

## Book Review

**Toxic Schooling: How Schools Became Worse:** Clive Harber, 2009:  
Educational Heretics Press

The introduction to this book is full of scorn for the idea that making children go to school is a way of promoting social justice and improving their chances of leading happy, successful lives. Harber finds the idea that introducing universal primary education is going to make the world a better place is absurd. "Schooling not only reproduce society fundamentally as it is," he says, "but also actively makes the lives of individuals worse and harms the wider society." School phobia is not a mental health problem, it is a rational reaction to an irrational authoritarian institution.

Harber follows this up with short chapters on a number of books published between 1969 and 1983, which he sees as a golden age of serious criticism of traditional education. These books are *The School I'd Like*, edited by Edward Blishen, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire, *Compulsory Mis-Education* by Paul Goodman, *The Betrayal of Youth* by James Hamming, *How Children Fail* by John Holt, *Deschooling Society* by Ivan Illich, *Life in Classrooms* by Philip Jackson, *The Little Red Schoolbook* by Søren Hansen and Jasper Jensen, *Education for Self-Reliance* by Julius Nyerere, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* by Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *School is Dead* by Everett Reimer and *Freedom to Learn* by Carl Rogers.

These chapters, as well as giving a quick summary of the authors' messages, contain many quotations. Harber has been looking for support for his views. It is tempting to make a selection of favourites, but it would go on for pages. Here are a few examples chosen almost at random.

From *The Betrayal of Youth*, by James Hemming

. . . the defeated rejects of the system sit out their schooldays in moods ranging from bored apathy to open hostility and leave school with their confidence and curiosity shattered, their powers of concentration atrophied and a bitter hatred in their hearts for the society which has put them down.

From *Life in Classrooms* by Philip Jackson

Even factory workers are not clustered as close together as students in a standard classroom. Indeed, imagine what would happen if a factory the size of a typical elementary school contained three or four hundred workers. In all likelihood the unions would not allow it.

From *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* by Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner

If you are over twenty-five years of age, the mathematics you were taught in school is 'old'; the grammar is obsolete and in disrepute; the biology completely out of date and the history open to serious question. The best that can be said of you, assuming you remember most of what you were told and read, is that you are a walking encyclopaedia of outdated information.

From *Freedom to Learn* by Carl Rogers

It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry.

There are seventy-four pages consisting largely of pearls like these, followed by a chapter called *Key Critiques*, which is a useful list of fifteen objections to formal schooling.

The last three chapters, called *Schooling today: much the same?*, *Making Matters Worse* and *What is to be done?* are pessimistic. Harber seems to have been looking for changes for the worse. The British national curriculum, electronic tagging to deal with truancy in the UK and Germany, the criminalisation of misbehaviour in school in the USA and excessive testing are all relevant examples. Harber has even found some research from Finland, where many of his criticisms would not hold, telling us that "teacher educators *were said* by former students to be dominating, unjust and authoritarian," and as evidence of the awfulness of school buildings and the irresponsibility of teachers he tells the story of a fire at a primary school in southern India, where "all 23 of the school's teachers *are reported* as having run away from the school building as the fire spread, leaving the children

behind” (LibEd italics). This elevation of the anecdote to serious criticism of the whole system weakens the argument.

Changes for the better are brushed aside. The new school councils and the examination successes of girls, for instance, are mentioned only briefly. Harber does not even mention the rise of ESSA, the English Secondary Students Association, which is supported financially as well as in principle by the NUT, the Room 13 movement, which started at Caol Primary School in Fort William, Derry Hannam’s research into British schools where there is greater student participation than is normal or the IDECs – International Democratic Education Conferences – which have taken place in a different country every year since 1993.

There are good things happening, and Harber’s book gives a wealth of strong reasons for recognising them, supporting them. and making them better known. It is a pity that he prefers to concentrate on what has been going wrong.