to dominate. Now education is back in the back seat and parents are once again left to make what they will of what is on offer.

They are likely to be at a loss because, to judge the issue, most people have only their own limited experience of schooling to go on. When their parents take Daren or Trudy to see round a school they have no idea what to look for or what questions to ask. The best they can do is to compare what they see with the school to which they themselves went. And if the difference is half-a-dozen computers, smart blazers and orderly seating, they may well be satisfied!

Boot Camp

By reflecting on my own experience I have learnt a lot. As a small boy I was dressed in a uniform, all grey except for the tie, which was black, and the

cap, which was blue, quartered with narrow blue and silver ribbon. I was given a number and sat at one of thirty desks set in rows. My brother went into the army. He was dressed in a uniform, given a number and made to stand in rows. When my mother became a nurse she was given a uniform and tended numbered patients laid out in rows.

The similarities between the school, the army and the hospital are no accident. Michel Foucault has shown how, with prisons and factories, they share a common organization in which it is possible to control the use of an individual's time and space hour by hour. The buildings are designed to serve this end. Discipline is imposed not only by punishment but also by observation and supervision. The staff table is on a platform even in the dining room so the staff can observe the pupils. The exam is also a surveillance that makes it possible 'to qualify, to classify and to judge'.

Schools, prisons and army barracks were designed by the same people according to the same principles. Many today believe this to be the true model from which every other sort of school is a deviation. And certainly it was against this background that Rousseau developed his ideas about education. His romantic view of childhood and optimistic view of human nature may go to the other extreme. His, however, is not the only possible alternative.

Flower Garden

Our politicians and pundits try to rubbish ideas such as child-centred learning, and education through discovery and play. They do it by labelling them 'progressive', always within inverted commas, and condemn them by association. These ideas were to the fore in the sixties - Chapter 2 of Lady Plowden's report on primary education, published in 1967, began 'At the heart of every educational process lies the child'. ('What should lie at the centre?' asked Ted Wragg, 'The dinner register?') They deplore the sixties, which was also the age of half-cured Afghan coats, cannabis, exotic gurus and Harold Wilson. As the sixties are generally regarded as having ended in 1974, Edward Heath can be added to the hit list. The Beatles excepted, everything from this decadent decade has to go so, along with any extant copies of the schoolkids edition of OZ, the Plowden Report itself is trashed. Condemning some English materials published by LINC, Roger Scruton declared that they 'show an indelible mark of the egalitarian nonsense that was being taught in the Sixties'. He also demanded that teacher training colleges be closed because they are hotbeds of this nonsense.

Plowden was not peddling Rousseau, nor was she as radical as some of her followers, those who rejected all forms of teaching in favour of experience and discovery. That is not our view. Learn from experience, yes, but parents, books and teachers are part of the experience. Sit a Mozart in front of a piano and he may produce a work of art without help. The average child will need a teacher to act as guide. The teacher will need to see that certain technical skills are mastered but, if she does not want to turn the child off, will make learning as much fun as possible.

Study and Play

Locke, who died before Rousseau was born, says in his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* of 1693: ‘Children should not have anything like work, or serious, laid on them; neither their minds nor their bodies will bear it.’ And, ‘were matters ordered right, learning anything they should be taught might be made as much a recreation to their play as their play is to their learning’.

We can go back further. Although he did not have a fully developed playway philosophy Plato recommended play as a means of teaching: ‘Enforced exercise does no harm to the body, but enforced learning will not stay in the mind. So avoid compulsion, and let your children’s lessons take the form of play. This will also help you to see what they are naturally fitted for.’ ‘That is a reasonable plan’, comments Glaucon. (*The Republic* tr. Cornford p. 252 VII 536)

Quintilian, the best-known Roman educator, whose writings were a great influence on English practice in the 15th and 16th centuries, also declared that study ought to be a diversion ‘lest the child who cannot yet love study should come to hate it.’ His teaching of writing followed a principle revived by Montessori.

Study as play, study as diversion. Surely that is better than dragging a lad through the processes of education, as DH Lawrence has described, to produce ‘a profound contempt for education and for all educated people (which) has meant nothing to him but irritation and disgust’?

At the Small School we believe that school should be a happy experience for both adults and children, and that has led some people to call us progressive. I think you can see from the examples the uselessness of this label, and it amuses me that those who use ‘progressive’ as a term of abuse themselves

believe in progress. Tolstoy, on the other hand, who founded a school on which that particular progressive label could be stamped, did not, not in historical progress, that is, only in individual improvement.

Children's Needs

Parents need to know that there is a wider range of view than the usual polarized alternatives of army camp or flower garden. To start from the child's needs does not mean allowing the child to become a dictator but to put the needs and interest of the child before any educational theory, teacher comfort or state interest.

What are the child's needs? It has been obvious in the past that it was hard for a hungry child to learn. Schools became agents for nutrition and delivered free milk and meals. Once fed the child could be taught.

The need has changed, though under-nourishment has again appeared in depressed areas. For me the most profound contemporary problem is a general spiritual emptiness, an existential vacuum: I believe that it is our responsibility to help pupils in their search for meaning. The corollary is that the teacher herself has to have found meaning in her existence.

One consequence of the spiritual malaise is in the breakdown of the family. More than a third of children have parents who are separated or divorced. Teachers must respond to this new, difficult situation, though a milk stronger than human kindness may be required. I do not mean that teachers must become counsellors. I mean that children must be loved. For many of my charges I am an uncle figure, and I try not to shrink from their demands. A teacher cannot claim to be only concerned with the child's head, with intellectual activity. We are whole, integrated beings and so the development of the emotions and the spirit are of equal importance to the teacher.

Education has to be conceived and organised 'as though children matter', which is an oblique reference to Schumacher whose *Small Is Beautiful* carries the subtitle 'economics as though people mattered'. At the centre of the discipline we call economics, he argued, must be the human being. At the centre of the activity we call education must also be the human being, in all her fullness, not the curriculum, the economy nor the school.

Values

‘A school is not merely a teaching shop, it must transmit values and attitudes’, wrote Lady Plowden. Schumacher described education similarly, as the ‘transmission of ideas of value, of what to do with our lives.’ These ideas of value do not come from within education. Education has its values added from outside itself.

In his book Fritz Schumacher drew attention to two types of problem, the convergent, in which the gathering of relevant information leads one closer to a solution, and divergent, in which, the deeper you go, the greater the number of possible solutions that present themselves. The problems associated with education are of this latter, divergent type. That is why I advise those interested in starting small schools not to attempt to get agreement on the details of what is to be taught or precisely how. The deeper they go the deeper the divisions that will develop between them. It was one of the blessings of the Hartland Small School that the haste with which Satish Kumar bought the premises allowed little time for much talk.

When considering what should be taught in schools, we face a divergent problem. There never can be agreement because, to begin with, not everyone agrees that education is about the transmission of ideas of value and, even if there were agreement on this, it is certain there would be no consensus on what those values are. There is not even agreement among historians as to what history ought to be taught.

Perhaps in a closed society in which values were held in common there might be a good chance of getting agreement on what goes on in an educational establishment. But that is not the case in this society, now. There was not even agreement in Plato’s city-state so it should not surprise us. We live in a multi-cultural society, and I mean multi-cultural rather than multi-ethnic. We are free to pick up our values from the store between the Sock Shop and the Tie Rack. Some buy club ties and others dispense with socks; some buy the Moslem creed, some the Christian, but most seek street cred and go for shopping as an end in itself.

A survey in Singapore identified shopping as the inhabitants’ favourite pastime. Eating out came second. A survey carried out in the UK for the Observer at the beginning of 1992 produced similar results, and the growth in Sunday trading illustrates the commitment to consumerism and the

primacy of materialism. I cannot be involved in promulgating, promoting or perpetuating these values, which are essentially an attempt to compensate for the lack of meaning in people's lives.

A concern with values and their transmission means that the teacher meets the whole child. Likewise, the child should meet the whole teacher, values and all. I wish to develop a concern for the environment and for fruitful and harmonious relations between individuals and groups, for instance. The government wants to encourage consumer spending to keep the economy buoyant. Do I tell my pupils that they should spend, spend, spend? Or do I tell them that the Buddha, Jesus and other religious leaders, as well as certain humanists, have warned that consumption cannot lead to happiness and is destroying the only world we have to live in? The question needs only to be posed for the answer to be clear.

It is not my job, and should not be any teacher's job, to encourage youngsters to adjust to an unjust and visionless society. It is my job both to ask unsettling questions and to show where meaning may lie. A teacher who has succumbed to nihilistic philosophy and who teaches what Viktor Frankl called the 'nothingbutness' of man, 'the theory that man is nothing but the result of biological, psychological and sociological conditions, or the product of heredity and environment', is of little help. This lesson does not have to be taught in a formal way. It should be done by example. The way a school is managed and the lifestyle of the teachers provide the model.

I have no hesitation in using all my powers of reasoning and persuasion to convince the youngsters in my care that the only long-term answer to the problems of our age lies in abandoning the unrealisable dream of growth and in simplifying our needs so that we live at a level attainable by all people on earth and sustainable from renewable resources. (They are perfectly entitled to question my pattern and level of consumption.) This 'green philosophy' puts me in a minority. These are not the values of the majority in our society, and certainly not of the government. How can I justify teaching them?

Firstly, because, in communicating values, the teacher must be true to him or herself. Secondly, because in the case of the Hartland school these aims are specified in its constitution; and thirdly, as it is my experience that the influence of the peer group, of TV culture and, most importantly, of the family, is usually greater than that of the teacher and the school the

effectiveness of my stand may be extremely limited. If young people do decide to follow the way that I recommend to them it will be because of factors completely outside my control. One has only to look at the agnostics who have emerged from Catholic schools to realise that the spectre of brainwashing, particularly in a day school, is an insubstantial bogey.

Economy Fodder

The government is more optimistic about what can be achieved through schools. The opening paragraph of the 1988 Britannica Book of the Year article on education begins: 'In most of the leading industrial countries of the world, there was renewed recognition in 1987 that an improved educational system was one of the key ingredients of better economic performance. At the same time education was being made the scapegoat for unemployment, social disorder, and economic underperformance.

Scapegoat: the one on whom the sins of the community are heaped. The goat is then either killed or driven out into the wilderness. The writers are wrong. It is not the educational system that has become the scapegoat; it is the teacher. This is not a slick observation. The effects of stress are there for all to see: a dramatic increase in the number of heads taking early retirement, turning to alcohol and other drugs, committing suicide; successful teachers no longer able to cope and leaving for a saner life; others hanging on by the skin of their teeth.

Those responsible for this suffering cannot be called to account. Usually they have moved on before the results of their innovations are clear. They therefore have no care for the particular consequences of their actions and will tell you that any change to a system such as education or health is bound to cause a bit of trouble to some. They drop hints about timeservers. They are adept at heaping the dirt onto other people's plates. With local management of schools it can all be blamed on the governors.

The pupil has become the means to an economic end being pursued by governments. The teacher is the means to the means to that end. For the politician we are all means to some end, and ultimately dispensable. The ends that our politicians pursue, and the values these represent, are no models for the next generation. For that reason, and as a result of their recent disastrous interventions, I believe the involvement of politicians in education should be minimal. Let them collect the money and distribute it;

vouchers have a lot going for them. And let them maintain an Independent Inspectorate.

This is not intended as a criticism of the particular individuals who make up our government. They may, indeed, be better men and women than their predecessors, than those on the opposition benches and their counterparts in other countries. It is politics itself that is a messy and sometimes ugly activity with its parties, its secrecy, its trade in power and its nurturing of ambition.

Plato says in the *Laws* that ‘those who have been rightly educated become good men.’ He wanted those holding power to be single, celibate, selfless and trained in philosophy. Quintilian, who was writing about the training of the orator, says that he ‘must be a man of integrity, the good man, otherwise he cannot pretend to that character; and we therefore not only require in him a consummate talent for speaking but all the virtuous endowments of the mind. For an upright and honest life cannot be restricted to philosophers alone.’ If we had politicians like these then we might feel happy for them to have charge of education.

Universal Schooling

Of course, these Greeks and Romans are not talking about educating the masses but a small elite. Their prescriptions have been condemned because they are ‘incapable of application to the common crowd in a common school by a common man’. (AF Leach, *Proceedings of the British Academy 1907-8*) The problems really begin with the commitment to universal education. Although Locke, Milton, Quintilian and Plato give consideration to the disaffected student, and make suggestions for keeping his attention and interest, they were not confronted by platoons of the disaffected, as many contemporary teachers are.

As a teacher, I don’t want unmotivated children in my class. No teacher does. Yet I feel hesitant about refusing to have them. Won’t I be admitting my incompetence? Anyway, I may not be allowed to refuse. By guilt and fear I am kept in an impossible situation of the sort likely to lead to a nervous breakdown. What should be an educational undertaking too often becomes a youth-sitting service.

In the Small School the teacher doesn’t need to refuse because the size and nature of the undertaking allows me to make appropriate provision for those

with learning or behavioural difficulties. It is also an important principle that the pupil chooses to come to us. As a last resort we can always say, 'You asked us to take you; we didn't ask you to come. There are certain standards of behaviour expected in this community and if you cannot respect that then you had better go somewhere else.' Sometimes the choice is, for them, the lesser of two evils, though, and those who transfer from other secondary schools bring with them very negative attitudes to school and to learning.

This is an issue that is wider than the school; the school has to take the pupil as he or she is. So the question that we should be asking is, What is the best sort of school environment for these unmotivated and potentially disruptive youth? Surely one in which they are respected as individuals, in which they can have a stable personal relationship with their teachers, in which their problems can be aired constructively and ways found to give meaning to the learning they are being asked to do and to their lives. Unfortunately, large classes in large schools make this very difficult to achieve. But exclusion is no answer.

However, the school that takes them must be clear about the sort of teacher that is going to be able to meet their needs. Where social deprivation is the root cause then not one who is seen as a representative of, and an authority figure in, a society that bears some responsibility for their misery, a society that has sat complacently by as the mines and factories that employed their fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers, closed; one that is driving farmers' sons from the land, a society that erodes rights and benefits and deprives lives of purpose and meaning. The teacher who helps is one who not only responds to this situation with anger and protest but who, through understanding and insight, shares the pain and suffering. That is, a teacher who has a vision of a more just society and already lives those values.

If the seeds of disruption lie in the home then the school, through the teacher, has to maintain a dialogue with that home. In such a situation the teacher will probably find herself called on to mediate, explaining the parent to the child and the child to the parent.

Personal Qualities, Literacy and Numeracy

The youngster whose sense of worth has been brought out, who knows his or her strengths and weaknesses and is confident, honest and has a sense of humour, is an asset to any society and attractive to most employers. And we

have already seen that preparing pupils for gainful employment is a primary goal for schools, in the minds of politicians. Of course, these attributes are more difficult to develop and test than literacy and numeracy. There is always a reluctance to have goals that we cannot test.

The ability to write well is a useful skill but its importance must not be exaggerated. For most people the ability to communicate verbally is of greater importance, and there are numerous examples of creative and business people who, usually because they are dyslexic, have trouble with the written word.

‘What do I want books for?’ asks our little lumpen prole, ‘Videos is great; books is boring. Me dad can read. Gets the *Sun* everyday. Don’t do no good though. Can’t get a job.’

Yes, why the fuss about literacy when you can get all you need to know from the tele? Yet literacy/numeracy has become the yardstick for success in school and has, incidentally, revealed the government’s own mathematical, or should one say, statistical inadequacies. In 1991 we had the first tests for seven-year-olds. We are shocked, said the Department for Education. Why? Because 50% were average, 25% were above average but 25% were below average. Now, I know statistics is a difficult subject but I really don’t see the problem. What did the Minister hope for? ‘I am very pleased to announce that, as a result of our education policies, 96% of seven-year-olds were above average in reading for their age.’

In getting at schools the government is hitting a sitting duck, and it’s the wrong target. Who teaches children to read? Some children are never taught; they just pick it up. All round them they see older people with their noses in books or hidden behind Sunday’s extract of rainforest and they copy. They follow words when they are read to. The school then reinforces and builds on what has gone on in the home. Our diligent researcher treks out to some middle-class suburb, discovers that, in a form of sixty in the primary school, most can read, and announces, to government delight, that large classes are more effective than small. Then, the terrible tests and their worrying results. Along comes another researcher who tells them they get marvellous results in New Zealand by, guess what? Teaching children individually or in pairs. The government forks out three million quid to solve the problem in this way, by enabling teachers to act as the parents

would if they took their responsibilities seriously. Then further research reveals that, when the special help is taken away, standards drop again.

Our problems are far deeper than a weakness in literacy. Some think that maths can save us. Because governments are concerned with better economic performance the British and Americans have been watching the Japanese, our main competitors, who seem to do rather well at Maths, to see what they can learn. A major study of differences in mathematical achievement between the US, China-Taiwan and Japan was undertaken by Harold Stevenson and associates. It was developmental research that sought to affect policy. The early findings received a great deal of publicity. Criticisms of it did not. The research does not reveal whether high mathematics achievement in Japan and China-Taiwan reflects understanding or skilful symbol manipulation. L.B. Resnick comments, 'Ordinary students are more likely to treat school mathematics as an invitation to master puzzle-like rule systems. Students who are good at such rule learning...will perform quite well in school mathematics. But they will probably never love the subject, nor be very creative at it'.

The Japanese educationist Giyoo Hatano draws attention to the fact that the Japanese students in the follow-up had a stronger tendency than their American counterparts to report that mathematics was hard for them. 'I am personally afraid that Japanese students are paying a high price for their high mathematics achievement.'

Cultural Matrix

The real lessons have little to do with maths. One is of the danger of focussing on method rather than motivation. The other is the tendency to look at things, such as the teaching of maths, in isolation instead of as part of a much wider matrix of cultural values.

Hatano gives an example of a simplistic solution that only succeeded in substituting one problem for another. Because the incidence of stomach cancer was higher in Japan than in the West the Japanese were encouraged to adopt a Western diet. The incidence of stomach cancer reduced. The incidence of colon cancer, however, increased. There is now a recommendation to return to a more traditional diet. He therefore warns the researchers against similar tinkering.

'If American children's low mathematics achievement is generally a consequence of their cultural milieu - such as, for example, the availability of a broader range of possibilities and the encouragement to pursue whatever is individually more challenging - then it should be viewed as part of the American culture.' Changing one bit of it has implications for the whole. He calls for a Western assessment of the weaknesses of the Asian educational system. (O. Hatano in *Contexts of Achievement*, Harold Stevenson and Shin-ying Lee, Society for Research in Child Development Vol. 55 Nos 1-2 1990 pp. 108-115.)

A similar thing is happening in reverse. The Japanese are looking at us, 'with a view to helping children develop their individuality to the full and foster various kinds of talent', (*Outline of Ed. in Japan 1989* p. 107, Govt. of Japan.)

Countries are always looking over their shoulders at each other. In establishing the national curriculum Kenneth Baker was influenced by a report by HMI on education in France and West Germany, and the latter's *Notenskala* was to be the model for the new tests.

If Hatano is right, that what goes on in schools is part of a complex and more or less coherent matrix of values, then this piecemeal piracy is quite irresponsible. The Americans will not match Japanese achievements in maths without losing some of their characteristic Americanness. They will have to become, in part, more Japanese. The Japanese desire to nurture individuality will, if successful, carry with it an enormous social upheaval. Tolstoy protested against the intention of imposing on the Russian people the German compulsory education system. (He said that in free England such a law would be unthinkable!) 'School is one of those organic parts of the state which cannot be viewed and valued separately, because its worth consists only in a greater or lesser correspondence to the remaining parts of the state. School is good only when it has taken cognisance of the fundamental laws by which people live, A beautiful school for a Russian village of the steppe, which satisfies all the wants of its pupils, will be a very poor school for a Parisian; and the best school of the seventeenth century will be an exceedingly bad school in our time; and, on the other hand, the very worst school of the Middle Ages was in its time better than the best in our time, because it better corresponded to its time.'

The school will be an expression of its time and of its place. It will also be an expression of the people who make it up: teachers, pupils and parents. It is they who should decide what is important to learn, not governments. They are the ones who have to make their way in this world, both spiritually as well as practically.

Motivation, Motivation, Motivation

In concentrating on grammar and spelling we miss more necessary skills. There is a nice Hodja story. The Hodja, or Nasruddin, used sometimes to ferry people around in his boat. One day he gave a ride to a pedantic and fussy schoolmaster. ‘Will it be rough?’ he inquired.

‘Don’t ask me nuffink about it,’ replied the Hodja.

‘Have you never studied grammar?’

The Hodja shook: his head.

‘In that case half your life has been lost.’

They went on in silence. Then a terrible storm blew up and the boat started to fill with water.

‘Have you learnt to swim?’ asked the Hodja. The schoolmaster shook his head.

‘In that case’ said his companion, ‘the whole of your life is lost for we are sinking.’

Learning, whether to read or swim, has a great deal to do with motivation. Paolo Freire and others have shown that, when the printed word contains material essential to the improvement of life, people of any age will learn to read in a remarkably short time. So unless President Bush has something better to offer as reading material than his speeches there is no chance that he will hit his target of 100% adult literacy by the end of the millennium. (This, of course was Bush the elder. His son is proof that he failed dismally.) As Bush Snr. himself said in outlining America 2000 education strategy, ‘Nations that stick to stale old notions and ideologies will falter and fall’: and still only one in four will finish high school.

A friend who was a primary head reckoned he spent 80% of his teaching time trying to motivate pupils. For him negotiating projects with individuals best did this. The national curriculum makes that sort of approach exceptionally difficult. So does the frequent change in policy.

Stability

A minister is in his seat for a far shorter period than a child is at primary school, yet with each change of minister there is a change of direction and sometimes two. If anything is likely to cause a lowering of standards it is the instability created by the fashion for instant policy that Mrs Thatcher and her successors have done so much to foster. The coffee adverts may say that you can't tell instant from real but I don't believe them.

In 1989 it was planned, in primary schools, to put more emphasis on information technology and drama and less on formal grammar. Two years later a change in leadership and a change in programme. Grammar was back with a vengeance: too many bureaucrats, journalists and undergraduates can't write proper. This is true. The LEA's response to the Small School's application for voluntary aided status was full of spelling mistakes and grammatical errors. It's nothing new. From where did Fowler get his howlers if not from journalists and bureaucrats? We wouldn't love them so if they were word perfect.

Justifying the 'Useless'

'Education is that which liberates,' said Gandhi, and went on, 'Knowledge includes all training that is useful for the service of mankind and liberation means freedom from all manner of servitude...slavery to domination from outside and to one's own artificial needs. The knowledge acquired in the pursuit of this ideal alone constitutes true study.'

This is different from what those who talk about the 'useful' usually mean. '...Put crudely they would say that an educated man is a man who knows how to make machines' claimed Bertrand Russell, 'a man who only attaches importance to physical satisfactions'. As an ultimate philosophy this is inadequate. What he calls the 'ornamental' is essential for a full development of the imagination. So also is the attitude of service.

There is an enormous gulf fixed between those who do something because the government has decided it is for the benefit of society and those who do it from inner compulsion. The image is Matthew the tax collector, government agent. He enables the Empire to build straight roads and keep the peace. He deserts his cash box to follow the strange prophet, Jesus. At that point his life changes from being outer-directed to being inner-directed. It is a transformation our Christian culture teaches us to value and respect.

Governments, however, continue to play the Roman. They are agents of the Lowest Common Denominator, which their efforts can raise. But they cannot, with their prescriptions, increase creativity or make us better men and women. They focus on the mundane because that is all they can control. To be free; to be responsible; to love God, however we fill out that word; to love our neighbours as ourselves. That is the programme for an education based on values.

If our leaders were like Plato's philosopher-kings perhaps they could help us with this task. They are not. To carry out our aims, said Tolstoy, we do not need an educational theory based on rigorously ordered scientific or logical statements which perpetuates the present system in all its banality. It should be based on insight, analogy, immediate observation, practice and existential awareness.

Upholding the Banal

A quick look at current educational research reveals three problems that tend to perpetuate the present system in all its banality. The first is technical: there are too many variables that cannot be isolated. This has led to a greater use of direct observation, which is fine, except that in the effort to keep it rigorous its focus has tended towards the marginal and the trivial.

Despite a commitment to scientific rigour people still seem to see what they want to see. How come there have been so many reports in the past hundred years alerting us to a fall in reading standards? If they had fallen every time they are supposed to have fallen you probably wouldn't be able to read this now.

Let me give another example of research confirming what the researchers want to hear. Discussion of the nature/nurture issue - are we born stupid or is it our environment that makes us so? - as I was initiated into it at the Institute of Education, drew heavily on the researches of Sir Cyril Burt with identical twins and Margaret Mead with sex in Samoa. Since then, this work of both has been discredited, though recent studies undermine the detractors. But the issue the rows highlight is that a second rate scientist dedicated to truth is more beneficial to society than a first rate one who isn't. In other words, values come first. Personal honesty and a commitment to pursue the truth take precedence over all else; otherwise we are just arming the devil, if you'll excuse the old-fashioned, mythological language.

The third problem is that most research deals with what may be true in general in a population. But in the classroom I am dealing with the individual and this individual may be an exception to the general rule. How am I to know?

Some teachers are happy with a statistical approach. If three-quarters of the class achieves C or above they are pleased with themselves. Better than last year. But if we are concerned with each individual pupil then we must scorn this statistical nonsense. If we are concerned with the development of personal qualities then it is the individual we have to reckon with. To know that 80% of the group are honest is unhelpful. We need to know that Jill tells the truth and Jack is a liar. Anything less precise is useless. At the Small School we've played the statistics game. We drew up a table which showed how much better our GCSE results were than the national average. The Chief Education Officer wasn't impressed. He said the sample was too small to be statistically significant.

This is a big problem for us. We are too small for most researchers. In any case, the most important question, how far has this school helped this child to realise his or her full potential, is impossible to answer. You cannot test potential and you cannot say what would have happened had the child gone to another school, though you may have a feeling about it. The only way to judge us is to look and see. Where you look and what you see is something you bring with you. If you want to be impressed we can impress you. If you want to be confirmed in your doubts, we can confirm you. Nevertheless, this is the only way.

A Glimpse of the Small School

Those attending the lecture had the opportunity to look at some slides, which I will describe briefly.

* * *

- The school, which takes up to 40 pupils aged 11-16, is in a former Methodist chapel. Inside the front door is the non-fiction library of about 4,000 books in oak cases made by a local carpenter. There are six or seven tables in the hall around which everyone eats lunch, prepared each day by Caroline and two of the pupils. This gives them an opportunity to do something for each other,
- The day begins with an assembly in the main classroom, in which it is possible to get everyone sitting in a circle. It ends with pupils cleaning the school.

- Except in the science lab, where there are benches, pupils sit at tables. Teachers move from table to table giving individual attention.
- Some teachers, like the potter, Phil Leach, and Richard Willoughby, who has an engineering group, earn their living in the community.
- A balance is sought between academic, creative and practical subjects. Pupils built a wood workshop, which has now become the science lab.
- Drama (up to 1992) has included *The Tempest*, *The Good Woman of Setzuan* and six medieval mystery plays. One presentation was of stories from the *Decameron*, with medieval Italian music, dances and costume, at the Beaford Arts Centre and at the Bishop's Palace, Exeter.
- The last six weeks of the summer term are 'special weeks'. These usually include a writing week, a week focussing on other cultures, a week away, science/maths weeks, and a craft week.
- The school receives many visitors: a group of Japanese, the head of a school for Tibetan refugees in Nepal, a drama group, a West African arts group, an Indian village theatre, as well as teachers and educationists interested in our approach.

Within a the Local Context

The first slides I showed were not of the Small School at all but of a new school in a Japanese village of 800 souls. It is an exciting design built at considerable cost to provide the ideal environment for learning. The architect, Masa Nobu Yuzawa, says, 'The school is a home which protects children's safety and continuously stimulates their imagination'. He thinks of his school as the 'navel of the village'.

This luxury school certainly tells us that the community cares about its children. The state of many of our schools conveys the opposite message. But in other respects Yuzawa has got it wrong. This school is a concrete equivalent of what Tolstoy had to say about the imposition of foreign education systems. This school is out of scale with the rest of the village, made of imported materials instead of the local wood, and deposited on the tree-covered mountainside instead of growing out of it. There is not a single real reference to 'home', as the children would understand it.

By comparison, the Small School is self-effacing, tucked into a terrace, in scale with the local community, its interior designed to be friendly and like a home, with carpets and curtains and vacuum cleaners. It is a lesson in an

aesthetic, like that of the Shakers, that values simplicity and the use of natural materials. It does not have purple walls and black ceilings, as it might have if some of the children had their way. They don't have their way, and we make no pretence of consulting them, because they have not yet learnt of the effect environment has on mood. Their bedrooms are the appropriate space for them to express themselves and perhaps make this discovery.

Teacher Autonomy

Although the child is the focus of what happens, what happens is teacher led. I approach it in a spirit similar to that of Tolstoy to his school at Yasnaya-Polyana. For me, running the school is a creative act. The ingredients are the pupils, their parents, the teachers, the time (1992) and the place (Hartland, North Devon). Whatever happens is a result of the coming together and interaction of these ingredients. I cannot emphasize too strongly that our starting point is quite pragmatic: these people in this place at this time. A change in any of the ingredients, a new teacher, a new pupil, for instance, results in a change to the whole enterprise.

I am Tolstoy's teacher. I have found no better description of my role than that given by Archambault: 'Tolstoy's teacher is not merely expected to transmit knowledge deemed traditionally worthy, nor even to convey the values of contemporary society. He is not a mere filter for purifying and simplifying a dominant strain of culture. He is, rather, a remarkably independent and creative artist who...stimulates the pupil to understand those aspects of culture that he as a teacher deems valuable. The teacher is, then, given an extraordinary degree of independence. It is his judgement that is final and crucial. His freedom is checked, or rather defined, by several claims...the claims made by the actual world in which the pupil finds himself and which he must live in successfully after his schooling as ended. His studies must prepare him for the realities of that world. They need not prepare him for a specific vocation or dictate a limited role for him; nor need they provide him with only utilitarian skills that would enable him to cope with the practical problems of life...

'The centre of the educational process is found in the dynamic involvement of the individual pupil with specific aspects of his culture through the direction of an individual teacher focusing on those elements of a subject which he deems most worthwhile.'

In a paper entitled *Curriculum Research, Artistry and Teaching (Alternative Perspectives on School Improvement*, ed. D. Hopkins and M. Wideen, Falmer Press, 1984.) Lawrence Stenhouse declares that teaching is an art, an 'exercise of will expressive of meaning', that 'education is learning in the context of a search for truth' and that therefore 'good teachers are necessarily autonomous in professional judgement'. 'Close control of curricula and teaching methods in schools is to be likened to the totalitarian control of art. Reaching toward the truth through education is a matter of situational judgement...You don't need a doctor at all if he is going to give you a treatment laid down by the State or suggested by his professor without bothering to examine you and make a diagnosis.'

Two American professors who, at the invitation of the Sunday Times, investigated the reforms initiated by the Conservative government called for the autonomy, not only of the teacher but also of the school. John Chubb and Terry Moe identified 'substantial autonomy' as the most important condition for a successful school, and then stated that, 'Except under special circumstances, meaningful autonomy is not possible within the current education system.' They claimed that Local Management of Schools and Accountability are unnecessary hindrances and called for the supply of schools to be liberated to give real choice. They favoured allowing private schools to opt in.

Freedom from the Centre

'The Labour Party is a lost cause when it comes to education reform. It is firmly allied with the education establishment.' Neither can the Conservatives be counted on. Among the negative factors are those within the party who 'strive for a return to traditional values and institutions', There is also an 'implicit but pernicious ideology of "business managerialism".' Conservatives opt for administrative solutions to social problems and think of 'choice as part of a top-down apparatus, rather than as a radical new system which is wholly incompatible with it.'

Chubb and Hoe's hope was that a new Conservative government would 'go into a holding pattern, (so that) the natural dynamics of opting out will bring the top-down system to its knees and create a hybrid with lots of choice, competition and autonomy.'

If 'virtually all authority to control the schools from above' is eliminated then school quality will be in the hands of the teachers. 'The schools must be

free to chart their own course, and it is parents and students - not the state – who have the primary role in holding the schools accountable.’ (*Sunday Times*, 9.2.92)

The Responsible Teacher

This unexpected support, and complimentary arguments, for the case I have been making, which highlights the centrality of the teacher, is very welcome. However, we need to be clear that, in this pattern of provision, the quality and character of the teacher is of crucial importance. For Comenius the requisites of the true teacher are: ‘he himself should be all that he expects his pupils to become; he should possess the technique of making them so; he should be zealous in his task...Accordingly teachers should be picked people, pious, honourable, serious, keen, industrious and tactful.’ (That sounds rather grey and worthy!)

Paul Ricoeur, the French philosopher, has said that the highest concept in moral philosophy is justice, and justice relies on reciprocity. But we live another life: we belong to an economy of gift, that is, we receive more than we can ever give. The operating force in this world is love, ‘the poetry of life’. (When I talk about the spiritual dimension of a school I do not mean catechisms and creeds, I mean love and forgiveness. I do not mean punishments and rewards; I mean acceptance and vision.)

When we accept the gift we accept responsibility for handing it on. That sense of responsibility, for myself, for the other person, for creation, is one of the most important qualities to be encouraged and developed in the young. How is it done? Let us remind ourselves of the context. The teenager is looking forward to a life of independence, free from the demands of the family. At the same time he or she is a little fearsome of what this means and is also looking for guidelines. A secure framework of values and expectations is required to struggle against. It can be tough, but the parent or teacher who allows a youngster to do whatever he or she likes is not helping. That is not how responsibility is encouraged.

The Responsible Pupil

Children at the Small School are not free to do whatever they like. They are free only insofar as they can show they are responsible. We the teachers do not supervise break times. Nor do we have prefects to do it for us. If something happens, a fight that goes too far or a breakage, then all those

present are asked why they did not prevent it. We are all responsible for what happens.

In the kitchen two pupils have to prepare lunch for between thirty and forty people and are responsible for getting it to the table at ten to one. (Those aren't the odds against!)

We try to get pupils to see that they are responsible for their own learning. However good our teaching, it is the students who decide how much attention they will give it. We can stop them doodling or chatting but we cannot make them think or learn. They might be encouraged with a system of rewards and punishments, but this is a short-term approach.

Many of our pupils go on to college, and quite a few to university. In both kinds of institution many of their fellows seem to be lost, unable to handle the personal freedom and often uncommitted to their subject. Small School graduates seem better able to cope. They take responsibility, trust their own judgement and get on with it.

We have no course in responsibility. We use whatever material our life together throws up. And sometimes it does throw up. Christmas 1991 we performed six medieval mystery plays, which brought together English literature, history, religion and enabled us to use the crumhorns and nakers, medieval musical instruments, that we had made. Plenty of scope for needlework and design. This having been said, the lessons we felt were the most important had to do with the disciplines of learning lines, working as a group, and achieving a standard of artistic excellence sufficient for us not to be embarrassed to ask the general public, and not just parents, to pay a reasonable price for their tickets.

At the dress rehearsal the whole project seemed in danger of collapse. God could not remember her lines. Every time she made a mistake the others groaned or laughed. God is not popular. The following morning, backed up by Caroline, I laid into them. We tackled the issue head on. Why was 'God' unpopular? Feelings were expressed. We looked at how their behaviour had led them into a downward spiral so that the performance got worse and worse. We looked at how support from the group could affect each individual's performance. Of course all this had been said in general terms before. This time the discussion had a sharp focus. Despite the hard things said, no one wanted to drop out. For the rest of the day, instead of the tidying

up and video watching that would normally occupy the last day of term, we rehearsed hard. Parents who had been at the dress rehearsal found it difficult to believe, on that and the three subsequent evenings, that they were watching the same children. They were disciplined, sharp, humorous, energetic and pulled together. Some of them said affirmative things to God. They had taken responsibility.

Now there are doubtless dozens of drama teachers who can tell similar stories. There is nothing done at the Small School which someone hasn't or isn't doing somewhere else. One important difference, however, is that in this activity the whole school participated. But the main point is that a small school can also achieve excellence.

Starting from where we are

What of the content of our lessons? Often I teach from whatever presents itself: visitors or the news; from created events such as trips, plays or special weeks; from what we ourselves are struck by. Because this is a haphazard and not a systematic presentation of material it worries some people. Let me try and set at rest these troubled souls.

Our brains are marvellous machines. They can take all sorts of odd bits of information and sensations and make patterns from, and systems out of, them. Look at the Propaedia of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and you will see how knowledge can be organised according to rational principles. Having organised our knowledge we proceed to teach it systematically, according to the pattern we have imposed on the material.

In adopting this approach we ignore completely this ability of our marvellous brain to make sense of whatever impressions it gets. The systematic presentation may aid memory but is not necessary to real learning. We humans are like the magpie. We pick up snippets on the radio, from magazines, from a chance conversation in the street; we carry them back to our nest and weave them into patterns. The patterns don't have to be made for us. The making of patterns is an exercise of our creative skills. An approach more profitable than the systematic syllabus is the making and pursuing of causes and connections.

Our humanities module last spring, at the time of the Gulf crisis, was *Conflict*. For this GCSE we are supposed to submit our programme of study before embarking on it. But what nonsense to study *Conflict* and ignore the

issue that was dominating the media and conversation. So we dug in. It was like getting to the heart of an onion: each question, each layer, revealed another question underneath it. We covered geography, history, economics, politics, moral issues such as the just war and arms sales, religion, which took us back to the sons of Abraham, the media and propaganda. We never got to the First Cause but we covered a lot of ground. In real life the divisions between disciplines are hazy. We do our pupils a disservice when we insist on them.

Everything is interconnected. Without appreciating the web of relationships we can have no true understanding of who we are, of who our neighbour is and of the sort of world we live in. The place to start is where we stand. That is why it is so ridiculous to say that history should stop at the Second World War. Like Tolstoy, I think history should start with the present and work backwards.

I have already pointed out that the hindrance to learning is either a block or a lack of motivation. My task as a teacher is to find a way in. Once the door is unlocked progress is rapid. Simon is a case in point. He hated maths – couldn't do it/wouldn't do it. We tried all sorts. Talking with his mother we discovered that, as a much younger child, he had had a maths book the illustrations of which he found to be childish and silly. That made maths silly. Having found the cause it still took two years for him to overcome the block, and then because he needed maths for physics, of which he was fond. In order to discover the motivational key I chuck a lot of material around.

Poetry is the most challenging aspect of English literature. Last year they got bits of Ted Hughes' *Crow*; Tony Harrison on video returning to his home town and using a lot of swear words; an article in the Observer by a prisoner turned on by Eliot's *Four Quartets*; odd verses and poems read at random from the books on the shelves. Then they had to choose either several poems by the same poet, or several poems on a theme, on which to do a project. Most had no idea what to do. I made suggestions and sent them off with this book or that. 'Didn't like it!' 'Couldn't get into it!' Try some more.

This is a most important part of the operation for, in their search, they read a lot of poetry. A choice was made but, more often than not, abandoned when the real work had just started. Eventually something was found that held the attention. Then the student and I would have long chats to work out a way of responding to the material. I avoid giving the critics' views. It is important

they learn to wrestle with the material itself and trust their own judgement. What came out?

Andrew, a farmer, took one of the Canterbury Tales and compared the language to Devonshire. Sam, a carpenter, responded to some poems by Rosalind Brackenbury, who had run a writing week for us. Naomi studied Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Peter explored those of Ted Hughes' *Crow* poems in which God speaks to Crow. Ruth chose Wendell Berry's *A Part*; and Hannah compared George Mackay Brown's two versions of the *Stations of the Cross* to each other and to *The Wreck of the Deutschland* by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Let me quote from Katy, one of the previous year's candidates, who wrote about Eliot's *Preludes*. She noted that all but two lines begin with a weak word. 'I experimented with messing up the position of words in this poem and discovered that a strong word at the beginning of a line gives the other words in that line less weight.. Eliot put weak words to start the lines, making the words equally stressed. In doing so he made every image equal. It is the piecing together of all these images, none supremely important, for there is no story to come to a climax, which makes the *Preludes*' total picture.'

She concluded her essay: '*Preludes* describes, in general, through its images, the effects city life and poverty have on people. *Preludes* is not written by a neutral observer. T.S. Eliot hates the state of the place he is living in. The writer's attitudes are shown in what he writes. It is not only the picture created by his words that is depressing but the underlying assumption that, if everything is broken, sordid and decaying, happiness is impossible.'

Well, there you see the pupil enlightening the teacher! I am not trained to teach English and am narrowly read in poetry. Nevertheless, the GCSE moderator's reports have been very complimentary, particularly about the teaching of poetry. But I don't teach it. My pupils teach themselves. All I do is open a few doors, give a few hints, make encouraging noises and write alongside them. This approach is successful because of the questions I ask, not the answers I give. And these questions are directed at pupils I know well.

Again, I am sure that other teachers could come forward with equally exciting material. What I am concerned to show is that you don't need either

a detailed curriculum or a specialist teacher to come up with quality goods. Nor do you need to burden the children with tests and the teachers with paperwork. The more the government tries to control outcomes in this way the more creativity will be stifled and the brilliant made mediocre. The reduction in coursework for GCSE, in favour of exams, bore this out so far as we were concerned.

We found that coursework, particularly where it allowed students to work on projects of their own choice, was excellent for motivating them. I could publish a book documenting our experience. It would show that coursework both stretches the bright student and allows the less able to show in positive terms what he or she is able to do.

Mukti's Science unifying module involved experimenting with windmills. At the end of it he wrote, 'I can say that I designed, built and modified this windmill with my very own hands. Not a single other person helped, and I feel that this is **THE GREATEST PRACTICAL ACHIEVEMENT I HAVE EVER MADE**. With pleasure...' (He received help on the theoretical side – propeller design – from an engineer.) The project was published by the Northern Board as an example of work deserving 100% marks.

Peter's unifying module was to design and construct a craft to collect water samples for pollution testing. The challenge was to sample at a specified depth and then bring the sample to the surface without contaminating it with water from other levels. It was also awarded 100% marks. The moderator wrote, 'This is one of those superb pieces of work that really makes you think we are producing embryonic scientists and engineers. Here is a boy who has obviously got his teeth into a real problem and has enjoyed the challenge.'

Hannah also received high marks and praise for her solar oven. In Humanities she wrote an excellent history of her farm using a considerable number of primary sources from the Domesday Book on, lodged in the public library and the parish church, interviewed villagers and checked every gravestone in the churchyard.

I won't go on: just enough to show what is possible. What is required to achieve excellence is not a national curriculum with associated tests and exams but for parents, governors and government to trust the teacher and for

the teacher to trust the child, to trust his or her intuition and to believe that outcomes do not have to be predetermined.

Short Summary

Let me sum up. It has been my main purpose in this lecture to show that there are more forms of schooling possible than those presently on general offer. The Small School is one such. Mini-schools and flexi-schooling are other alternatives. The pursuit of uniformity of provision is misconceived because it does violence to the values and wishes of significant sections of the community. A diverse system is a strong system.

The pursuit of quality through prescription and testing is also misconceived. The chief problem teachers have to face is lack of motivation, which may be the result of an absence of meaning. Only the close relationship of teacher and child can help. That close relationship is most easily fostered in a small school.

The character and values of the teacher are of crucial importance, for the teacher is a model of the kind of creative, spiritual, well-balanced creatures that our schools should be encouraging.

It is certain that the changes that have been made by the state to the education system from the early eighties will not be regarded for long as improvements. The so-called liberal sixties may come to be seen as having left just as beneficent marks on it as the aggressive eighties and selfish nineties. When that time comes we need to be ready with a more sensible programme. That is why I invite you to join us in *Human Scale Education* to plan the schools for tomorrow and give support to the few of today that put the real interests of tomorrow's citizens first.

There is no more sensible way than to trust the teacher who trusts the child and involves the parents. And, for God's sake, keep the government, any government, out of it.

© Colin Hodgetts 1992 and 2001