

Learning Autonomously: Disinterest Instead of a Thirst for Knowledge

by

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It is a known phenomenon that some students lose their enthusiasm for school. Ernst Michael Kranich writes, “The relationship that the young person has with the school becomes progressively problematic. In the first four classes of elementary school about one third of the students feel that school impacts them negatively; during middle school more than two thirds (sixty-nine percent) of the students; and in high school – particularly in the highest grade – nearly eighty percent experience school as a negative factor in their lives.”¹ He admits that this situation today is to a certain degree also true for Waldorf schools.

This negative development especially impacts the enthusiasm for learning. The joy in coming to know and understand the world is part of the general joy in life and the basis for self-realization. This joy should under normal circumstances last throughout one’s life.

Does not the young child have endless questions which we are supposed to answer, hopefully all at once? Naturally, the young child brings all these questions along to school. But over time this thirst for knowledge disappears and boredom and disinterest increasingly take its place. How does that shift come to pass? Is it possibly schooling itself which drives out the enthusiasm for learning? Many children and parents make that claim. Are they right?

Independent learning before school entry

When admitted into first grade, the children are often well-versed in reading and writing. Many of them can even read to me from a book. When I ask how they learned it, I am often proudly told, “I taught myself.” Again and again I ask myself why these children have to go to school if they are learning things perfectly well all by themselves. Are these abilities we notice today absorbed with mother’s milk? Are reading and writing in our culture learned in much the same way as walking, speaking and thinking – by active imitation? Are we not putting on the brakes to a self-starting learning process by making these children attend school?

During the late Middle Ages a good part of the middle class and of the urban population could read and write without having had formal schooling. By the time that public schooling became obligatory, a large part of the adult population could already read and write: in America around seventy percent, in Scotland eighty percent, in England seventy percent and in France approximately sixty-five percent. So how does it come about that, for example, in Switzerland today there are about 20,000 to 30,000 adults who cannot read – or read insufficiently – or write in spite of obligatory public schooling?

This phenomenon, which is called “functional illiteracy,” is in most cases rooted in negative school experiences and lack of support from the parents.² Teachers seem to overlook the fact that the children are already entering school with individual learning styles, which they have discovered independently. Instead of honoring this learning style, we approach the unsuspecting first grader with more or less sophisticated techniques for reading, writing, and arithmetic. We do not realize that with this approach we drive out the successful learning strategies that the children have found and developed on their own. Is that why so many students so quickly lose their enthusiasm for learning?

The inner urge to explore the world

As a young teacher I was able to let the children continue to learn very freely in those first years. At that time I was again and again amazed at how the children learned with ease and certainty without my adding much more than the opportunity for regular practice. These learning successes I have not been able to match with any teaching method for reading or writing. These methods did save time, the children learned somewhat faster, but they did not learn with the same certainty, and some even developed anxieties around learning.

Does it astonish us then that children lose their enthusiasm for learning if they are not allowed to adopt their own style of learning? They are forced without good reason into a learning style that may not be appropriate for them and on top of it they develop anxieties. I will never forget the fright and fear that overcame me as a first grader when in the first week I was supposed to draw a “K” in class and the teacher stopped by my desk and declared my work – which I thought was well done – as roundabout wrong. Why? “You drew it with the wrong hand.”

Today left handers can mostly write in their own familiar way; but we overlook that any pre-determined learning strategy is alien to the child and engenders uncertainty – unless it is his own, freely-chosen approach. We do not realize clearly enough that children have an inner urge to explore the world and that they have long found their own way in that endeavor. When they come to our schools, they have already developed various degrees of knowledge and skills. (When we look more closely and without prejudice, we may even ask if they do not bring along their own individual urge to learn right from the beginning.)

In the fourth educational recommendation of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, this problem is aptly addressed: “There is no school maturity that children reach, but only a school that approaches children right where they are in their learning process; if a school does not do that, it is a bad school.” And it goes on: “Faced with the growing diversity of children and adolescents, it becomes necessary to deal better with such differences and to create learning situations that meet the children on their individual levels.”³ The specific inability of schools to deal with such diversity certainly is a main cause to the rapid decreases in the enthusiasm for learning.

Why do we meet a greater degree of diversity in today’s children? Does this diversity in learning levels and styles manifest as a result of varying levels of knowledge due to their socioeconomic situations, as the foundation report wants to make us believe? Or are we faced with a deeply rooted process of freedom and individualization, which finds its particular expression in each individual child? The present generation is becoming more and more individualistic. Why is it then so hard to understand that it adamantly demands its own learning style for every single student? Is not such an apparent demand rooted in the strong will for freedom and for autonomous learning? Autonomous learning, however, in its last consequence renders school, as we know it, unnecessary. How can we do justice to such an appropriate wish for individual freedom in our schools, if it is school itself that continuously puts the brakes on such freedom?

Based on Rudolf Steiner’s Teachings about the Human Being, Waldorf Education Can Answer This Question.

School, an encroachment on the freedom of mankind

First of all we must examine the question concerning the trust in our own free development. In education that would mean: Will the student learn that which is right for him at the time that is right for him? Will he follow his inner compass or will he misuse his freedom if he is allowed to learn in a free and individual manner? In other words: We have to fix through education the damage done by encroaching arbitrarily upon the freedom of the child. We have to repair the damage done by interrupting the natural, meaningful development of the child by sending him to school. Or is there no such natural, autonomous and meaningful development?

Steiner addresses this issue decisively: “We are not as aware as we should be of the step backwards we have taken in the development of man; at one point we were on a level where people allowed their children to grow up more or less wild; they did not give them any particular formal instruction. At that point the freedom of man was not encroached upon, they did not interfere with the natural development as we do. At the age of six we begin to encroach upon the freedom of the human being, and we have to restore

what has been improperly destroyed in that phase through schooling. We have to restore it through right education. We have to become clear that the ‘how’ of education must improve lest we are going to face a terrible situation. People may remark as much as they like on what high a stage we have reached in our culture, how few illiterate people there are nowadays. But an education that does not compensate for this loss of freedom only produces students who are regurgitating what has been fed to them at school.”⁴

So school means a radical encroachment upon the free development of the human being – and thus regression in the development of humanity as a whole, a step back that must be compensated for. When a person is allowed to develop in freedom, she will become who she really is, she self-actualizes, which also furthers the development of humanity as a whole. One can fundamentally trust the free development of the individual. It leads in equal measure to a meaningful development of mankind. Actually the conscious awareness of this fact has grown in the last hundred years.

Learning with passion

Karl-Martin Dietz talks about the development of the generation of young people during the last thirty-five years, and he calls the youngsters’ trust in their own development self-realization. “I do not always want to be the servant of other masters – neither in my professional nor in my personal life.”⁵ One could correctly add – also not in school.

“I strive to realize my fullest potential!” In the last twenty years I have been hearing this statement like an ever-louder sigh emerging in all that students say and do. In its highest form it means: I learn independently, passionately.

Learning with passion is the highest level of learning said George T. Betts (University of Northern Colorado, USA, September 2003) at a conference about highly gifted and talented students.⁶ He continues, “Do you have passions that you pursue ardently? Do you support and further such passions in your students?” And we could add: Do you strive for your life to be a manifestation of your full potential? Students starting in first grade today pose this question. That is the foundation on which they want to learn. To discover one’s own passion and to cultivate it means to recognize one’s proclivities and talents and to develop them fully. In this path, the teacher must boldly, freely and courageously lead the student. On this path the student will then follow *in his way*, with joy. More than ever the student of today demands radical originality of the teacher.

Authenticity and creativity

This is the only way that a teacher today can become the “beloved authority” for the children, which they need during the second seven years of their life. As mentioned above, children learn freely, propelled by self-ignited passion long before the first grade. The child has achieved a piece of self-realization and wants to continue this process. In no way does he or she want to become a “cookie-cutter imprint” or “robot.” In the second seven

years of life the child is not over-challenged if he or she continues to self-actualize passionately according to his or her talents and proclivities. The child is not thrown into premature independence or social responsibility if he or she can freely choose and work through various subject areas (with the help and advice of a teacher, of course).

Authority is rejected

Today's children will experience guidance through authority – however well-meant – as an encroachment upon their naturally developing personality. Already first graders will no longer follow authority of their own accord, as Telse Kardel still wants us to believe.⁷ On the contrary, they follow any inner guidance only if and in how far an adult models a passionate and self-directed life for them. Only the *gesture* of inner-directness makes the adult an authority. And the children follow such a gesture. (This should not be confused with imitation during the first seven years.) By following this process of finding and actualizing one's self in the adult and following in their footsteps in their own way, the children come to know themselves and the world. Only in 'this sense' do they see the world with the eyes of the teacher. All other guidance merely elicits obedience.

But the path to freedom is not found through obedience, however well-disguised! This insight is not contradictory to Steiner's demand for repetitive action, which furthers the development of the faculty of willing by doing something "because it has to be done." We can awaken a sensitive understanding for just such repetitious actions, even if they merely have to be performed as a task. The children gain ownership of the task only through such sensitive understanding, which must be enlivened again and again. Only then can the educational support for the faculty of willing become fully effective. That is why Steiner attaches highest value to all artistic work and practice, because in art we joyfully exercise with repetitive practice and with sensitive understanding. (See also *The Study of Man*, fourth lecture.) Anyone who has observed such a free learning process in children over an extended period of time, objectively and without prejudice, knows exactly that such learning has nothing at all to do with intellectual overload or premature responsibility.

A new approach to schooling

We as teachers have to re-think and re-learn in a crucial way! The "how" of classroom instruction can no longer be defined by the way I prepare my lessons and by my choice of teaching methods. It must rather be defined by my own process of self-development and self-realization in the work I do with the child. The profession then becomes one's passion and then we perforce teach passionately. In this way our profession becomes a lifelong, self-directed learning process, which we strive to manifest consciously.

In this sense Waldorf education can be 're-thought' as Hartmut von Hentig said so poignantly: "In the new type of school a large part of learning must indeed proceed on an individual basis. Each child has his own challenges

and seeks the teacher's support when he needs help, or the teacher offers it to the child. Self-reliance (or self-realization) as much as differentiation and acceptance of differences requires an independent choice of one's tasks (ignited by passion) or at least participation in choosing when or what one learns."⁸

In Waldorf education this process of independent learning requires the presence of the teacher who decisively influences the child by taking a positive and accepting stance, untainted by prejudice. It requires the presence of a teacher who models such development through his own education and self-realized living.

Endnotes:

1. Ernst-Michael Kranich (editor), *Unterricht im bergang zum Jugendalter*, Stuttgart: 1997, S. 9.
2. Ollivier Keller, *Denn mein Leben ist Lernen. Wie Kinder aus eigenem Antrieb die Welt erforschen*, Kempten: 1999.
3. Professionalität und Ethos. Plädoyer für eine grundlegende Reform des Lehrerbewusstseins. 4. Empfehlung der Bildungskommission der Heinrich-B Stiftung, Berlin: 2003.
4. Rudolf Steiner, *Menschenkenntnis und Unterrichtsgestaltung*, GA 302, Dornach: 1986, S. 66.
5. Karl-Martin Dietz, *Erziehung in Freiheit, Rudolf Steiner Über die Selbstständigkeit im Jugendalter*, Heidelberg 2003.
6. Frank Rothe: "Beagbunen fördern, Lernen individualisieren," in *Erziehungskunst*, 12/2003, S. 1415f.
7. Telse Karde, in: Ernst-Michael Kranich: *Unterricht im bergang zum Jugendalter*, Stuttgart: 1997, S. 9. S. 153 ff.
8. Hartmut von Hentig, *Re-Thinking School*, Weinheim: 2003.