

An extract from the Book 'Christian Schiller' in his own words.

'Less of a gardener, more of a bee'

Article by Christopher Griffin-Beale on the eve of Schiller's eightieth birthday, *The Times Educational Supplement*, 19 September 1975.

Liverpool, at the time of the General Strike. The young inspector was visiting one of many dockside infant schools where ragged children, silent, hungry and regimented, crowded sixty, seventy or even more to a class in grim, dirty buildings. It was difficult to make contact with individual children. One five-year-old girl shrank back as if he was going to hit her, but he sat down by her and gradually coaxed out of her that her family lived in one room, and that as the eldest of three children she had the task of buying the family breakfast. His interest and admiration dispelled her listlessness. Asked to do some 'pretend' shopping she calculated the change correctly every time. Looking at the sums on her slate, the inspector noticed they were all wrong.

Christian Schiller - who is eighty tomorrow - often recalls such evidence of the squalor he confronted when he first arrived in Liverpool as an inspector fifty years ago. But it also illustrates the characteristic wisdom and perception with which he has consistently 'cherished the growth of the young' (the real meaning, he emphasises, of the Latin verb, *educare*). Children shied away because it was a novel experience to encounter an inspector, interested in them as individuals with lives outside the classroom. For infants it was a novelty to see an inspector at all. Most of Schiller's colleagues disdained even to enter infant schools.

Schiller campaigned with missionary zeal against the overcrowding and dilapidation of Liverpool schools — national difficulties aggravated by the city's sectarianism and municipal corruption. He persisted until there was a president of the Board

of Education, Lord Halifax - protected from local party pressures by his hereditary peerage — who 'fined' Liverpool, withholding their grant to compel improvements.

Schiller has usually exerted his influence in far less public or politically obvious ways. Everyone seems to agree on the scale of his influence. Indeed, Sir Alec Clegg reckons that Schiller exercised the greatest influence of any single person on the development of modern English primary education. But a former colleague, the etcher Robin Tanner, comments: 'I suppose it is not unusual for a prophet to be comparatively unknown while his influence is tremendous, though I always gasp at the almost universal ignorance about Christian Schiller.'

Schiller always followed an old colleague's advice - 'A civil servant should have a passion for anonymity and an indifference to reward. Then he may have great influence.'

And so, apart from a few lucid articles, he has concentrated on direct contacts, visiting schools, and exercising through lectures what Tanner calls 'his quite extraordinary gift for causing teachers to question and think for themselves'. He never offers teachers precise paths to follow. Instead he offers a vision, a distant star to guide teachers in steering their own course. His talks are beautifully organised around precisely evoked examples of children and schools. Witnesses agree he is the most perceptive and stimulating observer of children they have encountered.

Robin Tanner describes how he first heard Schiller forty years ago. He stood lean and erect, his white hair seeming to wave like flames and his all-seeing eyes magnetising us all, his long fingers gripping his lapels'. His book of notes lay closed before him. "Children move - because they must", he declared. "They touch, explore and make, and this is how they learn and grow. No two children are alike or ever will be. Children live only for the present, and our job is to help them fulfil their present stage of growth." The conference listened awed and intent as this passionate man pleaded for an education whose content and whole nature would be dictated by the needs of children rather than the convenience of teachers.'

Tanner's description could easily have been of a lecture last week. Schiller's appearance and his vision of education have hardly changed, except that today his views arouse less surprise, now that many primary schools practise what he has preached for so long. And although he retired from the inspectorate twenty years ago, he is still visiting schools and talking (only last month to the Plowden conference at Lincoln) about the future of education, often drawing on his own two grand-children for examples.

Schiller was born in London and calls his education conventionally middle-class. It was the First World War which gave his life its direction. Appalled by the enormous wasted potential of the ordinary soldiers around him, he realised the need to help everyone develop whatever talent they have. After the war he took up his mathematics scholarship at Cambridge! then taught briefly at a progressive boarding school before taking his postgraduate teaching certificate at the London Day: Training College. His mentor, Percy Nunn, recommended the [inspectorate and sent him off for interview. To his surprise | Schiller found himself appointed and, after a year in I Whitehall, dispatched to Liverpool in 1925, where he remained for twelve years until transferred to Worcestershire.

One conviction he emphasised was that all children, given opportunity and encouragement, could express themselves through painting, craft and movement. Copying given examples was then the only artwork generally permitted, and that only in enlightened schools. An exhibition of children's paintings brought to London in 1927 by a Viennese pioneer, Dr Cizek, was a revelation. 'It was as if the conviction we had always had of children's potentialities was suddenly presented, alive, before us.' Schiller bought several paintings for his [children's walls at home, and encouraged indigenous pioneers, like the Liverpool teachers white-washing newspapers by night to provide adequate 'canvases' for their young artists. If children's morale could gain so much from these creative activities, then so could teachers. Participants still recall his war-time holiday courses in Worcestershire and Herefordshire. For ten days teachers would

paint, write poetry, perform movement and mime — all intended to boost their image of their own potential, so that ultimately, they might heighten expectations for their children.

Schiller's influence widened after 1945, as the first Staff Inspector for Junior Education. Change was in the air, but not necessarily because buildings had new signboards. The 1944 Education Act had created the Junior School, but many Bleachers were tempted simply to reproduce the old elementary school. Schiller saw the inspectorate's role in encouraging them to have the confidence to feel and act differently, and in supporting the enthusiastic ex-servicemen leaving emergency training colleges with fresh approaches to teaching.

On his retirement in 1955 he walked straight into another career, drawing on long-nurtured plans for an educational 'staff college' in running a new one-year course at the London Institute of Education, for seconded heads and senior teachers. They visited schools and together thought through their approaches to education. The high point for him was the two afternoons each week when the group simply sat and talked among themselves.

'At first, they wanted me to speak, but I wouldn't. After a month I could spend a whole afternoon without saying a word. The conversations were keen, not desultory, I felt I had never had such influence before. I could almost feel the discussion flowing and changing course.' Many of his students during his seven years at the institute now occupy strategically important roles in education - as heads, advisers, college principals - and Schiller's vision can be detected throughout their own practice. Since he left the institute, they have kept him in constant demand as an external examiner, talking to students and assessing their school practice.

Not everybody shares the same admiration for Christian Schiller. He is invariably patient and gentle with children and teachers. But he does not suffer fools gladly, and could be uncomfortably direct with colleagues, who sometimes found his inflexibility on points of principle an embarrassment. Many people feel he has been misinterpreted as an advocate of licence, but his audiences could not mistake his view that there is no one

less free than a new-born child, so that primary teachers cannot abdicate responsibility for guiding children.

'A weakness of our present system of schooling is that we do not set out to deal with the problems of adolescence.' Adolescents and pre-adolescents need different approaches: he deplores the introduction of middle schools. Moreover, young men or women of fifteen or sixteen should not be expected to remain in the same institution as adolescents. Secondary education seems generally resistant to the kind of change Schiller would welcome (notably liberation from the twin

obsessions of curriculum and examinations). But he sees hope in pupils' own increasing dissatisfaction - of which truancy is partially a symptom.

Schiller also believes there are now too many advisers. As a district HMI in Worcestershire, he dealt directly with the county's director of education: there were no local advisers. As local authority staffs proliferated, he maintains the government inspectorate should have been contracted into a much smaller, high-powered body that would complement their work, rather than find its activities duplicated.

He reserves a special contempt for the prevalent brand of educational philosophy, a 'miserable form of behaviourism' that distorts the realities of people's thoughts and feelings to fit a particular conception of science. (And current developments in physics - which his mathematical training enabled him to follow avidly - have revealed the uncertainty and illogicality underlying what was previously supposed to be logically ordered.)

Schiller profoundly believes that lasting change in education comes not from central advisers and researchers handing down pre-packaged innovations, but from individual pioneers modifying their classroom practice in response to observations of their own pupils.

He encountered the best argument for de-streaming years before its national promotion through research projects and in-service courses. A young teacher - who, like Moliere's gentleman speaking prose, had no idea she was 'de-streaming' - brought

some children from the B stream into her own A stream, because she observed that all the children seemed to benefit.

Schiller is convinced that the 11-plus was doomed inevitably when - and not before - a large number of teachers gained the confidence to decide for themselves how to organise their children's learning and assess the achievement of their aims (functions previously exercised by the external examination).

With this conviction, Schiller likened the inspector's role to that of a bee, carrying the pollen of educational change from one pioneer to fertilise ideas already latent among other pioneers. He did not see himself as a gardener, overlording the plants, but as a necessary link in the educational scheme of things, helping teachers to realise their own potential.

Schiller's characteristic optimism about our educational future has the authority both of contemporary observation and a half-century of experience. He knows children learn more now: he saw himself how much children learnt fifty years ago. He knows the quality of teaching has improved: as an examiner he necessarily sees any potential failures.

As a young inspector his hopes had seemed illusory. He recalls reading an advance copy of the Hadow report on the primary school in 1931, on a ferry across the Mersey: 'What a good and wise father desires for his own children, a nation must desire for all its children.' He looked over at the desolate dockland and the Cammell Laird shipyard entirely closed. Most schools there had not a single child with a father in work. Schiller felt he must decide: was the report what we would now call a 'con', or a vision? 'I decided we'd better call it a vision.' And the vision has been more than realised. 'I never thought I should live to see what I have seen. I never did.'

Schiller believes excessive striving for educational change can frustrate the development of thoughts and feelings, on which such lasting change depends. Though his convictions are unshakeable, he recognises his vision can be realised only as fast as individuals solve the problems in their own hearts and minds. 'One must be content with the slowness of change.'

Schiller seems content for his own contribution to remain camouflaged within the general landscape of educational change. There's a saying of the Chinese sage Lao Tzu which he believes captures the essence of the best teacher. It also defines his own achievement. "The best sort of leader is hardly noticed by people. When he has finished his work, people say "We did it ourselves".