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INTRODUCTION

In the year 11 summer holidays my son attended a learning performance seminar for year 10-12 students which dealt with self motivation and organising one's time as well as speed reading and other useful skills. I ask the question; why should this have been necessary? Why are schools not providing this kind of information? These should be standard curriculum items. I believe that secondary schools have lost the plot in many other ways too and I offer the following article for your enquiry. It is a series of observations which result from being a parent of two children and of several years of membership on school councils, six at a primary and two at a secondary school. My disquiet was sparked by remarks that various teachers have made to my wife and I about our son, the most worrying of which being that he did not fit the mould of a school student. A terrible admission of incompetence for any teacher to make. In year 12 having done well in year 11 English, my son chose to do PES English on the advice of his year 11 teacher. The subject matter was extremely depressing including such stories as Hardy's "Tess of the D'Urbervilles", "the Mayor of Casterbridge" and other similarly dark works. Hardly relevant to our nation or our youth in Australia. He chose creative rather than serious responses in his essays and was of course marked down and failed the subject. It was this very creativity and imagination which gained him the good mark in year 11. Poor teaching also caused him to fail chemistry in year 12 having also done well under an inspiring teacher the previous year.

Having come from a long line of late developers it is my very strong belief that there are serious problems with the way we teach our children, particularly boys, and I have summarised these in the article below. To emphasise what I mean by late developer: my brother did not achieve a pass at third year high school level and went on to do a series of jobs beginning with woolclassing. After realising that was not for him he went through a slow process of self discovery before recently becoming a graduate of Australian National University with a Ph.D. in plant physiology at the age of 46. He is now regarded as one of the world's foremost experts on the classification of terrestrial orchids. He is perhaps an extreme example of those whom I believe the education system failed. My son seemed bent on the same course but has recently completed a TAFE diploma in Information technology. He is still tainted by the demeaning way he feels the school system dealt with him.

I have the feeling that the information exists for the system to deliver a better result than that and that for reasons of inertia these ideas are not filtering through to result in change. I am hoping that you will have time to consider some of these ideas and that you will be receptive to them.

I know that the SA Education department has just issued a new policy document which I have read and which addresses some of these issues and I agree that if even half of the proposed measures come off we would have a much better education system. However, something cynical in me says that it won't happen and that we will continue to have a lowest common denominator system that does not satisfy anyone but those who would do well in spite of it. If it were a business with the degree of customer dissatisfaction that is indicated by the numbers of children who 'fail', then it would go out of business.

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

The faults with the secondary education system as I see them are as follows. There are of course many exceptions to these observations and some individual teachers and even schools may be doing a better job than I have portrayed here but it is my perception that it is very likely that these are the exception and not the rule. My aim is to find ways to bring about changes for the better in a majority of schools for the benefit of a majority of students:-

THE PROBLEM

1. Students must pass or fail.

This gives those who “fail” the message that they are no good when in fact it is the system that has failed to educate them properly because it is an inherently flawed system geared only to those who behave and conform to the ideal student model. Those who do not fit this ideal are given subtle and not so subtle messages throughout their schooling that they are no good and are going to fail. This predetermines that only the model students will succeed and that others stand a good chance of failing. The system also rewards those who do best within the system by giving prizes to top students and schools put their names on honour rolls etc. Students are often so stressed by not performing in this system that they can become depressed and can even suicide. This is particularly prevalent in Japan. If *any* student fails then the system has not delivered for that student and it is the system that has failed. It is not a defence to say that some children do not want to learn as all children are born innately inquisitive and only those with severe inborn defects cannot learn. Children without the drive to learn in later adolescence have learned this response due to peer group pressure or parental or other environmental factors and even the most hardened of these cases can be drawn out by a system that seeks to understand them or treat their case individually. Some programmes where such children have been taken outdoors into a bush setting have responded well to the different environment and have seemingly “changed” to become civil human beings. This suggests that the existing education system does not cater for all and I would suggest that it has therefore failed these misfits and many others who only fit the system requirements in a marginal way.

2. No holistic picture

Subjects are divided into disciplines far too early. This creates several bad effects. Students lose a sense of how each subject relates to the others. They lose a feeling of how the subject is relevant to them and this is demotivating. Teachers do not cooperate in the curriculum but appear to compete for student’s time by being insensitive to the workload given to students by other subject teachers. This competition is giving students wrong messages about their requirements to pass each subject. Competition is not a good role model for students (see “No Contest: the case against competition” by Alfie Kohn and “Summerhill” by AS Neill).

3. No motivation

No attention is given in a systematic way to specifically trying to motivate students in the classroom, except in individual cases where a teacher has made the effort or does this as part of their natural approach. Some highly motivating projects, such as solar car construction, are conducted by schools but these are usually seen as peripheral to the curriculum and even as “extra-curricular activities”. The opportunity to use them as real classrooms where a real problem or project is worked on does not seem to have dawned on the majority of teachers. There are rare exceptions such as the Ardtornish primary school where a school environment project had the children monitoring the school’s energy consumption, tabulating results in maths lesson and working out a plan to implement change in another session. This has the advantage of being socially useful and fun to do. Another very good example of motivation working was the Physics teacher in England who ran a satellite tracking club. The kids who went learned a lot about radios and other electronics and as he said they were having so much fun they did not even realise they were learning. This example is famous because the club detected the location of the Russian satellite launching facility during the Cold War period when the CIA could not.

4. No application to the real world.

The “education” received by our students does not equip them for life in business or in any other occupation and this is reinforced when students try to get jobs but find they lack experience or are thrown into the job market already swollen with thousands of unemployed. Some employers have said that students from some of our schools are unemployable.

5. No rôle models.

Most of the teachers of our primary and secondary school students have no experience of the commercial world themselves. They have spent their entire lives in school. They cannot use examples from their own experience of the world. Teachers that have come into the system from another occupation are likely to be more interesting to students and more motivating. Schools, the teachers who run them and the principles of governing the school, could be a role model for how the real world should run. What we get instead is something which reflects the staid, inflexible institutional model. We are missing a golden opportunity to model some really useful social reform principles in schools. The experience students have in schools should be a model for them of how society could work. In fact modelling ideal social structures in schools would be a very good way of bringing about those reforms. An example is finding ways to reduce the competitive nature of schools. Competition is not productive and is indeed harmful as Alfie Kohn (see references) points out.

6. SACE straight-jackets the system

The requirement that subjects are passed within the system does not allow for any other system of education to be tried other than the official one, therefore the system will stagnate by stifling experimentation. SACE requires students to choose subjects based on a perceived career direction which many students do not have a clear idea of nor do they have good advice about the possibilities. No wonder we have the majority of adults in careers which they do not enjoy or to which they are in some way unsuited. There is no way for a slow learner student to repair early damage done to their grade record. No matter how they improve that early record continues to count against them. Options are best kept open for as long as possible for the majority of students. SACE closes them.

7. No effective use of time

In Holt's "How children learn" he states that schools are prepared to take three years to teach what most children can learn in three months with individual attention. This means that with a reorganisation of time to give children more one-on-one attention, more effective learning can take place leaving more time for interesting pursuits. Teachers claim that they do not have the time to do this but have not given it any real thought because they are straight-jacketed by the system. This could be done if teachers put their minds to it and were not having to conform to SACE requirements throughout.

8. Secondary schools lack innovation.

Primary schools are far in advance of secondary schools in the application of educational innovations such as, for example, the ready application of the new school discipline principles. Primary schools have also more readily accepted the idea that children are individuals who work at different rates and that this must be allowed for in the classroom. This does not suddenly stop for the secondary school student. Primary schools have an overall philosophy approach which secondary schools find hard to implement because they are not using a holistic approach. Vertical grouping and other innovative approaches work well in this environment and the only obstacle to their success is lack of support by parents suspicious of anything which does not look like the three R's. This merely means that the Education department needs to do some PR work to promote the value of these innovations. Does the Education dept even have a PR unit? Does the Education department have anyone doing research in these areas? Or even anyone doing any research?

9. No research

Education department research programmes do not exist as far as I know. Although individual teachers may be doing higher degrees; this is not the same thing as education research. If they are to implement current advances in education theory schools must have access to the latest research and this is best done by their own people being involved in research. University people such as Prof. Maurice Balson have introduced discipline innovations but there should be research into all aspects of education. How else can we improve the system?

10 Streaming

Streaming is a convenience for teachers and not of benefit to the majority of students. How can any student know what they want as a career at year ten level? If they think they know then it is because

their parents have influenced them to believe they know what they want to do, or they simply have not given it as much thought as they should have. In fact it is very often the case that sons do not want to follow in their father's footsteps contrary to what their fathers want to believe. Streaming reduces the options of students at a stage when they may not be ready to make those choices. Streaming of students is an anathema to holistic teaching programmes.

References:

1. Holt, John (198?) "How children learn"
2. Neill AS, "Summerhill"
3. Kohn, Alfie, "No contest: the case against competition"
4. Jean Piaget : many books and research papers into the basis of the learning process
5. Kohn Alfie, "Punished by rewards"

THE HOLISTIC SCHOOL: AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE CURRENT FAILED SYSTEM

1. No student shall fail.

Or; what is the purpose of examinations? A good education can be different for each individual and so must come through a system which is flexible enough to cater for these differences. If a student 'fails' it is the system that has failed. The system has an obligation to educate every student to their level of skills and abilities. Examinations only test the ability of students to pass exams by recalling facts and do not therefore prepare them for any other type of situation they are ever likely to encounter in employment or life. Examinations are useful only to test the ability to pass exams. So NO EXAMS. At the Holistic school we will look for more effective and useful means of assessing a student's aptitudes and so be able to guide them towards their career. This will be addressed further along.

2. Formal classes will be a minimum at the Holistic school

I believe that children need to learn in a motivating environment which consists of real projects with practical or community application. Some primary schools do this now but once children get to secondary school these ideas are somehow thought to be lacking seriousness for real world applications like passing SACE when the opposite is probably true. One school at the recent KESAB awards was commended for using an environmental audit of their school for class room work where e.g. the calculations of school electricity use became the maths lesson. At the Holistic school the carrying out of the projects will bring in the opportunity for students to learn what they need to know to do the project. This will not only be more motivating but will be more like fun and is limited only by the imagination of the teacher/guide who comes up with the project ideas. This may be done by the students themselves, however and the teacher/ guide would just vet them for feasibility. I believe that all education can be run like the satellite tracking club with some class-like tuition only brought in when enough need arises or when the need for specific background information has been identified by the students.

3. At the Holistic school learning will be fun

Having fun is a proven physiological aid to learning. Opiate receptors in the brain are stimulated and this reinforces the learning process such that the activity becomes more easily recalled. In fact children do not realise that they are learning in this situation and are not under the kinds of stress that leads to depression. This is a better model for real life occupations which should in the first instance be fulfilling although this is not an ideal reached by many. That may be because students are taught by the school system to accept less than ideal situations as the best they can hope for.

4. Career guidance

While the efforts with work experience and career guidance are better now than when I went to school, there is still much room for improvement. One aspect which will be in the Holistic school will be a counselling service which looks at the talents of each individual. Some schools such as Eynesbury College do this now. The aim is to allow the individual to search their own selves to determine which

strengths they have and to gain the skills they will need. I suggest that they should not choose a career path too soon but lay the foundation to maximise their chances of success and to above all to learn how to be true to themselves not to false goals of money or power. The counsellor will need to be someone who knows the student well since it is difficult for the student to self assess at the teen stage. This would require fewer teachers than occurs currently to be involved in teaching a particular student i.e. a drop in the number of “subjects” taught so that much more is taught by fewer teachers. Closer to the primary school situation.

5. Environmental issues

The most important project area in the Holistic School will be the environment and how to maintain it. This is because it is the single most important issue affecting the survival of the human race as a species on the Earth, particularly its future citizens, our children. All other curriculum material could be based around this as a core theme. If we don't do this we won't have any future anyway.

Environmental issues that will be addressed are:-

- Ecology and the interconnectedness of all living things
- Economic systems and how they are inadequate for environmental problems
- Local environmental issues and how to tackle the authorities
- Lifestyles of western civilisations and how we need to change them
- Environmental audits
- Business and vested interests
- Forms of pollution -how does the system cope?
- Science

6. Research

There is already a large amount of theory about educating children, (much of it ignored by educators otherwise why are they not doing a better job?) especially the theories of Jean Piaget who carried out much research into the process of learning and how children acquire intelligence. What is lacking is any research into how to put Piaget's or any other educator's theories to good use in our system. Prof. Maurice Balson at Monash University may be looking at the particular aspect of discipline but is he looking these other issues I have mentioned above? The teachers (*student guides) at the Holistic school will be people who also carry out this kind of research with the aid of their students.

7. *Student guides

It has been said that a good educator is someone who guides the student to the point where they realise that it is all up to them and they then no longer need the teachers. The didactic approach is actually a turn off for most students and tends to turn potentially exciting and interesting material into drudge work since it has to be learnt to pass the exam. The type of motivating guide person I think we need could be selected by the same aptitude test applied to students. Good guides are not selected for by the current system although many teachers may actually self select their career based on an internal feeling that they would be good at it. Teachers, like doctors, can also be academically good but totally lack the people skills required when dealing with students. There needs to be more deliberate selection for people who have innate teaching and/or motivational talent before they are let in to the teacher training courses.