*05.02.2014*

**Why the Children’s University is an essential force for good today**

*“The more pupils there are who get certificates, the greater the responsibility for those who don't.”*

Those are the words of one of the most influential educational visionaries of the 20th century.

Sir Alec Clegg, was the Chief Education Officer for the West Riding of Yorkshire, then the biggest authority in the country, from 1945 to 1974, and his influence was worldwide.

He successfully pioneered radical educational reforms during those turbulent times of industrial dispute and social change. Reforms which, today, have largely been turned on their head.

Clegg was himself, to some extent, a product of a traditional form of education simply because he was a product of the pre-war system.

He graduated from Cambridge with a first in languages but he had been a pupil at the Quaker boarding school, Bootham, in York, where the emphasis on the value of basic human worth was recognised alongside academic achievement and this appears to have had a profound influence on him.

Clegg believed there was good in every child, no matter how damaged they might be, and that teaching methods could encourage the child to become whole.

He once said *“There are two kinds of education: the education of the mind by imparting facts and teaching skills, and the education of the spirit … the child's loves and hates, his hopes and fears, or in other terms, his courage, his integrity, his compassion and other great human qualities."*

In other words, as Dr Nora George author of ‘Sir Alec Clegg: Practical Idealist’ puts it *“His continual preoccupation was how to make children think and use their knowledge, rather than produce the suffocation of overstuffed minds.”*

Which is where the values and ethos of the Children’s University can be brought into parallel.

Like Sir Alec, the mission of the organisation encourages a love of learning but it takes it further than the school gates through the involvement of a range of bodies that are likely to broaden the scope of a child’s potential.

And in a move that might appear to be prophetic today, Clegg anticipated trends and changes in occupation. He believed that unless pupils were encouraged to develop a sense of curiosity and a love of learning then an increase in leisure time and choice would be lost on those least equipped to use it.

The Children’s University does exactly that. It encourages a sense of curiosity and a love of learning, but by embracing the support of bodies in the community as well as extra curricula initiatives it broadens beyond measure the ‘experience scope’ for pupils.

During the seventies I had the good fortune to attend a middle school in the heart of mining Yorkshire and at the heart of Clegg’s directorship.

The only text books we had were for maths, which was also the only subject for which we were streamed; there was no homework, and there was a heavy emphasis on creative writing. Interestingly I never knew what a verb was until I studied French, aged 13, at the local comprehensive. Today I am a writer.

Yet our powers of perception were greatly enhanced by methods that encouraged us to consider and interpret the world by the development of our senses, particularly colour and sound.

Clegg encouraged the notion that the teaching of art, craft, music, drama and sport should be heavily integrated into mainstream learning. There was strong synergy across all subjects with cross curricula links and no one subject was seen as being more important or less so than the other. In fact we discovered the fascination of geology when making jewellery and the culture of the Incas when crafting clay masks. In short we were inspired by creative influences all around us.

Long before the Children’s University came into being we were able to return to school, once a week, in the evening of our last year for ‘Fourth Year Club’ where we were able to take part in a wide range of activities outside of the mainstream curriculum.

Throughout pupils were motivated to push the boundaries in terms of their creative thinking and curiosity, resulting in a love of learning both at school and outside the school gates – a legacy which continues today. We were asked, then we were shown. At no point were we ever formally told.

Just this week the government indicated that they would support a return to traditional forms of punishment – writing lines, picking up litter, community service.

Anyone who understands the psychology of human behaviour will appreciate that children respond well to positive reinforcement rather than criticism and punishment.

Enabling a child to feel good about one thing, frees them from feeling bad about their performance in another. The Children’s University recognises that every child has something to offer, they just need time, space, opportunity and support.

At my middle school attendance and behaviour issues were rarely an issue. A sense of social responsibility and concern for others was fostered and we were all encouraged to be proud of who we were and what we could do.

To promote this vision staff were selected not only for their academic ability but also for their personal passions as well as their desire to inspire and raise the aspirations of a community deeply affected by industrial issues.

The woodwork specialist was a keen outdoor adventurist and a big fan of Bertie Wooster; one English teacher was a powerful exponent of modern art; one French teacher spurned tradition at every corner but celebrated festivals in a unique way – including turning the class into a circus top at Christmas and letting us sit in darkness while we observed refracted light through colour filters on an arrangement of glass bottles.

Each term there was hymn practice (and even those were modern) but every Friday morning was given over to a mass singsong of first world war classics as the whole school joined together while the Head, a talented pianist, accompanied us. How relevant that is today with the centenary commemorations.

The music teacher was given considerable scope to encourage every pupil to take up an instrument with all spare time given over to free use of rehearsal rooms, music clubs, preparations for concerts, dancing and perhaps most importantly – for creative music. We composed our own music whether we could read it or not and even whether we played an instrument or not. In short we created while we learned and we learned while we created.

But what became of the pupils?

Well I can only speak for those with whom I remained in touch but many of us went on to become solicitors, medics, teachers, lecturers, graphic artists, geologists, librarians, computer specialists, journalists and in my case a writer and radio producer. Our futures were not adversely affected by this radical style of education – in fact they were enhanced.

In his last ever lecture Sir Alec Clegg’s concluded with this quote:

*“When Michelangelo was going to Rome to see the Pope prior to his being employed to build the great dome of St Peter's and paint the Sistine Chapel, he took a reference with him which said:*

*The bearer of these presents is Michelangelo the sculptor. His nature is such that he requires to be drawn out by kindness and encouragement. But if love be shown him and he be treated really well, he will accomplish things that will make the whole world wonder.”*

Sir Alec Clegg did just that and the Children’s University embodies the same ideal. The results speak for themselves.



*Hilary Robinson is an author, radio producer, broadcaster and feature writer. She was born in Devon and brought up in Nigeria and England. The author of over forty books for children she is best known for Mixed Up Fairy Tales. Her books have been translated into a number of languages and are sold across the world. She lives and works in London and Yorkshire. Hilary is a Patron of the Children’s University.*