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The Freedom in Education Magazine

Special Educational Needs

Why are some children diagnosed as having special educational needs? Why is there a stigma attached to children who do not conform to the pattern of development demanded by schools?

This month we explore some of the issues surrounding the question of special educational needs.

When we hear that a child has special educational needs, our immediate response is often to be slightly intimidated, to wonder what the view of the ‘experts’ is, to feel sympathy for the parents and perhaps to experience a slightly guilty sense of relief that our own children do not have special educational needs.

As we go through these emotions we fail to notice that we have allowed ourselves to be taken in by a cruel deception; by accepting that one child has special educational needs, we have tacitly accepted that other children do not. Nothing could be further from the truth – in reality each and every child is just as special as every other child, and has their own unique set of educational needs.

The misunderstanding arises because almost all schools are run on the assumption that there is some sort of average child; this leads to the creation of a fixed curriculum, a timetable and a set of rules – all of which are supposed to be appropriate for this average child. Children who manage to conform to this regime are deemed to be slightly above average, and children who cannot conform to it are deemed to be slightly below average, but children who have no chance of conforming to it are politely referred to as having special needs and this sets a pattern which can dictate the course of the rest of their lives.

However, what if the whole premise of the ‘average’ child is completely wrong? Suppose that each person is absolutely unique and

completely different from everyone else. Then it would never be appropriate for teachers to assume that someone should learn a particular thing at a particular age or because they live in a particular place or because they come from a particular section of society. The art of being a teacher would then involve getting to know each child and understanding what they are thinking. It would involve treating every child as though they were special and only teaching them things when they want to learn them and when they are ready to learn them. This would be different for every child.

I believe that this is the way that it really is. When I look back at my own childhood, I can remember being totally uninterested in everything that I did at school. School was something to be

Physical and Mental Disabilities

Children who have mental or physical disabilities are particularly disadvantaged by the current system. As soon as it becomes obvious that they cannot follow the standard curriculum, they are designated as having special educational needs and this inevitably carries a stigma which cuts them off from the rest of society.

If we recognised that *everyone* has special needs, then people with disabilities would no longer find themselves being picked on for being different – everyone would get special attention and everyone would find it easier to accept everyone else’s individual qualities.

Able-bodied people are not ‘better’ than disabled people and clever people are not ‘better’ than people who are not clever. Different people are able to offer different things to society and everyone benefits when this is recognised.

endured, it had nothing to do with me as an individual and it did nothing to meet my own educational needs. This was also true of all my friends and it is obvious to anyone who visits any school that it is still true today.

When you give children a chance to express themselves they are full of questions about every conceivable area of life; they are bursting with ideas; they have things that they want to do and they have feelings that they want to understand. Each child needs to have all this treated with respect. But this does not happen in our education system.

In our system, it is not even the teacher – who may well have an understanding of the special needs of the children in their class – who decides what sort of education children should receive. Decisions are made by curriculum authorities and examination boards who lay down what every child in a particular country should be made to learn at a particular time. In this way no one's special needs are ever met.

Dyslexia and Reading Difficulties

More and more school children are finding it impossible to comply with the literacy standards laid down by education authorities. Many of these children are diagnosed as being dyslexic and in some countries it is now a common practice to screen children for dyslexia when they start school. Whether diagnosed as being dyslexic or not, children who do not learn to read at the required pace are frequently subjected to a programme of extra reading tuition, the effect of which may be to bring their reading level closer to the standard required by the school but which can also make reading into a disagreeable chore for the children concerned.

A few children may benefit from the extra help, but for many it simply represents more pressure to do something that they do not want to do – in crude terms it is a form of bullying.

It is far better not to coerce children to learn to read at a particular time but instead to provide them with a stimulating environment (i.e. not a typical school classroom), read books to them, talk to them, do things with them, and let them come to reading in their own time and in their own way.

Even though children in school are in an incredible vulnerable and powerless situation, and will do almost anything to avoid drawing attention to themselves, some children simply cannot endure the treatment that they receive. Try as they might, they are unable to learn to read when the teacher tells them that they should; they are unable to sit still in a classroom when everything in them wants to be moving around; they simply cannot endure writing another word or doing another sum that has no meaning for them and which offers them no enjoyment. Children caught in this situation can react in many different ways; they may go very quiet, they may make a noise, they may become very passive or they may hit out. All of these are normal, natural responses to a stressful situation, but instead of recognising that this is a sign that there is something wrong with schools, people are still falling into the trap of believing that their must be something wrong with the children.

Children who do not conform are labelled as having 'special educational needs', but this does not mean that their special needs will be met, it means that more resources will be allocated to try to make them do things that they have

already demonstrated do not meet their special needs.

This explains why children who have been diagnosed as having special needs are disproportionately represented amongst people who home educate. For many children, the only solution to their problem is to take them out of school, and once they are out of school, they no longer have a problem. These children are the lucky ones; the fact that they simply could not do what school wanted them to do, and the fact that their parents had the courage to take matters into their own hands, has meant that they now really do have an education tailored to meet their own special needs. But this is no consolation to those millions of other children who also have special needs, but simply because they are able to more or less do what they told while they are at school, have them completely ignored.

The current system judges people according to how well they are able to conform to an arbitrary standard when what we ought to be doing is helping each child to fulfil their own unique potential. As a result, we can have no idea about what children might really be capable of achieving – their creativity, their originality, their enthusiasm, their innocence, and their optimism, are all schooled out of them by a system that fails to recognise and care for the special needs of each and every child that comes under its influence. That is why *every* parent should think carefully before committing their child to a conventional school.

Gareth Lewis

Albert Einstein

Albert Einstein provides a graphic example of what we might be losing as a result of the education system's efforts to try to make everyone the same. He could not talk until he was three years old, he always hated school, was unable to get a place in a university and developed his theory of relativity in his spare time while working for the Swiss patents office. In later life he reflected on how such an unpromising start in life could have led to him becoming the world's most celebrated scientist:

"I sometimes ask myself how it came about that I was the one to develop the theory of relativity. The reason, I think, is that a normal adult never stops to think about problems of space and time. My intellectual development was retarded, as a result of which I began to wonder about space and time only when I had already grown up."

Letters

Stymied

I am an undiagnosed, untreated yet compensated dyslectic that has earned two Master's Degrees and has had a successful career in non-profit housing development in New York City. That is to say that in spite of great difficulty with first learning to read and now accessing information through reading, I managed to somehow attain some measure of accomplishment. Currently I am researching the field of dyslexia.

In my studies, I am always impressed with the nature of the nurturing interaction between developing human beings and their caregivers. At its best, it's a give and take process, expressly adapted to particular individuals by loving parents. In the first few years of the child's life, parents communicate knowledge of the world, the culture and the spoken language. Having had a hard time learning to read within the school system, I always puzzled over why knowledge of reading wasn't also communicated within the family.

It just seems to make sense that parents start the process of teaching their children to read, because making the connections from the sound of a word to the visual symbol is subject to much variation from child to child. In addition, children are at varying stages of readiness. It seems natural for the rudiments of reading, which is a logical extension of language learning, to be taught individually by parents that have extensive experience with the child.

The stakes are so high. If a child hits school without a rudimentary knowledge of reading and if there is slowness in the child's ability to process written words, then this kid is likely lost.

Children need to be given the best chance of succeeding in school. They need to come properly nourished, properly equipped with the concepts necessary to participate and they need to come with the rudimentary skills necessary to learn to read well. Anything less is a handicap in this competitive world that begins the moment the child steps out of his parents' home.

Make no mistake. What is being called for is no less than a monumental task to modify the culture so that parents can start their children on the road to reading. This can not be done without the participation of the schools. To do better, a cooperative arrangement between the schools and parents would need to be developed.

This brings me to your article in the April issue of the freedom in education newsletter. I think that beyond your point that parents don't know that they can teach their kids to read or don't want to, the educational authorities are irrationally guarding their turf. In a misguided attempt to protect their profession, they foster a fear in the parents that they are inadequate to the task; that only trained experts are capable of getting the job done. In my experience, this is true on every level, from the national organizations, through to the teaching profession, and finally to the community organizations. They all feel that they have the answer and that everyone else is somehow misguided. Worse still, parents are enlisted to lobby the government for more money for the educational establishment. This is a main focus of most of the non-profit groups working in the area of learning disabilities. This is just the opposite of your point and mine, that there be less government, not more, and it should be more intelligent in what it does.

Where there could be cooperation, there is only mutual distrust, sullen discounting and manipulation. This is not a recipe for success.

When one thinks about it, all that is required is a few precious, quality moments of each day of an attentive parent working with an inquisitive child. I would think that such activities could only help teachers to do their job. The fear created by not measuring up, that fuels many negative behaviors, can be lessened. Things can improve.

Perhaps as the massive amount of new resources are poured into old solutions and found wanting, an opening for a new and different cooperative solution will be created.

Thank you for your attention to these thoughts. I welcome your comments.

John Tomasello

John Tomasello's letter has been edited to fit into the available space. The full text can be seen on the website <http://www.freedom-in-education.co.uk>

Education News... Education News ...Education News

Creative Thinking, Uganda – Learning from a scheme developed in South Africa, Uganda is launching a programme that trains head teachers in the art of encouraging the natural creativity of school children. The scheme is designed to benefit 12 to 16 year olds and focuses on developing a real partnership between students, parents, local business people, and investors.

Test Boycott, UK – The National Union of Teachers in the UK has voted to boycott the government's Standard Assessment Tests for 7, 11, and 14 year olds in England. They say that the tests narrow the curriculum and make education an unpleasant experience for children.

Stress in Childhood, UK – A survey carried out for the Times Education Supplement found that over a third of six and seven year olds in England were suffering from stress caused by the national school tests. Many children cut down on the time that they spend playing, in order to revise.

Writing, US – A report published by the National Commission on writing found that only a quarter of America's school and college students were proficient at writing.

Charter Schools, US – The first charter school – independent schools that receive public funding – was opened just over ten years ago in the US but there are now 2,700 such schools catering for 700,000 students. Charter schools owe their popularity to the fact that they set their own curriculum, they involve parents in the running of the school and they are free from government control.

Why do Children Learn More From Video Games Than They do from School? – Perhaps James Gee, professor of reading at the University of Wisconsin has the answer: 'Kids often say it doesn't feel like learning when they're gaming - they're much too focused on playing.'

Info...Info...Info...Info...Info

The Jamboree — the online e-magazine for children and parents:

“MAY IS HERE! And with it comes the May issue of the Jamboree...

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Freedom in Education Magazine

The May edition of the Freedom in Education magazine contains articles on Euclid's Geometry, School vs Home, Education Tips: Talking, a quiz, code, dot-to-dot, puzzles, cartoons, a recipe and gardening tips plus all the news and articles that appears in this newsletter.

For a free, sample, printable copy of the May edition go to:

http://www.freedom-in-education.co.uk/current_newsletter.htm

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