

A thought piece produced for England in a series of papers entitled “Why Education Isn’t Working, A Guide for the Perplexed”

## **Why Education Isn’t Working; A Guide for the Perplexed**

### **Paper No. 1: How goes it with the children?**

There’s a greeting widely used in Africa when people who haven’t seen each other for a long time, meet up. They say *umbuto*, which means “how goes it with the children?” A simple reply like “fine, thanks” won’t do here. *Umbuto* is a broadly based question about the ‘state’ of your young people, it’s about how they are ‘growing’ up. It’s a serious and profound question, involving far more than simply schooling. To men and women in today’s less developed countries – as indeed would have been the case with all our ancestors until recent times - the preparation and nurture of children to take over from their aging parents is nothing less than a life and death issue. *Umbuto* is no throwaway remark. It challenges every adult to review, in the company of their friends, how well they are bringing up their children to face an always uncertain future. It’s putting the parent well and truly ‘on the spot’ for if their children grew up ill-prepared it would suggest that their parents could not be relied upon.

*Umbuto* is the question we all need to ask ourselves if we are to understand why education — especially as “education” has come to be defined in recent years — isn’t working.

In the “comfortable” league of advanced countries, we seem to have lost that sense of personal responsibility for the future implied by “umbutu”, and so do not realise that the problem is more complex than simply modernising schools. It is now more than sixty years since the heady days of the mid 1940s when many countries began to introduce pensions for old people, free healthcare, free education and the promise that never again would people sink into abject poverty of body, mind or spirit. Three generations have grown up since then assuming that parents can ignore any long-term responsibility for their children, and that children need feel no responsibility for aging parents, or dependent relatives. Rather, personal responsibility has been transferred in most people’s thinking to that anonymous assemblage of agencies known collectively as “government”. So, rather than attempting ourselves to help our unruly teenagers, we call in professional counsellors. When we are unnerved by the sheer volume of children pouring out of the school gates in the afternoon, we demand there should be more teachers on patrol. Anything, it seems, is preferable to shouldering the responsibility ourselves. We would rather not get involved. For better or worse we have become private individuals – guarding that privacy relentlessly - and so have no wish to ask ourselves “how goes it with the children?” for fear of having to change our behaviour. By assuming

that government, in all its various forms, can do this instead, we desperately fail today's children with the assumption that more schooling will somehow create an educated person.

Our ancestors would scorn such a simplistic notion. What they were doing for their children instinctively was in fact going with what a carpenter working intimately with wood would call "the grain"! Recent findings from modern biology and evolutionary psychology show that there is a deep and persistent "grain" to the human brain. **This grain irrevocably shapes the brain of every newborn baby to grow their own thinking processes through such interactive experiences that have characterised human behaviour over the millennia.** We humans are naturally empowered by this natural "grain", but driven to operate in ways that go against it, as has been the case in the last two or three generations, simply drives us humans mad, or turns us off completely. Our ancestors knew intuitively from hard experience that quality education was as much a result of good parenting, and the influences of a rich and challenging community life, as ever it was to do with schooling.

So how do we assess the present situation? How is it really going with today's children, the ones we know? Undoubtedly they are better fed, and they receive better healthcare and are better housed than at any time in history. Few of them die in childhood. Most infectious diseases have been controlled. Preventative medicines flourish, and many a toddler today could well be fit enough to celebrate the arrival of the twenty-second century with a dance. So far so good. Yet paradoxically the wealth of western nations has brought its own problems, creating an apparent "affluenza" epidemic. Children eat so much and take so little exercise that vast numbers are predicted to contract diabetes through the early onset of obesity. Many of them have so much pocket money that the teenage years represent one of the most lucrative markets for consumer goods. Today's children are "born to buy". Astute advertising agencies exploit gullible youngsters' "pester power" so as to wear down the reluctance of stressed out and conscience-stricken parents to spend still more on toys and entertainment to compensate for the time they are no longer spending talking, playing, or simply exploring life together with their children. So prevalent is crime today that 7% of children in England will experience the imprisonment of their father at some stage during their secondary schooling, while a combination of circumstances means that England has the highest level of teenage pregnancies in Europe. Our teenagers also drink the most alcohol. While 80% of three-year-olds may have televisions in their bedrooms, half of today's five-year-olds actually lack the speaking and listening skills necessary to cope in a classroom.

So not all is well in the world of childhood. Too often this is apparent in the angry, sullen faces of many of our young people. And the fault lies not with the children, but largely with ourselves, the adults. This is a social problem that is trivialised if seen primarily as the concern of the school; children are born inquisitive, but just how they turn out later is as much a result of how they are brought up as it is to any inherited factors. And the bringing up of children is as much the responsibility of home and community,

as it ever can be of the school. In a world that prides itself on rationality it comes as a shock to many to be reminded that a caring, loving home matters even more than good genes, and more than a good school in later years.

It is a paradox that over the past thirty years the wealthier Britain has become, the more the family as the basic social unit has collapsed. So too have communities, those greater conglomerations of people beyond our front doors, with whom we once used to pass the time of day, and who provided the local context within which the family nestled. A community watched out for itself. Such “social capital” is a far better predictor of how children will do later in life than are the academic studies which figure so largely in the much vaunted school league tables. Thankfully there are still some people who do remember the extraordinary power of such communities where people cared for each other because they believed that this was their responsibility, not simply because they had been told to do so. We need to listen to them.

So what has all this to do with education? And why isn't education working?

After twenty or more years of endless “shake-ups”, new “national curriculum” and endless other innovations, we are still in a mess. For very many children schools are simply not producing the goods. Every August the nation's newspapers print photos of the smiling faces of the successful as they brandish their ‘A’ level successes. These are the highfliers, but there are many more for whom further education will not be the answer, even though government continues to exhort every young person to follow that path. Without hairdressers, plumbers and electricians we just can't function.

A staggering five million people in Britain are functionally illiterate, and three times that number are not properly numerate. In the United States the figures are even worse, and they're not that good in Canada. So the pressure put on schools to improve these statistics has been enormous. The national literacy strategy has meant that English schoolchildren now have the highest reading levels in Europe, but at what a cost; for these same children enjoy reading less than do youngsters of their own age anywhere else in the OECD countries. So pressurised do children and parents feel by the remorseless determination of politicians to raise pupil's test scores, that a constant regime of extra tuition is foreclosing childhood at an earlier age than ever before. We hear of too many children receiving Ritalin and Prozac to relieve the stress that has already built up in their young lives. The pressures of modern life have stolen away the time needed to be kind and considerate, and the definition of ‘family’, as it was known as little as twenty years ago, is no longer valid.

In a few short years, a generation and little more, the old English ethic of family self-sufficiency seems to have been replaced by an almost over-riding conviction that the individual's right to make choices at

every twist and turn in life has to be pre-eminent. Over the past thirty years the school, an institution that many saw as having only a limited life span as the technological age came into being, has now been reinvented as the secular church, whose senior officers act as if invested with the divine authority of priests and bishops not only to pontificate on what a child does in school, but also to force their beliefs on what goes on beyond the walls of the school as well. To this they apply regular and rigorous testing so as to assure conformity, every bit as systematic (and objectionable) as the weekly confessional in the pre-reformation church. Ministers of Education vie with prime ministers to deliver more dogma and doctrine than any pope or an archbishop had ever contemplated, while some scientists preach a form of scientific fundamentalism which is every bit as intolerant of alternative spiritual values as was the Inquisition in earlier days.

That reference to the Inquisition can give us a clue. Today's society seems confronted with a range of confusing, but obviously inter-related, issues that individuals, as with governments, seem paralysed. No next steps it seems can be defined if we are unsure of the direction we should take. However, history shows that European society has been here before, back in the early sixteenth century. This was the time when the monolithic power of the Catholic Church was threatened by the Reformation. For many years, even centuries, the Church deflected every criticism, treating any critic as a heretic and becoming ever more detached from everyday reality. The Church's power was phenomenal; not only did the "common man" believe that a priest could assign him to an eternity in Hell, the Church appeared to be an impregnable institution. It was phenomenally rich, owning, amongst other things, one-third of all the land in England. It was the nearest thing ever seen to a super power, ruled over by a pope whose spiritual authority was supported by temporal powers comparable in our own day to that of the President of the United States, the Secretary General of the United States, the President of the World Bank, and the financial resources of Microsoft all rolled into one person. To criticise the Church's temporal power was to be castigated as a heretic, meeting too often with a vicious death at the stake.

Then, in 1517, apparently out of nowhere, came a middle-aged, angry monk who drew all these earlier criticisms into a single document with ninety-five clauses that he simply nailed up in a very public place, the cathedral door of his hometown in Germany, Wittenberg. The rest, it seems, is history.

Martin Luther was clever. His theses were like icons on a modern-day computer screen, they certainly didn't attempt to explain everything, but simply pointed out where new thinking was desperately needed. They were like an early form of blog, they invited people into the debate; they gave credence to other people's ideas and, most importantly, they showed that all of these ideas had to be subsumed into a bigger picture. Using this simple technique Luther's Ninety-five Theses became the agenda for the Reformation, that transformation of the medieval world into the modern political structures we currently live with. In

his explanation of world history, Karl Marx described the Reformation as the transformation of a society based on faith in authority, to a society based on the authority of the individual's own beliefs — from a society that blindly trusted in a central doctrine and dogma, to a new form of society where the individual's authority was based on beliefs they had worked out for themselves. This theological distinction is not dissimilar to the present confusion in education about the proper relationship between teaching and learning — we need to encourage young people how to think for themselves, not simply to accept other people's ideas without question.

Historians have likened Luther's influence to that of Napoleon, and suggested that these were the two most powerful European figures in the past five hundred years. Napoleon, however, did it with gunshot, sword, bayonet and vast armies; Luther simply with ninety-five well-chosen discussion points. Recently the popular social commentator, Malcolm Gladwell, in his theory of *"The Tipping Point"* suggests a somewhat different explanation. Gladwell argues that there comes a moment in otherwise stable systems, when the build-up of numerous minor incidences reaches an unbearable level, where just one further incident — not necessarily any more significant than any of its predecessors — simply tips the balance, and upsets the whole apple cart. As former U.S. President, Bill Clinton, neatly described it when he said, "It reaches a kind of tipping point... and people kind of get it". It is at this tipping point, argues Gladwell, that a system goes into turmoil, and the mightiest edifices simply collapse on themselves. It is here that scientists now understand that new ideas are most likely to form. They call it "the edge of chaos", that elusive boundary between stability and chaos where physicists and biologists say that profound change occurs.

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I believe that the whole world now stands at this "edge of chaos". We are all wondering when and where this tipping point will occur, what single event, like Hurricane Katrina, a single "thought piece" like Luther's Theses, or uncontrollable terrorism will shatter our present assumptions and direct world society into a very different direction. While educationalists, policy makers and bureaucrats argue about the nature of the school curriculum, about how pupils are to be assessed and teachers monitored, reluctantly we are all having to face a far harsher inconvenient truth, namely that our present way of living is simply destroying our very planet, our only home. Knowledge of this could well be the tipping point which will finally draw us to our senses to appreciate that education is about something far bigger, far grander and far more exciting than what has recently passed as school reform movements, or extravagant proposals for building schools for the future.

In the general election of 2003 the two main parties hardly mentioned green issues, or the effect of carbon emissions on the accelerated rate of global warming. Two-and-a-half years later, however, when the United Nations International Review Committee published its summary of more than 2,500 scientific analyses of global warming, relatively few people were left to dispute its main finding that, unless immediate steps are taken to drastically reduce carbon emissions, there will be something between four-and-a-half degrees and a six-degree increase in world temperatures by the year 2100. That is more than the temperature change of the past fifteen thousand years that separate us from the last Ice Age. Sea levels are set to rise by up to three hundred feet obliterating many of the world's major cities, and destroying whole countries.

It takes time for the magnitude of a problem of this scale to sink into people's consciousness. As direct descendents of the Stone Age cave dwellers we are far better at dealing with immediate, tangible problems than we are with long-term, more abstract issues. We humans are a bit like the frog which when dropped into a saucepan of boiling water, instantly jumps out, but if dropped into a pan of cold water slowly being heated on the stove continuously adjusts its body temperature until, just before the water starts to boil, it explodes.

I believe that an appreciation of what this really means is slowly sinking into the human psyche. The first to get it are alert teenagers, because they can readily imagine the horror of living in fifty or sixty year's time when they would be desperately fighting for a dry place to live, and for enough land in an increasingly desertified landscape on which to grow crops. It is the politicians and policy makers who just don't know where to turn. They need our sympathy, and every bit of support we can give them, but we have to hold them to account to act now, determinedly and energetically, on a very long-term agenda. On the one side they have the rationale for a dramatic (something in the order of 90%) cut in carbon emissions, while on the other they see proposals for wind farms over-turned by the conservation groups, while governments are determined to increase airport capacity, to enable air travel to grow by 200% in five years. They see proposals for new super motorways for even more cars; for three million more homes to satisfy people's desire to live on their own, and they see complex and highly expensive plans to build larger schools that will require more children travelling even greater distances by car and bus each day... and know that the daily school run already accounts for 15% of the carbon emissions in Britain. Just where do they, or we, start to tackle these issues?

The immediate suggestion in February 2007 following the United Nations' report on global warming by government advisors was that all schools should now teach global warming. While this attracted much favourable media attention as "a good idea", a moment's thought, however, showed that this is like applying a sticking plaster to a mortal wound. It was simply dodging the issue. The entire curriculum, the

whole way people currently think about education, is what has actually created not only the problem of global warming, but of the depletion of finite resources, and the subjection of whole nations to a belief that only by their citizens having more money, can they buy more “things”, spend more money in super casinos, and seek to achieve happiness —something which all the research shows is “crooked thinking”. To fuel the amazing economic growth of the past twenty-five years western nations have persuaded all of us — children, parents, adults in general —believe that we have to become ever more compulsive consumers to fuel the economy.

It is this argument that drives right back into the classroom. It was in 2001 that the then Secretary of Education, David Blunkett, proudly declaimed that “the work of the DFEE fits with the new economic imperative of supply-side investment for national prosperity”. In the twenty-first century politicians seem to have decided that school has to be about the economy, not about individual personal development. It is not just that the advertising industry has decided that children were “born to buy”; it is as if the whole of the process of schooling is designed around exactly same assumption. School has become more about creating good consumers, than good and responsible citizens. The impact of all this on how we, including our children, think about ourselves and the world has been dramatic; “If you believe that the world is a vast larder, each item with a price, then you simply plunder it”.

By a perversion of what should be involved in education modern society has created the very cancer that is destroying our world. By proclaiming that greed leads to happiness we have created in our schools a curriculum for “happy” consumers, not a curriculum for thoughtful sustainability. It is a bit rich now for governments to suggest that pupils should study the causes of global warming, when the very officials who suggest this are people (of my generation) who created this nightmare, and who so far have no strategy with which to deal with this. As of now there is nothing to be gained by blame. Nor by denial. There is everything to be played for, immediately, if the worst of these scenarios are to be avoided. But there is a silver lining; intelligent, well-informed teenagers have changed the world in the past, and they could do it again. But only if we give them the space and encouragement.