

THE FRONTLINE OF THE CLASS WAR?

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The recent 'Teachers' Advice' article on this site (about 'witty' exchanges of insults with their students) coupled with the Peter Harvey court case ('Die Die Die') demonstrate the extent to which relationships within some classrooms have broken down. There is no easy answer to the problems of hostility between teachers and students, since there is, automatically, a power differential in place in most schools, along with a subsequent power struggle. Ideally teachers share knowledge, analysis and information with their students, either because the teachers have 'expertise' in their subjects and the students want to obtain this knowledge, or because the students and teachers work together to learn and explore the subject in question.

If only it were so simple...

The Tory Party election posters, in all their bland irrelevance even implored: 'Let's restore discipline in our schools.' Quite how to do this, or even what they mean by it, is conveniently glossed over. Do they mean more shouting? More intimidation? More violence? More serried ranks and rote learning? Less booze and drugs (for both teachers and students) the night before? More caring, sharing and understanding?)

There is a healthy anti-authoritarian streak running through our society, and even a degree of democracy and equality, in that most people at least feel that they deserve to have a voice. Obviously I am under no illusions about anything like real equality being achieved by everybody shouting more loudly and more often, without a true recognition of the validity of others' opinions and the

necessity for both rights and responsibilities; but at least our culture has changed from one of cowering subservience, which must be a good thing, even if there are downsides as well as upsides.

Teachers do not automatically deserve respect; nor do students. There is no excuse for insults and abuse from either side of the fence, and there is no excuse for acts of violence such as that committed by Peter Harvey, but it would be pertinent to ask what had gone on before between students and teacher. Teachers, as a paid professionals, have to endure certain things that they don't like, but at least they get paid at the end of the month. The students' reward is, of course, more nebulous, and takes the form acquired knowledge and experience and (possibly) exam certificates. How you quantify the 'value' of insults and intimidation is about as difficult as quantifying the value of one lesson taught or a new concept briefly explored. In short, you can't!

The Peter Harvey article implies that his violence against students is regarded as less important in law than, say, violence between two adults. This is not true, since his release after months of custody is on a technicality, in that he was accused of attempted murder, and found not guilty. This is not to say he didn't commit violence; just that he didn't attempt murder.

And what should we do with people like Harvey? He will (presumably) never work as a teacher again, and it is important to protect the public from potential danger. But surely this is a mental health issue, or at least a case where a formerly relatively stable teacher lost control under pressure. He and his students should receive support and counselling.

Or do we want to punish him for what he has done? What does he deserve? A year? Five years? Life? The stocks? And, of course, if we are getting into the realms of discipline and punishment, for reasons of equality and fairness, what should we do to the students? Or are they purely innocent victims and bystanders in all this? Having myself been an obnoxious teenager, and now working with obnoxious teenagers under extreme psychological pressure, my inclination is to limit the retribution and punishment, and to help everybody to move on.

Nobody comes out of this case smelling particularly rose-scented, and clearly there are enormous problems in classrooms where teachers and students exist in a permanent state of low-level warfare. Teachers are (or should be) role models for their charges, behaving in an exemplary fashion, never using insults or even sarcasm in response to all manner of taunts. This is, of course, to expect them to behave in a superhuman manner. They are the adults and professionals in the relationship, but, as libertarians, we are surely unwilling to give all the responsibility for the classroom dynamic to the teachers!

Students are often in the process of exploring the limits of their (expanding) world, including their relationships with authority figures and each other. Their focus is, laudably, by no means always on the job of acquiring curriculum-based knowledge, passing exams and preparing themselves for the labour market, or even on the joy of following the dictates of the National Curriculum. Clearly there is the potential there for much to go wrong, but the reality is that most people (teachers and students) exhibit enough humanity and empathy to get on and grow together.

The most important point to remember is that both students and teachers are human beings, with rights and responsibilities within a complex relationship that is constantly being renegotiated. Let's restore discipline in our schools by engendering something like mutual respect between students and teachers. Now that would be a lesson worth learning.