

One well-known psychology experiment set out to examine whether monkeys were simply driven by basic psychological needs such as hunger, thirst and sex in preference to psychological needs such as curiosity. The monkeys were contained in solitary confinement in a cell-like chamber. Periodically they were given the opportunity to view a variety of scenes through a peephole in the door. It was discovered, of course, that the monkeys given a choice between food and the opportunity for a 'peek' would often choose to 'peek'. What's more, similar findings were found in that much-maligned non-conformist, the rat.

It seems to me that the above little experiment illustrates many things (not least that some experimental psychology is simple-minded and contemptuous in its treatment and assumptions about animals). That apart, one conclusion that can be drawn is that curiosity, which can be regarded as a prerequisite and basic feature of learning and investigation, is shown in animals. An obvious enough conclusion. Even still more obvious is that we would therefore expect humans to demonstrate this even more acutely. But here, it seems to me, lies one of the tragedies of education today. Far from stimulating, cultivating and protecting this precious curiosity, we allow it to be constantly mangled in the cogs of the machinery of the education industries. Worse still, being blind to the perpetration of this crime, educators and politicians then ascribe the dull apathy of students to their personal qualities.

To take an example from my work as a psychologist teaching for the Open University, it is extremely common to note a contrast between the articulate and perceptive way students can apply their minds, not only to practical but abstract problems outside of their academic context. In the bar, on a train, at home, they may be articulate, yet when engaged in their academic work they often flounder and produce alienated pieces of work which merely traffic in academic ornaments and trinkets. Unfortunately the malaise runs deeper than the academic arena. In my research activity and explorations into therapy I have seen people, for example, in art therapy, frozen and unable at their first attempt to even put a line on a piece of paper. When encouraged to paint they usually say something like, "I was no good at art at school, I couldn't paint or draw anything." Unfortunately this is not mere modesty but the sad legacy of ten or more years of education. On the other hand, my own experience and many psychological studies confirm that young children feel little embarrassment about drawing, painting, singing, dancing and generally investigating and exploring their world.

How some of this damage occurs is obviously at the level of the relationship between teacher and pupil. I remember an elderly music and religion teacher saying to me when I was ten that my voice was like a frog's. Since at the time I was a bit too embarrassed and shamed (not to mention biased by the badpress frogs get in children's literature), I did not proceed to consider that perhaps her God nevertheless enjoyed their croaky voices raised in praise. I subsequently went musically mute for many years. She was not of course simply to blame, but merely a symptom of a much wider malaise. Some interesting studies by Rosenthal (1964) and his colleagues have shown that teaching situations frequently involve a process of self-fulfilling prophecies. In one study the performance of pupils was found to alter dramatically in line with the spurious intelligence quotient given to the teachers. Filming of the classroom interactions showed the teachers to be engaging in subtle, covert forms of encouragement of which they were totally unaware.

Nevertheless I remain an optimist, but unlike Voltaire's Dr Pangloss, I do not think that all these ills are for the best. The destruction of one person's spirit of curiosity and creative energy is unforgiveable. At the same time, though, it is this very spirit of curiosity itself which is food for optimism. Curiosity is reflexive, it leaves no stone unturned and eventually (sometimes at the prompting of a curious artist fascinated by worms, such as Robert Lenkiewicz), education itself is examined. So studies like Rosenthal's remove some of the dark oppressive fallacies about innate abilities which serve as excuses for the incompetence and class politics surrounding education. I am not optimistic enough though to hope that the diseases of education are easily to be cured: rather I believe only that the flame of curiosity and creativity is hard to extinguish.