OPEN-MINDED TEACHING

Will the role of teacher in future be much more like that of the impartial judge? Instead of putting across opinions, he will help in a weighing of evidence.

By definition, a controversial issue divides society, and hence divides pupils, parents and teachers. This was our starting point. A democracy values a dialogue between informed views, rather than a consensus. Teachers whose views range over the whole spectrum of opinion will have pupils whose own views and whose parents’ views similarly diverge, so teaching should be based on open but disciplined discussion rather than on formal instruction. The project is therefore committed to responsibility (the acceptance of one’s own accountability) rather than to authority (depending for justification on others).

What, then, are the main characteristics of the teaching strategy towards which we felt we had to work?

Teaching must permit and protect divergence and maintain respect for individual opinions. It would be absurd to push for agreement (rather than for understanding) between a Quaker child and the child of a regular army soldier about war. Our strategy must renounce the position of the teacher as an “expert” capable of solving all issues about values that arise in discussion—because this position cannot be justified. Yet it must be disciplined, so that the teacher understands his role as “chairman”—and can maintain it. Teaching must be based on discussion and inquiry. In sensitive issues, thought must be given to preserving privacy and protecting pupils. Thus, illegitimate children, the children of prostitutes, orphans and children from broken homes must be borne in mind when pupils are discussing the family or relations between the sexes.

We therefore aimed at a form of discussion in which the teacher should be a neutral and impartial chairman and resource consultant. He should help a classroom discussion group to find its own way to an understanding of the issues at stake and should try to moderate the group pressures on pupils to conform as far as they express themselves socially rather than intellectually. “Neutrality” means that the teacher should not propagate his own view, but be prepared to see the pupils treat all views according to consistent critical principles. By the principle of “impartiality” we mean that all pupils within the discussion should be treated alike unless unlike treatment can be justified on good grounds. The protection of a child with problems at home might be good grounds, for example.

Our experience shows that these principles of neutrality and impartiality are easily misunderstood.

In order to teach controversial matters well, a teacher must believe them to be important, and this implies that he must have deep commitments of his own. He is not teaching neutrality so much as the nature of responsible commitment. Let me give an example of an attitude which does not do justice to responsibility. We asked a teacher: “Do you meet the problem of pregnancy often with your pupils?” Her reply was: “Almost never, and you’d be surprised at the number who get pregnant in the year after they leave school.” She said this with satisfaction. If we are to move from this attitude of custodial containment to the desire to help pupils to cope with life after they have left school, we must at some time
The chairman said no, the child was not in pain, but was only angry and waving his truncheon. "The policeman behind him is restraining him."

"No, he’s just angry and waving his truncheon."

"The policeman behind him is restraining him."
from the group and raises questions about values which have no simple answer.

Successful classroom work of this kind gains its shape and unity from the dynamic flow of discussion. Most of a group that discussed the first world war poster of the Imperial Maritime League (above) agreed that though they doubted the truth of some war on both sides. Someone mentions the Moors murders and the fact that people like the murderers must be in the various national armies. Discussion then turns to the question: "What do we mean by an atrocity?" The chairman-teacher brings in an excerpt from the Geneva Convention. A pupil raises the justification of codes of conduct in war. The chairman introduces the attempt by the medieval church to lay down the criteria for a just war. The group moves towards the view that there can be no standards in a modern totalitarian war. The chairman introduces a description of the job of a forward air controller in Vietnam who has to decide whether or not to napalm a village. In making such decisions, are criteria and standards necessarily implied?

At this stage, the efforts of the project's central team are mainly directed towards selecting and designing appropriate collections of evidence which can be "foundation" collections for schools, and investigating the emergent techniques of discussion. In the schools we are studying, this discussion approach is being used as a core for the children's work. For two terms now, teachers in 32 secondary schools—ranging from Hartlepools to Merthyr-Tydfil—have been conducting experiments in teaching as part of the project. From next spring, the project hopes to offer "stimulus, support and materials" to a wider range of teachers. In what form?

First, we hope to publish a series of studies in the teaching of the humanities which will outline in detail the logic of the kind of teaching we have been concerned with, offer teachers guidelines about how to chair discussions, and report the experience of our study schools in timetabling and organisation, indexing and storing resources, developing pupils' research work, organising pupils' summimg up of the inquiry, and examining.

Secondly, we hope to publish "foundation collections" of evidence for each of our themes. We don't mean these to be definitive; they ask to be added to by teachers' and pupils' own research. They will aspire towards balance, as a library does, but they will inevitably fall short of this.

Thirdly, we intend to offer local authorities and teacher-training colleges courses which will ensure that there are enough people conversant with the work who can train teachers to use these materials and techniques in schools.

There can be no prefabricated solution to the problems teachers will be encountering with adolescents if they teach like this, and the project does not pretend to offer such a solution. But it will offer the raw materials and the experience on which a local authority or a school can undertake a thoughtful and self-critical programme of teacher development to meet the opportunity provided by the raising of the school leaving age.

Some further general points are worth making. The change of role in this kind of teaching is not easy for a teacher to achieve, we have found. His personality comes into it. But a teacher who is interested learns a lot. Almost all schools and teachers are more authoritarian than they realise.

This new pattern of teaching radically changes teacher-pupil relationships and has profound implications for the authority structure of the school. Schools are not likely to succeed in the changeover if they won't face a move from authoritarianism. Teachers are not likely to succeed without some retraining. Pupils of average academic ability can achieve intellectual levels in this work which indicate that they have been greatly underestimated. The kind of materials we offer and the method of discussion, are equally suitable for any "adult"—from a school leaver through sixth former to university student.

This last fact is an important opportunity. Academic subjects have been a divisive influence in the secondary school. The demands of the sixth form tend to mean that each subject is taught as if it were a preparation for specialisation, and this creates a pressure towards having streaming or "setting" by ability.

But it now seems possible to assimilate our kind of "humanities" teaching to the tradition of "general studies" teaching in sixth forms. This creates a bridge between the teaching of those pupils who will leave at 16 and those who will continue in full-time education. Corresponding to this opportunity, there is a threat, of course. If one tries to introduce into the curriculum an element such as "humanities" which has no immediate reference points outside the school, which does not relate to vocational demands or the demands of higher education, then there is a real danger that content will be devalued and standards will slip.

To bring out the potential of this work in the classroom will demand considerable thought and professional skill from teachers. If the right critical climate is to be created there must be in the inspectorate, in colleges of education and on examination panels, as well as in the classrooms, people who understand this type of teaching and care intensely for its rigour and quality. The new methods will cost money.

It is too early to report any full results from the project. My own view is that if the financial and institutional support is forthcoming, it will make a lot of difference in the 20 years after the raising of the leaving age in 1971. Its characteristic contributions will be in intellectual quality and the growth of responsibility.