

A Brief outline of the talk given to the the conference on Imagination and Education, Vancouver July 16-19.

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“Without vision the people perish”. Imagination, let alone vision, is under attack. As a concept it is denied to exist by philosophers, even if most people make it valid by their understanding of it, and it is feared and dismissed by those who see education in purely instrumental terms, as the delivery of skills useful in employment. The problem is that Imagination is mixed up in peoples’ minds with what Coleridge called “Fancy”, the pleasure to be found in letting the mind wander through the worlds of Harry Potter or Enid Blyton.

Imagination is far more powerful and far more forensic. It explains the way that young children see the world, analysing and exploring, probing for the truth. Let us give an example of the way that young children think. In the United Kingdom there is a strong inspectorial regime. Once every four years or so a team of inspectors enter a school for a week and examine every aspect. The school is given several weeks to prepare the paper work (“if its not in writing it didn’t happen”). Afterwards a report is made in which teachers are “named and shamed” and if the school is not functioning well enough it is put into “special measures” and threatened with closure. The idea of this is to raise standards and meet targets. What do the pupils learn through this policy?

The first thing they notice is the fear that takes over teachers, the stress and the breakdowns. The moment that letter of intention that warns of an inspection arrives the atmosphere changes at once. The first important lesson that pupils learn is that bullying is not confined to the playground or the corridor but is part of official state policy.

The second fact that becomes clear is that all normal activity changes; lessons are different, the teachers are busy writing documents, there are new carpets and fresh paint, and when the week of inspection arrives some of the weaker teachers are coincidentally ill and replaced with other more competent ones. Pupils learn that what matters is the way you present yourself, rather than the truth; they learn that what the politicians call “spin” can dominate.

Worst of all, children learn that even if teachers are seen to try their best, it is interpreted as a way of preparing for the inspection. Teachers are no longer seen as there because they care about the pupils but because they fear the inspectors; the results that pupils achieve make or break a school in its place in the league tables and do not matter in themselves.

This is how the acute imaginative minds of children work. They see the realities with forensic insight that no amount of cover up can hide. They learn to become cynical about the way the world operates.

There are four things we need to understand about children’s minds. The first is their great inarticulate intelligence and their unremitting gaze on the world. They are having, through their own imaginations to understand the way that society operates. The second important matter is the need for strong intellectual and not just emotional relationships; they need to share their vision and understanding of the world, something often denied them. As one comic put it recently “The children keep asking difficult questions about the meaning of life which we struggle to answer, so what do we do? Send them to school where they are taught not to ask questions”

The third fact of childhood is that the interpretation of the world sees society in all its contrasts, between the rich and poor, contrasting the fates and points of view of others and themselves.

All this leads to the deep vulnerability of children and their exposure to inadvertent trauma; if they are trying to understand for themselves, with little help, they are bound to make some misinterpretations.

One of the greatest puzzles for children is the relationship between the individual and the institution in which they work; why do well meaning people do such destructive things? Schools are a microcosm of the world in which roles and personalities are in tension.

There are three great fears in childhood, fears we go on carrying with us. One is the fear of humiliation, another the fear of not knowing what is expected of us and the third is of unfairness. Seen from the imaginative intelligence of children, schools encapsulate and make official all these fears. The exposure of stupidity and failure, and the need to guess what it is the teachers want them to say are joined with that urgent cry, heard every day: "It's not fair!"

So what are we actually teaching our children? We are not teaching them what we think we are, according to official policies. The reality, from the early years through school, is different.

We have had 100 years or more of universal state education, and what is the result? A brief reminder of the last century, from the mass bombings of the innocent, to the holocaust, suggests we have not got it right. Until we not only understand the nature of childhood but act on that understanding we will continue to produce the unhappy, the discontent, and the selfish. The problem is that the system perpetuates itself and it sometimes seems as if we would prefer to perish rather than use the imagination. And yet, and yet; it does not have to be like this....

This is, of course, a very brief synopsis. The research can be found in "The Best Years of their lives? Pupils Experience of School" and "The Human Experience; the Early Years" and the forthcoming "The Trials of Childhood; How Character Develops"