

Who Asks the Questions?¹

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Abstract *If children are to grow up to be responsible adults who contribute to the development of an ideal society, they need to feel able to ask questions of their own rather than simply learning the answers to other people's questions. This idea is expanded, and examples are given of places where such an approach has been adopted.*

Keywords questions, self-government, mutual respect, shared responsibility

Nowadays, what's known as education very often consists of asking children questions, which is extremely odd, because we presumably know more answers than they do, and instead of them asking us, we do tend to ask them. Or perhaps we tell them something, and then ask them questions to find out whether they've remembered it, and whether they've learnt what we were telling them, and what we tell them is, in most people's minds, supposed to equip them to fit into modern society.

Now, over the last 50 years, I have come to regard this approach as extremely foolish. Most people, most schools, which start with interesting and experimental ideas, gradually move back towards the conventional, and I have moved in the opposite direction. I started teaching at Repton boys' public school – only boys in those days – and I came to disapprove of it, and I was lucky enough to get a job at Dartington Hall School, which was one of the great progressive schools of the time, and when Dartington Hall School closed, then a group of children and two staff and I started another small school [Sands School], in the same area, which took the

¹ This is a lightly edited transcript of a talk given by David Gribble at a conference on Challenging Learner Voice, organised by Futurelab at Warwick University on October 23rd 2008.

same principles considerably further than Dartington did; the principles of self-government, broadly speaking.

So the school meeting of staff and pupils at Sands decides absolutely everything. It delegates some things; it delegates finance, for instance, but otherwise everything is decided, including appointments of staff, discipline troubles, the curriculum, the timetable – everything is approved or discussed by the school meeting, and if any of the committees in the school make a decision that the community as a whole disapproves of, then it can be changed.

Then when I retired from there, I visited similar schools all round the world; when I say similar schools I mean schools with the same sort of freedoms, and the same sort of shared responsibility. And I've been twice around the world, visiting schools in all sorts of different countries, which have the same sorts of principles. I have come to believe from this, that the most important aspect of any school is the relationship between the teachers and the taught, or between the older people and the younger people, which should, as far as possible be one of equality, mutual respect, and shared authority. It used to be called progressive education, but now it's generally known as democratic education, and it comes, not merely in small, independent schools, like Summerhill or Sands, it also happens in state schools; it happened at Countesthorpe, which Michael² mentioned earlier. It's happening now in Room 13 in Caol primary school in Fort William, in Scotland.

And then, when one looks around the world, it's happening in Moo Baan Dek, which is a children's village in Thailand for abused, abandoned, and orphaned children – and abused children in Thailand have been very badly abused indeed. Run on the same sort of principles; it considers itself to be a mixture of Buddhism and Summerhill principles. And in Delhi I visited an organisation called Butterflies, which works with street children, and I'll talk more about that later on. And everywhere, in all these places, I've found young people who were self-confident, responsible, and happy.

And so, equal respect, shared authority and equality characterise all these places, and I had no sort of theoretical justification for approving of this, I've just seen all these places, and worked in a lot of them, and found things that I thoroughly approved of, but I couldn't give a philosophical background to it.

The other day, I read a book called, *Beyond Learning, Democratic Education for a Human Future*, by Gert Biesta (2006), who is a Professor of Educational Philosophy, and I learnt a new angle. I'd just been saying it works, and it seems to work here, and it works there, but that's not much of an argument against the huge mass of conventional, traditional education. But Biesta goes into the attack on conventional education, and I find my position greatly strengthened, because he argues very strongly that the most important aim of education is not to impart

² The Michael referred to in this talk is Michael Fielding, who had spoken at the conference earlier.

knowledge and skills in order to prepare young people to fit into modern society. He says that what educators must do is to cooperate in the individual development of each child, helping them to come into the world as unique, singular beings.

From Biesta's book, and from my own experience, I now have four arguments against the idea that the purpose of education is to prepare people to fit into society. The first is that this idea implies that modern society is the best possible, because if it isn't the best possible, why are we preparing people to fit into it? And traditional educators don't generally accept this criticism, because they believe they obviously have the best system possible. When I was teaching at Repton, this boy's public school, I had an argument with a member of staff about how children learnt the difference between good and evil. And in the end he said desperately, "Well, if we don't tell them, how on earth are they going to know?" But how on earth did he know? Well, he knew because he'd been told, presumably, by his teachers, and they'd been told by their teachers. It's a sort of extraordinary fundamentalism, which I don't think will do.

The second reason is, if we prepare children to fit into the existing order, we prevent change or we hinder change. We all know that the existing order isn't perfect, either in school or out of it, but even educators tend to – I don't know if I should say even educators – people do resist change. There's a town in Norway called Porsgrunn, where a few years ago all three industries on which the town depended collapsed, and there was a great deal of unemployment and very poor morale, and everybody wanted to get away from it. But the mayor of the town decided the thing to do was to invite schoolchildren into their council, and to all the council committees. The children had quite different ideas from the adults, and before long, the whole atmosphere was changed. But there was one committee that for a long, long time refused to have any children on it, which was of course, the education committee.

The tendency to stick to tradition happens also in the most experimental schools of all, for instance Summerhill has a notice up in its entrance, which is "Unchanged for 80 years." You can't have progress without change, so disagreement should be welcomed. If someone disagrees with you, it gives you an opportunity for changing your own view and improving it. So if you are with people who come from a different culture, or have limited faculties, or, as they usually are in schools, are younger and less experienced than you, it's no reason to look down on them, or treat them, in Biesta's phrase, as strangers. I made a collection of reminiscences and comments from ex-pupils of Dartington Hall School, which was published in a book called *That's All Folks*, privately published when the school closed, and one child had an excellent illustration of what it's like to be annihilated as a stranger [in a non-democratic school]. Vanessa Pawsey, her name was. She wrote, "I sharply recall sitting alone in this little common room in full view, and one of the real girls came in and said, 'Oh, there's no one here.'" "At Dartington," she went on to say, "I

found myself taken on trust as a person, instead of a few bits of me left after censorship” (Pawsey, 1987).

It’s important to allow disagreement in school, and an instance of that came up at a workshop at the World Conference on Research and Practice in Children’s Rights, held at Exeter University in 1992. The workshop was run by three students from Sands School, the school I helped to start. One of them was Bonnie Hill, who said, “Most of the time the atmosphere in the school is good, but sometimes it’s horrible and stressful. I think this is okay, because in school meetings and at other times, we can look at what is causing this stress, and what we can do to make the situation less stressful. It helps us to learn to deal with situations which are stressful. Some students think the school is ideal, but I don’t, and I don’t think it should, or can be” (Croce, Hill & Williams, 1996). The discovery that you can improve the situation in your own school hopefully leads you to think, when you leave school, that you can improve the situation in society as a whole, which we all agree, I hope, is less than ideal.

The third reason for not wanting to prepare children to fit into society is that having that as an objective denies the vital duty of caring for children as they are. The implications of traditional education are that adults know what children ought to know, and if they don’t know it, they must learn it, and adults know what sort of person you ought to be, and if you don’t fit in with the model, you must change. But the denial of the child’s own values and personalities is destructive. There’s a Swiss educator, Jürg Jegge, who worked first with a remedial class in an ordinary school, and then with children who no other school would accept, not even special schools. These children were divided into groups of six, called *Kleingruppen*. Each group of six, with one teacher, met in a building somewhere far away from any school. Jegge worked with these extraordinarily problematic children, many of whom would stay with him for some years. He said that he thought that all their problems had stemmed from the fact that they were told they had them. His first book about it, was called *Dummheit ist lernbar* – “Stupidity is learnable” (Jegge, 1991). If you’re told you’re stupid, there’s no point in trying, and he emphasises the fact that if you’re told you’re stupid, you’re probably told you’re stupid ten times a day – in a secondary school, by ten different people. You’re told you’re stupid, you’re useless, you’re no good. If you’re told you’re a liar, there’s no point in telling the truth; if you’re told you’re a thief, you might as well pick up anything you can find. And these children, he found, hated this, and were ashamed and frightened of these things they did; they wished they weren’t like that, and he helped them to forget these labels, and to recover from them. But all too often, even children doing well accept what adults tell them, without question. Gemma Simm, who was 17 when she attended at the International Democratic Education conference in Australia in 2006, talking about herself and her companions in conventional education said,

“We all have the mindset that we are dependent on people who are above us” – which is hardly a good grounding for living in a democratic society.

Lots of people think that if you allow children to develop in their own way, they’re going to become self-centred and blind to the welfare of others, but this is actually exactly the opposite of what happens. If children are forced to do certain things, obey rules, forced to conform, then they are relieved of the duty of thinking about other people. But if they are to develop themselves they need other people; you can’t develop yourself on your own, you need to relate to other people. And so it is a fact that forcing conformity is a bad way of helping people to relate to the world, and to be concerned about it. Hanrahan Highland is an ex-pupil of Dartington Hall School, and he described his own experience of this kind of thing in a reunion video (Phoenix Education Trust, 2006). He said that what mattered most to him at school was, “from the very start, being given responsibility for yourself, to learn what you can do, and what you shouldn’t do; what you can be and what you want to be, and to be told that you’re just as important as anyone else, which is exactly the same as saying that everyone else is just as important as you.”

The way of being with children which leads to such a result is not easy. Jesper Juul, a Danish family therapist, very well known in Denmark and in Germany, said, “[This] demands much more than we speak democratically with them. It means that we must develop a kind of dialogue that many adults are unable to establish, even with other adults. That is to say, a personal dialogue based on equal dignity” (Juul, 2000, p. 9). I have an example of this; when my own children had left nursery school, and I had forgotten the importance of the dignity of a three-year-old, I had a conversation with the teacher at Dartington Hall nursery school, and she said that during the day she’d noticed a little boy, sitting at a table by himself, a three-year-old boy sitting at a table by himself, looking very unhappy. And she said, “I went over and tried to strike up a conversation with him.” Now, she didn’t go to give him something to do; she didn’t go to point out how all the other children were doing things that were great fun; she didn’t go to show him anything; she didn’t even go to strike up a conversation; she went over to *try* to strike up a conversation. That’s what I call a personal dialogue, based on equal dignity.

And the fourth reason for disliking this idea of preparing children to fit into society, is that it actually inhibits learning; it prevents children from learning as much as they would do otherwise. I don’t know if you know about Williams and Pierce. Williams and Pierce ran the Peckham Health Centre in the 1930s, which was a centre where you went to keep well, not when you were ill. And whole families joined and were given advice how to keep healthy, and there was a gymnasium, and a dancehall, and a swimming pool, and all sorts of nice things there. But after 18 months there, they wrote this: “Our failures during our first 18 months work have taught us something very significant: individuals from infants to old people resent or fail to show any interest in anything initially presented to them through

discipline, regulation, or instruction, which is another aspect of authority” (Stallibrass, 1989, p. 44). I think this is absolutely extraordinarily important, and very, very seldom recognised, even though, when one looks back one may find examples of it in one’s own life. I sometimes look back on my time at school, and I can remember times when I was actually unable to learn. I didn’t mean to refuse to learn things, but I actually failed to learn them. Even if I was threatened with a beating, which was possible at that time, I simply couldn’t learn them, entirely because I was told I had to.

Compulsion inhibits learning, so what are we to do? How are we to help children to learn anything? And the old method was often for the adults to ask children questions. So, what did we do in geography last week, or who can give me an example of iambic pentameter? We asked questions instead of waiting to be asked. And teachers also use questions as a means of leading children along pre-programmed paths, as a method of instruction, asking questions which they, the teachers, already know the answers to. There’s a nice story about someone who was taking a class in Biology, and trying to elicit answers as to the difference between a living thing, and a non-living thing, and so we got, they reproduce, yes; they use energy, yes; they grow, yes usually; they need nourishment, yes; they die, no. Dying wasn’t on the list. And throughout this conversation, the teacher, in spite of asking questions, retained authority to decide which answers were correct, and the students had no opportunity of asking any questions of their own.

But, even in the old progressive schools, like Summerhill and Dartington, or like Sands School now, people have not really been interested in techniques of teaching. W. B. Curry, who was the principal head of the important period of Dartington said, “As to what has actually been taught, and how it has been taught, I don’t think we can claim to have departed in important or significant ways, from what is done elsewhere” (in Bonham Carter, 1970, p. 218).

I’ve recently been learning lots of things about what can be done elsewhere. For instance there’s a German educator, Falko Peschel, who became a teacher when he was towards 30 years old, because he had a vision of primary classes where all the children were working enthusiastically, on their own, independently, really enjoying themselves (Peschel, 2003). And so he went round visiting schools all over the place, to try and find this atmosphere, and he found that children seldom preferred school to other activities. In fact in Montessori and Petersen schools, he found, and this is a quotation:

The pupils were supposed to work independently, but had no plan for themselves; performed tasks unwillingly and wrong; got bored, pulled themselves together again, and tried, somehow or other to create a curriculum for the day that would be moderately satisfying. Everybody seemed to be fighting for himself, and lots of them didn’t

know why they were in school, anyway, and just got through the day, somehow.³ (Peschel, 2003, p. 2)

Which is just the sort of atmosphere that traditional educators expect to result from any departure from tradition. Peschel said, “I found my school visits rather boring, and I think that, basically, I couldn’t have been all that far from what the children were feeling, too” (ibid, p. 3). But then, eventually, he found one classroom which was exactly what he was hoping for, and this is his description of it:

The children were great; they were working completely independently, writing their own stories; doing tricky mathematical exercises; collecting the information they needed for their research projects from reference books; thinking out exercises for other children whose stories they dramatised skilfully as they were read out, artistically illustrating poems. On top of this, the level of achievement in this second year class, [which is seven to eight year olds in Germany], was far above that of other classes. It was as if the lid had been taken off, and the children were reaching for the stars. (ibid, p. 3)

And this is what he said about the teacher’s approach: “The teacher behaved absolutely naturally; she didn’t provide any extra motivation with materials, or smiley stickers. She gave the children her opinion openly; put them off when she had no time, and gave praise when she found things great. In this classroom, there were no games, no teaching materials. You worked with blank paper which forced you to produce things for yourself. The class sets of maths and reading books were somehow more or less lost on the bookshelves. The children know that they are taken seriously, and behave correspondingly independently and openly; they *want* to learn” (ibid, p 3).

Now, I haven’t, so far, seen one of Peschel’s classes, though I intend to go when I can, but I have seen a class where the lid had been taken off in that way, which was at Tamariki, a school in New Zealand, which is almost a state school – it isn’t quite, it’s supported by the state and the parents pay a small supplement. When I was there, there was a group of eleven and twelve year old girls who had taken a fancy to the BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice*. They had brought in a video to school, and they had watched it, over and over again, lots of them. And then they decided eventually, they were going to make a film of it themselves, and because I can play the piano after a fashion, they decided that they would do what they called the ballroom scene, so I could play the piano and they would rehearse a dance and do it, and they dressed themselves up in an astonishingly convincing sort of way,

³ All translations from German to English of Peschel are by the present author.

out of the stuff that you normally find in an old dressing-up box somewhere. And they rehearsed their dance for three quarters of an hour, and by the end of the hour, they had filmed it with a video camera that they were allowed to use in the school, and produced something which was fascinating to watch. Now, this was done without any adult interference at all. I was very much employed as the musician, I wasn't making any suggestions or doing anything. There was no adult guidance of any sort, and it also stemmed from something that wouldn't be allowed in most schools, which was that children had, for a long, long time watched a video that one of the children had brought in. Now, if a teacher produces a video of *Pride and Prejudice* and everybody listens to it and watches it, and gets a bit bored, that's one thing; if a child brings it in, and plays it not once, but over and over again, and it's hours long, then this is normally considered a bad thing. If a teacher tells you to do something, it's work, but if you decide to do something for yourself, it's play. But these children knew more about *Pride and Prejudice* than I did, and it was wonderful.

Another place where children have done fantastic things is Room 13, which I've also been to. The original Room 13 is in Scotland, at Caol primary school. You may have seen they made their own half-hour television programme, which was shown on Channel Four. It is an art studio that is run entirely by the children. And when I say run by the children, they raise money to pay the artist in residence, they have their own bank account, they make their own decisions about how the place is to be run, they answer the emails; they keep the accounts, and they do the most fantastic art work. Their art work has been exhibited at the Tate Modern, among lots of different places, and it's very, very impressive indeed. The children are dignified and sensible, and when I was there they had just succeeded in getting a donation of £200,000, so these twelve-year-olds were administering £200,000 to expand the idea into other schools. There are now several Room 13 in Britain, and in other countries as well.

At Butterflies, that I was talking about, the street children's place in Delhi, the street educators have huge great trunks, which they bring to certain places, at certain times of day. And in the trunks there are slates and chalk, not books on the whole – some of them have exercise books but mostly slates and chalk – posters, perhaps a few books, and some games, and any children who want to, come. Now, the street children earn about 30 rupees a day, which is just enough to live on. If you went to a really cheap restaurant, 30 rupees would buy you a meal. So, you could have got one meal in a restaurant a day, or else you lived on scraps to some extent, and in spite of that children were prepared to give up earning time in order to come to learn. And they mostly, apparently, learnt to read and write in six months. The point of this is that it's the children in those circumstances who are wanting to do something. It's not the teachers who are saying, "Come here, and we're going to... you must do this, and you must do that." The children come to the street educators

because they want to; they want to know how to read; they want to know how to add up.

You don't have to make young children learn, because they learn all the time. Falko Peschel, the German educator, said that they want to learn. The trick is to avoid putting them off learning, let's say, by giving them things to do that seem to them pointless or boring. And the way you do this, principally, is not by asking questions yourself, but by allowing the children to ask the questions.

Peschel was talking about primary schools; Tamariki is a primary school that goes up to twelve; the original Room 13 is in a primary school and Butterflies is concerned with basic skills, but the approach also works at a secondary level. At Countesthorpe, that Michael also mentioned – and in case you don't know, it was a large comprehensive school, 1,400 children, I think; every one of them with an individual timetable, a large part of which was described as team time, which was no particular subject, but was for people to follow up their own interests. I've got a list of projects that children were doing there. A boy wrote a play for a primary school which was acted in primary schools in the neighbourhood. Another investigated the bird life in the garden, at home. A girl researched extreme right literature, from the BNP and so on, in order to be able to have answers for it. Another followed her family tree back to the 16th century. There was a boy investigating the patterns made by swinging pendulums. A girl compared her mother's life with the life of a model. A boy photographed examples of ecological damage in the neighbourhood, and so on. An extraordinary variety of stuff, and when I was there everybody was proud of what they'd done, and was eager to show it to me; there was no question of me imposing on them in any way, they wanted to show me what they'd been doing.

When you're genuinely interested, two things happen: learning ceases to be work, in the sense of an imposed duty – think of children who spend hours playing the guitar, or learning skateboard tricks, just because they want to. Anybody watching someone practising skateboard tricks will have been bored out of their minds, very rapidly, and that child will go on doing it for days.

And you also learn lots of new information without noticing, like how to get around in an area you live, or how to cook a meal so everything's ready at the right time. Or, an example I rather like is, I bet you don't know intellectually whether the hot tap in your sink is on the left or the right, but I bet when you go to the sink, when you turn on the tap, you always turn on the right one. Since this occurred to me, I now find that when I go up to my sink, I have to think; I can't do it automatically any more.

So, the taps are an example of learning without noticing. *Pride and Prejudice* at Tamariki was an example of learning for pleasure. This kind of learning stays with you, it doesn't drift away as soon as the exam is over. And it can only happen when the teacher offers, or indeed accepts suggestions, rather than telling children what to

do; helps rather than corrects; appreciates every individual's personal motivation, and so allows each one of them, in Biesta's phrase, to come into the world as a unique, singular being, ready, not merely to fit into society, but to go out and change it for the better (2006).

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- The Butterflies organisation for street and working children in Delhi: www.butterflieschildrights.org
- Moo Baan Dek, the Thai Children's village: www.ffc.or.th/mbd
- Room 13, the primary school art room: www.room13scotland.com
- Tamariki School: www.tamarikichch.schoolzone.net.nz
- Sands School: www.sands-school.co.uk
- Summerhill School: www.summerhillschool.co.uk

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