

Where is the freedom in education?:

the critical importance of self-determination in education

Hannah Kunert¹

What is the purpose of education? In 2015, Nick Gibb, Minister of State for School Standards, gave a speech entitled exactly that, in which he outlined three core elements of the education system: ‘Education is the engine of our economy, it is the foundation of our culture, and it’s an essential preparation for adult life.’² At first glance, this statement seems unobjectionable. Both our culture and the economy will be directly impacted by the education system and it is critically important that young people are equipped with the practical skills that they will need as they get older. The idea of childhood as preparation for adulthood arguably also gives children the space to simply *be* children.

However, the language that Gibb has chosen reveals one of the core problems with our education system: to speak of ‘an engine’ implies that young people are simply fuel for the economy; to speak of a ‘foundation’ implies that young people are mere construction materials; and the suggestion that education is ‘preparation for adult life’ implies that life during childhood and adolescence is only valuable in relation to adulthood. In short, the concept of children *as people* is lost.

This attitude is entirely reflective of our current society in which it is the end product which is most highly prized. In the eyes of society, a successful education is one which prepares young people to be the best, the most highly-skilled and the most knowledgeable fodder for the economy that they can be. Competitive success is rewarded and individualism celebrated in order to prepare them for this role. The results of this mindset are revealed in the fact that the education system is currently not fulfilling these goals: the economy is failing; intolerance of difference is sickeningly rife; the perceived value of the arts is low; higher education qualifications are losing their value; and the UK’s mental health statistics are alarming, particularly with regards to people between the ages of 5 and 16.³

There is a strong argument that a new way of educating must be introduced; one that begins to shape society into something that is less competitive, profit-focused, and work-driven, while simultaneously

¹ This research essay was written as part of Jubilee Centre’s SAGE Graduate programme 2020-21

² Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP, ‘The Purpose of Education’. Transcript published 9 July 2015.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-purpose-of-education>.

³ The most recent studies pre-Covid found that 10.8% of 5-16 year olds had a probable mental health condition. ‘Child mental health in England before and during the Covid-19 lockdown’, *The Lancet*, 11 January 2021.

enhancing the wellbeing of our young people, fulfilling their inherent curiosity and creativity, and honouring their status as *people*.

An alternative approach

Biblical law offers us such an approach in that it provides a framework for a society which allows all life to flourish. The term 'Biblical law' refers both to the commandments and laws given by God to the Israelites in the Old Testament ('OT') and to the teachings in the New Testament which develop and fulfil them. Essentially, the law given in the Bible is a series of instructions on how to live in a way which is good and pleasing to God. In Deuteronomy 6, Moses tells the Israelites, 'Be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you.'⁴ The emphasis in this verse should not be on what may happen if the Israelites do *not* obey, but on the fact that obedience to the laws and decrees given by God to the Israelites would produce a society that was rich and beautiful, in which all of his people could live good and abundant lives, and that these laws were the fulfilment of a promise made by a relational God who had already shown deep, caring commitment to his people for millennia. Moreover, the Bible tells us that these laws would create a society which would be internationally recognised as being righteous and wise.⁵

The indication is that not only does Biblical law present us with a good way to live but with one that can speak to our nation *now*. Of course, there are fundamental differences between ancient Israel and twenty-first century Western society which make transposing laws verbatim from the OT and placing them in our context entirely impossible: industrialisation, secularisation, multiculturalism, globalisation, and capitalism are all differentiating factors. Meanwhile, other differences in priorities, values, and the existence of a schooling system make finding a Biblical vision for twenty-first century education a process riddled with complications. Nevertheless, the Biblical principles behind the laws in the Old and New Testaments carry great wisdom which can be used to work out life-giving priorities and values in education.

Relational living

One of the most significant principles, which threads its way through the entirety of the Bible, is the importance of relationships in society. In Matthew 22, Jesus tells us that at the core of all biblical law are the commandments to love God and to love your neighbour.⁶ As a result, one of the most prominent characteristics of biblical law and ancient Israelite society is what can be termed 'other person centredness'.⁷ The vast majority of the laws focused on maintaining good relationships between the people and all manner of other relationships are addressed through them. Consequently, concepts such as competition, individualism, and profit were actively discouraged, while the equal distribution of wealth, citizen responsibility, committed families, concern for wellbeing over profit, dignity, respect, and justice were promoted instead.

Arguably, one of the key reasons for this emphasis on relationships was that God created humans to live in relationship with each other. At the very beginning of humanity, he is emphatically clear on this when he says, 'It is not good for the man to be alone' and creates Eve.⁸ The laws are also relational because we are created in the image of a God who is part of the trinitarian relationship, and who

⁴ Deuteronomy 6 v 3, NIV. All Bible references will be to the NIV.

⁵ Deuteronomy 4 v 6.

⁶ Matthew 22 v 37-40.

⁷ Schluter, Michael, 'Relationism: Pursuing a Biblical Vision for Society', *Cambridge Papers*, 6 (1997).

⁸ Genesis 2 v 18.

created us with the intention of being in a relationship with us; we are to be his people, and he would be our God. For Christians, this intention ultimately resulted in the death of his only son on the cross in order to reconcile us to him after humanity had turned away. Looked at from this perspective, it is clear that an 'other-person centred' society is far closer to God's intention for humanity than an 'I-centred' society such as the one we live in today. In other words, from a Biblical perspective, the relational focus of ancient Israel could be the greatest, most life-giving alternative to our current societal practices that can be found.

However, wrestling our individualistic society into a wholly relational one pushes the boundaries of what is possible. In the area of education, seeking to persuade the government to place less emphasis on teaching for exams and more on teaching for the sake of the person is extremely difficult. However, if we are to be able to live in a way that allows us to flourish, society (according to the OT) must become more relational, and therefore education must also become more relational, since society cannot become relational without an education system that prioritises relationships and wellbeing. There are two main reasons for this; firstly, 21% of the population is under 18, so failing to address education and the wellbeing of young people would show a gross disregard for over a fifth of the population and would not fulfil the vision of a relational society,⁹ and, secondly, education begets society as well as vice versa. The priorities, values, and methods of the current teaching system are the products of the priorities and values of our society; however, our society continues to prioritise specific things because they are what are taught in schools, whether implicitly or explicitly.

One example of this is the consequences of our exam-based assessment system. In a recent BBC Radio 4 programme, 'Rethink Fairness: Education', Sammy Wright, Commissioner of the Social Mobility Commission, stated that the education system is 'fostering this idea that the process is only made valid by the outcome.'¹⁰ In other words, education is only valid because of the grades achieved at the end and an education process is only good if it fulfils the earlier aims expressed by Gibbs. This sentiment saturates society and can be seen in the obsession with profit, in consumerism, in the prevalence of debt, and in the widespread idea that if you do something for someone else, you must benefit yourself in some material way. All of these come at the expense of relationships. Exams are by no means the sole cause of this attitude, but there is no doubt that they help to reinforce behaviours from which an individualistic, competitive attitude stems.

Education in the OT

The extensive impact of education on society was very obviously recognised in ancient Israel. God was clear that the good life that he presented the Israelites with was conditional; 'all the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful toward those who keep the demands of his covenant.'¹¹ Moreover, these laws were an intrinsic part of the nation's identity as God's people and inextricably linked with its history. It should therefore not be surprising that education in ancient Israel was entirely concerned with knowledge of the law, with learning how to practically implement that knowledge, and subsequently passing this wisdom on to the next generation in order to ensure that God remained at the centre of society. Deuteronomy 32 summarises this concept when Moses says, "Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you - they are your life."¹² For ancient Israel,

⁹ According to the 2011 Census. <<https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/demographics/age-groups/latest>>

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000qx05>

¹¹ Psalm 25 v 10.

¹² Deuteronomy 32 v 47.

education did not mean gaining skills and qualifications, but learning how to live life as God intended. This was a critical part of Israelite society and the consequences of failing to educate according to God's will were severe.

Although our experience of society is vastly different to that of the Israelites, this is a core lesson that we would do well to note, since education is critical to determining the fundamental principles of a society. If we believe that a relational society is the best kind of society that can be created on this earth, we have to begin nurturing people from an early age in a way that will not only equip them with skills and knowledge, but will also enhance their wellbeing, show love towards them, and help them become people who are capable of building relationships well and can enter into them autonomously, confidently, and responsibly.

As yourself

How can this be done? How can we encourage our young people to become autonomous, relational and compassionate adults? It has to be noted that education is a vast subject which is a lifelong endeavour and takes place in all areas of life. As a result, it is impossible to explore it all and so this essay will concentrate purely on education in the context of schooling because, as Brian V. Hill, Emeritus Professor of Education at Murdoch University, has noted, 'it is a virtual truism in the present day that by 'education' we *mean* schooling.'¹³ It should also be acknowledged that there are a multitude of opinions on what biblically-influenced education should look like, two of the most prominent being home schooling and faith schools, both of which can be justified by OT law, but neither of which will be examined in depth in this essay.

Instead, the intention is to focus on the OT law's suggestion that the most viable way to build a relational society in a secular setting is to start with the commandment, 'love your neighbour as yourself.'¹⁴ As with the term, 'education', this commandment can be examined from a multitude of perspectives; but a focus on the word, 'yourself', makes a compelling alternative approach to education. There is a strong argument that this word carries as much weight as 'love' and 'neighbour' in this commandment, and the inclusion of it is surely not irrelevant. Therefore, it can be suggested that having a healthy sense of 'self' or 'self-worth' is vital to the fulfilment of the commandment and, consequently, that providing the opportunity for 'self-determination' is crucial in relational, biblically-inspired education.

There are two obvious arguments against this concept. The first is that the idea of focusing on 'yourself' seems difficult to reconcile with 'other person centredness'; the second is that the Bible tells us to be wary of the self-centred individualism that the term, 'self-determination', implies. However, the idea is nevertheless highly viable. Firstly, because the outcome of self-determination greatly increases the likelihood of good relationships being built, particularly when viewed from the perspective of the Relational Proximity Framework ('RPF'). Secondly, biblical support for the concept can be found in the idea of free will, the essence of a relationship with God and faith in Jesus, and the great value that the Bible places on personhood and self. Underpinning all of these justifications is the concept of valuing a child as a person.

¹³ Hill, Brian V., *That They May Learn: Towards a Christian View of Education*, (Exeter: Paternoster Press Ltd., 1990), p2.

¹⁴ Matthew 22 v 37-40.

The Self-Determination Theory

There are many different theories of self-determination, but one of the most interesting is the Self-Determination Theory ('SDT'), originally developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan and now recognised as one of the leading theories in its subject area. Describing itself as 'a theory of motivation, development, and wellness',¹⁵ with a specific concentration on the idea of 'sustainable motivation',¹⁶ SDT rests on the idea that a person has three basic psychological needs that must be satisfied: competence (the person must feel confident and effective in the task that they are doing); relatedness (the person must feel that they are cared for, that they belong, and that they are caring for others); and autonomy (the person must feel that their actions are self-directed).

Deci commented that autonomy specifically is 'something that must be satisfied for optimal wellness and performance', or 'there will be negative psychological consequences that will follow',¹⁷ including mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety, in addition to a generally decreased sense of wellbeing and a lack of confidence. Significantly, this is the 'essential need' which is arguably most lacking in schools, and so will be the need on which this essay will largely focus.

According to the SDT, the fulfilment of the basic need for autonomy is the difference between a person becoming autonomously motivated rather than feeling a sense of controlled motivation. In Edward Deci's words, when someone is autonomously motivated, they do something 'with real sense of interest, enjoyment, and value', rather than because they are 'feeling pressured, demanded, and obliged to be doing it', as is the case with controlled motivation.¹⁸ A person who is autonomously motivated feels an increased sense of wellbeing, takes more responsibility for what they do, believes that what they are doing is worthwhile and valuable, and frequently has a greater understanding of their subject area. In the context of schooling, controlled motivation equates to someone being disengaged, finding little to no enjoyment in what they are learning, displaying disruptive behaviour, and showing signs of poor mental health. In comparison, autonomous motivation would result in the pupil progressing faster, achieving higher grades, having more confidence, being happier, taking more responsibility for their learning, and having greater capacity to build good relationships.

The Relational Proximity Framework

The Relational Proximity Framework ('RPF'), developed by Michael Schluter and David Lee, gives us a more specific context in which to examine exactly how important self-determination is for the building of good relationships. Developed as a strategy to convert the relational language of the OT laws into secular terms, the RPF succinctly outlines five dimensions of a good interpersonal relationship:¹⁹ directness of communication, continuity of story, multiplexity of information, parity of power, and commonality of purpose. All of these require significant commitment to fulfil, particularly the first two dimensions (directness of communication and continuity of story) because they rely on a willingness to invest heavily in spending time with someone frequently and in multiple settings. This requires both people to decide that investing in the relationship is valuable and important, and that it is a worthwhile venture in itself, a hallmark of autonomous motivation. Additionally, the fulfilment of 'parity of power'

¹⁵ The Brainwaves Video Anthology, 'Edward Deci - Self-Determination Theory', 17 October 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6fm1gt5YAM&t=23s>>.

¹⁶ Stone, Dan N., Edward L. Deci, Richard M. Ryan, 'Beyond Talk: Creating Autonomous Motivation Through Self-Determination Theory', 24 November 2008.

¹⁷ The Brainwaves Video Anthology, 'Edward Deci - Self-Determination Theory', 17 October 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6fm1gt5YAM&t=23s>>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Schluter, Michael, 'Relationism: Pursuing a Biblical Vision for Society', *Cambridge Papers*, 6 (1997).

and 'commonality of purpose' both require a great sense of responsibility, again a sign of autonomous motivation. Each person in the relationship is responsible for working through differences - be they of power, intention, or aim - and each is held accountable for how they treat the other and the impact that this has on the relationship. Finally, multiplexity of information requires committing to learning more about the other person but also a recognition that the other person, whoever they may be, is worth knowing, not for what they can give to you, but because they are a person with a life of similar complexity to your own, with their own views, opinions, and things that they believe are valuable. Without a person feeling that they themselves are worthy and competent, it is highly unlikely that they will be able to adequately appreciate this in someone else and can build a truly understanding relationship.

According to Schluter, right relationships only occur 'when people fulfil the conditions imposed on them by relationships'.²⁰ This is impossible if the people involved do not enter into the relationship with a sense of autonomous motivation, spurred by the belief that they are competent, worthy, autonomous, and responsible. Rather, to enter into any relationship only with controlled motivation is, even according to supporters of controlled motivation, 'unsustainable and can create negative consequences [...] encouraging fraud, cheating, and deception.'²¹ Consequently, it can be said that the fulfilment of the basic need of autonomy in self-determination is critical to the positive development of a person and to their ability to build relationships with others.

Biblical justification

There is now, of course, the issue of whether there is any biblical justification for a strong emphasis on self-determination, whether in the classroom or elsewhere. The first point is that the Bible places great value on the concepts of self and personhood, meaning that the subject of self-determination is something that Christians should be concerned about. As God's people and God's creation, we are given inherent self-worth and are valued beyond measure. We are unique individuals whose 'inmost being' has been knitted together by God, who are known intimately and loved wholly and unreservedly by him. In the image of our Creator God, we are born with inherent curiosity, wonder, playfulness, creativity, and intelligence; we are 'God's handiwork'.

In itself, individuality should therefore not necessarily be criticised from a biblical standpoint; problems only arise when the celebration of individuality develops into a celebration of individualism. The attributes that are developed as a result of autonomous motivation suggest that self-determination is exceptionally important to maintaining the balance between mitigating slippage into an excessive admiration of individualism while still valuing and loving each other in a way that recognises and reflects God's love for us as individuals.

Free will

One of the greatest objections to the concept of self-determination lies in its emphasis on autonomy and the arrogant suggestion that 'we know best'. However, this objection shows a misunderstanding of what autonomy means in the context of self-determination. As has already been touched on, autonomy is not blinkered independence but having the opportunity to make one's own decisions and to enter into something, be that a relationship or a task, voluntarily and with a genuine belief that that

²⁰ Schluter, Michael, 'What Charter for Humanity?', *Cambridge Papers*, 15 (2006).

²¹ Stone, Dan N., Edward L. Deci, Richard M. Ryan, 'Beyond Talk: Creating Autonomous Motivation Through Self-Determination Theory', 24 November 2008.

thing is necessary, valuable, and worthwhile. This is an almost exact reflection of the biblical concept of free will and the nature of the Christian relationship with God.

Hebrews 11 tells us that 'without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.'²² The implication here is that a genuine relationship with God is not the result of controlled motivation; God does not force us into a relationship with him nor manipulate us to conform to him. Instead, he offers us the chance to come to him, to fully know him, and to genuinely love him. In Matthew 7, Jesus says, "'Knock and the door will be opened to you.'"²³ We are not pushed through the door but are asked to come to it because we choose to.

Likewise, multiple parables revolve around the concept of free choice. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the father agrees to give his son his inheritance and let him go rather than refusing his request and forcing him to stay. Similarly, in the parable of the wise and foolish builders,²⁴ Jesus indicates that, although everyone may hear his words, there will be some who choose to act on them and some who do not. Jesus used these parables to tell us that we have to choose to follow God and to enter into a relationship with him. Indeed, Hebrews 11 implies that God will only accept those who come to him through autonomous decision-making.

Although the concept of free will in the Old Testament was admittedly most often associated with the decision to turn away from God, biblical self-determination can also mean quite the opposite: the decision to turn away from a sinful life, to 'put off your old self, [...] to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.'²⁵ This requires great commitment and engagement, such as are examined in the SDT. Moreover, it requires great responsibility in that there are consequences to the decisions that we make; the lost son becomes destitute and the foolish builder's house is destroyed. Autonomy is therefore not bad in and of itself, but the Bible shows us repeatedly that the decisions that we make as autonomous beings do have consequences. Essentially, it could be said that, to quote Hill, self-determination can be seen as the development of 'God-given potential for self-ruled behaviour'.²⁶

Wisdom and knowledge

To bring this biblical examination of self-determination more firmly into the context of education, the third point to bear in mind is that the Bible clearly shows that there is a difference between law and wisdom, between knowledge and being a person in the most holistic sense of the word, thereby suggesting that an education system that focuses so intensely on knowledge and employable skills may not be adequate. Comparing Deuteronomy and Proverbs shows the contrast between law and wisdom; whereas Deuteronomy is essentially a complex list of 'dos and don'ts', Proverbs can be read as a compilation of a man's advice to his son, imparting what a life according to biblical law practically entails. Guy Brandon summarises the difference between law and wisdom thus, 'the law is moral *instruction*; wisdom is moral *character*'²⁷: law is knowledge; wisdom is knowledge *implemented*. Implicit in this is again the concept of autonomy and free will, of following God, not out of controlled

²² Hebrews 11 v 6.

²³ Matthew 7 v 7.

²⁴ Matthew 7 v 24.

²⁵ Ephesians 4 v 22-24.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p45.

²⁷ Brandon, Guy, 'Education in the Bible: A Starting Point for Discussion', 2013.

motivation or coercion, but out of love and genuine faith. It is not enough to just keep the laws; the Bible calls for them to be kept because of an understanding of who God is.

It could be said that, in Jesus' eyes, the primary downfall of the Pharisees was that they had become so consumed by their endeavours in adhering to the law that they had lost its wisdom, resulting in a sole focus on 'moral instruction' rather than on 'moral character'; and on 'mind' rather than on 'heart, mind, and soul'. In Luke 11, Jesus attacks this tendency, saying, "Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also?"²⁸ Accordingly, if we are striving to honour God, we have to be concerned with 'the inside', with inner morality, because God created the whole person. In the context of education, this implies that the process of developing character and a sense of self through self-determination ('wisdom') is as key to a person's education as gaining knowledge and practical skills ('law'). While knowledge is vital, without wisdom it is simply not enough.

In practice

In order to implement a biblically-inspired pedagogical approach with a specific emphasis on self-determination, autonomy, wisdom, and relationships, society's perspective of who children are must change. There is currently a perpetuated idea that children are somehow not people of equal worth to adults because they have less factual knowledge and life experience, and because they experience the world in different ways. As a result, our current education system seems to both over- and underestimate children. On the one hand, we do not believe that they are capable of self-determination and so do not give them autonomy in their learning while, on the other hand, they are burdened with a work-load and high-pressured exams which would intimidate the majority of adults.²⁹ Not only does this have negative effects on mental health and overall wellbeing, but it means that we are disregarding their uniqueness as people by measuring them with an 'immoral' 'arbitrary yardstick'.³⁰ Rowan Williams has gone so far as to state that it is 'shabby and scandalous that anyone should think we can deal with educational discernment by means of statistical calculations'.³¹

The results produced by the exam algorithm in the summer of 2020 proved as much. There is a strong argument that assessment by exams alone is an unsustainable practice and disregards the fact that children are unique, creative and intelligent. If we are to create an education system that is relational, we have to recognise that schools are responsible for the holistic education of children as people.

Play

Another key element to relational, self-determined learning is play. The current education system is antithetical to children thriving through increased autonomy and the greater opportunity for relatedness as they learn. For decades, experts have been attempting to highlight the importance of play in the development of children. By 'play', they do not mean play according to rules imposed by adults but 'play in the broadest sense - the freedom to go wherever curiosity leads, to search and to discover, to experiment and to create.' It is arguably through play that primary school-age children have the greatest opportunity for self-determination because, through it, they are given autonomy, the opportunity to interact with others, and the freedom to learn in a way that they understand at

²⁸ Luke 11 v 39-40.

²⁹ This is eerily reminiscent of Jesus' comment to the Pharisees, 'You experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.' - Luke 11 v 46.

³⁰ Schaeffer Macaulay, Susan, *For the Children's Sake*, (Illinois: Crossway Books, 2009), p36.

³¹ Williams, Rowan, *Candles in the Dark: Faith, Hope, and Love in a Time of Pandemic*, (London: SPCK, 2020), p76.

their own pace. As a result, inevitably, their engagement with what they are learning, their sense of wonder and curiosity, and their wellbeing are all enhanced, and they become happier individuals with strong relational literacy. In 2014, Peter Gray³² stated that not only do between five and eight times as many children suffer from a clinical depression or anxiety disorder than in the 1950s, but that a decline in play has led to a rise in narcissism and a drop in empathy, creativity, and critical thinking.³³ In other words, the decline of this opportunity for self-determination is producing children who are unhappy and less able to love their neighbour as themselves.

Moreover, despite the emphasis that the Bible puts on discipline, play is not unbiblical. In Zechariah, God says, 'I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem [and] the city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there.'³⁴ This suggests that freedom for play is a blessing from God and so it makes very little sense to deny it to children. Furthermore, Peter C. Hodgson theorised that education is intrinsically linked to 'paideia', a form of wisdom, most simply defined as 'the formative process of the human personality',³⁵ 'a lifelong process of interaction with the natural and cultural environment by which individuals grow and are transformed'.³⁶ Such interaction 'with the natural and cultural environment' cannot be achieved in the classroom setting alone. Instead, opportunities for children to interact with each other freely must be created. This could be through extended lunch breaks, less homework, the creation of safe spaces for play after school, and the opportunity to take part in adventure trips or outdoor pursuit activities. Charles W. Anderson commented that this concept is beneficial for students all the way up to higher education: 'The universality of the mind is something it is best to come upon, unexpectedly, in all sorts of odd places, in the course of doing other things.'³⁷ While this may not take place through play for university students, it is still highly applicable to school-age children. Children's minds have a far greater capacity for information, learning, and wonder than adults give them credit for, and they need autonomy and relatedness in order to be fulfilled in this way.

Self-directed learning

However, autonomous motivation in a biblical context does not mean unbridled freedom and so increasing autonomy in education should not equate to entirely unstructured teaching. While supporting the concept of free will, we have seen that the parables of the Prodigal Son and the wise and foolish builders also show that there are very real consequences to a negative use of free will; the Prodigal Son becomes destitute and the foolish builder's house is destroyed. It is also clear that biblical freedom takes place within a framework of law. In Romans 8, Paul states that 'through Jesus Christ, the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death' and 1 John 3 states that 'in fact, sin is lawlessness.'³⁸ It is not that we are free of all law, but that we have willingly chosen to live our lives within a different structure through which greater freedom and abundance of life is found. We have to be careful to recognise that autonomy does not mean 'self-made law' but the ability to make one's own informed decisions. Just as biblical free will takes place within a framework in

³² Research professor of psychology at Boston college and well-known for his work on the interaction between play and education.

³³ TEDx Talks, 'The Decline of Play - Peter Gray', 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bg-GEzM7iTk>>.

³⁴ Zechariah 8 v 3-5.

³⁵ Hodgson, Peter C., *God's Wisdom: Toward a Theology of Education*, (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), p6.

³⁶ Ibid., p58.

³⁷ Ibid., p56.

³⁸ 1 John 3 v 4

which there are consequences to our choices, so self-determination also has to take place within a framework.

An existing biblically-influenced pedagogy which reflects this concept is that of self-directed learning, a key advocate of which was Charlotte Mason, a Christian educator at the turn of the twentieth century who firmly believed that 'the more of a person we succeed in making a child, the better will he both fulfil his own life and serve society'.³⁹ Her approach has been carried forward by various people and organisations, including the Susan Schaeffer Macaulay Heritage School in Cambridge, which uses Mason's methods as a foundation of its teaching style. Mason was strongly in favour of play and self-directed learning, while simultaneously maintaining that education needs to be academically rigorous and challenging. One of the main pillars of her pedagogical approach was a technique called 'narrated learning',⁴⁰ the idea that a student will read a set text once and then narrate it back to the teacher, whose role becomes that of a guide or mediator rather than a strict instructor. Learning takes place through collective discussion, experimentation, and creativity, respecting the individuality of each person and allowing them freedom and self-direction in their learning. Yet, it also ensures that the students retain the necessary information and gain other skills, such as analytical and listening skills. Moreover, it allows people to gain knowledge of each other, to find common ground despite their differences, and to respect each other's opinions, all of which are key to healthy relationships.

A similar, perhaps more well-known, method is Maria Montessori's. Also a Christian, Montessori held ideas about the importance of a child's personhood which align strongly with Mason's. At the heart of the Montessori method is an emphasis on learning through discovery, creativity, and play, with the aim of helping the student develop holistically at their own pace in a way that they understand. Both methods are examples of pedagogical approaches that are high in self-determination. The child is given the opportunity for autonomy and relatedness and is able to learn at their own pace in a way that helps them to grow naturally in competence and relatedness. Throughout, the students are esteemed highly and respected as unique individuals, while simultaneously being encouraged to respect others, reconcile differences, and learn collectively.

Mason and Montessori's methods both contain elements that are also evident in ancient Israel's approach to education, primarily in the role of the Levitical priests who, as Guy Brandon puts it, were a more formally educated 'kind of quality control to ensure that the 'curriculum' was accurately passed down'.⁴¹ Deuteronomy 21 states 'the Lord your God has chosen them to minister [...] and to decide all cases of dispute and assault.'⁴² Essentially, if there was a problem that the people could not solve or decide for themselves, they would take it to the Levitical priests who, using their formal knowledge, would explain what the people should do and why they should do it. The idea was that 'as teachers, the Levites' role was to make themselves as unnecessary as possible'⁴³ by explaining the law in detail to the people so that the next time a similar problem arose they would be able to solve it for themselves. In the modern classroom, this would resemble the teacher putting a new mathematical equation on the board and leaving the children to work it out collectively for themselves, only instructing them if they asked a question. By leaving it to the children, they are given the space to

³⁹ Schaeffer Macaulay, Susan, *For the Children's Sake*, (Illinois: Crossway Books, 2009), p14.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p28.

⁴¹ Brandon, Guy, 'Education in the Bible: A Starting Point for Discussion', 2013.

⁴² Deuteronomy 21 v 5.

⁴³ Brandon, Guy, 'Education in the Bible: A Starting Point for Discussion', 2013.

learn both independently and from each other, thereby gaining confidence and relational skills in addition to the knowledge. It is self-determination in action.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, the education sector is divided over how to best help our young people recover from the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on their schooling. On the one hand, there is great concern about the knowledge that will inevitably have been missed and the widening privilege gap; on the other hand, there is the opinion that the best way to help children (and parents) recover from gruelling home schooling is through free time. Essentially, the debate is a 'summer of school' versus a 'summer of play'.⁴⁴ The former is mostly backed by ministers and officials, the latter by teachers and union representatives who have branded many of the government's suggestions 'policy gimmicks' which would ultimately be 'a blanket requirement to grind out more hours of learning from tired children'.⁴⁵

From a biblical relational perspective, with self-determination at the forefront, a summer of play seems to be the right decision. After a year in which students' autonomy has been restricted more than ever, the statistics show that overall feelings of confidence and wellbeing are low and that children are suffering from increased feelings of anxiety and loneliness.⁴⁶ Through an increase in autonomy and the opportunity for self-determination over the summer, our young people may be able to regain a sense of autonomous motivation which will allow them to engage with learning again, build good social bonds with others, and recover a sense of responsibility, confidence, and happiness.

However, it also has to be remembered that one approach will not benefit all students: while some may have successfully kept up with the curriculum, others will have struggled due to family and housing situations, availability of technology, and overall health. God commanded the ancient Israelites to 'love your neighbour as yourself'; as we consider how to school in the future as well as in a post-Covid environment, we need to consider how we can educate in a way which loves our young people as ourselves, allows them to flourish, and gives them the opportunity to grow into confident, knowledgeable, autonomous, and relational adults.

⁴⁴ Weale, Sally, 'Call for 'summer of play'', *Guardian*, 13 February 2021.

⁴⁵ Weale, Sally, 'Schools minister refuses to rule out longer school-days', *Guardian*, 9 February 2021.

⁴⁶ 'Generation Lockdown', 30 June 2020. <<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/news/generation-lockdown-third-children-and-young-people-experience-increased-mental-health>>

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