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Gymnasium - Letting the Heart Sing*,  
by Denis Postle

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KNOWHOW> THE MAKING OF THE MIND> SCHOOL'S SUBTLE LESSONS



SCHOOL'S  
SUBTLE  
LESSONS

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School plays a crucial part in the formation of the mind. Any experience lasting six to seven hours a day, five days a week, forty weeks a year, for at least ten years, is bound to make a lasting impression.

The child's experience of school, as with all human encounters, divides into the conscious and the unconscious—into the highly structured content of the curriculum and the much deeper effects of the way in which it is delivered and assessed. School shapes children's minds both directly—by presenting partial views of history, science, and so on—and subliminally—by giving them a model of the way they can expect the world to work. A few may try to resist, but for most children, it quickly becomes both natural and inevitable.

The following screens look at how schools shape the mind.

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The world  
for which  
education is  
preparing  
people no  
longer exists.

STEPHEN STERLING

AGE  $\pm 13$  years (7-13)

NAME: YEAR 8 FORM:       

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
8.45 9.00	REGISTRATION				
1	English	science	science	design technol.	geography
9.35					
2	English	science	science	design technol.	geography
10.15	BREAK				
10.35					
3	PE	German	design & technol.	info. tech. I.T.	English
11.10					
4	PE	German	design technol.	info. tech I.T.	music
11.45 11.50					
5	French	history	maths	French	maths
12.25					
6	French	history	maths	German	French
1.00	LUNCH				
2.00					
7	Science	TUTOR GROUP OR ASSEMBLY	English	TUTOR GROUP OR ASSEMBLY.	drama
2.35					
8	maths	art	English	Personal & social edn.	English
3.10					
9	maths	art	German	Personal & social	Science
3.50					



## How the world works

Aside from the essential bundle of skills such as reading, writing, and numeracy, the over-arching thing that a child's mind absorbs at school is—this is how the world works:

The world is divided into winners and losers (schools produce what universities want, ignoring or sidelining the needs of those that are rejected)

Intellect is a supreme human attribute.

Conformity makes for an easier life.

Competition is the best way to organize social relations, 'me', and mine', rather than 'us'.

Production and task-oriented problem-solving are the primary life skills.

Hierarchical top-down and prescriptive power relations are normal and inevitable, 'I tell', 'you passively receive,'—the learning agenda is defined entirely by the school system.

Evaluation is external with standardized performance indicators and precise, non-negotiated learning outcomes.

Knowledge is a matter of categories—mechanistic notions of subdivision, breaking down, 'step by step', analysis, cataloguing, with little or no attention to how they are linked.

Quality and achievement reside only in what can be measured.

Success requires invulnerability, always being in control, not losing control.

One size fits all—too bad if you are too fast, or too slow, too visual, too aural, too intuitive, too physical, too emotional.

Replication of the existing cultural values, moulding to fit the status quo, matter much more than transformative change toward a fairer and better world.

Learning has no intrinsic interest or value—education is a means to an end—qualifications for employment.

There are settled bodies of knowledge about everything.

Education is a less important and less relevant source of values and knowledge than the media and peers.

A life devoted to time-bound goals is normal and unavoidable.

Deference to professional expertise is expected and unavoidable.

Bullying is tolerated and even admired.

Cultures of criticism, blame, and deficit are normal and inevitable.

So far as these ingredients take root in young minds this seems to be *schooling* rather than education. It replicates a world that exists but one that increasingly obviously, is unsustainable, in part due to these values and practices and the extent to which they permeate education.

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## From schooling to education

If the catalogue of notions on the previous screen that school instills in children's minds amounts to 'schooling', what would count as education? Here is a listing of what is already in the wings seeking its place on the educational stage.

Moving towards installing ecological sustainability as the defining benchmark for educational policy.

Greater trust in, and value for, local flourishing.

Giving high value to learning how to learn, inquiry, learning from experience, and life-long learning.

Bringing relationship: i.e. nurturance, participation, co-operation, communality, and interpersonal skills into the curriculum.

Bringing physical, intuitive and emotional intelligences and competence into the curriculum.

Moving toward pupil's ownership of their learning agenda so that school becomes meaningful, engaging, participative.

Giving high value to transformative change toward a fairer society and better world

Valuing knowledge as a matter of relationship, pattern, and understanding.

Valuing uniqueness and difference and providing niches for unusual or special interest and personal styles.

Moving from instructional, informative, prescriptive teaching styles, toward a more facilitative approach.

Understanding that anyone can generate knowledge and putting this into practice.

Acting on the notion that self-evaluation (with external support) epitomizes the educated person.

Actively contradicting the positive feedback of print and electronic media through reflection, review, and imitation.

Installing and nurturing cultures of appreciation, affirmation, support and feedback.

Appreciating that, despite thousands of years of intensive study, almost all of existence, not least life itself, remains shrouded in mystery.

Recognizing that 'flourishing' is a better indicator of well-being than 'success'.

So far as these ingredients take root in young minds they are much more likely to become educated persons—accurately in touch with their own capabilities—and able to contribute to benign, rapid and sustainable adaptation to the overwhelming, ecologically driven changes in the way we live and relate to each other that are on our doorstep.

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See also ▼



PHOTO: MICHAEL RILEY

### Success and failure

Examinations such as this at a major British university come at the end of a long line of grading and measurement that evaluate the vast majority of children as academic ‘failures’ and reward others as ‘successes’—almost entirely on the basis of their intellectual development.

Examinations constitute a failure culture: the esteem they concentrate in too few hands masks the damage done to the vast

majority of children through equating learning with failure.

Many of the ‘successes’, those children who fit the universities’ intellectual profile, may suffer a different kind of damage as they discover that the university is often more interested in them demonstrating that they share its beliefs about knowledge, power, and authority than in an open-ended exploration of their creative potential.

[more](#)



### Subliminal lesson

In the traditional classroom scenario, with the teacher in a controlling position, children absorb the subliminal lesson that human interaction involves domination rather than participation and cooperation. In most schools, the teacher sets the agenda for the class, the term, the year, while the children are rarely invited to contribute to decisions about the content, pace, or relevance of the work they are doing. There is very little choice and usually a large element of coercion. Co-operation between classmates is usually considered cheating and the child soon learns that you have to compete to survive, that intellect rules, and that it is natural and inevitable to have someone in authority over you. However, the denied emotionality which this is likely to entail often tends to emerge and find expression in sabotage, resistance, and disruption.

Of course there are many caring teachers—particularly of young children—who put a high value on the child's experience and judgement. But inertia and holding to tradition still prevent innovation that would soften the authoritarian approach of the classroom. Teachers' training colleges have been promoting a child-centred approach to education for decades. However, recent research shows that new teachers tend to teach in the way they themselves were taught.

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A teacher should  
have maximal  
authority and  
minimal power.

THOMAS SZASZ



See also ▾

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