

## Individuality and Play<sup>1</sup> in Education; Some Reflections (2) on *Education* by T. Percy Nunn

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### Abstract

Our argument in this article, which focuses on the educational theories of Sir Percy Nunn, is concerned with teaching methods, subject content and the curriculum, in order to develop children who are able to learn through their own motivation the key skills and the multiple intelligences they need for a healthy and successful life. We wish to consider the wellbeing and the balanced development of children in an environment where there is increasing pressure to be successful in academic tests. Finally we conclude that methods of teaching might be adopted which encourage individuals to assume responsibility for themselves at an early age, and that such methods might also facilitate interaction, promote discussion and collaboration, and enable students to practice these key skills, including communication skills.

### Introduction

Nothing good enters into the human world except in and through the free activities of individual men and women. (Nunn, p. 4)

Continuing from our previous article, *The Aims of Education and Individual Life; Some Reflections (1) on Education* by T. Percy Nunn,<sup>2</sup> in this article we shall, with a similar approach, focus on the method of education in which self-discipline, self-expression and self-assertion in freedom are the principles for realising the aims of education, in chapters four; *The Living Past*, six; *Routing and Ritual*, seven; *Play*, and eight; *The "Play Way" in Education*, in his book, *Education: Its data and first principles* (thereafter *Education*). We also reflect on individuality and play in education based on chapters four to eight in *Education*. The view-points we would like to specify in this article are how children can develop a balanced personality or character, and also learn more effectively through approaches to learning which include enjoyable play in their school.

Whilst Nunn is commenting on the British education system in his book, and on British schools and their methods, we believe it is very useful to consider what Nunn says about teaching methods and curriculum at a time when in Japan the government is reducing the time spent in schools on learning through integrated topics and subjects, and also reducing the time spent on the creative arts such as music, dance, drawing, painting, art and design. The government substantially is also, next year expecting schools to reduce the time available for developing thinking skills, intuition, insight, empathy and collaboration, in order to spend more time teaching to the national academic tests and thereby, they believe, gain ever higher marks. These changes will soon be taking place in schools in spite of previously affirming the significance of the integrated studies through topic learning in 2002, which is an approach to learning that is able to develop children totally, including all of their various intelligences.<sup>3</sup> In this article, therefore, through considering these issues of curriculum and teaching methods in

Japan we try to reflect on the key issue of how children learn best in daily life and in schools.

The responsibilities for the introduction and the conclusion belong with Yoko Yamasaki and in the other chapters with Gary Foskett mainly; the whole article, nevertheless, was developed through our working collaboratively.

### **The Living Past**

Nunn comments on the vital role of teachers in recognising the various developmental needs of children and young people, and on children's right to be able to participate in creative self-expression and self-assertion. 'The teacher who has the insight to detect the unsatisfied [drives] beneath the surface of a child or a youth's conscious life, and ... can draft them into worthy and satisfying modes of self-assertion, may often save for society a useful and vigorous individuality that would otherwise be lost.' (p. 54)

We should stress here that it's the failure to offer such educational experiences that in part causes so many of our young people to fall into unworthy and destructive modes of self-assertion. Nunn asks us to consider the secret of the success in reclaiming "young delinquents" whose uncompensated repression of natural impulses in childhood often leads to social outlawry in adult life. Again he says 'It is unquestionable that the records of psycho-analysis greatly strengthen the argument for making the autonomous development of the individual the central aim of education.' (our underlines, p. 55) He then says:

If it be asked why this truth has long been ignored and is still so rarely recognised, the answer is that, in ordinary cases, the sublimation of the rebellious or undesirable impulses of childhood takes place without difficulty under the normal conditions of home and school life. The child grows simply and easily into one of the stock patterns of humanity. On the other hand, every school has its problems in the form of boys and girls who "get across" [are in conflict with] their teachers or their fellows, and are obstinately unresponsive to instruction or in other ways out of touch with the influences of the school society. The short way of dealing with these divergents-the process called "licking them into shape" -has rarely more than a superficial success and often produces lasting harm; for it touches only the symptoms, not the causes of the trouble. The causes are, more often than we suppose, deep-seated impulses which have not found healthy modes of expression, and, their cruder manifestations being necessarily suppressed, sometimes prompt the child to rebellious outbursts incomprehensible even to himself, sometimes making him unteachable ... (p. 55)

The ... school, if properly administered, will ... open fields of interest for the intellectual and [creative] impulses that the conditions of industrial employment too often stifle and repress ... (ibid.)

The paucity of opportunities of this kind for the bulk of our young population has no doubt caused an immense loss of individual happiness and social wealth, and is largely responsible for the "failure of civilisation" ... (p. 56)

Throughout this section Nunn is emphasising the fact that within the majority of schools the pupils are repressed and have no opportunities for creative self-expression, or for the release of their fundamental drives and urges. Nunn is clearly concerned about what he calls the 'failure of civilisation' in countries like Britain-which we can take to mean the failure of our societies to promote civilised and human values, peaceful communities, non-violent attitudes and positive lifestyles. Clearly, then, Nunn wished to address these issues through a radical change in the ways in which education systems and schools operate. He makes it clear to us that he is concerned with the

development of not only a pupil's intellect but also the other intelligences – social, emotional and spiritual, which can only happen if school's become properly "pupil-centred" as opposed to "curriculum-centred".

### **Routine and Ritual**

In this chapter Nunn says that the activities of humanity may be broadly classified as either conservative or creative, which in a sense are both equally important expressions of human energy. He states:

These remarks have a clear educational application. A school fails to fulfil its purpose unless it is a place where the young are taught to accept and to maintain the best-tested traditions of thought and action handed down from the old time before them. Again it fails unless it serves as a 'jumping-off place' for a generation eager for new adventures in life. (p. 58)

Nunn points out that young children are "irrepressible questioners of our way of life" but also "great sticklers for law, order and propriety". He goes on to say that children enjoy, and also need, rhythm and repetition in order to develop mastery of skills and knowledge. He stresses the importance of establishing school routines so that all pupils know what is expected of them, and who can therefore behave according to the agreed codes of conduct. School discipline is not mere order – it is embedded in the whole ethos of the school. He also says there is a place for "repetition of the familiar" within "modern methods" of teaching – in particular to consolidate memorisation of number facts, dates, arithmetical and algebraic operations, etc., and 'Mastery of one's material is a prime condition of aesthetic "self-expression"; no solid progress in ... drawing and music is possible without the constant repetition of familiar processes, until one has them at the finger ends.' (p. 64)

He then also stresses the importance of ritual, eg dances, ceremonies and plays, and their power of arousing states of feeling or emotion that are "frequently of great social importance", then states:

We may ... give [ritual] a large place in the education of the young, using it as a means of intensifying and purifying social emotion. The main conditions of success are that the occasions may be worthy and the expression sincere. (p. 66)

In this chapter he is clearly trying to emphasise and to make clear his support for some aspects of 'traditional' education and schooling, and lets us know that he isn't condemning all schools and all teachers entirely. Obviously there is a place in the classroom for some formal and some rote learning. There is also a need for, 'traditional dances, ceremonies and plays which connect pupils with the traditional culture of their community.'

### **Play**

Nunn then considers in depth and detail the key issue of learning through creative play. At the start of this chapter Nunn considers what others have said about play being important as a means of children "letting off steam", and goes on to emphasise that whilst play is indeed important for relaxation and refreshment, it also has a far more important role in actual learning. 'In play ... the child gradually enters into possession of his own body, and raises his command over it to the highest possible power.' (p. 69) [i. e. Physical intelligence] Additionally, 'He finds and exercises in play his *intellectual* gifts and powers, and often discovers the interests that are to fill the central place in his adult life.' (ibid.) which mean I. Q. 'A boy finds and establishes his moral and social self largely in the [collaborative] games of adolescence – which is ... true of girls also.' (p. 69) which mean Spiritual, Social and Emotional intelligences. He then states:

Spontaneous activity, when not baffled or obstructed ... tends always towards ... more complete expressiveness ... Thus we are led to the idea that nature invented play not merely as a means of disposing harmlessly of the young animal's superfluous energy, but as a device for using that energy to prepare him for the serious business of life." (ibid.) "This view of the biological utility of play was suggested long ago by the philosopher Malebranche, but was first fully formulated and defended by Karl Groos. (ibid.)

The following observations are made by Nunn to emphasise what is lost and what is gained by the availability or absence of creative play opportunities:

The schoolboy welcomes the moment when he may escape from the oppressive labour of classroom or study to the playing field or the river. (pp. 75-6)

[It is frequently said that] ... play is activity pursued for its own sake as activity and without regard to any value in the product. It is thus contrasted with *work*, in which the activity is pursued for the sake of some further value beyond the activity itself. (p. 76)

And among adults we have musicians and actors, who accept the name 'players' but would resent the suggestion that their activities have no value and are unruled by standard as bitterly and justly as they would the implication that their 'playing' is not work. (ibid.)

Thus if I am a successful engineer, or an inspiring teacher, or a skilful surgeon, my 'work' may have all the felt qualities of play; while if I am a duffer at my profession its exercise may be an intolerable burden. (p. 78) The play-experience is ... inseparably connected with joy. (ibid.) Any task becomes play to the man who can do it with the ease of mastery which brings joy in the doing. (ibid.) The soul of art, like that of play, is the joyous exercise of spontaneity. (ibid.) The nobler joy of the painter, the sculptor, the poet, the musician comes from the triumphant expression of spiritual energy through 'significant forms'. (ibid.)

Nunn then describes the importance that William Morris and others have attached to craftsmanship. 'In their view beauty in craftsmanship is a play-phenomenon; for it is simply the maker's delight in a process he has learnt to carry out with the ease of mastery.' (p. 79) He considers the significance and importance of play, and its implications for schools and education. He says, 'No candid observer can doubt that school teaching would be immensely more efficient if teachers could learn to exploit the intellectual energy released so abundantly in play.' (p. 86) In this one sentence Nunn makes clear his view that:

- 1) Play involves the creative use of intellectual energy, and is far from 'mindless' or 'thoughtless' activity
- 2) Teaching and learning can be vastly improved if teachers are able to find ways of incorporating 'play' activities into what happens in the classroom.

Nunn points out that there are a great many creative people – writers, artists, explorers and adventurers among them-who have accused their school education of being useless and sometimes even hostile to their personal development. He says:

These men, whose intellectual force was great enough to bring their play-dreams to maturity, are only island-peaks standing out from a submerged continent of ability. (p. 86)

In other words-our outstanding individuals, whose achievements seem to tower above the rest of humanity like island peaks sticking out of an ocean, have frequently spoken out against the negative effect of a type of schooling that was dull and unimaginative and not in the least bit creative or stimulating. And yet they succeeded in spite of it. Most of humanity, who are unable to reach similar peaks of achievement through their own efforts, remain like submerged continents-which is a damning judgement on the failure of an education system that has failed to lift them out of a kind of 'sea of mediocrity'.

Nunn is quite clear that the school system, and its 'traditional' approaches to teaching and learning, bears much responsibility for the failure of so many individuals to develop their full potential, and what we would consider all their intelligences, as well as their capacity for creativity.

School instruction, narrow, unimaginative and over-formalised, was too often the direct cause of the submergence. It is not extravagant to say that if such losses are to be avoided then teaching methods must aim deliberately at feeding the impulse to intellectual play. (pp. 86-7) This does not mean that intellectual dissipation is to be encouraged or even tolerated, but that the child's impulses to "experiment with life" should be taken as our guide in teaching him. (p. 87)

We should take the child seriously, as he takes himself, as poet or dramatist, engineer, surveyor, chemist, astronomer, sailor, and should help him to explore as fully as he craves those concrete modes of self-assertion. (ibid.)

Nunn demonstrates that he belongs in the tradition of progressive thinkers which recognise that play must be given a key role in our schools. He also argues for a form of education that links learning to the real interests and concerns of young people, as well as their imaginations. This is in stark contrast to the usual forms of schooling which put so much emphasis on passive copy-writing, note taking and rote learning, and the didactic role of the teacher. Nunn clearly understood that we need to engage the imaginations of young people and pay attention to the importance of motivation if we expect high achievement. He clearly expresses a view that education should encourage and enable children to participate in the arts and crafts, and to become capable and skilful in such activities. He wished to emphasise the importance of aesthetic education, and the need to stimulate the positive flow of energy in young people, not to limit and constrain it, which was the usual case. He wants children to learn how to create music, to dance, to act, to build, to design, to make models, on so on. He also clearly wanted learning to be a joyful and creative experience for all children, and he clearly recognised that learning is more powerful and more rapid when there is an element of play in all activities, from mathematics and science to history and art.

Above all, he saw that all of the intelligences are developed when learning develops through 'play' and through joyful, expressive, collaborative, spontaneous activity. Nunn clearly saw the need for schools to develop multiple intelligences which can be described as emotional, social, spiritual, physical, intellectual and instinctual.

### **The "Play-Way" in Education.**

This is possibly the key chapter in this book – a chapter in which Nunn makes clear his support for the idea that the best teaching should be based on the methods of pioneers in progressive education such as Montessori and Homer Lane. In this chapter Nunn returns to his central point which is that the aims of education should be to produce children who are individualistic, creative, self-disciplined, free to direct and pursue their own learning, and highly motivated to actively pursue knowledge and the development of key skills.

Nunn again emphasises that children should do all this in a spirit of playfulness and enjoyment. Through the satisfaction of their own curiosity and their spontaneous creative impulses, children develop all of their intelligences – intellectual, social, emotional, spiritual, physical and instinctual.

‘In the understanding of play lies the key to most of the practical problems of education; for play ... shows the creative impulses in their clearest and most typical form.’ (p. 89) ‘Creative activities, such as art and craftsmanship, and ... geographical exploration and scientific discovery, ... have a peculiar affinity with play and are continuous with it in the development of individuality.’ (ibid.) ‘Whether child or man ... the eternal craving for free self-assertion ... must be fed or the soul [will] die.’ (ibid.)

Nunn then refers to a character in the book “John Bull’s Other Island” who dreamed of ‘a commonwealth in which work is play and play is life: three in one and one in three.’ (ibid.) In other words, Nunn himself shares a vision of a world in which wealth and wellbeing are “common” – shared by all – and where work, play and life itself are indistinguishable from one another. In such a world work is bound to be creative and enjoyable, and people do their work (and also learn) in a spirit that is playful, imaginative and inventive. Therefore life itself is enjoyable, creative, and fulfilling.

Nunn repeats his view that the development of individuality is the main aim of education: ‘It is no novelty in pedagogical thought – the theory of Rousseau and the practice of Froebel suffice to prove that – but it is at the present day affecting as never before the trend of educational progress.’ (ibid.) He then cites the work of Montessori in support of his views:

Among the movements inspired by it more or less directly, the one connected with the name of Dr. Maria Montessori has attracted ... world-wide attention. (ibid.) The cardinal feature of her teaching [is] her ... attempt to throw upon the child as completely as possible the responsibility for his own education, and to reduce external interference with his development to a minimum. (ibid.)

Dr. Montessori provides that her children shall learn how to live with others, to cooperate with them in work and play, to acquire social and personal graces. But the most characteristic part of her scheme consists in the devices [apparatus] by which they are led to teach themselves what infancy and childhood should learn: such as the skilled use of their powers of movement and sensory discrimination, and the elementary arts of reading, writing and number. (ibid.)

Left to themselves, under the supervision of the teacher ... to go their own way at their own time, to choose their own tasks and to be their own critics, the little students acquire ... a high degree of initiative, self-reliance and power of concentration; they learn self-respect at the same time as respect for others, and develop a habit of serious, purposeful industry rarely shown by children driven along the road of progress in accordance with the traditional method of class-instruction. (ibid.) The essence of [Dr. Montessori’s] practice may ... be described as the play principle erected into a universal method for the education of young children. (ibid.) The use of the ‘dramatic method’ in teaching history, geography, English literature, and foreign languages, is a still more obvious application of the play principle. (ibid.)

Nunn then goes on to consider the work of Homer Lane and his “Little Commonwealth”, which was a pioneering and experimental school for the education of ‘young delinquents’. Nunn, in citing this example, makes clear his support for Lane’s approach to involving pupils in the running of their school.

... we must now note another series of essays in revolutionary pedagogy, whose significance is rather in relation to school government and discipline. Here, the chief centre of inspiration ... has been Mr. Homer

Lane's 'Little Commonwealth' ... The original citizens ... were young delinquents, boys and girls of fourteen years and upwards ... (p. 92)

The prime feature of Mr Lane's policy was ... that the citizens were subject to no discipline or government which was not of their own making and administered entirely by themselves. They regulated their affairs with all the freedom and self-responsibility of a fully emancipated democracy (our underlines, p. 93). The argument that led up to this startling inversion of the usual methods of the 'reformatory school' is clear and simple. In Mr Lane's view, juvenile criminality is due not to a perverted nature but to the misdirection of strong impulses which, deprived of their normal outlet, are driven to seek satisfaction in irregular and anti-social conduct. (ibid.) If freedom and self-responsibility have power thus to regenerate characters warped by years of misdoing and mis-handling, why should they not prove equally potent for good in the education of *all* boys and girls? (our italics, pp. 93-4)

Self-government and some form of 'play-way' in teaching are necessary correlatives ... The larger the share of responsibility we throw on to the pupil the more necessary it is that education, as a way of spending one's time and energies, should be justified in his eyes. Tasks imposed on us by irresistible forces do not need this justification ... If they are expressions of our own free will, we shall take them seriously only if, like voluntary play, they seem intrinsically 'worthwhile'. (p. 95)

Connected with these new departures in education are two large questions ... The first is the question of school organisation; the second concerns the function of the teacher. (p. 95) It is ... [clear] that neither a rigid class-system nor a rigid timetable is wholly compatible with the principle that a *child should travel through the world of learning in his own way and at his own time*. (our italics, p.96) [The common assumption is that] it is the teacher's business to prescribe what shall be learnt and when and how it shall be learnt, the pupil's to respond as best he can. The 'Montessori school', on the other hand, accepts the full consequences of the principle that the individual pupil is the [proper] unit. Life being a social business and the school a miniature society, there must be certain regularities and certain corporate acts. Apart from these, however, there is no fixed timetable and there are no classes; the children go their own way and move freely ... (our underlines, ibid.)

Nunn recognises that the complete 'freedom' of the individual at the Nursery stage cannot be entirely maintained, and that groupwork and some whole class teaching are from time to time necessary and desirable:

In the case of older pupils this method ... must admit compromise. There are many times when the repetition of necessary instruction would be extremely wasteful, and many when corporate teaching has values of its own which nothing could replace. Moreover, provision must be made for cooperative activities, such as music, gardening, field-work, and hand-work, physical and dramatic exercises. For work of these kinds there must be fixed times, places and organisation. (p. 96)

As to the crucial role of the teacher, in such a libertarian learning environment:

The reader may have found it difficult to see what room is left for a teacher in a scheme of things in which child is to seek his own individuality and ensue it. (p. 97) They set the stage and furnish the properties for the play ... They have settled within certain limits what form the action shall take. Thus, though it is true that within a Montessori school a child may do as he pleases, yet what he may please to do is rigidly and

even narrowly limited ... There is always the abiding will of the teacher. (ibid.)

...in speaking of the teacher as an observer, Dr Montessori has in view not a merely passive onlooker, but an active observer-refraining from fussy interference, but ready to lend a hand when help is called for. She must keep a minute record of each child's progress, and, like a watchful but restrained mother, must look for the moment when a word will be truly [appropriate] or a suggestion judicious. (p. 98)

From [the teacher] the children learn in a thousand subtle ways the attitudes and tendencies that distinguish the humane from the brutal, the civilised from the barbaric habit of life. Insensibly but surely her values become their values, her standards their standards; and from her come the influences that direct the children's social impulses into definite forms of kindly action. (p.100) [The teacher] cannot help regulating the moral atmosphere of the school or class to a large extent by his influence on the pupils' study and reading. (ibid.) The power of moral ideas depends, in general, upon their being learnt from first-hand experience, and used as guides to one's own responsible actions. (p. 101)

Boys and girls can best learn the significance and value of the moral order by building it up for themselves ... (ibid.)

### **Conclusion**

In this middle section of his book Nunn describes in detail the reasons why he, and other progressive educators, insist that children should learn, as much as possible, through play and other sorts of meaningful and motivational activity. He again stresses the importance of developing the young person's ability to live, learn and work harmoniously, autonomously and creatively. Nunn clearly allies himself with such progressive thinkers and philosophers as William Morris, Montessori, Homer Lane and Rousseau.

In our (3DI) terms, Nunn is clearly making the case for a type of schooling that deliberately sets out to develop multiple intelligences-to develop in individual children, and in all children collectively, not only the intellect but also social and emotional intelligence, the use of the physical senses (physical intelligence), instinctual intelligence and spiritual intelligence. The development of creativity is also central.

Relating this back to our previous paper, we can see that Nunn recognises that such a multi-intelligence approach to education is essential if the key explicit aims of education are to be realised –

- To form character
- To prepare for complete living
- To produce a sound mind in a sound body

Nunn assumes, quite correctly in our opinion, that whilst academic and intellectual accomplishment and attainment are highly desirable, they are not the be-all and end-all of an educated person, they are not the sole aims of education, and that many other qualities, intelligences and characteristics are essential if individuals are to reach their full potential, and if society is to benefit from a fully-educated population.

Methods of teaching must be adopted that will allow and encourage individuals to assume responsibility for themselves at an early age. Such methods must also facilitate interaction, promote discussion and collaboration, and enable students to practice these key skills, including communication skills, if they are to become confident, willing, enthusiastic and capable lifelong learners for whom the aims listed above are a reality by the time they leave school and university, and not just an aspiration.



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- <sup>1</sup> In Britain many teachers, academics and educationalists were considerably influenced by Nunn's ideas. See, *Just Playing?* (Janet R. Moyles, Beales, First publish in 1989, Reprinted 1990, 1991 (twice) , 1992, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1999, 2001) & *The Excellence of Play*, Janet Moyles, Beales second edition 2005, 2007, 2008.
- <sup>2</sup> See Yoko Yamasaki and Gary Foskett, The Aims of Education and Individual Life; Some Reflections (1) on *Education* by T. Percy Nunn, Research Bulltein of Mukogawa Women's Univesity, 2009, pp. 1-8.
- <sup>3</sup> But Government was changed from Liberal Democratic Party of conservative party to Democratic Party by the election of Lower House in 30<sup>th</sup> August in 2009. <http://www.dpj.or.jp/english/index.html> (04/09/2009)
- <sup>4</sup> See Gary Foskett, Assessing the Strengths of Eveline Lowe Primary School, Naruto University of Education, in *Report of GRANT-IN-AID for Scientific Research (A (2) , No: 12308009) on Studies for Curriculum Development to Practices of Teachers in Integrated Studies*, Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, 2003, pp. 282-6.