How Children Fail

John Holt's book, *How Children Fail*, published in 1964, is based on his experiences teaching and observing at the Colorado Mountain School and the Lesley-Ellis School in the United States, where he worked mainly with ten-year-olds. All his views would be entirely appropriate to this catalogue, but this is his central theme:

Almost all children . . . fail to develop more than a tiny part of the tremendous capacity for learning, understanding and creating with which they were born and of which they made full use during the first two or three years of their lives.

Why do they fail?
They fail because they are afraid, bored and confused.

*How Children Fail*, p 9
They are afraid, bored and confused because their learning is intercepted, interrupted and moulded by well-meaning adults who have no idea what damage they are doing.

Holt asks himself why children who he has observed to be witty, imaginative and intelligent outside the classroom, should become complete dolts within it, and his answer is that they feel they must please the grownups at all costs. That is what school feels like to children. ' . . . [i]t is a situation where they make you go and where they tell you to do things and where they try to make your life unpleasant if you don't do them or don't do them right.' (Ibid, p 37)

Holt once asked his class what went through their minds when their teacher asked a question and they didn't know the answer. After a long silence, one boy answered, 'Gulp!' He spoke for everyone. They all began to clamour, and all said the same thing, that when the teacher asked them a question and they didn't know the answer they were scared half to death. . . . They said they were afraid of falling, afraid of being kept back, afraid of being called stupid, afraid of feeling themselves stupid. Stupid.

Ibid, p 50

There are very few children who do not feel, during most of the time they are in school, an amount of fear, anxiety and tension that most adults would find intolerable. It is no coincidence that in many of their worst nightmares adults find themselves back in school. I was a successful student yet now and then I have such nightmares myself.

Ibid, p 72

What the children find they have to do is devise strategies to avoid being found out. They learn to read the teacher's expression and tone of voice. They make tentative guesses, and when shown the right answer deny their previous mistakes. They seldom ask for help. These strategies, as Holt says, are consistently self-centred, self-protective and aimed above all else
at avoiding trouble, embarrassment, punishment, disapproval, or loss of status, not at learning anything.

The child who wants to know something remembers it and uses it once he has it; the child who learns something to please or appease someone else forgets it when the need for pleasing or the danger of not appeasing is past.

This is why children quickly forget all but a small part of what they learn in school. It is of no use or interest to them; they do not want, or expect, or even intend to remember it. The only difference between bad and good students in this respect is that the bad students forget right away, while the good students are careful to wait until after the exam. If for no other reason, we could well afford to throw out most of what we teach in school because the children throw out almost all of it anyway.

*Ibid*, p 171-172

Holt eventually retired from school-teaching and became an advocate of home education.

When he had begun teaching he had felt that he was helping his students on a journey towards some goal that was as important to them as it was to him.

It seemed very important to give students this feeling of being on a journey to a worthwhile destination. I see now that most of my talk to this end was wasted breath. Maybe I thought the students were in my class because they were eager to learn what I was trying to teach, but they knew better. They were in school because they had to be, and in my class either because they had to be, or because otherwise they would have had to be in another class, which might be even worse.

*Ibid*, p 37

Holt describes his reaction after supervising some end of year maths tests, during which he had reflected on the problems of the less able students.
I feel angry and disgusted with myself for having given these tests. The good students didn't need them; the poor students, during this month or more of preparation and review, had most of whatever confidence and common sense they had picked up during the year knocked right out of them. Looking at Monica today, on the edge of tears, unable to bring herself even to try most of the problems, I felt that I had literally done her an injury.

_Ibid_, p 141

And the tricks for getting good results from a class depressed him even further.

I learned that the only way to get a good percentage of decent or even passing grades was to announce tests well in advance, tell in some detail what material they would cover, and hold plenty of advance practice in the kind of questions that would be asked, which is called a review. I later learned that teachers do this everywhere. We know that what we are doing is not really honest, but we dare not be the first to stop, and we try to justify or excuse ourselves by saying that, after all, it does no particular harm. But we are wrong: it does great harm.

_Ibid_, p 130

It does harm, says Holt, primarily because it is dishonest, and teaches children that what teachers value is not genuine knowledge and understanding, but the ability to appear to know and to understand. Teachers teach you to pass tests, not to learn anything of importance. Exams prove that 'school is mainly a place where you follow meaningless procedures to get meaningless answers to meaningless questions.' (_Ibid_, p 151)

This is his condemnation of the way lessons are all too often conducted:

We ask children to do for most of a day what few adults are able to do even for an hour. How many of us, attending, say, a lecture that doesn't interest us, can keep our minds from wandering? . . . If we want to get tough enough about it, as many schools do, we can terrorise a
class of children into sitting still with their hands folded and their eyes glued on us, or somebody; but their minds will be far away.

*Ibid*, p 157

And this is his even fiercer condemnation of the culture of fear:

To feel that you are helping make children less intelligent is bad enough, without having to wonder whether you may be helping to make them neurotic as well.

*Ibid*, p 73

Towards the end of his book, Holt's views come close to those of Jürg Jegge (see link below). A major difference is that Jegge was writing in the main about severely damaged children who he was helping to recover. Holt was writing about ordinary children in mainstream education. Even for these children, this was his conclusion:

To a very great degree, school is a place where children learn to be stupid. A dismal thought, but hard to escape. Infants are not stupid. Children of one, two or even three throw the whole of themselves into everything they do. They embrace life, and devour it, it is why they learn so fast, and are such good company. Listlessness, boredom, apathy these all come later. Children come to school curious; within a few years most of that curiosity is dead, or at least silent.

*Ibid*, p 156

'To a very great degree, school is a place where children learn to be stupid.' John Holt was writing more than fifty years ago. Jürg Jegge was writing over thirty years ago. To a very great degree, it seems, school is a place where teachers learn to be stupid too. As the title of Jegge's first book says, stupidity is learnable.