

The relationship between sitting and education.

The verb "sedate", meaning "to calm", comes from the Latin "to sit".

A contemporary German philosopher and historian, Hajo Eickhoff, has argued that the chair is a sedative to create a docile population not inclined to criticize or become politically active.

This process of socialization to passivity starts early in schools, where the first task is not to teach children content, but to teach them orderly behaviour—specifically, the ability to sit still for long periods of time. Don Johnson, an American philosopher and head of the department of somatic studies at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, also fears that the way in which children sit at school is evidence of a disturbing educational philosophy. He sees the practice of sitting quietly in rows of seats as primarily a way for teachers to maintain authority and keep radical ideas safely contained. He would like both students and teachers to have the freedom to move around energetically.

Montessori and Steiner schools offer two examples of how education can incorporate activity with learning. Dr. Maria Montessori wrote *The Montessori Method* in 1912, describing how children were reduced to immobility in the Italian classroom, "not disciplined, but annihilated". She recommended simple tasks and spontaneous work rather than enforced, seated effort. In the United Kingdom, state primary schools have adopted the Montessori model, and in the United States Montessori theory has made a resurgence, mostly in private schools, but also in some public schools systems. Recently, American brain researchers have also come to believe that learning increases with physical activity. More public schools have been experimenting with allowing kids to sit without chairs and in clusters rather than rows. But for generations American schoolteachers have struggled to get children to sit still.

G. Cranz

*From The chair: rethinking culture, body and design
(WW Norton: New York and London, 2000)*