

14. The question of damage limitation:

and can 'organic and toxin-free' learning be a reality?

Every parent is a home-based educator until children reach the age of 5. After that, all parents are still home-based educators, although some are full-time, whereas others use schools for part of the time, during the weekdays, on those weeks the schools are open. For those who either choose to use schools, or necessity forces them to, I want to open up the question of damage limitation.

I had to face this question when, some years ago now, my son reached the age of 5. His mother, Shirley, was an experienced infants teacher, and I was an experienced secondary teacher and teacher educator. With our insider knowledge, we both understood the serious limitations of compulsory mass schooling, whether state or private, and set out to offer him a home-based education alternative. Ironically, he elected to try school, so his parents had to turn their attention to mounting a damage limitation programme.

Why was this necessary? A few years ago I wrote an article entitled "Schooling can seriously damage your education". I now think I was too cautious and should have entitled it, "Schooling **will** damage your education". The only question in my mind is how much damage will be done and in which dimensions.

There is **some** good news about schooling, however, as Everett Reimer indicated when he wrote, "*some true educational experiences are bound to occur in schools. They occur however, **despite** school and not because of it.*" Some teachers manage, despite our domination riddled schooling system, to swim against the tide of restrictions and regulations, and create episodes of genuine humanity and genuine learning. I tried to be such a teacher and so did my wife Shirley. As my son put it, the good news was that he was able to find "bits of treasure in the wreck" of the schooling system, because of such teachers.

It is also true that the homes of some children are despotic or neglectful, so that even a coercive school provides a respite. Schools also provide a respite for parents from their children, so that they can pursue their careers, or whatever.

But the long-term effect of mass, compulsory coercive schooling is damage. As the New York prize-winning teacher, John Gatto put it, he was employed to teach bad habits. These ranged from bad intellectual habits, bad social habits, bad emotional habits, to bad moral and political habits. Neither the 'successful' pupils nor the 'unsuccessful' pupils escaped. For starters, he identified seven of these bad habits. I have mentioned them before, but I think they are worth repeating.

John Taylor Gatto recognised that what he was really paid to teach was an unwritten curriculum made up of seven ideas. The first was **confusion**. He was required to teach disconnected facts not meaning, infinite fragmentation not cohesion. The second basic idea was **class position**. Children were to be taught to know their place by being forced into the rigged competition of schooling. A third lesson was that of **indifference**. He saw he was paid to teach children not to care too much about anything. The lesson of bells is that no work is worth finishing: students never have a complete experience for it is all on the instalment plan.

The fourth lesson was that of **emotional dependency** for, by marks and grades, ticks and stars, smiles and frowns, he was required to teach children to surrender their wills to authority. The next idea to be passed on was that of **intellectual dependency**. They must learn that good people wait for an expert to tell them what to do and believe. The sixth idea is that of **provisional self-esteem**. Self-respect is determined by what others say about you in reports and grades; you are *told* what you are worth and self-evaluation is ignored. The final, seventh lesson is that **you cannot hide**. You are watched constantly and privacy is frowned upon.

The consequence of teaching the seven lessons is a growing indifference to the adult world, to the future, to most things except the diversion of toys, computer games, 'getting stoned' as the height of having a good time, and violence. School, Gatto concludes, is a twelve-year jail sentence where bad habits are the only curriculum truly learned. School 'schools' very well but it hardly educates at all. Indeed, Paul Goodman entitled his book *Compulsory Mis-education*. But all this is good preparation for being gullible to the other controlling institutions, such as universities, but especially television, a theme developed in Gatto's book, *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling*.

In contrast, home-based education can be seen as analogous to organic farming; a system with the toxins avoided. Our 'damage limitation', however, meant 'building up the immune system' to fight the toxins of the schooling system.

Other parents were puzzled as to why we saw what they regarded as 'good' schools, which today would no doubt get OFSTED approval, as 'educational impoverishment zones'. 'A good uniform means a good school', they declared. 'And probably a bad education based on uniformity', we responded. John Gatto had an explanation for this puzzled response: "*It is the great triumph of compulsory government monopoly mass-schooling that ... only a small number can imagine a different way to do things.*"

So what did our policy of damage limitation look like? The first item was a principle: we would never pretend the school was right when it was wrong. If it proved necessary and with our son's approval, we would take the trouble to challenge the school when it was in the wrong, even if this meant we were labelled 'nuisance', 'interfering', or 'bad' parents. Part of this principle was never to shirk a dialogue with our son about what was happening in school and its implications. Thus, when a teacher, unable to find a guilty party, punished the whole class, we pointed out that this was a common fascist procedure, but also why the authoritarian system pushed teachers into this corner.

The second item was a positive programme of activities to offset some of the bad habits John Gatto identified. To some extent, we just continued the programme of activities used between the ages of zero and five years, providing a learner-friendly environment that was personalised and democratic, stressing fun and happiness. This involved construction toys, board games, electronic games, watching TV programmes together, playing games in the garden or park - business as usual in fact.

We located out-of-school clubs and activities such as Judo groups, holiday soccer coaching courses, holiday table tennis events, and provided transport for groups of friends to go skating in the evening. One 'bit of treasure in the wreck' was the Local Education Authority's Saturday morning orchestra facility. This encouraged young musicians to gain experience with their own or with loaned instruments, in beginner ensembles and, eventually, to the

senior orchestra. The LEA also had an Outdoor Centre in Wales and an Arts Residential Centre which were sources of worthwhile week-long courses.

The local naturalist society had regular Sunday outings to gardens, arboretums, bird watching sites ranging from woodland, to moorland, to seashore - even to sewage farms where we could view birds such as black terns; all in the company of enthusiasts. On occasion, we found ourselves at the Gibraltar Point Field Station for a weekend of investigation where father gained 'brownie points' for being the first to notice a rare red-backed shrike. The 'I Spy' booklets were a useful cheap resource but another favourite purchase was the magazine, *The Puzzler*.

We organised our own day trips to seaside, to parks with fun-fairs, to houses, to cities and museums, to sporting events ranging from the local soccer and cricket teams to the world table tennis championships. There were National Car Shows and the Birmingham Show to experience. We involved ourselves in a local amateur dramatic society that welcomed children to help out backstage. Also, the family, including grandparents, would often come along to meet the families, when I was researching home-based education. There were package holidays abroad, to Sweden to visit friends and also to Spain.

Perhaps none of this seems all that remarkable, and families across the social range do some selection of these things, according to their means and inclinations. But we consciously saw all these activities as opportunities for purposive conversation and mutual learning and an antidote to the effects of schooling. We could try to provide holistic and integrated learning to offset the fragmented approach of the school, and use any opportunities to practice the democratic skills of negotiation, consultation, accommodation, and co-operation - the skills that authoritarian schools usually discount and discourage.

What was achieved? Well, perhaps partial success could be claimed. Just choosing to be there, transformed the experience. At seven years, our son was telling us that, 'school did not get to him like the others, because he had an escape tunnel ready and waiting'. At eleven, he went to the Open Day at the secondary school where 300 children from the feeder schools in the district were in attendance, but he was conscious of being the only one making a decision whether to go or not. The others were conscripts. Later, we saw the head teacher where my son informed him that he was giving the school a term's contract to see how things went. I came to realise that my son regarded the school in the same way that an anthropologist regards a tribe being studied; he was in the role of a participant observer.

The switch from school to further education college was eventually a considerable release from the domination of schooling, and independence of spirit and mind were better able to flourish. On the other hand, moving away to university meant that this institution just had a field day. The intellectual dependence Gatto talks about now asserted itself in the form of courses and modules requiring replication of approved material and rejecting any alternative or independent analysis as a threat to the authority of 'experts'. (During twenty years working in universities, this is what I observed happening as a matter of course, and pointing it out in committees was never well received.)

Is a damage limitation policy really necessary? And does every parent using schools need one? John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* (1859, p177) observed that:

"A general State Education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another, and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the dominant power in the government, whether this be a monarchy, an aristocracy, or a majority of the existing generation it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by a natural tendency to one over the body."

This seems to me to be just the opposite of an 'organic, toxin-free learning' outcome.

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