

https://dspace.org/

Gordonstoun – an adventure into education

Walton, Don

1974
Johannesburg College of Education
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/27510
Walton, D. (1973/1974). Gordonstoun – an adventure into education. Symposium: A Journal of Education for Southern Africa, pp. 29-33.

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

gordonstoun — an adventure into education

DON WALTON

> "I will call the three views of education the Ionian view, the Spartan view, the Platonic view . . . Those who hold the first view believe that the individual ought to be nurtured and humoured regardless of the interests of the community . . . According to the second view, the individual may and should be neglected for the benefit of the state . . . The third, the Platonic view, is that any nation is a slovenly guardian of its own interests if it does not do all it can to make the individual citizen discover his own powers: and further, that the individual becomes a cripple from his or her own point of view if he is not qualified by education to serve the community."

Which of these aims are we trying to realise in South Africa? The introduction of the new differentiated system is surely designed to enable each pupil to "discover his own powers", certainly in the classroom situation where a much wider field of study is now possible than has been possible previously. So far, however, mention has been made only of the classroom situation and the phrase "field of study" seems to characterise the whole system. Surely education relates to more than the classroom situation? Surely education should also be related to the leisure life of a pupil? Surely education is concerned, not only with a citizen working in the state, but also with his living, and enjoying life, in the state? Sociological surveys make the point that the man of future years is going to have increasing leisure hours at his disposal. Are we showing future citizens how to occupy those leisure hours so as to give themselves, and others, delight in being alive?

Dr. Hahn's Educational Programme

The man who advocated the Platonic view outlined above was Dr. Kurt Hahn. He believed that education is far more than occupying youth for a few hours a day inside the four walls of a classroom.

He summed up his first major experiment in education at Salem in Germany as follows:

> "On the credit side we had established beyond doubt that through continuity of purposeful athletic training every normal boy and girl can be brought to attain the maximum standards within their reach. They can thereby develop resilience, stamina and powers of concentration — all of which help them towards vital health. The progress achieved often came as a surprise to the boy or girl in training: the experience of defeating their own defeatism remained a strengthening memory. The second contribution of Salem deserves the name of a discovery: namely that the so-called deformity of puberty should not be regarded as a decree of fate. You can avoid those loutish years, that dim and irritable period when even movements become sluggish and awkward, you can preserve a child's strength, the undefeatable spirit, the joy of movement, the power of compassion, the eager curiosity — all those treasures of childhood, on one condition: that you kindle on the threshold of puberty and subsequently sustain the so-called non-poisonous passions — the zest for building, the craving for adventure, the joy of exploration, the love of music, painting or writing, the devotion to a skill demanding patience and care. You can in fact satisfy the primitive longing for mastery, call it the begetting of creative instinct if you like, and thereby forestall the sexual impulses from monopolising an adolescent's emotional life and from seeking insidious satisfaction."

Any boarding school headmaster knows that much "trouble" can be avoided if pupils are "occupied" for most of their day. There should not be time to seek, never mind achieve, "the insidious satisfactions of the youth", whatever they be.

BUT.

Do we kindle and sustain the "zest for building, the craving for adventure and the joy of exploration"? Can not most of the ills of the "permissive" society be attributed to a "craving for adventure"? In cities today the only avenues of adventure and exploration seem to be those of drink, drugs and sex. It must be our duty as educationists to show that opportunities exist for exploration, adventure and challenge in other directions.

Hahn founds Gordonstoun

Hahn saw the problems of youth as "grave but not incurable" as long ago as 1920. The same problems seem to be with us today and although Hahns' answers to these problems

have proved themselves in practice, very few educators know about them.

Dr. Hahn is perhaps best known for his founding of Gordonstoun School in 1934 and for starting the Outward Bound movement. The Duke of Edinburgh Award and the Atlantic College also operate on Hahn guidelines.

It was his distress as he watched decay surround youth: "the decay of adventure and enterprise, of skill and care, and of compassion", that led him to establish Salem, under the patronage of Prince Max of Baden. It was because he saw the need to "educate young people in independence of judgement and in strength of purpose when following an unfashionable cause, to teach the protection of the weak, the recognition of the rights of the less fortunate, and the worth of a single human life" that he was at odds with the rising Nazi movement in Germany during the thirties. Eventually, this incompatability led him to leave his own country for England where his educational ideas had long been carefully watched and admired. Gordonstoun, founded with the help of English and Scottish friends, continued, and still does today, the original ideals developed at Salem.

The Gordonstoun regimen

Boys at Gordonstoun had to do athletic training, follow their "grande passion" on a Saturday morning, usually some sort of project that they were interested in, find their challenge and adventure either in the nearby Cairngorm Mountains or at sea, and be of some service to the community. Within a very few years Gordonstoun had its own fire brigade, and the coast guards assisted the local professional service. One of Hahn's convictions was that in order to develop in young men the basic human qualities, they had to be provided with the moral equivalent of war. He meant that the warlike instincts should be channelled into useful and peaceful means. "More than the equivalent has been found", he wrote. "The passion of rescue releases even higher dynamics than war".

Education, war and peace

It was the impeding war that led Hahn to find wider support for the Gordonstoun ideas. He noted that the local fishing lads, full of the zest for life in childhood, degenerated either to lawlessness or to listlessness during adolescence. He was also concerned about the general fitness of the youth of the country and so, together with the local high school, Elgin Academy, he instituted the Moray Badge. To qualify for the Badge a boy had to complete certain tests in athletics, make an expedition, perform some life-saving exercise and to observe full training conditions. No smoking or drinking were allowed. This programme received more and more support as the country realised how unprepared it was for the impending war.

Outward bound

During the war years Gordonstoun moved to Wales and it was there that Hahn had another opportunity to spread his philosophies. A summer course at Gordonstoun for Merchant Navy Cadets, some working boys and young soldiers showed how unfit and unprepared these boys were for the task that lay ahead of them. They lacked initiative, smoked heavily and some did not even like being outside at night. To provide these boys with the Gordonstoun ideas of independence as well as physical and moral stamina, the first **outward bound school** was started at Aberdovey, in Wales. Financial backing was provided by Laurence Holt, of Holt shipping lines, who felt that many lives were unnecessarily lost at sea because people did not know how to meet an emergency. Courses lasted for four weeks and boys from all walks of life attended. The course material was organised around the **Moray Badge** idea with a project, seamanship and teamwork being included.

Today there are 24 **Outward Bound** schools all over the world and the movement continues to spread. Courses vary from school to school but the basic ideas remain the same. The latest courses, "City Challenges", collect groups of young men, from widely different backgrounds, to spend three weeks providing different kinds of community services for city authorities. One group went to Belfast and Londonderry (both strife-torn towns) and with local youth organisations discussed ways and means of improving community relations.

To bridge international divisions and to give expression to Hahn's idea of internationalism, the Atlantic College was founded in 1962. Most of the boys are on scholarship to ensure that they come from the widest possible backgrounds and great store is set on the rescue services. Internationalism is achieved by mixing nationalities in the dormitories, by history lessons and by the teamwork required for the rescue services.

Hahn's ideas and philosophies have spread far and wide, but what happens at Gordonstoun today? Is the school that demonstrated the practical answers for Hahn's ideas and the springboard for the Outward Bound movement still viable in terms of solving the problems and difficulties of the youth of today? What happens at the school that has provided the education for two members of the Royal Family? Are there ideas that South African schools can adopt and use?

How Gordonstoun works

The school is set in beautiful surroundings about a mile from the coast of the Moray Firth. The school is centred around Gordonstoun House and the Round Square, seventeenth century houses of considerable historical interest. Building programmes have included new science blocks, boarding houses, teaching blocks, a chapel and a sanatorium.

The school has place for about 350 boys and 60 girls (having turned co-educational in 1972) who come from all over the world. Exchange programmes are organised with Australia (Geelong and Armidale), New Zealand (Wanguni) and Germany (Salem). Exchanges are also possible with Canada, Kashmir and India. Normal enrolment includes boys from as far apart as Singapore and the Carribean, Norway and South Africa.

In recent years more and more time has been allocated to academic activities rather than other pursuits. Hahn purists have been severely critical of this movement but the extra-murals are still so wide ranging and so competently organised that anyone who considers Gordonstoun a "normal" public school has no appreciation of what is being done there or of what the school tries to achieve. School policy is still planned with Hahn's ideas in mind and interpretations as to "how Hahn would have done it" still provoke many bitter arguments. The school still tries to prevent youth from falling into the "decline" traps:

— The decline of initiative as a result of the widespread disease of spectatoritis.
— The decline of skill and care as a result of the weakening tradition of craftsmanship.
— The decline of concern about one's neighbour as a result of the unseemly haste with which daily life is conducted.

Athletic training forms the core of Gordonstoun's extra-mural activities. The emphasis is on providing a boy with experiences in as many different sports as possible. Every boy is encouraged to spend at least two afternoons of the week breathing the fresh air. For those boys who do not represent the school, internal leagues are arranged for house teams to battle for the honours.

The summer term provides for the greatest variety of sporting activity where a selection has to be made from: cricket, canoeing, golf, cutter sailing, yachting, water skiing, swimming, basketball, athletics, squash and tennis. Colours are not awarded for prestige in sporting events but only for acceptance of a much wider range of community responsibility. The school does, however, produce very good sportsmen and has several players in Scottish National schoolboy teams. Even if a boy does excel in a particular sport, he is not compelled to play that sport every season. He is free to try his hand at any game so as to broaden his experience.

The idea of every boy following his **grande passion** on a Saturday morning has evolved into society afternoons for juniors and projects for the seniors. The society afternoons are set aside for the boy to build or make something which catches his interest, although the bridge and chess societies share the same time. Interests include fly-tying, model rocketry and radio "hamming".

In many of the new academic courses, especially Nuffield sciences, projects form an integral part of the syllabus. Saturday mornings are still given over to senior projects to enable this aspect of academic work to be completed.

Boys work in groups of two or three under the guidance, not supervision, of a master and have to plan, build equipment for, and report on, their research. Infra-red spectrometers, wind tunnels and an operating hovercraft are some of the projects completed to date.

The school has a well-equipped technology centre where a lot of the building takes place and where boys in the lower forms are shown how to use the equipment during normal timetable periods. The centre has produced a mould for fibre glass canoes and also provides courses in woodwork, metalwork, motor engineering, plastics, fibre-glass and casting.

The great out-of-doors

The mountains and sea are still used as the instruments of challenge and adventure. After careful training during the first six months at school, groups of third formers go off on a weekend expedition. These expeditions last for four days and take place in the Scottish hills. Although they are continually under the watchful eye of supervising masters, they are left to deal with their own navigating and leadership problems as they hike through difficult but beautiful country. A boy goes on a second compulsory expedition in his second year at school and after that the expeditions are voluntary. Each house usually has an annual expedition of a much more "away from home" type and there are the regular training expeditions for services such as **Mountain Rescue.** A boy spends at least one week sailing on the school yacht, **Sea Spirit,** off the West coast of Scotland. He also completes a one-week course in seamanship each year.

Service

The idea of service plays an ever-increasing role in life at Gordonstoun. The Fire, Coast Guard and Mountain Rescue Services are all attached to the senior, professional rescue services in the area. The Fire Service, with their own fire engine, is regularly called on to put out burning gorse and many a farmer has had a hay loft fire brought under control by Gordonstoun boys. On stormy nights the Coast Guard mount watch over the ships in the Moray Firth and even have their own permanent watch tower. The Mountain Rescue team spends many cold, blizzard blown, winter days in the Scottish Hills looking for missing walkers and climbers. Boys in the community service entertain hospital patients, play cards with retired fishermen and help old age pensioners with difficult tasks around their homes.

The Conservation Service recently laid a nature trail, complete with bridges, benches and a printed guide, through one of the forests near Fachabers. Wednesday afternoons are devoted to services and every boy is either directly involved in a service or else is in training to join one.

One could hardly ask for a better, practical example of education in its widest sense, than that offered at Gordonstoun school.

A second look at South African education

Do we provide a "broad" education in South Africa?

Are South African guilty of fostering "prima donnas" and "stars" in their school sports teams? Are row upon row of "ego-feeding colours badges" really essential? How do we deal with the average and below average sportsman? Do we encourage pupils to experience the greatest sample of sporting activities? Is it right that the first team walk the heroes' path, while the scholar, the worker and the server have to be content with the satisfaction of a job well done?

Although boys and girls in our schools make, and build, items at school, so few of these are truly creative projects. How often do they represent achievements in fields that the pupil is interested in, things that pupils want to build?

Equipment and facilities for science, biology or geography projects are inadequate; real projects, not writing and pictures, are severely limited. Education Departments do not even provide basic materials for the teacher to produce his own experimental equipment; everything is prescribed and the teacher with any imagination is left to stagnate. Project work, it is sad to note, has not been included in the new syllabuses.

Where do we provide challenge and adventure for our pupils? Around the corner with

a cigarette, in the coffee bars, groping in the dark on a Saturday night? We have the mountains and natural resources to provide both the adventure and the challenge, but to most South Africans a flat tyre on their car is a major journey of adventure. If walking and climbing, to see more of our beautiful country, is encouraged at school, our high coronary statistics could surely also be reduced.

Many city councils have shown that part-time traffic officers are a realistic proposition. In small communities, and there are so many of them in South Africa, a full-time fire brigade is far too costly, yet there are usually hundreds of keen, but as yet untrained, fire-fighters in the local high school. Who with veld-fire fighting experience as part of their school background will throw a match out of their car window?

In the field of conservation there must be place for hundreds of willing hands. Organisation is all that is needed.

In order to realise these ideas in a school situation a low staff/pupil ratio is a prerequisite. If a teacher is to carry out exciting extra-mural work he must have plenty of planning time and thus a low time-table commitment. Teachers in Britain find it hard to believe that forty out of forty-five periods is an average teaching load in a high school. The result is, of course, average; average teachers, average pupils and an average country.

It is these aspects of education that our planners seem to have ignored but which seem very essential to build up a country and a nation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Fletcher, B.A. Outward Bound (University of Bristol).

Jeneid, M. Adventuring Outward Bound (Lansdowne Press).

James, D. Outward Bound (Routledge and Kegan Paul).

Hogan, J. M. Impelled Into Experiences (Educational Productions).

Fletcher, B. A. The Challenge Of Outward Bound (Heinemann).

Gordonstoun School Prospectus.

Submission of MSS for publication

We invite enquiries concerning the writing of articles for future editions of Symposium and would welcome well-written **mss** concerned with primary education or directed to parental interests.

Symposium 1974

Without committing ourselves irrevocably, it may interest readers that we are planning for 1974 articles that assess our South African examination system, the problem of schools and drugs, the experimental "Open School" in Johannesburg, the use of small groups in the ordinary classroom and progress with African education. We hope to include a major article for parents on **howe-work.** Professor Andrew Leonie will present a specially written article on trends in American education. A former member of the staff of JCE, Professor Leonie heads the Department of Educational Foundations at Western Illinois University.

Costs

Like any other enterprise, Symposium struggles with inflation. We are a non-profit venture. We only just managed to hold the selling-price at R1 for this issue because of the generous donation of R250 from the **Witwatersrand Council of Education.**

ALWAYS AT YOUR SERVICE

for

SPORTS

requirements

Tony Britton at

Varsity Sports

Total Centre, Braamfontein,
Tel. 724-0051

DISCOUNTS FOR ALL SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL STAFF MEMBERS