

# BRIGHT SPARKS

## **an introduction**

This book of posters for pupils is for teachers and for parents to use to help children learn. Each poster has been carefully chosen and carefully positioned within the book. The posters come from different sources. Some are observations about learning based on my own work and put into sayings children can easily understand and remember. Some are from people researching into the workings of the human brain. Some are quotes from famous people. I have tried to use either famous people who the children may know and admire, or very famous figures from history. In a few cases posters contain sayings whose source cannot be traced but whose truths are universal.

Throughout the world there is understandable concern about children's learning. The concern takes different forms in different cultures. In some the preoccupation is with timing. At what point, if at all, in a child's learning should the provision become formal? Is 'too formal, too early' necessarily a bad thing? Should there be a place for hothousing some children? Does early formal training advantage or disadvantage? What happens to childhood in such environments? What is the place of play? Should we in the West follow the approach adopted in some other cultures, of learning through play, through freedom of movement, maybe even through early responsibility? Or are our urban, industrialized, Western societies too constraining, too benchmarked and too dangerous for such 'liberal' approaches? Does 'too formal, too early' create antagonistic attitudes to learning? If so, is this the same for boys as for girls? How might children begin to form views about themselves as learners as a result of such early experiences? What happens if, as a consequence of such views being internalized and adopted as part of oneself, they harden into attitudes, beliefs and value systems?

Learning is about more than assimilating knowledge and skills. It is about more than interacting positively in different social groupings. It is about more than loading up with content. Learning is also about finding out about one's self; about who you are and who you can become. It is about making considered choices in an uncertain world. It is about extending the horizons of possibility.

In the year after Neil Armstrong first stepped onto the moon, I arrived in secondary school. We spent our first year at secondary school in mixed-ability sets. In my second year, we were placed into sets

according to ability. I was good at 'doing school' and luckily had 'chosen' good parents who helped motivate me: I got into the top set. In this top set we were at the apex of a pile held up by four other sets. Because we were good at 'whatever' and there was a faint possibility that some of us might be selected again to go 17 miles away to the Academy, we had to do Latin in addition to French. The two sets below us did French but no Latin. The set below them did art and no languages. The set below art did craft and not much else. So while I conjugated, my erstwhile mates bashed lumps of metal and planed planks of wood. We settled into our new statuses: me, confused as to why I would want to have a conversation with a table in a language no one actually spoke; them, certain in the knowledge they had three years' worth of bird tables, coffee tables and bedside cabinets awaiting them.

Our first Latin exam was due and I discovered the value of learning posters. Out of the back pages of the *New Musical Express*, I had, some time before, sent for the Athena poster catalogue. I had ordered and duly received a poster of the Earth pictured from outer space. I stuck it up above the fireplace at the end of my bed. If I shut my eyes I can see it now. A blue and white ball coming out of the blackness. It was the last thing I saw at night before the blankets went over my head. Then the torch and the transistor came out from under the pillow and I read *Teenage Mutant Horror* while listening through the earpiece to Radio Luxemburg. Often I would wake in the morning with a searing pain. The radio would be suspended inches from the floor, held in place by 10 inches of wire attached to the earpiece which was being slowly prised from my ear. When I had removed the earpiece and come to my senses, I would see Earth looking down at me. When I had gathered myself even more I would remember the exams looming and the thought struck me, 'why not learn it from bed?' And that's what I did.

I recovered the unused wallpaper rolls from the attic, cut them into poster-size pieces using Earth as a measuring stick and wrote all the verbs on the back. Earth got turned around and on the back I drew a cross section of a Roman road which, apparently, no serious Latin scholar could do without knowing. Now in the evenings, after lights out and before '208 Radio Luxemburg – the Friendly Giant', I could do Latin by torchlight. So taken was I by my innovation, I told my mate Donald. Donald had got into the Latin class because he was frightened of what his mum would do to him if he hadn't. We both knew – he and I – he wasn't very good. So I told him what I had done and suggested he should try it. We both liked a shortcut. But he said he shared a room with his brothers and didn't think they would have it, and so the moment passed.

Eventually, it was exam week and the day of the Latin exam. Donald and I were walking to school and he seemed in a good mood. I pointed out that it was an exam. Exams were always a pain, so why was he so cheery? 'You'll see,' he says. 'I took your advice about putting it all down somewhere where you can see it. No problemus, meus es latinus terrificus!' he added, patting his bag. I worried, but we walked on. We got there, we sat down. Mr Fairley gave out the papers, droned an instruction, pointed to the clock, got his head down and off we went.

Question one: 'Draw a cross section of a roman road, labelling all the salient features,' 10 marks – a good start. I looked across the desks and saw Donald. Donald was unrolling the largest and brightest roll of flock wallpaper I had ever seen. He had pinned its trailing edge to the floor with an ink bottle and an old pencil case, and was peering intently at the detailed writing on the back; every now and again he raised his head, scanned the room and began to write at length. The wallpaper revision method never did catch on. Donald had forgotten that Mr Fairley was part time and finished early on Mondays. 'Beat the belt' MacDougall was not so understanding.

Visual reinforcement is, however, still part of our learning repertoire. The posters contained in this booklet are designed to enhance learning attitudes and learning techniques. With a different set of attitudes and alternative techniques, Donald may not have had to ruin his mother's DIY plans. The posters provided are to help develop 'the will and the skill'. Place them in classrooms and in corridors; in the assembly hall and in the gymnasium; in the reception area and the dining area. Draw attention to them in class lessons, in assemblies, during lunch, and when parents collect their children. Encourage pupils to make their own versions and put them up at home. Have a theme of the week and put the poster in the newsletter to parents. Encourage pupils to assimilate the messages by testing their recall of phrases and sayings.

Finally I leave you with one thought about the value and prevalence of 'immersion-learning environments'. I was taken to visit a Scottish primary school by a very forthright headteacher. She said, 'We walk our talk – we *are* an immersion-learning school. Come and see.' She took me around her wonderful school. Display was everywhere. Children were using it interactively. Framed affirmation posters were in every corridor. 'Look at this', she said and took me to the girls' toilets. She flung open every cubicle, and on the back of each door was a large poster of the times tables!

**Alistair Smith, January 2001**



**BRIGHT  
SPARKS**

‘If you want to  
change  
the world, start  
by changing  
your attitude.’



**BRIGHT  
SPARKS**

‘To do well  
in anything  
you need  
the skill and  
the will.’