

# It's OK to Experiment with the Education of Other People's Children

by [Nikos Akritas](#) (June 2022)



*The Children's Class*, Jean Geoffroy, 1889

**My first teaching post** was at a school in Pemblebury, north London, led by a head teacher with very progressive ideas about education. I realised something ominous was in the wind when, in an introductory training session, a visiting consultant spoke of how teaching was constantly evolving and referred to traditional and progressive teaching ideas. At the

end of the session, staff were asked to place themselves in a line across the hall where the training was taking place, in terms of where they thought their own personal perspective lay. I remember being the second to last person standing in line at the traditional end whilst the head was first in line at the other end...

The school itself was close to the border with Hedgefield and had, up until recent years, catered mainly for children from socio-economically deprived families. However, the area around the school had become increasingly gentrified over the previous couple of decades and by the time I got there it was an interesting mix of large numbers of children from middle class backgrounds with some from socio-economically deprived backgrounds.

I was placed in Year 5 (teaching nine to ten year olds) with, surprisingly, another Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT). It was a surprise to both of us that the leadership of the school had decided to put two inexperienced teachers together in a year group; as there were two classes per year group and so we had no experienced teacher on the Year 5 team. We were both anxious about this but tried to make the best of it. Unfortunately, by the time my colleague had completed two years at the school, her experience had put her off teaching in schools forever.

In the meantime, we muddled through. We were each assigned a mentor and I felt lucky to have Gloria, an assistant head teacher, who was experienced enough to provide good guidance but also open-minded and professional enough to have an intelligent discussion about issues we disagreed on. I had a lot of respect for Gloria. She gave good advice, displayed critical thinking and did not shy away from pointing out what needed improving in my practice. Having such a mentor right at the beginning of my teaching career was invaluable.

Gloria's position was interesting. She was a good friend of

the head teacher but didn't always agree with her progressive views, although, of course, she had to be seen to do so. Those progressive views included ideas that have gained increasing popularity in the UK and USA and are prevalent in international schools (especially those that offer the *International Baccalaureate's Primary Years Programme*); a couple of them being *learning through inquiry* and *self-direction* (part of the *child centred learning* approach). At the time (2006), these were new ideas the school wanted to pilot and didn't even yet have a name for. A working group of teachers was formed and was teamed up with visiting artists across a range of genres.

The group was eventually called *Creative Partnerships* and I was asked to be part of it. There was no direction, no remit and it seemed entirely experimental. The artists generated all sorts of ideas about how to introduce more creativity into classrooms and, although I would have considered these projects interesting outside of school, I couldn't help but worry what impact such experimentation would have on the pupils' education.

Projects which took children off course or on a tangential *learning journey*, as it was referred to, ate into school time which could not be clawed back. It was all very wishy-washy and fuzzy. There was talk of creating large art installations with children to excite their wonder and curiosity but all the while I was thinking: what about their maths knowledge, their reading and writing skills and all the subjects this impacted on – hours and hours of teaching and learning the children would miss out on – which would amount to days and even weeks of learning when one totalled up the hours of distraction.

I expressed concerns to this effect but the consensus from the artists and many of my colleagues was that it was all learning and rich experience for the children. I agreed with those assertions but still questioned whether we could afford to lose so much valuable time not teaching all the other things

we were supposed to cover in the National Curriculum. It was ultimately the children who would lose out on valuable knowledge which would place them at a disadvantage to their peers when it came to exams – the dreaded SATs!

I did not express this final point to the group. To do so would have been seen as not understanding education at all and in cahoots with the government and the likes of Chris Woodhead.[\[1\]](#) This was an example of teachers knowing better and gambling with the education of others' children. It is also a reason why *pupil voice* should be limited, as it is increasingly being used to justify pupil choice in such matters. How many children would choose to spend time on what most people understand as teaching and learning activities over such fun projects?

However, being an NQT, I was willing to be flexible, especially when faced with the assertions of my more experienced colleagues. But I knew in my gut this was detrimental not just to children's education but also their view of education. Not only was a lot of teaching time wasted on these superfluous, directionless, experimental ideas, we were also to allow children to choose their own topics for a whole term and pursue these. The idea goes as follows: allowing complete choice makes the learning *relevant* to children and therefore more engaging – something very much espoused by primary schools. This I was strongly against but was in a minority of one and so kept quiet; although I expressed my concerns to Gloria who shared them.

Children of this age do not yet have the research skills or breadth of knowledge to make sensible, informed decisions and go about conducting their *inquiries*. If children know nothing about a particular topic how can they possibly consider it as an area of inquiry? To quote Theodore Dalrymple, fully understanding the zeitgeist of progressive ideas in education and the insularity it fosters, "Education should not be relevant to a child's life but to teach him what is relevant

to him." [2]

Going against thinking such as Dalrymple's, leads to a self-centredness which undermines a child's ability to engage with the wider world. Interestingly, these progressive ideas in education were originally championed by the likes of John Dewey, who also held progressive ideas about how society needed changing. Here, possibly, is the root of the deep distrust of any form of expertise (relativism); disrespect for authority; and unhealthy cynicism towards any ideas contrary to progressive liberal ones, which children in the UK state sector are being indoctrinated with.

Surely teaching is about opening worlds up to children, as much as fostering their own interests. On topics they have a superficial acquaintance with, they will have poorly informed opinions and deepening their knowledge in those particular areas will help them develop better informed ones. It is why we have a national curriculum, to ensure children are acquainted with certain facts and ideas in literature, history, science, etc. Adults can argue over what a national curriculum should include but to not have one, or to have one and ignore it, leads to a dangerous *laissez-faire* situation, where it is pot luck what sort of education children receive.

In addition, children, especially young children, do not have the maturity to choose something other than what they find fun and think they will have further opportunity to enjoy. Most children, given the choice between learning and play will choose play. Given the opportunity to pursue their own topics and areas of learning only extends their thinking in the direction of choosing something where they can include more play activities. This, to my mind, is to fail children in our fiduciary duties.

It is our responsibility, as educators, to prepare children for life beyond the classroom and beyond childhood. Indulging them in their own personal (extremely limited) views of

educational pursuit, which they have no wider understanding of as children, is to fail in our duties and obligations. It also engenders a mind-set of the world evolving around each child; if they feel something is not relevant to them then it isn't relevant at all. This is surely neglect.

Just as worrying, whilst this *Creative Partnerships* experiment was taking place parents were not informed about what was happening. How many, I wondered, would be happy knowing what was going on in the classroom (which was effectively replacing the nationally prescribed areas of learning and knowledge they assumed were being taught)? The only parent of a child in my class who expressed concern was able to by virtue of the fact she worked at the school and so was privy to what was happening. She was not impressed and expressed concerns with the divergence from the National Curriculum and formal education she wanted her child to receive.

The following year, one other parent expressed concerns. She happened to be a teacher at another school and felt an activity I had given the children did not have enough direction. She did not approach me but expressed these views to a senior member of staff. I was only informed of them when the head teacher summoned me and demanded an explanation. By this time there was friction between myself and Lilith (the head teacher) and it seemed this issue was now being used for political purposes.

Lilith criticized the activity I had set but I pointed out that I agreed with the parent; that the whole exercise lacked structure because there was no guidance or structure regarding the *Creative Partnerships* scheme and as a fairly new, inexperienced, teacher I could not see how the vague ideas that were bandied about by scheme members could be aligned with National Curriculum outcomes. Lilith paused in her criticism, seeming to take on board the lack of structure of the scheme she had signed up to and championed might have its flaws. She suggested I speak to my mentor about how to take

things forward.

Over a decade on, and having gained experience of working in international schools which claim to deliver the *Primary Years Program* (PYP), I now understand Lilith garnered her ideas directly from the PYP rather than introduced something cutting edge, which some of my colleagues mistook her ideas for. Now I have a better understanding of the concepts underpinning the PYP, including *child-centred learning* and *ownership* of learning, or the other buzz word used (the world of education is notoriously susceptible to buzz words) *agency*, I am even more of the opinion these ideas are not only detrimental to most children but are the cause of much that is wrong in current educational practice and achievement, or lack thereof, and the pathologies present in school and college leavers.

The self-centredness such an approach to learning engenders not only hampers the widening of horizons but of empathy; critical thought; tolerance for differing opinion and free speech; and fosters a susceptibility to indoctrination – in this respect with progressive liberal views. Fine, if one subscribes to progressive liberal ideas (and doesn't care if they are followed unquestioningly, rather than subjected to rational scrutiny) but for those parents and teachers who do not and would prefer minds which were open to a range of opinions and ideas? Or recognize the limitations of, and necessity of being able to critically analyze, progressive liberal views?

In addition, it favours children who are already academically inclined and well supported at home. As a consequence, children whose parents have limited or no understanding of how the world of schools and education work are placed at a distinct disadvantage by such a system. This has been argued since the 1970s by British Sociologist Basil Bernstein, and the authors of a relatively recent article concluded, "It is clear that some pupils benefit more from this kind of approach [child centred learning] than others. Those who benefit the

least are the poorer children and boys.”[3] Children whose parents do not understand this, or don’t care, are completely reliant on the school system to provide a good education.

There isn’t enough research on the effectiveness of child-centred learning on education outcomes but one early research paper found, “...students of the open school [child centred approach] had significantly lower overall levels of academic achievement. These differences were especially noticeable in arithmetic computation, as well as in reading, and the other reading related achievement areas.”[4] Professor John Hattie’s research, over the last two decades, only seems to add statistical weight to these findings.[5] Katherine Birbalsingh’s *Michaela Community School* has made the conscious move away from these destructive liberal-left ideas, reintroducing the concept of discipline and responsibility in schools. Early indications are that it is working, with the school’s first GCSE results, “rank[ing] among the best in the country.”[6]

As Birbalsingh has been at pains to point out, our current system, “keeps poor children poor” and, much as I hate to admit it, I have to agree with Michael Gove’s assertion of a *progressive betrayal* of the poorest children in UK schools. Gove asserted these *enemies of promise*, “have been actively trying to prevent millions of our poorest children getting the education they need.”[7] However, I do not believe this is intentional. Child-centred learning proponents, with all the other ideas they bring with this approach, are genuinely convinced this is the way to go – the *holy grail* of education. Failing to recognise its insufficiencies suits some but fails many. I would reword Gove’s statement slightly. Liberals in our education system, pushing progressive ideologies *have prevented* millions of our poorest children getting the education they need for decades.

Those who disagree should consider how irresponsible it is of adults to put so much responsibility in the hands of young



children to direct their own learning. *Agency* is something that should be nurtured and *responsibility* devolved as a gradual process, much as parents do as their children get older, but too much at a very young age is harmful for educational, social and psychological development. Time and again, in my experience, it is parents, wanting the best for their children, who express concern with these progressive ideas about education. Educators should take stock of the patronizing attitude they know best because they are entrusted with children's education, especially those that gamble with the future of other people's children and not their own.

It seems many primary school leaders have a view of schools being some fantasy world of joyous experience for children, almost like an all-day play centre. Their ideas on education are very different from those of most parents. It is important children enjoy their time at school but this is not the same as making this the ultimate goal. The priority is education. How teachers and schools can deliver that without compromise by making learning experiences fun is significant, but we mustn't lose sight of the goal in the process.

In addition, children also need to learn as they get older that life and work are not all fun, joyous, entertaining experiences and that they must learn to persevere and deal with difficulties and boredom; that they will often have to do things they do not necessarily like or want to do. We do children a disservice by presenting schools and education as entertainment (or, as one job ad I saw put it, delivering the 'scientific principle of edutainment'), constantly interesting and exciting. How will they cope with life and work when it isn't? We create a fantasy world which ultimately dooms many children to extreme disappointment in the future, when life does not live up to the constant stimulation they have become accustomed to, and we set them up for failure when they cannot cope with life beyond the classroom.

*\*Names and place names have been changed by Mr Akritas, "in an*

*attempt to avoid having to deal with further asininites.”*

[1] Chris Woodhead was [Chief Inspector of Schools for England](#) from 1994 to 2000

[2] ‘Theodore Dalrymple: Britain’s Vanishing Culture & Character’ in interview with Peter Whittle, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgGs5pyS4Gg>

[3] Power S, Rhys M, Taylor C, Waldron S, ‘How child-centred education favours some learners more than others’ Review of Education DOI: 10.1002/rev3.3137 [http://orca.cf.ac.uk/114526/8/Power\\_et\\_al-2018-Review\\_of\\_Education.pdf](http://orca.cf.ac.uk/114526/8/Power_et_al-2018-Review_of_Education.pdf)

[4] Wright, Robert J. ‘The Affective and Cognitive Consequences of an Open Education Elementary School’ *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Autumn, 1975), pp. 449-465

[5] Hattie, John ‘Hattie Ranking: 252 Influences And Effect Sizes Related To Student Achievement’ <https://visible-learning.org/hattie-ranking-influences-effect-sizes-learning-achievement/>

[6] Weale, Sally ‘Controversial Michaela free school delights in GCSE success’ *The Guardian*, 22 August 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/aug/22/controversial-michaela-free-school-delights-in-gcse-success>

[7] Gove, Michael ‘[I refuse to surrender to the Marxist teachers hell-bent on destroying our schools: Education Secretary berates ‘the new enemies of promise’ for opposing his plans’](#) *Daily Mail*, 23 March 2013 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2298146/I-refuse-surrender-Marxist-teachers-hell-bent-destroying-schools-Education-Secretary-berates-new-enemies-promise-opposing-plans.html>

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**Nikos Akritas** has worked as a teacher in countries across the Middle East and Central Asia as well as in Britain. He has had articles published in *BBC History*, *History Today* and other small circulation magazines and newspapers. Born to Greek Cypriot immigrants to the UK, having Armenian relatives, appearing South Asian, having a Turkish partner and growing up in a very ethnically diverse area of London have conspired to provide him with experiences not only encountering prejudice but also of being able to recognize it in various claims, regardless of the colour, ethnicity, creed or gender of those espousing them.

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