

LEEDS FREE SCHOOL COMMUNITY TRUST O.K.

The anti-educational effect of school has been well reported (Holt, Illich, Reimer, Paton and Goodman et. al.). Coerced or cajoled into doing something that someone else thinks good for them, kids react. They might wear a mask of interest, eventually coming to believe in it or in the unquestionable necessity of it. They might dissent and pay for it. Thirdly, they might just switch off. In sum 'other directed' schooling erodes confidence in self, encourages both mass produced, passive consumer learning, and its direct antithesis, dissent in the form of violence, withdrawal and apathy.

In arguing against one standardised path of schooling, Goodman put forward 'many paths of education'. Such a path is Leeds Free School.

Leeds Free School is housed in a converted chapel in the Woodhouse area of Leeds, an area of small factories and densely packed workers' housing. It has been open for 15 months now, has 33 children aged between 5 and 16 on the register, and 20 on the waiting list. At the moment there are 5 full-time unpaid 'teachers', some part-timers and two unpaid people on the building.

Twenty seven of the children may be said to be 'at risk': ten have appeared in court, nine come from single parent families and eleven have parents receiving either unemployment or sickness benefit. Almost all of them fit the three criteria of the 'socially disadvantaged' child set out by Wedge and Prosser in 'Born to Fail'. These are:

1. A large number of children in the family and/or one parent figure.
2. Low income household.
3. Poor housing.

In many cases they have fallen out (or never fell in) with the state system of schooling. The refuse to go to a state school, risking and often suffering incarceration (being put into care), by way of remand home, for just that.

The free school believes in self-directed (not other-directed) education, the potential educational content of any situation (not lesson bias), and the self-government of the school by all its members (not arbitrarily imposed authority).

Activities are many and varied. They originate from both teachers and children, or just seem to happen. If a suggestion involves the whole school or a large part of it, or the spending of school money, a school meeting is held. This morning (26/3/74) five or six lads are helping to clear the site for an adventure playground at the rear and side of the school. This will be open to the whole community, the nearest adventure playground at the moment is four miles away. Other people are busy painting a room, doing building maintenance, papier mache and clay pots in the art room, maths and playing the piano. Others are chasing/playing football/sitting/talking/reading newspapers and Comics/haven't come.

Having found a place where they can choose to work/play in their own time, at their own speed, a place that many of them strongly identify with, kids are keen to see the Free School carry on. Cherie, one of the girls, writes,

I like the Free School because you can do anything at any time, like to say lessons. You can do any lesson you choose and for how long you want to do it. In a State School you sit in a classroom and you are told to do a lesson if you like it or not, and if you like a lesson you have about 25 mins. to do it in and no longer.

The Leeds Free School subsists on donations and need money and also helpers. If you are interested, get in touch with them at Leeds Free School, Edon Chapel, Woodhouse Lane, Leeds 2. Telephone Leeds 787008.

EARTHING

For Meher Baba

Earthing
Is a strange sort of thing
That can happen
Between two people.

Somewhere inside of you
You can caress
The other person's
Body and face.

Earthing, when it first happens to you
Is inevitably shattering.
Actually to feel that someone is there
In your presence

Instead of the everlasting nothingness.
Earthing
Is nothing short of miraculous
Is what gives you and other people

An inner as well as outer substance.
Earthing
Is what most people find most frightening
Yet without earthing, you remain nothing.

John Horder