



Taking Education Seriously

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 13 July, 2004 - 02:46

This editorial first appeared in TCS 24.



One characteristic that TCS shares with conventional educational theory is that both *take education seriously*. In both cases, education is considered to be important enough to take precedence over virtually everything else in the life of a child or family: schoolchildren have to attend *all day, every day*, whether this is convenient for the parents or not. Citizens, whether they have children or not, have to pay a substantial proportion of their income to maintain an ‘educational’ system. If parents have been working all night to fulfil an order from their most important client, they nevertheless have to get their child to school on time, one way or another. If they want to punish the child by ‘grounding’ him, or depriving him of TV, or making him do extra chores, or wear a beetroot on his head, or any other nasty fantasy that they wish to devise — that’s fine — *provided* that it does not deprive him of even a single minute of ‘education’. Thus nothing outside the sacred sphere of ‘education’ is allowed to interfere with anything inside; but ‘education’ is allowed to encroach, wherever necessary, on the rest of life: for instance, a school can impose homework or detentions as an absolute requirement, without reference to the importance of whatever other activities they may be displacing: education takes priority.

This is good. Indeed, there is only one thing wrong with this conventional view: it classifies as ‘education’ things that are largely irrelevant to, and often tragically destructive of, the genuine growth of knowledge and creativity in the minds of the young. But while rejecting those errors, alternative styles of education (such as non-coercive ones) must continue to assign education that same overriding priority if they are to be effective. All too often they don’t, and aren’t.

Take the idea that instead of going to school every day, children should ‘follow their own interests’. Well, if this is the idea the parents are following then they must be serious about it; they must make every effort to facilitate this interest-following all day and every day, because if the children are not given the means and the freedom to follow their own interests, then what exactly is going to be the driving force of their education?

At first glance, perhaps, this is obvious. And yet a little reading of any ‘unschooling’ literature or discussion forum reveals that many parents who ostensibly take the interest-led approach to education are simply not taking their children’s education seriously enough.

Some of them are simply neglectful – leaving their children to their own devices without offering them enough attention, ideas, resources, encouragement, and so on. But a much more frequent mistake in ‘alternative’ forms of education is for parents to draw an artificial line between activities which constitute Education and those which (they think) don’t. They are willing help their children to follow their interests in such areas as mathematics, geography and history, but they have no qualms about making their children do chores, preventing them from watching TV, or making them wait for help if the parents are ‘busy’.

All the wonderful things such parents say about interest-led education mean very little unless they actually do help their children to follow their interests wherever they lead. If the children are going to run into a wall of parental intransigence every time their interests take them over the artificial 'Education' line, their learning will be curtailed and their intellectual development sabotaged at every turn.

Consider the following example, from an article on learning to read, by Marnie Ko, editor of *Nurturing* magazine:

[Parents] need to be willing to let go of all the ideas they have about how children should learn to read and just let them read because it's enjoyable. Above all, when the children finally do want to read, they need to let them be to read. The dishes and chores can wait!

One can almost hear unschoolers cheering in agreement! So far, we are cheering too.

But how committed is Marnie Ko *really* to her idea that 'children should learn to read' because it's enjoyable' and 'Above all let them be to read'?

For if the dishes and chores can wait for however long it takes for the children to complete the sacred activity of reading, but chores are nevertheless compulsory, it follows that chores *cannot* wait for *anything* that the children would prefer to do instead: only reading (or other Education) gives them that privilege. But then it also follows that children who are currently reading are faced with a coercive choice: if they continue to read, they will be spared chores, but if they go to play with Lego, say, they will be forced to do them. Similarly, if chores are imminent, the children can avoid them by starting to read, but not by saying that they want to do some Lego. Presumably if they read until well past bedtime, they will be spared the chores until tomorrow. Thus, since they can escape bedtime, chores and other unpleasant things by reading, *they are being pressurised to read*. Contrary to the parents' intentions, the children *are* now under coercion in the sphere of reading.

Our point here is not merely that such parents are inconsistent or hypocritical. It is that they are switching off the very engine that they are relying on to power their children's education, namely the children's intrinsic motivations. A 'child-led' system of education that suppresses intrinsic motivations can no more produce results than could a conventional 'curriculum-led' system that abandoned the extrinsic motivations of reward and punishment.

It follows that freedom in the matter of academic study is inseparable from freedom in the matter of chores, bedtime and everything else. If parents want their children to be free to follow their interests, this can only be achieved by adopting the TCS approach: the children's interests must be given encouragement, priority, and a genuinely free rein.

You might like to read the next article in this series, by clicking [here](#).

to post comments

Comments

Good points

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 13 July, 2004 - 15:40

Most of the "radical" unschoolers I've read would agree wholeheartedly, and do not advocate requiring chores or limiting tv in the slightest. There is often much discussion about this issue on unschooling lists between those who do take children and education seriously, and those who still want some kind of control over their children's activities even if they call themselves "unschoolers." Just fyi.

to post comments

la de da

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 6 August, 2004 - 03:19

I wonder if there are more unschoolers who advocate banning TV than limiting it. Amusing thought.

- Elliot Temple

to post comments

This is something of a side note, but...

Submitted by Relsqui (not verified) on 3 December, 2004 - 06:13

Although I'm reluctant in general to complain about how I was raised (on the grounds that I like the way I turned out), I think I would have had a much happier childhood had my parents heard of unschooling before I was seventeen.

As it was, I took matters into my own hands and dropped out of high school. I was lucky, though--two years later I have a CHSPE certificate and I'm studying anything and everything I can think of, both on my own time and at a community college.

One of those subjects is architecture. I wish my parents still had my old legos! :)

to post comments

True

Submitted by BORED (not verified) on 26 January, 2005 - 11:11

what i do to help is think of the teacher bald well, my friend does anyway, i once said to the teacher that i 'NEEDED A POO' to liven things up a bit and guess what it worked! i think we all have a detention for messin about now!

to post comments

Unschooling is just silly

Submitted by [elispot \(not verified\)](http://www.elispot.cn) (<http://www.elispot.cn>) on 4 February, 2005 - 17:36

"Unschooling" seems to be propagated by individuals who know little or nothing about education or cognitive development. It's also remarkably naive. Let children simply pursue their own interests, and we'll have a nation of people with expertise in Britney Spears and Pokemon characters.

to post comments

what happens when...

Submitted by Lisa (not verified) on 27 February, 2005 - 13:12

How would this approach work for a child with a learning disability? A child who doesn't pick up reading easily might decide to minimize the loss and focus on other things, and never develop the confidence or skills to read -- thus limiting what she or he can learn in the long run.

to post comments

While

Submitted by pura vida (not verified) on 31 March, 2005 - 17:06

I agree with it, not everyone is comfortable enough with the idea - I myself wasn't confident enough to leave the system to be on my own. I would encourage people to look into it more thoughtfully.

to post comments

Unschooling is silly?

Submitted by julesmiel on 15 April, 2005 - 15:28

In reply to elispot, do you really believe that children who pursue their own interests will find nothing more interesting to explore than Britney Spears or Pokemon characters?

I'd like to suggest that the reason many of us spend time on pursuits that could be viewed as mindless or worthless is that we are weary of being coerced all day at school or work and just need to find a way to decompress. Once the stress of coercion has been removed, I think you would find that people (not just young people) would have the time and space to become more textured, deep, interesting individuals. It's food for thought, at least.

to post comments

children who

Submitted by [dissertation \(not verified\)](http://www.perfectwriting.co.uk/dissertation/) (<http://www.perfectwriting.co.uk/dissertation/>) on 7 June, 2009 - 20:12

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to post comments

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