

RETHINKING RADICAL EDUCATION:

A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

By

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ABSTRACT

For decades, there have been concerns with the contemporary Western education system. Many parents are choosing home schooling or schools with alternative programs. During this period, and earlier, reform theorists have proposed answers to society's concerns about education. Having come to the field of education after working for several years as an early childhood practitioner in an alternative setting, I too began to question the traditional method of schooling. Therefore, through this study, I analyze some of the attributes associated with alternative theories of education in order to re-examine their importance. In particular, I consider the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Ivan Illich, and A.S. Neill, three educational theorists who have been dubbed "radical" in their ideas. In this thesis I discuss three common themes amongst these, and other radical theorists—namely: nature, freedom, and useful knowledge. I believe that these themes have been neglected in contemporary educational discourse. It is true that no theory is without critics. With this in mind, I consider the analysis of Robin Barrow, who, in his book *Radical Education: A Critique of Freeschooling and Deschooling*, provides a thorough and point by point critique outlining the many problems associated with alternative approaches to education. This thesis re-evaluates the importance of radical education in light of Barrow's critique. I also discuss why it is important to reconsider the concepts of nature, freedom and useful knowledge, often associated with this theory. In the end, I argue that what is needed is educational reform that probes right down to the roots of the system—radical reform.

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For my husband

INTRODUCTION

The effectiveness of Canada's education system has been hotly debated for many years. As a society, we have become concerned for our children as high incidences of violence, a rise in cases of conditions such as Attention Deficit Disorder, and cuts in programs such as art and music are all affecting the quality of educational experiences. A survey performed by (then) Human Resources Development Canada in 1995 showed that 20% of young Canadians do not complete high school (HRDC, 1995). As well, many parents are choosing alternatives to the traditional school system. Estimates of the number of children being schooled at home exceed 80,000 (Kay, 2001; Wake 2000). According to Kay, the increase in home schooling is a direct result of parents' dissatisfaction with the public education system. Parents, educators and administrators are quick to agree that there is cause for concern, yet there seems to be little consensus as to how to "fix the problem."

F.W. Newmann (1991) believes that there are two issues that show the need for reform of our current school system. First, coinciding with the HRDC survey, many students are completing school only because they have to; they do not really want to be there. Second, traditional education consists of severely fragmented pieces of declarative knowledge. Evidence of this can be seen in the Ontario Curriculum Documents and the number and range of expectations for a student in any given year. The result of this is that teachers are having difficulty teaching everything that they are expected to, and students are not given the opportunity to develop an in depth understanding of any given subject. Similarly, Randle Nelsen (2002) discusses the widespread use of technology in the classroom, linking it to school boredom and the fact that students are "out of practice" when it comes to active

listening, language, and human interaction skills. In his book *Schooling As Entertainment: Corporate Education Meets Popular Culture*, he quotes educator and author Jane Healy:

when we have children who are sitting and receiving visually and not talking about what they are seeing or thinking or learning, they are not developing that wonderful ability to talk inside their own heads to solve problems. (Healy, in Nelsen, 2002, p.114)

It is much like giving a little girl a beautiful doll, and then telling her that it is too special to be played with. She should only show it to others to prove that she actually has it. The concern seems to be that our schools are simply transmitting information to the children, which they are simply expected to regurgitate, rather than understand.

The concerns regarding our education system are not new. Throughout history, there has never been consensus about the quality of our schools (Ballantine, 2001). Part of the reason for this can be attributed to the varying perspectives as to which methods of educational delivery are most effective. According to Barakett and Cleghorn (2000), “the history of schooling has been marked by fairly consistent efforts to bring about change that would benefit both the system of education and society as a whole” (p. 126). Progressive schools, open schools, and free schools are just a few of the movements that have advanced theories about education and have been explored in attempts to discover what it is that might be missing from the mainstream educational system. These theories reflect many persistent themes developed by early philosophers of education. In order to move forward in our search for an educational system that meets the needs of our children, it will be useful to first take another look at these theories, using them as analytical tools which may help us to reconceptualize educational aims in a present context. This thesis focuses on the ideas put forward by theorists that many have dubbed “radical,” as these theorists call for change that

begins at the very basis of our educational beliefs. It is my belief that these “radical” theories provide fertile ground from which to build a new foundation for contemporary education.

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. In Chapter One I introduce the project from a personal point of view, illustrating how I came to do this study. This chapter includes a section illustrating my own conceptions of education and why I believe certain aspects of alternative education ought to be reconsidered. Chapter Two presents the rationale for the study. Chapter Three consists of a brief literature review illustrating opposing arguments about three prominent themes within “radical” educational theory, and it will introduce the basis for my analysis. Additional literature is reviewed in subsequent chapters, as it provides “data” that I use to explore the themes of nature, freedom, and useful knowledge in education. Chapter Four discusses the use of conceptual analysis as a methodology and explain how it will be used in this thesis.

Chapters Five, “Nature in Education”; Six, “Freedom in Education”; and Seven, “Useful Knowledge in Education” examine individual themes central to my analysis. Within these chapters I consider each topic in light of the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau, A.S. Neill and Ivan Illich. I also review critiques of each author’s work made by Robin Barrow (1978). These criticisms provide a basis for reconceptualizing each theme. While there are other critiques, Barrow’s *Radical Education: A Critique of Freeschooling and Deschooling* (1978) is a particularly good example of the kind of analysis that reveals many problems associated with alternative approaches to education. Barrow’s book contains a point-by-point analysis of theories of Rousseau, Neill and Illich. His critiques are specific, thorough,

and attend to the concepts I wish to analyze. His work is, thus, valuable to this study. I conclude each of these chapters with a summary of my analysis and its relevance to our contemporary system of education.

The final chapter draws ideas together and develops the project as a whole. I use information from my analysis to highlight the importance of nature, freedom and useful knowledge within the context of education and I discuss how these themes can be more effectively utilized within our contemporary educational system. In this chapter I include what I have found to be both the limitations and the significance of the project, as well as suggestions for further research

CHAPTER ONE

A Personal Ground

As a student of education, I have long been interested in the area of alternative theories of education. Having had the opportunity to observe children of all ages in a variety of classroom settings, I am fascinated as to how the “classroom community” can be affected by everything from the method of teaching to the physical environment. I had always wanted to be a teacher, but having graduated from high school at the ripe old age of sixteen, two years of college seemed much more feasible both economically and personally. By enrolling in the Early Childhood Education program at a local college, I could both finish school early and still obtain a career in which I could teach young children.

Although this may have been a detour from my original goal of becoming a teacher, it proved a valuable experience as, after graduating from college, I found myself employed in a childcare centre based on a Waldorf (also known as Steiner) educational philosophy. The following is a very brief description of schools adopting this philosophy; it is intended to give an idea of the wonderful environment in which I was privileged to work and teach for 6 years.

The philosophy was developed by Rudolph Steiner (1861-1925) an Austrian philosopher, scientist and educator. In the early 1900's Emil Molt, who was fascinated by Steiner's views on education, asked him to develop an educational program for the children of workers in his Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory. Steiner agreed, on the conditions that the school was open to all children, was co-educational, and was not controlled by any

economic or political institution. Today, there are Waldorf kindergartens, elementary and secondary schools all over the world.

Within the Steiner school teaching is considered an art (Easton, 1997). During my time at the Waldorf kindergarten, I was a part of weekly staff meetings in which every aspect of teaching was discussed, support was offered, and continuous training was available. In every situation, the input from each and every staff member and administrator is considered. Teachers are encouraged to share both personal and work experiences in order to draw support from others as much emphasis is placed on the well being of the teacher, both physical and mental. The belief is that the teacher is a mentor; therefore, a teacher must be healthy and well balanced in his or her life.

Within the program itself great care is taken to ensure an aesthetically-pleasing environment and subject matter is presented in an artistic way. The belief is that beauty is critical to health; the beauty of nature fosters the inner child and creates a sense of well-being and reverence. The teacher reinforces this feeling of respect through her care of the surrounding environment. Teachers are never to be idle, especially in kindergarten. They sew, bake, and care for plants both indoors and outdoors. The children are encouraged to participate in all of these activities, as it is believed that this hands-on approach will reinforce learning. The children learn fine motor skills through sewing, measurement and science through baking activities, and biology and nutrition through gardening. These are just a few examples. An integral part of the Waldorf philosophy is the idea of learning through doing, through the internalization of information.

The program strives to follow the rhythms of nature and child development, right down to the belief that there is an appropriate colour for the classroom at each grade level (Prescott, 1999). Children are not taught lessons before it is believed they are ready. For example, in kindergarten children are not taught to read; there are no books in the classroom. Stories that are nature-based and teach some sort of lesson are learned by the teacher, rather than read from a book, and told each day for two weeks. This ensures that the children imbibe the story, and begin to actually “live” the story through their imaginative play. It is believed that this will foster a love of stories and, in turn, a love for reading later on.

In the older grades there is no ringing of bells or buzzers to harshly interrupt the learning process. Soft music, singing or the playing of an instrument indicates a transition. Each subject is taught in 4-6 week blocks and explored using all of the senses. In this way there is no fragmentation of learning. Because there is an exploration of the subject through all aspects, and plenty of time is given to absorb the subject, the teacher is better able to ascertain when a child is having difficulty.

The experience of being involved in an alternative educational program offered me the opportunity to see that there are other options to what we are currently offering our students. It was my opinion that there is much to be gleaned from these alternative programs. While the Waldorf program first piqued my interest, I began to notice that many alternative programs shared similar traits. It is my feeling, then, that rather than focus on a specific program, it is important to focus on the similar aspects of these programs and discover why these traits are so prominent. What makes these programs appealing? Are they successful,

and, if yes, why? It is necessary to return to the roots of these programs, to the theories from which they were developed, in order to discover the answers.

CHAPTER TWO

A Personal Rationale

After having my second child, my husband and I decided it would be more feasible for me to finally go back to school and earn my teaching degree rather than return to work. During my student teaching placements I began to question traditional schooling. Because of my previous experiences with alternative schooling I saw many aspects of our education system from different perspectives. The reasons, or rationale for this analysis, then, are derived from my personal experiences and questions.

One such moment took place while I was teaching a lesson on fractions to a grade 5 class. Many of us know that fractions can be an extremely difficult concept to grasp, and after 40 minutes of activity and discussion I was encouraged to see the sparks of understanding beginning to ignite in 24 pairs of eyes. One of my students had one of those “eureka” moments and said out loud: “Oh, I get it, it is like...” and lo and behold her sentence was interrupted by the clanging of the recess bell. The moment was lost as 24 students hurriedly gathered up their books and tried to stuff them in their desks as quickly as possible in order to run outside and enjoy a few brief minutes of freedom.

As I stood there amid the clamour I began to wonder to myself, what had I accomplished with this lesson? After recess they would head to French, then return to me for science. The “eureka” moment would be all but forgotten by tomorrow’s math class, and we would be back to square one. Sometimes it feels as if we are taking one step forward and two steps back.

As I continued on through my student teaching experiences, more questions came to mind. Is it suitable for children as young as three to be confined within the walls of classroom? The freedom of childhood has been interrupted. At this age, they are still developing as individuals and learning how to interact within the world as human beings. It seems we are interrupting that process by pulling them out of their worlds and placing them within an institutional setting. They may not yet know how to socially interact with others, but they are expected to know their ABCs.

If children are struggling there is not enough time during the school day to give them the extra instruction they may need, so they either lose valuable family time dealing with the extra homework, or valuable free time because they are staying in during recess just to catch up. On many occasions I spent recess indoors with students who were having difficulty with concepts such as “probability,” trying to squeeze in some extra instruction time. Even then, the fifteen minutes were over all too soon, and students had no choice but to take unfinished worksheets home to complete them for next day’s class.

It seems that we are expecting more and more all the time. I have seen parents that are upset if their child cannot recite the alphabet by age three. How will she ever keep up? Independent education agencies and learning centers are constantly encouraging parents to give their children opportunities to get ahead. The attitude seems to be that the sooner children enter a formal learning environment the better. Whatever happened to just being a child? Whatever happened to natural learning, to learning how the world works simply by living in it? What happened to learning that heat melts ice simply by watching the sun cause the icicles to drip while playing out in the snow on a sunny winter afternoon? Or that

two friends playing in the sandbox who invite one more to join them equals three friends playing in the sandbox?

How much information should a child be expected to absorb? Teachers are feeling pressured because of the number of curriculum expectations they are expected to cover within a school year. I was told many times during my teaching practicum: "There are too many expectations to cover, just cover as many as you can because you will never cover them all." So we touched on some math and then on some science and some reading, just enough to cover what we were supposed to but not so much that the children understood why it was important to learn these subjects. How can this fragmented information be useful?

Having had the opportunity to experience education from a different perspective, I was at a crossroads. Should I take the well-traveled path and simply accept traditional education as it was, or should I explore the alternate route? The traditional path would certainly be easier; however, it occurred to me that the alternate route could become clearer if I took time to remove a few rocks from the path and maybe I could discover the benefits it may have to offer.

It is my belief that we can glean much from the study of alternate theories of education. I am not implying that it is the whole solution, but perhaps studying such theories will assist in our search to provide better educational experiences for our children. As our society continues to change, so must our school system. At this point I am not sure if we are taking change in the right direction. We seem to believe that what our children need is more education, education that starts earlier and lasts longer, structured to a point where creativity

is stifled. Physical education, arts and music programs are taking a back seat to academic learning. But are we overlooking the importance of these other aspects of education? I believe that further analysis is necessary in order to re-evaluate the benefits of these alternative theories.

CHAPTER THREE

Literature Review

A significant wave of educational reform took place during the 1960's (Ballantine, 2001; Barakett and Cleghorn, 2000). Visions of a free and democratic society led people to question the authoritarianism of traditional schooling. Several educational theorists saw a rise in their popularity during this period:

John Holt's *Why Children Fail*, A.S. Neill's *Summerhill*, and Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society* became compulsory reading in educational faculties and teacher training programs as well as popular among the public during the 1960's. (Barakett and Cleghorn, 2000, p. 114).

These progressive theorists were often called "radicals" as they were part of a movement that advocated major changes within the contemporary educational system, the major focus of this change being freedom of choice and child-centered learning. Although the use of the word radical may seem to be rather strong, it is often used by the public and by the theorists themselves. In Robin Barrow's (1978) comprehensive book on "radical education" he describes the use of this term by turning to the Latin source "radix," which means root. In the case of these theorists, according to Barrow, the term radical is a description of someone who seeks change that begins at the source of the problem, rather than at the surface.

Barrow (1978) goes on to describe what he considers the common views of most radicals:

They value individual happiness highly, sometimes regarding it as the supreme value. They also claim to value critical autonomy, or thinking for oneself, and (superficially at least) a high degree of social freedom. They tend to value, and to equate in a rather vague way, whatever is natural, spontaneous and sincere in man's behaviour. They are adamant that learning is not dependent on overt teaching, and that more effective learning will take place without overt compulsion. In one way or

another they envisage the community or environment as a whole as being educative and thereby inducing, perhaps with help of adult guidance and inspiration but certainly without naked instruction, the natural and good, moral and intellectual, development of the individual. (p. 3)

Radical theorists believed in learning as a natural occurrence rather than something that is imposed. They valued freedom of choice and placed great importance on discovering knowledge that would serve a purpose and assist in a happy existence.

It seems somewhat odd that an educational movement that values such things as happiness and which advocates individual thinking has not been given more consideration. I believe it is necessary to examine such a theory more closely and reconsider the value of some of the concepts involved. In this thesis I have chosen to focus on three concepts that I have found to be the most commonly associated with “radical” education, and that also coincide with my own concerns: (1) natural learning, (2) freedom, and (3) useful knowledge. This analysis will explore these three concepts by returning to key theorists whose work grounds alternative schooling, beginning with Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the historical context and A.S. Neill and Ivan Illich in a more recent iteration. These three theorists were identified because, in the case of Neill and Illich, my experiences with both traditional and non-traditional methods of education have led me to understand that many of their ideas are worthy of reinterpretation. I have chosen to examine Rousseau because most reform theorists find their basis in his writings. From a critical standpoint, Barrow’s book provides a strong basis from which to evaluate the merits of each theorist.

Natural Learning

In 1762, Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote *Émile*, about an imaginary boy and the author's conception of the child's ideal education. This book also challenged traditional education of the period by offering a radical alternative. Rousseau (1762/2003) believed that traditional education forces children into a position of blind obedience, and steals from them the innocence of childhood by expecting more than they are developmentally prepared for:

Nature would have children be children before being men. If we wish to pervert this order, we shall produce precocious fruits which will have neither maturity nor flavor, and will speedily deteriorate; we shall have young doctors and old children. Childhood has its own way of seeing, thinking, and feeling, and nothing is more foolish than to try and substitute our own for them. (p. 54)

Émile would be allowed to develop and learn at a pace that was right for him, not one deemed proper by someone else. Rousseau believed that children are not little adults and should not be treated as such. To force them into adulthood before they are ready is to create children that do not know how to be children, yet are not ready for adulthood. In today's terms this might be akin to having a society comprised of only maladjusted teenagers.

According to Rousseau (1762/2003), a child is constantly learning through all he or she sees, hears and experiences in his or her everyday life:

Without studying books, the kind of memory which a child may have does not on this account remain unemployed. All that he sees and hears attracts his notice, and he remembers it. He keeps within himself a register of the actions and conversations of men; and all that surrounds him is the book from which, without thinking of it, he is continually enriching his memory while waiting till his judgment can derive profit from it. (p. 79)

It is the events actually experienced by the child that the child will remember, rather than those he or she has simply read about. I am reminded of the expectant mother who reads every parenting book on the market and feels she is very prepared to raise a child. Then the child is born, and it becomes clear that no book can prepare you for the actual experience of being a parent.

Rousseau (1762/2003) also asserts that part of learning through experience is the idea of learning the difference between right and wrong through natural consequences. He gives the example of a child who has broken a window in his room (p. 64). Rather than admonish Émile for breaking the window, Rousseau would simply let him feel the consequences of his actions by not immediately repairing the window and allowing him to feel the cold air blowing on him as he tries to sleep. In this way, the child has not been demoralized through punishment, but has internalized the consequences of his actions.

A.S. Neill (1960/1992) also wrote about the importance of values and proper behaviour being learned through natural consequences. According to Neill, punishment is a moral issue, and we should not as adults enforce our morality upon children. By learning through consequences of their actions, the children are internalizing the message of what they have done wrong, and why it is wrong. Neill (1960/1992) describes an incident in which one of the students borrowed his best saw and then left it out in the rain:

I told him that I should not lend him the saw again. This was not punishment, for punishment always involves the idea of morality. Leaving the saw out in the rain was bad for the saw, but the act was not an immoral one. It is important for a child to learn that one cannot borrow someone else's tools and spoil them (p. 55)

If an adult borrows an item from another adult and then breaks it, do we then spank the first adult or force them to stand in the corner? No, the individual who broke the item knows that he or she is expected to replace it. What sense, then, would there be in taking punitive action, to make a child stand in the corner for breaking a dish? The breaking of someone else's property and punitive actions have no relation; therefore, the lesson is not internalized.

Ivan Illich (1971/2002) shares many ideas with Rousseau and Neill in that he agrees that traditional schooling does not allow for individual development and creativity, or for every child to develop to their full potential. What traditional schooling does teach, according to Illich, is the need to be taught: "Once this lesson is learned, people lose their incentive to grow in independence . . . and close themselves off to the surprises which life offers when it is not predetermined by institutional definition" (p. 47). Although he does concede that there are areas in which abstract learning is necessary, he maintains that most of us can learn to live outside of the classroom through our everyday experiences. Through a child's play and interaction with the surrounding environment, he or she can learn about appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, and what he or she is interested in learning more about.

Robin Barrow's (1978) critique of the idea of natural or experiential learning raises a number of critical points. For example, Barrow maintains that there are certain things that simply cannot be learned through experience:

The truth is that most of the knowledge that schools typically teach and that societies typically want and feel a need to hand on is precisely knowledge or understanding of the unperceived workings that lie behind perceived events. (p. 55)

For Barrow, the claims of Neill, Rousseau and Illich are vastly overstated. He asserts that although there are certainly lessons to be learned outside of school, these experiences would be very limited and would depend on one's surroundings.

Freedom

Rousseau (1762/2003) maintained that children should be allowed complete freedom, with no interference from society, and that Émile be educated in a way that is natural to his being:

Leave him to himself in perfect liberty, and observe what he does without saying anything to him; consider what he will do and how he will go about it. Having no need of being assured that he is free, he never does anything thoughtlessly, or simply to exhibit his power over himself . . . Whatever he chooses to do, he will never undertake anything that is beyond his powers, for he has fairly tested them and he knows them. (p. 127)

According to Rousseau, then, children that have been given the freedom to test their own abilities will not attempt something that is beyond their reach, for they are aware, through ongoing experimentation and testing, of what they can and cannot do. Telling a child what he or she is or is not capable of robs them of the opportunity to discover for themselves what they *are* capable of doing. In this case, they may either shy away from challenges, or attempt to go beyond their abilities, as they are not fully aware of what is beyond their reach.

When my son was five years old, his father bought him a dirt bike. As a mother I was much more apprehensive than this five year old boy, and had to be very careful in my own attitude, so as not to pass my apprehensions on to him. On his third day with the bike, he tried to do a maneuver that was beyond his capabilities and he took a tumble. This scared

him, and from that point on he had a new respect for the bike. He had been given the freedom to test his ability and was now a little more aware of his own strengths and limitations.

In an educational context, the child that has freedom is able to choose an educational path that suits his or her abilities and interests, therefore ensuring a more fulfilling educational experience. Perhaps the most well known proponent of freedom in education is A.S. Neill (1960/1992). His Summerhill School was designed specifically as a place where children have the freedom to be themselves. Neill had a strong belief in what he termed self-regulation. For Neill (1960/1992):

Self-regulation implies a belief in human nature, a belief that there is not, and never was, an original sin. Self-regulation means the right of a baby to live freely without outside authority. It means the baby feeds when it is hungry; that it becomes clean in habits only when it wants to; that it is never stormed at nor spanked; that it shall always be loved and protected. (p. 36)

It was Neill's belief that the school should fit the child and not the other way around. Free children are happy children, and happy children are more apt to be excited about and open to the world around them.

At Summerhill children are not required to attend classes, they do so only if they wish. The goal of Summerhill is to allow children a safe and happy place in which they can exercise complete freedom; therefore, "we had to renounce all discipline, all direction, all suggestion, all moral training, all religious instruction" (Neill, 1960/1992, p.9). This is necessary because, in Neill's view:

a child is innately wise and realistic. If left to himself without suggestion of any kind, he will develop as far as he is capable of developing. Logically, Summerhill is a place in which people who have the innate ability and wish to be scholars will be

scholars; while those who are only fit to sweep the streets will sweep the streets. But we have not produced a street cleaner so far. Nor do I write this snobbishly, for I would rather see a school produce a happy street cleaner than a neurotic scholar. (p. 9)

Children at Summerhill are not forced to fit into any mold or conform themselves to what others think they should strive to be. Their freedom in their education leads to peace and happiness from within, and the confidence that they can accomplish whatever they may set their mind to doing. Although they may not be “successful” in terms of what society deems to be successful, they are happy in the paths their lives have taken, and that in itself is success according to Neill.

Ivan Illich (1971/2002) agrees that traditional schooling does not allow for freedom of choice. Rather than encourage individuality, he believes that school ensures that people will be prepared to fit into some kind of institution for their entire lives (p. 47). He proposes that as a society we must begin to recognize that not all individuals are suited to institutional schooling and that we change our view of education. Illich’s system of learning networks would offer the individual a choice of how and what he or she desires to learn:

A good educational system should have three purposes: it should provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives; empower all who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them; and, finally, furnish all who want to present an issue to the public with the opportunity to make their challenges known . . . learners should not be forced to submit to an obligatory curriculum, or to discrimination based upon whether they possess a certificate or diploma.
(p. 75).

It is Illich’s belief that people will learn only what they are interested in learning, and that schools should allow for development of the self rather than the imposition of societal values.

Barrow (1978) has great difficulties with the issue of freedom in education, particularly as expressed by Rousseau. Barrow states that, although Rousseau claims to advocate freedom, in fact the hypothetical *Émile* is being raised in an environment where his every move is controlled and manipulated. For example, in discussing Rousseau's assertion that the tutor should not go out of his way to prevent the child from hurting himself, Barrow sees a contradiction. First, because the reason for this is not for want of freedom for the child, but because Rousseau believes it is important for a child to feel pain:

The teacher has decided that the child should experience pain; the teacher ensures that he does. Second, the freedom granted is strictly limited anyway. *Émile* will do himself no real harm because the situation is quite literally a controlled situation—more like an experimental laboratory than the natural environment. (Barrow, 1978, p. 40).

Barrow (1978) sees another problem with Rousseau's assertion that left alone and free from external influences a child will not develop any malicious tendencies. He asserts that there is no way to either prove or disprove this theory. He maintains that though it is easy to assume that certain moral values are developed because of environmental circumstances, "the ideal circumstances on which so much is made to depend cannot be realized" (p. 59). Rousseau's utopian view of education could never be achieved.

Barrow (1978) furthers his argument that proof is not available when discussing Neill's self-regulation theory. Barrow states that, because children are not placed in Summerhill from the time of birth, true self-regulation is not possible. As well, even those children who attend the school from an early age still spend holidays and summers with the outside world. This fact, according to Barrow:

makes nonsense of the idea of self-regulation as conceived by Neill: for it transpires that the selves that do the regulating are themselves the product of their environment . . . This means that the self-hood of the Summerhill pupil is no more authentic than that of any other child.

(p. 73)

Therefore, according to Barrow, no matter what amount of freedom the children are given while within the confines of the school, they must, Barrow insists, still deal with the world outside of the school. They come to learn what is acceptable at school may not necessarily be accepted elsewhere. Their freedom is then still limited.

Barrow (1978) also takes exception to Neill's theory that children will "develop as far as [they] are capable of developing" (p. 85) if not subjected to adult interference. This, according to Barrow, essentially states that "one is born to be a king or a carpenter" (p. 85). Not only does Barrow believe that there are no grounds to support the notion that one's desire for academics or feelings towards art are innate characteristics, but he rejects Neill's suggestion that human nature is derived from innate characteristics. According to Barrow (1978), one cannot possibly develop to one's full potential, as there is no limit to the development of human nature:

Consequently the practice of Summerhill cannot be justified (or even explained) in terms of arguing that individual natures are there given the opportunity to develop themselves to the full. There is no such thing as a static state of fulfillment for an individual nature: the individual nature is dynamic. (pp. 85-86)

It is Barrow's belief, then, that there is no limit to how much the human mind can learn or become interested in learning. If not exposed to outside influences, a child will never strive to know more, for they will not have the awareness of what else is available to them.

In response to Illich's (1971/2002) theory that schools impose societal values on children, Barrow states that although schools may contribute somewhat to the imposition of such values, they are not wholly responsible. Instead of being seen as a place that closes the mind and stifles creativity, schools should be seen as a place where one can be taught to challenge such imposition.

Useful Knowledge

Rousseau (1762/2003) asserted that children should learn most of their lessons through experience, and that when lessons are taught they should take the form of "useful knowledge." The lessons taught in traditional schooling were, according to Rousseau, disconnected from the child and from the world around him, and were often just a collection of meaningless facts. "For what do [the teachers] teach their pupils? Words, words, nothing but words" (p.73). A child will internalize only what a child can see, hear, feel and experience; and should only be exposed to learning that is meaningful to his or herself.

Neill (1960/1992) concurs that the problem with the education system is the restraints that it places upon children's learning:

Obviously, a school that makes active children sit at desks studying the most useless subjects is a bad school. It is a good school only for those who believe in such a school, for those uncreative citizens who want docile, uncreative children who will fit into a civilization whose standard of success is money. (p.8)

He maintained that a person will only truly learn what he or she is interested in, and that this interest cannot be compelled or forced. He believed that education should be fostered through a love of learning, and that this love of learning cannot be achieved if the student is forced to study a subject that he has no desire to learn.

Both Neill (1960/1992) and Illich (1971/2002) assert that the subjects taught in schools are set by universities. Neill believes that this is a problem because universities have not evolved along with society. According to Neill there is no use, for example, for learning square roots or grammar anymore, as these are not necessities in most people's everyday lives. Illich (1971/2002), too, protests the fact that "one person's judgment determines what and when another person must learn" (p. 42). His assertion is that we learn most of our lessons outside school. Unfortunately, according to Illich, more emphasis is placed on the product of school—the degree, the diploma, the potential earnings—than the process, or what is actually being learned.

Barrow's (1978) problem with the idea of useless knowledge is that one cannot denote what is useful to any given individual. Usefulness depends upon context. What I may consider useful information, may seem utterly useless to someone else:

Rousseau suffers from a weakness shared by all the radicals: while priding himself on his vision, he has too facile and unimaginative an idea of the possibilities of use—of the myriad ways in which things may be useful, long-term, short-term, direct, indirect, to hundreds of goals which may in themselves also function as useful steps towards other goals. (p. 49)

According to Barrow this view is much too simplistic. It suggests that what are useful for children to learn are those subjects which will directly affect their lives. Those subjects that seem remote at first, however, can become increasingly relevant to one's life if one deems them interesting enough to pursue. Therefore that which was once remote now becomes familiar and useful.

This also links in to Barrow's (1978) criticism of Neill (1960/1992) and the concept of interest. Although interest cannot be compelled or forced, as stated by Neill, Barrow

maintains that “I may not be able to compel interest but I can certainly cause it” (p. 90). Barrow asserts that interests are not an absolute. One may not be born with an interest in art or music, but an interest in these subjects can be fostered through introduction in them. And, as body and mind change and grow, so interests can change and grow. Just because one did not show an interest in music, square roots or grammar as a child does not mean that one may not grow to appreciate these as one matures.

In perusing the literature that reveals different points of view, one sees that Barrow raises some interesting questions. Can everything be learned through experience? Is there a place for experiential learning within the classroom? What does it mean to have freedom in education? What is useful knowledge and who deems whether or not it is useful? Barrow’s answers, however, seem to fall into an “either/or” category. For example, though there may be, as Barrow (1978) states, certain things that cannot be learned naturally, does this mean that there is no value in striving to make children’s educational experiences as natural as possible? And, if it is not possible for a child to be given freedom in all areas or aspects of life, does this diminish the value of trying to foster autonomy and critical thinking by allowing children the freedom to choose, and in turn, make and learn from mistakes? To simply accept that education can be natural or not, free or not, implies that education is static and unchanging and this impedes progress towards discovering just what the aims of education are, should be, or can be. Just because things have always been done a certain way does not necessarily mean that it is the best way. It seems, then, that it is necessary to re-examine important aspects of “radical education.” Further analysis will assist in assessing

how these valuable theories can be married into our contemporary system, therefore ensuring a better educational experience for our children.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conceptual Analysis as a Methodology

In *A Critical Dictionary of Educational Concepts*, Barrow and Milburn (1986) conceptualize “research,” noting that the term does not necessarily mean “empirical research” as it has come to be exclusively associated within educational research. The two are not synonymous, and to treat them as such means to ignore “...philosophical and other reflective inquiries into such matters as values and aims...[therefore] the educational enterprise is in danger of being defined exclusively in monitorable means-ends terms” (p.195). To insist that research be empirical is to close the door on any research that explores issues that are not measurable in some way. The aims of education are not constant; they change with context and time. It is therefore important to regularly assess our aims within the context of our day.

Educational analysis, however, allows for provocative discussion and debate as to the “why” one should prefer a certain theory, as well as the observable answer as to “how” a theory works:

The attempt to analyze the concept of education thus becomes the attempt to articulate precisely what one ideally takes it to involve, and to tease out the various implications of one’s view...where one conception of education manifestly differs from another, important progress has none the less been made: the participants in the debate have a clear idea of what they are respectively talking about in the name of education, they know they differ, and they can move on to intelligible arguments about the rival value of their different types of education. (Barrow and Milburn, 1986, p. 17).

Following Barrow and Milburn, these arguments can then lead to re-evaluation of each theory, which will assist us in understanding what their strengths and weaknesses may be.

Examination and weighing of these “rival values” can create intellectual space that allows for exploration of new possibilities and new theories based on the successful aspects of the former theories. In the case of this thesis, for example, Rousseau, Neill and Illich all had theories about the importance of nature, freedom and useful knowledge in terms of education. Robin Barrow analyzed these “radical” theories, stating what he believes to be weaknesses within them. This thesis, in turn, re-evaluates the same theories in conjunction with Barrow’s arguments, in order to further explore the concepts of natural learning, freedom and useful knowledge; and to examine whether these concepts are helpful in education. By taking into account Barrow’s analysis specifically about the limitations of these concepts, a researcher can begin to understand how to re-imagine and re-position natural learning, freedom, and useful knowledge within the context of education.

R.S. Peters (1973) emphasized the importance of analysis, especially in times of uncertainty. He uses the example of certain teaching methods that may be deemed inefficient, but are still preferred because they promote principles that educators may find desirable. The question is then, according to Peters, why are these principles desirable in education? This he believes is where the process of analysis is necessary: “...analysis, therefore, draws attention to the need for more fundamental work in ethical theory to justify the fundamental principles underlying the whole ‘progressive’ approach to education” (p. 28). Empirical evidence can show us whether or not a process or idea works in relation to stated aims; analysis can assist us in discovering why it works.

Soltis (1968) stated “analysis in depth is able to provide a fuller range of clear alternative possibilities for what we desire to do as educators” (p. 49). Within the maze of educational

theories, the more paths we explore, the more chance we have of finding appropriate alternative paths to the child's garden, or "kinder garten" to use Fredrich Froebel's name for a child's school. Following the suggestions of Peters and Soltis, then, analysis seems to offer possibilities for useful research. With large numbers of parents choosing alternative forms of education for their children (Kay 2001; Wake, 2000), it seems we are in a time of educational uncertainty, and a search for alternative possibilities has begun. I believe that there are aspects of "radical education" that are worth revisiting, in order to explore both their currency and possibilities for incorporating them into current education systems. To begin this analysis, it seems appropriate to look back at what has been said by Rousseau, Neill and Illich in about the aims of education.

In *Learning from our Mistakes: A Reinterpretation of Twentieth-Century Educational Theory*, Henry J. Perkinson (1984) states that it is of utmost importance that we re-examine past theories in order to both explain the theories of alternative education and their limitations. In turn, we can generate new perspectives by "constructing new educational theories, or metatheories, that reinterpret those earlier theories that have generated successful educational practices" (p. xvi). It is my intention, therefore, to examine the concepts of nature, freedom, and useful knowledge within the context of education in order to understand why they are the foundation of much alternative schooling. While Barrow's book does provide a particularly noteworthy critique, in the true spirit of Perkinson (1984), I believe that Barrow's work does not settle the questions, that his critiques should be re-interpreted in order to both acknowledge his concerns yet remain open to the significance of nature, freedom, and useful knowledge in education. In essence, I am following the lead of

Barrow and Milburn (1986) themselves, by becoming aware of and acknowledging the values of opposing theories, and using this knowledge to encourage further discussion about aims of education.

Peters (1973) asserts that analysis can assist us in answering the question “why”? My question is: Why, or in what sense are the concepts nature, freedom and useful knowledge desirable educational aims? Soltis (1968) adds that analysis can reveal alternative possibilities for including these desirable aims within an educational context. Using conceptual analysis as a basis for interpretation of these aims in light of their critiques, I will clarify the importance of all three concepts. In turn, this will provide some groundwork for rethinking alternative possibilities for education and schooling.

CHAPTER FIVE

Natural Education

The question posed in this chapter is essentially: What is the importance of the concept of nature to education? These types of questions, according to John Wilson in *Thinking with Concepts* (1963), involve two tasks: analysis of the concept of nature, and an exploration of value judgments as to its importance. I will first begin with the analysis of the concept of nature.

One image regarding the word “nature” is a picture of lush, green forests and various forms of wildlife. In common use, however, “nature” has multiple meanings. We might say to someone: “You are a natural,” in this case meaning that the individual seems to be particularly well suited to a role because they do it well or easily. We use terms such as “naturally curly hair,” meaning “real” or “not artificial.” Or we might describe a certain act as “natural behaviour,” implying that it is normal behaviour. Because this term has a variety of intended or possible meanings, it is important that when discussing the term one explores the intended meaning in a given context.

One of Barrow’s (1978) main points in his critique of Rousseau is that Rousseau’s “use of the term [nature] fluctuates” (p. 47). This fluctuation in use, however, does not necessarily render Rousseau’s points invalid. Another analytic approach would be to carefully examine the varying uses, in context, to see if it is possible to find some commonalities in its intended meaning. Barrow foreshadows the possibility of common meaning when he implies that most readers of Rousseau’s *Émile* interpret Rousseau’s use of the term natural in terms of what is appropriate (p. 42). Rather than exploring this point

further, however, he simply states that this is what makes Rousseau's argument so persuasive; most people believe that something "is natural and therefore it is good" (p. 47). He goes on to state that "it is important to recognize how thin and lacking in argument much of the text is, and can be seen to be, if the word natural is removed" (p. 47). This statement is puzzling. Why would we want to purge this text of a common word? What is the philosophical use of such hypothetical speculation? Barrow appears to believe that without the word "natural," Rousseau has no strength in his claims.

Is Barrow (1978) implying here that any term that people are positively disposed towards, or have common understanding of, should not be taken seriously? In this case, if people's common understanding seems thinly supported, perhaps we can take analysis of the word nature a bit further, in order to uncover why the word natural tends to bring to mind that which is appropriate. Barrow's acknowledgment of subtle commonality suggests that, although the uses and applications of the concept natural may seem to vary, further analysis is warranted regarding common meaning and usage.

Radical theorists such as Rousseau, Neill and Illich used the word nature in different contexts. "Nature," or "natural," for example, can be used in a physical context to describe a physical attribute or growth, as well as in a social context, to describe an individual's behaviour in a certain situation. This may be the root of Barrow's assertion that because the use of the term varies, the argument is thin, if not invalid. I argue that, instead of rendering the term invalid, it is important to look at different uses of the concept and uncover the intended meaning within each context. By examining the use of the term "nature" in context, I believe the value of the term, and its educational importance, can be illustrated.

Biological/Physical Contexts

Rousseau (1762/2003) believed that certain levels of learning should not be introduced to a child until certain stages of maturity have been reached. Barrow (1978) contends that this type of statement is totally unnecessary, as it is obvious that we “cannot walk without a certain kind of prior limb development...This claim seems uncontentious and not very informative” (p.44). While Barrow’s “walk before you can run” analogy seems to suggest a certain level of common sense, does it mean that we should dismiss Rousseau’s claim as uninformative?

If education through “natural progression,” as presented by Rousseau, is good and appropriate, does this mean that it is a superior method for educating our children? Some might say that if children are only exposed to what they are ready to learn they will not strive for higher achievement or know what it means to be challenged. It might be argued that children need to experience stress, frustration and failure as these feelings are somewhat inevitable at some point in their adult lives, and they should be prepared for it. In this case it could arguably be important to circumvent the natural process and require children to sit quietly for extended periods of time absorbing information that means little to them at this time in their young lives, perhaps exposing them to what is beyond their grasp so that they never stop striving to do better. It seems, however, that children and other learners do challenge themselves and experience stress, frustration and failure as they explore the limits of their ability and understanding. Perhaps these self-imposed challenges are more manageable.

For example, in a biological or physical context, then, what counts as “natural education”? It can be said that “natural education” involves guiding children in their educational endeavours with a sensitive eye to their physical and developmental needs. If we have teachers with a thorough knowledge of child development who challenge children and offer them choices based upon what is appropriate for their particular stage of learning, then perhaps these children will not experience the frustration of not being able to complete the task. Having been successful, then, these same children will have the confidence to build upon what they have already learned, seeking further knowledge of their own accord. We might also say that children learning in a natural progression will be able to feel a sense of mastery, and in turn develop a higher self-esteem. In this case, have we not reached the same end in a more positive manner?

Perhaps as adults it is difficult for us to understand the feelings of something being beyond our abilities, but I will attempt to illustrate using an everyday example that may be familiar to many of us. Imagine yourself a computer novice in this age of technology. Now, in your beginners’ computer class you are taught to turn the computer on, and then forced to complete an assignment that is at the level of someone who is technologically advanced. Imagine the frustration you would feel about not being able to do what is expected of you. All other aspects of your life are neglected because you are forced to complete this assignment. Then, after many hours of struggling when you finally manage to scrape together the assignment you have no idea how you completed it, just that you did and that you will get some sort of mark. The assignment means nothing to you, you have learned little from it, and you hope to never have to do an assignment like that again. So we can

see how being expected to complete something that we may not yet have the knowledge or skills to complete, can result in feelings of frustration and damage to one's self esteem. These are much the same feelings as a child might experience in a similar situation.

In a biological or physical context, nature or natural can also be used to describe something that occurs without force. Again, appealing to everyday experiences, consider the idea of a child learning to walk. We do not, for example, force a young infant to sit through a lecture on the theory of mobility or show them videotapes on how to walk. This would be somewhat absurd, as (1) they would have no comprehension of what we were trying to communicate to them; and (2) their bodies are not physically ready to perform the action. While it can be said that the desire to become mobile is influenced by being in a context of others who are walking, it remains that, unless a child is physically able and has the instinct or desire to walk, the act of walking will not occur. The act of walking takes place when the time is appropriate, and the appropriate time occurs when there is a combination of developmental readiness and innate willingness, both of which occur without external force. "Natural" education, then, should involve the gentle guiding of our children through the process of learning, while remaining sensitive to developmental readiness and innate willingness.

Why, then, are we treating our young students as if they were simply information receptacles, requiring them to spend extended periods of time in an enclosed space while they are pumped full of scraps of information? Could it be possible that we are unnecessarily creating an environment filled with a disproportionate amount of stress and frustration? When we impose upon a child that which we, as a society, feel it is necessary

for them to learn, are we, in turn, stemming their natural curiosity about the world around them? It is as if we are telling them that curiosity is not important; that individuality is not important. What is important is that one learns what others want them to learn. Societal values, rather than emerging individual abilities, take priority. It is akin to filling a balloon with helium versus simply filling it with air. A balloon full of air does not float on its own; it needs to be batted around. But for a balloon filled with helium, the sky is the limit.

Social Context

The meaning of the word “natural” will also depend on the social context in which it was used. What may have been deemed “natural” 100 years ago may not be considered at all natural today, as social constructs change with time, culture and environment. For example, Barrow (1978) states:

It is a major weakness in Rousseau’s analysis of the human condition that he fails to see that what is conceived of as natural changes. This is true not only of the normative sense, where clearly people’s views as to what is natural (fitting, right, appropriate) change, but also of the other senses. Many things that are natural now, in a number of different senses of ‘natural’, were not natural in precisely the same senses at an earlier stage of history or evolution. Recognition of this point should remove any lingering tendency to see the natural as somehow necessarily desirable. (p.48)

The idea that what is conceived of as “natural” changes does not mean that “natural” should stop being seen as desirable, it simply means that what is desirable also changes. In education, as in any field, there are things that remain relatively constant as well as things that change. This necessitates ongoing research and analysis as to what should remain desirable and what should not. In many cases, what is deemed as natural may change depending on context and time. It takes on different meaning depending upon the situation.

What seems natural within one setting may not be natural within another setting. This is usually dependant upon societal attitudes. It is perfectly natural in many cultures, for example, for a woman to be on a beach wearing a bikini, but not wearing only her underwear. It is acceptable to drink a glass of wine at home or in a restaurant, but it is not acceptable to drink from a bottle of wine whilst walking down a public street. Society often decides what is natural and what is not. The concept of “natural,” in this case, can be used to describe something that is accepted by a particular society as appropriate, normal, or good.

Both Rousseau and Neill use “natural” in ways that describe societal expectations. Rousseau used the example of the child who breaks the window and then is left to sleep in a cold room. Neill discusses the child who borrows a saw and then leaves it in the rain. The child was therefore not allowed to borrow the saw again. In both cases, natural implies that the consequences were logical, reasonable or sensible in that they were directly related to the action and to the social context in which the action occurred. For example, the adult who borrows a friend’s saw and then leaves it to be ruined in the rain would be expected to replace it. This consequence is suitable to the context; it is a natural response. The child, however, has no resources with which to purchase a new saw. Not being allowed to borrow the saw again, therefore, is a consequence more suitable, or natural, in this situation. The lesson was internalized and understood. The consequence was not forced, but a natural reaction.

The Common Meaning

I have argued that the meaning of “natural” changes within different contexts. Depending on the situation in which the word is used, something natural can be said to be something (1) that a person is physically or developmentally ready for; (2) appropriate, normal or good; and (3) logical, reasonable or sensible in a given context. Barrow (1978) acknowledges that natural can have several different meanings while criticizing Rousseau for his fluctuation in the use of the word natural (p.43). If we analyze some of Barrow’s meanings for natural, however, we can see examples of common meaning. For example, in a biological or physical context Barrow discusses how natural can be used to describe behaviours that are physically or biologically normal (breathing) or innate (migratory instinct). Barrow notes that the term natural can also be used to describe something “familiar,” “usual,” or “semi-automatic,” as in behaving or reacting naturally. However, while acknowledging these different meanings in different contexts, I argue that the behaviour in these situations is behaviour that occurs without force, or forceful external expectation.

Barrow (1978) also acknowledges that social contexts can create meaning. For example, he states that the term natural can be used to “contrast with civilized or sophisticated,” (p.43) as in “The way of life of the American Indians used to be more natural than it is now.” The question here is, more natural to whom? The implication is that Barrow is seeing Western civilization as sophisticated and therefore, in contrast, the American Indian way of life was more natural before colonization. Who is the judge, here, of what is sophisticated and civilized and what is not? It is the individual who is making the statement based upon an attitude created by the societal context in which he or she lives. This

example, though, can be viewed from a different perspective. Looked at in another way, the North American First Nations way of life was once more natural in the sense that it occurred without force, until their adaptation to European demands. In this sense it has nothing to do with Western civilization. This is a prime example of how a concept changes with different cultural perspectives. The Western culture may view the concept of natural in a negative manner, equating it with “uncivilized,” but First Nations may see their “natural” way of life in a more positive light.

So, although uses of the concept “natural” seem to differ in different contexts, the various meanings also have an important common characteristic. That which is natural *occurs without external force*. Breathing, for example is not forced, neither is migratory instinct. To react naturally to something is to allow the reaction to come from within, the reaction is not forced. In an educational context, then, to allow a child to learn something naturally is to allow the desire for learning to come from within the child. Rousseau’s fluctuation in use can be seen as legitimate on two counts. First, he uses “natural” in different ways and the context should be considered. Second, though the context is different, analysis shows that there is common meaning in each context. Therefore, I argue that not only has analysis legitimized the use of the term “natural,” but has underscored the importance of re-evaluating its use within the contemporary education system.

Of course, there are always cases in which this meaning of *without external force* can be challenged. Barrow illustrates this with an interesting argument against the idea of natural consequences. He states that there are some cases in which no natural consequence is readily available, and therefore some consequence must be constructed by the adult. He

cites the example of bullying, and how the natural consequences, such as being disliked, would be a value judgment rather than a natural consequence. The bully may be disliked by certain individuals, but this does not necessarily have any effect on or result in a change to his or her behaviour. This argument brings to mind two points. First, if, as Barrow acknowledges, a common meaning of natural is that which is appropriate, and that which is natural changes with context, could the dislike not be considered a “natural consequence” in that the dislike is a direct result of the action of bullying? Second, while it is true in some cases that natural consequences may not be readily available, does this mean that we should not at least attempt to allow a consequence that is appropriate, reasonable and logical? Should we attempt to enable consequences that enable the child to glean some understanding of why what he or she did was unacceptable? In cases where it is necessary for the adult to construct a consequence, great care should be taken to ensure that the consequence somehow relates to the action.

So, while education through natural processes may mean that the education is appropriate, logical, comes from within the child, and is not acquired through external pressures, we can see that there may be situations in which other methods must be used. But what importance, then, does natural learning have in today’s educational system? The answer to this question cannot be discussed in terms of absolute categories. Barrow has some useful arguments when it comes to the concept of natural learning. There may be some things that an individual may not be able to experience naturally, through their senses of sight, smell, sound, taste and touch. In some cases, a prior knowledge base might be necessary. He seems to be suggesting, however, that natural experience plays little role at

all in the learning of these concepts. His dichotomous constructions distract from the usefulness of the concept of “natural” learning. For example, Barrow (1978) makes the statement:

One may learn that flowers bloom and that trees shed leaves by direct perception; but one cannot or will not learn that God exists, that justice demands impartial treatment, the square root of four, or atomic theory *simply by perception*. [italics added] (p. 55)

These assertions may seem to make perfect sense at first. However, taking a closer look one notices the categorical nature of these assertions. I can see the bud of a flower come to full bloom. I can smell the sweet scent of a rose. I can touch the soft petals. I can hear the leaves crunching beneath my feet on a beautiful fall day. I can experience these aspects of life with my entire being. I can learn to understand them by living them. Is there a better way to learn about my world than by experiencing it through body, mind and soul? Is it possible to learn everything this way? According to Barrow, it is not; but, if we revisit his statement, perhaps it can be seen in a different light.

For example, aside from the question as to whether schools are responsible for teaching religious belief, ask yourself, how does a child come to learn beliefs in a God? First, a belief in the existence of God does not qualify as knowledge as I have discussed it above. A child, therefore, does not “learn that God exists” but learns a set of religious beliefs. An individual can have religious beliefs before ever setting foot in a place of worship. A young child can experience that there is good and bad within the world through watching the actions of others. He or she can overhear adult conversations regarding religion. As a child gets older and reach different stages of maturation, he or she can then begin to ask questions

about religion, when his or her mind is able to process the information. To simply tell a young child about God: “God is good, God is watching you, God made the world”; is not enough explanation to bring the child to a state of belief comparable to the adult believer’s. It is the experience of religious activity, the beautiful music, the feelings of goodness emitted inside the place of worship, the actions of others that create conditions for a child to develop any set of religious beliefs.

However, while a child might be instructed in religious rituals, they will not necessarily come to *understand* the concept of religion and what it entails, they may simply be conditioned to believe. It is only through their natural, unforced experiences that they can feel, see and hear the results of such religious beliefs. When they also feel free to question and to make their own choices, they can live the experience rather than being just conditioned. When an individual is exposed to a religious setting and is given the opportunity to “feel” it, to “see” it as a natural part of their lives, it is more likely that he or she will understand what it means to believe. Once they understand what it means to believe, if their natural curiosity and critical thinking have been encouraged, they will be able to choose for themselves whether they believe or not.

A similar case can be made for the idea of “justice.” A child does not have to be told that justice demands impartial treatment. This can be learned through experience and example, and without external force. If one is treated fairly and justly as a child, then one is likely to internalize that this is the way people should be treated, and to recognize when someone else is being treated unfairly. It is through the actual experiences of living life, through the natural, everyday experiences of being treated fairly or unfairly, that one

encounters situations for learning about justice. I can be told over and over again about justice and what it should entail, but if I have never experienced justice, if I have not had the experience of being treated fairly and impartially in my natural, everyday existence, I will have no understanding of justice.

In the case of things such as atomic theory, one can see where direct instruction may be necessary. But let us look at the meaning of theory for a moment. *The Gage Canadian Dictionary* (Avis, Drysdale, Gregg, Neufeldt and Scargill, 1983) defines theory as, “1 an explanation based on thought or speculation. 2 an explanation based on observation and reasoning: *the theory of evolution, Einstein’s theory of relativity*” (p. 1166). If a theory is “an explanation based on thought or speculation,” then, how does one come to have these thoughts? Is it only through instruction that one can obtain the information necessary to formulate scientific theories? And, once one has such thoughts, how does one “test” them to discover if they are valid? This is done through putting one’s thoughts into practice, by doing experiments, through experiential learning.

Can we have an educational system, then, that allows for natural learning? While it is true that in today’s society some of the ideas of the radical theorists may be construed as too utopian, the analysis shows that it is important that we do not lose sight of the value of the concept of natural learning. When we look at the word natural in the context of education, it is important that we do not think in terms of absolutes. Perhaps the question is not “Is it important?” but “When and where is it important?” This is where the necessity for further analysis of the concept of nature, as I have provided, becomes critical.

School begins, in some areas, at three years of age, and in many areas there are plans to begin formal education even earlier (Ward, 2005). In her article, *Labour's Plan to Educate Toddlers*, Lucy Ward discusses the U.K. government's plan to "extend the principles of standardized education from the school classroom to the very youngest infants in England and Wales" (p. 1). According to Ward, the government's plan will involve the testing of three year olds in order to assess their literacy and numeracy skills. In some ways, this can mark the end of childhood, of the age of discovery. Now, it is down to the business of learning. If we must start school at such a young age, perhaps we should shift emphasis away from the formal learning of bits of information and away from forced instruction. Perhaps we can begin to follow the lead of the child, to allow for the opportunity for children to explore, to learn about themselves, each other and the community of their school, through natural occurrences in their everyday lives. When a child is given the opportunity to develop his or her imagination and interests, there develops in turn a need for, or wanting of, more information, and an enthusiasm for learning.

It makes sense, then, to talk about the value of natural education. While Barrow is correct in saying that the use of the term natural fluctuates, analysis has shown that some meaning transcends all contexts. Something that is learned naturally is something that is learned without force, that is, without having the information forced upon you by another individual. To learn something naturally, to immerse oneself in a subject with body, mind, and soul because you want to, not because you are forced to, is to understand it more richly, in a more lasting way. What you have come to understand becomes a part of who you are. Why do we insist upon bypassing childhood and rushing to prepare our children to become

adults before they understand what it means to be one? Perhaps it is true that everything cannot be learned naturally, but it is an important place to start. Natural learning can form a solid base of understanding for those things that cannot be naturally perceived. It makes no sense to have a mind full of facts and figures when one has no understanding of what they mean or how to use them. Children need to understand their world in order to live richly and fully within it. It is only through understanding who they are that they will be able to discover who they can become.

CHAPTER SIX

Freedom/Self-regulation

Before we can decide whether or not freedom is important in terms of education, we must consider what freedom is. Most of us are familiar with the word freedom. We think we know what it means to be free. We live in Canada, “the true North strong and free,” and our neighbours to the south reside in “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” Many people from other countries desire to come to Canada because they believe it is a country of freedom. But do we have a thorough understanding of what it means to be free, and is anyone ever completely free?

So, what is freedom? Most formal dictionary definitions read quite similarly. Freedom is “the condition of not being under another’s control: power to do, say or think as one pleases: liberty” (Avis, et al., 1983, p. 470). According to this definition, is Canada a country of freedom? Yes, we are free to vote, to own our own homes and businesses, and to express our opinions. But, are we really free to do as we please? Every country has laws that must be obeyed. Every culture has sanctions, or certain rules of conduct, be they written or unwritten.

A problem that one encounters when trying to isolate a meaning for the concept of freedom is that there are so many contexts in which the term is used to indicate different things. An individual can have physical freedom, meaning there are no abnormal constraints to the body, or restriction of movement, and he or she can have the ability to speak freely. He or she can be free from illness, meaning that he or she is generally healthy and without ailment. People often talk about being debt-free, meaning they do not owe money to

anyone. All of these scenarios give some explanation as to what freedom might be.

One of the main criticisms that Barrow (1978) makes of Rousseau (1762/2003) is that what Rousseau deems freedom is not really so. In terms of educating children, Rousseau states: “Equally in his actions and in yours, let him feel his liberty. If he is lacking in power, supply the exact amount of it which he needs in order to be free and not imperious...” (p. 47). This, according to Barrow, shows that “Clearly Rousseau advocates not freedom (absence of restraint) but a structured environment—structured in such a way that the child will come to recognize what is appropriate, and what is right” (p. 42). Émile cannot be free because he must be exposed to some adult supervision, and will in turn be influenced through this supervision. And though the environment may be free of societal influences, the teacher must make some rules, if only for reasons of safety. According to Barrow, the very idea of removing Émile to a secluded and isolated environment so that he can live in freedom is a violation of his freedom. This is a choice that has been made for him, not one he has made himself. This, Barrow states, decreases the freedom of the learning environment.

Freedom and Context

So, is there a middle ground between being controlled and being free? If so, where is it? Barrow’s point of view seems to address only the extremes, one is either free or not free; and true freedom cannot exist. Yet, we still find the term useful in everyday situations. Perhaps this is a concept similar to the concept of justice. For example, while a perfect or true justice may be elusive, we still aspire towards justice. It is necessary to look at

statements of freedom in terms of who is making the statement and why it is being made; to isolate the concept and look for meaning within an individual situation.

For example, if a Canadian teenager complains to her or his parents: "You never give me any freedom," what is he or she actually saying? The main complaint here is probably the desire for a later curfew, a pierced navel, or permission to attend a party with friends. Freedom in this case takes on the meaning of independence, room to grow and make mistakes. However, a teenager coming to Canada from a country rocked by civil war may have a totally different perception of freedom. To this individual freedom may mean being able to walk the streets without fear, being able to attend school, being able to speak his or her thoughts without fear of punishment. Both teenagers have the desire for freedom, but their ideas of what constitutes freedom are different.

At the same time, it seems that we can experience freedom in certain areas of our lives and not others. When at one's place of employment, for example, there are certain obligations, codes of conduct, and policies to adhere to. One is, in most cases, obligated to work a certain number of hours, or, perhaps, abide by a dress code. These are rules that must be followed whether they are liked or disliked, and certainly impinge freedom.

Responsibility, Work and Play

Why, then, do we experience freedom in some cases and not in others? One of the answers that could be offered for these questions relates to the idea of responsibility. The amount of freedom one experiences is directly related to the amount of responsibility one has. For example, if we have two women of the same age, with the same job, one with children and one without, who experiences more freedom? The woman without children

can choose not to go home and make dinner but go out with friends instead. The woman with children, however, has a responsibility to ensure that she is home to care for her children and to make them a proper dinner. But can it be said that she is not free? If she enjoys having children, and the choice to have them was made willingly, then she had the freedom to make this life choice and accept the responsibility that came with it.

My own experience with alternative educational theories has shown me first hand how freedom and responsibility work together. One day, after observing the children dump out an entire shelf of wooden blocks in order to find the right piece, a visitor commented that “tidy up” time must be quite a chore. She was surprised that nothing was said to the children about the mess they had made. She was also quite astonished to see that, when the play period was over and I began to sing a special song, that the room was orderly within 5 minutes. I later explained to her that the children were aware that they had the freedom to make as big a “mess” as they liked, but that they were also aware that they were responsible for tidying up afterwards, and it was a responsibility that they took pride in. The children knew that if they wanted to be free to use the toys the next day they had to act responsibly. Even at this young age, the children had learned that freedom comes through responsibility.

The experience of cleaning up was also made into an enjoyable one. The singing of a song, rather than constant echoes of “Suzie pick that up” or “Johnny put that away” assists in creating an atmosphere of co-operation, and the children are shown, through constant example, a special reverence for the toys. For example, dolls were not just “put away.” They were dressed in pajamas and tucked properly into bed. In this way, the “work” part of tidying up is actually experienced as a continuation of the play.

Perhaps part of the reason that our society has such a difficult time with the concept of freedom is that we have drawn such a firm line between work and play. We tend to think of them as two separate entities, rather than a partnership. According to John Holt (1972), work has become, for many, an area equated with toil and strife. Leisure, on the other hand, has become equated with freedom. Our modern society seems to hold the attitude that work is a productive sphere while play (leisure, freedom) is not, contributing in turn to the idea that if we want our students to be productive in the educational setting, we must eliminate any form of play or freedom. It can also be seen in our attitudes towards certain vocations. The manual labourer “works.” The job is physical and demanding. He or she works hard for his or her money. The artist or writer does not really “work.” They enjoy it too much, how can it be work? Yet the writer or artist is also working for his or her money. The difference is that their work is a source of fulfillment. It is, perhaps, a form of play. “Play is a source of freedom when it is enriched by the authority or outcome of purpose. Work is a source of freedom when it is enriched by a relative interest in the activity itself” (Nash, 1966, p. 52). It is important that we begin to recognize that both work and play can involve freedom, and still have purpose, be productive, and even structured.

Holt (1972) discusses the idea of structure in his book, *Freedom and Beyond*. Part of the problem, he suggests, is that in education we have begun to think in terms of structured versus unstructured events instead of two different kinds of structure. In a traditional classroom the structure is very visible and very simple—the teacher is in charge and the students follow as a group. In the open classroom, however, the structure is very complex and dynamic and not immediately visible. It might be assumed, therefore, that it does not

exist. The structure in the open classroom, however, is internal, “It grows out of the needs and abilities of the children and teachers themselves” (Holt, 1972, p. 11).

Such is the situation with A.S. Neill’s Summerhill school. The children are free to decide for themselves when they need to attend classes and which classes they are interested in taking. Though, as Barrow points out, it is not possible for a child to be raised with freedom from any restraints whatsoever, as we can see from our analysis it is not possible for *any* individual to live in such a manner. In any context there will be sanctions or rules that govern the amount of freedom an individual experiences. These rules are necessary to ensure public safety and individual rights. Every individual has certain responsibilities to be lived up to. These responsibilities are necessary to ensure our society does not become riotous and disorganized. Yet these responsibilities do not mean that freedom does not exist in some form. For example, one of Barrow’s (1978) criticisms of Neill’s idea of freedom is that:

some of his examples are on the face of it contradictory. Neill forbids jumping on the sofa, presumably because he doesn’t think that children should be free to damage valuable property, but counsels us to allow the child to play with our valuable breakable ornaments. (p. 87)

There is nothing necessarily contradictory in this statement. The children have the freedom to sit on the sofa, and a responsibility to ensure that it is not damaged if they wish to enjoy that freedom. A direct result of children jumping on the sofa would be damage to the furniture, but a child playing with a valuable breakable ornament does not necessarily result in damage to the object. The child is free to handle the object, not damage it. If a child has been shown through example that respect is necessary in the handling of certain objects, has

been given the freedom to feel the fragility of the object, and has felt the pride in being given the freedom to handle such an important object, he or she is likely to use more care. Rather than exerting absolute authority over the child by saying “No, you may not,” Neill is offering the child both the freedom to handle the object and the responsibility to care for it. He has been able to share some of his authority with the child.

Authority, Freedom and Responsibility

If we cannot create an environment in which children are free from all restraints, perhaps the answer, then, is to create a relationship between authority and freedom, and responsibility, taking into account the merits (and demerits) of each. For example, while it may not be in a child’s best interest to be allowed to run completely amok (assuming that the child will do so if given freedom, and this is by no means certain), that same child can be taught that freedom follows responsibility. If a child is made aware of what his or her responsibilities are, and that he or she is expected to live up to those responsibilities, the child can then be allowed freedom based upon acceptance of responsibility. In the words of W.R. Niblett (1960):

Anyone who has been concerned with children soon discovers two situations in which any of them may go to pieces. One is a feeble environment which provides no firm response to anything that he may do so that he finally becomes lost in his own waywardness with no signposts to guide him into profitable activity. The other is an environment which responds firmly but mechanically; there is not resilience, no recognition of the individual in his unique situation. (p. 29)

The teacher must be prepared to think of his or her authority in an alternate light. It is not authority over the student, but rather responsibility *with* the student, the formation of a learning partnership. The teacher must have some authority because he or she has been

given the responsibility to teach the child. Yet, the child should be given some authority as well, in the form of responsibility for his or her own learning. At the same time, both student and teacher must be willing to give freedom to each other. The student has the responsibility to allow the teacher to pass on his or her knowledge, and the teacher has the responsibility to allow the students the freedom to explore interests and learn in the way that is best for him or her. The teacher who demands total submission to his or her authority teaches deference to those in power. The teacher who shares responsibility with the student teaches a respect for authority.

It is also important to find a rhythm between activities involving authority, and those involving freedom. Freedom can be cultivated through a sharing of authority and an awareness and acceptance of responsibility. Holt (1972) gives an example of what happens when this rhythm is not in place. He describes a situation in which an acquaintance called, seeking advice about his son. The boy's teacher had called home on several occasions to complain that he was disrupting the class. Visits to a child psychologist and prescription drugs had been suggested. The boy's parents were frantic as to what to do about his behaviour. Holt's first reaction was to ask the age of the child:

Six! I thought to myself, what in the world can a six-year-old do in the classroom that can throw all these adults into such a panic. I tried to get in some further questions. What is the child doing...that is causing such a disturbance?...I eventually got an answer. What this six-year-old was doing to cause such an uproar was only this—he likes to get up out of his seat from time to time and go talk to his friends. He refuses to stay seated. (p. 237)

This is a prime example of what can occur when there is an unbalance in authority and freedom. The student was not experiencing any freedom. Therefore, he was not accepting

his responsibility. Though we might also ask, just how much should we demand that children of six should be confined to their seats? Had he been made aware that accepting the responsibility of sitting in his seat during lessons would lead to his receiving some time for freedom, he may have been more accepting of his obligations. In turn, he did not respect the authority of the teacher, as she encumbered him with only obligations and no freedom. Rather than create a learning partnership in which responsibility was shared by both student and teacher, the teacher was demanding absolute authority, and the student was not succumbing to that authority. Holt goes on to say:

I tried to convince my friend that the only problem was that this lively, energetic and personable kid had had the bad luck . . . to get a first-grade teacher who, like many other teachers believed that six-year-olds ought to spend a very large part of their waking hours sitting down, motionless and quiet. I said that many times at teachers' meetings the program chairman has explained to me that we had to break after an hour and a half because, "You can't keep teachers sitting longer than that." Was it reasonable or right to expect a six-year-old to sit still for most of the day? . . . This child may all too soon find his way into the hands of experts who will find something they can say is wrong with him. (They certainly won't say that anything is wrong with the teacher or the school.) At the very least, he will be convinced that because he dislikes these school rules and doesn't want to obey them all the time, he is in varying degrees bad, queer and sick. (1972, p. 238)

Holt later learned that the child had been placed on prescription drugs, which put an end to the problem.

In the above scenario, the parents were very worried that their child was not going to succeed in school, and, therefore, succumbed to the opinion of "experts." The problem ceased, but was it solved? The teacher was happy, she now had a child that would sit and receive the information that she needed to teach without "disrupting" the classroom. The parents were relieved that their child was no longer a "problem." But what about the child?

Was he enjoying his educational experience? He was not learning to accept responsibility, but being forced to comply because his faculties had been altered by drugs. He was still not experiencing freedom. It seems that our society has become so focused on student success that we have lost sense of what the aims of education should be. Do we wish to create mindless automatons that fit into the pre-formed mold? Or should we strive to equip our children with an awareness of and respect for responsibility and the freedom to be who they wish to be?

Freedom, Aims and Choice

It is difficult to discuss the concept of freedom in education without discussing aims. It is the educational aims that will ascertain the degree of freedom experienced by the students. In *Education and the Individual*, Brenda Cohen (1981) writes “The values of a society are and must be the values of its education system; the values of an education system are and must be the values of society” (p. 81). We, as a society, decide what is important for our children to learn. However, the problem that we are facing, according to Nash (1966), is that

There are at least two conflicting aims of education: one, that man should be educated to become what he is; the other, that he should be educated to become what he is not...the first aim emphasizes freedom: the second emphasizes discipline. (pp. 110-111)

The difference is education that recognizes the talents and potential of a student and attempts to develop these to the fullest, or an education that has a predetermined mold of what an individual should become and forces the individual to fit into that mold.

If the aims of education are dependant upon the aims of the community, perhaps we need to spend more time studying these aims and their purposes. Although it is true that we live in a society in which the technological advances demand an increase in the number of people knowledgeable enough to be able to ensure the functioning of such a society, it is also essential that we continue to analyze the concept freedom as it pertains to education. Students who are free to make some choices in regards to their education will have the opportunity to learn from their mistakes, to follow their own interests and to take responsibility for their own learning. They can develop the ability to make their own decisions, and the confidence to question what they believe is wrong. Individuals who are able to do these things are then independent, autonomous individuals. According to Nash (1966):

Autonomy is essential not only because of the withering away of alternative sources of support but also because of the danger that technological developments in transportation and communication will make us all more alike and hence, less interesting to each other. (p. 148)

Allowing our children some freedom in their learning teaches them to be autonomous. This autonomy will help to ensure a diverse society, and assist us in avoiding a rather monotonous existence within a society based on homogeneity. Illich (1971/2002) adds:

School prepares for the alienating institutionalization of life by teaching the need to be taught. Once this lesson is learned, people lose their incentive to grow in independence; they no longer find relatedness attractive, and close themselves off to the surprises which life offers when it is not predetermined by institutional definition. (p. 47)

By allowing our students freedom of choice, we can avoid teaching them “the need to be taught.” Rather, we can recognize them as contributors to the learning process, therefore creating within them a desire to learn. We need to stop thinking of children as receivers and begin thinking of them as participators. We need to think more about education as a process through which teacher and student work together to produce an end product that benefits the community as well as the student.

One could argue that this is the experience of the students at Summerhill. Summerhill students are learning that it is okay to disagree, that their opinions are valued and accepted, and that they can make, and learn from, mistakes. The respect for responsibility that they have learned while being a part of the making of the school rules, the self confidence that stems from being trusted with responsibility, and the creativity and autonomous thinking that is fostered within the school, are all valuable assets that a student can utilize in their adult lives. While the freedom allowed students at Summerhill may be judged extreme by some, further study of the program may lead to a shift in educational aims necessary to create a learning environment that is best for our children.

Creating such an environment is not an easy task. Some might argue that they have tried to offer students choices, but the students do not know what to choose. This is because they have been told exactly what to write for so long that, when faced with an open page, they experience writer’s block. I have experienced this myself in university. Having always excelled academically, I found myself in a panic when, for the first time, the professor asked us to complete a self-proposed project. I had no idea what to do, what was expected,

what I should include in the project. I struggled for weeks, and when I finally handed in the project I received the lowest mark of my university career.

The process for choice must begin slowly, gradually increasing as the student's self-assurance builds. Paul Nash (1966) believes that "More dangerous than the actual powerlessness of the individual in modern society is the paralysis that results because he believes he is powerless" (p. 237). Schools must begin to foster a belief in individual power and responsibility. The most important thing that an educational system can do is to increase a student's positive attitude towards self and self-acceptance. Without freedom, a student cannot learn to believe in his or her own power, or how to use it effectively. Without freedom, a student cannot learn what it means to make responsible decisions, especially when all the decisions are made for the student. Without freedom, or some degree of autonomy, a student cannot develop a sense of self, and therefore self-acceptance is unattainable.

It may be impossible to discover whether or not children living in complete freedom would become strong and self-regulated like Émile, or out of control savages running amok as in *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1954). Both situations are hypothetical, and therefore we cannot deduce from them what would happen in real life. What we do know is that these hypothetical situations need not be experienced in order for freedom to exist in some form. We know that freedom can be experienced in many different ways, and to different extents. What we have still to discover, through further research, are the benefits of allowing students more freedom within the learning environment

To what extent are students experiencing freedom in school now? In many cases there are rules as to when they can eat, when they can play, when to sit and when to stand, what and when to read. Often they must even ask permission to do something as personal as relieving themselves. They go outside when they are told to and come in when they are told to. When in the classroom, they may speak only when given permission. They must study what is established for them to study, learn what it is previously decided they must learn. In his book, *Experience and Education*, John Dewey (1938) discusses the implications of this type of environment:

In the first place, without [freedom] it is practically impossible for a teacher to gain knowledge of the individuals with whom he is concerned. Enforced quiet and acquiescence prevent pupils from disclosing their real natures. They enforce artificial uniformity. They put seeming before being. They place a premium upon preserving the outward appearance of attention, decorum, and obedience. And everyone who is acquainted with schools in which this system prevailed well knows that thoughts, imaginations, desires, and sly activities ran their own unchecked course behind this façade. They were disclosed to the teacher only when some untoward act led to their detection. One has only to contrast this highly artificial situation with normal human relations outside the schoolroom, say in a well-conducted home, to appreciate how fatal it is to the teacher's acquaintance with and understanding of the individuals who are, supposedly, being educated. Yet without this insight there is only an accidental chance that the material of study and the methods used in instruction will so come home to an individual that his development of mind and character is actually directed. (p. 21)

Without freedom the students cannot be who they are. It is not possible, therefore, for the teacher to know and understand his or her students. Without knowing the students, the teacher cannot know the best way to touch their minds. Without freedom, then, can there be effective education?

When asking the question: "Is freedom important in terms of education?" there is no absolute answer. Freedom, as I have argued, is important, but the extent and meaning of this

freedom would be tied to context. Analysis reveals that freedom is a relative term, and it seems irresponsible to make a blanket value judgment as to its importance. We cannot experience absolute freedom within the classroom, yet we do not want to submit to absolute authority. To find the balance we need to further analyze, observe and examine whether or not the amount of freedom that we incorporate into the educational process can have a direct effect on the sense of self and feelings of fulfillment, or freedom, that an individual experiences in his or her adult life. Perhaps the question should be rephrased as: "What is the appropriate balance between freedom, responsibility and authority"? We need to discover more appropriate formulations of these three ingredients in order to ensure that our children learn what it is important for them to learn, while at the same time allowing for individuality and freedom of choice.

I have argued, conceptually, that freedom is a very important part of the educational process, yet it seems to be under-represented within our school system. It seems as though, as a society, we fear freedom when it comes to education. How will we ensure that our children learn what is important if we allow them freedom of choice? How will we make sure that they are hearing the lesson if we allow them to move about freely rather than sit and listen? How will we discipline our children, if we are to allow them freedom? A large part of the problem seems to be that when we think of the word freedom, we think of it as an absolute entity. In his essay, *Compulsory Schooling and Freedom in Education*, Harold Entwistle (1993) discusses the problems that arise when trying to address the issue of freedom in education:

We become trapped in apparent contradictions and dichotomies because we can only think of *Freedom*, as an abstraction admitting of no degrees or distinctions in kind...it is necessary to free ourselves from the blanket use of the term, to particularize, and accept the obligation to examine the specific circumstances in which it is important to be free and where it is necessary to result to compulsion in schools. (as cited in Rieken and Court, p. 90)

Freedom is a means to a much larger end. Freedom and responsibility go hand in hand. Without freedom, one cannot experience responsibility. Without responsibility, there can be no self-regulation. Without self-regulation, there can be no autonomy. Without autonomy, there can be no diversity; and without diversity, we will have a world full of individuals who know a lot about a little, and a little about a lot. As a society, we need to stop seeing freedom in isolation, but realize that freedom is but a part of a lifelong learning process, culminating in a society of individuals who are creative, self-confident and tolerant, because their own individuality has been tolerated.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Useful Knowledge

Just as important as “how” we teach our children is “what” we teach our children. Whether or not the concepts of nature and freedom are accorded prominence within our contemporary education system will be a moot point if we are not offering subject matter that is valuable to the student. There is so much to learn and to teach in our ever-changing, ever-growing world that it seems an impossible task to ensure that our children learn all they need to know. But what is it that they need to know? It can be said that one never stops learning throughout one’s lifetime, the gathering of knowledge continues through adulthood. But is this knowledge valuable and useful to us, or can some of it be defined as mere trivia? What is useful knowledge?

The concept of knowledge

One of the ways that we can have knowledge of something is through our own experience. I know, for example, that if I touch the pot of boiling water on the stove I may be burned, as I have experienced this before. I can also have knowledge of something because someone in authority has told me it is so, as in a parent telling the child not to touch the pot on the stove because they may be burned. Another way that we can gain knowledge is through reason. I can see that the stove element is red; that there is steam coming from the pot; and that the water inside the pot is boiling. It is, then, through my own reasoning that I come to have the knowledge that if I touch the pot I may be burned. These are all examples of different ways through which we know about something. My knowledge that the stove is hot stems from a belief based upon a reliable source or truth (Steup, 2005)

Of course, in our everyday lives we often discuss other ways of knowing things. Often people are heard to say: “I just knew that was going to happen” or “I knew you were going to call me today.” But is this knowledge, or simply intuition? The knowledge perhaps stems from a belief, but is the belief based upon a reliable source or truth? I may have had a feeling that my friend was going to telephone, but I did not have a truth to base it upon. Similarly, one can claim to have knowledge of a certain event and be mistaken. For example, I may claim to know that Christopher Columbus discovered America in 1491. I know it because I read it somewhere and I believe it. But in this case my source was not reliable.

Knowledge, therefore, can be said to be a belief in something that is based upon a reliable source or coherent argument. All of these aspects must be in place in order for knowledge to exist. I can believe in something so fervently that I would stake my life on it, but if my belief is not based upon concrete evidence, then it is just that, a belief. What we teach our children in school, therefore, should be information that they can believe and that is based upon good evidence. But there is an infinite supply of knowledge that can be passed on. Where do we begin?

The concept of usefulness

The term “useful” is one that we use in myriad ways every day. There are some things that almost everyone would find useful. In Canada, for example, electricity might be considered useful in almost any home. Many Canadians would consider a vehicle a useful tool. But there are many things that might be useful to some and not to others. For example, I might use my blender all of the time because my family enjoys milkshakes, but my

neighbour's blender is collecting dust in her cupboard. A set of wrenches might be very useful to someone who is mechanically inclined, but not for someone who has no interest in such things. What an individual deems useful will depend upon his or her personal interests, as these will affect one's perception of the usefulness of the object or service. The initial meaning may be the same—something helpful—but there are differences in the ways in which we view the concept.

Imagine that you are cast in a reality show, such as *Survivor*, in which you and a partner will be stranded on a desert island. The two of you have a choice between two items to take with you: matches or a fishing spear. You think the matches would be the most useful, because you believe it will be difficult to start a fire. Your partner believes the fishing spear will be the most useful, because fire can be started without matches, and having a method of getting food is necessary. You both have your own perceptions of which tool will be most useful.

Not only does what is deemed useful change with each individual, it also changes at different points in an individual's life. What may not be useful at this time in one's life may become useful at some other point. Shoes may be of no use to the newborn baby, but they will become useful at a later time in his or her life. Knowledge of how to use a computer tax program may not be useful to a six year old, but it may become so when this six year old reaches adulthood. I may have no use for crayons, but my five year old child cannot seem to live without them. What an individual considers useful will change based upon context and personal goals of that individual. The concept useful, then, can be said to be something that

offers assistance or is of service to a particular individual in fulfilling his or her goals or pleasures.

What is Useful Knowledge?

Is all knowledge useful? Alfred North Whitehead (1929) once said, "Culture is activity of thought, and receptiveness to beauty and humane feeling. Scraps of information have nothing to do with it. A merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God's green earth" (p. 13). So, how do we ensure that our children are not "merely well informed," or worse? It seems as if we, as a society, believe that the more knowledge we have the better, useful or not. This is evident in the number of learning expectations that children are required to meet in a given year of school. Expectations that, even the teachers realize, cannot all be met in such a short time. "Just squeeze in as many as you can," is a common statement uttered to teachers in training. In order to accomplish this, young children are expected to sit for long periods of time, absorbing information. And, in order to create more time in which to transmit this information, in some cases children are beginning formal education earlier. In Ontario, for example, the Senior Kindergarten program has recently been increased from a three to a five day week. However, is all of this knowledge going to be of use to our children?

Analysis has shown that *knowledge* is a belief in something based upon a reliable source. It has also revealed that something that is *useful* is something that offers assistance to or is of service to a particular individual in fulfilling his or her goals or pleasures. *Useful knowledge*, then, can be said to be knowledge that is helpful to the individual at a certain point in his or her life. This is the type of knowledge that Rousseau (1762/2003), Neill,

(1960/1992), and Illich (1971/2002) feel is important to bring to our children—knowledge that is relevant to context and personal goals. There are some, however, who might argue that all knowledge is useful at some point or another. For example, Barrow (1978) states:

What is taught should of course be useful rather than useless. But in practical terms that bland vague statement needs to be interpreted with reference to a number of important variable factors. We have to consider the immediate and long-term use of something; things that it may be directly and indirectly used for; whether its specific usefulness in some respects is offset by disadvantages in other respects; and whether while having no immediate use itself it might not be a necessary condition of certain other useful things. (pp. 50-51)

Barrow believes that it is difficult to assess what may be useful or useless because of the many variables involved. The knowledge we teach may not appear to be useful, but may be useful indirectly. It may not be relevant at this moment in time, but may be necessary later. The question seems to be one of educational aims. If our aim is to create individuals who are fountains of knowledge then we should, of course, offer up as much knowledge as possible. But if our aim is to foster the growth of individuals who have a strong knowledge base that has taught them how to obtain the information they need, then we should offer our children useful knowledge, knowledge that is relevant to context and personal goals. The former results in individuals who have no curiosity, creativity or passion in their lives because they have had no time to cultivate it. The latter fosters individuals who have had time and freedom to learn about themselves, others and the world around them.

If something is not useful to us now, should we keep it anyway; storing it somewhere just in case it becomes useful later? If this were the case, many of us would have garages and storage sheds full of items that we are hanging on to because we might find a use for them some day, resulting in a mass confusion of gadgets and doodads. On the other hand, if

we are storing only one multi-purpose tool that can be built upon to do many different things, we have less confusion, less odds and ends to deal with. In terms of knowledge, then, should we offer up every bit of knowledge to our children that may be useful to them at some point in their lives and let them sort out through the odds and ends when the time comes? Or, should we offer what is useful, relevant, or pleasurable to children at this point in their lives, and provide them with the tools to go out and seek the knowledge that they may find useful later? Alfred North Whitehead (1929) stated: “Education is the acquisition of the art of the utilization of knowledge.” (p. 214).

Barrow (1978) cites Rousseau’s (1762/2003) example that children should study their own cities of residence rather than foreign cities. Rousseau believes that the study of one’s own surrounding would be more useful and relevant to the students. Barrow’s answer to this:

he is avoiding all the important and interesting questions about education . . . Of course, the study of our town seems more pertinent to the child, and has a more immediate and obvious use. But it is another question as to whether it is more useful that children should pursue such study than the study of Peking. (p. 51)

Can we ascertain which study is more useful? If one had to make a choice between the two as to usefulness, how would one decide? Again, it becomes a question of our educational aims? On one hand, a study of Beijing would give the children valuable information about a foreign country in case they ever visited or needed the information, and it might teach them how to use certain resources in order to pursue studies of other foreign cities they may be interested in. It might also create a context for better understanding of world events. It would not, however, teach them anything about their immediate surroundings. A study of

their own town would offer children relevant and useful information about their immediate surroundings and everyday lives. It would offer them the opportunity to put their ideas into practice, as they are “living” what they are studying. While studying their own city, they would be learning how to use resources such as the library that might assist them in finding out about other foreign cities, such as Beijing, in case they had an interest or an opportunity to visit there. It might also pique their curiosity about foreign sites. For example, they might wonder: “If this is what the climate is like here, what might it be like in other places”? Based on this information, can we answer the question: Which study is more useful? It depends on what we feel is important for our students to learn, and what we hope they will gain from the experience. It depends on whether we want them to simply possess copious amounts of knowledge, or to actually be able to put that knowledge to use.

If we are going to offer useful knowledge to our children, we must take a closer look at what we are expecting of our students within the current curriculum. It must be knowledge that is relevant to their context and offers them a good base upon which to build. In this way, they are not only obtaining the tools that they need in order to further their learning, but they will also have time for interaction, experimentation and self-discovery.

So, are we currently providing time for interaction, exploration and discovery? As an example, let us look at the Curriculum Guideline booklets created by the Ministry of Education and Training of Ontario (1997 a, b; 1998 a, b, c, d). For grades 1-8 there are 6 booklets—Language, The Arts (consisting of Music, Visual Art, and Drama), Science and Technology, Mathematics, Health and Physical Education, and Social Studies (Gr. 1-6) History and Geography (Gr. 7 and 8). French is added as a seventh subject beginning in

Grade 4. At first glance, this may seem a relatively small amount of information to be covered. But upon closer examination it becomes more complicated.

Each subject is divided into “strands,” or, subjects within subjects. Math and Science/Technology have 5 strands each; Language, Physical Education and Art have 3 strands each; and Social Studies has 2 strands. We now have 21 strands, or mini-subjects. Within each subject there are also specific expectations that each student is to have met by the end of the year. In Grade 1, for example, there are 84 expectations for Math, 44 for Social Studies, 28 for Physical Education, 37 for Language Arts, 92 for Science and Technology, and 44 for Art. This involves a total of 329 specific expectations within 21 strands of subject material that each child is to meet by the end of Grade 1. If a child spends approximately 1000 hours per year at school (Jackson, 1990) and we take away the time spent on recess and lunch hours (approximately 1.5 hours a day), we are left with 730 hours of teaching time. This leaves the teacher 2.2 hours per school year in which to ensure each of her students have a thorough understanding of each expectation.

At this point we could say: “Well, then, let us extend the school year to allow for more teaching time.” However, I have argued in Chapter 6, the contemporary school system as it is currently structured does not allow children enough freedom to explore. An extended school year, responding to the large number of expected outcomes, would only ensure that children are spending more time acting as receivers of information that is not necessarily meaningful to them. A preferable option would be to look at the knowledge we are imparting in terms of its usefulness to the children. For example, in the Data Management and Probability section of the Mathematics Guidelines (Ministry of Education and Training

of Ontario, 1997b), grade 1 students are expected to “record data on charts or grids given by the teacher using various recording methods,” and, “use mathematical language...in informal discussion to describe probability” (p. 62). We need to ascertain whether or not this knowledge is relevant to a six-year-old.

I argue that what is needed is a re-examination of the information we want our children to learn. What do we want them to learn and why? Those individuals who develop our curriculum need to re-evaluate what the basic and necessary skills are that provide a foundation for later learning. If we have a lower number of expectations within the area of mathematics, for example, the child will have more time to explore the basic concepts of addition and subtraction, and to explore numbers and their relevance to our lives. Currently, the large number of expectations lead to time constraints, making such exploratory, enjoyable activities virtually impossible. Yet if a child has been provided with the time to enjoy math as an activity, would it not make the concept of probability, for example, easier to grasp at a later time in their lives, when they might have use for it? The child who has no interest in sitting and learning fractions, for example, may realize their importance when they are made part of a baking activity. If a child can be shown the usefulness of something he or she once thought of as useless, they may be more apt to explore the usefulness of other subjects.

Too often the following statements have been overheard in the classroom: “I do not need to learn math, I am going to be a writer,” or “Why do we have to learn this, anyway”? Our students do not understand the relevance of the information they are expected to learn. Nash (1966) states that:

the traditional view of intellectual discipline as submission to the memorization of a mountain of data must be abandoned and replaced by a view that includes consideration of our knowledge of the learning process . . . what many of these traditional thinkers ignore is the concomitant demand that in the process of education the child must be brought to, and kept at, the level of interest and concern necessary to impel him to undertake the acquisition of knowledge. Before he can reach this level he must be shown, in most cases, that the knowledge, the facts, the material, are relevant to his life and important in terms of his own purposes.
(pp. 125-26)

In other words, a child must be presented with knowledge that is meaningful and relevant to him or herself in the present day—useful knowledge. This offers our children the opportunity to become interesting, involved, contributing citizens—not just useless bores. If we take the time to allow a child to experience how useful this knowledge is in everyday life, an interest is created, a thirst for more knowledge that might be useful, whether it is useful in terms of pleasure, interest, or the acquisition of wealth. If what a child is being taught means nothing to him or her, he or she will not have a desire to learn more. To know something meaningful creates a desire for more meaningful knowledge.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Concluding Thoughts

In Chapters One and Two of this thesis I discussed why I believe it is important that we re-evaluate the use of nature, freedom, and useful knowledge within our contemporary education system. Chapter Three outlined the literature, including both the theories of radical reformists and one of their notable critics, Robin Barrow. Chapter Four stressed the importance of the use of conceptual analysis as a research methodology. Finally, I have argued in Chapters Five, Six and Seven, that contemporary education is in dire need of a makeover. Evidence of this can be seen in the number of parents choosing alternative methods of education for their children (Wake, 2000). I have argued in Chapter Seven that, in many cases, education has become somewhat like channel surfing, and our children a form of couch potatoes. Their school days consist of sitting through continuous, brief, tidbits of information. By the time they get a chance to find out what the program is really about, somebody changes the channel.

Education is no longer about a love of learning, but of absorbing as much information as one possibly can, as quickly as one possibly can. In order to make more time for this absorption, school is starting earlier, preschool education becoming more popular, and the number of independent learning programs are on the rise. Often, as illustrated in John Holt's example in Chapter 6, children who cannot keep up the pace are labeled as learning disabled, having some sort of attention deficit disorder, or simply, "problem" children. John Dewey (1938), echoes Holt's sentiment when discussing children who do not conform to the traditional school system:

If he engaged in physical truancy, or in the mental truancy of mind-wandering and finally built up an emotional revulsion against the subject, he was held at fault. No question was raised as to whether the trouble might lie in the subject matter or in the way in which it was offered. (*Experience and Education*, p. 46)

It is time that we ask ourselves if this is really what we want for our children. Do we want them to simply conform to the world around them, or do we want them to live in and understand their world?

Before changes can be made, however, there needs to be a clear picture of what it is that needs to be changed. This thesis has involved an analysis of the concepts of nature, freedom and useful knowledge in education; concepts that are prevalent amongst radical theorists. Studying both the proponents of these concepts—Rousseau, Neill, and Illich—and their critics—in this case Robin Barrow—allows for opportunity to consider the arguments and counter-arguments in each case, and imagine how these arguments can be reconsidered, or reconceptualized, in order to be utilized within our current educational system.

Now is the time to take this analysis even further, and imagine what school can be. It is time to use analyses, as in this thesis, to re-imagine possibilities for better education of our children. Why do we insist, for example, on dividing our children's day into small segments of different subjects, when this is not necessary? Why not explore math concepts for a whole day, a whole week? I have observed kindergarten age children listening to the same story every day for 3 weeks, presented in different ways, yet never tiring of the story. I have witnessed them bringing that story into every aspect of their days; acting it out in the "dress

up” area, helping each other discover what the moral or lesson of the story might be, recognizing aspects of the story and connecting it to their every day lives.

These same children, though not exposed to books in the school setting before Grade 1, read at a level equal to or often above that of their peers in a traditional setting. The difference, however, is that children in the alternative setting are not placed under the same pressure to learn to read. They are not sent home in kindergarten with charts to record the number of books they have read, or flash cards of “sight” words that they “should know” by the end of the year. They have, instead, been given the freedom to explore, through the natural progression of their everyday lives, information that is relevant to their immediate context. Imagine the understanding that can be achieved when children are submersed in other subjects for longer periods of time without interruption. I have argued, throughout this thesis, how re-evaluation of the concepts of nature, freedom, and useful knowledge can re-invigorate planning for an education that offers children the freedom to explore and experiment with information that is relevant to them.

What does it mean to provide a more “natural” education for our children? This thesis has discussed several meanings of the concept of nature, such as something logical, appropriate, or that comes from within. Analysis has revealed, also, that the term has a common meaning in all contexts, namely, that which is not forced. Regardless of which meaning one chooses to utilize, our contemporary education system does not seem to meet these criteria, or ideas about “natural.” In a poignant critique of what is unnatural, Joe Sheridan (2002) says,

Education's mandated role to break the physicality of the human body is akin to breaking horses and here education's success is not outdoor movement but its capacity to prevail upon the body to sit still and examine the outside world through mediated experience that takes place indoors. Forcing bodies to sit still for eight hours a day conditions acceptance of that immobility and satisfaction with seeing the world without experiencing it. (p. 197)

There is nothing natural, logical or appropriate in taking a child of 3 or 4 away from the family and placing him or her in an institutionalized setting. There is nothing natural, logical or appropriate in expecting a young child to spend most of his or her day sitting in a desk and simply absorbing bits of information about a world they have not yet had time enough to experience for themselves.

Some might respond to these claims with the idea that, if what is natural changes with context, it might be completely natural to expect these things from a child in today's society. We are living in a world of technology and competitiveness, and this is an integral, relevant and natural part of our children's lives. Therefore it would be natural to expect them to learn how to live in this world. But, at the same time, whether or not one believes in theories of natural stages of learning or natural progression, it remains that children are not little adults. They do not think like adults, they do not reason like adults, they do not know what adults know. That is why we call them children, that is why we take care of and nurture them until they are mature enough to care for themselves.

Childhood is the time that we learn about ourselves, our likes and dislikes, our relationships with others. It is the time that we spend discovering our world and how we fit into it. It seems, though, that our society has become so focused on whether or not our children can compete in today's world that we have forgotten all about the importance of

childhood. In her recent article, *Labour's Plan to Educate Toddlers*, Lucy Ward (2005) quotes Margaret Morrissey of the National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations: "From the minute you are born and your parents go back to work, as the government has encouraged them to do, you are going to be ruled by the Department for Education. It is absolute madness" (p. 2). Education has become more about control than understanding. This is all well and good if our goal is to create well-informed individuals who can spew forth copious amounts of knowledge but have little idea how to interact with others or the world around them. When do we teach children about happiness; about self fulfillment; about creativity? When do we focus on who they are, not who they should become?

Education is a bridge to the future. To build a strong bridge, foundations must be firmly embedded in the soil on which they stand. Metaphorically speaking, this is what we need to provide for our children, a firm foundation. In order to build such a foundation, children must first "dig in" to their surrounding environment. Once the main structure is in place, they can build the most simple or most intricate bridge they choose to. At this point, though, we are giving them very complicated designs without giving them anything to build them upon. The tools they are given are not "useful" pieces, they have no connection with what is happening in their immediate context, and the children do not really have an understanding of how to use them.

What we need is a school system that focuses on the present, and provides guidance for the future. If we have a school that lets children focus on who they are, we will see children who feel less pressure to compete, to be the best. If we have a school that allows children time to explore relationships, we will see children who are more understanding and tolerant

of the differences in others. If we have a school that respects children, we will see children who have a respect for others. If we have a school that provides children with the freedom to explore information that is relevant to their lives, we will have children who *enjoy* their education, rather than children who feel *forced* into their education.

The question seems to be one of aims. Do we want our children to simply absorb information, to learn facts and figures, or do we want them to understand what it is that they are learning and how to make this information useful in multiple aspects of their lives? If the answer is the former, then we should continue on the way we are, but if it is the latter, then we need to return to a more natural environment in which they can immerse themselves in their learning. According to David Jardine (1990):

We are able to diligently pursue ways to teach the mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts curriculums without ever considering whether such diligence, such curriculums, and such teaching work consistently with the continued existence of an Earth on which such knowledge may be brought forth...Such a strangulated approach to education forgets that it is not accumulated curricular knowledge that we most deeply offer our children in educating them. It is not their epistemic excellence or their master of requisite skills or their grade-point average, but literally their ability to live, their ability to be on an Earth that will sustain their lives. (as cited in Flinders and Thornton, 1997, p. 217)

Life on Earth is not sustained by one being or entity alone, but through interaction and relationships between all organisms. Similarly, a school is not an institution that stands alone, but is part of a community of parents, educators, and students. In order to feel a part of this community, children need to be allowed to be who they naturally are, they need freedom to discover their place in this community, and they need meaningful, useful knowledge upon which to build a firm foundation for learning. School should be a place where we offer our children the opportunity to understand how to live and be on an Earth,

by teaching them how to interact and form relationships not with facts and figures, but with people and the planet.

I know an 18 month old child who is intelligent. Her parents have recited the alphabet and counted with her, have allowed her to play with only educational toys, and are extremely proud that their child is intellectually superior to her peers. But this same child seems to have little desire to interact with children her own age, or knowledge of how to amuse herself without the aid of electronics or adult guidance. She rarely speaks other than to recite the answers to the questions she is asked and seems to have difficulty expressing her emotions. If she desires an item that another child has, she bites them. If her mother is not paying her the attention that she feels she should have, she hits her mother until she gets the desired response. Now, we can surmise that this child will, most likely, excel in school. She may even perform above her grade level. But, how useful will this “head start” be to her in establishing relationships with her peers, or in the world outside of the school? Why is it important that she be, academically, ahead of her peers? Her entire being revolves around her intellectual prowess. Her time has been filled with the transmission of knowledge that she little understands. She has not been given the freedom to naturally explore her environment and develop relationships with those around her. She has been robbed of the most essential part of being a child, the opportunity to discover what it means to be a part of this world.

Although we may not be able to take Rousseau’s writings literally and apply them verbatim to our contemporary education system, we can re-evaluate the basic components of what he is proposing. For example, while we cannot create the environment that

Rousseau suggests for *Émile*, we can create a more natural and less institutional environment for our children. An environment that does not simply force knowledge upon children, but rather encourages children to seek knowledge. A more natural environment provides children with more time for discovery of self, and exploration of their environment. This, in turn, can develop a love of learning, because what is being learned makes sense and is connected to the learner's world. A more natural environment will assist in the development of knowledgeable individuals who are able to succeed academically, but also be successful in other areas of life.

We cannot achieve this more natural environment, however, unless we are willing to allow children more freedom within their educational setting. Children need to be given the freedom to explore, discover and experiment. When I first began teaching in an alternative setting, I was taken aback at the amount of freedom the children had. One of the golden rules I was taught was to ask myself: Is this child going to harm him/herself, other children, or anyone's personal property? Asking oneself these three questions can assist in the minimalization of external force, as one is not constantly imposing rules or direction that may be unnecessary. If the answer is no, then why not allow it? But, the freedom given also depended upon the responsibility shown by the children. If, for example, they wanted to use hammer and nails they were more than welcome to do so, if the tools were being used in the manner in which they were intended. If the hammers were used for anything other than what they were supposed to be used for, they were taken away.

If freedom is so important, why are there not Summerhill schools all over the world? There may be systematic issues that tend to reinforce the status quo. An example of this can

be seen in the 1960s development of an “open classrooms” concept, in which learners were given the opportunity to voice opinion about their own learning, to ask questions and create their own knowledge. The *Encyclopedia of Education Research* (Alkin, 1992) states that, at the time, researchers presented “evidence” that proved the method unsuccessful. This well publicized evidence turned the public off the open classrooms concept, and the method was never really accepted. It goes on, however, to state that:

Recent research has revealed that an influential study that trumpeted the failure of open education was retracted because of statistical flaws. Moreover, extended studies of open education led to the conclusion that open classrooms effectively enhance attitude, creativity, and self-concept without detracting from academic achievement, unless classes are radically extreme. (p. 276)

So, in the 1960s change was attempted and thwarted. Yet, there exists more recent research that discovered that, perhaps, the change may have been beneficial. This incident raises two important points. First, it shows our society’s willingness to accept, without question, the “expert” opinion of the status quo. Second, it underscores the entire purpose for this thesis, supporting my argument that, despite the valid opinions of its critics, radical education needs to be re-examined.

“But there is no time,” I hear many of you saying, “The style of educating you are proposing takes too much time.” But what are we taking time away from? This is where we need to ask questions about what we are teaching our children. It can be argued that there is so much focus on quantity, the amount of knowledge passed on, that we have forgotten about quality, and understanding what is being taught. It is time to look at the usefulness of the information we are passing on.

There are those, like Barrow, who might say that all knowledge is useful. But, is it useful if we never find a use for it? There may be, however, certain kinds of knowledge that are useful and necessary in order to survive in our society. If we pass on relevant information, children will learn how to find the knowledge they need when they have a use for it. We need to help them bake the cake; they can choose their own icing and decorations later.

Significance and Limitations

I believe that the significance of this study lies in the common belief that our education system may be lacking in many areas. The re-examination of the concepts of nature, freedom, and useful education can bring to light significant new information to assist us in creating a better educational experience for children. By also examining critiques of radical education, new ideas can emerge. There is strength in the power of ideas. As stated by Elliot Eisner (1990):

The debate could use more voices and deeper, more penetrating analyses of what schools should teach and the kinds of places schools should be. [We] desperately need serious discussion of the condition of our schools and of the content and form of school programs. If curriculum scholars, having once reclaimed their voices, could significantly deepen the dialogue by exploring the options, we would have made an extremely important contribution... (p. 526)

Although analysis of educational concepts is an ongoing and sometimes difficult task, it will lead us to ask more questions about educational aims and the merits of individual theories.

Paulo Friere (1970) once stated: "Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education" (as cited in Flinders and Thornton, 1997, p. 153). By promoting understanding of the different ways in which concepts can be

viewed, perhaps we can avoid the either/or type of thinking that sometimes predominates within the field of education, and set the stage for a new dialogue. The result can be new perspectives that address contemporary concerns in our education system.

Some might say that this thesis is limited because it includes no empirical evidence. The scope of the information that can be analyzed, therefore, is also limited. It would be impossible, however, to take into account the ideas of every educational theorist. I can only, in the space of this project, examine a few philosophies. It is intended, however, that this analysis will provide direction for further research, both empirical and conceptual.

Suggestions for Future Research

There are many options for further research. It would be beneficial to expand this study to include more theorists, both those who promote radical education and their critics. Important themes for analysis could include further work on the concepts of nature, freedom and useful knowledge. Although, for whatever reason, our schools have not embraced the radical education movement, it remains that radical theory has persisted for 200 years. The ideas might not have become mainstream, but they have not gone away, and there must be a reason for this. Why is Rousseau still so influential in education? Further analysis may be revealing.

This research provides a basis for numerous studies. We need to look more closely at alternative schools, especially those that have persisted for many years. While critics such as Barrow have taken issue with some of Neill's ideas, for example, are these objections adequate? Why has Summerhill school remained open for so many years? Neill must have been on to something. Although the amount of freedom the students at Summerhill are

given is extensive, are there benefits? We need more long-term studies about the effect this program has had on these students as they move through adulthood. We need more studies to examine which (if any) aspects of this program work and which (if any) do not. There are other examples too, such as Waldorf and Montessori schools, which have been established all over the world. What impact have they had?

Eighty thousand people in Canada alone are choosing alternatives to traditional schooling (Wake, 2000). What is it that makes these alternatives appealing? What are the commonalities among them? Radical educational theories may offer us valuable information as to what may be beneficial to our children. What we need to do is sift through this information and try to discover an appropriate combination of methods.

Finally, I believe there is great significance in studying those schools that have attempted to meld the alternative and the traditional. One of these is the Urban Waldorf School of Milwaukee (Easton, 1997). The school was established in 1991 through collaboration between the Milwaukee public school system and a group of Waldorf educators:

In 1994, after 3 years of the school's existence, a team of seven non-Waldorf affiliated educational researchers were asked to evaluate whether UWS "works." After immersion in the life of the school for a week, all agreed that despite the violence in the neighborhood that surrounds the school and many of its children, life inside the school is safe, well ordered, and relationally warm. There is little aggression, and misbehavior is consistently negotiated. UWS is a school where teachers teach and students learn. (Easton, p. 92)

We need more studies of schools such as these. What "alternative" ideas have they incorporated into the program? What are the benefits to the children? How do they fare in comparison to traditional schools? All of these questions emphasize the need for further empirical research studies.

By undertaking such studies, perhaps we can find working relationships between alternative and traditional methods of teaching. In our pluralistic society, it is a mistake to think that the same method will be appropriate for teaching all students. At the same time, our society is not static; therefore, our methods of teaching children should not remain static. It is essential that we reconsider practices, theories and aims within the field of education, in order to begin to reconceptualize educational paradigms and to create stronger dialogue about educational theories that benefit children—that is radical dialogue!

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