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Compulsory Miseducation: how far has Paul Goodman's 1962 book affected education around the world?

David Gribble*

Retired teacher, Devon, UK

After more than 50 years, Paul Goodman's *Compulsory Miseducation* (1962) has not lost its relevance. Many of his targets – testing, compulsory and/or uniform curricula, over-mighty administrators, an excessive emphasis on classroom-based learning – are still with us, notably here in the UK, notwithstanding several changes of government. However, there are places that Goodman would probably have approved of, such as Moo Baan Dek children's village in Thailand, and Room 13 at Caol Primary School in Scotland.

Keywords: primary education; secondary education; mis-education; testing; curricula; democracy in schools; work experience; Activity-Based Learning (ABL)

In writing the book *Compulsory Miseducation*, Paul Goodman had two objectives. One was to demonstrate that young people who attend conventional schools are *mis*-educated rather than educated, and the other was to suggest possible remedies. It was published in 1964, over 50 years ago, and dealt mainly with the education system in the USA – but it remains distressingly relevant in the UK in 2016.

There have of course been huge changes since Goodman's book was published. Technology has advanced beyond what anyone could have dreamed of. Goodman mentions, for example, record players and pinball machines as attractive sources of entertainment for the young. And another difference, which seems incredible when we look back on it from the present, is that Goodman seems to have considered that it was only boys and young men who went to school and university. The pronouns 'she' and 'her' are used very occasionally to refer to a woman teacher, but students are always 'he' and 'him'.

Obviously, much more has changed in society in the last 50 years, but the accepted attitude to the learner seems unchanged. This is Goodman's description of a typical college student in the 1960s:

> He is in his junior year. So, omitting kindergarten, he has been in an equivalent classroom for nearly fifteen continuous years, intermitted only by summer vacations. Schooling has been the serious part of his life, and it has consisted of listening to some grown-up talking and of doing assigned lessons. The young man has almost never seriously assigned himself a task. Sometimes, as a child, he thought he was doing something earnest on his own, but the adults interrupted him and he became discouraged. (p. 110)

*Email: davidgribble@idenetwork.org

> Nevertheless, when we consider these fifteen years, and sixteen years and twenty years of schooling, we cannot avoid the disturbing question: Why is the young man in such a classroom altogether? It suits him so badly. He is bright but not bookish, curious but not scholarly, teachable but not in this way … . He must be educated, everybody must be educated, but this kind of schooling has certainly not been the best way to educate him. We have seen him in other situations than in school when he has looked far brighter, both more spontaneous and more committed and was proud of what he was doing; when he learned a lot, fast, simply because he wanted to or had to. Maybe for him, the entire high school and college institution, in the form that we know it, has been a mistake. (p. 116)

And the classroom hours spent without commitment, ashamed of what he was doing, and learning only what other people ordered him to learn, were not the only thing that was so bad for him. He was also prevented from discovering what makes life worth living. As Goodman writes,

> For most people a candid self-examination will show that their most absorbing, long and satisfactory hours are spent in activities like friendly competitive games, gambling, looking for love and love-making, earnest or argumentative conversation, political action with signs and sit-ins, solitary study and reading, contemplation of nature and cosmos, arts and crafts, music and religion. (p. 30)

Few educators, then or now, would include gambling, love-making and sit-ins as important parts of any curriculum, but the rest of his list is surely unquestionable. And in fact, why are we so negative about young people's interests? Surely risk-taking, understanding relationships and the experience of protest are more important to most of us than the periodic table.

Goodman derides professional school people – administrators, professors and so on – whom he likes to describe as 'school-monks', implying an irrational faith in an all-embracing creed. One of the obsessions of these school-monks is that everything must be tested. Goodman again:

> The only evidence of 'performance' that school people ever draw on for their experiment is scoring on academic tests, and it seems to be impossible to disabuse school people of the notion that test-passers have necessarily learned anything relevant to their further progress or careers; or of advantage to the body politic; or indeed anything whatever that will not vanish in a short time, when the real life-incentive, of passing the test, has passed away. (p. 72)

Some 50 years later, the school-monks, particularly politicians, still use tests as their only criterion of success, and for some time the British government has assumed the right to impose a uniform curriculum which every child, whatever her interests, talents or needs, is required to study. (In the USA, too, there is a compulsory curriculum adopted by most states, but it applies only to English language and mathematics.)

Goodman's demolition of conventional educational beliefs is entertaining and powerful, but he did not stop at criticism. He moved on to his second purpose, and made suggestions about how the system could be improved.

In *Compulsory Miseducation* his first suggestion is the most revolutionary: some classes should never have lessons at all. He is cautious about this, though. Only children from 'tolerable though not necessarily cultured homes' should be selected for such freedom. My own experience in schools around the world about the turn of the century have shown that there is no need for this reservation. Moo Baan Dek,

for example, is a village in Thailand of around 150 children who have been abused, abandoned or orphaned. The extent to which they have suffered is illustrated by the fact that they are only encouraged to attend lessons after they have played and swum in the river for anything up to three years. These children run the school democratically, on the Summerhill model. In spite of the trauma some of them have suffered, the community is purposeful, peaceful and happy.

At Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts, and at other schools that follow the Sudbury model, there are no lessons at all. Lessons are seen as a harmful interruption of natural development. The Democratic School of Hadera, in Israel, is run on similar lines: the students are entirely free to decide how to spend their time, but there is a broad range of lessons available for anyone of any age who chooses to attend. The possibility of attending a class is generally seen as an additional opportunity rather than a limitation, but it is sometimes objected that the appearance of a topic on a timetable gives it superior status to valuable individually chosen activities that the students might otherwise undertake with greater advantage.

Goodman's second suggestion is that education should happen in the community rather than in a building known as a school. It is better, he argues, to learn from reality than from verbal instruction. So far so good, but he then falls into the trap that so many theoretical innovators fall into: he becomes over-specific about detail. Classes enjoying this form of education, he says, should not exceed 10 pupils to one pedagogue. Children involved in the Butterflies organization for street and working children in New Delhi meet in groups of any size in parks or markets, or wherever there is a suitable space. Few if any of these children come from what Goodman describes as 'tolerable though not necessarily cultured homes'.

Next, Goodman suggests that people who are not qualified teachers should be welcomed in schools and encouraged to take children into their workplaces, 'to try to overcome the separation of the young from the grown-up world so characteristic in modern urban life, and to diminish the omnivorous authority of the professional school-people' (p. 32). The English school-monks have, surprisingly, agreed that work experience can be a valuable part of education, though a week or so is not much in a full school career. A fine example of genuine experience of the world of work is Room 13, at Caol Primary School in Scotland, where the children run their own studio, raising money, buying materials, organizing exhibitions and sales, keeping their own accounts, and paying their own artist in residence.

Goodman then suggests that class attendance should not be compulsory. He approves of the Summerhill approach. 'If the teachers are good,' he says, 'absence would tend to be eliminated; if they are bad, let them know it.' He then adds, unexpectedly, 'The compulsory law is useful to get children away from their parents, but it must not result in trapping the children'. Summerhill is exceptional in being a boarding school, but it is unlikely that anyone there feels trapped. Though A.S. Neill (founder of the school) thought it important, taking children away from their parents seems a questionable objective. Nick Duffel's books, *The Making of Them* and *Wounded Leaders*, demonstrate the harm that the destruction of family life can do (respectively, Duffell, 2000, 2014).

Goodman's final suggestions are concerned with administration rather than education. Existing big schools should be split up into tiny schools with 20–50 pupils, with no new big schools being built, and every year children should spend two months on a 'marginal' farm, where they should if possible help with the work.

This latter suggestion is another example of the theoretical innovator going too far into practical detail.

Goodman's hostility to the school-monks extends to a wish for a new Henry VIII to come along and destroy all the school-monasteries. This has not happened anywhere on a national scale, if we discount the laification of schools after the French Revolution, but there now exist hundreds of small, independent schools all over the world that have experimented with ideas that Goodman would have approved of. Tokyo Shure, for example, was set up in 1985 for school refusers, and I think it must be the only school in the world where if you are enrolled you do not have to attend the school at all.

Activity-Based Learning (ABL), a method based on Montessori education, has been introduced into every primary school in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Children all follow the same curriculum, but they do it independently at their own pace, helping each other when they have difficulties. Goodman might have disapproved of the testing used to justify this method, but he would surely have been pleased by the fact that it is state-funded, and would have found it hard to regret the immediate improvement in the results of those tests. The ABL experiment is by far the largest illustration of the success of some of Goodman's ideas, as it has affected the education of at least 10 million children, but it still has a compulsory curriculum.

The most whole-hearted example of Goodmanesque education that I know of was at Countesthorpe Community College, Leicester, which aroused worldwide interest for a few years in the 1970s. It was a state school with 1400 pupils, but as Goodman would have recommended, they were split up into mini-schools of about a hundred, known as teams. Each team had a home area, slightly separated from the rest of the school. The size of the school made it possible to have a wide variety of opportunities outside the teams, and every student had an individual timetable to suit his or her own needs and interests. Most importantly, all students were also helped to find projects that were of real interest to them individually. They followed them up with enthusiasm, and much of their project work was conducted outside of the school. It was the only state secondary school that I have visited where the young people spoke to me in a natural, friendly way.

The story goes that Countesthorpe College succeeded in eliminating staff/student conflict and truancy, but the local education-monks disapproved, and in 1982 appointed a new head teacher who reintroduced both.

In 1992, John Taylor Gatto's book, *Dumbing Us Down* was published, in which he revealed that many of Goodman's criticisms of the US educational system still held good. He declared that in all his career as a highly successful teacher (three times Teacher of the Year in New York City and once Teacher of the Year in the whole state of New York), he had in fact been teaching mainly seven lessons: confusion, class position, indifference, emotional dependency, intellectual dependency, provisional self-esteem and the impossibility of escape. The book won great acclaim, but the school-monks showed what they thought of his ideas in 2010, when all but six states adopted the Common Core State Standards in English Language and Maths.

Corporal punishment is still lawful in 19 US states in both public and private schools. In England it was banned in state schools in 1986, but not in private schools until 1998. That does represent an improvement of a kind, but generally it seems that the school-monks are winning in both the UK and the USA. They are enthusiastic about the aggressive, life-destroying discipline of state schools in China and elsewhere in the Far East. A few writers, such as John Holt, Dan Greenberg and Herbert Kohl, have continued the fight, and there is an astonishing number of

small schools all around the world that are run on democratic lines; but Goodman would be sad, though not surprised, to see how little has been achieved.

On his last page he sums up what he considers to be the right principles on which education should be based:

> To make it easier for youngsters to gravitate to what interests them, and to provide many points of quitting and return. To cut down the loss of student hours in parroting and forgetting, and the loss of teacher hours in talking to the deaf. To engage more directly in the work of society, and to have useful products to show instead of stacks of examination papers. To begin to decide what must be automated and what must not be automated, and to educate for a decent society in the foreseeable future. (p. 127)

'To be candid,' he comments, 'I do not think that we will change along these lines' – and indeed the school-monks do still seem to be leading us in the wrong direction today.

In conclusion

There is, however, a growing movement worldwide towards a more Goodmanesque style of education, but it is almost entirely confined to small independent schools. Every year since 1996 there has been an International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC), attended by hundreds of people from all over the world. There is a list of schools that have, probably unwittingly, pursued Goodman's ideals at www.idenetwork.org, and a world map of such schools at http://www.idenetwork.org/index.php/directory/map-view/schools.

There are reports of my own visits to some of them in *Real Education: Varieties of Freedom* (the Democratic School of Hadera and Tokyo Shure) and in *Lifelines* (Moo Baan Dek and Butterflies), both published by Libertarian Education, and there is a long account of Room 13 at http://www.libed.org.uk/index.php/articles/407-room-13.

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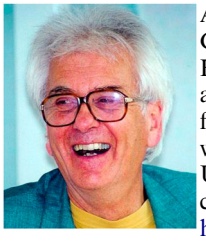
Notes on contributor



After an ultra-conservative education (Eton and Cambridge), David Gribble taught for three years at Repton before escaping to Dartington Hall School, where he learnt the difference between what is conventionally acceptable and what really matters. When it closed, he was one of the joint founders of Sands School. After retiring from teaching, David travelled the world visiting alternative places of education and writing books about them. Until recently, David was the organizer of IDEN (the International Democratic Education Network), and is one of the editors of the Lib Ed website, at http://www.libed.org.uk.

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