

For the Love of Learning

How Can we Protect It in the Modern World?



By Dr Richard House

'I want to talk about learning. But not the lifeless, sterile, futile, quickly forgotten stuff that is crammed in to the mind of the poor helpless individual tied into his seat by ironclad bonds of conformity!'

Carl Rogers

The inspiring work of the late American educationalist and psychologist Carl R. Rogers, founder of client-centred counselling and psychotherapy, offers us a wonderful opportunity to re-found and re-assert some perennial holistic values that modern schooling systems have lost touch with, with their deadly, audit-driven ideology of 'driving up' (so-called) 'standards', their high-stakes testing-obsessiveness, and their chronically outmoded 'Fordist' factory-farming model of institutionalised schooling where the 'scale economies' of size are far more important than the desire to create truly human-scale learning environments for our children. Certainly, Rogers's inspiring work can provide us with helpful counterweights to the 'unintended side effects' of modern technological culture on children's well-being; and the newly published book *Person-Centred Work with Children and Young*

*People*¹ offers us a wonderful resource on the contribution Rogers's thinking can make to working with children in a whole variety of settings.

In 1969, the first edition of Rogers's wonderful book *Freedom to Learn*² was published ~ a book which inspired a generation of teachers and facilitators wishing to transcend, and leave behind once and for all, the quasi-authoritarian model of schooling that has tragically dominated Western schooling systems for so long. My training as a counsellor and psychotherapist has had a strong 'Rogerian', person-centred input, helping me to recognise the pressing need for adults concerned with children's development to concentrate on unconditional positive regard (or *love*, broadly defined), empathy (or the mature capacity for attunement to the needs of the other), and congruence (sometimes termed 'authenticity' by such authorities as Martin Heidegger and Lionel Trilling).

Rogers's *Freedom to Learn* also supports the need for learners to take control, and experience some volition over their own learning, as is the case in children's un-adult-erated free play. Rogers believed that learners must be trusted to develop their own potential, and should be supported to choose both the way and direction of their learning. *Learning-centred* assumptions (as we might call them) suggest that

learners should have meaningful control over what and how things are learned, plus how the learning outcome is measured. This concern for the learner acquiring meaningful proactivity in, and even some measure of control of, their learning process has been called 'student centred' or 'learner centred', but might more appropriately, perhaps, be called *learning-centred learning*.

As educationalist Alan Block puts things, in his important book *I'm Only Bleeding*,³ in our relentlessly 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 noxious 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 – as England's OpenEYE Campaign has been arguing since last November.⁴

Photography by Will Bix, of his daughter, Nancy.

As I've written many times in previous TM articles, 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 onto children, which is both developmentally inappropriate and educationally unnecessary. An ever-mounting deluge of media stories and research evidence are reporting on 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; 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.⁵

Alan 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*. 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.

In the face of a system which, as Alan 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 practise extreme violence upon the child, denying him/her growth, health, and experience'. Those parents fortunate enough to be able to home-educate, or to send their children to a Steiner Waldorf, a Montessori, 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?

Some 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 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. As written about in previous issues, the 'OpenEYE' Campaign is a wonderful model of the way in which a determined group of talented and committed people can use the modern technologies of communication to wage a relentless 'propaganda offensive' that has the potential to rock the policy-making class to its very foundations.

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 them. 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. 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. Several prominent educationalists ~ among them Rudolf Steiner and Max van Manen ~ have also drawn attention to what Steiner called 'the intangibles' of the educational experience (van Manen calls it the 'tone' or the 'tact' of teaching).⁶ 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.

Adults who are emotionally open and who are comfortable within themselves, are also 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 spiritual intelligence (Dinah Zohar) ~ 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.

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 methods 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 embrace of modern schooling. As the visionary Kahlil Gibran put it in the *The Prophet*:

'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'.

- 1 Suzanne Keys and Tracey Walshaw (eds), *Person-Centred Work with Children and Young People*, PCCS Books, Ross-on-Wye, 2008
- 2 Carl R. Rogers, *Freedom to Learn*, Charles Merrill, 1969; latest edition ~ Carl R. Rogers and H. Jerome Freiberg, 3rd edn, 1994.
- 3 *I'm Only Bleeding: Education as the Practice of Social Violence against Children*, Peter Lang, 1997.
- 4 See www.savechildhood.org
- 5 See, for example, Sami Timimi's excellent book *Naughty Boys: Anti-social Behaviour, ADHD and the Role of Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- 6 Max van Manen, *The Tone of Teaching*, Scholastic/TAB Publications, Richmond Hill, Ontario, 1986

Dr Richard House is a trained Steiner Kindergarten and class teacher, and a senior lecturer in psychotherapy and counselling at Roehampton University, London.

E-mail: richardahouse@hotmail.com

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