

A SHEEP, A PIG AND THE MEANING OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS

Note

I have told this story in a number of places on this website but given the determination of so many governments to impose restrictive anti creative systems of learning and assessment I think it is worth singling out for circulation.

Some years ago, in a Liverpool Nursery School where the headteacher was very keen on Records of Achievement, a four-year-old child asked the headteacher if she could put one of the two pictures she had done that day into her portfolio. The answer was 'Yes, which one?'. Now the child had done one picture of a sheep and one picture of a pig. The picture of the pig was really very good: clearly a well-delineated and recognisable pig. The picture of the sheep, on the other hand, was not very good at all.

When she asked the child which picture she wanted to choose the head was surprised to be told "The sheep, of course".

Being an experienced teacher, and remembering that a purpose of Records of Achievement was that the child should own the decision about what went into the portfolio, the head refrained from intervening at this point. She did, however, ask the parent who came to collect the child why she thought her child had chosen the poor sheep rather than the much better pig.

The mother replied, "Well you see, she has been doing pigs for months. Our house is full of her pictures of pigs. That's her *first* sheep."

In other words, the achievement identified by the child as worthy of celebration was the taking of a first step towards new learning.

Having heard the headteacher tell this story it has stuck with me for a long time and I often wonder what happened to that four year old girl when she 'progressed' through a school system that required her to submit the equivalent of better and better pictures of pigs and hide her pictures of sheep.

Cliff Jones, with thanks to Rita McCogley, the headteacher from whom I pinched the story that I have used repeatedly. As far as I know no policy making politician has heard or read the story. Imagine how different our schools might be.

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