

The Small School  
by  
Stonebury Learning

Wander. Wonder. Grow.

## Trust in childhood.

### Our Aims:

- To provide children with an environment which opens up opportunities to explore their interests, develop their self-awareness and learn about the world in ways that are meaningful and which trusts in their own inherent strengths and ambition to learn about their world.
- To develop creativity and innovation through an approach to development which encourages questioning, observation, participation and reflection.
- To shift the emphasis in education away from outcomes and towards processes.
- To support family connections and develop communication skills that allow children to feel confident in expressing their needs and in knowing that their needs will be met.
- To ensure that children's physical, emotional and spiritual health are developed through regular connection with the natural world and their local environment.
- To allow children to stay children - to allow time for play - to allow curiosity - to allow emotions to dictate choices - to allow talk - to allow boredom - to remove targets and timelines - to encourage creativity and independence - to bolster self-esteem - to treat childhood as a unique stage rather than a time of preparation for academic work.

## Rationale

British Education is a headline subject nearly every day. Testing regimes, pupil dissatisfaction, bullying, teacher drop-outs and falling standards are cited frequently in both mainstream and educational press. To add to this, declining numbers of pupils go on to complete University education, practical training and apprenticeships continue to be in decline, employers continue to lament the lack of creativity, team-work and problems solving in new recruits and the number of NEAT young people continues to grow. Boys' satisfaction with education, reading levels and behaviour in schools drops every year and teachers are pressured into administering a system of assessments and evaluations which take away from instruction time and damage children's self-esteem. We live in a fast-changing technological world which makes it almost impossible to predict what the jobs of the future will be, let alone how to prepare children to succeed in that world. And yet we continue to push children into an assessment system that focuses on the skills of the past.

This system isn't working.

The problem with anything that is broken is that it often requires starting again from the beginning to fix it. Education is expensive. Our education system is entrenched in our culture and it doesn't seem likely that schools will be able to start again from scratch. The Government continues to pile on the pressure confusing *more* work with *more meaningful* work and the plasters that are being applied to our young people's educations are creating larger wounds which simply cannot be healed with plasters.

Any adult who has spent time with children will be able to comment on the extraordinary powers of their minds. Children who have not yet gone to school have not yet learned that there is such a thing as a *right* answer - so they find their *own* answer. Children don't fret about things being broken because they can get bits of tape and string and make broken things into something even better. Children who are allowed to play free learn to laugh and get on with others, to be brave and to get hurt, to try and to fail. Any parent who has been reminded by their five-year-old that '*two weeks ago* you promised us ice cream next time we went to the shops' will wonder at the extraordinary expansiveness of their minds. A child's drawings show us monsters with three heads, flying bikes and swimming pools full of chocolate water - their imagination knows no restriction when they are allowed to think freely.

And then they go to school.

At school children learn that there are right answers. They learn that when it's time for Maths they must think about numbers even if they would rather be thinking about aliens. They learn to sit quietly and put their hands up even though they might not get to share their ideas. They learn that the things which grown-ups think are important must become the things that they think are important. They learn to be quiet and get on with it because it's a lot easier that way. And they learn that all they need to do to succeed is remember the answers that have already been thought of by somebody else before them.

We need a new generation of inspired thinkers.

## Methodology

We can think of ourselves not as teachers but as gardeners. A gardener does not grow flowers; he tries to give them what he thinks they need and they grow by themselves. ~ *Holt*

*Educationalists* have a bad name. These days, economic advancement is the key driver in determining educational theory, despite the generations of *educationalists* who have developed, shared, tested and studied the effects of different ideas on the development of children. Phrases like 'self-directed' 'holistic' and 'open-ended' have become synonymous with being 'wishy-washy' and having 'low standards'. 'Academic rigour' is demanded in order to improve 'economic productivity' without any real evidence to suggest how the acquisition of the knowledge of 38 different Latin verb conjugations is going to sell more tumble dryers. Education of the 'whole person' has become a one-hour a week PE lesson with its own set of outcomes and expectations. The idea of allowing children to explore their own learning potential has turned into letting the children choose the theme (circus? dinosaurs? Egypt?) under which the same core curriculum is delivered.

Generations of educationalists did not get it wrong. We need to really listen to what they have to say.

More than 200 years ago, Freidrich Frobel first developed the concept of the *Kindergarten* and outlined what he believed was a very specific stage of development in children - as well as the clear needs of children in having access to play and games. Frobel placed a strong emphasis on the importance of activity in children's learning as well as the importance of song, movement, gardening and self-directed play. Frobel developed a unique system of 'gifts' designed to assist children's free and natural development through an exploration of concrete materials. Ultimately Froebel was silenced by a government unwilling to accept this challenge to established pedagogy, but clearly his early ideas influenced the thinking of educationalists over 100 years later. Frobel knew that education was a natural process and that children develop their creative selves according to natural laws. He held to the view that all men are smaller parts of the whole universe and that the interconnectedness of man and the natural world must be the main consideration in developing the education of children.

Play is the highest level of child development... It gives joy, freedom, contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world... The plays of childhood are the germinal leaves of all later life. - *Frobel*

At the beginning of the 20th century, a quiet revolution in early childhood education was taking place in Italy. There, Maria Montessori impacted upon the lives of hundreds of children who would otherwise have been given up as hopeless. Through careful observation and engagement with children's natural preferences in the learning environment, Montessori developed a philosophy of education which centred on the creation of enabling environments and the engagement of children in meaningful and practical activities. Montessori observed that children could develop autonomy and self-directed learning when given access to educational resources which were provided with no expectations of engagement, no time scales for achievement and no restrictions on movement within the environment.

If an educational act is to be efficacious, it will be only that one which tends to help toward the complete unfolding of life. To be thus helpful it is necessary rigorously to avoid the arrest of spontaneous movements and the imposition of arbitrary tasks.

We discovered that education is not something which the teacher does, but that it is a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being. - *Montessori*

Meanwhile in Austria, Rudolf Steiner was developing an alternative view of education which saw education as an holistic task of developing the mind, soul and spirit of the child focussed entirely on the specific developmental needs of childhood. The ultimate aim of education, according to Steiner, was the development of complete freedom - freedom of thought and belief.

Our highest endeavor must be to develop free human beings who are able of themselves to impart purpose and direction to their lives. The need for imagination, a sense of truth, and a feeling of responsibility—these three forces are the very nerve of education. -*Steiner*

Later on in that century, but back in Italy, Loris Malaguzzi was developing the Reggio Emilia philosophy of education. Like Montessori, the Reggio Emilia approach puts children's self-directed learning at the heart of its philosophy. It is based on the beliefs that children *must* have control over the direction of their learning, that children *must* learn through the experiences of moving, observing and interacting with their environment, that children will learn best when allowed to work in consort with other children and that learning must be allowed to be expressed through various means relevant to time and place.

Creativity seems to emerge from multiple experiences, coupled with a well-supported development of personal resources, including a sense of freedom to venture beyond the known. -*Malaguzzi*

It is said that World War II did more damage to the development of alternative educational pedagogy than all other world events, and perhaps this is true. Following the unrest of the war years, industry and society were focussed solely on getting back on track. The post-war boom of industrialised manufacturing, the flooding of the workplace with women, the need for early childhood care and the general perception that 'if it ain't broke, it don't need fixin' meant that it was far easier to implement mass programmes of early childhood education based on the status quo rather than these new and radical voices from varying parts of the globe.

Fortunately, not all innovation was drowned out by the war, and several radical thinkers emerged from that time. Perhaps the most notorious of these was John Holt. Holt believed that much that was wrong with education was caused by fear - fear of not knowing the 'right' answer and fear of not being 'good enough'. Further, he believed that it was the established system of forcing children to learn things in which they had no interest, or at developmentally inappropriate times, that caused them to disengage with school. Holt is infamous amongst homeschoolers and unschoolers for his 'radical' approach to education which lays at the feet of all children the ultimate in trust. Trust that children will seek out what inspires them, trust that children will negotiate shared goals with other children and trust that children will easily and happily learn the skills and knowledge that they need to progress through every stage of their development, simply by being given the freedom to learn on their own terms.

Children do not need to be made to learn to be better, told what to do or shown how. If they are given access to enough of the world, they will see clearly enough what things are truly important to themselves... and they will make for themselves a better path into that world than anyone else could make for them. -*Holt*

Other radical thinkers also have made significant impacts on education in small pockets of society but never really grabbing hold of the common structures in education as dictated by government:

- John Dewey formulated an approach to education that had at its core the belief that democracy and community were essential factors in developing society.
- Jean Piaget, a psychologist who spent his later career studying childhood and education, determined that children's maturation is the single most fundamental factor in their learning.

He believed that children could not undertake particular tasks until they were physically and emotionally mature enough to do so. Unfortunately, this understanding has been used as justification for creating a 'schedule' of expected developments for children rather than a basis for understanding that what children need, more than anything else in their education, is a system that acknowledges that they will all develop maturity and interest in different areas at different rates, and that it is counterproductive to attempt to move children through these stages before they become ready.

- In the 1970s Postman and Weingartner developed the concept of inquiry education, in which children are encouraged to ask questions which are meaningful and relevant and to understand that these questions may not have answers. Further, teachers are encouraged to avoid giving answers, rather they ought to encourage further understanding through asking additional questions.

In the UK, the advent of the Conservative government's national curriculum in the late 80s had a major impact on these new movements and education generally. The right-wing emphasis on traditional subjects and the importance of English, Maths and Science, meant that cross-curricular concerns all but disappeared for a number of years. From 1997, under New Labour, the climate changed somewhat, and there again we saw a recognition of the importance of issues such as race, environment and citizenship - although this was watered down to an aside by the end of Labour's government. Today, the dominant ideology in education is still one of teachers as technicians in a market-led economy with SATs and league tables used to measure performance of pupils, teachers and schools, the very antithesis of radical ideas.

This system isn't working. The answers are there - we just need to use them.

## The Purpose of Education

Why is it that we send our children to schools? And what is it we hope for them to achieve? The answers to these questions are as many and varied as the children who walk through the doors of our schools. However, after many years in the classroom talking and working with children and many more years of helping parents who were trying to get the best for their children, the answer is probably much simpler than at first it seems.

Parents want their children to be happy.

Now, every parent will have a different view of what happiness is - and in this is where the differences lie. Some parents believe that personal fulfillment and developing their passions are the key components of children's happiness. Others believe that high performance in exams will lead to happiness. Still others believe that the promise of a good job, a high salary and the acquisition of material goods will bring happiness. Educationalists, philosophers, psychologists and pretty much everyone else on earth will have an opinion on the validity of each of these arguments. However, using the basic premise that parents want their children to be happy, education seems best directed at allowing individuals to develop their own understanding of themselves, thus enabling them to identify and achieve their own personal levels of satisfaction.

An education system that promotes rather than damages self-esteem, an environment that encourages health and emotional well-being, and a childhood full of exploration and inquisition are the foundations for developing personal satisfaction.

Education, as it traditionally stands, is a process wherein adults select various chunks of history, science and art and attempt to feed this information into children. We then check that they have retained this information and continue to push and chastise until they do. Who are we to decide what is relevant to a child's life? How can we know which information will save them and which will lead them to despair. Education cannot be about information - it must be focused, rather, on developing skills of inquiry, doubt, verification, expression - and above all else, wonder. We need to grow a whole new generation of thinkers, creative and inspired, who will become stewards of our world and of our various cultures and who will innovate and contribute to the development of a better world.

## The Stonebury Way

Children, when left to their own devices, will eventually find ways of amusing themselves. They have little need of toys or extraneous bits of 'educational' resources - a stick and a piece of rope can provide endless hours of creative and productive play. The child does not need to be guided to study the colours of the petals of a daisy - this is a natural line of inquisition that will inevitably lead to other lines of inquisition which will eventually lead to some pretty big questions. See-saws provide all the information a child needs to understand weights and balances, play is the natural exploration of the world and our interactions within it.

Trusting that children will come to inquire about and understand numbers as and when these are relevant will lead the child down the road of self-directed and motivated learning. Real world application of new found knowledge cements understanding and sets the child up for further questioning.

The teacher is not an instrument for imparting centuries of received wisdom down the proverbial throats of our nation's youths. Rather, the teacher is a facilitator, an enabler and an observer. By providing the necessary equipment at the right time (a piece of string, scissors, a questioning word) the teacher can enable the children to continue their play and exploration. By observing and feeding back to children as they play ("I see that you are lifting up the bucket with a hole in it.") the teacher is providing audio-feedback to children which allows them to reflect and continue to make choices in their own play. By modelling passion for learning, enthusiasm for the natural world and fascination with the interaction of things, the teacher is providing children with the inspiration to develop their own interests and fascinations.

The family cannot be distinct from the process of education. Too often parents complain that they don't know what is going on at school. Teachers struggle to communicate more than the most general feedback regarding the content of lessons, Head Teachers cannot handle the flood of questions and complaints levelled at them every day and children struggle to remember what has happened throughout their day because of the whirlwind of disconnect that occurs on a daily basis.

Parents should be welcome in schools all day, whenever they like, whenever their children like. This fallacy that children 'have to learn' how to be away from their parents must not be allowed to continue. Encouraging young children to be 'independent' of the most important people in their lives when they are not even out of nappies seems not only absurd, but entirely cruel. Why must we prepare children for a life without their parents? They will, of course, achieve a life without their parents when they are good and ready. Parents provide vital insight into a child's insecurities and can also inspire the best in their children. By involving parents in every aspect of a child's education, by welcoming parents to be a part of any school day, we are giving families the chance to participate in the learning journey of each of their child's lives.

Learning is experiential, intrinsic to existence and a natural process through which all animals on earth develop. We learn to crawl, to walk, to talk and to laugh without anyone sitting us down with a book or a chalkboard. We learn to negotiate human relationships, work together and resolve our differences through being a part of a group with a common goal - not through sitting in circles talking about what went wrong. We learn because we need to learn to survive - no one needs to force learning on children - the urge to learn, to grow and to prosper is tacit. The only real danger is that we quash the desire to learn by trying to teach. Trying to teach too much, too soon. Trying to teach the irrelevant. Trying to teach what we feel is right. Trying to teach children to do what they will naturally learn to do when they reach the stage in their lives that this knowledge is necessary.

Like learning, discipline is inherent in human development. Socialisation is a more complicated matter and one which requires a different approach. First, discipline. A young baby trying to



unscrew the top of a plastic bottle is demonstrating discipline: a keen focus, a need to continue to try, the understanding of what is trying to be achieved and a desire to achieve a goal. All humans have discipline in spades - it is the goal of our school to foster this sense of discipline by trusting that all children are disciplined and will regulate their own needs and goals accordingly.

Socialisation is a more complicated matter and is reflective of variations in society, social class and personal ambition. Just as in some societies it is appropriate to smack a child, use foul language or coddle a screaming baby, there are massive differences within specific geographic areas in terms of what is acceptable behaviour. We agree, using an unwritten and unspoken code, that certain behaviours are not acceptable - we have laws to lay down what is absolutely unacceptable, though this of course varies from one country to the next. Just as in government, the people are theoretically given the opportunity to change the belief systems and laws under which we live, schools should give children the same responsibility. Whilst we can become enmeshed in the intricacies of many different belief systems, the fundamental principle that guides our learning, our community and our interactions with the world is simple: do no harm.

We do not use a behaviourist system of reward and punishment. There are no gold stars for good behaviour, nor are there time outs for misdemeanors. There is no space for lecturing, for endless lists of rules (even if they are "Do" rules) and there is no reason to believe that these things would do any good. Time and again research has shown that the only effective way of developing passion for learning and exploration is through intrinsic motivation - that is, the motivation of the individual to think, act or believe in a certain way must come only from their own desires and not from some externally imposed belief system. We are in the business of fostering creativity, passion and enthusiasm - none of this needs rewarding.

"When you want to teach children to think, you begin by treating them seriously when they are little, giving them responsibilities, talking to them candidly, providing privacy and solitude for them, and making them readers and thinkers of significant thoughts from the beginning. That's *if* you want to teach them to think." ~ Bertrand Russell