



## **Educational alternatives**

### **Introduction**

School is something that most people have an opinion about. As a teacher, I would love it if that opinion was typically enthusiastically positive. Unfortunately, many people view it as a “necessary evil” – some maybe not granting the “necessary” too readily. Currently and historically, much dissatisfaction has been expressed with regards to school and how it is “done.” The media has often reported on how public education is failing students. As Canadian Reformed people we may experience a measure of dissatisfaction with school as well. Dissatisfaction is not a bad thing, if it leads us to examine critically and Biblically the way we do things and then improve them.

In this article I introduce briefly some alternative approaches that have been and are being explored by people who are dissatisfied with “traditional” schooling. As you read the summaries of each type of schooling I urge you to be quite discerning in the most positive sense of the word. I will provide a summary of some main points but please look for the good, what can be learned, modified, and adopted as appropriate; also be on guard for what is at odds with God’s Word and teaching.

### **Some basic points**

A common view of school, as it is traditionally conducted, is that school is rigid, boring, irrelevant, and is something that teachers “do” to the students. In this view, the redeeming element of a school’s existence is often the opportunity for socializing that students get to do, or the need for a diploma/courses to get a job or admission to a post-secondary institution. If it were not for that, there would be no point to school, many people think.

In reaction, each alternative model of education tries to bring the students into the centre and the teacher out of the centre, in a way that critics perceive to be lacking in the traditional model of schooling. They also typically focus on the student creating meaning of life, rather than teachers trying to tell them what the meaning of life is. These reactions have resulted in some good changes, but also in some very “optimistic” and unrealistic thinking about the nature of mankind.

The list of alternatives that I will present is as follows: Waldorf, Montessori, free or democratic schools, and work/school experiences. There are many more alternatives, but these are representative of the most dramatic departure from traditional learning. Classical schools and home schooling can be quite easily fit into the context of this article and the reader’s familiarity with so-called traditional schooling.

In very general terms, all these schools share various similarities with traditional schooling. They are all communities of students (workers) and teachers (whether these are called advisors, directresses/directors, guides, facilitators, coaches etc.) gathered into one physical location, (although this is changing with electronic learning) with parents having a role in the school to varying degrees. Assessment and evaluation of student learning also occurs in most schools.

The differences can generally be described as abandoning the structured school environment of set class times, subjects, physical layout of the building, and the relationship between “teacher” and “student.” Rote learning by memorization, drill, assessment by typical tests, and fixed subject matter is what tends to be rejected. The impulse is to let the student dictate the process and direction, with a minimum (positive sense) of guidance. These changes all revolve around the differing views of human nature and the purpose of our existence as people. The humanistic view

of man and his purpose is certainly the driving force of many of the educational alternatives presently offered in the western world.

When people fail to reckon with the reality of man's depraved nature and man's God-centred purpose, educational reforms are doomed to failure in terms of the so-called big picture. Lest we get haughty, one caution to Reformed Christians is to not think so negatively of human nature that we create a school environment that effectively produces hard rocky soil instead of well-tilled and cared for soil. Another tendency might be to think so exclusively of school as preparation for work, that we lose sight of the rest of life – the seemingly less utilitarian areas like art, the environment, relationships, etc. Our history is glorious but not without its blemishes. Our present is no different.

Unfortunately, it is impossible for me to gain a working knowledge of each of the following alternatives, so I have to rely on the words of people who believe in these educational methods to present a picture of what they are like. As a result, the descriptions of a particular alternative will occasionally sound very positive. This is not necessarily an opinion that I share (or disagree with for that matter!). Please see the summary comments at the end for my opinion. Where applicable, I provide a link or reference to my source of information. The Internet has excellent resources on each of these alternatives. Seeing the method in action is better, of course, but time and money prevent most of us from having that opportunity.

## **Waldorf**

The Waldorf method of education is based on the theories of Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian philosopher. In the early twentieth century Steiner was asked to set up a school for the children of the employees of the Waldorf Astoria Company in Germany. He accepted and soon the school he established was drawing quite a bit of interest because of the non-traditional approach that it took towards education. This approach maintains a religious/mystical element often referred to as anthroposophy. Steiner had a bizarre cosmology and developed all sorts of ideas related to clairvoyance, reincarnation, Atlantis, and future life on planets such as Jupiter. Clearly, Waldorf schools are not for Reformed believers. However, we can learn some other things from them.

Waldorf schools state the goal of their schooling *“to produce individuals who are able, in and of themselves, to impart meaning to their lives.”* They aim to educate the whole child: *“head, heart, and hands.”* Their curriculum is as broad as time will allow, and balances academics subjects with artistic and practical (i.e. hands-on – the sense of touch is very important in determining what materials are used and which activities are undertaken) activities. Proponents of Steiner's methods believe that by freely using arts and activities in the service of teaching academics, an internal motivation to learn is developed in the students, doing away with the need for competitive testing and grading.

*Some distinctive features of Waldorf education include:*

- Academics are de-emphasized in the early years of schooling. There is no academic content in the Waldorf kindergarten experience (although there is a good deal of cultivation of pre-academic skills) and minimal academics in first grade. Reading is not taught until second or third grade, though the letters are introduced carefully in first and second.
- During the elementary school years (grades 1-8) the students have a class (or “main lesson”) teacher who stays with the same class for (ideally) the entire eight years of elementary school.
- Certain activities which are often considered “frills” at mainstream schools are central at Waldorf schools: art, music, gardening, and foreign languages (usually two in elementary grades), to name a few. In the younger grades, all subjects are introduced through artistic media, because the children respond better to this medium than to lecturing and rote learning. All children learn to play recorder and to knit.
- There are no normal textbooks in the first through fifth grades. All children have “main lesson books,” which are their own workbooks – which they fill in during the course of the year. They essentially produce their own textbooks, which record their experiences and what they have learned. Upper grades use textbooks to supplement their main lesson work.

- Learning in a Waldorf school is a non-competitive activity. There are no grades given at the elementary level; the teacher writes a detailed anecdotal evaluation of the child at the end of each school year.
- The use of electronic media, particularly television, by young children is strongly discouraged in Waldorf schools.<sup>1</sup>

## **Montessori**

This is probably the most well-known of the alternative approaches covered in this article. Maria Montessori came up with this approach in 1907. She summed up her approach to education with the words, *"I have studied the child. I have taken what the child has given me and expressed it, and that is what is called the Montessori method."* Montessori methods are praised by objectivists, people who place reason and man very highly, as in the Ayn Rand tradition.

According to Montessori, her approach is designed to help children with their task of "inner construction" as they grow from childhood to maturity. The flexibility of the Montessori approach provides an environment or framework within which *"each individual child's inner directives will freely guide the child toward wholesome growth."*

To achieve that, the Montessori classroom strives to provide a carefully prepared environment that encourages children to respond to their natural tendency to work. To this end, children are given opportunities to engage in *"spontaneous, purposeful activities with the guidance of a trained adult,"* and *"...at their own pace and rhythm, according to their individual capabilities."* It is believed that through their work, the children will develop concentration and joyful self-discipline.

Maria Montessori saw children as progressing from birth to adulthood through a series of *"developmental planes."* Montessori practice therefore changes and adjusts to meet the changing characteristics and interests of the children as they grow up. The goal is to *"...allow them (the children) to take responsibility for their own education, giving them the opportunity to become human beings able to function independently and hence interdependently."*

Montessori classrooms are designed to mix a range of ages (three to six, six to twelve, twelve to fifteen). This is done to allow for both individual and social development. *"Beyond the more obvious reasons why it is sensible to group the ages three by three, such as the little ones learn from the older children and the older ones learn by teaching the younger, every child can work at his own pace and rhythm, eliminating the bane of competition..."* These schools also try to achieve a balance between liberty and discipline, believing that children who have learned to work freely in a structured environment, will in turn *"joyfully assume responsibility for upholding this structure, contributing to the cohesion of their social unit."*

A final quote gives a good summary picture of how proponents of the Montessori method try to work by moving the student to the centre:

*"The role of a Montessori teacher is that of an observer whose ultimate goal is to intervene less and less as the child develops. The teacher creates an atmosphere of calm, order and joy in the classroom and is there to help and encourage the children in all their efforts, allowing them to develop self-confidence and inner discipline. With the younger students at each level, the teacher is more active, demonstrating the use of materials and presenting activities based on an assessment of the child's requirements. Knowing how to observe constructively, and when and how much to intervene, is one of the most important talents the Montessori teacher acquires during training..."<sup>2</sup>*

## **Free or democratic schools**

These schools are not as standardized as Waldorf and Montessori school, so I will be relying on a well-known free school (Sudbury School) as representative of this alternative. For readers familiar with John Taylor Gatto – a vocal and fairly well-known critic of public education in the USA – this seems to be the alternative he leans towards.

The hallmark of free or democratic schools is that the students are given the liberty to decide for themselves how to spend their days. Regardless of age, students determine not only what they will do, but also when, how, and where they will do it. This freedom is considered the students' inviolable right.

Supporters of free or democratic schools hold several basic beliefs: that all people are curious by nature; that the most efficient, long-lasting, and profound learning takes place when started and pursued by the learner; that all people are creative if they are allowed to develop their unique talents; that age-mixing among students promotes growth in all members of the group; and that freedom is essential to the development of personal responsibility.

What this means in free school practice, is that students initiate all their own activities and create their own environments. The physical building and grounds, the staff, and the equipment are there for the students to use as the need/desire arises. There are no planned programs or curricula since the students individually determine what they want to learn.

Free school advocates believe that all this will work only if the school setting is one in which students are treated as independent, trusted, and responsible people. As events arise, the students and staff are to function as a community in the framework of a participatory democracy. This means that "town-hall" type meetings are used to regulate the running of the school.

The core beliefs behind schools like the Sudbury School are that all people are born with an intense drive to understand and master their environment; that learning happens all the time, in whatever people do; that no one can decide for another what they should learn (or when, or how) or what constitutes a good use of their time; and that the only way a young person can learn to be responsible is by being given real responsibility from the youngest age.<sup>3</sup>

## **Coalition of Essential Schools**

The Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) partnership of more than 1000 schools has as their main goal the continued striving for improved student learning and achievement. They are essentially a reaction to the idea that many schools simply keep on doing whatever has been done before, instead of proactively seeking to improve. Ted Sizer is one of the main names associated with CES.

CES schools are characterized by certain emphases. They are to be rooted in the local community and responsive to the particular needs of the community they are in. To allow for a sense of community they are to be small (600 students maximum); they are to allow for mentoring and teacher/student time in small groups, often called advisories; and they are to be virtually autonomous from the school district they are in. Parents, students, and staff are all to have a say in what is done and how. To that end, democratic structures are set up to give a voice to parents and students. Student learning and promotion is to be based on mastery of the agreed-upon curriculum. This curriculum is to be student driven, and individualized to each student as much as possible. It should also follow the "less is more rule," which identifies a limited number of essential skills and areas of knowledge. It should provide opportunities for discovery learning and construction of meaning. The student as worker, and teacher as guide or coach, is to be the model for interaction. Learning is to be evaluated via exhibition-based portfolios or work to the community. CES schools are also to commit to sharing best practices with other CES schools to build a larger community, each helping the other. That would be a good lesson for us to learn as schools.<sup>4</sup>

Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor ([www.bigpicture.org](http://www.bigpicture.org)) have formed a school that uses many of the CES principles, but is built around students being active in the workplace for a part of each week and then setting the educational goals for each students, based on the skills needed to complete the necessary tasks required by workers in that job or workplace. That way the students learn what they need to know and are hopefully motivated to learn, since they can see an immediate application or need for the learning.

## **What can we learn from this?**

Each of the methods presented above share certain features or strengths that can be judged to have their root or at least a portion of it in biblical truths. Most of the truths I have in mind are connected to the basic and most positive biblical truth that begins in Genesis and continues to Revelation. That is, that man and woman are created in the image of God and consequently are of great importance and value. Psalm 8 is a clear expression of that truth. The people who espouse these alternate methods have rightly seen that you must accord every person great respect. However, since they do not seek their guidance from Scripture, they retain, at most, a kernel of the truth and obscure it with humanism. Nonetheless they can give us insight into and cause for reflection on how well we understand and live out that respect for people.

Another strength we can draw from their philosophies is the recognition that education must be meaningful for the learner. Education that is biblically rooted cannot be a succession of pointless facts requiring simple memorization. For schooling to be educative, students must find meaning in life. They must be given learning opportunities that awaken their desire to live Christianly, learning opportunities that show them the way to live Christianly, to find the meaning God intends for them. Creativity in this and other areas should be stimulated and developed.

A third biblical truth that these forms of schooling have identified and attempt to address is that the whole person and all persons must be considered and reached where they are. Schooling may not take one form and one form only. God has bestowed a range of gifts, learning styles, and learning abilities on his people and schooling must help to develop those various gifts in the measure they are granted. All students are expected to develop all their gifts. Having said that, I believe there are particular gifts that must be developed to as high a level as possible by all, such as reading/hearing and seeking to understand the Word of God, singing praises to his name, giving to the communion of saints in time and service, etc. As Reformed people we have tended to neglect certain “less utilitarian” gifts such as the artistic musical and design gifts, often citing our financial limitations or government requirements. We need to take a good look at those arguments and see if we are acting with integrity in this area. If the government mandated a course, would we then find the financial means to provide the course? Forcing all students into a particular mould is not consistent with Biblical teaching.

A fourth strength is that each of the alternative educational methods sees the importance of community. Most of the methods believe that large schools and certain structures like the typical high-school schedule prevent or at least significantly obstruct the building of meaningful communities. As inheritors of a method of schooling that is sometimes compared to factories and traced to Industrial Revolution type thinking, we need to evaluate how we do on this point. Are age-based grades and rigid schedules with distinct subjects the proper way to organize a school? Is grading student work an appropriate way to evaluate what God's covenant children have done?

The weaknesses of the various methods typically lie in the fact that they fail to acknowledge the antithesis. They take the kernel of the biblical truths that form their strengths, but because of their denial of God they inevitably distort the truth. They take mankind and make him the “be-all” and “end-all” to the exclusion of God. They deny truth where it will require submission by man. By not acknowledging God's absoluteness and sovereignty, nor man's depravity and need for the gospel message of redemption, they doom their efforts to failure. They believe that individuals construct meaning that can be different for each person. They seek happiness but fail to recognize that the only way to find it is, as Blaise Pascal is so often (mis)quoted as saying,

*“There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person, and it can never be filled by any created thing. It can only be filled by God, made known through Jesus Christ”*

(Sec. 148 of his *Pensees*. Pascal says essentially the same thing in a more complicated way).

It is at this point where the school based on Reformed principles has its strengths. Since we find our root in the Word of God, we tend to be better balanced. I do caution us, though, to look for our own weaknesses. We sometimes overreact to certain things. We may misunderstand the biblical teaching regarding man's depravity; we may use excuses of convenience to rule out certain

changes that might require sacrifice on our part. We often follow the practices we have inherited without subjecting them to careful examination. We adopt new practices without digging into the motives that drive them and unwittingly find ourselves in places we never intended to be. We impose a uniformity at times that is not biblically rooted. Too often we conform to the pattern of the world and consequently miss the mark as well. Our schools have moved past the survival mode of the early days and we are now at the point of settling into established grooves. Before we get more comfortable and entrenched, it would be time well spent if we took a long hard look at our practices to determine if indeed our schools are operating in the most appropriate manner. If the conclusion is that we are not, then let us have the commitment and wisdom to make the necessary adjustments.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information go to <http://www.fortnet.org/rsws/waldorf/faq.html>. Two Websites critiquing Waldorf are <http://www.waldorfcritics.org/> and <http://skepdic.com/steiner.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Visit <http://www.montessori-ami.org/ami.htm> for more information.

<sup>3</sup> A few websites might be of further interest: <http://www.sudval.org>; <http://www.sudbournetwork.org/model.htm>; and <http://www.albanyfreeschool.com/overview.shtml>.

<sup>4</sup> Additional insights are to be found at [http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces\\_docs/schools/benchmarks/benchmarks.html](http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/schools/benchmarks/benchmarks.html) or at [http://www.cesnorthwest.org/18\\_criteria.htm](http://www.cesnorthwest.org/18_criteria.htm).