

## NATURAL LEARNING

In the United States a large number of families practise what they call “home schooling”. In Australia many similar families prefer to call their own practice “home education” to make the point that education and schooling are not the same thing and to stress that it is possible to value education without valuing schooling. We would call our own family practice “self-education” or the more common term, “natural learning”, because the use of the word ‘home’ can evoke an image of social isolation. “Natural learning” describes one approach to home education and corresponds largely to what is called “unschooling” in the United States.

Natural learning occurs when, within broad limits and a secure and stimulating environment, a child’s right to control their own learning and their own life is respected. Advocates of natural learning place meaning above the accumulation of knowledge and motivation above the concept of ability. They see both as intimately dependent upon freedom or a sense of control over one’s own life. If the parents provide love, trust, respect, time, enthusiasm, support and guidance, as they should, then learning will be enriched.

Natural learning is characterised by speculation, imagination, hypotheses, experiment, mistakes and changes of direction. It is always meaningful although not limited to what is practical. Theories and ideas affect behaviour even if only the direction of further learning. Rather than a passive recipient, the mind is purposeful and active. It reaches out, grasps and organises. Natural learning is not primarily directed towards job training or socialisation. It is motivated by a person’s desire to understand the world around and is driven by pleasure and engagement, not obligation or escape. Periods of uncertainty and indecision are seen as important parts of the learning process but natural learners do not see their education as someone else’s responsibility. Although they may learn from educational theorists, natural learning is not itself a method created by educational theorists. It is the way the most successful learners have always learnt - children before they go to school and those popularly described as talented.

Natural learning is not a special activity separate to other activities. It does not stop and start and cannot be timetabled or programmed. It is not a body of knowledge and skills delivered by experts and it is not a course carefully constructed to contain imitation forms of discovery, imagination or experiment. Yet, natural learning does not exclude the use of experts or structured courses. Generally, structured courses used are short and specific, chosen or organised as a specific need arises. Natural learning does not exclude rigorous and systematic learning or even rote learning and

drill, but it does exclude hothousing and the pressurising of children into moulds of the parents' choosing. Natural learning is not an attempt to replace theory with practice or to replace books with real life experiences. Nor is it an attempt to replace teachers with computers. It is not school transferred to the home and is not an activity isolated either in the home or in an institution. As much as possible it observes and participates in the society as a whole and this is where socialisation takes place rather than in an artificial model that is age segregated, peer dominated and coercive. Indeed, it sees the isolation of the old and the young in institutions as one of the least attractive aspects of our society. Rather than the overprotection of an institution or fortress home, the excitement and chill of freedom is experienced. Natural learners believe that overprotection creates dependency and coercion creates defeat, but that the chill of freedom motivates and invigorates and the sense of control empowers.

Natural learning is not anti-public education. It is not opposed to the public funding of educational resources and structured courses and although some natural learners advocate a free market system of education, natural learning itself does not. Natural learners recognise the need for professional accreditation.

The following illustration elucidates how natural learning families differ to other families and how they may appear to observers. A family goes for a bushwalk along a headland or to a lookout. The children run along and do what children do – play, pick up things that interest them. The parents talk amongst themselves and watch the children. The parents do not think of seeing it as a teaching experience although they accept that incidental learning is occurring. To turn it into a teaching experience would spoil the fun. It would be too onerous for both parents and children. This is something for pleasure. But, also, the parents are not confident about what they should teach or how they should teach it. They are not trained teachers and, therefore, not experts in the body of knowledge to be taught, the methods of teaching, or the level appropriate for the age and ability of their children. To attempt to teach would be to intrude into the role of the professional teacher who has all this expertise.

A second family comes along the same walk. The parents take their teaching role seriously. They might be home educators. One parent gives what very much appears to be a formal lesson. There are stimulus questions from the parent and responses from the children looking for the “right” answers. There is a feeling that something is being taught by an expert or authority, something the children have to learn. They have to learn it because it is for their own good, even if they cannot now see what that good is. There is a sense of obligation and an assumption that neither the parents nor the children would spontaneously behave in this way if unencumbered by this sense of obligation.

A third family comes along. The same information is discussed as was discussed by the previous family but it is discussed as a shared interest, a spontaneous and common curiosity. There is an appreciation for some expertise but there is no sense of authority. Uncertainty and conflicting opinions are freely expressed. There is no sense of teaching or learning. No teaching techniques are applied, no questions designed “to draw students out” or “to make them think”. There are no formal learning theories being followed. There is no interest in assessment although the parents are tuned into the children and their development. Instead of obligation it is obvious they are all, parents and children, doing what they gain most pleasure from at

that moment. Respect, open communication and an engagement with the world around can be observed. The key difference between this family and the previous two is not the questions raised or the information supplied but the values, pleasures and degree of confidence incidentally imparted by the parents. This is a family of natural learners.

Whatever the stimulus around us happens to be – whether a natural environment, an urban environment, a story, a news item, a TV drama or documentary - our response follows the pattern of the third family. We talk about it together out of curiosity about the world, a passionate desire to understand it, and a belief we can. We do not see the world as an impenetrable confusion whose secrets, if it has any, are held by people superior to ourselves. Our passion and confidence are infectious and our guidance is active. We tell our children whatever we believe is important for them to know or believe they would like to know. We hope they do the same for us. We help them develop skills they need. We build on their natural curiosity and work with their interests. We take any question asked as an invitation for a discussion and follow it while their interest lasts. It might lead to an experiment, an excursion, an observation or the collection of further information. Learning is often heuristic and is efficient because it occurs when the children are most receptive. Natural learning is not a “go and choose a topic and write on it” approach.

At times our guidance is very up-front and although it usually remains only guidance it is a significant force because personal respect flows in both directions. If, at some stage, we assess that for a period we need to set aside a time each day for writing or maths, then we will do that without feeling inconsistent. We remember, however, that the most important form of guidance is example because it provides the clearest expression of values. Recognition, praise and encouragement are important aspects of guidance but we are careful not to confuse praise with recognition and we know that praise does not always encourage. The level of our praise inversely indicates the level of our expectations and assumptions and, as advertising agencies well know, unstated assumptions are communicated far more powerfully than clearly stated advice. A child’s self-concept is created by others’ perceptions of them.

Play and pleasure in our family are not differentiated from education. Stories are a source of pleasure and are an important part of our lives. Together with films they are the best stimuli for discussion of character and human experience. History is a great epic, the greatest adventure story ever told. It provides meaning and understanding as we recognise ourselves in others and others in ourselves. Although not popular in a society attracted to the perceived certainties of both science and dogmatic religion, we consider historical understanding, in its broadest sense, the most important understanding of all. Playing with, and understanding, language is one of our greatest pleasures. We remember our children learnt to speak the English language by playing with words and listening to us use words they did not understand. So we continually play with words and never simplify our language for their benefit. When explanations are asked for we explain things beyond their understanding and are regularly surprised when the topic resurfaces to find how much they understood. We have found that apparent understanding is a poor guide to teaching. Maths is approached both practically and systematically but has the same status as puzzles and games. Science we see as a methodology appropriate to certain questions but we take our ecological context as our starting point. By choice, our children enjoy lessons in swimming,

tennis, music and drama or anything else they choose and we can afford, so long as they are treated, as they usually are, with respect. That these lessons are timetabled and structured they find beneficial.

Would we send our kids to school if they asked to go? The child's curiosity and the parents' guidance would lead, generally, to the observation and investigation of social institutions first hand. This may include, at an appropriate age, a short stint in school. How long do you spend each day on schoolwork? Which parent does the teaching? Do you take school holidays? Are your children advanced or behind? These questions have little meaning to natural learners. It is only a production line mentality that gives them meaning. Natural learning is an attitude to life, a set of values rather than a set of tasks. It starts at birth and is continuous throughout life. Rather than lineal and "logical", learning just as often zigzags across a wide range of territory, following this passion and that interest. Do your children interact sufficiently with other children, especially those from other backgrounds? Isn't this difficult when other children are in school? We would like our children to have greater opportunity to interact with other children - but not where they are subject to the impositions of school.

Freedom, or the abolition of coercion, is fundamental to natural learning. Because our family practice seems inconsistent in this regard and because the abolition of coercion is a stumbling block to many parents, it needs to be clarified. There are two broad qualifications to freedom. The first is that it does not include the freedom to infringe another's freedom. That would be a contradiction. It therefore recognises that if we live in families and communities, compromises are necessary. Damaging communal property and polluting the natural environment are seen as examples of infringing others' freedom. Respecting others and respecting their freedom are taken as synonymous. The second qualification is the recognition that children need to be protected from dangers they do not understand, dangers that would infringe their freedom greater than our intervention would. That intervention may be coercive. As well as physical danger, this includes at times the dangers of ignorance, exploitation and manipulation. To be free, children must be informed and they must be protected from burdens they cannot yet carry and information and images they cannot yet deal with. Their environment must be secure, ordered and predictable. Freedom is not a simply defined absolute, a concept independent of interpretation. Nor is it a "do nothing" or "anything goes" approach. Parents must actively construct an environment where children can be free. Nurture, not neglect, secures freedom.

These two qualifications to freedom define for us, therefore, inappropriate behaviour. Inappropriate behaviour is behaviour that infringes others' freedom, fails to accord respect, or is associated with danger. Parents as well as children have the capacity to behave inappropriately. Parents must find the line that, according to these two qualifications, divides the protection of freedom from the infringement of freedom. It is not always an easy task. Indeed, this rationale has been used to justify the most authoritarian regimes. They have often claimed that they, too, were merely protecting freedom and maintaining security. The distinction between such regimes and free societies is determined by where they draw that line.

When drawing that line in the home we differentiate between natural coercion and arbitrary coercion. If I want things I must work for them, if I want to be a pianist I

must practise, when resources are limited I must share them, and if I am careless I will have accidents. These are natural forms of coercion. Natural learning does not oppose natural coercion. To prepare children for the future they need to understand that this is how the world works. Instead of arbitrary coercion, natural learning advocates that the best preparation for the future is the gradual withdrawal of protection from natural coercion. There is the gradual and early introduction of responsibilities in the home, the linking of desires with related obligations, and the natural consequences of behaviour increasingly allowed to follow behaviour. The nurturing and protecting role of parents is gradually lifted.

The freedom of all family members, however, is respected and protected subject to the above two qualifications. If the parents' *desire* to nurture corresponds to the children's *need* for nurture, as it should, no freedom is infringed. Parents neither jump to satisfy every whim of the children nor make the children jump to satisfy theirs. The parents' values and standards are unequivocal but it is understood there is a difference between good behaviour and convenient behaviour and that obedience and belief are not themselves educative or character developing. The parents encourage cooperation rather than demand obedience. Freedom is sometimes thought to imply selfishness but we remember that selfishness in parents can take the form not only of neglect but also of a desire for authoritarian power.

Even though consequences for inappropriate behaviour are regularly imposed by parents, love, trust, fun and companionship dominate the parent/child relationship rather than correction. The imposed consequences are designed solely to protect freedom and ensure safety. Unlike punishment, suffering itself is not an objective. Under a regime of punishment, any form of inflicted suffering is believed to act as a deterrent and to be the most effective way to communicate to the child that the behaviour is inappropriate. Inflicted suffering is believed to build character. We find these beliefs unsustainable.

Time to dream and to be free of the cares of the world are recognised as important parts of growing up but natural learners experience no sudden switch from protection to independence or from captivity to freedom as those leaving school experience; a sudden switch that only exists because arbitrary coercion and punishment fail to prepare students.

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The problem with school is not poor teachers or inadequate resources, or even that it offers structured courses. The problem with school is that it is built on arbitrary coercion. In school, children's time and thoughts are almost entirely managed by others. School equates education with the coercive imposition of a large, systematically delivered, minutely timetabled, centrally designed, structured course; an all-encompassing package. No matter how much flexibility and choice is built into that course, while it remains compulsory, or while it encourages the belief it is all-encompassing and equated with education, it cannot do the job it is designed to do. To believe school encourages natural learning and merely provides structured courses as needed is illusory. School is a product of Industrial Age thinking. The factory

with its production line is the model. Efficiency, uniformity and control are dominant themes and coercion is fundamental in advancing them. Assessment and classification are important at every stage and the meaning of 'education' is limited to what is easily assessable. The ability to regurgitate information and logic-chop others' opinions are more important than the imaginative understanding of those opinions or the imaginative development of one's own. Busyness is crucial no matter how banal or meaningless the work is to the student. A quiet and deferential atmosphere is ideal; a challenging, argumentative and loud one is a control problem.

Faults in the final product are accounted for by faults in the raw material, not the production process. Biological determinism is the favoured explanation for inefficiencies and dysfunction because it eliminates all responsibility and does not challenge the assumptions the institution is built on. But more, production lines are geared to the capacity of the raw material and it is best if it can be claimed that that capacity has been confirmed by independent testing. The efficiency of the production line is assessed according to whether it maximises that capacity. As a result, the concept of 'natural ability' is necessary in schools. It is in a school's interest to claim its students are "working to their ability", and to be able to say, "we got the best out of every student" is the ultimate measure of a school's success. Determinism has always been happily embraced because it functions as a tool for oppressors and as a refuge for the defeated. The factory model of education generates its own view of human nature and individual potential.

But the question of whether one is "working to one's ability" has no scientific basis whatsoever. Even the leading advocates of I.Q. testing, let alone their critics, no longer claim such judgments can be made. We were once taught that because some living species are more aware or intelligent than others, and because some people are born taller or darker than others, then the broad range of human behaviour must be a reflection of the former phenomenon and have the same cause as the latter phenomenon – biological inheritance. Some argued that the environment played a significant part but an underpinning assumption remained the same. It was the assumption of determinism inherent in science simply applied intact to human behaviour. What is, must be. An individual's general behaviour must be a fixed property of that individual, it must reflect an underlying quality that can be measured and ranked on a scale. But statistics describing what the majority of people actually *do* have no bearing on what the majority of people *can* or *might* do, let alone what any individual can or might do. In the technical language of biologists, even if the heritability of I.Q. test scores is accepted as greater than zero in modern Western Societies – and the evidence that it is greater than zero is non-existent according to some experts – nothing at all is implied about the degree those scores (or performance on any other activity) can be improved. This is true for an individual and for the society as a whole. Nor does it indicate the degree biological inheritance contributes to any individual's I.Q. test score (or performance on any other activity). I.Q. tests do not measure capacity or potential.

Why, then, do we have them? Why the pretence? Apart from the fact that there are now so many self-images dependent on them, the factory system of education demands them. A student can do something lovingly, or passionately, or aggressively, or generously, or intelligently but unlike intelligence school does not demand that love, passion, aggression and generosity come in fixed and measurable

capacities. The industrial “scientific” mind-set, when in its interest, simply redefines adverbs and abstract nouns as concrete nouns and fails to recognise when ‘capacity’ is used metaphorically.

Coercion underlies the factory system of education but the abolition of coercion appears a stupid suggestion to most people even if the above two qualifications to freedom are accepted. It appears bizarre to parents daily trying to make their kids go to school, do their homework and practise the piano. And it appears ludicrous to teachers who are constantly trying to get students to work in class and remain civilised in the playground. But coercion generates a life of its own and the more it is used the more it is needed. The reaction it inevitably provokes against itself is taken to support its necessity. So much of the behaviour observed in students – aggressive behaviour, passive behaviour, dependent and irresponsible behaviour, hostility, resentment and alienation – is a product of coercion itself. In the presence of coercion, therefore, standards are always under pressure. Resistance to coercion is constant whatever standards are set. However, because the system interprets performance as a product of “ability”, there is always pressure for standards and expectations to be lowered in order to accommodate performance.

Coercion is best achieved, of course, if its need is internalised. In schools, students are not only prevented from exercising their will but are encouraged to believe coercion is necessary. They are taught that their own motivations and intuitions are fundamentally misdirected and unreliable and that almost all decisions, whether important or trivial, must be made for them. They are taught that obedience, belief and conformity are important aspects of education and should be rewarded. They are led to believe that their minds have been scientifically measured, that they have a fixed and known capacity and that their performance is capped. (The lower the cap, of course, the more destructive the effect.) They are constantly measured and labelled against criteria they either do not understand or do not accept. Increasing numbers are described as having a “learning disability”, a far more debilitating label than the eschewed “physical disability” because it mystifies in a way “physical disability” cannot. (A recognisable pattern of behaviour is not necessarily a disease, a disorder or a disability, no matter how inconvenient or incomprehensible it is.) They are taught that resistance is a malady that indicates a need for re-education, not something that could possibly be justified or rational. They are taught increasingly that it indicates a defective brain and requires drugs. Many counsellors and psychologists advise parents never to criticise school. No matter how unhappy or ineffective the parents’ own school experience was, or how much their child dislikes school, they advise parents to dissimulate, to paint school always in bright colours. That is, always to blame the child. At root, school teaches fear and self-rejection.

Passivity, dependency and irresponsibility inevitably follow – a fragile self-esteem and often a superficial bravado to hide it, the constant need for entertainment, a lack of personal initiative and desire to learn, and the absence of an experimental imagination. Students believe it is a teacher’s job both to control and to spoon-feed them. They readily take difficulties experienced as evidence of a lack of “natural ability” and therefore believe they are biologically unable to surmount them. Many students leave school unaware they are free. Fatalism and defeat characterise their minds. Many in tertiary institutions behave as if the coercion of school still applied. Interaction between students is distorted because impotence creates a desire for

physical and psychological power. In some extreme cases the feeling of impotence leads to a preoccupation with power and violence. Like birds brought up in a cage, students appear to want freedom but have no capacity for it. Most students are finally persuaded that coercion is necessary and are thankful for its application to them personally. To adopt this view is taken as a sign of maturity. They believe that without coercion they would not get out of bed in the morning and certainly never learn anything. They have forgotten what they were like before they went to school. To dare to dream, to imagine what might be possible, to be prepared to invest significant effort and accept significant risk, to reject others' judgments and social norms, and to maintain a fierce loyalty to one's own judgments and imagination – all we know about what motivates people to strive and achieve – is undermined by the factory system.

The great promise of freedom contained in liberalism over two hundred years ago is not felt by the majority of young people growing up today, and certainly not while they are still at school. When it is felt it is often in the absence of, or antipathy towards, education because, tragically, education is not differentiated from schooling. Students are not expected to feel it. They hear that arbitrary coercion is the best preparation for life because there is little freedom in life. What they must learn is obedience, respect for authority and conformity to social expectations. But this does not reflect the ideals our society is built on or how it operates. Arbitrary coercion prepares people to live in a dictatorship not a liberal democracy. One lesson that should have been learnt from the Soviet Union was that the *means* must be consistent with the *ends* but it is a lesson educational institutions have failed to learn. School students often appear to live in a world of unreality.

The factory model is not a model carefully considered when applied to education. It is just assumed to be the best approach. It is efficient when making toasters and therefore assumed to be efficient when making people. There is no support in educational psychology for the coercion that underlies the model; all the evidence is against it. The factory model functions as a faith and the underlying coercion is unacknowledged – disguised by euphemisms like “classroom management” and “pastoral care”. It is rather like fish that will never notice water. The solution to many problems is invisible because the pervasive medium that creates them is invisible.

Further, because coercion is invisible, freedom cannot properly be imagined. It is taken to suggest neglect and anarchy because these are seen as the only alternatives to coercion. Of course, when neglect and anarchy *are* seen as the only alternatives, coercion does look attractive. (Surprisingly, freedom is sometimes taken to be a form of prohibition – “but I liked school and I think education is important”.) Because the factory model generates its own view of human nature, a kind of perception deficit disorder develops where coercion is invisible, freedom is unimaginable, and underachievement concealed. Furthermore, many of the ideas of natural learning are voiced within the factory system. There is talk about individual, meaningful and active learning, respect and independence, equality and responsibility. But because coercion is unacknowledged this talk functions as Newspeak. Instead of motivating and inspiring, it increases uncertainty, contorts communication, weakens people's grip on reality, erodes personal confidence, engenders cynicism, and increases teachers' workloads. Natural learning and the factory system do not mix.



The factory model of schooling affects parents as well as students. Through coercion and mystification parents, as a group, have also been trained to be passive and dependent regarding their children's education. Many parents now feel no sense of responsibility for their children's education. Packing them off to school and slotting them into a music lesson on Tuesday afternoons is where they believe their responsibility ends. Many demand schools take responsibility not only for their children's education but also for their upbringing. These attitudes are maintained without a sense of social condemnation. The demand, however, that schools take more responsibility does not always indicate the parents value what teachers provide. In spite of superficial support and solicitude, the parents' attitude to school in private is often one of indifference or hostility. And many "committed" parents are committed to marks, not content. Teachers feel this pressure from parents to take more responsibility and yet often feel their efforts are undermined by the values and beliefs of the home.

Criticism of school is not itself wrong as many counsellors suggest, and it is not necessarily inaccurate. But children find it difficult to assimilate this contradiction within a family. The greater the gap between the family's culture and the school's culture, the more coercive school feels and the more destructive it is. That the gap, in most cases, is considered to be a product of biological ability widens the gap and sets it in concrete. Schools function, therefore, more as agencies that select and exaggerate differences than agencies that provide equal opportunity. Schools provide opportunity for children from financially disadvantaged homes but, generally, they do not rescue children from repressive or negligent homes. Even though they provide exposure and stimulation that would not otherwise be provided they usually add a new dimension to both the repression and the negligence.

Teachers, too, suffer under the factory system. Their training is directed towards its survival and their early ideals fade as they, too, feel increasingly powerless. They get caught-up in a system that generates its own justification, a justification they cannot help but absorb. Public relations and the maintenance of the faith are part of a teacher's job description. As the gap between the social perception and the reality of teaching opens up, the temptation (which exists within all professions and trades) to create a perception they have knowledge and skills to which outsiders have no access increases. To mystify the laity may increase the perception we are indispensable and alleviate feelings of impotence but when succumbed to creates dependency in both students and parents. Most teachers are caring, dedicated and hard working but frustration is their fate and cynicism their susceptibility.

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The abolition of coercion is not the withdrawal of responsibility or the institutionalisation of neglect. It is not a "do nothing" or "anything goes" approach. As well as the need to create an environment where children are free and safe, there appear to be four things necessary for learning or success. The **first** is stimulation or exposure. But stimulation is not just books on the shelf and a piano in the corner. Stimulation must be actively provided and at times that requires tact and persuasion.

Providing the right stimulation at the right moment is often important and engagement with both the natural environment and society is fundamental. The **second** is values. A person must value what is to be learnt. But glib values – “I want to be a famous swimmer” – should not be confused with real values that include the full implications of the choice, shape priorities and determine behaviour. Many students say they want to perform better but are not prepared to put any time and effort into it. Further, a student will not value education if more basic needs, like acceptance and belonging, are not being met. Values are derived largely from parents, but from their actions more than from their words. The **third** is a belief. A person must believe they can succeed, that they *can* learn what is to be learnt. They must be able to imagine themselves succeeding or, as some put it, visualise success. This belief or ability is shaped by the person’s self-definition, their view of the world and their place in it. That view, and its accompanying standards and expectations, is held unconsciously and is communicated to children both covertly and overtly at home and school. Labelling students has a profound effect and the popular view of “intelligence” and “ability” clearly plays an important role. If biological ability is seen as the primary determinant of performance, then the influence of labelling students will be both greater and denied. It is always disheartening for teachers when a student refuses even to attempt a task because, as they say, “I can’t do that, I’m dumb”. The **fourth** is opportunity. A person must have the necessary time, space, resources, and control.

Certainly, some people have more immediate ability than others but immediate ability to learn something new, or the ratio of effort to performance, is not the same thing as biological potential.<sup>1</sup> Rather than the cause of dependency, poor ability is more often the effect of dependency. Rather than merely the producer of ideas, ability is also the product of ideas. The most significant factor affecting performance in Western Societies is meaning, and whether or not learning is meaningful is determined by whether it accords with a person’s values and self-concept - the second and third points above. If meaning is threatened the mind can set up unconscious blocks against the acquisition of particular knowledge and skills, defining such knowledge and skills as outside its ken. If this is combined with fear the mind has the capacity to lock-up altogether. The concept of learning inherent in the factory system of education - that it is the filling of vessels with a fixed capacity or the exercising of a fixed ability to its elastic limit, and the consequent assumption that everyone wants to be filled or stretched as much as possible - is sharply at odds with the role meaning plays in learning. This disparity can result in conflict between a conscious effort that is driven by the assumptions of the factory system and an unconscious resistance that is motivated by meaning. It is a conflict that further inhibits performance and appears to confirm the ability/capacity theory of performance.

An additional obstacle is often observed. When students find themselves behind their designated location on the production line, many spend considerable time bolstering their egos by ridiculing everything that is on the production line. Talking to these students, one finds not only unconscious blocks but also very conscious barriers carefully constructed over long periods against everything they see as “education”.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Ability’ is used very loosely in schools and the various meanings that stretch from current knowledge and skills – to the ability to learn - to the ability to learn how to learn – to the ability to change values and self-concepts - and finally, to biological potential are not kept distinct. A person may not have ability in the first, second and even third senses but may in the fourth and fifth. To use a computer analogy, we shouldn’t confuse software with hardware.

They have persuaded themselves it is all stupid and irrational, or not useful. The ready availability of information and a knowledge of how to find information are important to learning, but a *willingness* to find information is more important. Recent research puts motivation at the forefront. It questions even the existence of innate talents or gifts and suggests, instead, that elite performance is the result of focused practice backed by opportunity, stimulation, support and self-confidence.<sup>2</sup>

Like fundamentalism in its various forms, stupidity is the result of a blinkered vision rather than a lack of “intelligence”. Apart from fairly obvious cases of dysfunction, when I see different students perform at different levels I do not see differences in “ability” – in the sense of biological potential. I see differences in any combination of the following: values, self-concepts, opportunity, expectations of success, explanations for failure, levels of anxiety, degrees of inner conflict and uncertainty, perceptions of the world, perceptions of the education process, degrees of independence, willingness to question and doubt, willingness to be engaged and to make an effort, persistence in the face of difficulties, preparedness to plan and work for a future beyond the immediate present, sense of control over their own lives, confidence in their own judgments, the degree they seek escape – from themselves and from reality, and *fear* – the degree they cling to fantasies of certainty or authority.

When fear and impotence reach a certain level an inability to trust, to give, and to yield a little is also evident. Adult guidance in all forms is rejected, social alienation is almost complete, and to risk self-destruction is more attractive than to invest effort and risk failure. Such people habitually see themselves as victims, transgressed against at every turn, but are unable to identify accurately its source. They have an inability to be objective and tolerant and, as indicated above, many are preoccupied with power and violence. A tough facade is their only protection and rational behaviour is almost impossible. In adults the same fear and impotence exposes a latent desire for personal authoritarian power and an attraction to dogmatic ideologies and conspiracy theories. These behaviours in adolescents and adults should not, however, be mistaken as independence or freedom. There is more to independence and freedom than merely reacting against authority or clinging to power and certainty. It is the absence of freedom, the absence of a sense of control, that creates a desire for power. But power is not freedom. Power is control over others, not control over our own minds and lives. Thinking for themselves is the very thing such people fail to do.

To achieve significant success a person must be fiercely loyal to their own judgments and vision. But whether or not we live according to our own judgments is also an ethical question. It is whether we take our lives in our own hands and take responsibility for them or whether we either abandon our own judgments or, more often, simply fail to make our own judgments. To do either of the latter inevitably means to accept someone else’s judgments and views, and to simply react against a view is to adopt another view by default. These adopted views, then, represent authorities to which we cling. Others’ judgments may, of course, inform our own or even be relied upon in specific instances, for example when we ride in a plane. But this reliance should remain a working hypothesis, an active judgment that is always

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<sup>2</sup> See – Ericsson, K. A. and Charness, N. ‘Expert performance: Its Structure and Acquisition’, and Howe, M. J. A., Davidson, J. W. and Sloboda, J. A. ‘Innate Talents: Reality or Myth?’ both in Ceci, S. J. and Williams, W. M. 1999, *The Nature-Nurture Debate: The Essential Readings*. Malden, Mass: Blackwell.

open to question rather than the abandonment of judgment. Of course, our own judgments will not always be right, but if they are made in freedom they will always be active and open to reason and correction.

Confidence to imagine life for ourselves, confidence to make our own judgments about what we can do, what we should do, what life is and what it might be, and to live according to those judgments, should not be confused with arrogance. Neither should a failure to do so be confused with humility. Confidence implies a willingness to question and the courage to say, “we don’t know”. Arrogance is to refuse to question because we *fear* we do not know. It is to assert, or to assume, we have certainty. Confidence opens the door to knowledge; arrogance closes it. But to make our own judgments is also logically necessary if we are to display any discrimination at all. We assess other’s judgments in the *light* of our own. To develop and live by our own judgments is the only rational and responsible way to live and even though this is a fundamental principle of liberal education, it is unrecognised and undermined by the factory system. Only under the most controlled conditions and within the narrowest of confines is even an expression of opinion called for. In such a system teachers cannot help but value obedience, belief and conformity.

There is a logic that flows like a mudslide into bog. The more “scientific” and “tolerant” a society becomes the further it slides. If there is always a scientific explanation for individual behaviour waiting to be found, then people can be neither free nor responsible. Therefore, there is no point in believing things can be different or trying to bring about change. Vision, hope and a sense of control over our own lives are illusions. The irony is that if an individual or society adopts this belief, very great consequences follow. It leads inexorably to impotence and despair. The converse is also true. The greater the sense of control an individual has, the greater the motivation. If our education system excludes freedom and responsibility, if it discourages people from developing and living according to their own judgments, and if it inculcates a belief that coercion is necessary due to an individual inadequacy that has been scientifically demonstrated, then impotence and despair are inevitable. The earlier four points identified as necessary for learning place personal vision and motivation at the centre and clarify how and why the factory system impairs learning. Schools fail to recognise the importance of freedom, the importance of having a sense of control over our own lives. They fail to recognise that both the aim and the process of education are more about seeing than about knowing, more about having new eyes than collecting information. Yet, it is also clear there is a major role for both teachers and schools.

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What, then, is the role of teachers? How else could schools operate? Many natural learners believe a school should operate like an extended library service, offering resources, structured courses on demand, organised access to all parts of the community, a child minding service if required and home visits to encourage and support families if appropriate. It should provide guidance, stimulation, encouragement and counselling. It should exude enthusiasm, confidence and trust. (Like freedom, trust is not neglect.) It should be characterised by a love of debate and

diversity and should be a place where people feel free, equal, respected and safe no matter what their homes are like. Teachers and schools, clearly, have a role to play on all four points characterised above as necessary for learning. It may sound expensive but a system that does not constantly operate against resistance, hostility and sabotage is far more efficient than one that does.

A number of administrative problems would evaporate. The first is the conflict between those who feel more discipline is required and those who feel more student control is required. The focus of attention would not be the punishment of those who do wrong - with 'wrong' defined primarily to maintain teachers' power and the rebel, therefore, often cast as the hero. It would be the energetic protection of people's freedom. In schools at present there is not enough discipline to protect freedom, and not enough freedom to engender discipline.

The practice of defining, classifying and labelling students could no longer be imposed. The need to predict "learning styles" and analyse "natural abilities" would evaporate. And the questions of whether or not to stream and whether or not to mainstream people with special needs would not exist. Anyone would be free to sit in any class. It is often forgotten that the factory system is a lock-out system just as much as a lock-in system. Each class would cater for a certain interest at a certain level, take it or leave it. What those classes are and how they are run would, within limits, be determined by demand. Students' freedom to learn at their own level and in their own style would be protected. It would not be interfered with by coercive teachers who would not have that power, disruptive students who would instantly be excluded, or students with other needs because in that class they would not be catered for. A voluntary system gives both force and moral authority to exclusion but a compulsory system renders exclusion impotent, if not rewarding, and undermines moral authority. A voluntary system also makes exclusion less necessary.

The objection will be raised that many people wish they had been forced to learn and practise this or that when they were young. But it is easy to wish we had all sorts of knowledge, skills and qualifications *now*. This objection looks rather like the glib childhood wish - "I want to be a famous swimmer" - viewed from the other end of childhood - "I wish I *was* a famous swimmer". When someone wishes that their previous wishes had been overridden caution is justified. But perhaps it was stimulation, opportunity or guidance that was lacking rather than coercion. Different patterns of stimulation, more flexible opportunities or clearer guidance may have made coercion irrelevant.

It might be said that if the system is voluntary some parents would not encourage their kids to participate and many parents would provide little education of value themselves. Most parents would brainwash their children in their own opinions and beliefs and deride or disregard others. Tolerance, understanding and the ideals of a liberal education would rarely be achieved. The danger of social fragmentation would be increased. And what about the anti-social types who, for religious or environmental reasons, see society as corrupting and irredeemable? And who would maintain standards? Surely popular nonsense would be elevated to the status of authority? And isn't it true that ignorance is more often associated with arrogance and dogmatism than with humility and openness, and doesn't this bode ill for the popular recognition of true expertise? Won't it give free rein to crackpots, exploiters

and the predatory free marketeers who are always barking at the gate? Don't most people see education as nothing more than primary school education followed by job training and aren't they reluctant to learn anything they won't "use"? Wouldn't a home education amount to nothing more than a random collection of general knowledge and lack the advantages, and even the knowledge, of academic disciplines? Isn't it putting the rights of the parents above the rights of the child? Can stimulation and exposure be guaranteed without coercion? How would we free people from their assumptions and show them new ways to see the world if they're not looking for them and don't want them? How will there be progress? Natural learning sounds very idealistic, it might be said, but clearly people are not ready for such an ideal and, in any case, society is structured now so that we don't have that choice. We must keep up with social trends and expectations and school is an important part of growing up in our society. That school is good is surely one of the assumptions we need to keep.

The principle that will liberate us from this quagmire is consistency. We cannot defend the values of a free society and a liberal education – freedom, equality, respect, independence, responsibility and reason<sup>3</sup> – if our behaviour is inconsistent with them. 'Authority' in the sense of expertise should not rely on 'authority' in the sense of power. We must protect children from exploiters without infringing their freedom as much as, and more obviously so, than these people wish to. If we are consistent in the application of these values their meaning will be enlivened, their power to motivate will be re-established, and hostility to school will be neutralised. The only people it will leave unhappy are those who believe tolerance and diversity, themselves, constitute an imposed dogma. Even though it is a common assumption, freedom and respect do not imply "nothing matters" or "anything goes". Coercion is not the only way to communicate values, provide guidance or achieve exposure. Without going to the extremes of advertising agencies, our efforts can be very up-front and when respect flows in both directions adult guidance is a significant force. The structure of public funding could also provide guidance.

If parents do not play their role, natural learners believe the community as a whole should encourage and support them to do so rather than take it from them. The fear that parents are inadequate for the job ignores the observation that it is family values and commitment that foster meaning. Natural learners wish to counter the surrender of responsibility by parents and the contradictions between home and school that exist in so many children's lives. They do not believe consistency should or can be achieved by enforcing conformity or by encouraging parental dissimulation. They do not claim all family cultures are of equal value and they do not necessarily agree with the practices of other home educating families. But natural learners do believe a family's culture should not be taken from it by force, no matter how much we personally dislike it. They believe the rights of the parents come before the rights of the state. They believe the community should provide what parents do not - to the extent it can do so without coercion - and that the community has a coercive role only in clear cases of abuse or neglect. Studies show that home educated students (not specifically natural learners) out-perform school students both academically and

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<sup>3</sup> That is, 'reason' in the sense of thinking and judging for oneself as opposed to accepting authority and tradition. It is a meaning that includes imagination, emotion, intuition, fantasy, passion, meaning and art.

socially. One reason they do so is not because home educating parents are, on average, more educated but because they are, on average, more committed and consistent. This commitment and consistency is not an accident or an unfortunate distortion of the statistics, it is an important part of what home educators are promoting and supporting.

But change is difficult. Winners always like the game no matter what the game is, and in education it is the winners who make the decisions about its future. Further, the problems of schooling develop only slowly. In a child's early years school is seductive and relatively harmless. By the time the problems surface the source cannot easily be identified and the early years still cast their warm glow. But more often the problems themselves are unrecognised. The parents' view of their child's potential and, to a large extent, their view of human nature itself have been designed to accommodate the outcomes of the factory system.

There are two ways we can attempt to bring about change and raise the efficiency and status of education in the community. We can attempt to make the factory model more efficient. We can make it more coercive and segregated, more uniform and standardised, more controlled and regulated, more exclusive and competitive. We can make the production line longer at both ends. We can make assessment more important and continue to limit the meaning of 'education' to knowledge and skills that are easily assessable. We can rely more and more on experts and specialists and encourage the belief they are indispensable. We can give teaching the appearance of greater and greater complexity and sophistication and increasingly reduce the autonomy of teachers. We can call pedagogy a science, see teaching as a performance and believe parents are largely irrelevant. We can attempt to create a system of education that is not only "parent proof" but one that is also "teacher proof". Some may even attempt to replace teachers with machines. And we can increase the public relations effort as dissatisfaction and frustration increase.

Or, we can reject as flawed the assumptions that underlie this model. We can make education open, voluntary, accessible, diverse and personal. We can see learning as the straightforward activity it is. We can encourage students to listen to themselves before they listen to teachers or experts. We can provoke less hostility and resentment. We can behave consistently with its stated aims of freedom, equality, respect and reason. We can see teaching as a relationship and see that relationship as important. We can support parents to play their role and see education not as a package delivered by experts or a number of packages selected off a shelf but as a lifelong activity and one that is as much a part of life as breathing.

The two approaches have long been contending. In fact, records of complaints about coercive teachers and meaningless rote learning go back to 2000 BCE. The factory system is just a modern refinement of the traditional authoritarian approach to education. Unfortunately, it continues to be the preferred approach. Indeed, like the astronomer in Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* who believes he needs to manage the stars and the seasons, the desire to manage naturally occurring phenomena now appears to be an escalating anxiety. Schools believe they have plumbed the forces that shape human behaviour and human performance. They devour at an unprecedented rate exciting new programs that promise to manage self-esteem, self-motivation and independence. If reflection or meaning is said to be wanting then it too will be

incorporated into the management plan and slotted into the timetable. Whether it is argued in their defence that schools are now enlightened and have overcome their past faults or that schools have only recently lost their way, the factory system itself appears too entrenched to be questioned.

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Schools believe the problems they face are created outside the school grounds. They believe they are either created by others or are an inevitable consequence of human biology. Natural learners hold a different view. They believe that although the factory model of schooling is excellent at providing resources and exposure, it creates an environment that has an adverse effect on learning and behaviour. They believe the unstated assumptions of the hidden curriculum undermine the objectives of the written curriculum and that unstated assumptions are communicated more powerfully than clearly stated advice. Whether or not the school is a nice school with good teachers is irrelevant. The problems remain the same. Natural learning itself is not about protecting children from unpleasant people or unpleasant realities; it is about protecting them from an artificial and overprotective system. It is a system that fails to provide opportunity for students to believe in themselves, to take responsibility and to control their own lives.

That schooling and education are undifferentiated has two unfortunate consequences. The first is that schooling, for many, inoculates against a love of learning and a resultant indifference or hostility to school that is passed on to the next generation includes an indifference or hostility to education. The second is that those in authority invariably assume the remedy to this unhappy state is more coercive schooling rather than more education. They maintain this view even though for perhaps ten years of the child's life coercive schooling has produced nothing but appalling results. These authorities cannot see that coercive schooling is the problem, not the solution.

People do want to understand the world around them and control their own lives but we cannot support the former without supporting the latter. The "scientific" management of education by experts and authorities backed by the coercive power of the state can support neither well. It is creating an epidemic of meaninglessness, impotence, dependence and irresponsibility. Science, instead of a philosophy of doubt, reason and hope, a philosophy motivated by wonder and humility, has become for many a new source of certainty and cynicism, and a justification for coercion. The modern world has largely forgotten that science and reason are inventions of the imagination and that the imagination continually guides and changes our ideas about them. In a desire for certainty lies a temptation to reduce the world to scientific, literal, infallible "facts" that are both independent of interpretation and not subject to value judgments. But science is not an accumulation of infallible facts or eternal truths. Progress usually involves the overturning of scientific paradigms. In the anthropological sense of 'myth', the concept of the production process is the great myth of the Industrial Age. As a paradigm in education it needs to be overturned.



It is popularly thought that a free person motivated entirely by pleasure would never engage in education. Education, it is believed, requires discipline. But the mind is integral to pleasure. Pleasure and our perception and understanding of the world are inseparable. Meaning has an important influence on performance because it defines pleasure. A person who appears disciplined to others may appear hedonistic to themselves. To the ancient Greeks, the word 'school' (*scholé*) meant leisure or recreation. Natural learners know that to limit pleasure to immediate, self-interested or physical pleasure is a form of self-incarceration. To take control of our own lives and to develop and live according to our own judgments is not only our first responsibility, it is also our greatest pleasure. It motivates us to understand the world around, to experiment with different ways of imagining it, to develop our own ideas about what life is and what it might be, and to communicate with others who do or have done this in the past. It liberates us from our own time and place. Rather than merely job training and socialisation, education for liberation and transcendence has always been regarded as the highest goal of education. That it requires a gift or discipline is an illusion. Instead, it requires vision and can only be achieved when sought for its own sake in an environment of freedom, equality, respect and reason.

Like pleasure, freedom also depends on the mind more than the body. A person can be physically free yet feel impotent or, indeed, be totally controlled. The freedom to *do* what we want without the freedom to *be* what we want, the freedom to define ourselves, is not freedom at all. The factory model of schooling has institutionalised knowledge. Knowledge is defined and controlled by people other than ourselves and has become almost a form of private property. But the factory model of schooling has also institutionalised people and taken away their right of self-definition. To escape this, to reclaim the vast reservoir of human knowledge and experience, to reclaim our ability to discover and create knowledge for ourselves, but more, to reclaim our right to define and create *ourselves*, liberates the parents as well as the children.

Learning in our family is not schoolwork. It is not a distinct activity added to our lives, not a burden or obligation, not someone else's responsibility, and not a high-minded but unrealistic ideal. It is a source of pleasure and the natural consequence of freedom. Someone has said, "the world is your only classroom and you are your only teacher". Despite the value of teachers and mentors, that remains the best brief statement of natural learning I know.

John Logan  
2002