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Schooling: Liberation or Mind Control?

By Richard Heinberg

If there were no age-specific and obligatory learning institution, "childhood" would go out of production. The youth of rich nations would be liberated from its destructiveness, and poor nations would cease attempting to rival the childishness of the rich. If society were to outgrow its age of childhood, it would have to become livable for the young. The present disjunction between an adult society which pretends to be humane and a school environment which mocks reality could no longer be maintained.

- Ivan Illich, **Deschooling Society** (1970)

I hated school. I remember feeling that I was being indoctrinated, that the adults who were in charge of the institution were deliberately trying to make me stupid and servile. School was prison.

I recall being given an IQ test in the fifth grade. One of the first of the multiple-choice questions was: "Is a tomato a (a) fruit, (b) vegetable, or (c) neither of the above?" By that time in my school career I was well accustomed to providing expected answers instead of thinking for myself. But this question appeared deliberately confusing. I asked the teacher if I should give the true answer or the answer that best matched what I thought I was "supposed" to think. She said: "You mustn't ask questions during the test." I concluded that I should give conventional responses; consequently I succeeded in achieving an "average" IQ score.

After two years of college, spent mostly in an informal study of the neurological effects of cannabis sativa, I abandoned school for good. A few years later, after I'd gotten education out of my system, I began to read and learn.

I have few positive things to say about the schooling I received in the 1950s and '60s. There were good teachers, to be sure; but the system in which both teachers and students struggled to come to terms with one another was utterly deadening. Still, when I see the obstacles to self-discovery the children of today face, I think my generation had it easy by comparison. Television, dual-income families, the evaporation of opportunities for unstructured play, and generally grim prospects for the world's future must weigh heavily on young people's spirits these days.

Fortunately, there are a few compassionate souls who still care enough about the young to unmask, and find alternatives to, government factory-schools.

Nature and Nurture: Aboriginal Child-Rearing in North-Central Arnhem Land, by Annette Hamilton. (Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1981),

paperback.

Annette Hamilton is an anthropologist rather than an educator, and her book has almost nothing to do with Western schooling. But it is a good starting point for our discussion, because what she does is to examine carefully the patterns of parenting and learning among a group of people who until recently lived as gatherer-hunters. It's really unfortunate that this book is unavailable in the United States, because it provides an enlightening - and devastating - mirror for our civilized pedagogical practices.

After presenting the details of her research findings, Hamilton draws conclusions. She notes that while, for Europeans, the needs of the child are determined by "experts," in Aboriginal society "the role of the caretaker is to pay attention to the overt demands of the infant.... The infant cries, the caretaker feeds. When it is old enough, it grabs the breast or the food for itself. If it does not grab for it, it does not want it.... The Aboriginal model trusts the child's knowledge of its own states, both physical and emotional. When a three-year-old is tired someone will carry it. No one says 'Three-year-olds are old enough to walk.' In fact, no one makes generalizations about children at all. Each child is treated solely on the merits of its actual concrete situation at that moment." This sort of treatment tends to produce confident, secure, self-motivated adults. In contrast, according to Hamilton,

A sense of helplessness seems to be a feature characterising much of the modern world's literature and life. The emphasis on the material realm has created conditions whereby control over much of the 'natural' world has become second nature to humans, while those same material conditions have meant that infants, biologically much the same as infants 50,000 years ago, have increasingly been handled in less and less 'natural' ways, and as adults have come to feel less and less powerful in themselves....

At the very end of **Nature and Nurture**, Hamilton sadly concludes:

Present material conditions preclude any possibility of a completely 'natural' method of child-rearing since the methods are adapted to hunting and gathering conditions and if applied wholeheartedly to infants and children in modern urban environments would represent a danger to their survival, both for physical reasons and because most parents today have neither the time, the energy, nor the emotional resources to permit their children to exist in such an autonomous fashion.

Dumbing Us Down, by John Taylor Gatto (New Society, 1992), \$9.95, paperback; "Origins & History of American Compulsory Schooling," interview of John Gatto by Jim Martin, in *Flatland* #11 (1994).

The fact that John Taylor Gatto was the 1991 recipient of the New York State Teacher of the Year Award is remarkable, since what he has to say can be of little comfort to the educational bureaucracy. "It is time," he said in his speech at the award presentation, "that we squarely face the fact that institutional schoolteaching is destructive to children." The essence of Gatto's message is well summarized in the following excerpt from his book:

I've come to believe that genius is an exceedingly common human quality, probably natural to most of us. I didn't want to accept that notion - far from it - my own training in two elite universities taught me that intelligence and talent distributed themselves economically over a bell curve.... the trouble was that the unlikeliest kids kept demonstrating to me at random moments so many of the hallmarks of human excellence - insight, wisdom, justice, resourcefulness, courage, originality - that I became confused. They didn't do this often enough to make my teaching easy, but they did it often enough that I began to wonder, reluctantly, whether it was possible that being in school itself was what was dumbing them down. Was it possible that I had been hired not to enlarge children's power, but to diminish it? That seemed crazy on the face of it, but slowly I began to realize that the bells and the confinement, the crazy sequences, the age-segregation, the lack of privacy, the constant surveillance, and all the rest of the national curriculum of schooling were designed exactly as if

someone had set out to prevent children from learning how to think and act, to coax them into addiction and dependent behavior.

Bit by bit I began to devise guerrilla exercises to allow the kids I taught - as many as I was able - the raw material people have always used to educate themselves: privacy, choice, freedom from surveillance, and as broad a range of situations and human associations as my limited power and resources could manage. In simpler terms, I tried to maneuver them into positions where they would have a chance to be their own teachers and to make themselves the major text of their own education.

If compulsory schooling is such a lousy idea, why did it catch on? Gatto notes that "Modern schooling as we now know it is a by-product of 1848 and 1919, when powerful interests feared a revolution among our own industrial poor." Actually, the system was pioneered in Prussia in the early nineteenth century, then exported. In his interview in *Flatland*, Gatto traces how the American economic elite (led by men like Andrew Carnegie and J.P. Morgan) systematically promulgated the U.S. compulsory school system as a way of controlling the population so that it would present a minimal threat to the owners of the means of production, and instead form a docile, dependent work force. In 1776, 85% of Americans had independent livelihoods; by 1840 the number was still 70%. Today, of course, the idea that everyone should have a "job" (that is, that they should be employed by someone else) is considered self-evidently humanitarian. But only people whose self-will has been sufficiently domesticated can fit into the social-economic machine. It is our schools' purpose to make sure not only that young people are fitted for employment, but that they regard the status of being employed as necessary and as an ideal to strive for.

In order to accomplish their goal, Carnegie et al. realized that they would first have to do away with the one-room school. "The one-room school had a mixture of six or seven ages simultaneously," says Gatto in his *Flatland* interview. "Everybody got the same work but the teacher didn't teach. The teacher only taught a few kids, who taught a few kids, who taught a few kids. There was this tremendous powerful interdependence, where terrific confidence of talking to people older than you was developed in the course of the school day. There was concern for people younger than you. There was responsibility. It was almost a cost-free institution, and it worked splendidly, but it had to be eliminated because it doesn't subordinate the professional staff. There are no principals, or superintendents, or assistant superintendents."

As of 1910, the one-room school was mostly a thing of the past and teacher accreditation programs (underwritten by the Carnegie, Rockefeller, Whitney, and Peabody families) had been established nationwide. By 1990, the number of school boards in the county had dropped from 140,000 to about 15,000; meanwhile, funds available to schools had exploded. Today, "Foundation agents are wandering the halls of state legislatures, key businesses, key teacher colleges, writing a tight script to seal the loopholes that have prevented Andrew Carnegie's dream [of governmental control through universal education and licensure, which he set forth in 1890 in a group of essays collectively titled "The gospel of Wealth"] from being realized."

What about the future of institutionalized schooling? Gatto sees "Goals 2000," President Clinton's plan for educational reform, as just a refinement of the existing system. Likewise the school voucher program, which is appearing increasingly on state initiatives: "It's inevitable. From the institution's perspective the voucher system is much more desirable than the tax credit system. You can spend your voucher in any school that's been certified by the state legislature as okay, and right there you have the catch-22. It will be a looser form of control and maybe because of that much more effective. That's the diabolical part of voluntary national testing."

In Their Own Way, by Thomas Armstrong, Ph.D. (Tarcher, 1987), \$8.95, paperback

Thomas Armstrong is a former learning disabilities specialist who no longer believes in learning disabilities. "After teaching for several years in public and parochial special education classes... I realized I was going nowhere with a concept that labeled children from the outset as handicapped learners. I also began to see how this notion of learning disabilities was handicapping all of our children by placing the blame for a child's learning failure on mysterious neurological deficiencies in the brain instead of... our systems of education."

In his book **In Their Own Way**, Armstrong dissects the idea that some children are “learning disabled,” tracing the history of the concept back to the early 1960s. He turns the label on its head, showing that many children pigeonholed as dyslexic, hyperactive, or underachieving are in reality merely the possessors of talents our schools fail to recognize. For example, “dyslexic” students often excel in three-dimensional spatial visualization, and special education children referred for learning and emotional problems often show high levels of imagination. “In my own classes for the ‘learning handicapped,’” notes Armstrong, “I had an amazing group of children: a boy who held the national freestyle swim record in his age group, a girl who was a model for a national department store chain, gifted artists and writers, a psychic child, expert storytellers, superior math students, and many other talented human beings.”

In other cultures, children with such abilities would be valued and encouraged every step of the way. Unfortunately, however, our educational system favors only one learning style, and insists that it be developed in the classroom setting (desks in neat rows, instruction via lecture) and that it be measureable by standardized tests (which place unique individuals along a hypothetical “bell curve”). When a child entering school fails to meet the system’s expectations, teachers and parents soon begin to focus nearly all their attention on the child’s “disability”; meanwhile, the child becomes “defective merchandise sent back to the shop for repairs,” and may remain stuck in a cycle of learning failure for the rest of her school days, concentrating her energy on the perceived deficiency rather than on the development of existing talents.

If it were only an indictment of the “learning disabilities industry,” Armstrong’s book would be an invaluable contribution. But his analysis of the problem merely sets the stage for nine chapters filled with solutions - specific ways to engage each child’s unique learning style. Basing his proposals on Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner’s discovery that there are at least seven different kinds of human intelligence, Armstrong offers practical advice for recognizing and cultivating the child’s linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal abilities. He outlines seven ways to motivate the child (gauged to her or his learning style), and “seven different ways to teach anything.” Most of his comments are directed to parents (what to do if your child is “diagnosed” as “learning disabled”), but there is a gold mine of information here for teachers as well (for example, how to teach to a different intelligence each day).

One chapter offers ways to “make learning physical,” engaging the entire body in the educational process and eliminating bodily stresses during study periods. Another deals with cultivating the imagination in learning, showing how imagination need not wither with the passing of childhood. Armstrong urges teachers to “teach with feeling” by finding ways to express and transform feelings through art. He also tells how to create a “learning network,” or support system, for the child’s academic life. He counsels patience and positive beliefs, and gives specific advice on how to create and maintain these attitudes. Armstrong also addresses the roles of diet, atmosphere, time, and (lack of) noise in learning.

Awakening You Child’s Natural Genius, by Thomas Armstrong, Ph.D. (Tarcher, 1991), \$12.95, paperback

This book is, in many respects, an extension of **In Their Own Way**. It is a reference manual, handbook, and guide for parents who want to help their children realize their full potential as natural learners. The goal of the book is not to turn each child into a little prodigy by force-feeding abstract knowledge, but to support “the intrinsic drive for mastery that is every child’s birthright.” Each child, says the author, is a born learner, open to new experience and eager to explore and create. We are all “born to be brilliant.”

Armstrong begins by tracing the barriers to natural learning - competition, testing, grades, stress, shame, boredom, dull textbooks, bland teachers, student labeling, and educational tracking. Part of the process of awakening the child’s natural genius consists of removing these externally imposed obstacles. In a chapter titled “The School: Bridge or Barricade to Life?,” the author contrasts real-life learning with school learning (in real life, learning “takes place directly through interaction with experiences and objects in their natural context,” while in school “learning takes place indirectly through talking, thinking, reading, and writing about experiences and objects”). Unfortunately, while the public is aware that there is something dreadfully wrong with our schools, reforms usually take the direction of bigger course loads, longer school days, and tougher graduation requirements.

According to Armstrong, "the American educational system is in danger not because the school day is too short or there is not enough mathematics in the curriculum, but because our classrooms have become emotional wastelands." The author advises parents how to evaluate their children's school and how to work for change in the school system.

However, fixing what's wrong with our schools is not the focus of the book. Armstrong's main concern is to help parents understand how children learn naturally so that they can nurture the process.

The book is divided into five sections. The first explores "The Learning Triad: Child, Home, and School." In it, we come to understand "the developmental stages of genius in learning," and how families and schools help or hinder the learning process.

Section Two is a guide to innovative approaches for helping the child develop an interest in reading, math, science, and history. In the chapter on reading, for example, the author downplays the usefulness of phonic drills ("such a disconnected approach to reading threatens to turn our kids into paper-pushing bureaucrats and assembly-line robots instead of clear-thinking readers") and suggests instead that "the child emerges into literacy by actively speaking, reading, and writing in the context of real life." He advocates a "whole-language" approach to literacy, in which reading, writing, spelling, handwriting, and grammar are taught as "one seamless process of communication," and in which "children spend their time, not hunched over worksheets, but actively involved in reading and writing about things that passionately concern them."

The third section stresses the vital role of free, unstructured play in children's emotional, social, and mental development. "Play," says Armstrong, "is nature's way of forging fresh evolutionary possibilities." Sadly, unstructured play is on the decline in our culture as our children find their leisure time increasingly regimented. Television and computer-based games are, of course, part of the problem; another is the substitution of organized, competitive sports for made-up games in which children use their own imaginations and spontaneously investigate social roles. Armstrong offers constructive advice for "what parents can do with toys," and how to encourage free play. He also devotes chapters in this section to nurturing the child's musical and artistic expression and includes a cautious guide to the use of television and computers as learning tools.

Section Four addresses the challenges faced by children who don't fit into the system. The material here follows closely on that in **In Their Own Way** - outlining Howard Gardner's seven kinds of intelligence, suggesting alternatives to standardized testing, and offering guidance for circumventing the "learning disabilities" trap. Readers of Armstrong's earlier book will not, however, find this section entirely redundant, as it is updated and differently organized.

In the fifth section, the author explores "educational systems that work" - Waldorf and Montessori schools, as well as Superlearning and peer teaching. After describing each of these systems, Armstrong offers advice on how to use at home the basic principles on which it is based. I would have appreciated more discussion of home schooling here, but there are other resources available, such as the magazine *Growing Without Schooling* (2269 Mass. Ave., Cambridge MA 02140), and John Holt's book **Instead of Education**.

The Radiant Child, by Thomas Armstrong (Quest Books, 1985), \$7.95, paperback

At the age of nine, the great Lakota prophet Black Elk had a vision of the healing of his people. It would guide him throughout the rest of his life, and would later be recorded by ethnologist Joseph Niehardt and commented upon at length by mythologist Joseph Campbell.

Other children have spiritual experiences too, though usually not as dramatic as Black Elk's. Are these experiences the result of hallucinations and infantile obsessions? Or are children capable of genuine spirituality? This is no small question: it is one that has exercised the greatest poets, philosophers, and psychologists. And it is the hub on which the discussion in **The Radiant Child** turns.

Jesus said that "whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will never come to it"; Lao

Tze observed that "one who is weighty in virtue resembles an infant child." In his famous poem "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," Wordsworth wrote:

...trailing clouds of Glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

William Blake felt similarly; like Wordsworth, he saw childhood as a time when perception is clear and fresh, full of wonder and amazement, and the infant as the bearer of otherworldly grace.

Freud, on the other hand, viewed infants as masses of primitive instincts. Later, the behaviorists would regard the newborn as a "blank slate" on which culture and experience inscribe their influences. And the cognitive psychologists (including Piaget) would theorize that the infant possesses only a bundle of undeveloped sensorimotor structures that by adolescence will mature into abstract thinking. "So who is right," asks Armstrong, "the behaviorists or Wordsworth? Freud or Christ?"

The Freudian/behaviorist/developmentalist side of the debate is well represented in the contemporary psychological and educational literature, but these days there are few who speak for the child as a spiritual being. Armstrong is one: "Emotional expressiveness, spontaneity, and imagination," he says, "are well-known characteristics of childhood. However, what I am pointing to... goes beyond these qualities. I am suggesting that children have access to experiences which are not merely the product of fantasy, that children are capable of levels of perception into what Abraham Maslow called 'the farther reaches of human nature.'"

The author makes it clear that he is not proposing that babies are bundles of undiluted spirituality. He proposes two ways of looking at children - as spirit coming down into flesh, and as bodies developing expressive and cognitive abilities - and insists that both views are right.

Armstrong goes to some length to explain and take issue with transpersonal psychologist Ken Wilber's "pre-trans fallacy" as applied to childhood development. Wilber has claimed that many theorists make the mistake either of reducing adult transpersonal experiences to infantile origins (as did Freud, who regarded all religious experiences as fantasies), or of exalting infantile experiences of pre-personal unity to transpersonal status (as, in Wilber's view, did Wordsworth, Bergson, Jung, and others who regard the child as capable of spiritual insight). Wilber agrees with Maslow, who believed that "The child is innocent because he is ignorant." However, Armstrong points out that if the infant is incarnating from spiritual realms (as he believes is the case), then some recollection of that transpersonal reality may persist, allowing the child access to genuine and occasionally profound religious experiences for which no groundwork could have been laid in the present life. This is what the poets see in childhood - and what the developmental psychologists miss. Armstrong argues that the child comes into the world "with the acquired experience of many lifetimes of existence within its psyche."

Fortunately, the author is careful not to sentimentalize. He recognizes that "radiant" children can also be exuberantly physical, selfish, impetuous, and headstrong. "Belonging to both heaven and earth, the radiant child dances into our lives as a bridge between dark and light, body and spirit, ego and Self, the individual and God. The radiant child spans and sings this wholeness in every fiber. We would all be wise to listen. Even better to sing and dance along!"

The Everyday Genius: Restoring Children's Natural Joy of Learning - And Yours Too, by Peter Kline (Great Ocean, 1988), \$12.95, paperback

Peter Kline is a pioneer in the development of the ideas of Bulgarian educator Georgi Lozanov. The Lozanov method is known in this country by several names, including Superlearning, Optimal learning, whole brain learning, and holistic learning. Kline prefers to call it integrative learning. It is based on recent investigations into the human growth process and the functioning of the brain, and there is abundant evidence that it helps both children and adults learn more and faster, and that it helps make learning fun.

As Kline underlines at the outset, learning is inherently an absorbing activity. People who are involved in learning about something they are passionately interested in don't have to be coaxed; typically, they are so pleasurably involved in what they are doing that they lose track of time.

In his experiments in the early 1970s, Lozanov discovered that teaching (in the usual sense) insults the mind. We are accustomed to teaching by telling people what to do and how to do it; but this only deadens curiosity and creates confusion. Why not instead find out what the person wants to learn, give an overview of the scope of information available, and then begin filling in details? Kline gives the example of how an innovative teacher helped a group of miners learn to read. First, the teacher asked the miners about themselves, tape recorded their stories, transcribed them, and asked each miner to read his own words. "The man would labor over the first few words before recognizing them. Then he would usually exclaim, 'Well, now, these are my words.' After that, the words would begin to flow from his mouth and take on some of the cadence of a man speaking, not just an awkward reading." The next step was to find out what the miners wanted to read - which turned out to be instruction manuals for their equipment. Instruction manuals are not easy reading, but the miners were motivated and learned to read them remarkably quickly. One wonders whether they would have done as well with Dick and Jane.

Kline believes that every person's potential for learning is virtually limitless, and that - given an educational program whose top priority is producing natural learners rather than obedient factory workers - it is possible for an entire society to blossom with creativity. "In our time," he writes, "excellence is not a priority. Because we have been primarily interested in the futile search for security, we have spent our private funds on the accumulation of property and wealth as opposed to experience and education, while public funds have maintained the economy and defense industry. They might instead be used to develop the highest possible level of cultural excellence." In most contexts, this might come across as a utopian fantasy. But here - given that Kline is laying before us proven ways to ignite anyone's passion for learning - we are in fact being presented with a thoroughly realizable, practical alternative to civilization as we now conceive it. It is truly sickening to think how much human potential is currently being wasted, how many lives are being spoiled, by our schools' systematic suppression of the spontaneous joy of learning. As I read **The Everyday Genius**, I found myself longing for the kind of society that would result if only the natural genius of every child were respected and nurtured. Kline shows that we can have such a society, if only we will alter our priorities and open ourselves to the joy of self-discovery.

Related resources: Motherwork magazine, PO Box 23071, Winnipeg MB R3T 2B0, Canada; Unschooling Ourselves newsletter, PO Box 1014, Eugene OR 97440, USA.

Richard Heinberg is the author of Memories and Visions of Paradise: Exploring the Universal Myth of a Lost Golden Age (Quest Books: 1995), Celebrate the Solstice: Honoring the Earth's Seasonal Rhythms Through Festival and Ceremony (Quest Books: 1994), and A New Covenant With Nature. He also publishes Museletter, an excellent monthly newsletter exploring issues in cultural renewal. Subscriptions are US\$18 per year. Send to: 1433 Olivet Rd, Santa Rosa, CA 95401, USA. The above is from Museletter No. 40, April 1995.

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**The above article appeared in
New Dawn No. 39, November-December 1996**

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