

Chapter 3

From Theory to Practice: Challney Secondary Modern School

I needed to do postgraduate study to realize my career choice, but certainly not at the University of Tasmania. After the malevolent dishonesty that senior administrators and some academics had displayed in the Orr Case, I decided to do what many young Tasmanians were then doing: go to England where I would study for a PhD. How to support myself? I learned that with a degree, even if it was in nonteaching subjects like psychology and philosophy and the lack of a teaching qualification notwithstanding, I would be qualified to teach in an English secondary school. My strategy was therefore to obtain a teaching position and then take it from there. I applied for positions all over England, and received just one offer, from the Luton Education Committee, and that was through the agency of a family friend.

I reported to the Luton Education Office where I met the Chief Education Officer, Dr. John Corbett, a tall, kindly looking man. He told me there was a vacancy at Challney Boys' Secondary Modern School, where the senior maths master and deputy headmaster was ill, long term. Corbett looked at me speculatively: 'And don't let the big boys get on top of you!'

He referred me to the staffing officer, a Mr. Garnsworthy, who with moustache, pipe and white scarf, looked like he'd just landed his Hawker Hurricane at Luton Airport. He took me through the paperwork. He told me what bus to catch and where to get off. He looked at me speculatively as he bade me farewell: 'And don't let the bigger lads get on top of you, old chap!'

The Headmaster of Challney was the dour Mr. Hamilton-Fox, the spitting image of Alistair Sim on an off-day. He too looked at me speculatively: 'And don't let the big boys get on top of you!'

'Modern' school kids were the rejects of the English selective school system; they had failed the Eleven Plus exam and so missed out on both Grammar and Technical School. Yet despite the warnings, these working class kids struck me as better behaved than the young gentlemen from Hutchins: '...extremely courteous and respectful, without being shy or nervous as so many "well-mannered" Australian children are,' I wrote home.

Hamilton-Fox gave me a light load, plugging gaps in the final term of the year. Next year, he said, I would be given a full load and be form master of 2B, a nice class he said, in

an annex away from the main school. In keeping with my career choice, I tried using my psychological knowledge in my teaching but to tell the truth, I couldn't see that the psychology I knew suggested anything much, beyond working from the kids' own interests and keeping them active. I wrote the start of a corny thriller and got them to finish it with their own endings, telling them that if they wanted their readers to understand their stories they needed to make their texts intelligible by using basic grammar and spelling. They voted on what they thought were the best endings, the winning authors receiving chocolate.

Most of what I learned about applying psychology to the classroom came from negative instances. I didn't know if the school was following the American psychologist E.L. Thorndike's precepts, or just an honoured English tradition, but either way corporal punishment was the default for misbehaving. When the deputy headmaster first introduced me to my class, he concluded: 'Mr Biggs comes from Australia and he has a kick like a kangaroo.'

The expectation, by both school authorities and the boys, was that I would physically assault them, at my discretion, for offences ranging from more-than-trivial to less-than-capital. The approved method of assault was 'slippering': the offending boy touched his toes while the teacher slammed his backside with a flexible 'slipper', as runners were called. The incident was to be recorded in the Punishment Book. One teacher recorded that he had slippered 50 boys in one day.

I didn't think much of this and wondered what the kids thought. I organized a class debate: 'Should masters use the slipper?' After lively discussion, I held the vote: For, 23; Against, 8; Abstentions, 1. I asked them if they bore any malice to the master who had slippered them. With very few exceptions they said no, as long as they were given due warning.

I wrote home to my father, who didn't use corporal punishment although at that time most teachers at Hutchins did, telling him about our class debate. 'That surely is the answer to all opponents of corporal punishment,' I wrote.

So I used the slipper and it was received without rancour as far as I could tell. One day I overheard one boy, Capell, tell another boy that Biggs couldn't slipper as hard as Yockney, another teacher and a friend of mine. The next time Capell was due to be slippered, I recalled his assessment to the class, adding that he would not be saying *that* in future. I took him out into the corridor in order to assault him in the approved manner. On returning to class, the now slippered Capell grinned at the class and stage-whispered, 'Yockney!'

It had become a sick game. Why did the kids seem to take it in such good part? I did a little research on the subject and came up with this by a psychologist E. Wulffen writing in 1913:

...the initial pain soon gives way to a sensation of warmth which envelops the whole of the seat like a soft, warm blanket, producing a pleasurable sensation and this may easily connect up with the sexual area. Boys after a sound thrashing are often surprised by the subsequent pleasant sensation of warmth in the seat and for this reason they sometimes endeavour to obtain a repetition of the chastisement which may ultimately affect them sexually.¹

I ceased slipping forthwith.

But there is possibly even a darker side to this. Desmond Morris², in discussing the origin of bowing, by which a male underling acknowledges the seniority of his master, writes that bowing occurs in apes, except that the low status ape faces *away* from the silverback alpha male when he bows. The latter then sodomises the proffered orifice, not out of passion, but to let the underling know who's boss. It is an act of power, just as a conquering human army rapes the women of the vanquished. Morris's point was that, as we share some 98 per cent of our biology with the great apes, our social behaviour is significantly determined by that common inheritance. The parallel with using a slipper on a lower status male in a bending posture, and the implications of that, are disturbing. At least corporal punishment is now illegal in British government schools, as it is elsewhere in the Western world.

I discovered another example of psychological theory and how it stacked up with Challney malpractice. In the annex, away from the main school, 2B and I had got on very well. When we were transferred back to the main building they turned into monsters. I asked them what they thought the problem was.

'You were a better teacher then,' a spokesboy said.

'We were the senior boys there. Here, we're junior.'

'Yus, the big kids bully us.'

Yus, I could've told them, and the headmaster bullies junior staff, and the staff bully the big kids, and the big kids bully the littler kids, and you kids play silly buggers with me, a soft target now I don't belt your arses with a slipper.

¹ Quoted in Pearsall, R. (1983). *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality*. Harmondsworth, Mdx.: Penguin Books.

² *The Human Zoo*. London: Cape, 1969.

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A school is an ecosystem. It's not just a matter of individual good teachers or bad teachers, good students or bad students, it's the way the system works as a whole that's most important. And our slaphappy little system down at the annex worked a lot better than the dysfunctional mess up at the main school, where the headmaster was strongly disliked and staff morale was low. And when we were transferred into the latter system, our own working system broke down. The kids were the same, I was the same, yet we all behaved differently. Thinking about education as a system later became central to my educational theory; here I was doing the groundwork the hard way.

Bottom up, as it were.

Her Majesty's Ministry of Education had a curious but convenient regulation for unqualified teachers like me who possessed a university degree. If the teaching of these people was deemed 'satisfactory' by their headmaster, they were regarded as equivalent to having a formal teaching qualification. To my pleased surprise, given many incidents that I thought would have suggested otherwise, my headmaster made that recommendation. Accordingly, I was officially recognized as a qualified teacher. As it happened, that recognition by HM's Ministry turned out to be crucial in my appointment as Professor of Education at the University of Newcastle fourteen years later.

But if anyone had told me that, as I walked through the door of Challney School for the last time on 29th March 1958, I would have said:

'Cor mate, you're bonkers. Stark raving.'