

VOLUNTARY LEARNING FOR CHILDREN AND THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER



RON DULTZ

While adults have specific reasons for attending school, and do so voluntarily, children attend school at the request of their elders, and often under pressure to do so. While adults may at any time quit a school, or a particular class or learning program within a school they attend, children usually may not. Clearly, children are placed in a school, and expected to participate in the programs of a school, without their consent. Their wishes are not consulted, nor is a proper investigation made of their learning or developmental needs, before beginning to teach them. They are herded through programs at the behest of educators, and at the convenience of educators. Little, if any, attempt is made to determine the effects of this blatant manipulation.

THE ROLE OF DICTATOR

Adults have long assumed it is their moral duty to manipulate and mould children insofar as their education is concerned, because they worry that if they do not establish a direction for children by steering them and nudging them, cajoling them and pressuring them — thus controlling their lives as students — children will not develop properly. Adults, on the whole, have transferred responsibility for this objective onto professional

educators, who oversee their children's education in the afore-said authoritarian manner.

The fact that children are vulnerable, pliable and usually unquestioning of the authority of their elders does not entitle professional educators to impose learning upon them. Professional educators may assume they have the right to impose learning upon children to ensure that they become properly educated, and parents may believe educators should have this right; but, in reality, no one has the right to demand learning of children. It is a gross violation of their civil rights.

Making children learn is as inappropriate as making your friend go for a walk, or making your friend climb a tree, or making your friend cut your front lawn. All people, of all ages, respond extremely poorly to being forced to do things. It is not in human nature to be forced, manipulated or controlled. It is contrary to every decent concept of democracy and of freedom. The moment you force someone to do something, you assume the role of dictator. The role of dictator may be required in emergencies and to ensure children's safety, but it should not be used as a method of teaching children.

Since most children are not asking for formal education, but are simply obliging their elders by going to school, it is extremely important for parents to make sure educators are not imposing or dictatorial hosts while their children are in their care. If educators impose upon children in unfair ways, thereby generating hostility and resentment in children, it would not be surprising if children held their parents to be partly responsible because they are attending school to please them. This hostility and resentment toward their parents may be of an unconscious variety, but it is real nonetheless.

FROM EDUCATOR-CENTERED TO STUDENT-CENTERED

The most important idea to keep in mind when educating children is the fact that *all children are immersed in sensitive, complex and critical patterns of self-development*. Their formal education cannot occur properly if it is inharmonious with their various patterns of self-development. Consequently, the primary role of the teacher of children must be that of fitting what he or she has to offer into the self-development of children. The only way this can be accomplished is for the education of children to cease being an educator-centered process, and to begin being a student-centered process.

But today, most public and private schools for the education of children are educator-centered. The programs, devices, concoctions, and whims of educators are central and all-important. Little effort is made to determine the degree to which children need, want or can properly participate in what educators force upon them. In today's scheme of educating children, the educator is a dictator and children are his or her pawns. Gains that are made in acquiring information under this scheme are often losses with respect to the personal identity and overall development of the individual student.

To reverse this process, and begin to establish a solid foundation for the education of children, reasonable minds must prevail. The old ways of doing things must be discarded. Only those who have the courage to begin anew, with new concepts and new methods should step forward to reform and rebuild our institutions for educating our children.

THE CIVIL RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

I believe the new instructor of children must first determine if the children require, or can use, his or her services. Secondly, the instructor must nurture in the students a willingness or desire to be taught. In other words, the new teacher of children must first justify his or her teaching. And that is because the teacher's students likely have not elected to learn from him or her. They are simply obliging their parents and the state by being in school.



Educational Notes No. 28

ISSN 0953-7775 ISBN 1 85637 413 0



An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

© 1998: Libertarian Alliance; Ron Dultz.

Ron Dultz is a freelance writer. This essay (which was sent to us under the title "What Should Be The Role of the Teacher of Children?", and without the subtitles we've added) is an excerpt from a 168 page book entitled *Educating The Entire Person* by Ron Dultz (1998). To obtain a copy of this book, send \$10 to: Ron Dultz, P.O. Box 370985, Reseda, CA 91337, USA.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame
Editorial Director: Brian Mickelthwait
Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

A period of initial adjustment to this unnatural situation must precede the instruction of children. This period of initial adjustment will address the civil rights of the students and the professional rights of the teacher.

The civil rights of children are centered in their right to refuse being manipulated, even for so noble a purpose as education. We all know that an employer has a right to manipulate his employees within certain parameters in order to get the job done that he is paying them to do. But our society has erred in assuming that educators have a mandate, or a right, to demand learning of children in their charge.

A thoughtful analysis of this issue will reveal that demanding learning of children is inappropriate in a majority of cases. It humiliates children, frightens them, intimidates them, disorients them, and often establishes in them resentment and hostility toward learning.

Demanding learning of children is also an unfair assignment for teachers. Teachers placed in the position of having to demand learning from children are themselves given an ignoble task. It can be humiliating, unrewarding and demoralizing.

In conclusion, the entire foundational theory upon which the teaching of children has been established must be thoroughly re-examined. Much of it is destructive of the aims of a free and healthy society. Much of it is clearly undemocratic.

THE STUDENT MUST BE WON OVER

If demanding learning of children violates their civil rights and is unfair to teachers, what should be the precise role of the teacher of children?

I suggest that the role of the teacher of children should be limited to that of a facilitator who is not permitted to demand learning of his or her students. The teacher can suggest learning, encourage learning, and make it possible for learning to occur. The teacher is then a gatherer of educational resources and materials, a provider of an educational environment, and a personal source of inspiration, support and encouragement for his or her students.

If a teacher of children is not permitted to demand learning of students, the students need not participate in the teacher's programs, offerings or suggestions. This sends an important signal to the teacher. It tells the teacher that the students must be won over by genuine teaching skills and by genuine human qualities. If the teacher is to develop a proper teacher-student relationship, he or she must learn how to properly address the learning and developmental needs of the students, and must have personal qualities which students find appealing. The students will determine if the teacher is a successful instructor by their voluntary responses to his or her teaching efforts.

THE NEW BRAND OF CURRICULUM DESIGNERS

A school which wholeheartedly advocates, and practices, voluntary learning for children in all instances, and at all times, sends an important signal to those who design and mandate learning curricula. It would appear at the outset that their specialized services are not needed. But perhaps this is not entirely the case. Certainly, if all schools for children were places of voluntary learning, there would no longer be any mandated learning curricula; but perhaps there could still exist specialists who design learning curricula. Their work as curriculum designers would then require different research than is commonly used for such a purpose, and much more personal involvement with the lives and needs of children. The new brand of curriculum designers would likely have to do a good deal of on-site field work to see how well their *suggested* curriculum is being used, and to see if it is being used at all. Their success as curriculum designers would be predicated upon the frequency with which their *suggested* programs, projects and materials are voluntarily accessed, and upon their appeal to students.

A LOVE OF LEARNING AND OF KNOWLEDGE

Schools, teachers, curriculum designers and educational administrators may wish to straddle the fence *between* methods of instruction which favor mandatory learning for children and those which favor voluntary learning for children. In other words, they may advocate and practice a mixture of the two educational methods simultaneously. With regards to instructing children, I suggest that this is like trying to mix oil with water.

Children need and deserve a learning atmosphere, or environment, devoid of the tyranny of curriculum enforcement. Educators need to show children what they know to be true: that something as invigorating, inspiring and useful as learning need not be required or enforced. By teaching children a love of learning using genuine teaching skills and genuine human qualities, and by gently fostering — within a resource-rich educational environment — the dynamic impulse to learn which resides in embryonic form in every child, children can be stimulated and encouraged to attempt voluntary learning of all types and varieties. They will then automatically regard learning as their lifelong helpmate and benefactor, and willingly immerse themselves in it.

When educators teach children that the love of learning is an insufficient motivation for learning by pressuring them and cajoling them to learn what they (the educators) have predetermined is best for them to learn, educators destroy in children the inclination to develop both a love of learning and a love of knowledge at the very beginning of their lives, which is when they most need to acquire them. On the other hand, if the concept of voluntary learning for children is properly researched and implemented, it will restore a love of learning and a love of knowledge to the lives of all children, and stimulate and invigorate the learning process in unforeseen and glorious ways.

VOLUNTARY LEARNING IN ITS MOST UNDILUTED FORM

Compulsory education for children has been tried for such a long time, and has so often failed the teachers and the children, or produced mixed or uncertain results, that it is now time to try voluntary learning for children in its most undiluted form. Although the idea of voluntary learning for children in a completely undiluted form might seem extreme, it is actually a very basic and logical approach to educating children. In the beginning, *pilot programs* should be tried, but only in an undiluted form. No admixture of compulsory, required or mandated exercises or programs should accompany them, infiltrate them or be interwoven into them. This is the only way in which this method of teaching children can be properly instituted, and properly evaluated by teachers, students, curriculum designers and educational administrators. To ensure the integrity of this method, entire schools — both public and private — should be selected for its adoption.

STORIES OF SUCCESS

These ideas are not without precedent. A small number of schools are operating today with a long and successful record of voluntary learning for children. Three of the most successful are: Sudbury Valley School,¹ Framingham, MA; Windsor House Public School, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada; Summerhill School, Suffolk, England. In addition, there is a vigorous contingent of homeschoolers called Unschoolers who believe that children should be educated voluntarily. Their stories of success in this endeavor, and their struggles to articulate its principles and practices, are well-documented in *Home Education Magazine* and *Growing Without Schooling*, which are the two most popular home education magazines in the U.S.

NOTE

1. An excellent article on Sudbury Valley School can be found in *Teacher Magazine*, January 1994, pp. 20-25.
It can be downloaded at: www.teachermagazine.org