

The inspirational legacy of Rewi Alley's education theories and practices and their link with modern teaching and learning methods.

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Some of Rewi Alley's autobiographical writing and poetry will be analysed in this paper to seek the essence of his education theory and practice. The aim is to discover his heart and spirit as he reflected on his own experiences in establishing cooperatives and vocational training schools in rural China. Alley's own words, from his writing in English, will be used as the source for assessing the power and spread of his work. It will be shown that his ideas have wide application in education generally into the present day. It will also be shown how he was ahead of his time, using training methods which are now supported by neurological and educational research.

Rewi Alley's written legacy

In studying Rewi Alley's autobiographies and poetry, the broadness of his vision for preparing young people for building a new China becomes clear. Much has been written, and will continue to be written, about how this great New Zealander inspired so many to work together to build better lives in a fractured war-torn China in the second half of the twentieth century. The details and facts of the training methods used in his schools are available in the biographies and commentaries, but the heart and the spirit of Alley's idealism are found in his personal writing, especially his poems, and diaries. In these, the emotional impact of daily events are recorded and his deep desire for growing a new China are revealed. The focus of his education vision was of a China where the energy, initiative, positivity and cooperation of rural people would emerge and be valued. He saw these qualities as the true culture of the country.

It is possible that Rewi Alley's long-lasting inspirational power is that he crossed the old Chinese 'class' lines in a unique way. As a philosopher, writer, poet, artisan, teacher, trainer, farmer, factory manager and fund-raiser, his wide range of abilities and interests is impressive. Significantly he thought of himself also as 'learner'. No doubt these roles have rarely, if ever, been combined in such a complete way in Chinese society. Perhaps only a courageous and passionate foreigner could work across the traditional stratified class system. The Gung Ho movement and the training schools which emerged from it were designed to break down the traditional barriers by educating the 'whole person' in a new way to build and serve the new society. Training school graduates would need a wide combination of skills and characteristics: ability to work hard physically in the fields or the workshops, ability to be thoughtful and reflective about what was achieved and what could be improved, ability to imagine and achieve new pathways for their lives, ability to cooperate and communicate with others while solving problems and achieving the goals of the group.

Rewi Alley was a strong man physically, mentally and emotionally. He combined powerful individualistic thinking with belief in the benefits of manual work and physical fitness. Alongside this was his strong will-power, his emotional strength, or what is called 'grit' in New Zealand. He demonstrated in his own actions the value he placed on the struggle needed to survive adversity and achieve goals. Alley's methods for 'cultivating people for the future' within the cooperatives and particularly in the schools, helped young people to grow their own physical, mental and emotional strengths. Beyond the training schools these strengths were spread far and wide. Rewi Alley rejoiced when he saw this happening, often writing of the growth of trainees while they were at Sandan and their achievements after they left. Alley was treasured in post revolution China, but he always gave the honour to those Chinese young people who carried the spirit of the schools into their new roles in the new society.

The influence of 'Gung Ho – Working Together'

The heart and spirit of Rewi Alley's educational work is captured in slogans which became famous in China and beyond. These pithy sayings encouraged people to cooperate in their revolutionary struggle, and to focus on new ways to create better futures. The first and most famous slogan was born in Shanghai in April 1938, during the establishment of industrial cooperatives. Alley writes:

'I realised that an emblem was needed to help hold the group together on crossing Henen Road I thought up the simple term of 'Gung Ho' ('Gong He') – meaning 'Work together' in English – easily written and remembered for our movement and our co-operation'.

(Rewi Alley An Autobiography, p105)

Although he writes of sudden inspiration, the badge emblem arose from Alley's immersion, over a period, in the cooperatives ideal, and his desire to forge a way forward for oppressed people. Combining his creativity and analytical abilities, he cleverly combined two Chinese characters, capturing the essence of the powerful idea. The 'Gung Ho' emblem, and the movement it symbolised, became a focus of a huge educational process, as millions of people worked together to create the new society. Alley's ability to distil a big idea into a small slogan written in a few characters, became significant in his educational work throughout China, from city factories, to rural cooperatives and innovative training schools. This slogan, in its true meaning, captures the heart and spirit of Rewi Alley which continues to the present day and in many parts of the world. The energy and organisation of Gung Ho led directly into Alley's adventure in creative education in Gansu and was basic to the philosophy of the training schools.

Yo Banfa – We have a way! It can be done!

Another slogan expresses Rewi Alley's power of positive thinking, inspiring others to have an outlook of success. All his slogans are positive expressions which continue to be widely relevant, in education and beyond. In Alley language, 'Mei-yo Banfa! (There's no way!), a cry of defeat and helplessness, was replaced by 'Yo Banfa!' (We have a way!), a cry of aspirational success. This could seem like playing with words, but it worked, and became embedded in the spirit of cooperative endeavours. Alley writes:

'Everywhere men began to look with hope, at difficulties overcome, began to turn to one another and say "Yo Banfa!". The idea spread. The little groups became larger groups until they swelled into an overwhelming tide that engulfed the old, swept away its rottenness and cut new clean channels.

The thing that gets to one is to see the light in two lad's eyes, when, as they complete a job, they look at each other and say, almost with one voice, 'Yo banfa!

(Yo Banfa!, Preface -The Author Explains his Title)

Much was achieved in ways large and small by this Alley initiative. People in schools and cooperatives used these words to change their thinking to a positive setting. Transporting a school to Sandan through hostile country, converting an abandoned temple into school-rooms, building an irrigation system, modernising a coal mine, planting ten thousand trees, growing school food in the desert; these and many more great things were achieved as people, working together, proved 'We have found a way!'

In recent decades, neurological studies have shown that using positive affirmations such as 'Yo Banfa' 'We have a way!' changes people's physiology. More helpful neuro-transmitting

chemicals are produced in the brain, while the stress chemicals which inhibit creative and logical thinking are suppressed. Thus people's ability to solve problems, overcome difficulties, and work effectively is enhanced, and positive outcomes are more likely. Alley did not know this science but his instinctive understanding of the attitudes needed for good outcomes was, and still is, a recipe for successful cooperative endeavours. The spread of the education ideals promoted by Alley at the training schools relied on people using slogans such as this and realising that achievement was more likely when they maintained this attitude.

Working hard and working together

Weaving throughout Alley's writing is the theme of working hard and working together as being necessary for creating the new society. This slogan probably originated with George Hogg, with whom such a lot of hard work was shared in the schools in Shuangshipu, Lanzhou and Sandan. This motto, so closely connected with Alley's philosophy, incorporates the sense of 'struggle', a word that appears so often in his writing. He recognised struggle as an essential and valuable part of the process of getting good things done.

In Sandan in 1950 Alley wrote of his time in Shanghai

*'I longed to spend my days amongst people who were struggling'.
(Yo Banfa! p 65)*

In Peking in 1976 he wrote:

*'Dreamers can dream away their days,
Poets enthuse, trying to extract
the essence from the things down-to-earth
hard work has produced;
but to get real results much tough struggle
Has to be gone through.
(Snow Over the Pines, p 46)*

Alongside the theme of struggle and hard work, which had for centuries been the lot of rural Chinese, this motto places importance on cooperation. This was an obvious theme within Gung Ho and was continued in the training schools where the power of cooperative endeavour replaced the individually competitive nature of traditional Chinese education.

Modern teaching and learning strategies world-wide involve cooperative learning, teamwork, peer mentoring and working in groups. These practices are effective in stimulating variety, broadening interest and generating enjoyment, and are proven to be helpful for all, from kindergarten to university. The teacher still has a pivotal role in setting up the learning environment to facilitate classroom cooperation and interaction with resources, but is the guide of the process, not the guardian of all the knowledge.

Hands and Minds Together

A prime ethos of the training schools was combining practical and theoretical experiences. Thus, in its ideal form, the school day at Sandan was divided, with mornings being devoted to physical work and afternoons to classroom study. This famous education concept originated with Joseph Bailie in the 1920s and 30s, was consolidated in Shuangshipu by George Hogg in the early 1940s and brought to full fruition by Rewi Alley at the Sandan Training School after Hogg's death in 1945. Once again, Alley's skill in developing suitable symbolic words to encapsulate a huge concept has given the world 'Hands and Minds Together'. His passion for this was always close to his heart. As he observed people and later reflected on what he saw, he revealed his deep feelings in

poetry in a way that is not seen in his prose writing. While remembering, at his typewriter, about people he met 'padding over Gobi sands' he notes:

*How lovable is quiet courage, steadfastness (of the people) amongst shifting sands.
How beautiful creative minds and creative fingers of handicraft workers. The boy on the
lathe – ancient skill and modern tool blended together. (Gung Ho p19)*

Many years later, after visiting potters in Nelson, New Zealand, similar feelings were expressed:

*Watching them work in simplicity and frugality, catching some of their spirit, creating
links between past and future, quietly putting all their heads and hands into it, ever
searching for a better way.
(Poems for Aotearoa, p34)*

In both of these poems Alley draws attention to the way things of beauty and usefulness are being created, with hands and minds working together. This way of working linked human toil and knowledge from the past, to the present, and on to the future.

The 'Hands and Minds Together' motto has significance way beyond the early training schools, and connects with modern neurological research on how people learn effectively. Although the word 'mind' is now not used scientifically, its use here is worth examining. The modern concept of 'mind' involves more than the meaning of 'brain'; there are also ideas of consciousness, spirit, feelings, emotions, motivations, even 'heart'. It seems reasonable to think that Rewi Alley was using 'mind' in this more holistic way.

Neurological research in recent decades shows circular links between a person's mental, physical and emotional state and how these relate to readiness to think and work and learn. An easy parallel can be drawn in the practice of Tai Chi. After the balanced rhythmic movements of a Tai Chi session, participants are in good condition physically, they feel good emotionally, and they can think clearly. Alternatively, when people are unwell or unbalanced physically, their thinking and emotions are likely to be unreliable.

'Hands and minds working together' invokes a sense of balanced body, brain, and spirit. This threesome is called 'head-hand-heart' by some present-day educationalists. Although Alley's training school students did not practice Tai Chi, their half-day working cooperatively ensured a good balance of head-heart-hand. Pottery, spinning, weaving, paper-making, glass-making, brick-making, building, farming, milling, planting; all of these required body, mind and spirit to be together. This was Alley's new paradigm of education. Trainees were developing skills and knowledge together in a holistic way, and acquiring helpful attitudes to carry them through life.

There is a big message here for present-day students in both vocational and academic study. Human cognition and memory-building works best when students are in good condition mentally, physically, and emotionally. Rewi Alley understood and practised this. In the years since his death, educationalists have recognised that learning is not all in the head. Now it is well known that a learner's emotional and physical conditions are as important as mental functioning. This important message, supported by neurological research, deserves to be incorporated in all levels of the education system. While Rewi Alley's 'Hands and Minds Together' concept is honoured in many vocational schools and in junior education in some districts, it deserves to be spread even wider to overcome some basic problems of education in China.

Create and Analyse

The Sandan training motto usually had two connected phrases: 'Hand and mind together, create and analyse'. These words, suitably concise in Chinese characters, summarised the essence of innovative training spearheaded by Alley in what he called his 'new pattern for education'.

'The aim of our school was to educate young people to acquire not only book knowledge, but also practical experience in production so that they were able to analyse and create for themselves.

(Rewi Alley An Autobiography, p232)

The word 'create' has two senses in English. One meaning is to make, construct, or build in the physical sense. The other meaning is to imagine, evoke, or develop an idea in the mental sense. It is arguable that these two meanings are closely connected. The mental image is created quickly, while the physical construction can take longer; days or even weeks. In problem-solving, first comes the idea, but the difficulty is not overcome until something is constructed. This real-world expression can take many forms: writing, drawing, engineering, architecture, as well as producing objects. At Sandan, creative ideas led on to making things: pottery, irrigation channels, paper, buildings, plantations, tanned skins, farm implements, flour mill, and many other daily life requirements. Repairing or rebuilding is also a form of creation. Possible solutions need to be imagined, and then work done to mend or adapt to achieve recycled usefulness. Creativity and construction were the basis of everyday activity at Sandan, and an essential part of Rewi Alley's innovative education ideas.

Ideally, at each stage of 'creating', progress is analysed or assessed. At each stage the workers reflect on what is going well and what could be improved. This is now called de-briefing or evaluation. At Sandan, important time was devoted to reflection. Often, after the evening meal, groups gathered to talk over the events of the day and make plans for on-going work. This reflective thinking was not an optional add-on, but an essential part of the educative process. Alley writes his diary in June 1951 at Sandan:

Last evening we gathered after flagdown to discuss ways and means of increasing our production. The workers were full of ideas. . . . Lao Ho said, "we will find a way among ourselves, don't worry". (Yo Banfa!, p 163)

Rewi Alley placed a high value on analysis and reflection. His own beliefs and idealism came from his habit of reflecting on his many and varied personal experiences. He valued those moments at the end of the day, when he wrote his diary, poetry or letters, enabling him to clarify his thoughts and actions.

'And at night . . . by the light of the steady kerosene lamp, comes the hour to one's self, time to review all the little human crises of the day.'

(Gung Ho, p32)

The daily writing habit, so important to Alley, was passed on to Sandan trainees. English homework for them was writing their diaries, so that this way of thinking, reflecting and analysing could set up a helpful life-time habit.

In China an emphasis on 'left-brain' analytical skills is emphasised in formal education while the creativity associated with 'right-brain' creativity is somewhat neglected. It is now known that all learning requires a good balance of right and left brain functioning. Once again Rewi Alley was ahead of his time in promoting 'Hands and Minds Together – Create and Analyse'.

The inspiration of nature in the Sandan experiment.

A big part of Sandan school life was connected with caring for the natural world: cultivation, forestry, tree-planting, horticulture, animal husbandry. Survival in the inhospitable environment of the Gansu desert needed constant attention to the natural world. It was essential that in a school day of 'half work, half study', plenty of both work and study focused on plants and animals as well as machinery and industrial production.

In using a phrase from T'ang Dynasty poet LiuYu-Hsi, Rewi Alley linked the spirit of old China to the twentieth century struggles to grow a new China on the land, as well as in the hearts of people.

*Beyond the withered oak ten thousand saplings grow. . .
... now new trees spread out away beyond the old,
light glinting from slender trunks,
young branches with twigs raised
to the sun; young but already they
come through dry summers that scorch and burn,
and bitter winds of winters
that blast, bend, but cannot break, simply
making themselves each spring more green again.
(Beyond the Withered Oak Ten Thousand Saplings Grow. p 11)*

On the surface, this poem is about environmental improvement through reforestation, but it is easy to draw analogies with education and trainees. Improving the environment and improving the chances of a better future for trainees in the schools were both essential to Rewi Alley's work. Together these two improvements embody his legacy. The spread of the spirit of his training school experiment is easily linked with the idea of the young trees (trainees) growing strongly around and beyond the source of inspiration (schools). In this poem, Alley can be understood to be allegorically reflecting on the way young people learn and rise up through their struggles to grow a productive future. It creatively symbolises the way his adventurous educational spirit continues to spread its influence. Massive tree planting projects, born of the cooperatives, keep spreading through China today. Training school graduates, their children and grandchildren, similarly carry the spirit of their education way beyond its birthplaces.

As well as work with plants and animals, working with nature in the form of water was vital to survival in the Gansu desert. Many Sandan enterprises were involved with harvesting and controlling water for using in industrial and farming activities. Designing, building and maintaining irrigation channels was a huge part of life. The human health-giving properties of water were appreciated also, and the swimming holes were part of the spirit of the place. Rewi Alley encouraged swimming. Enjoying the water recreationally was part of school life, after the manual and mental work of the day. Rewi Alley's water-use initiatives are continuing today in the valuable work of water research enterprises in Gansu, and elsewhere in rural China.

Modern science, once again, makes a strong connection with the natural world and effective teaching and learning. Students and teachers are better prepared for their work when they have some physical connection with nature. Even stroking a tree or an animal or playing with some water increases the level of helpful neuro-transmitters and reduces the level of stress hormones. This makes for better physical, mental and emotional balance and improves working and thinking effectiveness. There are links, also, with ancient philosophies and practices in China and elsewhere, where connecting with nature was part of the balanced life, even in the cities. There are lessons here today in the rush and bustle of Chinese cities, and the pressure for students to perform in a highly stressful education system, separated from the natural world.

The inspiration of Rewi Alley - ahead of his time while looking forward and back.

As explained already, Rewi Alley was ahead of his time in his education philosophy. The ideas that he developed as he set about training young people for the new China fit nicely with those of present-day educational innovators around the world. Alley did not have the benefit of neuroscience research but he reached similar conclusions. He promoted education theories and practices which stand up to present day academic scrutiny. It is also highly significant, in the Chinese context, that he valued ancient philosophies. In an autobiographical chapter, 'Create and Analyse – Motto for a New Pattern of Education' Alley translates and quotes the ancient classic work *Li Ji, The Rules For Doing Things*, formulated about 2000 years ago.

When an understanding man realises why some teaching methods succeed and others don't, then he can teach others. In teaching he leads, but does not drag, strengthens and does not discourage, opens up the way but lets the student carry the work through. Leading and not dragging produces the right spirits. Encouraging rather than discouraging makes it easy for the student to succeed. Showing the way and then letting the student find his way along it, makes him thoughtful. If a teacher can get good spirits, successful work and thoughtfulness, then he can be said to be a good teacher... Teaching should develop the student's good points and correct his bad points.
(Quoted in Rewi Alley An Autobiography, p232)

This could have been written by a modern-day educationalist promoting effective classroom practice. Alley showed his exceptional understanding of good teaching by quoting this in his autobiography, and by using it as a guide for teachers at Sandan. His aim in the Sandan experiment was 'Cultivate People for the Future'. This wide view of education as a life-long process, initiated by good teaching is the antithesis of the 'pass the examination' goal in most modern schools and colleges. Sadly, a traditional reliance on studying hard for tests and exams, even doing without sleep, is still pervasive in China. Alley's ideas, although valued so highly in vocational and industrial training, have not yet enlightened general teaching practices.

Neuroscience research has, in recent years, established that students show measurable helpful physiological effects when the teaching methods mentioned in Li Ji's Rules are used. When strategies involving leading, encouraging, guiding and establishing good spirits are used by teachers, the proportion of helpful neuro-transmitters is more predominant. There is a corresponding reduction in the proportion of stress chemicals which produce the flight/fright/fight response which is so antagonistic to effective natural learning. The old philosopher and the twentieth century revolutionary agree with modern neuroscientists on teaching methods that are most helpful for learning. But still, in the twenty-first century, so much Chinese education, at all levels, seems based on stressful strategies that force students to strive for individual success. There are signs of reform of teaching methods in some areas, but even when teachers are trained to use more helpful methods such as those promoted by Li Ji and Rewi Alley, they can be hampered by bureaucratic structures and a suffocating examination system.

The legacy lives on.

Before the sudden death of George Hogg at Sandan in 1945, Rewi Alley had never imagined himself as a teacher. However, he was so committed to the cause of preparing people for the future China that he took over as headmaster of the school to continue Hogg's work. The school that grew in that remote desert town in impoverished Gansu caused a paradigm shift in education in China. Alley's far-sighted innovations evolved in a special time and place and were designed for a special purpose. The Sandan education experiment was, however, much more widely applicable, and ultimately changed the world for millions of working people. Half a century later, the legacy of

Rewi Alley's innovative methods are carried on by those who have been inspired by the work of this 'ordinary kiwi bloke'. Not long before his death in 1987, Rewi Alley wrote these words:

There is much to be learned and much is being learned. The good things of the past will be preserved and better things devised for the future. I am confident that the necessity of facing reality will foster people who can analyse and create even better than in the past. A people determined to get results will not stand for bureaucracy; the cream will certainly come to the top in a society properly organised, with the old taboos demolished and an enterprising spirit revived. (Rewi Alley An Autobiography, p 333)

As Rewi Alley looked back on his 70 years in China, he was still thinking about the importance of cultivating people for the future. His dream remained of a society unfettered by barriers to equality, and where the spirit of cooperative enterprise would be obvious everywhere. Alongside China's many great achievements in the twentieth century must be placed those for which Alley himself was an initiating force: Gung Ho Cooperatives and Vocational Training Schools. The legacy of Rewi Alley and his Sandan adventure in creative education lives on in the twenty-first century.

Note

The modern English versions of place names have been used in general, except for Sandan where the spelling used in Alley's time has been retained.

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