

The protest songs have gone, yet we still need them

LES WALTON on how attempts to dismantle one wall in the way we educate our children only led to the construction of another

IN the 60s, popular songs critical of the controlling influence of teachers, started to appear.

These new 'protest songs' contrasted very much with the 1963 Beach Boys' very pro-school song: 'Be True to Your School. Just like your gal or guy'. In 1964 Tom Paxton sang 'What did you learn in school today?' a song about the American school system, and how they are misinforming our children with an optimistic outlook on history that's just not true.

The ultimate school protest song came along in 1979 in Pink Floyd's rock opera 'The Wall'. Another Brick in the Wall' protests against rigid schooling generally and boarding schools in the UK in particular. With this track, Pink Floyd provided the voice for millions of students across the globe.

So in the 70s the big protest was targeted at the controlling influence that teachers had over children.

In 1972, the English translation of one of the most influential books about education was published. Every so often, I read a book which not only transforms my thinking but more importantly affects my day-to-day experience. Pedagogy of the Oppressed written by educator Paulo Freire has achieved "near-iconic status" and has sold almost one million copies - remarkable for a book in the education field.

I have never thought it was a coincidence that Pink Floyd came along just after Paulo Freire. Freire calls traditional pedagogy the "banking model" because it treats the student as an empty vessel (tabula rasa) to be filled with knowledge, like a piggy bank.

However, he argues for pedagogy to treat the learner as a co-creator of knowledge. In addition, he argues the banking approach stimulates oppressive attitudes and practices in society. The child should be an active learner. The transmission of mere facts should not be the goal of education.

With the new CSE exams, introduced in the 1960s, control had moved from universities to teachers as designers of the curriculum. Politicians, as curriculum designers, would come later. Teacher control over the content was an important feature of CSE administration in all modes - even for CSE Mode 1 which



► Bob Geldof in Pink Floyd - The Wall, the 1982 film which was based on Pink Floyd's album of the same name from three years previously

was externally set and examined. The subject committee determining the content of syllabuses was dominated by teachers rather than university academics.

The new CSE Mode 3 Examinations allowed the teacher to devise the syllabus, get it approved and then examine and mark it him/herself, with moderation. This was a popular option for enthusiastic and innovative teachers.

However, the thought that pupils could co-design the syllabuses was very rarely considered. The teacher decided what was to be taught and the pupil accepted what was given. There was also one major drawback during this period. Whilst CSE Mode 3 brought much in terms of innovation, pupils at that time were not entitled by law to much of a broad and balanced offer.

I attempted to apply aspects of Friere's thinking to our Mode 3 social studies syllabus. Pupils were involved, albeit in a very limited way, in the design stage. Part of the syllabus encouraged the children to understand why they were deprived and understand the barriers to their success.

We examined the health and economic limitations they faced within the north east. We analysed why they had fewer opportunities for employment, poorer health and even lower life expectancy. If they understood why poor white children from their part of the North East did not succeed and recognised their own part in this process then they may do something about the blockages.

This thinking became a critical building block in my personal educational philosophy. I continue to

reject the idea that we need to compensate for the individual failings of our poorer children.

I refuse to use the phrase 'disadvantaged children'. It is society that is disadvantaged by not accessing the tremendous potential that these children bring. Our poorer children must not be treated as 'unfortunates' nor should we present 'middle class children' as models to which they aspire.

Today we believe it is the art and duty of any teacher to engage the young person in his/her own learning and make relevant and interesting subject matter. It should be a shared journey, rigorously taught and assessed.

Nevertheless, I would go further. We also need our children to examine their own role in how they themselves limit their own opportunities. The school should be a partner with the child, helping the young people to overcome barriers which limit opportunity.

Protest songs about the controlling influence of teachers over what is taught in schools are rarely heard today. Ironically with the increasing 'autonomy of schools', control over curriculum design has moved even further away from the pupil and teacher and now lies firmly in the hands of central government, or more truthfully in the hands of government ministers.

The voice of the child in the design of the curriculum was rarely heard in the 1960s and 70s. Today, like the teachers, it is silent. There is now not only another brick, but also another wall.

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