

New Writing: Opinion

Gerry German



Gerry is Director of the Communities Empowerment Network providing advice, support and representation for children and young people experiencing problems in education including, among other things, admissions, special educational needs assessments and exclusions. He taught in Jamaica, England, Wales

and Nigeria, 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.

Schools – are they worthy of our children?

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Most schools are institutions that have not changed over the years. Governors, teachers, parents and children have been conditioned to accept them as they are. Teachers are expected to work with children who are quickly identified and labelled according to their 'intelligence/ability' bands. Streaming has been replaced to a certain extent by setting which is fundamentally no different. Setting is reinforced by timetabling and teacher allocation as well as by subject options and examination entries. Success and failure are built into a procedurally fixed system capable of ensuring that gifted children succeed and problem children do not. For the most part, children

and their parents soon concur with the teachers' assessments of their ability and potential. When they do not agree and want to question what is happening, parents are regarded as troublesome and their children as problems.

The ultimate sanction for the problem child is exclusion from school, either permanently as a so-called last resort or for fixed terms up to a maximum of 45 days in any one academic year.* In England, there are some 7000 permanent and about 350,000 fixed term exclusions every year! Schools also have a system of internal seclusion by which children can be excluded from their normal lessons for days and weeks at a time. If such children are in Years 10 and 11 when permanently excluded, they are unlikely to gain admission elsewhere. Large numbers are out of mainstream schooling forevermore. For many students exclusion is the start of the slippery slope downwards through delinquency, youth detention, criminality, incarceration and un-employability, especially if they're Black.

So what does the English government do? It sets up a Young & Safe Programme to turn potential criminals away from crime and a PREVENT project to prevent young Muslims from being indoctrinated and becoming Muslim extremists. What a danger this represents with unreflective workers operating on the basis of a combination of negative prejudice, destructive stereotyping and low expectations! They may well only perceive criminals and extremists. On the other hand, it does generously fund the REACH programme based on recruiting Black celebrities who have 'made it'! But this programme locates the causes of failure in Black children, their families and their communities. It ignores the history of Black struggles through grassroots parents and teachers' associations as well as the contribution made by supplementary evening and weekend schools. The government has also identified another category of children as Gifted & Talented who have been able to spend a few weeks every summer at university, including visits to Oxbridge. In the

meantime, little is done for those labelled as having learning and social difficulties. Special educational needs assessments take longer and longer, and the assessors seem strongly influenced by budgetary considerations in allocating remedial resources.

There are clear patterns of discriminatory treatment. Few students are able to get into schools at the top of the league tables. Admission is increasingly a labyrinth for most parents, what with church schools, city technology colleges, academies and specialist schools/colleges which are so far outside local authority planning and co-ordination as well as being unrepresentative of, and unaccountable to, their surrounding communities. Schools are encouraged to develop parents associations and student councils but most of these have little control of their agendas and implementing decisions. There is little evidence that they are permitted to discuss issues such as discipline, curricula, option and setting arrangements as well as relationships within and between schools and with the surrounding communities. Most teachers have a punitive view of discipline, seeing it more as a matter of order and control rather than self-discipline and good relations with others. Little wonder that some students are provoked into disruptive behaviour, with many claiming to be endlessly bored by their lessons/teachers.

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So what do we do? Let us start off by envisioning schools as communities of learning rather than institutions providing compulsory education from five to sixteen (soon to be upped to 18). Why not small urban schools of 500 with classes no bigger than 20? Why not tailor-made individual study programmes with space for creative group work? Why not a return to openly accessible, non-selective comprehensive schools? Why not get rid of the staffing hierarchy and the Superhead idea? Why not a single salary scale? Why not a new kind of architecture with the Head's office in the main reception area – and with Heads who can be seen (and recognised) on the corridors, in the playground as well as – occasionally at least – in the classrooms?

There are distinct patterns of discrimination with regard to admission to school, treatment within schools and outcomes – certainly in terms of young people realising their full potential. Schools should be open to all children of whatever background, condition and ability. They should be happy, joyful communities encouraging relationships based on consideration and respect for others. Students and parents should carry out their own audit of the schools they attend –

exploring to what extent Britain's richly multi-ethnic, multilingual, multicultural and multi-faith society is reflected in the governing body, staff, student enrolment, curriculum, learning resources, extra-curricular activities and community outreach. Such monitoring should be followed by the relevant corrective measures, of course – it's not just a head-count!

No longer should schools be engaged in dishonest selection or exclusion of Black children at 3 times, Children in care 8 times, and statemented children at 3 or 4 times the rate of others. No longer should there be 50,000 children absent from school every day in England, and no longer an annual total of nine million school half-days lost through truancy – one third from primary schools! Teachers, too, would find their niche – no longer taking sick leave at 7 times the rate of students' truanting!

There are some models of good practice. 5% of secondary and 20% of primary schools do not resort to exclusion. Let us spread their elixir of community cohesion and solidarity. Let us co-operate rather than compete. Let us include and integrate! Let us get into modern times!

* Statistics in this article are from Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) in England.

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