

The backlash against children

By Penelope Leach

THE business about Ridings School and other things in the press about the "discipline" of children reflect a real problem — but it's a problem that's partly being used as a cover for other issues: a lack of resources in schools, lack of support for teachers, underfunding and selection. Possibly some of the ministers concerned in the debates are jolly pleased to have these issues to blast the headlines with.

If they can make it appear that the education system is breaking down because the UK's youth are impossible, violent and delinquent, and so forth, then they don't have to look too closely at the system and its resourcing.

Of course, John Major must also be conscious that the exaggerations make teachers and educationalists extremely angry. So he's also got to appear to be supportive by saying: "The majority of teachers do a wonderful job. Some of my best friends are teachers."

To really get to grips with what is going on there is a lot of detailed data that people don't usually refer to, for instance, Rachel Hodgkins's very careful statistical study of the ethnic background of excluded pupils. I try to base my opinions on that kind of thing, not just on impressions.

I think it's almost worse to have individual school selection linked to individual school funding than the old "11 plus". Now even quite well-meaning schools can't afford to offer education to the children who need it most.

At least in the bad old days, and I do think they were appallingly bad, schools' expected and recognised job was to offer an education to everybody. Now with exclusions and so on, there's a growing



Excluded, pressurised, demoralised... brutalised

minority of children whom nobody wants, and nobody's got to have, except ultimately the bootcamps. Many 14 and 15 year olds are losing their right to education. And then everyone will be surprised when they don't turn into good, law-abiding, democratic — preferably right-voting — citizens by the time they're 18.

There has been a backlash against children, really since the time of the Bulger murder. I think we are very frightened of children. We don't really seem to like them or talk to them or regard them as people like ourselves, and therefore all we can think to do is to squeeze harder and harder and harder. And the harder we squeeze, the more people pop out

through our clenched hands.

There's a lot of talk — some of it sensible, some of it not — about education for parenthood. I think that comes a little late in the story. For me, the story starts with the need for government, the taxation system and so on, to recognise that being a parent makes a major difference to people's lives.

Parents these days have virtually no special recognition of the fact that you work the same hours as everybody else, you earn the same money as everybody else, the same is expected of you as non-parents — and yet your time and your money and your energy have to spread to cover more people.

A great deal of the flak parents are getting makes me very angry. It's easy to say that it's the parents' job to get their children off to school and see they do their homework and so on, but just how is a single mum supposed to manage? How are the family supposed to eat if she doesn't work, and will someone please show me the nice family-

friendly employers who will allow her to work convenient hours?

There is a certain amount to be said for the "parent support group" argument, though it can get patronising. It has to start with a much harder socio-economic recognition of what it means to be a parent. You need the resources. And who's going to have access to these parenting classes? Are they going to start in schools? There are some useful initiatives, but will they survive?

This is something that could possibly be different under a Labour government — I don't know — but what tends to happen at the moment is that new ini-

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Making space for the "lost boys"

By Jane Ashworth

AS THE TEACHERS fight it out for more resources and events take an ugly turn in The Ridings School, the debate about disaffected youth has grown narrower and narrower. When the government used to think there was such a thing as society, pupils who were not doing well at school were a cause for concern. Now that the government says society costs too much, the arguments are no longer about how reforms could be made, but about how to discipline pupils into accepting schooling. The issue has been privatised: disaffection is now a personal, moral weakness which can be beaten out of children or fined out of parents.

A future with employment would be the most immediate remedy for the situation. That is not going to happen without a vast shift in the balance of class forces. There are changes which could be made, which are winnable even now, even from a very right-wing Labour government.

Children spend seven hours a day, and 39 weeks a year in school. The rest of their life is spent in their home and in their community. When mass unemployment has meant three generations on the dole and the development of informal coping structures, too often the children's sphere is the unsuitable environment of the streets.

Media stories about violence, drugs, "taxing" and gang rule have a base in truth, and that world is not where junior-age school children should be. When Jack Straw calls for a curfew, he voices the anti-children response to the problem. But he is addressing a big social issue. It is not that he is meddling with issues which of no concern to the labour movement, but that his is a right-wing answer to the problem. He is blaming children and families for a situation which is not of their making.

The situation produced by twenty years of mass unemployment demands of the labour movement more than trade-union responses and implacable hostility to public sector cuts. What is needed is a clear-headed response to the social consequences of the economic crisis, which does not deny the facts of brutalisation but which recognises the types of reforms

needed if working-class areas are to free themselves from the burdens of poverty and social decay.

In the education debate, we need to look at the whole lives of pupils. Quality childcare before school, after school and during the holiday times is essential. Play centres run by local organisations would make a substantial improvement to the quality of children's lives. Creating safe environments, with decent food, run by adults with the time and inclination to listen, talk and play with children, would protect children from the dangers of their streets and ease parental worries about what their children were doing, who with and where.

Alongside such community centres for children would go facilities for parents to get the support they need to keep their heads above water in an impossible difficult situation. Breaking down the isolation of unemployment with drop-in centres, hosting toddler groups, credit unions, advice shops and so on, does make a difference to the morale of women trying to cope.

There have been such facilities in the past, and some councils still do provide such services, but most do not plan them with the participation of the users. Not only does such neighbourhood planning validate a service, it offers opportunities for people to learn the skills of organisation which used to be learned in the labour movement. It allows them to come together to restate that what the media insists is a personal inadequacy is in fact a common problem and not of their own making. It is part of a process of building solidarity where the traditional solidarity of the workplace no longer exists. Such rebuilding will encourage and help create the space for politics. It will challenge the decisions of Labour councils. It will create the space where the "lost boys", as the police propagandists call them, can re-examine their relationships with each other; make real decisions about what is good and what bad; where they can express their alienation and depression without losing respect for themselves and those around them and without having to resort to real-life video-game violence to make themselves heard.

tiatives get funded for the first two years. Even if they look really good, at the end of two years they are supposed to become self-resourcing. And of course they don't, so they die.

For instance, I'm associated with what I think is a good, very simple scheme based in Camden to provide twice-monthly, safe babysitting for single parents, so that they can get out for an evening. We've shown that it works; there have been no scandals; nothing has gone wrong. It's a good idea which for very little money could make a major difference to quite a lot of families' lives. How limited can your aims be? But we've been struggling for about seven years now to get even this resourced as a service rather than an experiment.

I resent the media's idea that there is a simplistic family-values morality to be taught. It sounds pretty silly in a pluralistic society. For example, how are we going to push Christian marriage in a society that not only has given up going to church but has largely given up getting married; a society where most people aren't, even by the stroke of a pen, Christian anyway? It seems to be all upside down.

The issue I get really hot about is how teaching morality should be done. The idea that you can teach children to be reasonable and non-violent, self-controlled and self-disciplined by hitting them really winds me up. Children don't do what you say if it isn't what you do. "Don't do as I do, do as I say," doesn't work, and that covers the versions called "I hit you for your good not for mine," or "I do this in love." A loving whipping? Thanks very much.

We should think a bit more about positive examples, about showing children the behaviour that we want. Many schools do this. They are run as co-operative communities where children understand that the reason for not running in the corridors is not to knock the little ones over; and there are a few schools that have school councils which consult about making the rules with the people who have to keep the rules.

The best way I can think of undoing all the work that has been done against bullying would be to go back to using the cane. I absolutely guarantee that a school that reintroduced the cane would reintroduce bullying. I'll certainly pin that principle to my flagpole!

Luckily, I think teachers know that, even if a failing government, on the run-up to an election, pretends not to.

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