

Joy: A Subject Schools Lack

Becoming educated should not require giving up pleasure.



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- ① When Jonathan Swift proposed, in 1729, that the people of Ireland eat their children, he insisted it would solve three problems at once: feed the hungry masses, reduce the population during a severe depression, and stimulate restaurant business. Even as a satire, it seems repulsive and shocking in America with its child-centered culture. But actually, the country is closer to his proposal than you might think.

- ② If you spend much time with educators and policy makers (even if you just read editorials about education), you'll hear a lot of the following words: "standards," "results," "skills," "self-control," "accountability," and so on. I have visited some of the newer supposedly "effective" schools, where children chant slogans in order to learn self-control, are given a jelly bean when they do their worksheet, or must stand behind their desk when they can't sit still. When I go to these schools, all I can think of is Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, in which Wackford Squeers, the headmaster of a school, says with great certainty, "Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them ..."
- ③ In the novel, Squeers is hell-bent on making sure that his students leave school with the knowledge they need to be "serviceable" in the adult world. It's not so different today. Everyone is worried about whether kids are "learning what they need" to get into college, finding good jobs, getting along in a big company, and learning new trades. The country's whole school system seems geared toward solving large-scale economic woes and producing future workers. It's most definitely not geared toward children. In fact, the prevailing view is that if teachers focus too much on students' pleasure they will somehow be encouraging wanton self-indulgence and dangerous hedonism.
- ④ A look at what goes on in most classrooms these days makes it abundantly clear that when people think about education, they are *not* thinking about what it feels like to be a child, or what makes childhood an important and valuable stage of life in its own right. This may explain why so many schools that I visit seem more like something out of a Dickens novel than anything else.
- ⑤ I'm a mother of three, a teacher, and a developmental psychologist. So I've watched a lot of children—talking, playing, arguing, eating, studying, and being, well, young. Here's what I've come to understand. The thing that sets children apart from adults is not their ignorance, nor their lack of skills. It's their enormous capacity for joy. Think of a 3-year-old lost in the pleasures of finding out what he

can and cannot sink in the bathtub, a 5-year-old beside herself with the thrill of putting together strings of nonsensical words with her best friends, or an 11-year-old completely immersed in a riveting comic strip. A child's ability to become deeply absorbed in something, and derive intense pleasure from that absorption, is something adults spend the rest of their lives trying to return to.

Many teachers are pressured to treat pleasure and joy as the enemies of competence and responsibility.

- ⑥ A friend told me the following story. One day, when he went to get his 7-year-old son from soccer practice, his kid greeted him with a downcast face and a despondent voice. The coach had chastised him for not paying attention and not focusing on his soccer drills. The little boy walked out of the school with his head drooping downwards, shoulders slumped, dragging his way towards the car. He seemed wrapped in sadness. But just before he reached the car door, he suddenly stopped, crouching down to peer at something on the sidewalk. His face went down lower and lower, and then, with complete ebullience he called out, "Dad. C'mere. This is the most amazing bug I've ever seen. It has, like, a million legs. Look at this. It's awesome." He looked up at his father, his features brimming with energy and delight. "Can't we stay here for just a minute? I want to find out what he does with all those legs. This is the coolest ever."
- ⑦ The traditional view of such moments is that they constitute a charming but irrelevant byproduct of youth—something to be pushed aside to make room for more important qualities, like perseverance, obligation, and practicality. Yet moments like this one are just the kind of intense absorption and pleasure adults spend the rest of their lives seeking. In his masterpiece essay, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud described childhood as a period of trying to balance primal urges to find pleasure and avoid pain with the growing need to be part of a group. Every piece of research since that essay has shown that Freud was right. Human lives are governed by the desire to experience joy. Becoming educated should not require giving up joy but rather lead to finding joy in new kinds of things:

reading novels instead of playing with small figures, conducting experiments instead of sinking cups in the bathtub, and debating serious issues rather than stringing together nonsense words, for example. In some cases, schools should help children find new, more grown-up ways of doing the same things that are perennial sources of joy: making art, making friends, making decisions.

- ⑧ Building on a child's ability to feel joy, rather than pushing it aside, wouldn't be that hard. It would just require a shift in the education world's mindset. Instead of trying to get children to buckle down, why not focus on getting them to take pleasure in meaningful, productive activity, like making things, working with others, exploring ideas, and solving problems? These focuses are not so different from the things to which they already gravitate and in which they delight.
- ⑨ Before you brush this argument aside as sentimental fluff, or think of joy as an unaffordable luxury in a nation where there is dire poverty, low academic achievement, and high dropout rates, think again. The more dire the school circumstances, the more important pleasure is to achieving any educational success.
- ⑩ Many of the assignments and rules teachers come up with, often because they are pressured by their administrators, treat pleasure and joy as the enemies of competence and responsibility. The assumption is that children shouldn't chat in the classroom because it disrupts hard work; instead, they should learn to delay gratification so that they can pursue abstract goals, like going to college. They should keep their hands to themselves and tolerate boredom so that they become good at being bored later on.
- ⑪ Not only is this a dreary and awful way to treat children, it makes no sense educationally. Decades of research have shown that in order to acquire skills and real knowledge in school, kids need to want to learn. You can force a child to stay in his or her seat, fill out a worksheet, or practice division. But you can't force a person to think carefully, enjoy books, digest complex information, or develop a taste for learning. To make that happen, you have to help the child find pleasure in learning—to see school as a source of joy.

12 Adults tend to talk about learning as if it were medicine: unpleasant, but necessary and good for you. Why not instead think of learning as if it were food—something so valuable to humans that they have evolved to experience it as a pleasure? The more a person likes fresh, healthy food, the more likely that individual is to have a good diet. Why can't it be the same with learning? Let children learn because they love to—think only of a 2-year-old trying to talk to see how natural humans' thirst for knowledge is. Then, in school, help children build on their natural joy in learning.

13 Joy should not be trained out of children or left for after-school programs. The more difficult a child's life circumstances, the more important it is for that child to find joy in his or her classroom. "Pleasure" is not a dirty word. And it's not antithetical to the goals of K-12 public education. It is, in fact, the *sine qua non*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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