

## OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

### Skype interview with Jerry Mintz, Director of the Alternative Education Resource Organisation (AERO)

By Helen E. Lees, December 2013

**HEL:** What do you think is the most urgent problem facing alternative education at the moment?

**JM:** The most urgent problem I think is that there are two revolutions going on at the same time, in opposite directions. One is the people who realize kids are natural learners and therefore their education should be based on what they are interested in; that it should not come from afar. In the other direction are people who have only been trained in the system. These people are extrapolating from what they have learnt in that system and doing more of it. They know there is something wrong with the system; they know that education is failing and it's not really working in this new millennium and so what they do is they push for more testing: to get rid of teachers, to get rid of schools, but then replace them with the same thing. More days, more homework and all of that. It's destined to failure. So that's the biggest problem. That side of it.

The fact is they are mightily resisting what needs to happen—which is the whole approach to education has to become learner centred and based on people's interests. Children today can find the

answers to anything they want. If you look at Sugatra Mitra's work, it's obvious they can teach themselves even very highly complex things. The trouble is people in the system have a very powerful position, so it's hard for the *other* revolution to succeed in the face of what they're doing which is pushing and pushing for these kinds of "changes" that won't change anything much.

I was reading in the local newspaper just today, however, that all of the education superintendents in Long Island counties have just signed a letter saying they have to slow down on the testing; on teacher evaluations. I would say that's not really what they need. They need to just scrap it. All this business of coming from a distance. It needs to be local.

It's great the superintendents have come together as one to oppose the system but unfortunately they are still in the system, so they still buy the concepts. I think the thing that just got their attention recently was the fact that teachers and superintendents were being evaluated by all these tests and that they personally did not like it. So this is self interest opposing

it. It's quite a quagmire. These sorts of thing are the biggest problem right now.

**HEL:** You mention concepts. To what extent do you think a lack of conceptual difference—or awareness of conceptual difference between the mainstream approach and an alternative approach—circulating, is a problem for these people you're describing to understand what real change would look and feel like?

**JM:** The difference in concept is that it's a totally different paradigm. The paradigm the people in the old schools are using is that the kids are naturally lazy and need to be forced to learn. This isn't true according to modern brain research.

**HEL:** If we are dealing with paradigms then the work of Thomas S. Kuhn on scientific revolutions could apply? There may need to be a “gestalt switch”: a realisation. Not everyone will have that moment Kuhn describes as necessary for paradigmatic perspective to change. Is this the “stuckness” or conservatism you allude to?

**JM:** The problem is that most of us have been trained in the old paradigm. I hadn't finished telling you what the new paradigm is.

The new paradigm is that children are natural learners; that they don't have to be pushed. So you wouldn't do things in the old way at all. You wouldn't have homework; you wouldn't have competition. Both of those make no sense. The trouble is that the old paradigm tends to be self fulfilling: over time. If you force children to learn something that they're not interested in for all of seven or eight years you do tend to extinguish the natural ability to learn. Then it looks like the first paradigm is true.

Unfortunately many of the people in power today are victims of that. So they will mightily resist and even be afraid of the freedom involved in the new paradigm and totally distrust it. That is the conflict that's going on.

**HEL:** I have never heard the new paradigm articulated that succinctly or easily. I think it's clear what the old paradigm is but this new paradigm still requires a tremendous amount of labelling and naming. There don't seem to be easy agreements. You described it as children are natural learners. Can you say a bit more about how a paradigm that is called “the paradigm of natural learners” can become recognized and valued?

**JM:** I don't know the answer to that. We're working on it [at AERO]. We're just a small non-profit here. The only way I really know how to do it is to help people create small alternatives to that system. I really think it does have to be done outside the [old] system.

**HEL:** Why? That's very interesting.

**JM:** Because if you try and do it inside the system, the system will try and beat you down. Because it is actually based on completely different concepts, completely different assumptions and if you tried to start doing it in a different way—even if it works—that's even worse for them! If it works then that flies in the face of what they are doing.

We [at AERO] will help people to try and do it within the system, because it needs a certain amount of that, I guess, for change to take place. But in almost all cases that I've seen, you might have an individual who does something very unusual in their regular school but as soon as they leave, then it disappears without a trace and it's back to the old approach.

But more often if they really trying to do something different, then they get fired. Or if they are trying to start up a new charter school, they get defunded. There were really interesting and unique charter schools going on and they have been closed down by the local authority.

I think one of the most significant things that happened in the last decades was when Summerhill School, in England, was under attack but managed to muster enough legal force and funding to defeat—at least temporarily—the English educational bureaucracy; to show they had the right to keep on doing what they had been doing. That was a very, very significant victory.

I think the reason why we in the alternative paradigm might be successful in the end is because I believe we are operating on scientifically based principles. The problem is that the education system is really not scientific. It's more like a religion. As such that means it's not very susceptible to science or to logic. It's basically an attitude that we've always done it this way: "It was OK for me, so we should just keep doing it." That's very hard to fight against.

**HEL:** So you are mentioning the value of neuroscience for alternatives? That's very interesting. How would you position it?

**JM:** Well like anything else it's not absolute truth, but it does show more and more they are finding children are natural learners. A toddler is a learning machine.

**HEL:** What is the most exciting thing happening in and for alternative education now, in your opinion?

**JM:** The most exciting thing is that we seem to be getting a spread of learner centred alternatives all around the world. So it's like seeds being planted. AERO are

helping with that. We've probably helped about 75 alternatives to start, but lots of people also go to the website and we never hear from them directly. We have 25 people at a time in our school starter course. We have that many people now on the course, as we speak today. That's the exciting thing to me.

Here's one example: some people were in New York and they came down to talk to us. They're from Saudia Arabia. They want to start a democratic boarding school for Syrian orphans in Turkey. As just one example. We're hearing from people in some of the most unlikely places: Arab countries, South American countries. Sometimes there is a language barrier so we can't realize everything that's going on. In places where alternative education is banned that doesn't seem to stop people.

**HEL:** How would you describe their democratic or learner centred credentials?

**JM:** An important credential is that they weren't trained to teach in the public schools. If they have had that training we consider it a negative credential that has to be overcome. It's hard if they've been trained in the old paradigm, but a lot of the time they will see through it and realize that it's not accurate.

**HEL:** What kind of changes have you seen over the course of your years as a campaigner in this field?

**JM:** Well of course we've seen changes in both directions. Sometimes things don't happen as fast as you would like them to. In the sixties there were hundreds of little free schools created, including the one I was responsible for starting, which itself ran for 17 years. Then it seemed to people that they came up against more conservative regimes so they kinda went underground. But they never stopped

because people who were part of them knew they were doing the right thing.

So it's ebbed and flowed but now we're really at a very crucial moment because the old system's approach to all this has become so draconian that everybody knows there is something really wrong with it. As I said, it's a headline in today's paper that even the local education superintendent is saying this is wrong; it's not working.

Whether or not it's a conspiracy or not on the part of rich people to take over education and the trillions of dollars that are in it, or whether it's just based on their thinking that this is the best way to do it, I'm not sure. But I do know that we are at a very important moment and this is one of the most important changes I've seen.

Around 2000 when all this [No Child Left Behind—high stakes testing etc] started, I thought it would be like in the 80s when they did the “back to basics” thing, which ran its course in two or three years. But this has just kept on being picked up and utilised by more and more regimes. I confronted them on it. I was part of the Education Writer's Association and had a chance to confront Obama's education tsar Arnie Duncan. I said: “People in alternative education think this [no child left behind program] is very destructive, Will you get rid of it?” He started to hum and ha and said “Well, there are some things I like and some things I don't” and I said “No! Will you scrap it?” He replied: “Well, the name is kinda toxic. We'll change the name.” Can you believe that he actually admitted this! They did that. They changed the name and came up with “Race to the Top.” This was said in a room full of reporters and as far as I know none reported that part of his

comments. I find that shocking that an admission that a name for a programme has developed toxicity goes unreported.

**HEL:** This in a way is connected to something that people involved with alternatives regularly mention, which is the conservatism and dogmatism about allowing alternative perspectives to have a validated voice. Have you noticed any change in the place of the voice of the alternative? I've noticed that more books are being contracted for publication by large, prestigious mainstream publishers on alternative approaches. The market for information about alternatives is hotting up. That is significant to my mind. What do you think? [Brief discussion about CCBY and copyright follows].

**JM:** Yes there's a lot of things happening. Lots of different groups doing things and putting information out there. It is growing. At AERO we provide a lot of information and many people take it. I would hope they would acknowledge where they got it from.

**HEL:** How do you think alternative education and mainstream schools might communicate with each other and what would they talk about?

**JM:** [Sighs] Nothing. [We both laugh]. That's a little flippant but basically you're operating from two different systems and somebody inside the system, as I said before, who wants to make change—they can try! And it's fine and we'll support them, but in the end if they are really successful at it, they'll get slapped down for it by their system.

**HEL:** How would you describe the networks and organisations that are working in the alternative arena. What is their nature and behaviour?

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**JM:** Well I don't know about everything. I know what we do: We have listservs, so we email people who are members of AERO and for the conference (AERO conference and IDEC which we help to organise) and we have between half a million to a million people who come to the website every year. And there are school starter courses we run. We try and link the various networks that exist to the extent that we can also. I think that kind of communication is very important for change. One of the things AERO does which I don't think other organisations do is we try and get the various types of alternatives talking to one another and understanding what they have in common, which is the learner centred approach.

**HEL:** Do people working with and in alternatives have some key thing in common?

**JM:** Well the only thing I could mention is that people in this area seem to be able to understand that "the emperor has no clothes." They were able to realise that how they were being treated was not the way it should have been and that that was not the way they or others were going to learn. They have all come to realise on their own that people are natural learners and that this is the approach to take and not the old one of forcing people to learn.

**HEL:** Well thank you Jerry for talking with me today.

**JM:** A pleasure!

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**AERO:** <http://www.educationrevolution.org/store/about/>

### **Interviewer details:**

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