Putting Education First

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 5 January, 2006 - 11:54

The TCS Way Vs. The Conventional Way

This editorial first appeared in TCS 26. You might like to read the first article in the series, that is **here***.*

In *Taking Children Seriously* **24** (page 4, TCS Opinion), we **discussed** the rather ironic fact that TCS shares an important attitude with the most conventional of teachers, politicians and educational theorists: we consider education important enough to take precedence over virtually everything else in the life of a child or family. As we said:

> schoolchildren have to attend all day, every day, whether this is convenient for the parents or not. Citizens, whether they have children or not, have to pay a substantial proportion of their income to maintain an 'educational' system. If parents have been working all night to fulfil an order from their most important client, they nevertheless have to get their child to school on time, one way or another. If they want to punish the child by 'grounding' him, or depriving him of TV, or making him do extra chores, or wear a beetroot on his head, or any other nasty fantasy that they wish to devise – that's fine – provided that it does not deprive him of even a single minute of 'education'. Thus nothing outside the sacred sphere of 'education' is allowed to interfere with anything inside; but 'education' is allowed to encroach, wherever necessary, on the rest of lifeâ€¦

We differ from conventional opinion, of course, about which activities are educational, and which are a waste of the child's time, and about who is responsible for a child's education. But we agree that activities that *are* educational should be given top priority by anyone who is responsible for a child's education.

But there is a another difference, equally vital but perhaps less obvious: the practical meaning of giving something 'top priority' in a coercive system is very different from what it is in a consent-based system like TCS. For a consent-based system is capable of being rational, and that means that something can have top priority without having to override lower priorities. In a coercive system it always does.

For example, suppose that a child suddenly needs help in pursuing a burning interest at 9 a.m. A TCS parent might, as a result, end up choosing to be late for the meeting with the important client. If that happened, it would be analogous to what a conventional conscientious parent would have to do in order to get the child to school: no matter how bad Mr Conventional feels, and no matter what other priorities he has, he must drop everything to get his child to school on time.

However, in the TCS case, by contrast, we expect such a self-sacrificial outcome to be avoidable. In the TCS style, where there is a problem or disagreement, the family members seek common preferences – they create solutions which all parties prefer. Perhaps the parent can help the child in the car, on the way to the client. Perhaps it wonâ€™t take that

long, and the client won't mind waiting half an hour. Perhaps the client would like to come to lunch at the family's home instead, and share the marvellous meal that the child has made. Or perhaps the child might come up with the idea of phoning a friend about it instead, a friend the child has just remembered would be particularly interested and helpful in this sphere. And so on. Any one of these possibilities may be quite unlikely to work, but the point is, there is an infinity of them waiting to be discovered by creative thought.

If changes in another person's plans or preferences are regarded not as potential disasters necessitating confrontation, but merely as *prima facie* differences of opinion, or problems that can be solved, they become opportunities to improve oneself as well as to help the other person. When a child is going off in directions that on the face of it don't seem at all valuable, the TCS parent continues to take the child's choices seriously, recognising the inherent unpredictability of children's educational choices. This (and only this) permits the child to take the same view of problems, and to contribute to the creation of solutions that benefit everyone. Thus, in a TCS system, sudden changes in direction on the part of the child, though common, do not lead to confrontations, power struggles, or disruption of the family's way of life. On the contrary, they enrich it.

A coercive system cannot allow this flexibility, because as soon as you allow someone to be late without punishment, they will always be late. As soon as you allow them to substitute one activity for another, or to postpone a lesson they don't feel like, they will do so. Quite generally, as soon as you allow 'I don't feel like it' to count as a reason, they will never feel like doing things they don't like, and the coercion that drives the coercive system becomes ineffective.

When there is a failure to find a common preference, self-sacrifice will occur, but the additional flexibility that the TCS style makes available, and the fact that the children and parents are solving common problems and reaching common solutions, means that this is the exception. In conventional education, at least when it is carried out conscientiously, self-sacrifice is just as much the rule as coercion is.

Freedom, as the saying goes, is that which you cannot have without giving it to others. Thus, the criticism sometimes levelled at TCS parents, that they must be doormats, is in this regard more appropriate when applied to conventional parents. They may not be trodden on by their children's wishes, but having to kow-tow to their 'needs' is just as burdensome – or more so, for when parents make sacrifices to meet 'needs' that make their children unhappy, who is happy?

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