

The fearful teacher: insecure adults, vulnerable youth

Stuart Waiton

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CHAPTER 5:

THE FEARFUL TEACHER: INSECURE ADULTS, VULNERABLE YOUTH

Stuart Waiton

Sometimes, it's hard to work out what's going on with the whole youth thing – less in terms of what youth are up to but more in terms of society's apparently schizophrenic love-hate relationship with the young.

In the last decade or so we have been swamped by a discussion about the 'job culture' of binge drinking and violence. The result has been myriad new laws and regulations: ASBOs, curfews, more young people being locked up and a growth in school exclusion. From the government to teachers' unions and even among the public, there appears to be a high level of intolerance of the young, a sense that they are out of control and need tighter control and regulation. Today, for example, even the discussion about youth unemployment quickly moves from a concern about jobs to one about a 'lost generation of young people'. Consequently, the social problem of job creation shifts to a fear of 'disengaged youth'.

For some critical sociologists, this fear and regulation of young people is understood as an assertion of authority over the young – a kind of adultism which results in child and youth oppression, with adults portraying 'power as responsibility, control as care and regulation as protection' (Scruton 1997: 163). However, why adults would want to oppress young people in this way is never made clear.

At the same time as this apparently authoritarian anti-youth sentiment has grown, there has also emerged some opposition to it and there is the beginning of a defence on behalf of the young. There is, for example, a call to end the 'demonization of young people', coupled with various campaigns to promote positive images of youth. The government has created the post of Children's Minister, which has a remit to act as a representative or a 'voice' for children and young people. Child-centeredness is also part and parcel of school life and more widely the framework of children's rights is firmly established across the UK, not least of all within the various children's organisations who campaign on behalf of children and young people.

To some extent we appear to have developed two opposing camps: one that is on the side of adults and authority, the other that represents children and youth and seeks to protect them from the intolerant authoritarianism of adults.

However, this adult/youth division is far from clear cut, after all the same government that has enforced curfews on young people has also established the Children's Minister. The Department for Children, Families and Schools has also appointed a consortium to challenge the demonization of youth and to promote positive images of young people. Teacher unions campaign for zero tolerance of pupil misbehaviour but at the same time endorse an educational approach that focuses on the 'whole child'. Whilst the general public, for its part, appears to have a certain fear of young people, as parents they are more home and child centred than ever before.

So what is going on today? Are we lovers of children and young people or do we fear and loath them? Arguably there is no contradiction, as both the 'child-centred' approach to young people and the 'lock 'em up' response, are both products of the decline of adult authority.

The humanism of child centeredness?

Firstly, to unpick this question a little, it is worth examining certain aspects of the 'child-centred' and 'pro-youth' approach, in particular, the sense that there is something humane and positive in the attempt to stand up for young people. An alternative interpretation could be that the celebration and promotion of youth and children's rights in fact stems more from a negative view of adults than a positive one of the young.

The recent campaign by Barnardo's connected to their report *Breaking the Cycle* is a useful illustration of this point. Using a YouGov survey, the press release for this campaign announced evidence that more than half of the adult population think that 'children are beginning to behave like animals'. The release was based on advocacy research, in which leading questions gave little or no leeway for responses. This was then backed up with comments made by 'Mr Angry' type adults worthy of the gossipy sections of online newspapers. On this basis Barnardo's portrayed adults in the UK as rabid, child-hating fanatics. In their online promotional video this representation took the form of a group of bile-spitting men ranting about feral youth before going out to hunt down and shoot some kids hanging out on the streets.

That a respected charity like Barnardo's could fraudulently produce such a one-dimensional and degraded view of British adults is telling. That there was almost no questioning of it is equally worrying. Indeed, the level of venom directed at the adult population usefully illustrates the underlying anti-adultism or indeed anti-humanism that underpins the thinking of the pro-youth lobby. Here, fear and loathing of adults is the mirror image of perceptions of young people. Rather than vitriol and rhetoric about 'yobs' we get an alternative panic about vile adults.

The child friendly nature of child centeredness?

The growth of campaigning by children's charities in the last decade can at first appear to represent a positive alternative to the anti-youth anxieties that exist in society. However, the apparently pro-child and pro-youth approach of these organisations is not straight forward. As we have seen, misanthropy typically applies to adults, but it also extends to young people themselves.

The work of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) demonstrates how the myopic focus on abuse can lead to young people being represented as a danger to one another. It published research in September 2009 that explored the nature of teenage sexual relationships. This resulted in headlines such as a 'third of teenage girls forced into sex', which were backed up by quotes about the high rate of 'exploitation' and 'violence' existing in teenage relationships. Their research replicated the approach adopted in a previous NSPCC document *Child Maltreatment in the UK*, which discovered that the greatest abusers of children are in fact children – or more specifically 'boyfriends' and 'girlfriends'.

In fact, this 'discovery' had nothing to do with the changing nature of young people and their relationships but the interpretation of them – an interpretation which transforms teenage fumbblings and 'trying it on' with abuse and violence. That it is 'boyfriends' and 'girlfriends' who are described as being the greatest child abusers in society tells us more about the immature and unworldly approach of the NSPCC and their obsessions than it does about life behind the bike shed. Here the apparently child friendly NSPCC ends up labelling and criminalising young people as child abusers – an approach that in part helps to explain the growing number of young people being placed on the sex offenders register.

The dangers of the vulnerable child

Young people have increasingly been defined and understood in terms of vulnerability. Indeed, by the mid-1990s the Association for Metropolitan Authorities noted that: 'children are the most vulnerable group in society' (Scraton 1999: 179). Once they are defined in this way an ever growing array of experiences that young people have can be interpreted as damaging, abusive or traumatising. As many of the difficulties and conflicts youngsters face are with their peers, the end result of this vulnerability focused outlook is that children themselves are understood not only as victims but also as villains – as potential bullies and abusers of their peers.

At a conference in Edinburgh the perverse consequences of this ‘child-friendly’ approach was illustrated beautifully by the then Scottish Children’s Commissioner Kathleen Marshall. Feeling a little under pressure to illustrate her child friendliness in an audience of child care professionals Marshall stood up as the saviour of the ‘vulnerable child’ pronouncing with great gusto that we should understand and recognise that bullying is a ‘crime’. Taken seriously, and taking the breadth of behaviours that can today be described as bullying, here Scotland’s Children’s Commissioner managed to propose the criminalisation of far more young people than any authoritarian grumpy old man has ever done.

Within schools more widely, the institutionalisation of anti-bullying practices and aspects of the new relationship education curriculum can turn everyday interactions into something that is understood as dangerous and damaging. This is illustrated by ‘relationship education’, which represents young people’s ordinary sexual relationships as one-dimensionally bound up with ‘peer pressure’ and potential abuse. Ultimately, this process results in the problematization (and potential criminalisation) of children and young people’s behaviour and relationships.

Progressive campaigners?

Here, through the prism of vulnerability, we find that the ironic outcome of the activities of children’s campaigners and organisations is that they end up being at the forefront of the demonization of young people. However, this process is not specific to children’s organisations. Take Age Concern for example. A few years ago they ran an advertising campaign about the abuse that the elderly face. Again, a newly defined ‘vulnerable group’ – the elderly – were seen to be in danger of all sort of things, that we the public needed to be made aware of. The following awareness poster consequently pictured a teenage boy standing behind his grandmother with the words: ‘What will you do to your Gran today? Steal from her? Beat her? Rape her?’

Here, the interpretation of older people as vulnerable not only resulted in anxiety about aspects of their daily dealings with their grandchildren, but even more perversely it resulted in the construction of a bizarre panic about grandchildren who beat and rape their grandparents!

The anti-youth approach of Age Concern can at first sight appear to represent a very different outlook to the pro-youth approach of organisations like Barnardo’s. In reality however, they both represent an underlying misanthropy – a fear and loathing of either young people or adults – based in part upon an exaggerated sense of the vulnerability of the groups they claim to represent.

Demonised youth or vulnerable adults?

It is the crisis of adult authority that explains the explosion in the numbers of children being locked up, the growth of ASBOs and curfews and the significant number of exclusions from schools. These initiatives are not the consequence of old fashioned authoritarianism by state institutions but are the direct outcome of a new vulnerability based social policy.

If adults on the street and teachers in the classroom are understood to be vulnerable, then the antics of the young will be as damaging and dangerous. Following from this, adults will then need protecting from the 'harassment, alarm or distress' caused by antisocial behaviour (or what used to be called nuisance behaviour or even mischief). Finally, adults in authority will be required to take a 'zero tolerance' approach to 'violence', particularly in our schools (where violence is now reinterpreted to include verbal 'attacks').

This approach, in which teachers themselves are seen as being fundamentally weak, has been promoted by various teachers' unions over the last decade and was illustrated when the Association of Teachers and Lecturers ran a campaign against the cyber-bullying of teachers by pupils. That the occasional derogatory comment made by pupils on the 'rate your teacher'-type websites can be understood as a form of 'bullying' of adults by children is more illustrative of an infantilized view of adults than it represents any growth in demonic youth.

A question of authority

If the pro-child and youth approach is not all it seems, neither are the so called 'adultism' and the sense that society has become overly authoritative in its dealings with the young. In fact, the opposite is closer to the truth. Rather than adults asserting their authority over the young, today it is the collapse of adult authority that helps to explain why more children are being locked up and excluded from schools. Previously, adults would recognise the nuisance behaviour of young people for what it was and deal with it themselves. Today they are encouraged to phone the police and get the council to use a variety of ASBO type laws to sort things out. Similarly, in schools the previous assumption that teachers can build up their own authority and exercise it over a class has declined and problems are increasingly passed on to guidance staff – or in some schools to the resident police officer! So whilst the zero tolerance initiatives introduced into schools and elsewhere appear to be authoritative, they in fact reflect a society that uses bureaucracy and laws to *enforce* order rather than relying on the genuine personal authority of teachers.

The outcome of all of this is that the messy business of day-to-day dealings with young people moves out of the hands of adults, who can make judgments based on their experience, and moves over to officialdom and its legally and bureaucratically enforced system of order maintenance. More child prisoners, more laws to deal with teenagers and more excluded school pupils are some of the consequences of an adult society that has lost its sense of authority and has come to rely on procedures and prison bars to regulate the young.

Therapeutic manipulation

However, there is a contradiction in today's world: the young are increasingly seen as vulnerable while also being subject to new laws, forms of exclusion and even prison. The difficulty is that once we've redefined all people as 'being vulnerable' then the very idea of punishment becomes problematic.

Prisons (even adult prisons) are now often understood as places where 'vulnerable adults' face 'further victimisation'. Indeed, it is hard to find robust defence of prisons, even though we are imprisoning more people. Simultaneously, disciplining children is becoming problematic, so that smacking, for example, or even shouting at children is perceived as tantamount to child abuse. Indeed, the very act of criticising a child is understood as undermining their self-esteem.

The world, however, cannot operate without some form of order, which is why teachers are increasingly inclined to use therapeutic methods to deal with the problems of behaviour. But like more technocratic forms of behaviour management, therapeutic techniques are themselves simply an avoidance of the assertion of adult authority. As Edgar Friedenberg observed as far back as the 1950s, therapeutic discipline should be understood as a form of manipulation of the young that 'mediates' but never 'clarifies' things for pupils.

In the end, what we are witnessing in schools today is a managerial, legalistic and therapeutic regulation of young people – an anaemic replacement for real and meaningful adult authority. How this situation is resolved is not straightforward but must be predicated upon the reestablishment of the meaning (and authority) of education and a challenge to any policy or practice that encourages the idea that either teachers or their pupils are essentially vulnerable.

The modern notion of the vulnerable child demonises adults who assert their authority over children and inadvertently leads to more serious forms of regulation and criminalisation. It results in the perverse situation where children are themselves represented as abusers of one another, which again leads to even more forms of regulation. In the end, this outlook actively helps to further

undermine the thing that children and young people need more than anything else - a society of authoritative adults who have the strength of character and the autonomy to socialise the young. Young people need authoritative adults who can recognise the difference between themselves and children and who consequently embody a mature sense of both discipline and tolerance towards youngsters. They also need adults who can act as leaders for the next generation and who can bring meaning and purpose to their lives through their own beliefs and actions.

References

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