

'SMSC – OPTIONAL EXTRAS OR HIDDEN OPPORTUNITIES?'

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These reflections emerge from writing *Children's Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development - Primary and Early Years* (www.learningmatters.co.uk)

In the book I suggest some provocative, at times radical answers to the question of whether SMSC is, as it tends to be seen, like an optional extra, a slightly embarrassing relative overstaying their welcome to the party, or a look-out who can, if only we attend, help us see currently hidden opportunities for enhancing children's learning and their lives.

In September 1976, just over thirty years ago, I started teaching what would now be called a Year 4 class in a suburban school in Hertfordshire. October 2006 marked a more famous thirtieth anniversary: the speech at Ruskin College when Prime Minister James Callaghan called for a Great Debate about education.

Whether the Great Debate ever really happened is a matter for conjecture. It seemed largely to bypass the teaching profession. It oversimplified what the desired outcomes of education should be, forgetting that education always, inevitably, has multiple and contested purposes. And it took little notice of the insights of both research and practitioners about learning and young children's learning in particular. But it marked a turning point in terms of educational policy, providing the rationale, for good and ill, for the 1988 Education Act, and much that has followed.

The years since 1976 have seen massive social and cultural change, spurred both by technological innovation - especially in terms of communication - and the media, and by the movement of people. Still, despite increased affluence, too many children still grow up in poverty, not only economic but in terms of aspiration. Our culture, increasingly dominated by consumerism and individualism, places insufficient value on learning, taking for granted what others less fortunate recognise as one of the greatest gifts of all.

Communities have become increasingly fragmented and some old certainties more fragile, with a pick'n'mix approach to values. In a world that is a faster, more confusing and complex place, where sustained affiliation, let alone affiliation to a set of beliefs, is somewhat alien to many people, schools are even more important in helping children, especially the vulnerable, make sense of their lives. School are beacons of hope for those adrift in a sea of uncertainty.

The time before the 1988 Act - before the National Curriculum, Ofsted, Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, devolved funding - seems, in retrospect, remarkably innocent, most of all in relation to individual teachers' autonomy. Let us not indulge in a sentimental nostalgia for a tradition of primary education which was in many ways romantic and naive. Many children, especially in urban areas, did not get a good enough deal. Some important skills were taught unsystematically or hardly at all. There was too little progression and pace in many respects.

However, that tradition embodied an understanding of the needs of young children and teachers' practical wisdom that the mechanistic, outcomes-based approach now dominating our schools underplays. Those in the early years have never lost that, but it is time for a much more profound debate about the aims of education and the consequences of our knowledge of learning, drawn both from tradition and new disciplines such as neuroscience.

I am troubled that, as teachers of young children, we have lacked an intellectual, research-based rationale for our work. Our lack of confidence has led to a collusion in the myth that teaching is simple. Our fear of complexity has resulted in not only content but pedagogy being, effectively, dictated. I don't exclude myself from this criticism. Indeed, when I left headship after nine years and started my doctorate I knew nothing, or next to nothing, about some thinkers whose work has subsequently enriched and underpinned my thinking and which my new book tries to introduce to those starting out in teaching now: Jerome Bruner, Margaret Donaldson and Guy Claxton to name but three.

I am going to highlight nine themes I have started to explore in the book, from the standpoint of young children's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Each starts with a somewhat bald, and bold assertion.

1 The aims of education are much wider, and subtler, than the current obsession with 'standards', based on a narrow notion of intellectual ability, separate from values. Of course, the ability to read and write fluently and to be numerate is an important part, but only a part, of personal development. SMSC deals with the most profound aspects of what it is to be human, who we are and who we may become. Spiritual development is about a search for what gives life meaning, the most basic questions of who am I? where do I fit in? why am I here? stretching way beyond, though overlapping with, the boundaries of religion.

I suspect that our culture has been seduced by the search for happiness, which, though desirable, is not an end in itself. John Hull*, reflecting from a viewpoint of Christian faith on going blind, writes: 'My blindness was the result of thousands of tiny accidental happenings. These were not a 'path' and I was not being led along it towards blindness. Looking back, I can see the chain of events, and it looks a bit like a path, but any trackless waste is laid out with paths once it has been crossed. When you look ahead, there is no path but only an infinite number of possibilities... Meaning is conferred after the event... The most important thing in life is not happiness but meaning. Happiness is the product of chains of accident which tend towards our well-being. Blindness does not make me happy. I did not choose it, nor was it inflicted upon me. Nevertheless, as an accidental event, it could become meaningful.'

2 Teaching is inherently a moral enterprise. The danger in such a statement is that of preaching and of seeming strident or holier-than-thou. But teaching is not value-neutral, right down to the smallest and apparently least significant action.

Rowan Williams** writes: 'moral education is neither the imparting of rules in a vacuum nor the discussion of how young people think they decide issues, but is bound up with the roles and responsibilities actually learned in the corporate life of an institution. .. It is no use at all

to pontificate about the need for 'values' to be communicated if the entire style and pace of an institution allow no room for understanding of learning in their diversity, or if the institution moves more and more towards a monochrome version of what learning is; if the institution sees its task as the - increasingly hurried and anxious - job of passing on quantifiable information and measurable outcomes at the expense of reflection on the character of its common life as educative'.

The role of schools as moral communities becomes all the more important as children grow up in a macro-culture where moral considerations hardly enter the radar; and especially for those growing up in micro-cultures with too little structure and example to guide them on how to act and who to become.

3 Learning is a social process, rooted in relationships and reciprocity, rather than a quest for independence or autonomy. Culture, in Terry Eagleton's*** words, 'not only what we live by. It is, also, in great measure, what we live for: affection, relationship, memory, kinship, place, community, emotional fulfilment, intellectual enjoyment, a sense of ultimate meaning.'

Culture matters, first, because we become human by engaging with other people, by belonging, although at times we need also to be alone. Second, because learning to experience, to welcome and to learn from diversity challenges a culture which worships homogenization and fears difference. And, most immediately for teachers, because the values we live, the qualities we deem worthwhile, the environment we create, the mood we encourage, the expectations we have matter more than the content of the curriculum. It is not that content is unimportant, but that climate trumps curriculum, to borrow Deborah Fraser's phrase; so that a culture of learning depends on appropriate relationships, secure but challenging environments, and high but achievable expectations.

4 Identity is always malleable, so that our intelligence, our abilities and our beliefs are not fixed, but early experience is especially influential, particularly in how we relate to other people and regulate our emotional responses. While there has been a theoretical recognition of both horns of this paradox, our cultural narrative still sees intelligence largely as fixed and to be valued only within narrow confines. The allocation of resources in education, with its implications for prestige, recruitment and career structure, is still skewed away from early childhood, when the chances of making the most difference and the range of demands are the greatest.

5 Understanding is constructed, not delivered. While it may appear that information can be passed on pre-packaged, learners always have to incorporate new learning from existing into new narratives. So, the teacher must always strive to establish the learner's understanding and start from there. This means that questioning, differential responses and assessment for learning are central to pedagogy. Of course, some techniques and specific programmes are valuable, but we must be wary of the quick-fix at the expense of the subtler aspects of teachers' understanding of, and reflection on, pedagogy.

6 Learning is not entirely, or even primarily, a conscious process. Young children, especially, learn much more deeply from what they experience, what they see and what they do than from what they hear. The most profound learning bypasses consciousness, operating through the emotions. As learners, we must seek to recognise, to regulate and to trust emotions. As teachers, we must work not only at the conscious level, but allow space for the imagination, for the symbolic, for the creative. Personal narratives are created both through language and by other routes into learning - example, habituation, play, activity - rather than what is consciously taught.

Three implications for teachers come to mind. First, that what we do, how we relate and how we act matters more than what we say. Second, let us inject passion, humour, stories, individuality into our teaching. Third, that we must re-assert the importance of the creative potential of the arts and the humanities - art, music, drama, physical education, literature - as what helps to make us human; the problem being, of course, that these are far less open to adult control than a strategy-led, delivery approach. But we have to learn to let go.

7 We have a curriculum that is not fit for purpose. By overplaying the importance of content, of listening and adult intentions, we under-trust the child as learner and limit the diversity of routes into learning. By over-emphasizing delivery, we underestimate the coiled power of a young child's learning potential. By separating learning into little boxes, we fall into the trap of reductionism. Rather than enjoying a varied and healthy diet as espoused by Jamie Oliver, young children are too often offered the educational equivalent of turkey twizzlers and fizzy drinks.

Let me enter a plea for direct, unmediated experience. As John Ruskin recognised, this and the opportunity to 'dwell on experience' is the basis of developing an aesthetic, a way of deciding what is beautiful or worthwhile. Without this, the result is, for many children, learned passivity when they need learning activity.

8 Children are not just little adults and childhood not only a preparation for the adult world. Children inhabit a world full of wonder, of mystery, of imagination, and play - until adults intervene to inhibit this. By our insistence on pace, on performance, and on pressure, we deny children the space they need, and we fail to recognise and to value the qualities which they have - and which are so often inhibited in adults - openness, curiosity, capacities for wonder and joy.

SMSC has the potential, in some respects, to raise 'standards', but more importantly to alter our conception of which standards are to be raised - drawing on Andrew Pollard's notion of there being two parallel paradigms, of attainment and development, the second of which needs far greater emphasis. Moreover, SMSC has radical implications for the whole trajectory of development, whereby we believe ourselves to be climbing the evolutionary ladder: a claim that appears fragile when we look at the trail of destruction, violence and injustice in the world. A little humility would not come amiss in listening to what some religious traditions call the prophetic voice of the child.

9 Unless teachers are motivated, and passionate, and energetic, and engaged, and creative, it is unlikely that children will be. Adult expectations are the keystone of children's aspirations. It is too easy to see teaching as about content rather than process, competences rather than conversations. I worry about teachers concerned about content not covered and burdened by a consequent sense of inadequacy. Unless the teacher engages with the child, there is a danger of disengagement from learning leading towards disaffection, however fantastic the planning or the technology.

This is a danger so much greater for children who find learning difficult and lack the external props that can support those more fortunate when the going gets tough. As learners we all require, at different times and in different contexts, both haven and challenge. As teachers, we too need haven and support, so let us nurture each other.

As soon a book is completed - especially one into which one invests a great deal of one's beliefs - some of its limitations become evident. Some were obvious in the writing, largely because of trying to write for a particular audience or constraints of space. While the first half seems to me to work well, the later chapters go into less detail about pedagogy and curriculum than I would have wished. Maybe that needs to be the subject of a further book. The role of parents and communities is less prominent than I would wish. And more work is needed on leadership in relation to SMSC.

A headteacher colleague wrote to me recently, 'I think the more parents understand that schools are there to encourage and support children to be "people" - respectful, loving, caring, non-violent, co-operative, peaceful and truthful - and that is their prime objective, then "standards" automatically become a secondary issue. I hope your book persuades the new generation of teachers that this is the case.'

'Optional Extras or Hidden Opportunities?' By now, maybe, the question answers itself.

References:

*Hull, J (2001) *On Sight and Insight- a journey into the world of blindness*. Oxford: Oneworld

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