Book Review: The Hungry Mind: The Origins of Curiosity in Childhood

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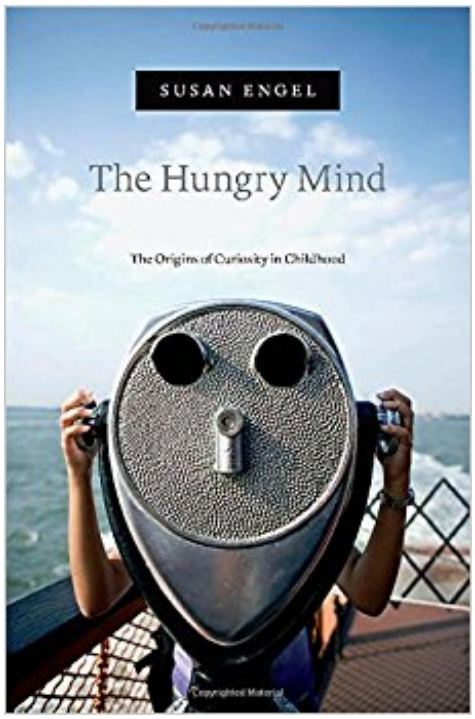
Curiosity is vital, but it remains a surprisingly understudied characteristic. The Hungry Mind explores what curiosity is, how it can be measured, how it develops in childhood, and how it can be fostered in school. ***Inez von Weitershausen*** *finds that although the reader might have come across some of the insights in this book elsewhere, the author does a brilliant job connecting a wide range of essential 20th century research on the development of children.*

The Hungry Mind: The Origins of Curiosity in Childhood. Susan Engel. Harvard University Press. March 2015.



"When people want to know, they learn". Although this insight might appear rather simple and self-evident, it is a crucial fact that is often discarded when we consider methods of fostering learning or ways of designing education systems. Therefore Susan Engel's *The Hungry Mind*, a book which engages in depth with how our interest and desire to explore the world evolves, makes a valuable contribution not only to the body of academic literature on the developmental and educational psychology of children, but also to our knowledge on why and how we learn.

Starting from the assumption that the very "linchpin of intellectual achievement" is curiosity, Engel presents a range of interesting insights into how this feature expresses itself and develops throughout childhood. While her findings may not always be new and the reader might have come across some of the insights already, the author does a brilliant job connecting a wide range of essential 20th century research on the development of children and turning these insights into a coherent narrative about how children become aware of and interact with their environment.

In the initial chapters, Engel introduces the different sources and forms of curiosity that exist among babies and toddlers; she points out that the feeling for "bad math" or "natural concepts" about what objects belong together already exist at a very early stage in our life. She then goes to trace the role that language has for the child's ability to expand its knowledge by asking questions and telling stories. Here the author finds not only that a "child's early question-asking experience lays down a foundation for her future", but also that children who hear and tell stories in collaboration with their parents become better story-tellers, more engaged readers and self-reflective personalities. Another interesting aspect in this regard has to do with the way children perceive of themselves, either in relation to the stories they hear and read or when they interact with their peers. In elementary school, children develop and "carry around representations of dynamic social matrices", as Engel puts it, which clearly facilitates their understanding of human relationships, as does gossiping. In Engel's interpretation, the latter is therefore not understood as a despicable human activity but rather as simply a different way by which children acquire insights into how the world and other human beings function.

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The author also traces the role played by parents and teachers and underlines the danger of adults who expect children to learn according to a particular script. Rather than for a prescriptive approach to learning à la "First you do *a*, the you do *b*, follow the instructions until you accomplish *c*", she argues that children need free time and solitude in order to identify which issues and activities they truly find interesting. Children "absorb, understand, and retain various kinds of information and skills" often when they the opportunity to explore things on their own . Yet Engel does not advocate a complete laissez-faire attitude to learning and education. Rather, she underlines that while some children are "naturally" more inquisitive than others, adults and the setting they provide, impact heavily on the way children learn and develop curiosity. Encouragement to explore, access to unexpected and complex materials, and contact with other children and adults are thus found to be potent ingredients for intellectual advancement.

Even though Engel's work is first and foremost concerned with the development of curiosity in children and will therefore appeal predominantly to readers interested in this particular field, the books touches on such a large range of subjects that it makes for a valuable read for a much wider audience. The distinction between specific and diversive curiosity, for instance, will resonate with anyone interested in the different ways people acquire knowledge, choose books or engage with internet search engines such as Google. Similarly, readers interested in psychology are likely to be fascinated by the insight that reading fiction enhances people's ability to also "read people" and to demonstrate empathy, while educators might want to debate how for need for solitude and free time can be reconciled with strict class-room settings and pre-defined learning outcomes.

The fact that *The Hungry Mind* combines the work of some of most prominent scholars on the childhood development such as Dewey, Piaget or Cuffaro, with lesser-known researchers and examples from Engel's own childhood, makes the book not only a highly informative but also very enjoyable read that leaves the audience with a number of important takeaways: throughout their life, human beings have an "urge to know about things that have no obvious or utilitarian function", a feature that distinguishes them from other species; Furthermore Engel finds that this extraordinary kind of curiosity can and needs to be cultivated in order to tap its full potential; And finally, Engel's findings suggests that a parent or teacher who "knows what the itch to find out feels like is in a better position to foster that itch" in others. What better reason could there be to remain curious?

Inez von Weitershausen is a PhD student and member of staff at the LSE's International Relations Department. Her doctoral research concentrates on European foreign policy with a special focus on crisis response and the Southern Neighborhood. She holds degrees from Bucerius Law School Hamburg and University of Bonn,

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