

Promoting a Learners' Charter

Gerry German



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and was Chair the Society of Teachers Opposed to Physical Punishment which helped to abolish corporal punishment in UK schools in 1986. He retired from the post of Principal Education Officer at the Commission for Racial Equality in 1993. Gerry is of Welsh peasant/proletariat origin but acknowledges Jamaica as his spiritual home as a result of active involvement in the cultural and political awakening of the island in the fifties and sixties.

Summary

There needs to be an agreement by all of us about educational provision in modern, multi-ethnic Britain. The ones really to be consulted are children and young people who combine knowledge of life at the sharp end with a vision of a society where they could be at the same time happy and secure – and imaginative and co-operative in developing individual, community, national and global potential. Gerry German anticipates a new Learners' Charter to be published in summer 2010.

Force of habit and social conditioning rather than ill intent make adults, especially teachers, harp on about children's responsibilities wherever they are – in the classroom, on the corridor, in the playground, on the way to and from school, and at home – with no reference at all to their human rights.

Hence, the degree of hostility and conflict in British society, sustained by divisions based on class, ethnicity, sex, sexuality and abilities related to intelligence. The lower you are on each scale, the more you are made to suffer through a combination of negative prejudice, destructive stereotyping and low expectations.

Except for class, all the other issues are covered by equalities and anti-discrimination legislation. The omission of class is significantly British, of course. It is the peg on which all the other 'isms' can be hung!

Human rights are badly neglected in promoting genuine equality of opportunity for all. There is ominous talk in our new coalition government about amending present provision. We need to question what that means, in relation to both the UK's historical record and the last government's questionable initiatives on juvenile criminality and religious extremism.

By looking critically at the way our educational institutions work at every level, we will recognise the extent to which they are inherently and permanently exclusive, rejecting and discriminatory – and able successfully to remain so on the basis of custom and practice, legal precedent and propaganda.

People well knew their place in the tripartite system (of grammar, technical and secondary modern institutions with 11-year-olds selected and stereotyped accordingly). There were only so many grammar school places, and their numbers carefully matched intelligence distribution throughout the kingdom.

But even then they were further streamed according to ability upon arrival at the grammar schools. The setting variation has taken time to introduce but works very much in the same way to justify selection procedures.

The comprehensive system was aimed at tapping Britain's human potential more effectively but there were reactionaries who saw dangers in its transforming Britain socially, economically and politically. The academies are now a way of maintaining the pre-comprehensive position, of course. Hence the need to promote their acceptance by means of bribery and seduction through extra cash and resources.

Many professionals and community activists profess support for the attractively packaged 'Building Schools for the Future' and 'Every Child Matters' programmes although there is little evidence of popular consultation and participation to achieve universal inclusion and entitlement.

The idea of 'one size fits all' seems to be rejected, at least in theory, but there is neither the courage nor the will to promote inclusive schooling. While lip-service is paid in high places to our children and young people, unique in terms of their needs and potential, such tributes are not accompanied by actively campaigning for locally accessible community schools where effective learning, meaningful socialisation and true power-sharing can take place in truly democratic conditions.

Universal rights need congenial conditions for staff and students to be both learners and teachers in Learning Campuses representative of and accountable to the surrounding feeder-communities as a means of developing social cohesion, mutual respect, solidarity and security.

While we could carry out our own local tests and surveys to see to what extent school governance, staffing, parent participation and student enrolment reflect the surrounding communities in all their diversity of both needs and potential, most parents associations seem dominated by the middle classes, and rarely do their discussions challenge old-fashioned theories of intelligence and performance. Nor do you find their concept of discipline extending beyond order, control and punishment to embrace instead the more dynamic ideas of self-discipline, sense of the occasion and mutually respecting relationships.

And what about students councils? How representative are they in terms of social class and ability, for example. Do they control their agendas? Can they look critically at discipline in terms of punitive sanctions such as exclusions as well as wasteful time-outs and detentions? Can they organise forward-looking referenda on uniform, extra-curricular activities and

school trips? Can they hold their own bank accounts?

School buildings and programmes should embody popular initiatives like supplementary/ weekend schools and such community-based alternative provision as parents, extended families and neighbours have devised between them to cater for children's unique individual needs – as well as to facilitate the realisation of their limitless potential, otherwise ignored by the establishment.

A properly discussed and agreed Learners' Charter, subject to regular review, is the means of ensuring that schools develop as universally accessible and accountable learning communities inspired by a sense of equal partnership between community, school, local authority, inspectorate and the DCSF – all endorsing the Charter in the context of children and young people and their inalienable Human Rights.

This has to be the way forward: to include and welcome once again the tens of thousands permanently out of school and to reject a maintained school system that annually excludes over 300,000 students in the name of maintaining discipline and encouraging academic achievement.

We need to ask how the system persists in alienating so many of our children and young people, predisposing them to failure and anti-social activities including delinquency, crime and unemployability. The establishment has the money to offer superficially attractive programmes such as REACH, Young & Safe and PREVENT all of which are fundamentally flawed. REACH suggests that Black children, their families and communities need role models that they have never been able to provide in the past! Young & Safe works with children to identify potential criminals. And PREVENT focuses on those likely to become 'Islamic' extremists!

We might go a step further and ask how our children would do if they went to schools with the status and resources of English public schools. They are well-endowed 'charities' with bags of property, some as many as an acre per student. They have small classes, well-paid teachers and steady staffing. No problems with results, of course. Or with Oxbridge admission.

What about bringing them into the state system? What about redistributing resources and abolishing their undeserved charitable status? A good start in the direction of equalising funding might be to start establishing inner-city schools with an enrolment no more than 500, classes no bigger than 15, with properly paid, well-trained and secure staffing, and meaningful space for all our children, whatever their immediate and long-term needs.

Now is the time for this kind of creative and imaginative initiative – while the establishment is beset by keen, almost cut-throat competition for resources and uncertainty in high places, and while there is a consequent, almost unconscious search among the oppressed for viable solutions. This is where the rights-based Learners' Charter comes in.

Communities Empowerment Work

Founded with a grant from the National Lotteries Charities Board, The Communities Empowerment Network (CEN) provides advice, counselling, support, representation and training for people experiencing mistreatment and discrimination in education especially exclusion from school. 95% of CEN's clients are from the black communities. Information about the Learner's Charter will be posted on the website when it is published.

<http://www.compowernet.org/>