

Freedom in Education

March 2005

Welcome to the March newsletter. It has for its main topic 'Socrates and Plato', those famous Greek philosophers who have left such a mark on history. The whole idea of a school can be traced back to them, but the kind of school Plato created was quite unrecognisable from those we have today. It is fascinating to read Socrates' ideas of how the young should be taught, and to see how applicable they are two thousand five hundred years later!

The **Contact List** has grown considerably in the past month and more people add their details every day. I am very pleased to announce that we seem to have solved the problem of junk mail.

After adding our details we soon noticed, as many others probably did, that the amount of junk mail we received increased tenfold. After this we changed all the @ symbols in the addresses to the word 'at' in the hope that the internet machines that scan the internet would not be able to pick them up. This seems to have worked.

I have included another short article about gardening. I can't help thinking there is nothing more important in someone's education than spending time outside.

Academic work like reading, writing and arithmetic pale into insignificance when compared with the importance of fresh air, exercise and seeing nature and all its wonders. If there is one advantage, above all others, to not going to school, it is being able to spend as much time as one wants out of doors, and with Spring coming on it is the perfect time to start a garden.

I hope you enjoy this month's newsletter.

Wishing you all the best for March,
Wendy

Links of the Month:

<http://www.home-educators.com>

This site aims to create an on-line home educators community, with forums, information and resources.

<http://www.takingchildreneriously.com/>

There is plenty of free information and articles on this site about taking children seriously. Comments are posted below by people who have passed through the site, and they are particularly interesting to read.

If you would like to send a comment, link, favourite quote, or news about an upcoming event to be included in next month's newsletter, please [contact](mailto:wendy@freedom-in-education.co.uk) me. (wendy@freedom-in-education.co.uk)

Socrates & Plato

Few people now take the time to remember that our modern education system owes its roots to Plato's Academy in Athens. Furthermore, today's educators seldom stop to consider how far they have strayed from the original ideals upon which their calling is based.

When politicians wish to appeal to people's better feelings they tend to talk about education and health or about schools and hospitals. It is taken for granted that these are good things and that everyone wants to support them.

The word 'education' is repeated so often that it now seldom occurs to anyone to stop and ask themselves what it actually means or what the benefits are that it is supposed to bring.

There is in most people's minds an underlying assumption that education is concerned with acquiring skills that allow people to get a better job and to earn more money. This idea does not, however, stand up to scrutiny: over past millennia, young people have been trained for work by people who are experienced in that particular work – and not by school teachers or university professors.

If the object of education were simply to train people to do particular jobs, then no one would ever have come up with the idea of sending children to school – where they spend ninety-nine per cent

“There is a perfection which all knowledge ought to reach, and which our pupils ought to attain.”

Socrates, The Republic

of their time doing things which have no relevance to later life – or with the idea of Universities, which keep young people away from useful employment just when they could start to play an active role in the workplace.

One aim of modern education is to teach people to read, but many children can now read before they even start school, and there is certainly no move to let children leave school once they have learnt to read, so clearly reading on its own is not what modern educators have in mind.

Another commonly held belief is that children learn something about citizenship and how to behave while they are at school, but this notion flies in the face of people's own experience of school: schoolchildren since time immemorial have been filled with a sense of repugnance for the double standards operated by school teachers and their ability to create one set of rules for themselves and another, quite different set of rules for their pupils.

If pressed, once they had dismissed the concepts of better employment prospects, the acquisition of basic skills, or learning how to behave, people eventually come to the notion that education ought to be about gaining a clearer understanding of life, and that it should be a training, not for a particular job, but for life itself. When one looks at the history of the Western world, one can trace this idea directly back to Plato and the Academy over which he presided.

“Professors of education must be wrong when they say that they can put knowledge into someone which was not there before, like sight into blind eyes.”

Socrates

The Academy

Plato founded ‘The Academy’ around two and a half thousand years ago in Athens. His avowed aim was to train young men and women in the science of philosophy – the love of truth – with the intention that they would then be able to take up the government of their states and bring about an age of peace and harmony.

Few first-hand accounts remain of Plato's academy, but its graduates really did succeed in illuminating the ancient world, and many did become rulers, famous generals, and renowned scholars; for a while, being ‘an academician’ was the highest honour to which anyone could aspire, and Plato was the most revered figure of his time.

The Academy continued for hundreds of years after Plato's death. When Greece eventually declined into being a colony of Rome, the Romans copied the Academy and used it as the model for their own

system of education. For many further centuries senators, generals, and governors in the expanding Roman world were trained in a system supposedly similar to that employed by Plato in the Academy.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire, ‘education’ temporarily disappeared from Western Europe, but a sort of Roman-style education was reintroduced by the Catholic Church in the form of schools attached to cathedrals. From these grew public schools, grammar schools, universities, and the school system that we have today.

Plato's Curriculum

Plato never chose to write about the work done at the academy. His published works consist mainly of dialogues between his teacher, Socrates, and other characters. From these it is clear that it would be hard to find anything more diametrically opposed to Plato's ideal of education than modern schools and universities.

‘*The Republic*’ is one of Plato's most famous works and in it he gives some of his clearest indications of what his views of education really were. In it he recounts a discussion in which Socrates outlines the subjects that students would study in his ideal educational institution.

“Let early education be a sort of amusement.”

Socrates

Socrates recommends the study of arithmetic, not because of its use in trade or science, but because it can give a student an insight into the fact that the concept of number exists independently of the physical world.

Similarly, he recommends the study of geometry because, if taught properly, it can lead a student to question why it should be easy to imagine the existence of ‘perfect’ shapes such as a perfect circle or a perfectly straight line, even though such things cannot exist in the material universe.

Astronomy is included in this curriculum in the hope that by observing the movement of the stars and the planets, which though wonderful is subject to time, a student will be moved to gain an understanding of movement that is perpetual and eternal. And, finally, a study of harmony is advised in the hope that by observing the apparent harmony that exists between sounds on a musical instrument, students will be moved to feel the nature of perfect harmony.

“Geometry will draw the soul towards truth and raise up that which is now unhappily allowed to fall down.”

Socrates

Socrates expresses the belief that by studying these four areas, students might be able to leave behind the limitations of thought and to grasp an understanding of an absolute truth that exists outside the limitations of the world that we perceive with our senses, a truth which is eternal and all powerful.

Rather than this being a ‘useful’ skill, Socrates points out that anyone who is possessed of such knowledge would, in normal circumstances, lose interest in seeking after wealth or honours. He suggests that such people might, however, be induced to take up roles of leadership for the good of the community as a whole –which is his justification for his proposed system of education.

His recommendations include that young children should be left to learn in their own way and at their own pace, that compulsion should never be used in the realm of education (it is hard to imagine what Plato or Socrates would have made of the notion of ‘compulsory’ education), and that people should not start upon this course of higher education until they are about thirty years old.

What did Socrates Mean?

The success that the Academy achieved when it was being run by Plato would suggest that these ideas were not just mere theory: however, it would be a brave person who dared to say that they understood what Socrates meant when describing this idealised form of education and it is sobering to consider that, even so, it is from these very ideas that the concept of ‘education’ is derived.

Modern schools and universities differ from Plato’s original conception in almost every way: they use compulsion, they enrol children as young as four or five years old, they teach subjects that Socrates advises against, and they avoid the subjects which Socrates recommends – and their declared aim is certainly not to help students to gain knowledge of a supreme and absolute truth. If schools are not really following in the footsteps of Socrates and Plato, then it would seem logical to enquire as to where they do in fact derive their inspiration and guidance.

The answer would appear to be from nowhere.

Socrates is renowned for his love of reason and the remorseless way in which he used logical argument to reveal to people the inconsistency and absurdity of their own behaviour. The modern education system provides an ideal opportunity for anyone who wishes to put this method into practice.

“Surely you would not allow the future rulers of your state to be like posts, having no reason in them and yet set in authority over the highest matters?”

Socrates, The Republic

“When someone knows not their own first principle and when the conclusion and intermediate steps are also constructed out of they know not what, how can they imagine that such a fabric of invention will ever become knowledge?”

Socrates

It would be perfectly defensible for modern teachers to reject the ideas of Socrates and Plato, and to deny the possibility of attaining a knowledge of absolute truth through study, but if that is really their position, then they ought to be able to explain what the specific benefits are of the education that they are offering, and the ways in which their schools provide a better chance of reaping these benefits than other methods of study. The discussion at the start of this article shows that not only are they unable to do this, but also that they are seldom called upon to do so.

Of course, this is not really the fault of teachers or politicians. Another of Plato’s tenets is that it is the student who is responsible for selecting a teacher, rather than vice versa. Thus the problem is not that modern schools exist, but that parents send their children to them without stopping to consider whether they truly are educational institutions.

Gareth Lewis

Gardening

Children can learn more from gardening than from almost any other single activity, and it is greatly to be regretted that it has been allowed to become one of the poor relations of the educational world, and at this time of year, when a new season is starting in the garden, it may be worthwhile to stop and consider what use a knowledge of gardening may be to a child.



At the most basic level, gardening provides something to do. This might not make sense to anyone who has never had to care for children, but all parents know the value of things that are really able to engage a child’s attention and keep them occupied. No matter what size a garden might be, there are always things in it that a child can do, and there are always things to capture a child’s interest: on those days when you have reached the end of your resources, it is always a great relief to remember that the garden is there, ready and waiting.

There are, of course, always other things that *could* be done; for example, in most modern homes there are televisions and computer games waiting to be switched on, but whereas most of these technological means of keeping children occupied leave them stressed and dissatisfied and provide them with little real mental stimulation, the garden not only has a restful and calming influence, but is also genuinely educational. It gives a child a chance to learn about plants, animals, the seasons, the weather, and much, much more, through direct experience. At best, a classroom can only supplement an understanding gained from spending time in nature. A child who does not spend a significant amount of time outdoors in a natural environment has no reference points to help them understand anything that they read about in books, see on the television, or are told in school.

New to the Jamboree

website:

Easter Ducklings

These little Easter ducklings are made out of marzipan, and are good fun to model.



Another craft for Easter: a knitted Easter chick.



New to Bethan's Cookbook are these delicious potato and chickpea croquettes.



growing, etc. – that stand them in good stead for the rest of their lives, even if, when they are older, they discover a love for academia and spend their time absorbed in reading books.

The garden is also a place where a child can acquire practical skills. Children working in a garden not only have a chance to do everyday gardening jobs such as weeding, sowing seeds, hoeing, raking the ground etc. but they can also get involved in building walls and paths, sharpening tools, making fences, and a myriad of other jobs that help them to develop practical skills that will prove useful to them for the rest of their lives.

In some ways it is quite tragic that the importance of working in the garden is not appreciated. If a child does not respond well to the work that they are asked to do at school, everyone panics, but if a child does not have a chance to do any gardening people simply do not seem to notice.

Some children do not respond well to being put in a classroom and encouraged to work from books when they are five or six years old. There are two possibilities with such children: either they will change as they grow older and, if left to develop naturally, at some point in the future will grow into an interest in books of their own accord, or they really do have some inherent difficulty with book work.

In either event there can be no justification for making such children do school work. Their time would be much better spent in doing things that they enjoy and for which they have some aptitude.

This has been the experience of many home-educating families who have withdrawn their children from schools in which they have been labelled as having learning difficulties. When such children are allowed to spend time regularly working in their garden they not only learn about nature at first hand but have a chance to acquire a range of practical skills –vegetable growing, seed production, pruning, grafting, plant propagation, fruit



www.jamboree.freedom-in-education.co.uk

Also new to the Jamboree website is an all new Bip and Bop cartoon. Read about how the little apple and carrot are celebrating Easter! You can also read the Indian story of the Great Flood or 'The Legend of the Fish'. It has been told in India for thousands of years and is really quite a classic!



Poem of the Month: Cherry Blossom

A. E. Housman was twenty when he wrote this poem. In it he bemoans the fact that if he lives until he is seventy (threescore years and ten) he will only have fifty years more to enjoy the cherry blossom.



Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now of my threescore years and ten,
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a score,
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.

-A. E Housman-

Hand-Made Jewellery

Avril Manderson is a jeweller based in Wilmslow, Cheshire who has just launched a unique business which may be of interest to readers.

People send her their children's drawings, or their own drawings which they did when young, and she turns them into high-quality pieces of silver jewellery, which she will then send back to you. This novel idea produces unusual, one-of-a-kind jewellery which is sure to be treasured and worn with pride for many years to come. Cufflinks, brooches, pendants and earrings are all included in her range and many examples can be seen on her site: www.amjewellery.co.uk

Avril is probably the only jewellery designer in the UK to offer this service.

Please send contributions to:

wendy@freedom-in-education.co.uk

Or you can write to Gareth Lewis at
gareth.lewis@freedom-in-education.co.uk

The contents of this newsletter appears in the Freedom in Education Magazine, the Freedom in Education Magazine can be purchased for £12.00 at www.nezertbooks.net

© 2005 freedom-in-education <http://www.freedom-in-education.co.uk>