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Thoughts on a Playful, Curiosity-Led Curriculum: a walk in Sheffield in May 2020

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ABSTRACT This is a meditative piece generated by a walk in Sheffield during the pandemic. The author explores the notion of curiosity and considers what a curiosity-led curriculum might be like, contrasting it with current schooling practices in England. She links this to playful pedagogies and echoes the call for a pedagogy left in peace, then concludes with a discussion about the need for utopias and for hope.

> Give me the clear blue sky over my head ... a winding road before me ... and then to thinking! ... I plunge into my past being and revel there ... Then long-forgotten things ... burst upon my eager sight, and I begin to feel, think, and be myself again.
> (Hazlitt, 1931, p. 182)

This is a personal meditation, a thought piece, provoked by the circumstances of 'lockdown' and 'social distancing', behaviours adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Permitted out for exercise, I took an urban walk from my front door. Although of advancing years, I am extremely fortunate in being able to walk reasonable distances, in having the leisure to do so, and in living in a part of the city where it is easy to socially distance oneself from others who are out and about. It was a public holiday and there were not many people about, providing an ideal space for thinking, feeling and seeing. As I walked, I looked about me, and everywhere there were sources of enquiry. Some things that I noticed were things I knew about, at least in part; some were things I had known about but had forgotten; and some were things I did not know about. In all cases, what I saw usually set off a chain of internal questioning, where new things to find out about toppled over each other in presenting themselves to me. The reader can come upon just three of these sources of enquiry in Figures 1, 2

and 3. This exercise of *curiosity* was a joyful experience and it drove me to reflect on how powerful and wide-ranging an incentive curiosity is to the search for knowledge.

The walk was real and the things observed that I illustrate were real.[1] But I began to imagine I had a group of children with me who were asking questions and making observations, perhaps taking photographs. It struck me that just one walk could provide a curriculum for a week – more, for a term, perhaps even for a year, as one line of enquiry generates another. The leisurely pace – the 'slowliness' (Ayliffe et al, 2020, p. 43) – and the extended space both made room for curiosity to be provoked.[2] The time felt expansive (Povey et al, 2019) and the relationships amongst the imagined participants and their relationships with knowledge and enquiry felt spacious (Angier & Povey, 2013) – an opening up which is both experienced and metaphorical. It is no coincidence that I was outdoors and on a walk. Experiencing biophilia – a passionate love of life and all that is alive (Fromm, 1964), an emotional kinship humans feel and share with the natural world and all its life forms (First Discoverers, n.d.) – we feel more content and curious, and open to the new.

The experience was in such stark contrast to what English schooling has become, despite there being many teachers who hold to a different vision and strive to make their classrooms places of real learning and joyfulness. I have written elsewhere, with colleagues, about the effect of neo-liberal thinking on teachers and children in schools in England (Povey et al, 2017; Povey & Adams, 2018). Suffice it here to say that the 'audit ideology' (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009, p. 5) has produced a testing and inspection regime with instruments of surveillance – 'hierarchical observation, normalising judgements and examinations' (Hall & Noyes, 2009, p. 851) – which have a far-reaching effect on teachers' and children's lives in school. Education has been recast as a consumer good rather than a moral enterprise, and the ethical social life is undermined:

> it is not only animal and plant species which are being destroyed ... but set after set of our human priorities. The latter are systematically sprayed, not with pesticides, but with ethicides – agents that kill ethics and therefore any notion of history and justice. Particularly targeted are those of our priorities which have evolved from the human need for sharing, bequeathing, consoling, mourning and hoping. (Berger, 2016, p. 83)

And, I add, being curious – experiencing that strong desire to know or learn something – which is also given the heave-ho. Insecurity for both teachers and learners is rife and teaching becomes driven by a preordained, usually pretty fragmented, closed curriculum, which is often experienced as relatively irrelevant and meaningless. Curiosity, on the other hand, has the capacity to generate *meaning-fullness* in learning (after Jardine, 2013).

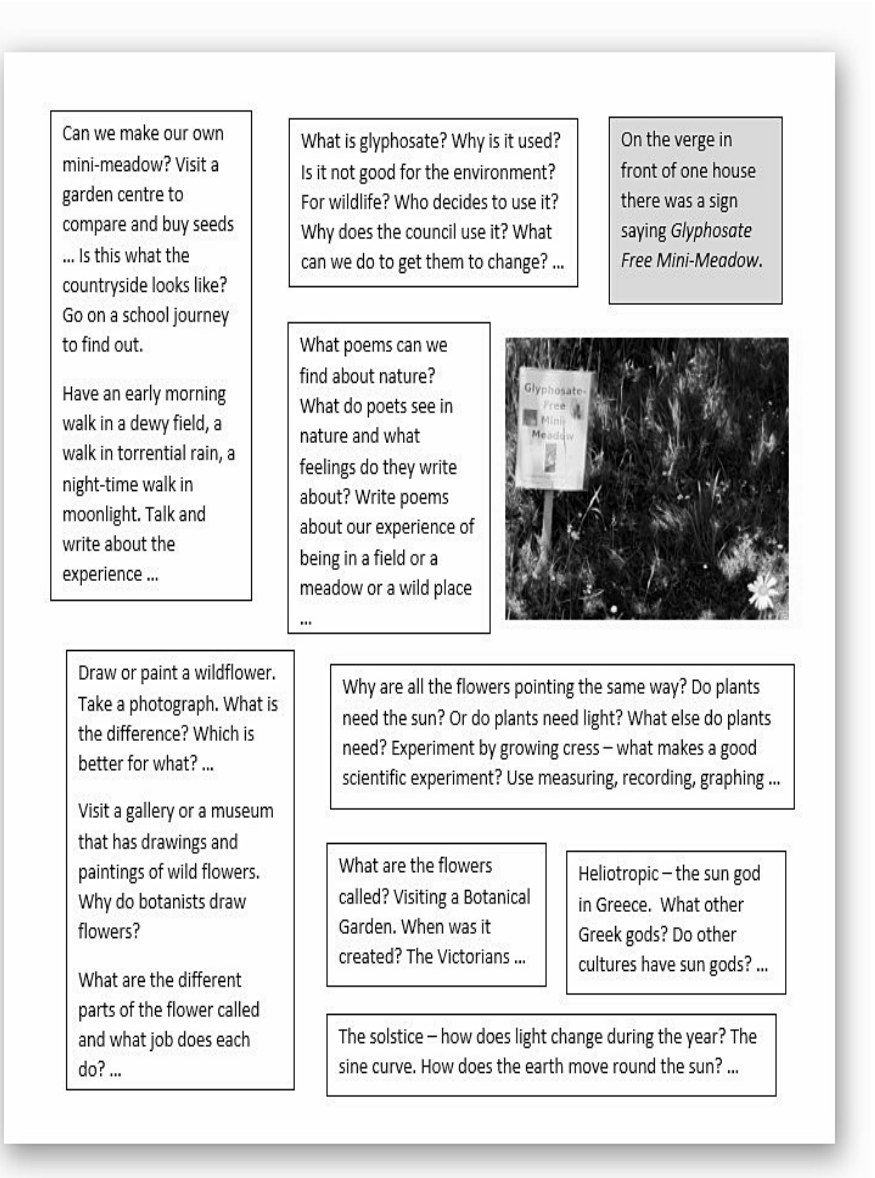


Figure 1. A glyphosate mini-meadow. (Colin Jackson, copyright free.)

I had not foreseen this, but as I reflected on the experience and thought about curiosity-driven learning, I began to make connections with the idea of playful pedagogies. Play has a long history in early years education. As long ago as the beginning of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Froebel wrote that 'play is the highest expression of human development in childhood for it alone is the free

expression of what is in the child's soul' (quoted in Early Education, n.d.), and a century later the Reggio Emilia approach to early years learning argues for the importance of 'the full, slow, extravagant, lucid and ever-changing emergence of children's capacities' (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 74). The playfulness intended is well conveyed by Loris Malaguzzi: 'if a child wants to be a Chagall character flying over houses', then that is quite alright (Cagliari et al., 2016, p. 339).

A group of us at the university where I am Professor Emerita have recently been trying to work with the notion of *playfulness* in learning – discussions that have been, temporarily, I hope, cut short by the pandemic. One of the group, Professor Cathy Burnett, drew my attention to the manifesto of the Playful Learning Centre based in Helsinki, which lists six conditions for playfulness in learning:

- Question the authority of authority. Everything is up [for] grabs, teachers, knowledge values, epistemology – the works. What purpose does authority in learning serve? In whose interests? What's the point of the power relationships in education?
- Always draw attention to the fact that learning is all in the game, that it's a bodily, context-bound set of practices. It takes place in an immediate, often emotionally charged, social world. Don't ignore this fact. Don't pretend that it is otherwise. Challenge the myth that learning is only something that happens inside people's heads!
- Challenge the rules, the conventions of classroom interactions, the purposes of examinations and accreditation, the practices and processes of how learning is currently organized.
- Fight the boredom. Succeeding in education can often be a question of attrition. Keep finding ways to engage and motivate.
- Assert the agency of players. Too often children and young people are considered passive and empty. They are not. Learning is something people do not something that is done to them.
- Consider the consequences or what's the point? Of education, of study, of learning? Winning and losing count: they matter. This is part of the game. (Playful Learning Centre, 2015, p. 7)

It seems to me that we could do a lot worse than take such a pedagogy seriously and derive our curriculum content from children's curiosity, their concerns and their interactions. Indeed, I share the view that adopting such intentions and practices enables schools to fulfil their role of providing 'risk-free environments in which children may follow passions, experiment, explore, gain feedback and consider alternatives' (Burnett & Merchant, 2018, p. 65).

Cathy and her co-author, Guy Merchant, also a member of the group, point out that playfulness as defined in this way 'can sit rather uneasily with other classroom priorities and practices, particularly those governed by instrumental learning goals' (Burnett & Merchant, 2018, p. 10). I was distressed to read, early in the pandemic, advice from the deputy head teacher of a primary school on teaching five-year-old children at home: 'You cannot over-encourage

a child ... Young children love a sticker' (quoted in Williams, 2020). Rather, I would say that young children have an inbuilt attraction to learning, provided it has meaning for them, and, when this is so, learning is a source of real pleasure: they do not need other 'rewards'. In early years education, there are increasing attempts to transfer from a social pedagogic approach, where confidence is placed in the learner's own learning strategies and centres of interest, to a readiness-for-school approach, with learning 'objectives' and testing connected to prescribed targets (Fosse et al, 2018) – a process powerfully described as 'schoolification'. Sigrid Brogaard Clausen (2015, p. 356) writes about early years democracy, which can be understood as 'children and adults taking part in communities of active participation, responsibility, emancipation and egalitarianism ... This democracy is perceived as being threatened by a neo-liberal discourse of accountability and "schoolification"'. Fortunately, the importance of play and learner-initiated and self-directed activity is still recognised within much teacher thinking, at least in the context of early years education and sometimes beyond.

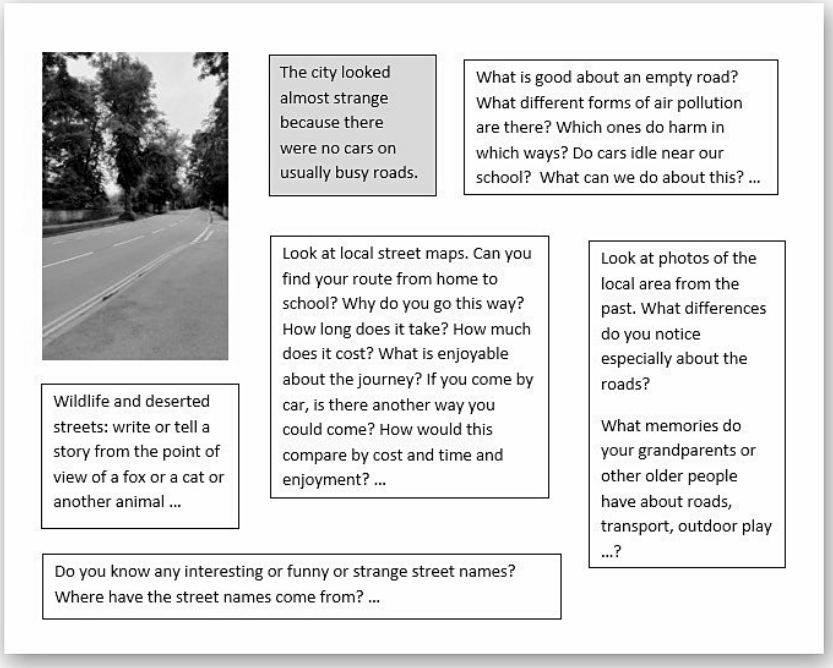


Figure 2. No cars. (Colin Jackson, copyright free.)

As I have for many years argued, my point here is that the same approach to learning – learner-initiated and driven by curiosity – should permeate all educational institutions, not just kindergartens but schools, colleges and universities too. These are fundamental characteristics of all deeply human

teaching and learning. I have found the writings of David Jardine inspirational in helping to imagine what such teaching might be like in the here and now – or, as I write, perhaps not actually the here and now, but rather when things return to 'normal'!

Jardine (2012) acknowledges his 'great fortune' in having spent many hours in the classrooms of teachers who understand these things and can implement them in their living practice [3], 'even in the shadows of troubled schools and troubled students' (p. 130). He advocates letting the world speak to us rather than being obsessed with us speaking to the world – where we are 'caught in its regard and not just vice versa' (p. 101) – and this describes that joyous walk which inspired this piece of writing.

What I have called 'curiosity' can perhaps be best described in this way:

> in our everyday experience of the world, simple things sometimes strike us, catch our fancy, address us, speak to us, call for a response, elicit or provoke something in us, ask something of us, hit us, bowl us over, stop us in our tracks, make us catch our breath. (Jardine, 2012, p.101)

He calls for a pedagogy left in peace – 'we are left in peace and thankful for the leisure, time, and opportunity that such thinking requires' (Jardine, 2012, p. 114) – where 'things start to regard us and tell us about ourselves in ways we could not have experienced without such whiling' (Jardine, 2008), and where things are left open and allowed to be unfinished (Povey et al, 2019), with such unfinishedness being 'essential to our human condition ... [and] integral to the phenomenon of life itself, which besides women and men includes the cherry trees in my garden and the birds that sing in their branches' (Freire, 1998, quoted in McLaren, 2000, p. 161). The content covered can be noted and recorded *after* the event rather than before. Or, to go even further, we might take the view of Ray Gibbons, a passionate mathematics educator, who devoted her life to trying to improve children's experience of learning. In a group conversation which took place as part of a historical exploration of a mathematics curriculum development project based in the Inner London Education Authority, she said:

> I don't really care, I don't think, what anybody knows at the end. What I care about is that they have learnt that the more you learn about things, the more exciting the world is, so they'll want to go on learning more.[4]

The conversation was recorded when Ray was already in her nineties, and reflected a lifetime's experience of teaching and thinking about teaching.

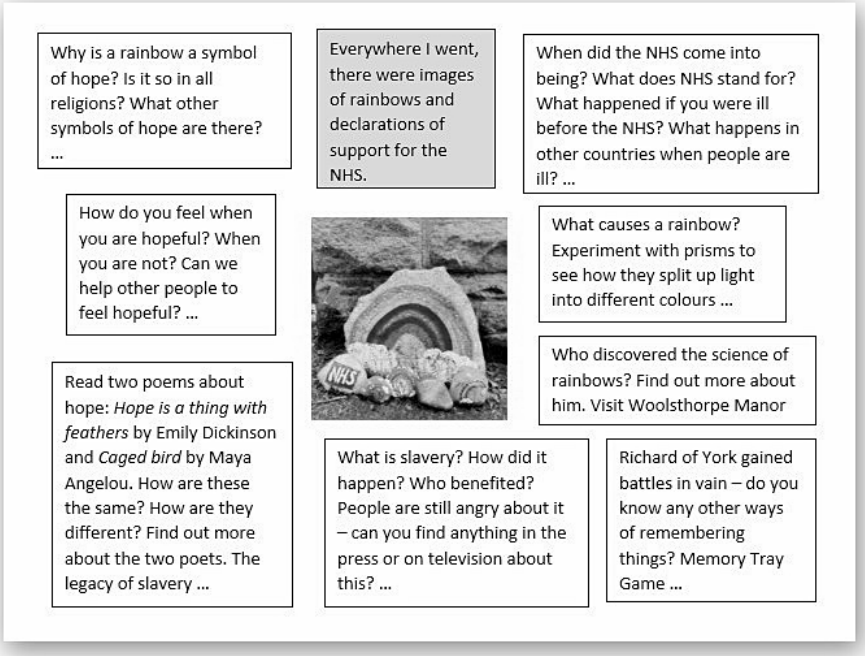


Figure 3. Images of rainbows.[5] (Colin Jackson, copyright free.)

I have no problem in admitting that a desire for a playful, curiosity-driven curriculum is utopian. We know that schooling under capitalism has quite other intentions (Chomsky, 1988; Macedo, 2000; Pais & Costa, 2020); that many children leave school feeling like failures (Reay, 2018) and turned off from learning; and, moreover, that 'Disutopia is the most significant project of our time. It is not just the temporary absence of Utopia, but the political celebration of the end of social dreams' (Dinerstein & Neary, 1999, quoted in McLaren, 2000, p. xxv).

These musings are intended not as a blueprint, as a plan for action, but to reawaken such social dreams with utopian imagining – imagining that can act as a catalyst for intuiting changes that are potentially immanent in the present (Passerini, 2000, p. 138), to glimpse 'the speculative could' (Straehler-Pohl et al, 2017, p. 3). Perhaps a defining characteristic of a utopia is that it is not a goal to be reached; rather, it points to a horizon that continually recedes as we approach it (Povey & Adams, 2018): 'we feel that even though we do not reach the goal, the quest is not futile because at each step we acquire greater wisdom' (Morson, 2003, p. 413). Ruth Potts quotes Fernando Birri:

> Utopia is on the horizon. Every step I take towards her, she takes a step back and the horizon runs ten steps further away. So what

> purpose does Utopia serve? Well, it serves the purpose of making us move forward. (Potts, 2017, p. 16)

I recognise that, as things currently are, 'the major purpose of education is to make the world safe for global capitalism' (McLaren, 2000, p. 196); but my musings conclude with the hope that the sort of utopian thinking to which my Sheffield walk led might support the 'genuine transformative passion' (Bewes, 2002, p. 172) that is required for us to make a difference to teaching and learning in today's classrooms and those of the future. The capacity for curiosity needs help, and support and validation from caring adults and teachers are a vital part of this process. A child's sense of wonder requires the companionship of adults, who can share it, 'rediscovering with him [*sic*] the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in' (Carson, 1956, p. 428). In classrooms, it requires the same resourcing and detailed planning (including planning for the unexpected) as all effective teaching does. And it requires us to rekindle our own curiosity and to share the joy generated by openness to the world. Hope, too, needs to be shared between teachers and learners: 'The hope that we can learn together, teach together, be curiously impatient together, produce something together, and resist together the obstacles that prevent the flowering of our joy' (Freire, 1998, quoted in McLaren, 2000, p. 161).

Acknowledgement

My grateful thanks to Pat Eastwell, who encouraged me and worked with me on the enquiries that the images might inspire.

Notes

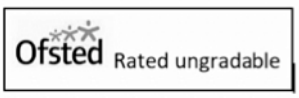
[1] I did not have a camera with me, so the photographs were taken at my request by Colin Jackson at later dates.

[2] I was able to get a copy of Ayliffe et al's (2020) work just as I was finishing the article – I highly recommend it. The passions and values of Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination begin with curiosity.

[3] See Jardine (2012, pp. 112-124) for an extended description of rich learning when some of his students, bored with a routinised and ritualised approach, allowed themselves to become curious about doing calendar work in the classroom.

[4] See https://smilemaths.wordpress.com/

[5] I was delighted to see that one of these rainbows had next to it a small poster:



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