

WHY IS POO BROWN?

PAUL STURGES EXPLAINS THE CHILD'S RIGHT TO INFORMATION

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The question in the title was framed by Matilda Michael-Philips (aged 4 at the time), but this article will not attempt to give the kind of physiologist's answer for which the question calls. [Note] The point is that her question was asked seriously and the theme of this paper is that children have a right to serious answers to their questions. First, the article will deal briefly with some of the reasons why children's questions are avoided and, indeed, suppressed. Then it will argue that the child's need for information is so essential that to ignore it is to hinder and even damage the basic processes of its development. It is on the basis of the perception that information is something utterly fundamental for the child, that the idea of an information right has been developed. This is explicitly set out in the United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child, various articles of which will be discussed. Finally the implications of this for libraries will be identified.

WHY CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS ARE A PROBLEM

Children's questions can be embarrassing, worrying and downright difficult to answer and the old saying 'Children should be seen and not heard' is a response to this. This avoidance of children's questions is sometimes just laziness and unwillingness to do a little research. At other times it reveals something deeper. At a conference at the Biblioteca Alexandrina in 2008 I asked a colleague 'Do Egyptian children have imaginary friends?' The answer was a simple 'No'. There is always someone with them (parent, grandparent, servant, or sibling) who cares for them and keeps them occupied. This strong and protective family environment has its admirable aspects, but another side of it is that 'Father knows best' and the child's speculative side is not encouraged. In such societies it is usually considered to be of the highest importance that religious belief is inculcated into the child. From this perspective, questions are not encouraged, because they interfere with the process of making children believers.

This applies to most if not all faiths. In the sixteenth century Erasmus said that 'Most important is that the seeds of piety are planted within a child's tender heart.' (Erasmus, 1530) Education systems do not always challenge this emphasis sufficiently. For instance, multiculturalism in the context of the school often leads to teachers feeling that they should respect their pupils' religious and cultural beliefs, even when those beliefs have obviously been acquired from their family and community with little question. In general, systems of mass schooling have the tendency to avoid the difficult individual needs of the child, and the modern concern with tests and measurement of 'learning' across the whole child population is not especially conducive to a child's freedom of inquiry.

Another kind of justification is frequently offered for curtailing children's desire to know. As Marshall (1997, p.2) says 'Most adults have an instinctive desire to protect

children from situations and information that might cause them distress', citing a survey of childcare professionals showing that all of them identified some circumstances in which information might be withheld. The serious response to this is to ask two questions: 'What is a child?' and 'What is protection?' Systems of law identify a child by some benchmark age ranging from 8-21, but non-lawyers argue that there should be no such presumptions. The non-legalistic approach stresses giving children information when they are clearly ready for it, but presenting it in a way that is meaningful to them. The justification for giving information to a child when that child reveals a desire or need for it is that by avoiding giving answers we can leave the child vulnerable. As Anthony Browne, the Children's Laureate, puts it in relation to fiction, 'If we insist on telling children that everything in the garden is lovely, we're doing them a disservice'. (Crown, 2009, p.13) The learning process may be disrupted by the lack of necessary answers, or the child may experience difficulty in protecting itself if it is in ignorance of dangers and possible responses to danger. This is a strong argument for giving answers, but there is another more fundamental line of argument leading to the same conclusion.

THE CHILD'S DEVELOPING BRAIN

The early development and functioning of the human brain is dependent on access to what we might broadly call information. A flow of sensations into the brain that range from tastes and smells through to the visual and auditory reception of incredibly complex messages coded in language, number and other sets of symbols, does not merely inform, it develops and supports the ability to think. The newborn baby immediately begins to identify sensations, recognise them when they occur, and even predict their recurrence. Babies can be observed responding to the messages from their senses as early as the moments when they first seek to attach their lips to their mother's nipple. Very soon they will know their immediate surroundings and recognise those who care for them. A process of change and growth in the brain is central to this development of understanding, but that in turn is reliant on the reception of a flow of stimuli.

The processes that are taking place in human learning are now much better understood through the use of technology such as electroencephalography, positron emission tomography (PET scanning), magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), and magnetoencephalography (MEG). (Winston, 2003) The increase of brain activity in the areas associated with the various senses can be measured during the early months of human life. The development of the baby's physical coordination and its perception of distance and space develop markedly during the first few months and before the end of the first year the frontal lobes become active. At this stage, the baby can choose to concentrate on particular visual or auditory stimuli to the exclusion of others and to make other choices based on this observation. Later the child develops the ability to understand and use language, and can process and benefit from the encoded messages passed on by other humans.

The important thing is that this process of finding out, building understanding on what is identified, and then basing actions on that understanding, is not merely a learned response. The neural equipment of the infant human has the basic capacity to cope with the information that reaches it, and what is more, the brain requires it. We could

regard this as the state of being wired to discover. Gopnik (2009) calls the child a 'learning machine' and Koren (1996, p.63) says that

As a child grows, matures and develops he[/she] demonstrates at every stage of his life his[/her] need for information, which is in both a broad and narrow sense the driving force of his[/her] very being.

The truth of this can be appreciated by looking at the negative case. A child that is deprived of sensation visibly suffers in consequence. Occasionally children are discovered who have been shut up for years on end by their parents or carers in spaces that allow them hardly any access to external stimuli. These children's ability to learn has on each occasion been severely damaged and if the incarceration has continued too long they have proved incapable of progressing beyond very limited understanding and communication. The nature and quality of the input obviously matters. It is sometimes alleged that when too much content is delivered by computers and television development is also hindered. Greenfield (2009), for instance, argues that computer games offer sensations only, devoid of metaphor, abstract concepts, narrative and a sense of the consequences of actions. An Australian Government report (Barrowclough, 2009) suggests that exposure to television for the under 2s, can stunt their language development and shorten their attention span. With this possible reservation, exposing the child to a wide range of sensation and information from its earliest days, so that it can continue to develop, is a necessity rather than a luxury.

EDUCATING THE CHILD

To understand what happens in the process of learning how to find out, and the actual business of finding out, we need to turn to the area of educational theory. Still the most widely known and accepted approach of this kind is Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development. (Piaget, 1953) He came to understand the development of the mind as a process of the same kind as biological growth. His intensive observation showed him the child constantly defining and redefining its understanding of what it perceives as it experiences more and more exposure to external stimuli. He saw this as the child actually thinking and reasoning in different ways at different stages in its life, an insight on which he elaborated his theory of cognitive development. The argument that the child is inherently structured and oriented towards discovery is given specific shape in Piaget's explanation of the four main stages he identified.

Piaget's theory overwhelmingly suggests that learning is not passive: learners must actively construct and reconstruct their own knowledge. He argued that for a child to learn it must be ready: that is, it must have reached the appropriate developmental stage. This placed a requirement on formal education to respond to the needs of the child, not to feed the child with highly structured information, ready or not, according to the pre-set structure of a curriculum. As Maria Montessori, one of the other great pioneers of modern educational theory put it,

Education is not something which the teacher does, but it is a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being. It is not acquired by listening to words, but in virtue of experiences in which the child acts on his environment. The teacher's task is not to talk, but to prepare and arrange a

series of motives for cultural activity in a special environment made for the child. (Montessori, 1949)

More recently, this approach is the basis of hosts of experiments, both small and large scale, with child-centred learning in schools. It has also inspired a whole body of theory. For example, there is critical literacy which provides a theoretical basis for the idea of information literacy. (Shor, 1980). In this the teacher seeks to encourage learners to probe beneath the surface meaning of the information and ideas to which they are exposed, so as to draw out the causes, context and ideology of all types of communication. What is more, the principle that the child needs to experiment and question and to be an active searcher for answers, provides a rationale for the provision of responsive information services such as children's and school libraries.

INFORMATION RIGHTS

When we identify a fundamental human need based on the very essence of intelligent life, it is natural to define a positive response to that need as a right. Rights are identified and codified because they are inherent in human beings, not because they are granted by governments, or by some God. The idea that children are also autonomous beings with rights dates back at least to the Enlightenment of the Eighteenth Century, and probably most directly to Rousseau's novel *Emile*. (Rousseau, 1762) The clearer perception of brain development and function that we now possess suggests that we could even say that children have specific rights over and above those applying to all humans. This line of argument was undoubtedly what inspired the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). An international convention is a treaty that all the signatory governments undertake to put in force, in contrast to a declaration which merely sets out intent, and every nation (with the strange exceptions of the USA and Somalia) has ratified the 1989 Convention. It is therefore well worth looking at what such a powerful agreement says about information rights.

First and foremost, in its Article 13 the Convention reasserts the right to freedom of expression set out in Article 19 of the United Nations (1947) Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 13 goes on to follow Article 19 in specifying the right 'to seek, receive and impart information and ideas'. This quite simply asserts the identity of the child as essentially an information seeker and the rights that this implies. What it adds is that this seeking can be satisfied 'either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice', thus recognising the diversity of sources from which children already learn. The directness and clarity of this leaves little room for dissent, but various other Articles expand and strengthen the basic idea. Koren (1996) works through whole Convention for its implication for children's information rights in considerable detail, but here we will draw attention to Articles 14, 16 and 17.

Articles 14 and 16 make important statements about the child's autonomy as a person and a learner. Article 14 calls on states and their institutions to 'respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion'. In doing so it answers most of the objections to answering children's questions set out in the beginning of this article. What is more, it directly counters the idea that the child's religion, whether passed on intact from parents and community or acquired independently, is somehow

to be isolated from the influence of information. Thus teachers, libraries and other adults are free to inform the child about ideas, principles and beliefs, though not permitted to interfere positively or negatively with what the child chooses. Article 16 is largely a restatement of the privacy rights in the Universal Declaration, phrased as freedom from interference with privacy, family, home and correspondence. With these articles we see the child recognised as an independent learner and seeker for information. Article 17 provides further clarification of what that might mean in practice. It recognises the importance of mass media and calls for a diversity of national and international sources to be available to the child. In particular, in sub section (c) it calls on states to 'encourage the production and dissemination of children's books'.

CONCLUSION

In the UN Convention we have a legally binding international agreement by which states recognise the child as independent learner. Wilful failure to respond to children's search for knowledge by states, churches, schools and libraries, even parent and community groups effectively constitutes a violation of a major international agreement. In particular, the Convention provides a solid endorsement for libraries for children, when their choice of materials to put on the shelves or their unwillingness to apply powerful filtering software to Internet resources is challenged. The library as a browsable set of resources and access facilities has been used by children in many times and cultures as a kind of secret garden for the mind. Behind the walls of protection provided by librarians they have been able to pursue their personal quest for knowledge with little or no interference. The justification for this protection is stronger when we realise that it can be argued through from rights arising from the basic characteristics of the developing human mind. The precise nature of these rights is clearly specified by the United Nations. By this reasoning, libraries and librarianship for children are not mere matters of resources and techniques, but a response to the very strongest human needs.

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NOTE

If any reader really needs an answer to the colour question, the brownness comes chiefly from bilirubin, a product of the body's breakdown of haemoglobin. Bilirubin passes into the small intestine where bacteria transform it from green to brown. http://everything2.com/index.pl?node_id=... [Accessed 2.7.09]