

**Written evidence submitted by Michael Newman,
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What Can We Learn from the Heroes of the First World War? – a response to the Children's Commissioners Report 'Ambitious for Children'

"Children also have clear messages for us all about what would improve childhood. More freedom and independence to make their own decisions and be who they want to be without judgement is a priority for half. Just under half think that school could be improved, including having less homework so that all their free time is not taken up. Children are clear that they want fewer exams and tests and better classes and lessons that not only teach them about particular subjects, but also life skills and prepare them for adult life. And just under a third of children and young people say that childhood would be better if they were respected, had their views heard and taken seriously."

Introduction by Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield OBE,
to 'Ambitious for Children'.

That what the children are asking of their schools reflects what the heroes of teaching in 1914-1937 struggled for in order to help create a world of active citizens who would contribute to justice and peace. That this history should allow us, teachers and children to help contribute to the dream they pursued. That 'liberating the child' should be the main focus of our schools.

1. Foundation of the New Ideals in Education Conferences in 1914.
2. Some of the heroes of the movement.
3. Quote describing the community.
4. The value they all shared, liberating the child contributing to defining the good primary school.
5. Recognition of reasons for failure.
6. Need ever more urgent, with quote.
7. One model of practice that represents the tradition.

1. With regards to the Commissioners statement on what our children want, I would like to refer her to the 1914 Conference at East Runton, Norfolk, called the Montessori Conference, organised by Lord Lytton, previous chief Inspector of Schools Edmund Holmes, and Rev Bertram Hawker, the founder of the Montessori Society, the International Student Movement, and the Kindergarten Society in Western Australia, and that went on to create an annual event called the New Ideals in Education Conferences.

2. These ran from 1915 to 1937 and included in their speakers and attendees, Rt Hon H.A.L.Fisher MP, War Cabinet member for Education; Lord Baden Powell; American Ambassador; Percy Nunn, first Director of the Institute of Education; Dr Arthur Brock, therapist to Wilfred Owen; up to nine school inspectors, including those in charge of art, music and London; Lillian de Lisa, who became Principal of Gipsy Hill Training College in Surrey and helped found the Nursery

School Association of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; hundreds of women teachers from state elementary schools; numerous professors of education, headteachers of state and private schools; Albert Mansbridge, founder of the Workers Education Association.

3. "In the first place, this amazing Conference at which we have seen sitting side by side Government Officials, advanced Montessorians, antediluvian Teachers like myself, University Professors, Soldiers in khaki, Musicians, Artists, Headmasters of Public Schools, the superintendent of the Little Commonwealth, Primary Schoolteachers, and the American Ambassador himself stands, first and foremost, for Freedom, - I do not like "emancipation", for the word suggests slavery, and the use of it probably promotes it. We have all agreed that the child is to be free: yes, but the teacher must be free as well as the child..." Mr Lionel Helbert, Headmaster of West Downs, Winchester, 1915

4. These practitioners all shared one value in common, and that was pronounced at the start of every conference, published in all the newspaper articles about the conferences, and in the annual report of the conference, "to liberate the child from the authority of the teacher". In the third year of the conference they actively sought experiments based on this value, and held days presenting their work and outcomes. This sharing of successful practice and the involvement of education and cultural associations, including the Shakespeare Festival, Punch magazine, meant that they were to influence what was seen to be good practice in schools: co-operative learning, learning through work, group work, peer teaching, learning through play, developing creativity, learning using the outside environment, child centred learning, and above all children expressing themselves and taking part in decisions about their lives.

5. The message from the children is a reflection of the successful work of the heroes of our schools since before the beginning of the First World War. It is part of that tradition, and we should be celebrating this centenary and reflecting on the good practice of schools in 1915 and after. At the time they recognised they would fail to implement schools based on liberation because of exams, inspectors and a national curriculum. They succeeded in our primary schools and failed, as they had predicted in our secondary schools. The one thing they did not realise was tragedy of our secondary schools being used as a model of practice for our primary schools.

6. This evidence of history and practice, so relevant to all our discussions about the nature of schools and how we treat our children, must not be lost, especially as the need now, as in 1915, is to think on how we can all create a more just and peaceful world.

"If education will not finally abolish wars, misery and cruelty, together with their parent, fear, then education is not worth another moment's consideration. If the education of Man is to result in speedier and more complete methods of annihilation and enslaving his fellows, then I maintain that education of this kind is a curse, and not a blessing." Mrs Hutchinson, from Catherine Street LCC School, 1915.

7. One such teacher, A. S. Neill, having taught in state schools for ten years, and whose first book, '*A Dominies Log*', published 100 years ago this November,

describes his headmastership of a village school, Gretna Green School, changing it from a centre of academic drudgery to one of happiness and humanity, founded the oldest school in the world based on these values, Summerhill School. As a school of outstanding practice in PSHE, citizenship and values, it is about time we reflected on what we have learnt from successful and heroic practice.

Reference

Quotes taken from:

[https://www.academia.edu/14081708/Regaining the History of Childrens Rights in Schools Through the New Ideals in Education Conferences 1914-37](https://www.academia.edu/14081708/Regaining_the_History_of_Childrens_Rights_in_Schools_Through_the_New_Ideals_in_Education_Conferences_1914-37)

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