

FOREWORD

By the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams

No-one can now ignore the fact that a serious debate about the welfare of children has at last begun in our society. And, appropriately, it has started to open up a wider debate about the nature of learning and even the nature of human maturity. The essays in this collection are significant not only for what they say about childhood but for what they invite us to think about human growth and well-being in general.

So in this volume you will find some searching reflections on what we do to the growing human consciousness by certain styles of education. Several contributors make a powerful case for resisting the pervasive drift towards measurable skills and tightly defined goals for (especially) primary schoolchildren. Richard House, in a very challenging piece, appeals to Rudolf Steiner's theories to underline the dangers of treating the child's consciousness as simply a limited and inadequate version of the adult's, and argues that the best way to keep therapists in work indefinitely is to perpetuate this error. And whether or not the reader will share the Steinerean perspective, it seems undeniable that one of the roots of the expanding and well-documented unhappiness of children and young people in our culture is the sheer impatience we exhibit with the long period of latency that characterizes the human animal. We want to supply a storehouse of useful skills and to measure their acquisition at every step. But what if that biologically unusual latency is in fact itself a treasury for human well-being? What if hurrying children through it is one of the most effective forms of deprivation we could devise?

If 'therapy' is one of the key words in this collection, the other is 'play'. Therapy, so the editors argue, is not a matter of damage limitation—nor does it necessarily imply that we begin by assuming a state of 'victimage' or diminution on the part of all young people. Rather, it is to do with attempts to heal an entire social climate that is unduly obsessed with outcomes and panicky about wasting productive time, focused overwhelmingly on fantasies of individual success and damagingly clumsy in most of what it seems to think about relationships. And in this light, the connection of therapy

with play becomes clear. Play (as the essays in Part IV particularly show) allows the growing consciousness to establish a very particular kind of relation with the world of physical stimuli: it allows you to think that it might be different. It develops the ‘what if...?’ function in the mind—the function that in the long run permits art, science, and even politics, and a bit

paradoxically, strengthens our awareness of what is specifically in front of our noses by challenging us to think it away and ‘remake’ it. This is not a matter of acquiring skills that will enable us to solve problems, but of nurturing the imagination that will make us constantly wonder if we are asking the right questions of our world. And it is in this imaginative maturity that we discover what is distinctive in our humanity and why our humanity, with all its pain and frustration, can be an opportunity for joy.

The freedom of the imagination, the freedom to ask whether we are asking the right questions and to reconstruct the world in speech and image and vision, is of course an essentially spiritual thing. For the Christian believer, ‘spiritual’ is not a word that designates simply some distinct quality or ‘territory’ in the individual subject; it is a word deeply imbued with resonances to do with connection or communion. A spiritual education is not one in which we are shown how to cultivate certain highly satisfying and even useful private experiences, but one that exposes us to connections, possible and actual, with other subjects, with the material world we inhabit and ultimately with its source. The discussion in these pages of spirituality in education assumes, refreshingly, that the capacity to rethink the world, to see it differently through the imagination, is bound up with the capacity to see yourself as connected in ways you did not choose with a whole environment, human and non-human. Behind the back of the conscious ego lie all sorts of links, life-giving and also at times frightening, which make us who we are; imagination allows us a glimpse of that rich and elusive hinterland, and without it we shall both wreck our own selfhood and ravage our environment and our human relations. Whether or not all this opens on to the wider horizon of relatedness to the ultimately mysterious life of the creator is something about which these authors will not agree, any more than readers will. But it is important that the question be recognized for what it is, a serious one that asks about the framing of our whole imaginative life.

Kathryn Ecclestone casts a sharp and sceptical eye on an approach which, disturbed by all that we have identified so far, comes to see education and nurture as fundamentally problem-driven—so much so that it casts children in the light of helpless and shrunken souls who require endless therapeutic attention. Education, she argues, is thus distorted into a constant struggle to make the world easier for its injured and hyper-sensitive subjects. It is, as the editors acknowledge, a salutary warning. Talk about ‘emotional literacy’ *can* turn into a recipe for emotional illiteracy if it refuses to deal with the challenges of managing the reality of others, the inevitability of frustration, and the tough edges of choice. But the concern of other authors here is certainly not to collude with the idea of a ‘diminished’ self or to propose that the ideal educational process is one in which individual emotional states are to be cosseted or indulged. Properly understood, there is much in common between a good deal of what Ecclestone argues and the rest of the book: education is how we equip children for transforming their thinking and acting and for relating with both celebration and critique to the world they inhabit.

Sue Palmer and Sue Gerhardt summarize their invaluable researches in their contributions here, showing in different ways the complex interweaving of patterns of imaginative and affective deprivation with neurophysiological problems and behavioural disorders. For those who apparently want to trivialize the question of children’s well-being (young people have always said they’re unhappy; children just *grow* up however you bring them up; we can’t over-protect our children by going along with their complaints; and so on), the concrete evidence, medical and statistical, represented in these as in many other chapters ought to give pause.

But the resistance to such evidence suggests the uncomfortable conclusion that quite a lot of commentators in the UK at the moment are still reluctant to approach these issues with care and openness—and that this is sometimes expressed in terms that imply a positive dislike or fear of children and young people. Why this should be is a question that deserves a whole series of further essays. But here is one way into the issue. Our uneasiness with our children—that is to say, the uneasiness over-represented in public comment and media rhetoric, if not corresponding very exactly to how any one of us is likely to feel with particular young people—is rooted in our own uneasiness as to what it is we want to communicate to the next generation. The

presence of the young reminds us painfully that we have little or no ‘wisdom’ to transmit. As a culture, we are individualistic and focused on short-term gratifications—or at least that is the public rhetoric we allow and indulge in advertising or entertainment. But not to have any clarity about what we believe worth transmitting is a sobering and unpleasant condition. The threat that so many claim to see in the young is in fact, as much as anything else, the threat of the void we suspect in ourselves as modern or postmodern adults, unclear as to whether we really have anything to *value*.

Which may mean that we ourselves, modern and postmodern adults, have been deprived of some of that spiritually serious playfulness that allows us to approach the world as if it were a place of possibilities and unexpected affinities, as well as a place of profound challenge and potential pain, to be reworked through the imagination. If this excellent collection helps us think through not only the needs of our children but our own often unacknowledged needs, it will have achieved a very great deal. But meanwhile we owe much to the authors and editors of such a varied, engaging, and outspoken guide to our ills and puzzles, and to what we might need to address them, at last, with greater honesty.

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