



Freedom to Learn Against the Odds

As an optimist I have to think that the triumph of good, reason and truth is ultimately inevitable. When I witness young people whose autonomy is being respected and whose growth of learning is being nurtured, rather than constantly hampered by compulsion and manipulation, then I can certainly believe this. Yet the boulders along the way sometimes cloud the whole horizon.

In the burgeoning plethora of labels used to control children a new one has appeared; another syndrome invented by educational psychologists to keep children quiet and themselves in business - ODD - oppositional defiance disorder. If you don't want to do as you're told you're sick and need mind bending therapy and no doubt mind numbing drugs as well, provided of course you are a child.

Elsewhere I read all about the authoritarian behaviour of various Local Education Authorities towards home educators in the UK - one wants to insist on three home visits a year, claiming that it is the law that they check up on children by full and frequent intrusion. Of course it isn't the law - they have nothing like such draconian powers, but if they can intimidate enough home educators then they can establish a customary practice and argue that the dissenters must be unreasonable people who have something to hide - or maybe they're just suffering from ODD and need medicine!

Another LEA wants to insist that evidence of educational provision must include their 'right' to investigate child protection issues in the home educating family. They have no grounds to suspect that there are any child protection issues or that any crime is being committed. They have no legal remit to extend their powers beyond establishing that there is 'an appearance' that suitable education is taking place, but that doesn't seem to cramp their mission to invade privacy on the a priori ground that anyone not playing by the system must be suspect. Yet another LEA uses an even heavier tactic - passing on families to Social Services for investigation - you can shut your door on the Educational Welfare Officer, but not on the SS - you have to let them in, only to find that their cause for concern is 'education', which is not part of their remit at all.

The list of gloom could go on - LEAs on power trips overstepping their legal remit, the introduction of the electronic Connexions card for young people, with its overtones of Hitler Youth reporting on their parents, or routine invasions of privacy on the streets for home educated children out and about. Truancy sweeps have to be authorised by a police officer of superintendent rank or above and involve police and educational welfare officers combing the streets in pairs. When the Crime and Disorder Bill was being introduced home educators fought hard and with success to have the guidance notes to the Act changed to ensure that home educators were specifically excluded from the target group - all home educators need do is state that they are home educating and go on their way. However it is not unheard of for policemen to act outside a truancy sweep - sometimes knowing nothing of the guidance notes - despite the fact that at least one children's rights group contacted every Chief Constable and was assured that all officers have been briefed. Some home educators have even been told by the police that it is the duty of parents to carry a copy of the guidance to an Act of Parliament with them to prove the law to police officers. Other officers have resorted to hints that they might arrest parents for wasting police time, when what parents are actually doing is asserting reasonable rights under the law. I've known home educated children going to the library or to a local shop to cave under such pressure - and why shouldn't they? It's intimidating



and they can too easily be convinced that stating their rights will be taken as an act of defiance.

Lots of home educating families feel nervous about being out in the daytime and lots of children never go out 'just in case'. Imagine if you could be routinely be stopped in the street by policemen checking up on whether you should be in work and suspecting that you might be committing a crime just because you were going to a bookshop on a weekday morning. Imagine how you would cope with the suspicion, intrusion and pressure to give details that are not really required of you by law if you were twelve years old.

The solution? Recently I read an article suggesting we go down the route of identity cards. Then we'd all be 'properly' registered with our Local Education Authority and could compliantly hand over the card to any policeman who felt like stopping our children or us. The argument was that the mere principle of freedom should be dropped if it might risk teenagers being humiliated and intimidated. We have a choice - give up our freedom willingly and without defiance or have it wrested from us. For myself I can't get my head around the concept of 'mere freedom' - freedom is just too fundamental to ever be described as 'mere'. The solution has to be more optimistic; it has to be something that furthers truth and reason - we have rights and we should dare to insist on them. We should be prepared to shout and scream about the rights that are being eroded and do what we can to stop the tide that is eating away at civil liberties. If it comes to it we might even have to risk being ODD - "resistance," as Alice walker tells us at the end of her novel, "is the secret of joy."

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