

TV was great because our family could talk about something other than nutty slack

LES WALTON on the theories for improving education that provide an excuse for our failure

BRITISH parents are among those in Europe most likely to neglect their children, according to Reg Bailey, the Government's childhood tsar.

Reg says that 'screens take over' from family time. He considers that the proliferation of smart phones and tablet computers is reducing the amount of 'face-to-face time' that families spend together.

Citing a recent UNICEF study, which examined the behaviour of families from the UK, Spain and Sweden by recording them in their homes, Reg said "it was clear that British parents spent far less time talking to their children - and far more time in front of the television - than their European counterparts".

"What was really noticeable was how few of the British families had a dining table or a kitchen table," he said. "They tended to eat meals around the television on their laps, whereas both the Swedish and Spanish families had a meal around the table and spent a lot of time just talking."

He continued: "I think it perhaps tells you something about the amount of face-to-face time which is spent in British families. People talk sometimes about 'quality time', and actually I think most children don't really need quality time. They need you to be there to talk informally all the time."

The debate about 'quality time with children' and the impact of television has been going on for years.

In 1972 I shared a platform with a very distinguished HMI (Her Majesty's Inspector) who described the poor and restricted social interaction of working class families which limited their conversations to comments about popular TV programmes.

He also reminisced about the good old days, pre-television, when families sat around the fire engrossed in conversation.

The year before Basil Bernstein had published 'Class, Codes and Con-

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► Mrs L. Wilkinson prepares a bath for her miner sons at Hartford Village in Northumberland in the 1950s, having heated the water on the coal fire. But how much nutty slack was she having to deal with?

trol' which spoke about two types of language, the elaborated and restricted code. At the time his ideas were mind blowing to the teaching profession, who still considered education theory and research important.

He argued that the working class is likely to use the restricted code, whereas with the middle class you can find the use of both the restricted and elaborated code.

I certainly disagreed with the idea that TV families had a more 'elaborated' conversation than families without TV.

My big memory of a pre-television childhood in the 1950s was helping to shovel the 'free coal', dumped outside our house weekly, into the coal-house. Then we would have detailed, and restricted, conversations about the amount of nutty slack in the coal. Nutty slack was small, hard and shiny and had extremely poor burning qualities. For those of you who are not 'aficionados of the nutty slack genre' it is hard to believe the significance of discussions about nutty slack when I was a child. Nutty slack was even debated in the House of Commons. On February 2, 1953 Gerald Nabarro MP asked Geoffrey Lloyd, the Minister of Fuel and Power, the calorific value of nutty slack currently being marketed to domestic consumers, ration free, by the National Coal Board and "whether nutty slack is to be a permanent, ration-free feature of our domestic economy."

Mr Hamilton MP then asked "what steps he proposes to take to reduce the price of nutty slack, in view of its extremely poor burning qualities".

On reflection the Walton family was discussing issues that were being debated in the House of Commons. Impressive!

Unlike HMI I considered that conversation certainly improved when

television arrived in our household in the mid 1950s. We were able to talk about Robin Hood, William Tell, the Lone Ranger and Champion the Wonder Horse ... and when Coronation Street came along, our family had more arguments than the Oxford Union.

What made me concerned about the HMI view of the 'restricted code' was that he was promoting it as an excuse for poor teaching. He also failed to recognise that schools themselves employ a restricted code.

The teachers at my Grammar School certainly used a restricted code - using words such as 'swotting' and 'prep' and then later terms unclear to myself and my family such as UCAS, clearing houses and redbrick universities (as opposed to those made of wood).

Today, it is hard to be a school governor when terms such as 'three levels of progress', 'requires improvement', 'assertive mentoring' are banded about. Without doubt a 'restricted code' is alive and well within education - even the Chief Inspector has now redefined the word satisfactory and restricted its use to non-educationalists.

So I am making three points:

There is a great danger in the misuse of educational theory and research often due to a shallow understanding of the theory.

Too often the very theories that encourage us to challenge our own limitations in supporting young people are used to provide an excuse for our failure.

We are developing an educational 'restricted code' which is increasingly isolating the education system from the rest of society and from the students it serves.

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