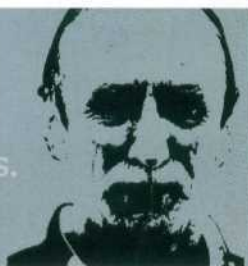




# LEARN to conform

Children are the world's great innovators – at least until they go to school. **Geoffrey Maslen** looks at the effect of the classroom on young minds.



MARK TWAIN ONCE SAID that a cauliflower was only a cabbage with a college education. I don't know if he meant that going to college and becoming educated made people woolly-headed, or that education was a process of refinement and transformation.

In any event, let me use Twain's epigram to raise the question of the purpose of education and, in particular, to ask what are schools for and what are they like? I can't say that my own experiences of school left me with many fond recollections; in fact they seem, in retrospect, to be a time of corked legs in the playground and flailing leather in the classroom.

Yet I do look back on my teaching days with considerable nostalgia. More than anything that has to do with the contact teachers have with young minds and the constancy of fresh, original thinking.

It was children's ability to identify crucial issues in the subjects teachers present to them that I found intriguing. Once, for instance, I had to mind a third grade during a religious instruction lesson and, after a long talk about Jesus, the parson tried to wrap up his lesson by asking the kids: "Now, what must we do before we can expect forgiveness of sin?"

There was a long silence until a little girl put up her hand and said tentatively: "Well, first we've got to sin."

Then again, I've always been struck by the perspicacity of children, by their ability to ask questions adults would never have considered. Like the well-known occasion when a woman took her

young daughter to the ballet for the first time. As the five-year-old saw all the dancers leaping about on their toes, she whispered, "Mum, why don't they just get taller people?"

What many teachers seem too often to forget as they settle prep graders down after their first week in school are the accomplishments young children bring to the classroom. Long before the school gate opens to them, children have already attained one of humankind's great mental achievements – the use of language.

"I'm hungry," a three-year-old complained to her mum. "Isn't there anything in the cupboard," her mother said. "Only a small piece of cake but it's middle-aged," the tot observed.

When he was young, my son once asked me, "What's a knife, the fork's husband?" And, on another occasion, he said thoughtfully, "Isn't it strange. I drink Milo, water, tea, cocoa but out of me only pours tea."

As the Russian child-watcher and poet Kornei Chukovsky noted, beginning at the age of two every child becomes, for a short period, a linguistic genius. Chukovsky said if the child's talent for word invention and construction had not abandoned him, he would – even by the age of 10 – eclipse any of us with his suppleness and brilliance of speech.

This speech gift enables pre-school children to master, with apparent ease and no direct instruction, all the complex grammatical forms of the language into which they are born, all the rules about word order, intonation, verb endings, and all the other linguistic paraphernalia we require to be regarded as competent in our mother tongue.

According to Chukovsky, the child uses meaningless rhymes and fantasy to explore the chaotic world through the safe conduit of the imagination. Yet the inventiveness, curiosity and love of fantasy that all children display before they go to school is too often lost, ignored or even destroyed when they take their silent places in the desks of the little red schoolhouse.

In the 1970s, the poet and author Barry Hill – then education



editor at The Age newspaper – wrote a book simply called *The Schools*. It was a devastating critique of schooling at the time yet many of his observations hold true today. For too many students, Hill said, schools are places which bore kids, which humiliate them and give them a sense of failure.

“They are too often places which cultivate competitiveness, which render kids passive, give them little choice about anything, which mock their capacity to accept responsibility and lead them to dislike learning.”

Hill argued that teachers too often wanted to keep everything under control all the time, who saw their own role as serving outside agencies first of all, where the school’s success was measured by the students’ achievements in tests and examinations. Institutions, in other words, which might have been specially designed to maintain society as it was: competitive, materialistic and so meritocratic that there was a grossly unequal distribution of power and privilege – much as is the case today.

Are schools that different today? I’m not so sure. A Sydney researcher a few years ago conducted a survey of former secondary school students in that city who had dropped out before the end of year 11. He asked why they had done so and found the main categories that emerged were dissatisfaction with teachers, dissatisfaction with school in general, and to obtain work or training for work.

Some students reported that school work was boring, unenjoyable and irrelevant to their chosen career. Others said it was too hard, and that they had experienced poor relationships with their teachers.

The researcher asked students in year 9: “In your opinion, what would make school a better place to attend?” He got a list of suggested improvements that were largely predictable: students wanted lessons to be made more interesting; they called for more excursions, more social activities, more electives, more sport, more free time, more individualised instruction, more student

involvement and flexibility in class, and more lessons on sex, health and drug education.

But they also wanted less compulsion regarding subjects, less emphasis on examinations, shorter lessons and less homework. They said they would like teachers to be friendlier, fairer, more helpful and more understanding. While they wanted teachers to be less authoritarian, they also wanted them to be able to control their classes.

In a later Queensland survey of teachers, students, parents, business people and unionists, another researcher set out to find what these groups believed schools should be doing. As with the Sydney study of Year 9 students, the groups all acknowledged the importance of teachers displaying warmth, supportiveness and respect towards children, and each thought that schools should give more emphasis to these aspects.

There was also a clear expectation that teachers and students should work together as a “community of learners”, and that teachers should not erect barriers between themselves and their students.

That that is still not the case in many of our schools is only too obvious to students and their parents. One could argue, therefore, that radical reform is needed. But just as every long journey must begin with a single step, so does widespread change begin with a single person – the reforming teacher – and a single school.

Those teachers and those schools are out there but it still seems the process of transforming our education system to capitalise on the innovativeness, creativity and imagination of the young is a long time coming.

Mark Twain also once suggested that we should endeavour to live so that when we die, even the undertaker will be sorry. Perhaps parents should urge their children’s teachers to endeavour to teach so that when they stop, even the naughtiest of children will be sorry. More important, though, they should demand that all their students will be prepared to take their place in a world in desperate need of innovative and original thinkers. ✦