



## YOU'VE BEEN SELLING US THE WRONG DREAM

Wendy Ellyatt, Daily Telegraph, 12/09/13

*"I think we should not educate children to be similar according to a standardized metric but help them to discover their own talents and teach them to be different from one another. Diversity is richness in humanity and a condition for innovation."*

*Pasi Sahlberg, Finnish Lessons*

We really need a national debate about the purpose of the education system and the meaning of success. Who is the system for? What is it serving? And in what ways do its values relate to the needs of the future?

The issue of what to do about education is increasingly becoming the subject of blogs, radio shows and dinner party conversations around the country. We all know that things aren't right, but there currently seems to be a growing wave of concern from exhausted practitioners and teachers working at the grassroots level that it's time that we actually did something.

The Finnish educator Pasi Sahlberg has just published a best-selling book about what he calls the 'GERM infection' (Global Education Reform Movement), with its key symptoms including: standardisation, a focus on core subjects, the search for low-risk ways to reach the required learning goals, the use of corporate management models and test-based accountability policies.

It seems that England has a particularly bad case of the infection – and it's spreading. Even our four-year olds are now at risk of being the subject of baseline assessments and, despite the fact that 90 per cent of countries in the world prioritise social and emotional learning and start formal schooling at 6 or 7, in England we seem grimly determined to cling on to the erroneous belief that starting sooner means better results later. There is nothing wrong with seeking high educational standards and accountability, but there is surely something very wrong indeed if this comes at the cost of natural development, creativity, diversity and child wellbeing.

The New Economics Foundation (NEF) has been doing a lot of research on what makes life worthwhile, and talks about personal and social wellbeing as the two crucial aspects of how people experience their lives.

According to NEF, wellbeing involves four key characteristics:

- a sense of individual energy/vitality (VITALITY)

- undertaking activities which are meaningful, engaging, and which help them to feel competent and autonomous (PERSONAL MEANING-MAKING)
- a stock of inner resources to help them cope when things go wrong and be resilient to changes beyond their immediate control (RESILIENCE)
- a sense of relatedness to other people, so that in addition to the personal, internally focused elements, there is an external appreciation of the needs and perspectives of others (RELATIONSHIP AND CONTRIBUTION)

All these aspects are going to be crucial if we want to have a society of healthy, compassionate adults who care about themselves, others and the wider world. In a recent Radio 4 'You and Yours' programme a seventeen year old who was talking about her own experience ended by simply saying 'You've been selling us the wrong dream' - and this seems to encapsulate the essence of the problem. We are selling young people the wrong dream and they are beginning to realise it.

From the time that they are five we have been making it clear to our children that the only things that really matter are external results and credentials, and in the process we've completely neglected the internal developmental life processes that are centrally about personal fulfillment and joy and that actually make life worth living. Creativity, spontaneity and 'flow' facilitate the kind of divergent, 'out-of-the-box' thinking that will be so essential to the world of the future, and yet these are so rarely achieved within the rigidity of the current system. How can teachers be expected to inspire when they are no longer inspired themselves? And how can children be expected to engage in deep learning when they spend so much time in fragmented environments that have no personal meaning for them? There are some great schools out there, but they are constantly having to battle the system.

Even our youngest children now quickly learn that what really gives them value in the eyes of the adults in their worlds is how well they know their numbers and letters. Yet we now know that children have multiple intelligences, and that in the early stages of life what matters most is that all these intelligences are engaged through experiences with the sensory world. That is how their bodies and their brains grow. Denying children access to rich sensory environments, and particularly the natural world, denies them the ability to make the connections and relationships that give life meaning, depth and the fascination to want to know more.

So we think it's time for some fresh thinking, and that what is needed is for policy-making in the UK to be grounded in the Science of Human Learning and Development. Such a multi-disciplinary, evidence-based approach would transcend political boundaries and would recognise the responsibility of all governments to put the developmental rights and wellbeing of the child at the centre of all public policy-making. It's already happening in other countries. For example in Finland and Sweden all civic action relating to children must take the best interests of the child into consideration, as per Article 3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in the USA Harvard University currently hosts the multi-disciplinary and multi-university National Scientific Council on the Development of the Child.

It's the biology, neurology and psychology of healthy developmental processes and values that we should be focused on, rather than targets and results. With a rapidly changing world and increasingly worrying statistics about child health and wellbeing in the UK we really can't afford not to.

**The Save Childhood Movement is launching its first campaign 'Too Much, Too Soon' to call for a stop to developmentally inappropriate policy-making in the early years - [www.toomuchtoosoon.org](http://www.toomuchtoosoon.org)**