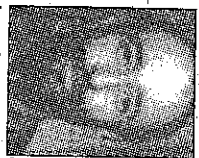


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POLÉMIO Terry Hayden

Crack down on troublemakers



ONE of the few areas of consensus in educational policy is the acknowledgment that the 'bottom 85 per cent' of children do not achieve as much as their counterparts in other countries. The most significant difference between British schools and those in Japan, Taiwan and Singapore is the working atmosphere in the classroom. Recent reform of education has focused on what is to be taught, how it is to be assessed, and the provision of 'choice and diversity' of schools. Only recently has the question of working atmosphere been raised and, even

then, John Patten asserts it is a problem that affects 'a small number of pupils in a small number of schools'. There are thousands of classrooms where the quality and quantity of learning is limited by the lack of order, calm and co-operation, not all of them in poor, inner-city schools. It is encouraging that the Education Department is aware of this. But its suggestion that it can be resolved by more detentions and merit marks, and fewer exclusions, indicates it has little idea about the scale and nature of the problem.

As the Elton Report into school discipline and recent Office for Standards in Education reports have indicated, severe disruption is comparatively rare; much more prevalent is where calm and order are preserved by tactical adjustments to the lesson format. This impacts learning, because control is maintained by limiting what is attempted.

Even the best teachers are sometimes obliged to resort to activities to get pupils writing and keep them occupied. The majority of pupils are keen to learn and would welcome an environment with the teacher in complete control. Often this is frustrated by a small minority, who subtly disrupt the lesson without having to resort to the sort of atrocity for which exclusion is now permissible. Most teachers have become so inured to putting up with such difficulties that they try to contain the problem by using minor sanctions. But the atmosphere deteriorates and the education of the majority suffers.

Dreadnought High



Bill Stott

The rules are drawn up by politicians and educational policy-makers who have little idea of how difficult it is to establish a satisfactory working atmosphere in many schools. Well-intentioned but over-idealistic left-wing local education authorities have also contributed to the ineffective and indulgent system. Their concern for equal opportunities has not extended to establishing the right to learn for all.

The rights of problem pupils should not supersede the needs of their classmates. The balance between pupils' rights and teacher authority needs careful consideration. At the moment, it is not a fair contest.

The Government's answer of creating city technology colleges and grant-maintained schools, which scrabble for more than their share of bright pupils, merely concentrates problem pupils in other schools. Attacking teacher training is another red herring. Research shows that head teachers consider the vast majority of recruits to be competent.

Brian Cox, professor emeritus at Manchester University, has recently criticised those who aim at equality of outcome rather than equality of opportunity. I have no problem with inequalities of outcome — except where this has nothing to do with children's educational potential.

The right to learn needs to be firmly re-established. It is as important an entitlement as the National Curriculum itself. If we can learn to combine the best of traditional and progressive teaching methods with a more purposeful and controlled working atmosphere, it will improve levels of educational attainment more than any number of adjustments to curriculum content and assessment procedures.

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