

The rage for creativity

Rationale for working with excluded young people

We educators have taken learning, a wonderful, God-given, spontaneous capacity of all human beings, and coupled it with punitive measures. We have developed an arsenal of sanctions and punishments that we inextricably link with learning experiences. 'Sam, if you don't pass this next test, I'm calling your parents in.'... 'Tom, if your state-administered standardized test scores don't improve, you don't graduate.'... School cultures in which students submit to learning, generate students who want to be finished with learning when they graduate from school. ...Learn or we will hurt you.

Roland S Barth, *Learning by Heart*

The looming threat of punishment still seems to be the default approach to dealing with the problem of young people's 'disengagement' with mainstream education - whether it is in imposing the stress of regular testing on infants or urging macho 'zero tolerance' measures against classroom misbehaviour. The ultimate punishment dealt out to students who don't 'submit to learning' is to exclude them from mainstream classes and from their schools. Since the mid-to-late 1990s, the number of Learning Support Units (LSUs), temporary exclusion units located within schools, and of Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), housed separately, has mushroomed. There are countless LSUs and nearly 500 PRUs in England and Wales, with a current population of nine thousand young people aged from 5 to 16. Why are they there?

American educator Roland Barth notes that 'one major purpose of schooling is thought to be to take youngsters at risk and, through a variety of interventions, remove them from this peril' - yet he comes to the conclusion that it is actually *putting* many young people at risk. Schooling, Barth writes, 'may be, in many ways, a *subtractive* process that forces children to give up their cultures, relinquish their creativity, and demean themselves to succeed or to merely survive'. He cites the negative impact of 'ability groups, grade retention, college pressures, working alone, denial of strengths and focus on weaknesses, and an information-rich, experience-poor curriculum that students must endure and frequently ignore'. Learning is reduced to listening to teacher, doing what you're told and, come exam time, regurgitating whatever information has been poured in (and kept down). The impact on young people is evident from the statistics.

In a presentation to *The Arts Included*, a conference held back in October 2001 and the first to explore creative interventions in PRUs and LSUs, a behaviour support specialist reported that 'in any one year' there are 1,000,000 pupils who truant, 100,000 who are temporarily excluded and 13,000 who are permanently excluded. This does not include substantial unrecorded short-term truanting nor those pupils who, as another speaker put it, 'might be still living and breathing in the classroom but who are not

engaged in active learning'. This is clearly, as the conference report pointed out, 'a mainstream issue' - but one that is most visible in the ranks of the educationally dispossessed in PRUs and LSUs.

The conference, organised by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the Arts Council of England, announced the beginning of a three-year programme of funding for 'first-time projects' in PRUs and LSUs across the country. That particular programme has now been completed and two reports have emerged. Both *Serious Play*, the National Foundation for Educational Research's summative evaluation, and

Creating Chances, my report based on oral testimony gathered from a dozen projects in progress, attest to the beneficial impact of bringing artists and creative professionals into this kind of setting.

While many young people acquired new skills – from keeping a sketchbook to working a camcorder – the main benefit lay rather in attitudinal change: a leap in self-esteem and confidence among students who had spent much of their school-time 'failing on paper'. Participating in a creative project with someone skilled and sympathetic from the outside world, students learned about the connections between the often messy creative process and their own learning. What surprises many teachers about projects that involve creative professionals is the way in which children assumed not to be 'intelligent' or 'able' suddenly blossom under a regime where problem solving, making mistakes and teamwork are encouraged. They find a different kind of energy and confidence to set out on the road to becoming responsible for their own learning and for themselves. For those children in PRUs who have been stigmatised as 'difficult' or 'disaffected' on the basis of their academic, behavioural or even medical record, the need for this kind of approach is beyond urgent.

What an arts project can offer – and, by extension, what a creative intervention from Ignite! can offer – is a temporary learning environment or 'dream-space' where creativity and learning can resume their natural symbiosis, which is – in the final analysis – about a process of *growth*. Ironically, as many education reformers have pointed out, the failure of schools to engage so many young people may lie in their failure to challenge or stretch them – not, as now, with bucket-loads of inert information but with problems and difficulties that require the development and application of intelligence. That is, after all, how they grew to begin with – they didn't have to read a manual to learn to walk or talk.

One of the intriguing aspects of Ignite!'s new initiative – taking the programme into PRUs and LSUs – is that this cohort of young people hived off and segregated from their 'mainstream' classmates may be in the vanguard of an educational revolution. Prof. Angela MacFarlane said this in reply to a question at a recent Ignite! conference:

Those of us who've taught more difficult children know that one way to manage them is to give them something that motivates them and engages them. But one of the things that are changing is that, whereas we used to associate poor performance behaviourally with poor performance educationally, what we're now seeing is disaffection among those who were our high achievers... This is probably the beginning of a tide. So, my guess is that, sadly, what will really force change is actually pupil behaviour.

This 'behaviour' is not a peculiar or fixed attribute, any more than 'intelligence' or 'ability' is, and, by this account, any young person may display it if they are forced into and through a system that is increasingly exposed as anachronistic and authoritarian. *The Inventive Answer*, an essay used to set the conceptual scene for the launch of the *Ignite!* programme for 10-21 year olds, began with a quote from *The Beast in the Nursery* by Adam Phillips:

The child has the culture's repertoire of acceptable ways of being foisted upon him, and answers back often in rage, but more acceptably in inventiveness and innovation.

Rage is a good way to describe the condition of students in LSUs and PRUs, whether it is made visible by 'kicking off' and acting out, or has been turned inwards as a kind of self-immolation. One question for Ignite!, then, may be whether that rage can be transmuted into 'inventiveness and innovation'. Perhaps a more profound question it might consider is whether the rage itself is merely a symptom, a sign that such angry children have been forced to 'relinquish their creativity' but – crucially - still have too much pride to 'demean themselves to succeed or to merely survive'. If that's the case, Ignite! might be onto something very interesting indeed.

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