

## CHAPTER I I

*The Democratization of Learning*

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It is surely the case that schooling is only one small part of how a culture inducts the young into its canonical ways. Indeed, schooling may even be at odds with a culture's other ways of inducting the young into the requirements of communal living ... What has become increasingly clear ... is that education is not just about conventional school matters like curriculum or standards or testing. What we resolve to do in school only makes sense when considered in the broader context of what the society intends to accomplish through its educational investment in the young. How one conceives of education, we have finally come to recognize, is a function of how one conceives of culture and its aims, professed and otherwise.

JEROME S. BRUNER, *THE CULTURE OF EDUCATION*, 1996: IX-X

**Finding Ourselves through Others**

Human beings are extraordinary natural learners and undoubtedly the most successful and dominant species ever to walk the earth. Predictability and expectation have always played a fundamental role in our development as we need the solidity of a predictable world, particularly when we are very young, in order to feel secure. However, we also have an innate need and curiosity to seek out the unpredictable and unknown, and it is our desire for ongoing experience that allows for diversification, exploration, expansion and growth. It is this that has enabled man to evolve faster than any other species, and to become a consummate master of his environment. What is clear, however, is that man is not only immensely creative but is also

an innately social animal, and this quest for learning is constantly constrained by the human need to 'do what is expected' within the confines of the surrounding culture.

Every society is organized in such a way that codes, rules, habits, expectations and customs fundamentally influence the way that its members behave. Human societies are unique in that we cannot survive without such interaction. Peter Farb talks of this in his book *Humankind*:

Humans survive as a result of the things that they are able to learn, not the things they are born with ... Culture is what is learned from the cumulative experience of past generations, shared among contemporaries, and preserved beyond the individual life-span of a society's members. (Farb, 1978: 76)

Man is therefore subject to a dialectical play between his developmental needs as a dynamic living spiritual being, and his needs to adapt to, and conform with, the needs and expectations of the dominant human culture. We are 'beings in process', with that process fundamentally reliant upon and informed by the relationship with others. The psychologist Colwyn Trevarthen talks of human children having an innate expectation of 'finding themselves through others' (Trevarthen, 1980). The social behaviour of a child depends upon the influences and examples set for him by his society; in fact the well-being, and often the very survival of each member of a human society, depends largely upon the reaction and behaviour of others.

**The Role of Culture**

What is it that a child draws from his culture? It is the mirror through which he creates the emotional attachments that accompany each and every sense impression. It is the means by which he sees his own reflection. A newly born baby cannot qualify the impressions that he receives in any complex way – he only knows that things either feel 'right' or 'not right'. The whole rhythm of his growth is directed towards a world in which he is open to the minds and feelings of others. This interplay between the immature learner and the more mature other creates a field of play that is culturally shaped and stretched. The inherited basic biological programmes of the human child continue, but are subject to the continuous pressures of the

cultural environment, much of it based on the accepted development of social ‘competence’, which we know as education.

In pre-literate societies, education was achieved orally and through observation and imitation. The young learned informally from their parents, extended family and grandparents. At later stages of their lives, they received instruction of a more structured and formal nature, imparted by people not necessarily related, in the context of initiation, religion or ritual.

Wikipedia, retrieved 12 October 2010

Children are, therefore, actively involved in the social construction of their own lives. The lives of those around them and the societies in which they live are fundamental influences in their ongoing development. As the Russian psychologist Vygotsky said, ‘Human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them’ (Vygotsky, 1978: 86). And Howard Gardner (1983: 239) includes ‘interpersonal’ and ‘intrapersonal’ intelligences in his theory of multiple intelligences:

Interpersonal intelligence is the ability to understand other people: what motivates them, how they work, how to work co-operatively with them. Intrapersonal intelligence ... is a correlative ability, turned inward. It is a capacity to form an accurate, veridical model of oneself and to be able to use that model to operate effectively in life.

### **The Importance of Relationship**

If we look at the social world of the child, it becomes immediately apparent that there are certain primary relational influences, i.e. the mother, father and other key caregivers. Numerous studies have demonstrated the levels of extreme deprivation experienced by children denied care, stimulation and love from these sources (Bowlby, 1969; Bronfenbrenner, 1968; Rutter, 1991). As Bronfenbrenner says, however, it is not sufficient to look at these influences in isolation. The larger world must pay a significant part in the overall attitudes of all concerned:

Whether parents can perform effectively in their child-rearing roles within the family depends on the role demands, stresses

and supports emanating from other settings ... The availability of supportive settings is, in turn, a function of their existence and frequency in a given culture or subculture.

(Bronfenbrenner, 1968: 7)

He emphasizes the principle of interconnectedness between settings and the enormous effect that public policies and practices can have on societal values and roles conducive to balanced family life. There are, for example, profound differences between the government-funded childcare provision within different EU countries. For example, parents and children living in Nordic countries, with their long-standing focus on more broad-based family and child well-being rather than the measurement of early developmental outcomes, can expect a very different experience to those living here in the UK.

When looking at the life of the modern child in the United Kingdom and the social environment in which it lives, it becomes clear that there have been enormous changes in the last 50 years – perhaps more than at any other period of time. ‘Traditional’ family life, where the mother devotes her time to caring for home and children, the father brings home the wage and everyone sits down together for meals, has now long gone. In 1996 a report revealed that out of 1,000 children interviewed, one in three had not sat down to a meal with his or her family in the preceding week. Nor are most children now allowed to go out to play after school. Gone are the hours of hopscotch and marbles, the games of cowboys and Indians, the intimate social network of children in the street. A 2009 ‘Family Trends’ report showed that 71 per cent of adults reported playing in the street or near their home every day when they were children, compared to only 21 per cent of children in 2007 (Child and Parenting Institute, 2007). With the economic and social stresses of modern life, people are now having fewer children. Only 25 per cent of households have the classic 2.4 children, a decline of 13 per cent since 1971. In 2009 the provisional Total Fertility Rate (TFR) for the UK was 1.94 children per woman (Office for National Statistics, 2009). And approximately one in four children are being brought up by single parents, compared with one in fourteen in 1972 (Child and Parenting Institute, 2007). Those children live in areas where they are no longer surrounded by close-knit families with grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins all living close by. Instead, they are living

increasingly isolated lives where adults make all the major decisions about the way that they spend their time. Schools are therefore playing an increasingly dominant role in the social understanding of children.

### The Need for Wholeness

What is it that a child needs in order to develop socially? All human beings need warmth, respect and acceptance from others, particularly 'significant others' such as parents. They need to reinforce their identities through the recognition of others, they need to know that they can relate and communicate with others, they need to be allowed to construct and co-construct meaning with others, and they need to feel that they, and their thoughts and opinions, matter to others. Children acquire identity in the context of their social group. As the Italian educator Malaguzzi says, 'A child can't develop a good sense of self isolated from other people' (Edwards et al., 1998: 219). The child has an inborn expectation of finding an atmosphere of reciprocal help and socialization. Implicit in this expectation is his desire to feel whole, and feeling whole is a vital biological and spiritual need for achieving a true sense of self.

The danger of cultures is that their influence is so profound that they can easily offer the child a vastly impoverished world in which to develop. As Bruner writes,

A culture equips its members with such structured models of the world so that they may predict, interpolate and extrapolate. That much for knowledge. Without such models man would not be the species that he is. Nor would culture be so controlling.

(Bruner, 1972: 11)

The extraordinary potentials and intelligences that young children possess can be stifled and bound down by the demands of society. Modern Western cultures have consistently been criticized for continuing to develop educational systems that emphasize the intellect, to the detriment of the social, emotional and spiritual development of children. Bruner goes on, 'Man's intellect ... is not simply his own, but is communal in the sense that its unlocking or empowering depends upon the success of the culture in developing means to that end' (ibid.: 21).

The complexity of modern cultures has resulted in knowledge and skills far beyond the capacity of a single group. Increasingly, therefore, we have developed means of children being 'instructed out of context', rather than 'experiencing in context'. The danger of this way of learning for the child is that he cannot make the connections and relationships with an experience of meaningful reality in his mind. 'A piece of unreal learning has no hooks on it; it can't be attached to anything, it is of no use to the learner' (Holt, 1990: 169). In such environments, children sense the anxious expectations of the adults around them and begin to experience the fear of failure, of disappointing others. Malaguzzi talks of spoken language being increasingly imposed upon children: 'Through imitative mechanisms which are lacking or completely devoid of exchange, rather than strong imaginative processes linked to experience' (Malaguzzi, 1996: 35).

Language is the accumulated wisdom of a group of people. As Aldous Huxley says in his book *The Doors of Perception*, 'When you learn a language – you are the inheritor of the wisdom of the people who have gone before you' (Huxley, 1954: 118). You are, however, also the victim, in the sense that, of the infinite number of sensorial experiences that you could have had, certain ones are repetitive in the experience of your people and are therefore given more emphasis and more labels. Take, for example, the extraordinarily high number of words available in Eskimo culture to describe snow. Eskimo children have clearly defined labels for each recognizable difference in their sensory impression of this part of their environment. With only one label, European children only relate to that one over-riding impression, and their attention is therefore not drawn to the differences. Experiences on the sensory level that are given few or even no labels at all are hardly able to intrude into consciousness. Daniel Stern discusses how this can affect the development of the young child. Language, he says, provides a new way of being related to others. By sharing personal world knowledge in a common symbol system, there is a forging of shared meaning: 'They discover that their personal experiential knowledge is part of a larger experience of knowledge, that they are unified with others in a common culture base.' He describes the advent of language, however, as a very mixed blessing for the child: 'What begins to be lost (or made latent) is enormous ... The infant gains entrance into a wider cultural membership, *but at the risk of losing the force and wholeness of original experience*' (Stern, 1998, emphasis added).

## Dynamic Creativity

Educational systems have, therefore, a double responsibility: one is to ensure that the child has a real understanding of those elements that are important to his establishing a secure place in the particular society in which he lives; the second, however, is even more important, and that is to ensure that he or she as an individual is allowed to move beyond those values in order to express his or herself as a dynamic, creative individual sharing an entire world with others. Creativity is the dynamic force that enables us to transcend the confines of cultures and to delve into the immensely important properties and possibilities of the unknown. It is this that underpins all scientific, artistic and technological advances.

The world is rapidly becoming a smaller place. Information technology is creating an extraordinary environment where children no longer have to accept the barriers between countries, where they can communicate freely in a way that transcends cultural defences. Such freedom has never been known before and the impact has far-reaching consequences. We need no longer be bound quite so rigidly to the limitations of our own social and cultural experiences. We can open our minds to new ways of thinking. Educational policy-making needs to both acknowledge and adapt to the extraordinary diversity of social experience that is now available.

The language of education must not therefore continue to offer what Jerome Bruner terms 'the so-called language of fact and objectivity'. It must help to make the connections and associations necessary to extend the child's cultural 'library of labels'.

It must express stance and must invite counter-stance, and in the process leave place for reflection, for meta-cognition. It is this that permits one to reach higher ground, this process of objectifying in language or image what one has thought and then turning around and re-considering it.

(Bruner, 1986: 129)

For the children in our modern world, it is the rich tapestry of these connections and associations that is all too often being denied them. This is clearly demonstrated by studies such as that carried out by Fowler et al. (1997) who, having seen the dramatic results of providing a cognitive and language enriched environment for a controlled group of children, concluded that, 'It would appear that

common forms of socialisation seriously underestimate and fail to stimulate the biological potentials for the development of competence of which most children are capable' (Fowler et al., 1997: 142). As Jones and Reynolds discuss in their own research into the interaction of teachers in children's play, 'Teachers do not really "trust" children as learners and most environments and lesson plans are therefore dependent on teaching, not on children's spontaneous learning activities' (Jones and Reynolds, 1992: xiii).

The 2010 television programme 'Gareth Malone's Extraordinary School for Boys' (BBC Radio 2, 2010) was a clear demonstration of how fundamentally learning can be compromised by the formality of current systems. In 12 weeks, this young choir teacher took a profoundly disengaged group of primary school boys and, by breaking all the stipulated curriculum rules, improved their developmental reading profiles by as much as 20 months. Not only that, but he started to reintroduce them to reading as the fascinating, highly meaningful and powerful tool that it can be, rather than something to be avoided and that led them to feel bad about themselves. Despite enormous investment over the past few years, England's performance in reading attainment has been steadily declining. The 2007 PIRLS Study, *Progress in International Reading Literacy*, showed us dropping from 3rd to 19th, and reported that children in England read *for pleasure much less frequently than their peers in other countries*. There had been significant increases in the proportion of English 10-year-olds with the 'least positive' attitudes to reading, and who said that they very seldom read stories or novels outside school:

On average, children in England reported less frequent reading for pleasure outside school than children in many other countries: just a third of children reported reading for fun on a daily basis ... Of particular concern is the 15 per cent of children in the sample for England who had the least positive attitudes, a significant increase from 2001. This is one of the highest proportions in all the 2006 participating countries.

Surely it is levels of enjoyment and deep engagement that we should be seeking to achieve when children read, rather than the very arid measurement of their decoding abilities; and examples such as this reinforce the urgent need to re-examine the efficacy of current approaches. After all, what is it that we are trying to achieve?

Hundreds of thousands of students who have great paper results, but have lost a sense of who they are and their place in the world, or young adults who are deeply connected to their communities, have a true sense of self and whose worth comes from being able to develop their unique skills and capacities in ways that have real meaning for them.

Goleman lists the core emotional and social skills needed for life (Goleman, 1983). These include: self-awareness; identifying, expressing and managing feelings; impulse control and delaying gratification; handling stress and anxiety; reading social and emotional cues; listening; being able to resist negative influences; taking others' perspectives and understanding what behaviour is acceptable in a given situation. Such qualities can only be developed through rich interpersonal relationships. Teaching children with a bank of regurgitated, inert, unexciting words deprives them of the joy of learning through relationships and connectivity. 'Children expect living words, words that are rooted in reason and in ideas, in plans and actions, in situations of real human exchange' (Malaguzzi, 1996: 35).

Teaching children with isolated, inert and regurgitated subject material, particularly that has no connection to their own everyday lives and that serves primarily to answer examination questions, is an insult to their innate intelligences and deserves the lack of respect that it is so often given. Because our children aren't stupid. It's just that we have created a system that leaves a significant number of them feeling that way, and that even affirms it for them as they grow older.

## The Task Ahead

### *AQA (The Assessment and Qualifications Alliance)*

So, on the one hand you have the AQA of the old world – we'll measure how clever you are by seeing how much information you can cram into your head and regurgitate in an hour or so in an exam hall with millions of other children on the same day and then forget it all on the following day – and on the other the twenty-first century AQA – the knowledge will cost you just £1 and then we'll see how clever you are by what you do with it.  
(Gilbert, 2010)

Our task, therefore, seems to be that we should help children to communicate using all their potential, intelligences and languages. We should protect them from the demands of cultures that in any way limit their possibilities. We should do everything we can to support their innate expectations of living and learning in vibrant social worlds. Roger Hart, in his work with UNICEF, recognized the dichotomy between the children in the poorest countries who, although denied high standards of schooling, can see and feel the enormous contribution that their work provides for their families. They were therefore valued and important members of their social communities (Hart, 1992). Research from 50 non-industrial societies revealed that the most common age for the assignment of responsibility of the following tasks was 5 to 7 years of age: the care of younger children, tending animals, household chores, gathering food and materials, and running errands. He argued that these activities have innate social meaning for the children, whereas in industrial nations we are now seeing the effects of young people who have had no opportunities to discover the pleasures of meaningful work (ibid.).

Sociality involves the development of competence, which is relevant to the expectations demanded by the culture, and through these experiences every child should find a route to his or her meaningful role in the community. What any schooling system should do is to maximize the child's opportunities to demonstrate competence. Self-esteem is the most critical variable affecting a child's successful collaboration with others, and self-esteem is a value judgement that is made based upon competence. Children who feel valued and important know where they stand, and will not be afraid to contribute to the work of others. Colin Rogers, in his article 'Early Admission: early labelling' (Rogers, 1989), recognized the enormous influence that teachers' expectations can have on the performance of children, and that a young child experiencing negative feedback can be profoundly affected. Low expectations from a teacher all too often result in a reality of low achievement from the child. As Bandura was quoted in one of Daniel Goleman's *New York Times* articles:

People's beliefs about their abilities have a profound effect on those abilities. Ability is not a fixed property; there is a huge variability in how you perform. People who have a sense of self-efficacy bounce back from failures; they approach things in terms

of how to handle them rather than worrying about what can go wrong.

(Goleman, 1988)

Children are enormously perceptive. Teachers must understand that it is not only their words that children react to, *but also their emotional attitudes*. Back in 1990 Martin Woodhead argued that early years schooling should be seen as only one element in the transition that the child must make within a much wider social setting. Children's lives, he said, involve infinitely more than the schooling system, and what we should be concentrating on is the 'educational' process of enjoyable meaning-making, whatever the context (Woodhead, 1997). Perhaps we should, in fact, examine the very nature of schooling itself, and question the reasons that it developed in the way that it has. Perhaps we would then better appreciate the drastic transformation that has occurred in the last hundred years when work has been removed from its intrinsic connection with meaningful family life to become, instead, a means of producing an effective and controllable workforce. The new construction of childhood that began at that time significantly reduced the children's sense of their own value and meaningful contribution. Children were comprehensively removed from socially significant activity and given new imposed characteristics of dependence, vulnerability and immaturity. Thus the overall aim of Margaret Thatcher's education policies in the 1980s was to convert the nation's schools system from a public service into a market (Gillard, 2007).

Children have an expectation of taking part in vibrant social worlds in which they can feel secure and valued. They have an expectation of being empowered, and need their work to be meaningful to them so that they can make the connections and associations unique to their needs as individuals. Whatever learning environments we provide for children should, therefore, be fulfilling these expectations.

### Empathy and Interconnectivity

The National Curriculum was written by a government 'quango' (quasi-autonomous non-government organisation). Teachers had virtually no say in its design or construction. It was almost entirely content-based. Dennis Lawton, of the University of London's Institute of Education, described it as 'the reincarnation

of the 1904 Secondary Regulations'. It was huge and therefore unmanageable, especially at the primary level, leading to a significant drop in reading standards. It divided the curriculum up into discrete subjects, making integrated 'topic' and 'project' work difficult if not impossible. But perhaps the most damaging outcome of it was that it prevented teachers and schools from being curriculum innovators and demoted them to 'curriculum deliverers'.

(Gillard, 2007)

The problem, therefore, is to create learning environments that allow children this rich interplay between home, school and the community. Loris Malaguzzi clearly recognized this in his work at Reggio Emilia. The teachers in Reggio 'listen intently to the way children perceive and understand the world and respond with both appreciation and expertise to help them build on and expand what they understand' (Boyd Caldwell, 1987: 32); and 'The teacher's role is to ask good open-ended questions that stimulate children's thinking and provoke discussion – to facilitate, orchestrate and gently guide ... In these conversations the teacher does not fish for right answers or impart information' (ibid.: 62).

Carlo Rinaldi says, 'We do not hurry to give them answers; instead we invite them to think about where the answers might lie ... *It is not the answers that are important, it is the process that you and I search together*' (ibid.: 63, emphasis added). And that seems to be the fundamental difference to the approach taken by traditional educational settings in Britain. We do not have an educational culture built on recognition of children's extraordinary abilities and interests. All too often we rely on pre-planned curricula that assume that adults know best what children need to learn, that adults know the limits of children's abilities and that adults know best how to teach them.

An emergent curriculum requires teachers to listen to children's ideas and interests, and to adapt their learning goals to those of the children in responsive and creative ways. It is a co-constructivist view of education where child and adult participate in a mutual voyage of discovery. In Reggio the child is an important person in his own right. His thoughts, opinions, ideas and interests are all invited to be shared with the community. The adult's behaviour conveys to the children that all aspects of their work are taken seriously. As Lillian Katz comments, 'This message is not communicated directly by

pronouncement or announcement; *it permeates the environment indirectly through a variety of actions, provisions and strategies*' (Edwards et al., 1998: 58, emphasis added). What Reggio has done, therefore, is to reproduce for the child the same sense of being an important contributor to the life of the community as children had before the advent of the schooling system. They are helped to feel that they matter, that people care about what they think and that they can make changes to the world around them. It is education based on relationships, shared understanding and participation, rather than education based on knowledge alone. As Jones and Nimmo say in their book *Emergent Curriculum*, 'You're not teaching children – you're living with them' (Jones and Nimmo, 1984: 1).

Children have an expectation of a co-operative, dynamic system of communication with others. If they experience emotionally unreactive or negative responses, they cannot effectively communicate their feelings. This is the same for a young baby left with an unresponsive mother or a young child left with a disengaged nursery teacher who is focusing more on filling in observation sheets than the quality of interaction. Mutual engagement and flow only happen when the process becomes a co-operative exchange. Daniel Stern talks of the adult 'attuning' to the child, and Trevarthen's work clearly demonstrates the importance of the child being with someone who is meaningful to him.

The ability to talk and think communicatively relies on there being a dynamic link:

It appears that the development of communication is indissolubly linked to the formation and use of relationships and to a co-operation that depends on mutual liking and trust ... the evolution of language has been shaped by the needs of emotional minds that try to be conscious, interested and purposeful together.

(ibid.: 28)

In Trevarthen's view, the child is born with an intersubjective mind that seeks an affectionate partner. These processes, he says, retain priority in control of cognitive and linguistic developments as well as in the formation of social attachments, as the child grows towards adulthood and a responsible life in society. In the period of time when the child has not yet developed his linguistic abilities and has limited experience of the world, it is therefore of critical importance that he spends his time with adults with whom he shares empathy.

What are we doing to a child when we leave him in the care of someone who does not interact with him, who perhaps does not even share the same language as him? What happens when a child is left for hours on end with only a television set or computer screen to interact with? How can that child express himself in ways that are meaningful, and which will be effectively reflected back to him? Speech and language therapists throughout the country are being flooded by referrals for children with some sort of language delay, and research shows that this is the commonest development problem in pre-school children. In some inner city areas the incidence was found to be over 30 per cent in 1996 (Faulkus, 1999), and a 2009 study by the *Archive of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* reported that parents and children virtually stop talking to each other when the TV is on, even if they're in the same room. For every hour in front of the TV, parents spoke 770 fewer words to children, according to a study of 329 children, ages 2 months to 4 years of age (Park, 2009). The Family Policy Studies Centre produced a report in 1996 that stated 'The current focus throughout the educational system on academic and vocational achievement is in no way matched by a voiced concern for the development of social communication and relationship skills' (Family Policy Studies, 1996).

### The Definition of Quality

'Quality', therefore, is neither neutral nor self-evident, but saturated with values and assumptions. It is not essential, but a constructed concept. Originally developed as a part of management theory, it has been incorporated into early childhood care and other services as part of the revolution of new public management and the growth of the audit society.

(Power, 1997, quoted in Moss and Dahlberg, 2008: 5)

The most drastic change in our approach to early childhood has come with what Moss and Dahlberg (2008) call 'the paradigm of regulatory modernity' which has been significantly influenced by the twin disciplines of organizational management and economics:

The concept of quality assumes the possibility of deriving universal and objective norms, based on expert knowledge. 'Quality' is an evaluation of the conformity of a product or service to these norms.

It values universality, objectivity, certainty, stability, closure; and presumes an autonomous observer able to make a decontextualised and objective statement of fact. It deploys certain methods, based on applying templates to particular settings (e.g. rating scales, check lists, standardised inspection procedures).

(Moss and Dahlberg, 2008: 4)

They go on to say:

It is a technology of normalisation, establishing norms against which performance should be assessed, thereby shaping policy and practice. It is a technology of distance, claiming to compare performance anywhere in the world, irrespective of context, and a technology of regulation, providing a powerful tool for management to govern at a distance through the setting and measurement of norms of performance.

(ibid.: 5)

The danger of such a normalizing and regulatory paradigm in a twenty-first century world is that it relies on the criteria of the past, and stifles the possibility of more expansive meaning-making and creativity. It uses the technical language and structures of the workplace which, in order to ensure the organizationally defined criteria and quality, then confine, limit and oppress the possibility of more risky and challenging new thinking and experimentation. The achievement of safe, externally acceptable and measurable outcomes is the core goal of the system. In his book *Why do I Need a Teacher When I've Got Google?*, Ian Gilbert refers to it as 'the world of right answers' (Gilbert, 2010: 45), and provides Mark Steel's simple example from one of his BBC Open University lectures typifying the current system (ibid.: 42):

TEACHER: What did the Vikings come in, children?

CLASS: Longboats, Miss!

TEACHER: No, no, now come on ... – we did this last time, remember ...

CLASS: Er, ships, narrowboats, er, don't know, Miss!

TEACHER: Oh, come on, we did this! They came in 'hordes', class. What did they come in?

CLASS: 'Hordes', Miss ...

The actress Imogen Stubbs and her husband Sir Trevor Nunn recently challenged the obsession with results over the need for genuine engagement with the material when their children were going through their A-Level English exams. Whenever they tried to provide interesting anecdotes and related materials to the children over the dinner table they were told that it would just confuse them and wouldn't be relevant to the questions that they were going to be asked (Stubbs, 2010).

Sir Ken Robinson likens it to the fast-food model of quality assurance based upon standardization and conformity: 'Standardization tends to emphasize the lowest common denominator. Human aspirations reach much higher and if the conditions are right they succeed. Understanding those conditions is the real key to transforming education for all our children' (Robinson, 2010).

In 2010 IBM's survey of 1,500 global CEOs identified creativity as the number one 'leadership competency' of the future. And yet in July 2010, *Newsweek* published a new research report showing that American creativity appears to be drastically declining, especially in the youngest students. The increased focus on standardization was identified as a possible culprit:

It's too early to determine conclusively why U.S. creativity scores are declining. One likely culprit is the number of hours kids now spend in front of the TV and playing videogames rather than engaging in creative activities. Another is the lack of creativity development in our schools. In effect, it's left to the luck of the draw who becomes creative: there's no concerted effort to nurture the creativity of all children.

(Bronson and Merryman, 2010)

Most European countries place particular emphasis on the importance of social development and communicative skills, together with the importance of family and community. The Danish Government in particular has demonstrated its belief that the nurturing of self-confidence, independence and social competence is *of more importance* than the acquisition of knowledge and specific abilities. Britain has consistently been criticized for its stance in this area, and communicative and social skills even now remain secondary to the attainment of specific learning goals. The recent UK investment in the early years has come at the cost of an increasing need to justify this

investment and the potential danger of doing so through flawed and old-paradigm definitions of what constitutes quality.

It is not as if we are leading the field in successful outcomes – in fact the latest findings of the PISA survey – the Programme for International Student Assessment – show the UK tumbling down the rankings, according to tests recently taken by an international sample of 15-year-olds. In 2000, when 32 countries took part in the survey, the UK came 7th in reading skills – but the figures for 2009 show that out of 65 countries and regions, the UK has fallen to 25th place. In maths, between 2000 and 2009 the UK has fallen from 8th to 28th, and in science from 4th to 16th (Coughlan, 2010). Almost one in five seven-year-olds in England did not reach government targets for literacy in 2010, and one in eleven boys in England – one in seven in some areas – starts secondary school with, at best, the reading skills of an average seven-year-old (BBC News, 2010). The danger of the political reaction to such statistics is that there is then a panicked call to increase the focus on isolated elements of the curricula, rather than the recognition that it may be developmentally inappropriate pressures that are actually causing the problem! Nor do we do well in assessments of child well-being. A 2009 European league table of young people's well-being placed the UK 24th out of 29 countries (Child Poverty Action Group, 2009), and this backs-up the 2007 table by UNICEF which placed the UK at the bottom of a list of 21 industrialized nations (UNICEF, 2007). A 2008 study by the World Health Organization showed that underage binge-drinking in Britain was amongst the worst in the world (Devlin and Porter, 2008).

About 10 per cent of children have a mental health problem at any one time, and the UK has one of the highest rates of self-harm in Europe, at 400 per 100,000 population (Mental Health Foundation, January 2011). The 2009 OECD report found only 36 per cent of children 'liked' school, and that British children were twice as likely to be drunk before the age of 15 than children in any other OECD country (OECD, 2009). Surely these statistics confirm that something is very wrong with how we are currently approaching learning and education. Government Ministers are quoted as being very concerned and determined to ensure that future investment reaps the acceptable results, but there remains damningly little investigation into the possibility that it may be the value systems themselves that may be at fault and, as Moss and Dahlberg have highlighted,

virtually no investment in the possible value of alternative views and perspectives.

Although today there is a sort of standard policy document, produced by governments and international organisations, which offers a predictable rationale and prescription for early childhood education and care and draws on the same much-quoted research, it does not provide so much as one critical question or recognition that there may be different perspectives and views ... Not only do these documents make dull and repetitive reading. They stifle democracy.

(Moss and Dahlberg, 2008: 9)

## Conclusions

We are entering a new age of interpersonal social awareness unlike anything that we have known before. The skills and competencies needed in tomorrow's work-place are going to be significantly different from those that we have traditionally cultivated in schooling systems, and across the world key thinkers are starting to call for a re-definition of the role of education. The old models that measured value through the regurgitation of banks of memorized information simply aren't going to cut it any more. The obsession with the criteria of 'performance' has created a generation of children who are profoundly disengaged from the joy of learning, and who struggle to find any real meaning in their lives.

For it is personal meaning-making, deep engagement, adaptability and creativity that we need to nurture as we move into a drastically changing world. A curriculum that employs instructional strategies encompassing the needs of the whole child is the only one that is going to meet with the true needs of the twenty-first century. It should encompass the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual growth of the child with environments that stimulate and nurture the intuitive as well as the rational, the imaginative as well as the practical, and the creative as well as the receptive functions of each individual. As Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi so succinctly stated 'the chief impediments to learning are not cognitive in nature. It is not that students cannot learn, it is that they do not wish to' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991: 1).

We need to move from educational systems based upon conformity and standardization (thinking and moving only within the box) to

ones that embrace complexity, diversity, subjectivity and multiple perspectives (thinking and moving in, over and beyond the box). And we need to actively seek out and encourage new thinkers and researchers who are exploring the importance and value of differing approaches, views and perspectives, and who are developing new frameworks for education, such as lifelong learning, learning on demand, self-directed learning, information contextualized to the needs of the learner, collaborative learning and community learning. We live in a complex and rapidly changing world that demands new, exciting and innovative responses, rather than more of the same old deeply flawed model that is serving neither the welfare of the child, nor society as a whole.

We know that children's learning dispositions are highly environmentally sensitive – meaning that they are nurtured or weakened by their experiences, especially those in relation to the significant adults in their lives. And yet we invest extraordinarily little in research studies that measure child well-being and flow, or that investigate whether what we are currently doing is enhancing or eroding those dispositions. After all, what good are acceptable outcomes or great test results if your whole sense of self-worth has been moved from an internal to an external focus, and you are no longer able to recognize or follow your innate developmental needs? Just as we are currently seeing the call for democracy in all corners of the world, so should we be calling for the democratization of learning for all children, and the protection of the extraordinary potential that is so clearly evident in the early learner.

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