

1988 - ESSAY - THE INSIDIOUS CURRICULUM

by David Boulton

It's not what we are intentionally teaching children that most concerns me. Beneath the various subject, technology, classroom and teacher issues, I am concerned with what the learner is learning in relation to the entire system. In other words, if we were to look at the first 8-10 years of a child's educational experience as if he or she were moving through a corridor with windows and doors that represents the intentional curriculum, I am concerned with what the child is learning from the corridor itself.

Over the educational span which begins in Kindergarten and ends in the 8th grade, our educational system is, almost as a rule, converting highly energized, curious, eager and alive children, into comparatively tired, disinterested, uneasy and curiosity dampened students. This appears to be true regardless of the teacher, the particular school, or the socio-economic family context, though they all play a role. What I am proposing is that while many complex issues do play a part in this transformation, the major player is the "corridor" itself, the insidious curriculum. But before we can see how this can happen, we have to understand a little about the learning process - the human being - it all happens to.

Before children enter the formal educational environment, their primary learning environment is their own bio-energetic, intrinsic fluctuations. In learning to walk, for example, a child is learning to balance his or her own instinctual impulses with the **real-time-intrinsic feedback** (proprioception) of their movements in the terrain they are in. Should they lean a little too forward or backward, the environment (gravity) immediately effects them and they compensate or fall. **But, interestingly, gravity and the terrain do not change or send feedback messages. The human body generates the inclination to walk and, through a subtle sensitivity to inner self-sensing, develops the balance necessary to do so entirely within itself. The outside environment is a comparative constant to the myriad of high frequency, multi-sensory, inner variations which are the real in-vironments the child learns to walk in.** (I think this description of learning to walk is a metaphor through which we may better understand the central dynamics of learning throughout life.)

For the young child, learning is a process of tactile sensations, sounds, sights, smells, tastes, muscle tensions - the activities going on throughout their whole being. At some really basic level, these inner variations co-emerge and cohere into inclinations, such as desire, curiosity and intention; they can oscillate through tentativeness and uncertainty, and /or they can become dis/inclinations such as fear.

Affecting the amplitude and directional acoustics of what is happening in the child's attention, these spontaneously emerging, implicate-order feelings are the child's inner learning guides (no personalization intended). Happening in the **now**, emerging between the child's attention and what is being attended, these guides dynamically and responsively orient the child through the miracles of early learning. By becoming more and more sensitive and *internally responsive* to the subtle "voices" of these guides, children go on to learn everything else.

Now let's revisit formal education.

How many thousands of hours do children sit in classrooms experiencing a presentation or

formal activity which, by its nature, circumstantially prohibits their spontaneously emerging impulses from getting attention? Their own or the teacher's? One teacher, fifteen to thirty children? If during a class lecture, a movie or exercise, the child experiences curiosity or uncertainty about details in the flow, what happens? What can they do?

For really young children, the capacity to be uncertain or curious is in marked contrast to the capacity to articulate what it's about. Meanings can be moving by at a pace so foreign that the child can't even consciously know, let alone articulate, what it is that caused them to "need more." Some older children do stand up or raise their hands and say "Excuse me - stop - I am curious about your use of the word (x)" or "What do you mean by (y)"? **But it isn't the rule.** Even for those not intimidated or those able to stay in sync with the class, thousands of minor uncertainties and curiosities (voices) are ignored for every one acted upon.

How many hundreds, if not thousands, of hours do children spend with a book in their hands? Again, what can a child do when they encounter a word, term, phrase, concept, method of presentation, etc., that either evokes curiosity or uncertainty - that causes them to need more? Put the book down, break engagement with the flow, and seek help from the teacher or reference library? Skip along hoping the meaning of the word will emerge in context? I suspect - and know from my own early experience as well as watching children today - that most children just learn to ignore all but their most powerful urges. Slowly but surely their experiences mount up to deadening their inner sensitivity.

Unlike the way children learn informally on their own, or one-on-one in relationships, the entire educational system discourages them (untold thousands to millions of times) from "listening" to their own inner learning processes.

Add it all up.

Before formal education, children learn miraculously by developing an inner sensitivity to the discernment processes we have called the "guides". This is their second to second, day to day experience for years. When they get to formal education, while in the course of being taught about various subjects, their second-to-second, day-to-day, year after year experience ***tacitly teaches them***: YOUR INNER GUIDES ARE MEANINGLESS! PAY ATTENTION! (OUT HERE)!

It hasn't anything to do with our intentions - it's a fact. The issue isn't what we are explicitly teaching, or even explicitly teaching, about how to learn. It's how the environment we teach in and through tacitly and continually discourages children from remaining sensitive to their own capacities for learning. The reasons may vary, but the fact remains that children learn to ignore their own inner "meaning needs" by the very processes intended to help them be learners.

The insidious curriculum is the corridor, the pervasive tone of the whole experience. It is the consequences of a system which has so far evolved with an orientation towards subject-matter and "what works" in presenting it.