

REVISITING THE "3 R'S"

The 3 R's of reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic that were once regarded as the foundations of a good education now require a revisit - with another 3 R's added - those of respect, rights and responsibilities.

These 6 R's could, and should, apply to the whole of the education community - students and teachers as well as parents.

Please consider. "We live in a decaying age. Young people no longer respect their parents. They are rude and impatient. They frequently inhabit taverns and have no self-control." These words - expressing the all-too-familiar contemporary condemnation of young people - were actually inscribed on a 6,000-year-old Egyptian tomb.

Later, in the fourth century BC, Plato was heard to remark: "What is happening to our young people? They disrespect their elders, they disobey their parents. They ignore the law. They riot in the streets, inflamed with wild notions. Their morals are decaying. What is to become of them?"

And then, a few hundred years later, in AD1274, Peter the Hermit joined the chorus. "The young people of today think of nothing but themselves. They have no reverence for parents or old age. They are impatient of all restraint ... As for the girls, they are forward, immodest and unladylike in speech, behaviour and dress."

Were these writers suffering from ephibiphobia - 'the fear of youth'?

We live in increasingly risk-averse communities, where many children's behaviour is constrained. We raise them and educate them "in captivity" because of our anxieties.

We are continually hyper-vigilant, as our anxieties are fuelled by stories and images of violent and aggressive crimes. And then we label children as troublemakers or failures because, as a society, we often fail to see their potential.

Even little children are now becoming victims of our ephibiphobic culture, as powerless teachers seem helpless in the face of nursery hooligans.

Today's young people, who are feared because of the actions of a minority population - suffer from the violent, aggressive and antisocial minority; a population that has always existed.

Our distorted perception of young people creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: why bother to try when you are told that you are a failure? Why bother to strive when your existence is seen as a nuisance?

There are certainly some really destructive children and young people in our communities - just as there are adults. They are mostly those who exist in deprivation and are anxious and aggressive. They are made to feel worthless and so they become destructive. They are incredibly vulnerable.

There are also many young people who want to make a go of their lives but are blocked at many turns and so give up. Blocked by an education system that narrows the definition of achievement because it is built around targets and testing, and staffed by creatively compromised and disempowered teachers.

Blocked by a higher education system that is mostly riven with elitist and narrowly defined notions of academic competence.

Blocked by a society that discriminates against youth and so reduces the participation of upcoming generations in the development of the social and cultural landscape.

How can we turn this around? Children first become negatively labelled in nurseries and schools, and often these labels stick. We so often forget that children misbehave because they are struggling in a learning environment.

The educational culture of the attainment of targets and constant testing of skills places enormous pressure on school staff who have to manage large classes of children of mixed abilities, and with a huge diversity of needs. It creates a herd mentality.

Sadly, many of these children (mostly boys) get lost in huge classrooms, develop behaviours to compensate for their difficulties, and get labelled as the class clown - or worse.

Schools need support and resources to individualise teaching again. We need to have the courage to see child development from the perspective of difference, not sameness.

We must value personal achievement alongside academic attainment, and help young people to broaden their personal and academic horizons.

Schools that "protect" their reputations via elitist and narrow assessment criteria, which rely on attainment in a traditionalist sense, should start to look more broadly at criteria of success that encompass the whole person and not just their grades.

Many schools discourage robust student diversity and so do not allow themselves to benefit from young people who bring varied life experiences to their student population.

It seems that we are an ephebiphobic society and, if this is so, we should be ashamed of ourselves.