# More Than a Brick in the Wall: On Traditional Schooling and Parenting Children **[1]**

Submitted by Wessel on Sunday, 20 October 2019 - 17:31



Read time: 15 minutes
“I'm glad I learned about parallelograms in high school math instead of how to do my taxes. It comes in so handy during parallelogram season.”

This is one of many variations of a clever jab at the education system and how it does not equip children with the necessary life skills needed after school. I have lamented this myself, thinking that it is unfair to expect a person (who has just been recognised as an adult) to live in a country with complex laws without preparing them to do so. For example, when we install software, then when we agree to a software EULA, we are engaging with a complex legal document—possibly across legal jurisdictions—which is beyond the comprehension of many ordinary people1. It seems like discontent towards the current schooling system is increasing. Yet I have been finding myself now increasingly defending the traditional schooling subjects. In this article, I want to explore and explain these thoughts, and how they relate to the Christian life.

## Disclaimers

I need to start with a couple of disclaimers. Firstly, I am going to be speaking about aspects of raising children while not having any children of my own. I am therefore speaking from an *a priori* and idealised perspective2. Parenting is tough, I acknowledge that, but what I am going to advocate later in this article should be possible for a parent in most reasonable circumstances (meaning, for example, not a situation where the parents are in debilitating circumstances).

Secondly, I acknowledge that not all schooling systems are equal. South Africa is notorious for poor schooling performance [2]. Coming from a family of teachers, and having a social circle of teachers, I have heard many teachers lament how the standards and curricula have become increasingly poor over the past few decades. Since I have left university, many of the top universities in the country have introduced admission exams to ensure that applicants meet their minimum requirements in addition to the (lower) requirements for earning a high school diploma. It is not merely a matter of *what* children are taught at school, but *how*. In this article I am only going to make a case for the “what”.

## The Origins of Schooling

The origins of our modern schooling system can be traced back to ancient Greece. It developed through the Middle Ages [3], passed through the Renaissance and Enlightenment, and into the current age. Surprisingly, the basic curriculum of mathematics, literature, history, etc. have remained largely the same. Others, such as basic biology and geography, have moved from higher

education level to schooling level. Of course, things have also been refined somewhat: in few schools would children be taught Homer today, but we are instead taught Shakespeare. We are also thankfully spared many of the errors in Aristotle which were taught unquestioned for hundreds of years, and instead learn about modern (scientific) physics and biology[3]. In contrast, Euclid's book Elements *[4]* was used as a mathematics text book for almost two thousand years, up until relatively recently (and still forms the basis of some modern mathematics text books). It ranks behind the Bible as one of the most influential and enduring books of all time.

In past times, it was important for a person to have a well-rounded education. It was not just a virtue, but a necessity to be exposed to a wide range of human knowledge. In fact, for a period of time, a person could only study theology (then known as the “Queen of the Sciences”) if one had first studied all the other “sciences [5]”. Of course, we are well beyond the time where a single person can learn all of humanity's “formal” knowledge. But it is still important to be exposed to a wide breadth of knowledge.

## Not the Knowledge which we Need, but what we Deserve

There are only so many hours in a day, and so many days in twelve years of formal schooling. While it would be wonderful to be able to learn more during one's schooling than a typical curriculum allows, for those of us who are not savants that would be difficult to muster.

Let us imagine a school curriculum which is completely practical and utilitarian. Instead of learning mathematics beyond basic arithmetic, children are taught how to do their taxes. Instead of Shakespeare, children learn a basic legal framework of the country. Instead of history, children are taught life skills and emotional intelligence. Instead of biology and physics, children are taught about sustainable living.

To many people, I may just have described a utopia. Certainly the world would look much more positive if young people had better emotional intelligence, did not feel anxious about how to do their taxes, and almost instinctively lived more sustainably.

But at what cost?

The intention of being exposed to a wide range of knowledge is to make a person more well rounded: to think more clearly and carefully, and to approach a problem from different angles and perspectives. It should make people acknowledge and appreciate the interdependence between different professions. But to master these “arts” take a long time. Mathematics, for example, requires much groundwork before its practicality (beyond arithmetic) becomes clear. I am grateful that the problems which we had to solve for homework and in tests—for which I could not see the practical use—became ingrained in me, because *when* the beauty of mathematics open up to me, and I needed those skills to be second nature at university, I had them. Otherwise, I may simply have abandoned my pursuit of mathematics. And if one sees the world “mathematically”, it opens up many new perspectives and possibilities.

I do not mean to say that everyone should become a mathematician or scientist. Not everyone is inclined towards or adept in STEM[4]. But in the same way I lament not having been more exposed to the modern “arts” (music, painting, etc.), I would hope that someone who is artistic would appreciate the world of science, history and literature.

Now, the argument can be made that a child could still pursue things such as mathematics or history in their own time. But that is not the point. For a child to choose to pursue something, they need to know about it, meaning that they needed to have been exposed to it before. The point is that children need to be exposed to the wealth of human knowledge, *through which* they become more well rounded, and *from which* they may choose to pursue more in depth study.

## Skills Come and Go, But Knowledge Remains

I am going to interject briefly to mention that skills come and go. There was a time in South Africa when schooling offered the opportunity to be more practical. Home economics taught valuable skills which could be used to start a small business or sustain a family. Woodwork, too, taught practical skills which could be used to earn an income. In the first school I attended, there even was agriculture, where children could learn to grow their own food, and prepare them for further studies in agriculture (soil science, etc.).

But the trades fell out of fashion: how could the dignity of children be degraded by teaching them skills which would prevent them from flourishing? The focus shifted to STEM: all children had the capacity to be turned into scientists and engineers, whose achievements would usher in a utopia.

Yet, now we have come full circle. Young people are anxious about the world. The reality is that not everybody can (or wants to) be a scientist or engineer. People are finding escape in working with their hands, and see it as vital to be able to grow one's own food to ease the pressure on the climate which results from commercial farming.

How long will it be before the scales tip yet again, when the next generation blames the millenials for their shortcomings and shortsightedness in how they conducted themselves, and how they prepared the future generations?

## A Skillful Balance

Even if I managed to convince anyone of the importance of teaching the traditional “arts” in school, what about the practical skills which so many people lack when leaving school?

My proposed solution is parenting. There needs to be a balance and symbiosis of formal education, and wholesome instruction which a child receives at home.

Parents are already living *in* the world. They have filed their taxes, and can easily show the process to their children. Parents have pass through many stages of life, grown in knowledge and experience, and refined many soft skills and basic life skills. They do not need to be perfect, just experienced. What is more, they know their own children, and for that reason alone can probably pass what they already know on to their children far more effectively than a school curriculum could.

When parents complain about the shortcomings of the schooling system, they are concerned that their children are not getting the education which they need to be successful. What roles do these parents take in the education their own children? Do they believe that they are absolved from that responsibility? That they can offload some of the responsibilities of parenthood unto the school?

Parenthood means being involved in the lives of children, teaching them and instructing them as best as the parents can. Not all parents are scientists or musicians and knowledgeable of history and are able to teach their children about these things. But if they have undergone workplace training about, say, cultural sensitivity, they can certainly pass those skills unto their children: both explicitly, and by modelling it.

It needs to be acknowledged that for some parents, this will be difficult. They may not have the knowledge or skills to teach and parent their children well. However, the solution here is not for the state to take over. The state can provide assistance to parents in capacitating them with the skills which they need to raise their children well, while ultimately leaving the responsibility of raising their children up to the parents. Communities, extended family and churches can also help in this respect.

In Christianity, the nuclear family is extremely important. It is “the soil from which a healthy society grows”. Part of this growth is passing on the faith and skills through which society will flourish. Christianity has had a profound (and, on balance, positive) impact on society, such as transforming the West from an honour/shame culture to a right/wrong culture. Such transformation is not effective because it is preached from pulpits, but because it is lived out by people and passed one from on generation to the next.

## When there are Educational Conflicts of Interest

There is a mutual distrust between secular authorities and devout Christians regarding the raising of children. Secular governments fear that Christians will indoctrinate their children into potentially dangerous or disruptive people (whether it is the atheist-communist government of China, or Barnevernet in Norway [6]). Christians, in turn, fear that secular schools will actively work to undermine the faith of their children, whether through “unbiblical science” or liberal sex education classes.

Here, too, a balance is necessary. Governments should allow parents to be the primary influencers of their children. Parents have a responsibility (whether one views that responsibility as given by God, or it coming from the natural order) to raise their children with a proper and balanced view of the world. Churches can help here as well5. If a child is taught how to evaluate whatever they come into contact with objectively and critically (including their own faith, for which I believe there are strong evidence [7]), then they won't be tossed to and fro by wayward teachings. They will be able to appreciate the beauty of science without being poisoned by the lies that science are in conflict with faith [5].

It is important to keep in mind that, as much as they would protest me saying this, secular governments and modern principles of government are not grounded on sound philosophical principles [8], but often are reactionary to social issues. This means that what governments perceive as good may be subjective and not as objective and wholesome as they claim.

## Conclusion

Children should be exposed to the richness of the world. Whether it is the joy of making and appreciating music, the rich imagination of fantasy stories and other kinds of great literature, or the wonder of science, they need to be *exposed* to all this richness. From there, they can choose how they themselves can contribute to the richness which is in the world, all while being more well-rounded and having some appreciation of richness of all which they did not pursue. In the meantime, parents have a responsibility to be actively involved in their children's lives, including their education. They need to teach their children the practical skills needed to navigate the modern while. And their faith needs to be nurtured in their homes and churches, so that their are not “tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:14).

- 1. In the short time in which I took business economics at high school, I got to see that they at least explain *some* legal aspects around running a business in that subject.
- 2. If God ever grants my wife and I children, it would certainly be interesting for myself to review this article again in a couple of decades' time.
- 3. One example is that, in his Physics *[9]*, Book VII, Aristotle says that a heavier object will fall faster towards the earth than a lighter object. In his famous experiment (among others) at the Tower of Pisa, Galileo (using a much more modern scientific method) demonstrated that objects (excluding factors such as air resistance), fall to the earth at the same acceleration. There were many other such errors in Aristotle's teaching which could have been prevented with rigorous empirical experimentation.
- 4. Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.
- 5. Churches should not only teach children sweet Bible stories and take them through formulaic confirmation classes. Children should be able to freely ask their questions and raise their doubts. They should be exposed to difficult objections to the faith, and how to address those objections. To quote William Lane Craig: “*[S]tudents I met with at Princeton were enrolled in a class taught by the New Testament critic Elaine Pagels which they nicknamed the “Faithbusters Class” because of its destructive effect on the faith of many Christian students. They had no way of knowing how far out of mainstream scholarship Prof. Pagels’ views on the Gnostic gospels are. It was a privilege to share with them grounds for the*

*credibility of the New Testament witness to Jesus. Their experience is not unusual. In high school and college Christian teenagers are intellectually assaulted with every manner of non-Christian worldview coupled with an overwhelming relativism. If parents are not intellectually engaged with their faith and do not have sound arguments for Christian theism and good answers to their children's questions, then we are in real danger of losing our youth. It's no longer enough to teach our children simply Bible stories; they need doctrine and apologetics. It's hard to understand how people today can risk parenthood without having studied apologetics. Unfortunately, our churches have also largely dropped the ball in this area. It's insufficient for youth groups and Sunday school classes to focus on entertainment and simpering devotional thoughts. We've got to train our kids for war. We dare not send them out to public high school and university armed with rubber swords and plastic armor. The time for playing games is past."*

## Categories:

- Worldview [10]
- Family & Relationships [11]

## Tags:

- schooling [12]
- school [13]
- education [14]
- parents [15]
- parenting [16]
- parent [17]
- william lane craig [18]
- responsibility [19]
- stem [20]
- science technology engineering mathematics [21]

**Source URL:** https://siyach.org/node/1215

**Links**
[1] https://siyach.org/node/1215
[2] https://businesstech.co.za/news/lifestyle/87310/south-africas-education-system-vs-the-world/
[3] https://siyach.org/node/1180
[4] https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/21076
[5] https://siyach.org/node/1144
[6] https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-36026458
[7] https://siyach.org/node/107
[8] https://siyach.org/node/1143
[9] https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/physics/
[10] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/660
[11] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/120
[12] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/703
[13] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/702
[14] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/410
[15] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/959
[16] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/960
[17] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/961
[18] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/103
[19] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/962

[20] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/963
[21] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/964