



Unschooling And Schooling as a Continuum

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 19 June, 2005 - 10:38

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by **Sarah Fitz-Claridge** (<http://www.fitz-claridge.com/>)



A poster wrote:

I see unschool vs. schooling as a continuum. On one side there is "School at Home" – following a prepackaged curriculum to the letter, and on the other is pure unschooling – completely child-led. I, and most of the people I know, fall somewhere in between.

This continuum may be true, but it misses the point, in my view. Or perhaps I am misunderstanding your use of the term "child-led." On one end of the continuum, there would be a child who completely directs himself with no input from anyone else. This misses the point that there is a fundamental philosophical difference underlying different approaches.

Those who impose "education" on their children do not understand that learning always starts with a problem – a problem *in the mind of the learner* – a problem *to him*, and that the learner then seeks a solution, makes conjectures that might solve the problem, tests the conjectures (in other words, thinks about each conjecture, to see whether it fits in with everything and solves the problem), abandons those conjectures which the testing has refuted, and thus arrives at a preferable problem situation (with new but preferable problems).

The issue is not whether or not the parent brings home some books ("directing the child", as you might see that?) but whether this "direction" (which I would not myself want to call "direction") causes the child an intractable internal conflict. If I bring home a load of books and in some way make my child feel unable to refuse to look at them even though he wants to refuse, that is coercion, and diminishes the child's creativity (by which I mean ability to learn). But if I simply bring home these books, no matter how "educational" they are, if my child is not put into a state of conflict, there is no problem. If I were to bring home a textbook, but for some inexplicable reason my child really loved it, that would be fine (I am assuming that the child has many many options, otherwise it might be that their interest in the textbook is purely because they have no other options of interest). So I don't really see much value in this continuum of directed-learning-to-child-led, because it does not seem to capture the important epistemological difference.

The above poster graciously responded:

In my model, "child-led" would refer to all learning being initiated by "problems" brought up by the child. Input from others is solely in response to the desires/interests of the child.

I believe I understand, your point concerning the difference between coercive schooling and supportive direction, and it is an important point to make. I think, though, that some of your ideas do fit into my idea of a continuum.

I am not sure about this – because “direction” implies to me at least a hint of coercion, and I should not wish to endorse that. My problem with this continuum may become apparent after this next bit:

Sarah wrote: “if I simply bring home these books, no matter how ‘educational’ they are, if my child is not put into a state of conflict,…”

This is what I would see just past the completely child-led level, where parents present books and ideas to the children as suggestions that the children may accept or refuse, as well as following up on the child's interests.

So you would put me somewhere between child-led and “School at Home” (near the child-led end, but not at the extreme end of it). The problem with that is that it does not distinguish between the “direction” (which as I said, I do not accept is direction in the usual sense of the word in this context) I might engage in, and that of parents who bring home the same number of books, as it were, but who manipulate their children into reading them.

It does not highlight the difference in our ideas about how children learn and how they should be treated. It does not indicate anything about how the child herself experiences it (which thinking more in terms of coercion would) and it is not clear what you would consider the extreme “child-led” end. At what point, for example, does an ordinary family outing become “direction”? How do you distinguish between fully “child-led” and neglect? Presumably you can't think that parents should do nothing with their children that the children have not themselves suggested – otherwise it might look more like neglect than “child-led.”

Surely the important consideration is not whether, for instance, the parents engage in conversations with their children about subjects the children might not have known about before (but are very interested when the parent *does* talk to them), or whether the parent brings home a toy or book for them, which the children had not suggested (but which they are entirely free to reject or ignore), but whether there is any pressure – coercion or manipulation or whatever you want to call it – on the child to take up any of these things.? I can imagine a case that some would put on the extreme end of this continuum, but which I'd say is a coercive situation, because I'd be looking at education in its widest possible sense. We could have parents who think coercion is all right in certain circumstances on both ends of the continuum, with me somewhere on the continuum, thinking that coercion is harmful to the child. Do you see my problem with it?

Still, it is quite a novelty for me to be placed somewhere other than on the extreme end of whatever continuum is being proposed, so I'll have to save your message to quote at my critics when they accuse me of being “too extreme.” :-)

to post comments

Comments

I so much agree with you on

Submitted by Janet Stevens (not verified) on 14 December, 2008 - 00:30

I so much agree with you on the bringing home to many books, during my pregnancy I was too tired to read to my son, and it seems just a few books were better than a lot.

Thanks, Janet

to post comments

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