

Not the last word: point and counterpoint

If Big Brother is watching, let's tell him what we think Education is a child's right

Chris Goddard

The mail I receive is both one of the best and one of the worst things about writing this contribution to *Children Australia* and other pieces for journals and the broader media. The letters I receive raise a number of questions. Why are abusive letters so often written in red or green ink? Or both? Why do abusive letters use so many CAPITAL LETTERS and exclamation marks?! Why are abusive letters so often anonymous?

Sometimes the letter writers, both abusive and complimentary, include copies of articles, even books, and these are often interesting. Some of the enclosures, however, leave me lost for words. Just recently, for example, someone sent me a photocopy of a small book by Alan Gourley, *Assault on childhood* (1988). It was interesting to read, although I am not sure what else to say. Perhaps a little context might be helpful. According to the frontispiece, Alan Gourley's other books include *How to avoid the LOOMING CATASTROPHE* (1985, capitals in original) and *Democracy and treason in Australia* (1987). According to the blurb, this latter book is a best-seller, having sold '10,000 copies in less than five months'. I suppose it just goes to prove that Australia is an interesting society, full of perceived conspiracies.

Sometimes the most apparently innocuous comments can produce the most vitriol. Sometimes there are even letters from solicitors. How is it that solicitors' letters are so polite and yet so threatening? Do they teach this way of writing in law courses? Sometimes, however, responses are overwhelmingly favourable. My recent piece for *Children Australia* on the conference in the Philippines (Goddard, 1999) produced a surprisingly large amount of messages and letters, all of them complimentary. It served a useful purpose for me, as I had thought it might not interest the *Children Australia* readership.

For this reason I intend, in this shorter piece, to travel overseas again – although, unfortunately, I will remain firmly anchored in my office. My travels for this piece are prompted by the campaigns to eradicate the debts of poorer countries.

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These campaigns do not appear to have had the same impact in Australia as they have had elsewhere, particularly in Europe.

A useful starting point on this journey is the debate about privacy. Denis Duclos (1999), in his article warning of the dangers of technology invading our lives, starts with a complaint that bailiffs, social workers and psychologists are increasingly able to invade the privacy of the home:

...the front doors of ordinary folk are now open to accusations of incest or physical abuse, whether justified or not. Witness a recent case in the French town of Corbeil-Essonnes, where rumours of abuse destroyed the reputations of young people as well as those in authority, and resulted in innocent people being arrested. (Duclos, 1999:14)

Now I know nothing about this case, although it sounds as if Duclos is writing of a French version of Cleveland and I would welcome information. Duclos goes on to argue, correctly in my view, that technology is giving some people more and more opportunities to invade our privacy. He refers to the 'double scandal' of Microsoft and Intel which:

...embedded identifiers in the Windows 98 operating system or the Pentium III processor, [and] are part of a vast struggle to target the individual at a time when everyone is trying to remain as anonymous and impenetrable as possible. (1999:14)

I have always believed that every so-called advance contains within it another less-easily identified giant step backwards. Every solution in other words contains another problem. If I were bashing this out on my computer at Monash University, someone could find out very easily what I am writing before it is sent off to *Children Australia*. They know, or could if they wanted to, exactly when I switch my machine on and when I switch it off. Duclos argues that:

The more the world is felt to be invasive, the more we respond with preventive intrusion. The more prevention is perceived as a shameful breach of trust, the more we react by abnegating the prerogatives of citizenship in the public domain. (1999:14)

Duclos writes of the increasing number of 'gated communities' in the US (and, of course, in Australia) where guards are employed to keep out undesirables. The distinction between public and private is disappearing according to Duclos:

What tomorrow will be the difference between a convict required to wear a bracelet that allows his movements to be tracked, and a free man whose 'smart' badge deducts from his pay the time spent visiting the toilet while at work? (1999:14)

This interaction between the private and public is one that I have often thought about. Our lives have changed in ways that we have yet to fully understand. If we examine the increased urbanisation of society, we see that in many ways our lives have become very different. On my way to work, in a car or on a train, I pass hundreds, perhaps thousands of people. Once I leave my street, I rarely see anyone I know. A couple of hundred years ago, less even, on a similar journey, walking or on a horse, I would have known everyone. This is why, in small South Australian towns (and presumably elsewhere), as you drive along, people in cars coming the other way acknowledge you with a little wave of the hand.

Generally speaking, two hundred years ago the only people who would have had information about me would have been those that I knew and perhaps the occasional anonymous public official. Now, it is probably true to say that many more people, not known to me, know more about me (or could know more about me) than anyone apart from my family. Duclos quotes some pretty alarming figures. Two examples will suffice.

A 1998 study (Doyle, 1999) of more than 1000 firms by the American Management Association shows that 40% of those companies are undertaking active surveillance of employees:

They read electronic mail, monitor telephone conversations, examine the content of voice-mail boxes, log the passwords of personal computers, record work performance on digital video. Forty-one percent of US firms carry out random blood-tests for drugs, while 15% use psychological tests... (Duclos, 1999)

It cannot be long before our brave new world of privatised welfare starts down this track. Random blood-tests of some of the health and welfare workers that I have met could produce some very interesting results. Duclos (1999) also cites an Illinois University study that showed that one quarter of the 500 US companies examined by *Fortune* magazine were giving governmental agencies confidential information about their workers (Linowes & Spencer, 1996):

The sense of ownership that modern economic powers have over their dependents is obvious, since they have free and unreciprocated access to the most intimate information about them. (Duclos, 1999:15)

The next articles I read appeared in the *New Internationalist*. The latest issue is devoted to what the journal calls 'the great education scandal'. Chris Brazier sets the scene. In 1990, the world's governments, after a meeting in Thailand, set the goal of education for all by the year 2000:

Yet here we are, a few months from the twenty-first century, with 125 million of the world's children still deprived of any schooling, another 150 million who drop out of school without learning to read and write and the absolute number of illiterate adults still growing. All over the world, teachers' morale is low ... public funds are steadily drained from education. The state is – slowly but surely in some quarters, with rampant enthusiasm for privatization in others – withdrawing from the field. (1999a:8)

Brazier reviews the phenomenon of decentralisation, a phenomenon he has found to be worldwide through his work for UNICEF. He describes it as a concept that 'can mean all things to all people' (1999a:8). From the perspective of the left, decentralisation can be seen as taking power from the powerful or as privatising by stealth. From the perspective of the right, Brazier suggests that it can be seen as giving more choice to parents, and reducing the power of liberal education experts. Alternatively, the right can see decentralisation as a potential threat to national and cultural standards (Brazier, 1999a:8).

The advantages, Brazier concludes, are obvious:

A school would be at the hub of its local community, capable of responding to its needs. And in agricultural communities in the south, these needs may well require a school's timetable to be flexible enough to allow children to participate in the harvest. (1999a:9)

Every solution has its problems, however. Community management of education will only work if it is adequately funded:

At its best, decentralization is likely to require more careful planning, more extensive data collection – even more staff and resources. (1999a:9)

In other words, such undertakings need to be approached not because they are cheap but because they are the best. Unfortunately, this is not the case of course:

Decentralisation is being seen by finance ministries all over the world as an opportunity both to save bucks and pass the buck. (Brazier, 1999a:9)

Drawing on his experience at his local school in the UK, Brazier writes that a few years ago money was raised to fund special events, but now parents are asked to raise money to pay for essentials such as books. Soon, Brazier suggests, parents will be asked to provide money just to keep the school going. Needless to say, at Brazier's school, teacher numbers have fallen from 11 to eight (Brazier, 1999a:9).

Brazier draws the inevitable (to me at least) conclusion:

It is a small step from this to class apartheid. It doesn't take an expert to recognise that a school in a middle-class area will have more resources to call on than one on a deprived housing estate, whether it is in Auckland or Rio de Janeiro. Schools in comfortable suburban settings will sail blithely into the sunshine while those in inner cities will sink even deeper into the hole. (1999a:9-10)

Around the world the pressure is on. In Australia, in the US, and in the UK 'the whole basis of public education' is being destroyed by 'the gospel of "choice"' and by the refusal of governments to adequately fund education (1999a:10). In the US, schools are doing deals with Pepsi and Coke to allow those companies to market their products to the captive audience of our smallest citizens. This is terrifying stuff. As Brazier writes, there are health implications in such agreements and, believe it or not, there are major curriculum issues. In one school at least, a day's activities are devoted to Coca-Cola in chemistry and social science classes. One child was suspended for protesting by not wearing his Coca-Cola T-shirt (Brazier, 1999a:11). Brazier concludes that we all

have to be prepared to stand up for the right to universal education.

Brazier has other articles in this issue of *New Internationalist*. There is, for example, an excellent piece on the gender divide in education in the south. 'Getting girls into schools in the South is literally a matter of life and death', he writes (Brazier, 1999b:12). It is his concluding piece that drives home our failure to take action. Brazier suggests that education for every child in the world will cost an extra eight billion dollars a year:

This may seem an enormous sum of money. Yet it is only around half of what Americans spend each year on toys. Even more telling, it is equivalent to just four days of global military spending, or just nine minutes of international currency speculation. (Brazier, 1999c: emphasis in original)

One of the most touching articles in this edition of *New Internationalist* is written by young people aged 13 to 17 years. They visited Tanzania to examine the impact of debt and were shocked by the impact of debt on the system of education (Robertson, Kibria, Rosénior, O'Garro & Box, 1999). They report on the work of social worker and psychologist, Victor Mulimila, and his Streetside School. Mulimila is scathing in his criticism of the rich countries which continue to demand debt interest payments that destroy services:

'Social services have been deteriorating because all the money which is supposed to pay for them is being paid to rich countries. The way I see the future, it's getting worse. We will be dying. The rich countries have to forgive all the debts ... If they want to help, they shouldn't apply conditions that exploit us.' (Mulimila, quoted in Robertson et al. 1999:27)

Robertson and his fellow writers then confronted the local World Bank representative with what they had found. They describe his 'apparent unconcern' (1999:27).

New technologies present us with many challenges, not just to our privacy. There are very real concerns about what our lives in the wealthy countries will be like when every action that we take will be recorded somewhere by someone. On the other hand, technology also provides us with small opportunities to communicate in ways that ten years ago would not have been possible. At the end of *New Internationalist* the Global Week of Action is described. This is a campaign to push the right of high quality education for all. The aim is to put pressure on the donors and governments. ActionAid, Education International and Oxfam are some of the organisations involved.

One of the tactics planned is the use of e-mail petitions. You do not have to be a conspiracy theorist to recognise that these new technologies are changing our lives in ways we have yet to comprehend. On the other hand, there are small opportunities to do things somewhat differently. These technologies also give us the chance to bring new pressures to bear on those in power and to tell them we would like the world's priorities to be different. Coincidentally, in a financial analysis article in the *Guardian Weekly* that arrived at the same time as my *New Internationalist*, Mark Atkinson (1999) tells us that the International Monetary Fund values

its gold reserves at 4.9 billion dollars when their current market value in fact exceeds 32 billion dollars. That would be a useful starting point for the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries. We could keep the gold reserves at 4.9 billion dollars and sell the rest. Education for all starts to look quite achievable.

Occasionally, increasingly rarely since they installed security cameras, graffiti appears on the walls of the building in which I work at Monash University. One piece, hidden around a corner, has remained for months, presumably out of the range of the cameras: 'Big Brother is ignoring you'. Unfortunately, I do not think that he is ignoring us but clearly he is ignoring the educational needs of many of the world's children.

Education, public good-quality education, for all children everywhere is a right. The message we should be giving, by e-mail and other means, is that not providing free education for all children is a terrible wrong. If our e-mail messages are monitored, that means that the message would be even more powerful, for it will be read by those who monitor the messages as well as those to whom we write. □

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