FORUM
Volume 50, Number 3, 2008
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM

In Praise of Wasting Time in Education: some lessons from the *Romantics*

DAVID HALPIN

ABSTRACT Far too much curriculum time in primary schools is overly regulated and assessment driven, with the result that many children attending them are either bored or made to feel anxious. The antidote to this tendency is for teachers to rediscover the value of deregulated ('wasted') curriculum time via a renewed commitment to the value of play, fostered by an initial acquaintance with *Romantic* conceptions of childhood.

In his first interview of 2008, Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alistair Darling, revealed to the *Financial Times* that, unlike most of the rest of us, he had had little vacation to speak of since the previous Christmas Eve, having been hard at it most days running his department of state. 'If there's one thing I've learnt', he said, 'it's that being Chancellor means that there isn't such a thing as a day off.'

And, of course, there is a sense in which this must be true, for the economic affairs of any country never go on holiday. But, we were also meant to be impressed by Mr Darling's industriousness. Indeed, working for long hours, and taking few breaks, seems currently to be some kind of virility symbol, despite the fact that such things do not make people either more productive at work or better at their jobs in other ways. The evidence in fact suggests quite the contrary – specifically, that working long and intensively and eschewing relaxation actually makes us less job efficient, not to mention miserable, unsociable and unhealthy. Evidence also indicates that such practices are becoming more the norm than not nowadays. Reversing a ten-year long trend of a cut in the working week, a recent Trades Union Congress (TUC) report, for example, highlights how today more than one in eight of adult people – 13% of the nation's employees – work more than forty-eight hours a week, rising to one in six in London.

None of this might matter if it was just restricted to the adult population. But, it turns out that children, some as young as those of primary school age,

are caught up in this process as well, and seemingly at their teachers' and parents' behests rather than their own.

Two recent surveys of school practice submitted to Robin Alexander's Primary School Review illustrate this tendency. The first, written by Carol Robinson and Michael Fielding, looks at the findings of British research on what primary pupils think of their education, focusing in particular on their perceptions of its purposes, and on learning, teaching, the curriculum and assessment. Disturbingly, it reports that, while children are mostly happy to attend their primary schools, they largely see the purposes of their schooling in instrumental terms, as chiefly to prepare them eventually for getting a job, considering that there is a direct link between working hard at school and getting 'good' employment later on.

The same children also believe themselves to be under pressure to get through a large workload in preparation for SATs; and they think that such pressure results in their teachers placing more emphasis on the completion of work than on the understanding of it. In some cases primary pupils perceive learning in their schools to be almost entirely focused on working towards and achieving good test results.

Similar perceptions are reported in Berry Mayall's review of other UK research that investigates primary-aged children's lives both inside and outside of school. This spotlights the degree to which today much more of these are adult regulated – firstly, by most teachers, who restrict the amount of 'free time' pupils are able to enjoy in school to pursue their own interests; and, secondly, by many anxious parents, who feel it necessary to convert the home into an overtly educational establishment to support the school's work, so providing even 'more school', and in turn making their children's lives increasingly 'scholarised' ones, with more time spent on doing academic type school work and less time devoted to play and having fun.

It's enough to make any school-aged child stressed, which is what appears to be happening, if we are to believe those reports which tell stories of more and more very young children suffering increased levels of anxiety at school through feeling afraid of being exposed as failures. Such stories led Mary Bousted, General Secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), to state at the annual meeting of her union held earlier this year that 'the rise in children's mental health problems cannot be divorced from their status as the most tested in the world'. She also drew homework into the mix, arguing that the setting of too much of it – also increasingly evident – was not just 'a waste of time' for many primary-aged children, but also a further factor in making them less happy at school.

The wish on the part of teachers and parents to see greater purpose and structure in children's learning is of course not a bad thing. It's the massive extent and regulating nature of it at the moment that is perturbing, making schooling, for too many pupils, far too taxing and insufficiently enjoyable, leading me to urge teachers to consider building into the school day more unscheduled moments for children to learn in their own time and ways. Such

'wasting time' is not wasted time, if it is defined rather as a form of child's 'play' in which pupils are enabled, as Jerome Bruner famously instructed, to learn in less risky ways. Indeed, as Adrian Voce, Director of *Play England*, recently stated, 'play has a big role in children becoming responsive, self-aware, resilient and resourceful', echoing Donald Winnicott's observation that 'it is in playing, and perhaps only in playing, that the child is free to be creative.'

The utopian child, Emile, anticipated much of this, for his creator, Rousseau, was all in favour of him playfully 'wasting time' in the classroom: 'dare I expose the greatest, the most important – the most useful rule of all education? It is not to gain time, but to lose it ... [Don't you] see that *using time badly wastes time far more than doing nothing with it* ...?' Rousseau's applauding of time-wasting here derives entirely from his conception of the importance of offering a 'negative education' to children – one in which the natural order of things takes precedence over teachers' urgings. While I am not recommending that as an important axiom of good pedagogy, the idea that children should frequently be allowed in class to control completely the form, content and pace of their learning – through being allowed to 'play' in one way or another – is surely not so shocking; on the contrary, it may be necessary in order to engage properly their interests, contributing in turn to raising their motivational levels generally.

It may be a necessary means as well of making improvements to the overall quality of their lives, blighted as they are now by burdens entirely not of their construction and by coercions largely out of their control. Again, Rousseau, writing to us across nearly 250 years of time, has a lesson to teach about this: 'Love childhood, indulge its sports, its delightful instincts. Who has not sometimes regretted [the passing of] that age when laughter was ever on the lips, and when the heart was ever at peace? Why rob these innocents of the joys which pass so quickly, of that precious gift which they cannot abuse? Why fill with bitterness the fleeting days of early childhood, days which will no more return for them than for you?'

William Blake, a few years after Rousseau, was equally anxious that teachers should acknowledge and nurture children's creative and imaginative impulses. In his poem 'Nurse's Song' in *Songs of Innocence*, for example, he invites us to envisage a group of children playing:

> When the voices of children are heard on the green
> And laughing is heard on the hill
> My heart is at rest within my breast
> And everything else is still.
>
> Then come home my children: the sun is gone down
> And the dews of night arise
> Come, leave off play and let us away
> Till the morning appears in the skies.

No, let us play for it is yet day
And we cannot go to sleep
Besides in the sky the little birds fly
And the hills are all covered in sheep.

Well, well go play till the light fades away
And then go home to bed
The little ones leaped and shouted and laughed
And all the hills echoed.

The children's nurse here, representing a form of adult consciousness, follows their wishes, allowing them to continue playing until tiredness finally sets in. She talks empathically with the children, complementing her experience with theirs. What was good for Blake in 1789 seems more than relevant for primary schooling in 2008. It is a great pity we seem to have lost sight of this.

As we have too, it appears, of a further relevant educational insight from another Romantic poet, William Wordsworth, who, like Blake and Rousseau, advocated a positive conception of the significance of childhood, arguing that it warranted special respect and treatment on the part of adults, including and especially teachers, whom he charged with the unique duty of developing their imaginative powers.

A key feature of Wordsworth's theory of the imagination was the facility he said it had, when fully exercised and stretched, to take us over – distractedly, to usurp ordinary ways of thinking, transporting us into a world enlivened by new visionary experiences which delight the mind, encourage an optimism of spirit, and remove one temporarily from the hurly burly of life's sometimes harsh demands.

The days are long past when a teacher could seriously say, without fear of mockery, that one of her intentions in the classroom, after Wordsworth, is to enable pupils 'to lose themselves' in learning – to feel a sense of imaginative abandonment as they become caught up in the process of engaging with new ideas, notions and experiences. Today, school curricula are not constructed to facilitate such wonderfully distracted states, and teachers are rarely publicly invited to encourage them. Instead, programmes of study in our schools are devised and prescribed to be delivered and digested, akin to ordering in and consuming a pre-cooked fast meal. This is all the wrong way round, leading me to conclude that schools need to adopt a new pedagogical perspective via fresh engagement with some of the central organising ideas of old-fashioned progressive education.

Certainly schools need to prescribe and pressurise less; and they need to become happier places in which pupils are regularly encouraged positively to 'waste time' on and 'lose themselves' in their interests and projects, and not to work mostly at what their teachers determine, which is a version of what the Government wants.

It is also about teachers finding ways to help undermine the harm presently being done in the modern world by the belief in the essential virtuousness of working long hours, realising in children's thinking that the road to their happiness and prosperity may lie instead in an organised diminution of the importance of work.

The trouble is that too many schools today are part of the problem, for they unreflectively socialise children into believing the exact opposite, which is why the people that lead them could learn a thing or two maybe from listening intelligently to Bing Crosby, who once sang that he was 'busy doing nothing, working the whole day through, trying to find lots of things not to do.' However, my worry is that too many of them would not recognise the paradoxical truth contained in this lyric, assuming instead that it is an apology for idleness, which of course it isn't remotely.

DAVID HALPIN is Emeritus Professor of Education at the Institute of Education, University of London. His most recent book, *Romanticism and Education: love, heroism and imagination in pedagogy*, was published in 2007 by Continuum. *Correspondence*: Professor David Halpin, Flat 2, Capstan Court, 24 Wapping Wall, London E1W 3SE, United Kingdom (gbb71@dial.pipex.com).

HSS

Human Scale Schools

A ground-breaking project helping large secondary schools across the UK develop human scale principles and practices.

To find out more about the Human Scale Schools project please go to **www.hse.org.uk** or contact **simon.richey@gulbenkian.org.uk**

Human Scale Education

because people matter