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BOOK REVIEW

Children's Minds, by Margaret Donaldson. Published by Fontana/
Collins: Glasgow, 1978.

Michael Christie

Most of us as teachers have been worried about Piaget's theory for a long time. Apart from the fact that we never quite got to the bottom of the theory itself as it was so complicated and extensive, we found that in the classroom it often did not work out as neatly as predicted. On one task a child would show amazing understanding and ability, and five minutes later draw a complete blank on something only slightly different. Most of us just put this down to human nature - to factors in the children which are pretty much beyond our control.

But a woman named Margaret Donaldson, who used to work with Piaget, has been looking into these factors, and has come up with a little book called *Children's Minds* which is easy to read and most interesting.

Basically, what she is saying is that remarkably young children *can* think logically and objectively under the right conditions. But these conditions are not Piaget's laboratory experiments. Donaldson points out that the things children fail to do in Piaget's experiments they are often doing successfully in their everyday life, because, she says, children are basically "warm-blooded" creatures. They put a lot of themselves into problem solving. They use their intuition, they rely more on what they see in a problem than what they are asked to do, they jump to conclusions and don't often stop to think. Why do they act like this? Not because they are incapable of operative thought, but because they have learned that in most of what they do, at home, with their mothers and playmates, these techniques work perfectly well. In fact, the only places where they don't work very well are the classroom, and Piaget's laboratory.

Donaldson is not so much saying that Piaget is wrong (although she is saying this too), but rather that he is barking up the wrong tree. Piaget is too worried about what a child can't do. Under the right circumstances there are many things which a young child can do very well. Donaldson gives lots of examples of fascinating but simple experiments which clearly show up flaws in Piaget's techniques and results.

For us, the solution is basically to make the school setting more warm-blooded. In Aboriginal education this principle is especially important - right through post-primary. One of our aims as teachers must eventually be to produce cold-blooded thinkers; but to characterize cold-bloodedness in terms of concrete and formal operations is unproductive. It means that we are sitting around waiting for something (operational thought) to develop. By closely watching the social and emotional environments of our teaching tasks we can begin to allow children to think at levels much higher than Piaget probably ever thought possible. This will also make school a much more natural learning situation - something which is badly needed in Aboriginal education.

Unfortunately for us, Donaldson does not go very far in working out the implications of her findings for curriculum. But I think she has put us back on the path, where with Piaget, we may have been beginning to wander.

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