

Loving to Learn

Protecting a Natural Impulse in a Technocratic World

by Richard House

Study without a liking spoils the memory, and it retains nothing it takes in.

Leonardo da Vinci

The Problem

Intrinsic motivation is destroyed under a pressure to reach and maintain 'standards'.... When pupils are exposed to the pressure of extrinsic motivation, and have to be made to learn, they lose autonomy and self-regulation.

Dr. Diane Montgomery

Far too many young people are leaving school without an interest in anything they have been taught.

Robert Hamilton

Nearly a century ago now, the great modern educationalist Rudolf Steiner described how the soul of the child quite naturally “wants to develop and unfold *in accordance with its own nature*” (my emphasis). Contrast this view with the sheer intensity of the educational ‘surveillance culture’ that has been engulfing childhood in recent years. In Great Britain, where I live, there was an outcry when the government’s first (consultation) document on early years education was published several years ago with ‘play’ not receiving a single mention. And their hastily cobbled together and philosophically incoherent notion of “*structured play*” pays at best only grudging lip-service to the central importance of play in early learning.

As educationalist Alan Block puts the matter in his recent book *I'm Only Bleeding: Education as the Practice of Social Violence against Children*, in our technocratic age, “the definition of the child is made so precise that the imaginative freedom of the individual child is denied, [and] the child’s freedom to play and explore is severely curtailed.” The relentless incursion of imposed cognitive-intellectual learning at ever earlier ages is just one example of these pernicious trends — and this in the face of mounting international evidence that the “too much too soon” educational ideology may be doing untold harm to a generation of children. It’s certainly a depressing sign of the times when we can read headlines in the *Daily Mail* like “The nurseries that fail in the 3Rs.”

The notion of *developmentally appropriate education* is, of course, central in all this. Mainstream education seems to have lost touch with a deep understanding of the developmental needs of children, and is, rather, preoccupied with foisting an adult-centric agenda on to children which is both developmentally inappropriate and educationally unnecessary. We are increasingly reading media reports about how, for example, children are becoming bored and disaffected with learning at ages as young as 6 or 7; how the rates of mental ill-health in children are at record levels and relentlessly rising; how Ritalin prescriptions are also soaring as our society medicalises and pathologises what might well be children’s understandable response to, and unwitting commentary on, our “mad” educational culture;

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and how young boys' learning is suffering dramatically in a system in which these boys are being forced to "sit still" for long periods in formal settings which are failing quite fundamentally to meet their developmental needs (cf. the important work of internationally acclaimed parenting author Steve Biddulph).

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Block's impassioned arguments on imaginative play are consistent with the views of a host of educationalists — Emerson, Froebel, Steiner, Isaacs, Winnicott, Vygotsky ... — that the experience of free, *unintruded-upon* play is an absolutely essential precondition for the development of both a well-rounded, emotionally mature personality, and for inculcating the highly desirable human qualities of creativity, self-motivation and, not least, the lifelong *love of learning*. Carl Jung was emphatic when he wrote that "without playing with fantasy no creative work has ever come to birth. The debt we owe to the play of the imagination is incalculable."

What we are talking about here, then, is the freedom of *imagination*, a delicate human quality that can all too easily be damaged — sometimes irreparably — by modern educational practices. For Alan Block, "to deny imagination is to deny the very creativity that makes self possible.... To deny imagination is to instill hatred where should stem love and creativity." Moreover, modern schooling "establishes a dictatorship over the child *in which reality is defined by the other ... the imagination ... [is] denied for the predetermined outlines of the other. This violence denies the very existence of the individual child and denies that child all opportunity to learn*" (my emphasis).

In autumn 2000, prominent reports in the British media highlighted the unexpected lack of enrollments in universities (see, for example, the readers' letters in *The Times* under the heading "Is education a lesson for life"). Yet amidst the plethora of "expert" explanations, no one for a moment seemed to consider that perhaps young people are becoming systematically disaffected from education and aspirational learning *in general* as a direct result of the mechanistic utilitarianism and obses-

sive testing culture that have recently been engulfing mainstream education. In the face of a system which, as Block writes, "banish[es] children ... under a dense cover of rationalistic, abstract discourse about "cognition," "development," "achievement," etc.," it becomes "impossible to hear the child's own voice," in the process "dismissing the child's experience and ... falsify[ing] the actual lived experience of children."

Block advocates doing away forever with the fixed curricula, universal standards, and intensive surveillance through which we discipline our children: "Until we create an environment in which the child may use the educational establishment *to create him or her self*, until we serve only as a frame on which the canvas may appear in paint, we will continue to practice extreme violence upon the child, denying him/her growth, health, and experience" (my emphasis). Those parents fortunate enough to be able to home-educate, or to send their children to a Steiner Waldorf or small school run along humanistic lines, are more than able to nurture their children's inherent love of learning. But what of the family which has little or no choice but to engage with the mainstream education system?



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Possible antidotes

We do not receive wisdom. We must discover it ourselves after experiences which no one else can have for us....

Marcel Proust

So just what can concerned parents do to enable, encourage, and nourish their children's natural, intrinsically healthy desire for learning — both before and after formal schooling begins?

From the political...

At the level of political engagement there is a lot that can be done. Politicians, teachers, and head-teachers (head-teachers are the administrative leaders of British schools) can be challenged to provide evidence-based rationales for current educational practices (of course, there aren't any!). Letters submitted to newspapers are typically very widely read; and letters sent to government departments, ministers, and MPs are invariably read and responded to. A number of people, including myself, have been involved in such activities for several years; I believe that, at the very least, these sorts of political actions can contribute to a change in the prevailing climate of opinion.

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Another approach is to get involved with organisations which are championing "the right to childhood," like the Alliance for Childhood and "Let the Children Play." The latter organisation is currently collecting signatures for a petition to be sent to the government, which reads: "We the undersigned ask government to abandon their proposals for formal literacy and numeracy teaching for 3 to 5 year olds."

It may feel quite lonely, even futile, to be challenging what seems like a myopically monolithic educational ideology; but if enough people make their voices heard, then politicians who rely on our votes for their election will simply have to start listening. Moreover, the very process of bravely challenging the institutionalised damage being done to our children may well be a positive experience with major spin-offs for our children. For it empowers children to experience their parents' empowering themselves.

... to the personal

There is a whole range of ways in which the family environment can provide at least some refuge from, and antidote to, the schooling system's assault on our children's love of learning. As already mentioned, and particularly for younger children, the opportunity and space for free creative play is quite fundamental. In our obsessively "control-freak" culture it might be hard to

understand that simply by staying out of children's play, we bestow on them a priceless gift. I'm reminded of one three-year-old child in the Steiner toddler group which I run, who spontaneously (and passionately!) told his mother in no uncertain terms, "Let me play!" when she was trying to distract him with her own agenda! A recent article in the *Daily Mail* was headlined, "Too busy to think: children whose lives are too well planned for their own good." Stories such as these are becoming ever more prevalent, as people begin to wake up to the way in which modern culture is systematically obliterating childhood.

Several prominent educationalists — among them Rudolf Steiner and Professor Max van Manen — have drawn attention to what Steiner called "the intangibles" of the educational experience (van Manen calls such "intangibles" the "tone" or the "tact" of teaching — though I think Steiner is referring to spiritual qualities as well). For Steiner, "If ... mechanical thinking is carried into education ..., there is no longer any natural gift for approaching the child himself. We experiment with the child because we can no longer approach his heart and soul." In our technocratic age, such "intangible" "being" — qualities — which cannot be canned, measured and "delivered" in any mechanistic way — are arguably far more important than so-called "objective," factual (often abstract) information. Such "being-qualities" might include, for example, psychological and spiritual presence; personal authenticity or "congruence" (as founder of Person-Centred Therapy, Carl Rogers, called it); the capacity to love non-possessively, and to "live" a relatively undefended, emotionally open intimacy in relationship; a reverent respect for the being of the Other; the capacity to engage in healthy intersubjective encounter between self and other; and so on. It is, of course, of the very essence of such "intangibles" that they are intrinsically (and appropriately!) hard to pin down with the "empirical" exactitude that positivistically inclined apologists for modernity would demand.

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Steiner went as far as arguing that it is *who the teacher is*, as a person, which matters more, educationally, than the purely factual knowledge which she imparts to her pupils. For him it followed that the ongoing, open-ended personal development of the teacher was a crucial feature of Waldorf education; and similarly, for parents to be openly committed to their own personal and spiritual development is, again, one of the greatest gifts we can give our children. Adults who are emotion-

ally open and who are comfortable within themselves are far more able to engage with their children in a “being” rather than in a hyperactive “doing” mode, and are as a consequence far more able to provide the nourishing space and relief from unnecessary intrusion that children so lack in regimes of formal schooling.

Such a *way of being* with children will also enhance what Dan Goleman refers to as their “emotional intelligence,” the capacity for intimacy, and Danah Zohar’s “spiritual intelligence” — all key features in developing a robust self-esteem, and a necessary condition for an embodied, impassioned kind of learning, in which what one learns is vibrant, “alive”, and meaningful rather than abstract, “dead”, and meaningless.

The recent Alliance for Childhood report, *Fool’s Gold*, provides deeply disquieting evidence about the mal-effects of computers and ICT on children and educational experience, and Martin Large’s book *Who’s Bringing Them Up?* offers a range of alternatives to television (the so-called “plug-in drug”). The role of nature is quite crucial here — with deeply disquieting media reports (“Children think that lions roam in UK fields,” *The Independent*, “Why I mourn for a nation whose young believe wool comes from wool plants,” *Daily Mail*) showing just how far “Technology’s children” (and adults) have lost touch with the rhythms and realities of the natural world.

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The place of *story* in children’s lives also cannot be overestimated (see Nancy Mellon’s recent book, *Storytelling with Children*); and again, recent research has been discovering how crucial the bedtime story is to young children in their formative development — no doubt for a whole range of reasons (cf. “Once upon a crime: loss of bedtime story may lead to a generation of offenders,” *Daily Mail*).

Anxiety is also endemic in the hot-housing atmosphere of modern schooling with its obsession with forced cognitive development, relentless testing and surveillance, and all the other paraphernalia of our “modernised” education system. A culture of anxiety is, of course, quite antithetical to healthy learning; so again, the more parents can relieve their children of the burden of “achievement anxiety” through reassurance (even to the extent of withdrawing them from statutory tests, as some brave parents have done), the more their children’s natural love of learning will be protected. As Steiner so aptly put it, “There are three effective meth-

ods of education — fear, ambition and love. We will do without the first two.”

Above all, what we need to cultivate and protect is *a passion* for learning, if the creative fires of the imagination are to be kept alight in the face of the deadening impact of modern schooling systems. As philosopher Colin Wilson recently put the matter: “the essence of education is becoming excited about ideas.... How many children have a hunger for the nine-times table or the rules of grammar?”

Conclusions: Three R’s — or three I’s? ...

You may give [children] your love but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts ... Seek not to make them like you.... If [the teacher] is ... wise, he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.

Kahlil Gibran

There is mounting evidence that the “regime of surveillance” that has swamped mainstream education in recent years is contributing to an epidemic of child ill-health, as empirical research is beginning to show (“Exams regime ‘harms pupils’”, *Guardian*; “Exams Chief: GCSEs harm pupils,” *Independent on Sunday*). Steiner predicted as much many years ago: “If ... the teacher overloads ... and continues to cram the child with knowledge in the usual way, disturbances in the child’s growing forces will manifest themselves. For this reason the teacher should have no hard and fast didactic system.” Perhaps anthropologist Ashley Montague had it about right when he poignantly wrote: “I remember spending the greater part of my childhood wondering about adults. Were they ever children? From their behavior toward children it seemed to me quite clearly that they could never have possibly been children.”

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Simon Jenkins in *The Times*, recently renamed the currently fashionable 3R’s as “Ratings, regulation and rigidity” — which pretty much sums up what is really happening within modern education. I would like to take this renaming process even further, and propose that — certainly in the sphere of early learning — we replace the 3R’s with *the 3I’s* — namely, *Intimacy, Initiative, and Imagination*. (And some other *I’s* spring to mind too — like Invigoration, Immediacy, Improvisation, Inspiration ...). For it is becoming increasingly clear, as the unremitting march of technocratic modernisation continues unabated, that the very foundations of what makes for a healthy well-rounded human being are typically being relegated to little more than an afterthought, as the soul-less utilitarianism of “cognitive

competencies" systematically crowd them out of the imposed early-learning curriculum.

In my view the three I's, and their associated, often intangible "being-qualities" (referred to earlier), should form the centre-piece of a learning environment for young children, fostering, among other qualities, emotional competence, a capacity for intimacy, physical dexterity, creativity, initiative, and flexibility — in short, the kinds of qualities that our postmodern world increasingly requires. And if your child's school is not providing these nourishing and essential formative experiences for your children, then it becomes all the more crucial that you create the space for such subtle and delicate "being-qualities" in your home life. Parents seeking more specific recommendations about just how to do this can pursue the excellent literature listed below.

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Above all, it is up to all of us — educationalists, parents, citizens — to take responsibility for *finding a better way* to educate our children; for if good people really do "do nothing" in the face of modernity's assault upon our children's education, and indeed upon their very *being*, then evil, deeply damaging values and practices are far more likely to prevail. As Neil Postman resoundingly put it in his excellent book *The Disappearance of Childhood*, "There are parents ... who are defying the directives of their culture. Such parents are not only helping their children to have a childhood.... Those parents ... will help to keep alive a human tradition. [Our culture] is halfway toward forgetting that children need childhood. Those who insist on remembering shall perform a noble service."

Useful Addresses

- *Alliance for Childhood*, Kidbrooke Park, Forest Row, East Sussex RH18 5JA, UK (01342- 822115).
- *Human Scale Education*, 96 Carlingcott, Bath BA2 8AW, UK (01275-332516).
- *Let the Children Play*, Hillview, Portway Hill, Lamyatt, Shepton Mallet, Somerset BA4 6NJ, UK (01749-813260).
- *Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship* — details as for Alliance for Childhood (above).

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