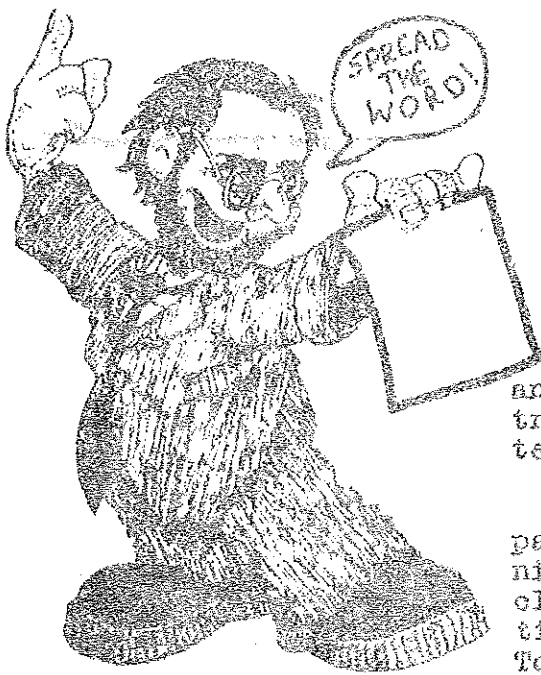


# Notes on being a **RED TEACHER**



I teach 10 and 11 year olds in a London school and despite all the problems and contradictions try to put some socialist content into what I teach and the way I teach it.

I joined BF as a result of the education pamphlet (the only recruit I think) which recognised that a certain amount can be done in the classroom. Paradoxically, this is a very good time to develop such a practice - despite the Tory government, or rather because of it, with children and parents much more receptive to alternative ideas.

Much of the thinking on radical education has come not from socialists or communists but from anarchists and libertarian socialists and there is still not a coherent body of thought on what socialist education is. What I have developed is practical and largely an extension of liberal/radical educational ideas with a dash of socialism added.

The things that I try to do include:

- 1) encouraging co-operation between children rather than competition
- 2) bringing in community and national political & social issues as a legitimate area for classroom discussion
- 3) encouraging creative writing which allows children to 'think themselves into someone elses shoes' or to realise that there are different ways of organising the world to the one we have
- 4) encouraging instrumental writing eg most people as adults use writing mainly for letters and little else. These letters to have a real audience and use, not merely being an exercise.
- 5) Regular discussion and debates.
- 6) Development of an anti-racist/non-sexist content to what I teach.

## **CO-OPERATION**

Children in most primary schools are grouped together 4,6 or 8 to a table but often still work individually. This fits in with a philosophy that sees each child as an individual with his/her own needs etc and work is individually tailored. Co-operation probably only takes place in art or other non-academic activity (See Inside the Primary Classroom by Galton, Simon and Croll - RKP £4.95).

I try to set tasks that can be done co-operatively. One thing that we do quite a lot is the writing of plays or TV scripts. Doing this each child in a group can take a part and develop it in interaction with the others discussing the plot as they go along. One person may be chosen to write it all down or the job may be shared. Similar things can be done in science or maths. The children also mark each others work when this is possible and 'brighter' children may be assigned to help 'slower' ones. This brings problems when the children sit their secondary transfer tests at the end of the primary school. The only option I have is to explain my view of such tests and why I think they are wrong and to turn a blind eye to the 'cheating' that goes on. Tryin to explain the alleged

difference between co-operating and cheating gets you into very deep water.

# Discussion

A lot of lip service is paid to this in primary schools but suprisingly little takes place. It is one of the most popular things with my class. We sit in a circle and pass a stone around the circle. You can only speak when the stone comes to you; you hold the stone for the duration of your speech. This gives everyone equal opportunity to speak, even if they don't take it up and puts down on dialogues developing between 2 people at the expense of others. It works pretty well with a high rate of participation but the method means that there may be a lack of continuity between contributions. (Try it at your next branch meeting). I take part in the discussion on the same basis as everyone else.

The discussion may be centred around a particular subject or be entirely free. In the latter case any subject may be raised and I guarantee to answer questions or points that are directed at me as far as I can.

The sort of points that come up in open discussion often relate to school organisation; teachers attitudes, my defects, suggestions for changes that could be made, complaints about other children interfering with work or bullying and sometimes relate to the general oppression of children: lack of money, being chased off the streets, police harassment etc and often take off from a TV programme the night before.

Another way of encouraging discussion is to take a small group and interview them about a particular topic. This encourages them to articulate their ideas and also gives these ideas credibility.

The extract on the right was done in preparation for a talk I was giving to trainee teachers on racism in education. I told the children that my account would necessarily be second-hand and I wanted the audience to hear directly from them.

They were at first amazed that anyone would be interested in what they had to say and then really keen to get on with it and 'tell it like it is.' When I moved on to another school and played the tape in preparation for a second talk some of the kids overheard it and immediately wanted to add their views.

All this may seem liberal but if you think about it you'll realise how seldom children are listened to. If they are interviewed on radio or TV at this age it is usually in order to elicit childist remarks which will move the adult to say: 'aren't they sweet' or to laugh at the sort of misunderstandings children have. Too many lefties still see what children have to say as merely an echo of their parent's views rather than something arrived at by the child his/herself.

T: Do you know anybody who is in the National Front, or have you ever seen any of them ?

J: I've seen some, because some came to our house. They were just walking down our street and they just said, we don't want you lot here, and all that. They saw my little brother playing outside and they were just saying we don't want you lot here, and get away and get lost and get out.

T: What do we have to do about people like that ?

J: Sir, if they want us to get out of the country, like the people who are in the West Indies, those white people, why can't they get out of our country before we go back, if the National Front want us to get out of their country ?

T: What I'm saying is how do you deal with people like the National Front ? What do you do about them ?

J: I think they need treatment. Brain treatment. They have no right to say that. We're all human beings, we're made from flesh and blood like the white people. They have no right to tease us because of our colour.

M: Like we're animals or something.

All: Yes.

J: Those white people are the ones that get most things from the tropical countries like bananas and all that.

M: Why should the white people want to run us out of the country. It's not their country.

J: They must be scared of us then.

# Writing

As I said at the beginning one of my aims is to encourage 'instrumental' writing. The local swimming and washing baths was closed by the local council. In the build-up to the closure we discussed the subject in class and the children made banners which were taken down to the Baths and erected outside. We decided to write open letters to the Council about the closure after reading some in the local newspaper. We had mock 'arguments' between councillors and users about the issue to try and get the real feeling that was in the area into school. The letters were given to the campaign committee to use in the way they pleased and the kids were really pleased to see them have a prominent place in the Save Our Baths publicity. Later when the Baths were occupied the children went down to use them after school.

Another thing that has been quite effective is the playwriting that I mentioned earlier. After a discussion based on the Red Poster Collective's 'My Wife Doesn't Work' the children made up and recorded their own plays based on an argument between a woman and man about housework. When they did this work there was genuine debate amongst the groups about the issues involved which became quite heated at times. It was interesting that only a handful of girls took a position that said women should stay at home and do housework and most of the children, including about half the boys thought child-rearing and housework should be equally shared.

Other writing has included personal experience stories based on the Mississauga disaster, and extending this to an account of the effects of a similar disaster in our area - this wasn't too hard to imagine as a 'nuclear train' passes through regularly - thus from a story in a newspaper you can generate discussion of much wider issues.

The sort of personal writing that allows the children to express their doubts and

**Prices** I think we should stop prices (rising) because the things we buy like cabbage is about 40p or 50p. And when all our money is gone we have no more - then you go starving hungry. When we ask for money we spend it again and when the Government gives us more we have to give the money back to them, and we don't have any money left.

**Education** Children have always complained about being bossed about by the teachers. They say that instead of putting education in their heads they just put money in their heads when they call out school fund, dinner money and that sort of stuff.

When the headmaster or headmistress gets angry that's no excuse for them to hit us 'cause they say that when we get angry that is no excuse to go and fight.

Save Our Baths

Dear Council

I say you should keep the baths open because all our first and second years can't learn to swim. That is bad, they could drown. It is far too far to walk so you have to pay 12p for a bus. It is more money to pay if we have to go to Putney. All you can do is close it down because it has cracks in it. You could easily fill them in if you wanted to spend a little money. That's if you wanted to spend some money. When you close down, what about the people who have not got a bath. How are they going to have a bath? Try and answer that one. I bet you can't! In the summer people won't be able to go swimming 'cos because it is so far to come. But we only have to go down the road and we are there. So please keep our baths open

Yours Truly  
Gillian  
age 10.



**Strikes** Soon, one day all the children of Westminster schools are going to join together and form a strike but if they keep doing that the teachers are going to force them to go back to school, and then the Government is going to have to do something about it.

**Rent** The Government should make us pay less rent because of the dampness in most of our houses. It's like paying for a pigsty.

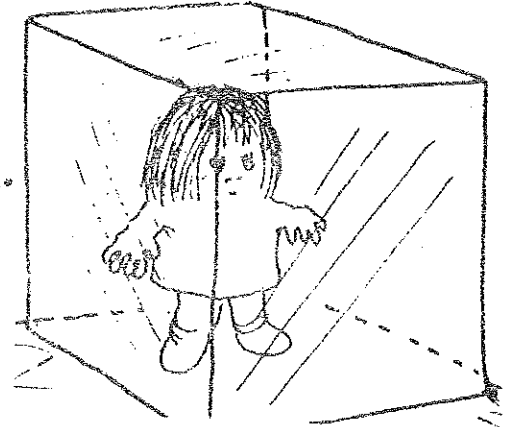
**Taxation** The Government have no right to take taxes from our mums and dads. Because if they keep on doing that people are going to think that they need our money to take home as their wages.

Michael

fears is very important. Here you have to combat ideas that boys aren't supposed to show emotion. A recent lesson I did on seal culling tried to get inside the head of the person doing the culling as well as inside the head of a baby seal about to be culled. One particular boy who always identifies with macho images at first refused to do anything, then went into a corner and cried, settled back to work and produced a really beautiful poem that expressed the turmoil of what it felt to be a paid killer. Unfortunately I haven't got that with me this weekend so can't reproduce it, instead here is a poem identifying with the seal that was dictated by a boy who can hardly read or write:

I was with my mum, nice and warm,  
 When I saw this tall figure,  
 It had something long and shiny,  
 I couldn't really make it out.  
 He came closer and closer,  
 I saw him raise his arm with that long sharp thing.

He came closer,  
 I got frightened.  
 My mum began to hold me tighter:  
 The long thing was rising.  
 He was coming closer and closer,  
 He began to drop the long thing.  
 It cracked my skull,  
 Blood spurted out - I was DEAD.

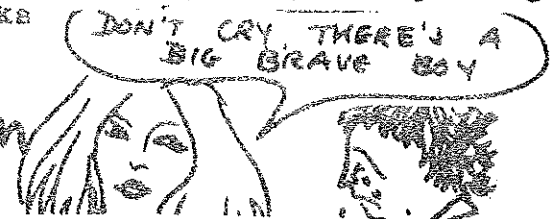


It will take up too much space to give more examples but the general idea is that there are many different forms of writing and stimuli, and that this variety gives a range of possible ways to put over ideas and get children thinking for themselves.

One thing that made a great impact on the class was the TV series Grange Hill. From that 3 girls got the idea of producing their own newspaper. This is now on its fourth issue and is written, duplicated and sold entirely by them, they have editorial control. This means that the last issue contains a rather unprogressive agony column, but the fact that at 10 or 11 years old they can produce their own newspaper is really marvellous. When Grange Hill was threatened with being taken off the air the class wrote letters to the BBC and organised a petition of support signed by children and adults.

Other ways of demystifying the writing and printing process include creating your own books: typing out stories and poems and binding them, then putting them into the school library beside other books

## Combatting Racism and Sexism



Racism and sexism have to be combatted at several levels. In terms of classroom organisation one of the first things that can be done is to stop separating the children on sexual lines. Most registers have girls and boys listed separately - usually boys first. They are lined up for assembly, dinners etc in separate lines and there is often a tradition of 'ladies first' when they leave the room. It is a fairly simple matter to mix them up on the register either randomly or according to alphabet or birthdate. Another sexist and sometimes racist matter is when jobs have to be done! Another teacher sends a message asking for '4 big strong boys' you send girls, racism is added when black boys are thought to be stronger than white ones. I'm not joking, it does happen. Another relatively easy area is that of books etc - Spare Rib, Issues in Race and Education, Childrens Book Bulletin all review non-sexist and non-racist books that you can order, although education cuts are going to affect ability to do that; in addition you have to go through the library and throw out the really objectionable books. The third level is that of content - I've given some examples above but a lot can also be done in history and social studies to show for example that slave revolts in the West Indies were one of the reasons for the eventual abolition of slavery, the story of Harriet Tubman

has inspired many kids. At one school I was able to take small groups out for Environmental Studies; that gave opportunities to look at the housing in the area and the types of jobs available. A visit to Paddington Station revealed the racial hierarchy there. In addition other visits included a visit to the local community printshop and a discussion of the anti-racist posters that were being produced there; as well as the fact that it was being run collectively. On the way back to school we discussed whether that also could be run collectively. One thing that I have learnt is that racist remarks must be taken up immediately and discussed openly in the class - if you have a foundation of multi-racial/anti-racist teaching to refer back to that is made much easier, it becomes more than merely a moral matter. ALTARF has produced a document on secondary anti-racist teaching and we're now producing something similar for primary schools - any ideas from SF comrades will be very welcome.

## Conflicts and contradictions . . . . .

Working like this obviously involves conflicts. The first is the contradiction involved in what schools and society (and the kids/parents) expect teachers to be, and what you're trying to do. I've found that the liberal ideology that allows the teacher autonomy in the classrooms creates some space and the children find it remarkably easy to adjust to different rules according to the situation - but sometimes things do blow up. At one school we were an oasis within a very authoritarian set-up, and the kids had generally adapted to behaving differently inside the classroom to outside it. However some of them thought my approach was a sign of being 'soft' compared with other teachers and generally pissed about. We had been doing stuff on Victorian education and had also covered the Childrens' Strike of 1911 that term. When they were messing around I lost my temper and said, 'If you want the sort of education where you don't have to think, where you're expected to be still and quiet you can have it!' The next day they had to line up, address me politely as sir, ask permission to speak and were given formal work from text books. By lunchtime they were really frustrated and begged me to stay behind and discuss the situation - I refused and said they had to sort it out. When I came back to the room after lunch they'd rubbed all the lists of formal work off the blackboard and had chalked up Childrens' Strike. They told me they were having a meeting about the situation. I stayed around while they talked and then they asked for a meeting with me. I agreed to have talks to find a solution and ~~we~~ they elected spokespeople and a chairperson. Each side then aired their grievances and we ended up (like good social democrats) with an agreement that all the class and I signed about how school would be conducted in future (or rather our class). This was pinned up to the wall and remained there for some time. The first clause was 'Children will not be treated like dogs', other clauses said that children who played around would be given 10 minutes to carry on with their work at a table in the corner of the room rather than being sent to the head, other clauses were about co-operation. In the next few weeks we often referred to the agreement when either side breached it. The whole situation was decidedly dodgy, the kids had actually realised their collective strength, I had felt quite threatened by the criticisms levelled at me, and worried about the news getting out - but it produced a degree of solidarity in the class that I've not encountered since. They also seem to have survived with the teacher that pleased me.

Obviously teaching in this way lays you open to attack by other teachers or parents. It's important to be also teaching the basic skills at the same time, so as to cover that line of attack - and also to make the quality of what you do good, thus making it harder to criticise. I presented several things on what we did in assembly (pictures, songs and speeches about working class Victorian life; poems and descriptive passages on the rise of Hitler and the Home Front in the 2nd World War) which were far better than the normal assemblies; the acting headmaster (CP) thought they were 'rather political' but didn't really know how to do anything about it. So I survive. I hope this doesn't seem to be blowing my trumpet - the reality is that much of the time we do boring routine work, and I'm bad-tempered and about a lot, to many of the kids I'm the enemy - but there are also times when we break through. Political activity after school lessens the chance of having the spontaneity and warmth, and emotional involvement as well as solid preparation you need to develop socialist teaching effectively. That is a continuing problem.

I sometimes feel that I should cut down on other activity so as to develop my teaching more - and to give the kids a break. However the classroom is not an island and its important to work with others, to be involved in the union, and on issues like disruptive unite. The result is exhaustion. Solutions should be sent to me immediately.

Here is a last contribution from the children - a co-operative effort by a group of kids that gets shaky towards the end, and then recovers.

### The Row - 'My wife doesn't work'

Husband: Why don't you work Judy?

Wife: I do, every day of the week, Saturday and Sunday as well, just to get a nice home. And you're down the pub drinking to your heart's content.

H: Listen all I'm saying is that you don't work - which is true.

W: I only get 7 hours sleep!

H: Listen, I'm the man around here and you do as I say. Okay?

W: I've taken orders from you for a long time and you've always had your way. Now I'm not taking any orders!

H: Shut-up woman! (Slap)

W: Leave me alone...y...you Pig! I do all the housework and I get only an hours rest, but in that hour I watch the kids and knit your socks.

H: I will stop you talking woman! (Slap)

W: Go away - you savage!

H: If you are going to argue like this we might as well split up.

W: No I won't - I won't.

H: Go and make my dinner.

W: Okay - but you'll be waiting long.

H: I better not be waiting longer than half an hour.

W: I'm up from 6 until 11 rushing around, paying bills, doing the housework, watching the baby, doing the washing up, washing your clothes, doing the shopping and the ironing and the sweeping and getting the baby to bed and all you can say is 'get my dinner'! If I want to I won't get it at all.

H: Look love, I'm sorry and I'm sorry that I hit you. Please forgive me Judy?

W: Okay, but just this once.

H: Can I have my dinner please?

W: Yes, and then I'll leave and I'll take the kids with me. No, in fact we'll go now. 'BYE!

Thanks to Radical Education, Issues in Race & Education and Bush News for extracts from the kids' work.

Roger Osbourne, West London Big Flame

### Useful Sources

All London Teachers Against Racism and Fascism: Handbook on Anti-Racist Teaching in the secondary school. (1979)  
7 Sigdon Road, London E8  
Primary School Handbook (forth-coming)  
+ Divide & Rule Never - pupils book

London branch of Nat'l Ass'n for Multi-racial Ed'n: ISSUES in Race & education  
(58 Collingbourne Rd, London W 12)  
Teaching About Africa  
(150 Weston Park, London N8)  
NAME Journal  
(ditto)

Women in the NUT: Sexism in School (c/o Carole Regan, 29 Wayland Avenue, London E

Sheffield women & Education: Sexism in Schools (29 Parkers Road, Sheffield 10)

New Childhood Press: non-sexist Teaching materials & approaches (c/o Photography workshop, 152 Upper Street, London N 1)

Spare Rib List of Non-sexist books. Childrens Book Bulletin. Dragons Teet

Thames Television: Our people. Free Booklet (Thames TV 306-316 Euston Rd, NW1)