

# Bearing witness to more fruitful learning

*Patrick Yarker*

## ***What is Education About? And other articles.***

Geoffrey Marshall, Blurb books, 2021.

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How the likes of Nick Gibb will loathe this book! Unassuming, yet quietly fierce, it testifies to the enduring significance of that holistic child-led primary practice - so derided by right-wing media and belittled by right-wing politicians - which the Education Reform Act of 1988, and much subsequent policy, determined to sweep away.

Gibb's final monument as minister for schools is yet another test: the multiplication table check inflicted on eight- and nine-year-olds despite the best advice of those who teach mathematics. For Geoffrey Marshall, rote learning of tables is the prime example of how children are mis-taught arithmetic: 'Instead of matching numbers to material objects so that they can relate the objects to the numbers they are using, which would help towards a sound understanding of number in all its aspects, they are expected to count and manipulate numbers in the abstract ... So tables become an abstract exercise in repeating a magic spell which relates to nothing' (p76).

As with number, so with all other elements of formal learning in childhood. The golden key, Geoffrey Marshall believes, is reflection on first-hand experience. It is this which enables a child to abstract from the concrete, and connect knowledge and world. But education policy-makers have capitulated to the ideology of the market, and politicians have succeeded in watering down the rich broth of education until it has become a thin gruel: training for compliant employability. By doing so, Geoffrey Marshall contends, they have betrayed every child's birthright and done harm: 'Schools are now actively harming children by denying their curiosity [and] making learning a matter of memory' (p14). Schools have become 'the engine of conformity' (p75). On page 89 he sums it up: What such a version of 'education' has never been interested in, he says, is education.

Against a system now fully bound over to the demands of employers and the capitalist economy, Marshall speaks from a position informed by the full-bloodedly child-centred understanding of education he encountered some years into his own long teaching career, thanks to an in-service course he undertook in the early 1960s at the Institute of Education in London. By then he'd been a teacher for a decade, 'standing before the

children', he writes on page 27, 'and doing what I remembered' from his own schooldays in the 1930s and 40s. 'Over 30 years after [the Hadow Report] ... still I knew nothing of learning by activity and experience' (p28).

Participation in Christian Schiller's course, 'Education and the Junior School', enabled Marshall to visit classrooms where children worked 'in ones and twos, independently of the teacher, with unbroken concentration, at tasks which had no central theme ... [where] the teacher had set up rich, first-hand, tangible experiences, making the classroom attractive and interesting' (pp28-9). Such an approach flowed from the educational principles by which these classrooms and schools operated. Succinctly put, these principles were:

that the school was a place of learning where both children and teachers come to learn: that teachers learn from and about children by closely following them, and children are helped by teachers to refine their skills of learning as they abstract meanings from concrete experiences. They do this by observing and making choices about what they are interested in while the teacher is watching for a growing control and sophistication in developing ideas. (pp29-30)

To see such classrooms and schools successfully educating children proved revelatory for Marshall. Across the rest of his career as a teacher, headteacher and LEA adviser - he retired in 1989 - he upheld these same principles, true to the belief that childhood is its own event, and that children are not to be seen as 'imperfect adults, as adults in the making ... the traditional [view] which I had inherited and [which] has been so thoroughly and consistently reimposed by the dictators of Whitehall' (pp32-3).

Against the continual requirement for conformity and standardisation which the education system demands in order 'not only to appear even-handed but to ensure uniformity for the market' (p21), Marshall advocates the importance of a learning environment replete with judiciously chosen objects, books, activities, plants and creatures to enable first-hand experiences to be had. He says that:

the central motivation for learning ... is choice. Choice is the essence of democracy, the chance to reflect upon the issues, to balance one against another, to make a choice and be responsible for it. Education is a version of that. It is the opportunity to examine experience at first hand, reflect upon it, and draw out personal conclusions to act upon. Furthermore, choosing cannot be taught; it must be experienced. (p15)

So schools must build 'a child's version of an interesting world upon which it can focus and begin to work' (p16) and within which the child can exercise choice. 'If children are encouraged to choose within their growing capacity to choose, they will flourish in all fields of enquiry' (p15).

Marshall's view of the power of first-hand experience to educate, and his belief that

‘education is the fostering of growth of children’ (p9), have something in common with what John Dewey writes. But, as may be apparent from the nature of the quotations I have selected, this is not a book which painstakingly argues an academic case. Unencumbered with citations, it is a work of conviction: a series of passionate re-statements urging the essentials of a deeply held view of what education is, and is about.

Most of the writing collected here comes from the final phase of Geoffrey Marshall’s life. He died in 2021: an obituary can be found on *The Guardian* website.<sup>1</sup> Across the book, Marshall denounces uniforms and uniformity, speaks up for mixed-age classes, offers a case study of the malign impact of privatisation and the outsourcing of school catering and cleaning contracts, and continually reminds readers of what has been lost by a deliberate turning away from child-centredness in education policy so that at the heart of the educational process nowadays lies the test score. Of the 16 short pieces presented in this book, three have previously appeared in the journal of the National Association of Primary Teachers. The writing is interspersed with illustrations of artwork made by children whom Geoffrey Marshall taught, and with photographs of children as they learn independently or in pairs and trios in classrooms where their drawing, writing, weaving, painting and mechanical designs cover the walls.

In spite of all, it endures, this other, better, way of conceiving of children and their education which current policy has purposefully set out to eradicate. Geoffrey Marshall bears witness to it with clarity and commitment. His broad-brush approach may make for the occasional un-nuanced judgement, for example as regards the degree of organised opposition to the imposition of the national curriculum and to the subsequently imposed system of testing and league tables, literacy and numeracy hours, and the phonics screening check. He is unreflective about the notion of ‘ability’, and leaves almost entirely aside the question of how best to address issues of educational inequality deriving from racism, sexism and class prejudice. But these are matters which new generations of teachers are grappling with. They will struggle successfully if they can hold to the way of thinking about education’s fundamentals which finds expression in Marshall’s thoughtful, humane, occasionally forthright and always resolute writing.

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## Note

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/oct/26/geoffrey-marshall-obituary>