

TEACHING AND ASSESSING SKILLS: TIPS FOR PARENTS

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Parents should be aware of the importance of skills for our children, and the need to keep skills in mind when we set our learning intentions.

'There are seven masters in Leamy's National School and they all have leather straps, canes, blackthorn sticks.... They hit you if you don't know why God made the world, if you don't know the patron saint of Limerick, if you can't recite the Apostles' Creed, if you can't add nineteen to forty-seven, if you can't subtract nineteen from forty-seven, if you don't know the chief towns and products of the thirty-two counties of Ireland, if you can't find Bulgaria on the wall map of the world that's blotted with spit, snot and blobs of ink thrown by angry pupils expelled forever' (Frank McCourt, [1996] *Angela's Ashes*, p.80).

The above is a description of the situation in Ireland in the 1930s. In Malta the atmosphere must have been very similar indeed, and this on two accounts: (a) the application of corporal punishment and (b) the emphasis on rote teaching, very often paying little or no attention to understanding. That was probably one of the main reasons why a number of children must have hated going to school. Obviously, it was not an enjoyable experience.

Luckily, the situation nowadays is far different from that described above. Our National Minimum Curriculum (1999) emphasises educational objectives which have to be realised through teaching and training. Students are expected to acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes related to several areas of development (p. 47). So, for obvious reasons, knowledge is still very significant in the teaching and learning

process. The danger lies when we go too far and overload our children with trivialities and memory work.

With the help of her father, Christa is revising the events that happened in Sarajevo in 1914 and which led to the beginning of the First World War. The following are some of the questions put forward by Paul to his daughter Christa.

- Who was Prince Ferdinand?
- Where were he and his wife murdered?
- When were they murdered?
- By whom?

One immediately realises that these are what we call closed questions demanding specific answers and therefore not challenging enough. Either you know the answers or you don't, hardly any thinking is required. Such questions are directly or indirectly giving the message to Christa and her peers to learn by heart as many facts as possible to be able to reproduce them during tests and examinations. It is necessary for educators, including parents, to realise that these methods do not enhance good educational practices. We should give greater importance to open-ended questions which surely pose a greater challenge to our students. Christa would have to think hard to answer questions such as :

- Why were Prince Ferdinand and his wife murdered? or
- What were the consequences of such a murder?

Of course one cannot answer these questions without having sufficient knowledge of the subject. What I am trying to say here is: let's help our children to acquire a fair amount of knowledge. But let's not stop there. Let's make them think how to use that information. Hence the importance of discussion, initiated by demanding and motivating questions. This is the way that leads us to the teaching of skills. So the issues here are basically two: (a) which skills do we need to teach our children and (b) which are the best methods to teach such skills. The following case study will serve as an illustration.

Mary is very much aware of the need to teach skills to her son Benjamin. She manages to do it in a very enjoyable way, very often using simple pictures lifted from magazines. The following picture was lately used with very successful results.



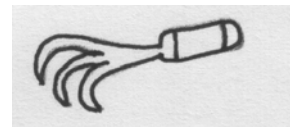
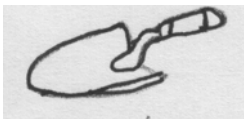
Mary told her son Benjamin: This is an interesting picture, isn't it? What can we see in the picture?...an umbrella ...two glasses with a straw in each glass ...sunglasses ... a chair ... and a wheelchair.

Mary then put the following questions to her son. What do we know about the people who will take their place at the table? And what time of the year do you think it is?

Obviously, an exercise / game such as the above makes children think and learn how to infer and come to conclusions.

Mary is not a teacher but through reading and observation she developed a knack how to challenge and sharpen her son's mind in a way that is relaxing and enjoyable.

Some time ago Mary and Benjamin were playing with pictures, sorting them into different categories. Mary picked up the following three pictures. She told her son



that these belong to a girl called Anna. Anna has a trowel, a watering can and a hand fork which she uses during her pastime. That was enough for Benjamin to conclude that Anna's pastime was gardening. Of course, his mother smiled and looked very

satisfied because she knew that by these positive signs of encouragement she would increase her son's confidence and self-esteem.

Parents and other educators need to reflect on what is happening regarding the teaching and the assessing of skills. Are we giving them the importance they deserve? How often do we have them in mind when we set our learning intentions? Are our children conscious of the skills they need to be trained in?

The teaching and learning of skills has to start at an early age. 'Ordering' was the skill that Mary had in mind when she presented the following three pictures to her son Benjamin.



The child was asked to put the pictures in sequence and to say in his own words what happened to the boy who jumped over the candle.

Our NMC (1999) is clear enough regarding the importance of skills. Among these we have to emphasise physical, numerical, technological and communicative skills. We have also to be very conscious of language skills. We want our students to be proficient in all aspects of language, that is, listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing. Furthermore, our NMC demands the implementation of a policy of bilingualism which involves acquiring a sufficient level of proficiency in Maltese and English. Paul looks back at the time when Christa was very young. How many happy hours they had spent together reading in Maltese and in English, playing home-made picture tombolas, writing letters to imaginary persons, and inventing stories and then acting out the different roles. And now that his daughter is older, Paul leaves no stone unturned to help Christa with her French and Italian.

Following a policy of bilingualism does not preclude the learning of other foreign languages. We should be in total agreement with the Council of Europe in the promotion of plurilingualism particularly in response to European linguistic and cultural diversity. So language skills is another area parents have to think about if they really wish to have a say in the education of their children.

Incidentally one cannot ignore the importance of the Arabic language. Malta is in an excellent position to be the link between the European Union and the North African countries. It is in our national interest to have a good number of students proficient in Arabic. Let's not take the risk of missing the boat. Parents should encourage their children to choose Arabic as one of the foreign languages.

There is no limit to what we can do with our children and we can therefore make a significant difference in all aspects of their development. If parents are aware of the skills that their children need to acquire, they would surely find themselves being more interesting company to their children. Indeed, many basic skills such as sorting, ordering, analysing, inferring, concluding, imagining, empathising, and a number of other skills or concepts, can be introduced to children through play.

I strongly believe that parents should play an active role in the education of their children. Daily encounters between parent and child can be transformed into enjoyable experiences which would prove to be of great educational value. Indeed parents have to reflect on what it means to spend quality time with their children.
