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Failure in Education

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ABSTRACT In this article, it is argued that Kurt Hahn felt that it was important for children to experience 'failure' at times and to learn how to cope with it. If this is no longer desirable in the classroom, it ought to be possible to encourage children to be adventurous and 'take risks' in a wide range of Outward Bound activities.

This article will be of special interest to *FORUM* readers who knew, or admired the work of, our founding editor Brian Simon. Brian was one of Kurt Hahn's admirers, although the two men differed greatly on many aspects of educational philosophy. In his 1998 autobiography *A Life in Education*, Brian described how in 1933, he spent two terms as a pupil at Hahn's remarkable German school, the Schule Schloss Salem in Southern Germany. This was the time when Hitler and the Nazi Party came to power in Germany and in March 1933, Brian witnessed the School being surrounded by SA men and Hahn himself, an outspoken opponent of the Nazis, being brutally hauled off to jail at Uberlingen. Brian later visited Hahn at his new school Gordonstoun in Scotland, and he says that 'he retained that sincere admiration for his character, style and determination, though not sharing his concern for an aristocratic education' (p. 9).
Clyde Chitty

On 22 November 1934 the BBC broadcast a talk by Kurt Hahn, formerly headmaster of Salem School in Germany and then headmaster of Gordonstoun in Scotland. In the course of his talk he put forward a number of principles which were intended, as he put it, 'to do justice both to the community and to the individual child'. One of them was the following:

> Make the children meet with triumph and defeat. After you have replenished their tanks of vitality, by discovering and maintaining their strength, but not before, you should tackle their weaknesses. It is possible to wait on a child's inclinations and gifts and to arrange carefully for an unbroken series of successes. You may make him or her happy in that way – I doubt it – but you certainly cripple him

> for the battle of life. *It is our business to plunge children into enterprises in which they are likely to fail* and we may not hush up that failure; but we should teach them to overcome defeat.

I have highlighted what I regard as perhaps the most radical and controversial of all Hahn's proposals. Yet, after this broadcast, he never again advocated failure as a suitable educational instrument. What could be the reason? There appear to be two possible explanations.

One is that he changed his mind. From my personal knowledge of Hahn, I do not believe that to be the case. Having come to certain conclusions early in life he stuck to them. I cannot recall any instance where, in the essentials, he departed from deeply held convictions. He would take into account which readers or listeners he was addressing, but the message stayed the same.

A more likely reason is this: Hahn was an opportunist as well as an idealist. He had only just arrived in this country with a handful of pupils and desperately needed additional numbers for his new school to establish itself. Imagine the reaction to his reference to failure by prospective parents. They might well conclude that it was not safe to entrust their sons to him. Either his attention was drawn to it, or he himself realized the risk of being misunderstood. So he decided to put into practice what he thought was right , without causing unnecessary alarm by revealing the rationale behind every method of his.

In 1934 we did not have endless testing which the government, obsessed with targets, has inflicted upon the teaching profession. The effect on lower-achieving pupils has been well documented. Too many of them are subjected to stress and anxiety and become demoralized- and that applies to some teachers as well. Time and time again these pupils are made to feel inadequate not having made the rigid grades demanded by national tests. Small wonder, of all industrialized countries in the world, England has one of the lowest rates for staying on post- sixteen.

At the same time it is not only the 'less gifted' who feel under pressure and are vulnerable. High-achievers are apt to create an image of themselves as being innately gifted, of whom success is always expected. Aspiring perfectionists live in the constant fear of letting themselves down. When they do fall short, if only of their self-imposed expectations, they find it hard to take. This has been found to be true of girls more then boys. In academic terms, too, girls are more competitive.

It is easy to blame them for being unrealistic. But teachers and parents alike must take some of the responsibility. Teachers rightly encourage and reward scholastic achievement. And it is natural for parents to be ambitious for their children, to take pride and express it by indulging in praise. What is not always appreciated is that by doing so, they do not necessarily act in their best interest. Praise which is indiscriminate can only lead to unrealistic expectations, success being taken for granted. By putting pressure on their young over-

achievers, as some parents do, it is done at the expense of his or her social and emotional development.

In the above broadcast Hahn advocated that children should 'meet with triumph and defeat' (what Kipling in *If* called 'triumph and disaster'). If my reading of the current situation is correct, it leads to the conclusion that high-achievers experience the first but not the second, and low-achievers the second but not the first. How can we ensure that every child has experience of both?

Let us first of all see how Hahn tried to solve this dilemma. He had no control over what was taught in the classroom, where, as in any other school, external examination requirements had to be taken into account. But he was in his element when it came to the so-called 'extra-curricular' activities – a term he rejected because 'extra' suggests something that does not necessarily belong and is therefore dispensable. He, on the other hand, regarded them as part and parcel of a balanced education.

These activities included pitting his pupils against the natural elements, in this case the sea and the mountains. Whether they were out in boats or on a walking expedition, adverse weather conditions could easily thwart the most carefully laid plans. Other activities included a number of rescue services, athletics and individual projects. There was even an award for all-round achievement, that of the Moray Badge, forerunner of The Duke of Edinburgh's Award of today. One of Hahn's favourite saying was 'It is wrong to force anyone into opinions, but it is neglect not to impel the young into health-giving experiences'. Hence pressure to participate was considerable. A favourable pupil/teacher ratio made this possible, plus his almost uncanny insight into young people's minds.

Being adventurous is not the same as being reckless. Whereas there was plenty of scope of the former, the school was bound by elaborate safety rules. Any breach of them resulted in harsh punishment. Such rules and their strict enforcement were inherited by the Outward Bound movement (another of Hahn's innovations) and accounts for its remarkable accident-free record.

Hahn was not alone in issuing a warning against shielding people from coming face to face with danger in their lives. When in 1943 G.M. Trevelyan , Master of Trinity College , Cambridge, renamed an Outward Bound ketch *The Garibaldi* (a name full of meaning), his address included these words 'Without the instinct of adventure in young men, any civilisation , however enlightened , any state, however well ordered, must wilt and wither'.

The headmaster of Gordonstoun was conscious that he spoke from the vantage point of a boarding school. At the end of his talk he anticipated, and tried to counter, the charge that day schools would never be able to adopt his ideas. Here he was over-optimistic. Already at that time the majority of them were unable to offer the same opportunities as were available to him. Today the situation is even more acute. A wealth of health and safety legislation – some of it quite absurd – which has been introduced since then is but one example. As a result teachers have become less and less willing to organize camping weekends

or to take their classes on trips abroad, in case someone meets with an injury and they find themselves in court.

Reference must also be made to league tables by which the quality of education provided is judged by results in external examinations, and by nothing else. Some schools, in order to improve their league table position, are said to persuade pupils to drop any subject in which they are unlikely to attain top grades (a practice referred to as 'culling'). If it is true, their charges are deprived not only of receiving a broad education, but of the experience of facing up to reality.

So, what can the ordinary secondary school do to ensure that all children 'meet with triumph and defeat'? Bright ones have met their triumphs in the classroom. For them, additional challenges will therefore have to come from outside. Those who are always likely to struggle with academic subjects will also have to look elsewhere, but for a different reason: so that they may enjoy the satisfaction of discovering they are good at *something* and have their confidence restored.

The following headings will give an idea of what can be arranged by the schools, or encouraged after school hours: sports, personal interests and skills, expeditions and service to the community. Under each of these headings a wealth of activities can be found, for young people to test themselves out. The Duke of Edinburgh's Award covers them all. Among its attraction are that it is non-competitive and, when its conditions have been fulfilled, the achievement receives formal recognition.

It must be accepted that the resources day schools can draw on are limited, which means that parents must take up their share of responsibility. The contribution they can make will vary from family to family, depending on circumstances. At a time when street and drug-related crime is rife, to avoid taking risks is understandable. So we get the so-called 'helicopter' parents, who hover over every aspect of the lives of their children. Excessive protectiveness and caution, however, can easily be counter-productive in the long run.

The above classification into high – and low – achievers is, of course, an artificial one. Most young people come somewhere in between. Wherever they may belong, for all of them to fulfil their full potential, one must look beyond the four walls of the class room. If the classification and corresponding educational measures outlined in this article achieve no more than stir up a debate, a useful purpose will have been served.

It is always easier to identify problems than to find solutions. The idea of setting tasks which have been designed specifically to end in failure is an interesting, but dangerous, one. Not even Hahn went as far as that. On the other hand, taking risks – provided reasonable safety precautions are taken – is a legitimate educational aim. It is better to experience failure early in life when it can be turned into something positive, than later on when the consequences may well be beyond repair.

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