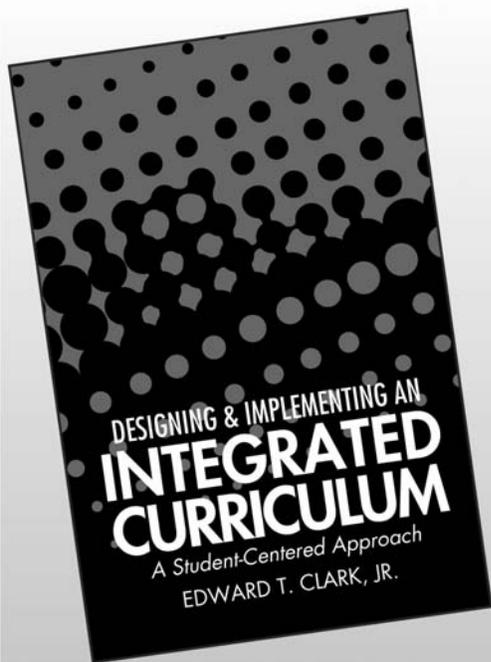


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### **Table of Contents**

- Educational Reform: A Design Problem
  - The Design Solution: Systems Thinking
  - Creating a New Educational Vision
  - Creating a Context for Teaching and Learning
  - Questions Worth Arguing About
  - Concepts as Organizing Frameworks
  - Implementing an Integrated Curriculum
  - Designing Schools as Learning Communities
- 

Dr. Ed Clark is an international educational consultant specializing in integrated curriculum design and site-based educational change. He has been involved in teacher education for over thirty years.

# ENCOUNTER

EDUCATION FOR MEANING AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

VOLUME 22, NUMBER 2 SUMMER 2009

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## Table of Contents

<i>Editorial. Animal Suffering: Learning Not to Care and Not to Know.</i> William Crain . . . . .	2
The Transformation of Kindergarten. Edward Miller and Joan Almon. . . . .	6
<i>Chris's Column. The Three P's.</i> Chris Mercogliano. . . . .	12
Rooks. Polly Devlin . . . . .	15
Children and Urban Gardens. Tom Goodridge. . . . .	17
Dog Trust: Lessons from Our Companions. Marc Bekoff. . . . .	20
Let Kids Be Free. Elana Davidson. . . . .	22
Unschooling: An Oasis for Development and Democracy. Karl F. Wheatley . . . . .	27
Engaging Communities Outside the Classroom. J. Cynthia McDermott and Sylvie Taylor . . . . .	33
Literacy Education: The Big Picture. Joseph Sanacore . . . . .	37
Take Two Poems and Call Me in the Morning (Or Why Teachers Need Poetry). Amy L. Eva . . . . .	41
Book Reviews	
<i>Escaping Education: Living as Learning Within Grassroots Cultures</i> by Madhu Prakash and Gustavo Esteva (Reviewed by Chris Mercogliano) . . . . .	43
<i>Alex and Me</i> by Irene Pepperberg (Reviewed by Lawrence Nyman). . . . .	46
<i>Autism's False Prophets</i> by Paul A. Offit (Reviewed by Roberta Weiner) . . . . .	47

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# **Animal Suffering**

## **Learning Not to Care and Not to Know**

At a recent New Jersey public hearing, the topic was a proposed black bear hunt. A small boy walked up to the microphone, said his name was Bobby, and told the officials that shooting bears was terrible. "How would you like it if someone shot at you? You wouldn't like it, would you?" Then Bobby threw up his arms and said, "But you won't care what I say because I'm only 7 years old," and walked back to his seat in a dejected manner.

Many parents and teachers have observed that young children have a strong affinity to animals. Preschool teachers often keep gerbils, hamsters, and others small animals in their classrooms to make the settings attractive to the children. Cartoons and children's books also appeal to children by featuring animals as their central characters. Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse, and the Three Little Pigs are children's staples.

In fact, animals are so important to young children that they routinely dream about them. Psychologist David Foulkes (1999) found that 3- to 5-year-olds dream about animals more than about people or any other topic, and animal dreams are nearly as common among 5- to 7-year-olds. Other researchers also have found that animals take center stage in children's dreams (Crain 2003, 50).

But as children grow up in the Western world, they find that their deep feelings for animals aren't shared by their dominant culture. Like Bobby, they are often dismayed by adult indifference to our fellow creatures.

### **The Rude Awakening**

For most children, the first and most upsetting confrontation with adult views seems to occur when children discover the source of the meat they eat. In a preliminary study of 28 urban, middle class children, one of my undergraduate students, Alina Pavlakos, found that most 5-year-olds didn't know where meat

comes from. They all knew they ate meat, but when asked, "Do you eat animals?," most said, "Nooo!," as if the idea were outrageous.

Pavlakos found that children soon learn otherwise, most by the age of six or so. As several writers (Goodall 2005, 142; Singer 2002, 215) have informally observed, some children become so distraught when they learn the facts that they want to become vegetarians, but their parents rarely permit it. Even the developmental psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg (1981, 15), who usually championed children's independent thinking, spent six months persuading his young son to abandon vegetarianism.

### **From Caring Child to Detached Adult**

We need much more research on how children respond to adult practices and views with respect to animals and food. It seems that in the process of socialization children undergo a considerable transformation — from a caring child to a detached adult. Most U.S. adults eat meat, tolerate hunting, and don't lose sleep over the treatment of animals in zoos, rodeos, circuses, or research labs. In fact, when it comes to today's most widespread and horrible animal suffering — that on factory farms — most adults know little about it. This, at least, is what another undergraduate student, Srushti Vanjari, and I have found.

From December, 2005, to the present, Vanjari and I have distributed brief questionnaires in two colleges (The City College of New York and the University of Miami), in two hotel lobbies, and at a senior citizen center in the New York metropolitan area. Our sample totals 213 respondents. We selected one hotel that was expensive and another that was inexpensive to tap into different social classes. In these samples, 73 to 90% of the respondents rated their knowledge of factory farms as either slight or nonexistent (with a

large majority of these respondents rating their knowledge as nonexistent).

Admittedly, our surveys are informal, and several of my colleagues have questioned our results. They believe that the current decade has witnessed a dramatic rise in vegetarianism as people have become aware of the mistreatment of animals. This also is the impression of some major writers. For example, Michael Pollan wrote in 2006 that “vegetarianism is more popular than it has ever been, and animal rights, the fringe of fringe movements until just a few years ago, is rapidly finding its way into the cultural mainstream” (p. 305). Actually, a 2008 Harris poll found that only 3.2% of U.S. adults followed a vegetarian diet, and only half of these did so out of a concern for animal welfare (Vegetarianism in America 2008).

It is possible of course that a dramatic rise in animal consciousness is now beginning for real. But we need data — not impressions — to know. It’s quite possible that a large majority of adult Americans continue to view animal suffering with detachment, if they know about it at all.

How, then, might our society produce this detachment? The following are some mechanisms at work (See also Joy 2006).

### Detachment Mechanisms

#### Media Screening

Factory farms and slaughter houses are usually in relatively isolated, rural parts of the country, so most people aren’t exposed to them. Still, the media might bring the factory farms into our homes, but it does not. Except for an occasional late-night cable documentary, it’s rare to see footage of animals on factory farms on television or in motion pictures (Singer 2002, 216).

#### Language

Sometimes our language hides the identity of animals as food. We eat pork, not pigs; veal, not calves; meat, not flesh. The killing of wildlife, too, is disguised. Wildlife managers and hunters say a person “takes” or “harvests” deer. They almost never say a person actually “kills” an animal.

The 19th century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1995, 177) pointed out that the English language more subtly distances us from animals by referring to them with the impersonal pronoun *it*, as if

animals were mere objects. The personal pronoun *who* is incorrect. Our language also replaces *who* with the impersonal pronouns *that* and *which*. So just as it’s ungrammatical to speak of “the shovel *who* is by the door,” it’s also improper to speak of “the bird *who* is by the door.” Our language requires us to use the words *that* or *which*, as if the bird were a thing — not a living being.

#### Denial

It’s not just the media and our language that hide the suffering of animals from us; we also hide it from ourselves. Many of us would rather not learn about the treatment of animals, especially when it might

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***As children grow up in the Western world, they find that their deep feelings for animals aren’t shared by their dominant culture.***

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spoil our meals (Robbins 1987, 143; Singer 2002, 217).

John Robbins refers to our wish to look away as “repression” (1987, 143-144) and “denial” (1987, 144-145). These are defense mechanisms in psychoanalytic theory, and of the two, denial more accurately describes what occurs in the case of animal suffering. Most of the time, people try to keep from looking at the facts. However, in psychoanalytic theory, defense mechanisms work unconsciously, beneath awareness. When people consciously defend themselves against knowledge, then, it’s not pure denial, but a kind of “conscious denial.”

#### Statistics and Abstractions

As Jonathan Balcombe (2006) points out, our society also distances us from animals by considering them as population statistics rather than individuals. Population statistics are more general and abstract, and it’s easier to think about reducing the size of a population than to imagine a particular animal being killed.

Thus documents such as New Jersey’s *Comprehensive Black Bear Management Policy* talk about “population control” and “desired densities” (New Jersey Fish and Game Council 2007, 36). Even some defenders of animals focus on populations. The Blue Ocean

Institute (2009) asks us to avoid eating fish such as groupers and Atlantic bluefin tuna because their numbers are in peril. The Institute recommends that we eat fish such as Atlantic herring and chub mackerel because these fish stocks are at healthy levels.

But what about the individual fish? Each fish pulled from the sea writhes and gasps for oxygen. Each wants to live.

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***If we do open ourselves to animal suffering, we are likely to want to do something about it. In particular, we are likely to try a vegetarian diet. But this opens us to another kind of distress.... To deviate from a society's customary way of eating is to alienate oneself from the dominant culture.***

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Humans can think of animals as population statistics because of our mental capacity for abstraction and generalization. The developmental psychologist Heinz Werner (1948, 271-272) described how this capacity develops as the child grows. Children under the age of 10 years or so tend to think in specific pictorial images. For example, young children don't consider "space" in general but think of particular spaces, such as their bedroom, the pond down the street, or the space under the stairs where they like to hide. Only later, as children move toward adolescence, can they think about space more abstractly and generally, as when they understand that the rule "area = height x width" applies to *any* area.

Western scientific culture places a high value on such equations because they use quantitative measurement. As a measurable quantity, space doesn't depend on personal preferences, opinions, or emotions. It is purely objective. Using the same abstract approach, wildlife managers speak of target deer densities such as 20 deer per square mile. Phrasing the goal in this way has considerable appeal in our

science-admiring society. The danger is that it distances us from what we are actually doing — killing individual deer.

It is especially easy to think of herd animals as population statistics, rather than individuals, because they strike us as so similar. But the more researchers learn about a species, the more they discover that each animal has an individual personality. This is true with respect to deer, black bears, wolves, and many mammals (Inglis 2005; Balcombe 2006). Even fish, including sharks and octopuses, have individual temperaments (Balcombe 2006, 54-57, 210). It seems that whenever scientists look beyond statistics and get to know the members of a species, individuality comes to the fore.

Abstract reasoning detaches us from animals in many ways. Sometimes we keep discussions on a theoretical plane. A case in point is Richard Louv's immensely popular book, *Last Child in the Woods* (2005). This book has done more than any other to raise public awareness about children's alienation from nature. Louv wants children to have direct experience with nature and develop reverence for it. But Louv defends hunting and fishing, and it's difficult to see how killing an animal for sport shows reverence for the animal. To defend his position, Louv moves to the abstract intellectual level. When it comes to fishing, Louv says the central question is whether fish feel pain, and the answer "depends on your definition of pain and suffering" (pp. 192-193). Louv chooses not to delve into the matter, but says that the answer "is not so clear as it may seem. Certainly, the definition is not settled" (pp. 192-193). So what appears straightforward to us when we watch a fish gasping for oxygen becomes a matter of abstract definition — and therefore removed from our emotional responsiveness (Crain 2006).

#### **Motives for Maintaining Detachment**

Will people become more sensitive to animal suffering? Perhaps, but it won't happen automatically. Detachment serves emotional purposes, making life more comfortable for us.

#### **Avoiding Empathic Pain**

As Robbins suggests, if we open ourselves to animal suffering, we cannot help from sharing some of

their pain. Because of our natural empathy, we hurt too. Robbins (1987, 145) adds that we suffer because we are not apart from animals; "our pain arises from our kinship with life." To avoid the pain, we look the other way.

### The Need for Cultural Belonging

If we do open ourselves to animal suffering, we are likely to want to do something about it. In particular, we are likely to try a vegetarian diet. But this opens us to another kind of distress — that which comes from being separate from our culture.

In his book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006), Michael Pollan discovered how a vegetarian diet can frustrate the need for cultural belonging. As part of his investigation of meat-eating in our society, Pollan decided to try out vegetarianism himself. During this time, Pollan wrote, "Healthy and virtuous as I may feel these days, I also feel alienated from traditions I value: cultural traditions like the Thanksgiving turkey, or even franks at the ballpark, and family traditions like my mother's beef brisket at Passover. These ritual meals link us to our history along multiple lines: family, religion, landscape, [and] nation" (Pollan 2006, 315).

As students of anthropology know, Pollan has a point. In every society one might consider, food is central to the social fabric. Food is tied to rituals, taboos, gender roles, forms of indebtedness, land rights, and feasts of social solidarity (Haviland 1990, 396-397).

Thus, to deviate from a society's customary way of eating is to alienate oneself from the dominant culture. Since humans have a strong need to belong, departure from social norms is emotionally difficult. In fact, the child psychologist Susan Isaacs implied that a young child's wish to adopt a vegetarian diet can cause mental disturbances. A vegetarian diet, she said, would cut the child off "in the most unhealthy way from the common ethos of his time" (1966, 164). When I have asked my vegetarian students about Isaacs's statement, they generally have said it's an exaggeration, but they do acknowledge that their vegetarianism has caused tensions within their families and has made them feel isolated, odd, or different.

### Conclusion

Opening ourselves to animal suffering, then, isn't easy. Applying "detachment mechanisms" blocks us from emotional pain and satisfies the strong need to belong to the mainstream culture. However, personal growth sometimes means confronting negative feelings and departing from the mainstream. We develop strength and maturity by attending to our own sense of what is right.

— William Crain, Editor

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# The Transformation of Kindergarten

Edward Miller and Joan Almon

The Alliance for Childhood

Based on research by LaRue Allen, Jennifer Astuto, Jan Drucker,  
Margery Franklin, Allison Fuligni, Sandra Hong, and Barbara Schecter

**Early academics is pushing play out of kindergarten, to the detriment of our children.**

In this article we will report data that indicate that didactic instruction and testing are pushing play out of kindergarten. Kindergartners are now under intense pressure to meet inappropriate expectations, including academic standards that until recently were reserved for first or second grade. These expectations and the policies that result from them have greatly reduced and in some cases obliterated opportunities for imaginative, child-initiated play in kindergarten.

The data we report suggest that public school kindergarten is now very different from what most adults recall from their own childhoods. We do not have comparative data from the past on the amounts of time and materials for play that earlier generations of kindergartners enjoyed. We do, however, have the direct observations of early childhood educators and researchers — and they are alarmed.

Professor Nancy Carlsson-Paige of Lesley University has taught, supervised teachers, and conducted research in kindergartens for more than 30 years, working in both urban and suburban schools. She says,

The loss of play and child-centered learning that these new studies reveal signals great cause for concern. Decades of research and theory in child development affirm the importance of play in the early years as the primary vehicle through which children build a strong foundation for cognitive, social, and emotional concepts. The loss of this foundation that can only be built through play will undermine children's

*Note: This article is adapted with permission from The Alliance for Childhood's March 2009 report, *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School*.*

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success in school and academic competence for years to come. (2009)

The data we describe, combined with her own observations, “show clearly that the kindergartens of today barely resemble those I visited fifteen years ago,” says Carlsson-Paige.

The majority of children today are spending most of their time in teacher-directed activities, especially in literacy and math, and have little time for activities of their choice. The vast majority of kindergarten teachers now spend some time each day on testing and test preparation, an activity that would have been considered irrelevant and even harmful in the past. (2009)

“Across all of my experiences in classrooms,” says Carlsson-Paige, describing the kindergartens of a generation ago,

no matter what school I was visiting — whether it used a traditional or a progressive pedagogy, whether it was public or private — I found consistency among kindergartens. Without exception, there was an emphasis on play and hands-on learning in kindergarten. In the classrooms I visited, children would choose the area they wanted to go to each day to start out, and then choose other areas as the day went on. Sometimes teachers would encourage certain children to explore specific areas, and sometimes teachers asked that all children spend some time in a particular area, such as the literacy area. But the emphasis was always on choices made by children. Most of the school day was spent in active, child-centered, imaginative exploration and play. (2009)

Professor Diane Levin (2009) of Wheelock College, another long-time kindergarten researcher, confirms these observations, noting that school principals “are under much more pressure now to push formal academics in kindergarten.” For a variety of reasons, she says, rich dramatic and make-believe play is rarely seen in today’s schools. “Play is not completely gone, but it is often superficial,” she says, adding that many children still show playful behavior but are not able to develop complex play scenarios for extended periods.

Confirming the findings of the qualitative study presented below, Levin adds that in her own research she finds that today’s teachers

may say that play is important, but they often don’t recognize the difference between the imitative, repetitive play frequently seen today and the more creative, elaborated play of the past. Many teachers don’t know the reasons why play is important. And now it’s even more important for them to be able to articulate those reasons, and to understand why play is not happening in their classrooms — including the fact that screen time and other changes at home can undermine children’s ability to engage in creative play without teachers’ help. (2009)

We recognize that the restoration of child-initiated play to early education will not by itself solve the complex problems of helping all children — especially those with special needs or in poor families and neglected schools, as well as English-language learners — to reach their full potential. We are not calling for a simple return to the practices of an earlier time. We now understand much better the kinds of rich language experiences and skills that young children need in order to become literate, avid learners. But teachers need to understand the ways in which child-initiated play when combined with playful, intentional teaching leads to lifelong benefits in ways that didactic drills, standardized tests, and scripted teaching do not.

Play is a major mode for learning in early childhood. With sensible boundaries and support from teachers, it leads to enormous growth in all aspects of the child’s development — cognitive, social, emotional, imaginative, and physical. Furthermore, it is the primary tool through which children explore their interests, express their joys, and process their fears, disappointments, and sorrows.

“The research is clear,” says Nancy Carlsson-Paige.

Faster is not better when it comes to early education; young children need play and hands-on interactions for genuine learning to occur. We must reverse this destructive trend and develop education policies that are grounded in re-

search and theory in child development and early childhood education. (2009)

### Background of the Studies and Summary of Findings

The three university research studies described below, commissioned by the Alliance for Childhood and completed in 2008, provide clear evidence of the endangered status of child-initiated play in public school kindergartens in New York City and Westchester County, New York, and Los Angeles.

Two research teams, from Long Island University and U.C.L.A., surveyed a total of 254 teachers in full-day kindergartens in New York and Los Angeles — the quantitative studies. A third team, from Sarah Lawrence College, made repeated in-depth observations in 14 kindergarten classrooms in New York and interviewed teachers and school principals — the qualitative study.

These studies were designed to help create an accurate picture of how children spend their time in public kindergartens today, what materials are available to them, and the attitudes and beliefs of the adults who are charged with educating and caring for them. Detailed findings of these studies are available online at [www.allianceforchildhood.org/sites/allianceforchildhood/files/file/kindergarten\\_report.pdf](http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/sites/allianceforchildhood/files/file/kindergarten_report.pdf).

In brief, the findings of these three studies suggest that:

- Teacher-directed activities, especially instruction in literacy and math skills, are taking up the lion's share of kindergarten classroom time.
- Standardized testing and preparation for tests are now a daily activity in most of the kindergartens studied.
- Free play, or "choice time," is usually limited to 30 minutes or less per day. In many classrooms there is no play time at all.
- Most classrooms do not have enough materials for all children to engage in play at once; blocks, dramatic play materials, and sand and water for play and exploration are in particularly short supply.
- Teachers say that major obstacles to play in kindergarten are that the curriculum does not incorporate it, that there is not enough time, and that administrators do not value it.
- Most teachers say that play in kindergarten is important, although few teachers or administrators are able to articulate the relationship between play and learning.
- There are wide variations in what teachers and principals mean by "play."
- Many classroom activities that adults describe as play are in fact highly teacher-directed and involve little or no imagination or creativity on the part of children.

### The Qualitative Study

The Sarah Lawrence study looked at 14 kindergarten classrooms in six urban and suburban communities in Westchester County, New York. The principals and teachers interviewed by the researchers included a wide range of activities in their definitions of play, including teacher-organized activities such as planting a garden, organized games, and recess, as well as child-initiated free play. Their responses to questions like "What do you see as the role of play in kindergarten?," "What kinds of play take place in kindergarten?," and "How is play related to learning?" similarly evinced a wide range of opinions, from a view of play as separate from learning (and incidental to it), to a view that play is integral to learning.

The Sarah Lawrence research team summarized their findings as follows:

What principals and teachers mean by "play" varies. They generally did not distinguish imaginative play from other activities that include manipulative materials, games, gardens, and centers. Most teachers referred to "free choice time" or "center time," and did not actually call this "play." They often did not bring up the topic of play in the context of questions about free choice time until the researchers brought it up. Principals and teachers in the same school often differed in how they talked about play — in emphasis, allotment of time, priority, urgency, and degree of conflict with other activities.

The relationship of play to learning was rarely articulated by principals or teachers.

Even when teachers and principals said they thought play is important, or that play leads to learning, they were usually referring to an understanding of play as a highly scripted, teacher-directed activity.

The amount of choice time or center time in the 14 classrooms varied from as little as 30 minutes once every 6 days to one hour every day. The great majority of classrooms had choice or center time every day. Two classrooms provided less than 30 minutes of choice or center time, and only one provided 60 minutes (2 sessions of 30 minutes each), with the majority having 30 minutes. Taking into account the time for getting started and for clean-up, the actual time for children’s activities was less than the allotted time, sometimes considerably so.

The materials available to children at centers in different classrooms varied greatly, from a well-stocked housekeeping corner to a barely furnished one; from good-sized collections of blocks to very few blocks.

The degree of actual free choice that children were given during choice time varied from ample (all materials in the room were available to all children in six of the classrooms) to none in one classroom (the children were assigned to centers by the teacher).

The variation in play in different classrooms seemed to be the result of a complex interaction of factors, including the larger educational culture, government mandates, and the views, values, and interests of individual educators in administrative and instructional positions within schools.

The researchers also noted this observation: “Even given restricted choices, little equipment, and inadequate amounts of time, children seize the moment to create imaginative play episodes.” How these children would do if given more time to develop complex play scenarios is not known, but it was encouraging to see that the spark of play was still there despite all the obstacles.

**The Quantitative Studies**

**Demographics and School Characteristics**

In New York City, 142 teachers responded to the survey; in Los Angeles, 112 teachers responded — for a total of 254. All taught in full-day kindergartens.

In New York, 58% of the respondents had a master’s degree. In L.A., 36% had a master’s degree.

One-third of the Los Angeles teachers (34%) had not taken *any* courses in child development or early childhood education.

In New York, 51% of the respondents said they taught in Title I (high poverty) schools; 82% reported having at least four-fifths of their students on free lunch.

In Los Angeles 57% reported that they worked in Title I schools “in need of improvement”; 75% of the students received free lunch, while 60% were English-language learners.

*Table 1. Use of Kindergarten Classroom Time in a Typical Day, New York City*

	No Time	1-30 Mins	31-60 Mins	61-90 Mins	90+ Mins
Literacy Instruction	0%	2%	22%	42%	34%
Math Instruction	0%	16%	61%	21%	2%
Testing and Test Prep	21%	42%	28%	6%	3%
Choice Time	6%	54%	37%	1%	1%

Note: Rows may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

McGraw-Hill’s Open Court Reading curriculum was used by 88% of the Los Angeles teachers; 90% used either Harcourt Math or Scott Foresman Math. Most of the teachers (75%) in the New York City study reported using a curriculum offered through professional development workshops conducted by the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University.

**How Kindergarten Children Spend Their Time in School**

In both N.Y. and L.A. teachers reported spending much more time in teacher-directed instruction, especially of literacy and math skills, testing, and test preparation, than they gave children for free play or choice time.

Three-fourths of the New York City teachers (76%) spent more than an hour per day in literacy instruction. Almost one-fourth of them (23%) had more than an hour of daily math instruction. Only 2% reported giving students more than an hour of choice time per day. The average amount of daily choice time, calculated by using a weighted average of the teachers’ reports, was 29.2 minutes. Almost four-fifths of the teachers (79%) reported spending some

time on testing or test preparation on a typical day; 37% spent more than 30 minutes per day in test-related activities. 86% of the teachers reported that their classes had access to outdoor recess, weather permitting.

The results in Los Angeles were similar to the New York data: more than nine out of ten (92%) of the teachers said they spent more than an hour a day in literacy instruction; 17% had more than an hour of daily math instruction. Almost none gave children

psychologist David Elkind. “Curiosity, imagination, and creativity are like muscles: if you don’t use them, you lose them” (Wenner 2009).

Vivian Gussin Paley, the MacArthur Award-winning author of numerous books in which children’s voices at play are beautifully captured, recommends keeping daily journals of what children say and do during their play. These observations can help convince others of the value of play — and of the time required for it to flower:

*Table 2. Use of Kindergarten Classroom time in a Typical Day, Los Angeles*

	No Time	1-30 Mins	31-60 Mins	61-90 Mins	90+ Mins
Literacy Instruction	0%	1%	7%	31%	62%
Math Instruction	0%	13%	70%	17%	0%
Testing and Test Prep	18%	63%	14%	3%	3%

We continue to call play the work of young children while reducing its appearance to brief interludes. There is barely time to develop a plot or transform a bad guy into a hero. The educational establishment has ceased admiring the stunning originality of its youngest students, preferring lists of numerical and alphabetical achievement goals. (Paley 2004, 33)

more than an hour of free play or choice time. The average amount of daily choice time was 19.1 minutes. One in four Los Angeles teachers said there was no time at all for “free play,” although it is not clear how they differentiate free play from choice time. 97% of the teachers reported that their classes had access to outdoor recess, weather permitting.

**Concluding Comments**

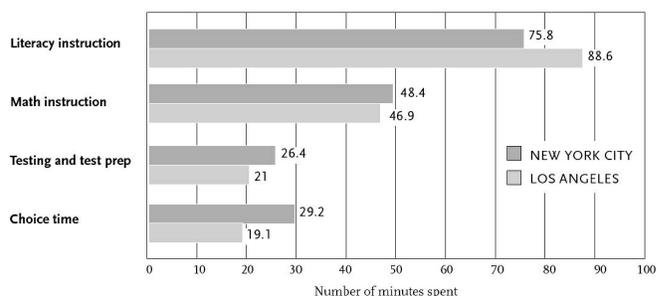
The research studies described above, because of their relatively limited scope, are strongly suggestive but not definitive. What they suggest is a crisis that calls for action — the restoration in kindergarten of play and playful learning, methods that have been shown to support healthy development and long-term gains in learning. Given the seriousness of the situation and its implications for the future, it is shocking that research on the loss of play and playful learning in kindergarten has until now simply not existed.

Teachers and administrators must understand what play offers young children and be able to speak clearly about it. Parents also need to be well informed. “Play has to be reframed and seen not as an opposite to work but rather as a complement,” says

Having not listened carefully enough to their play, we did not realize how much time was needed by children in order to create the scenery and develop the skills for their ever-changing dramas. We removed the element — time — that enabled play to be effective, then blamed the children when their play skills did not meet our expectations. (Paley 2004, 46)

Elena Bodrova and Deborah Leong (2003), early childhood researchers who developed the “Tools of the Mind” curriculum, summarize the abundant research documenting the benefits of play and the developmental gains associated with it:

CHART A: Daily Kindergarten Schedule in Two Cities Average number of minutes spent daily in selected activities



Play has been of great interest to scholars of child development and learning, psychologists, and educators alike. Jean Piaget (1962) and Lev Vygotsky (1978) were among the first to link play with cognitive development. In a comprehensive review of numerous studies on play, researchers found evidence that play contributes to advances in “verbalization, vocabulary, language comprehension, attention span, imagination, concentration, impulse control, curiosity, problem-solving strategies, cooperation, empathy, and group participation.” (2003, 50-53)

Further, research directly links play to children’s ability to master such academic content as literacy and numeracy. For example, children’s engagement in pretend play was found to be positively and significantly correlated with such competencies as text comprehension and metalinguistic awareness and with an understanding of the purpose of reading and writing. (2003, 50-53)

We call on policymakers, educators, health professionals, researchers, and parents to take action as follows:

- Restore child-initiated play and experiential learning with the active support of teachers to their rightful place at the heart of kindergarten education.
- Reassess kindergarten standards to ensure that they promote developmentally appropriate practices, and eliminate those that do not.
- End the inappropriate use in kindergarten of standardized tests, which are prone to serious error especially when given to children under age eight.
- Expand the early childhood research agenda to examine the long-term impact of current preschool and kindergarten practices on the development of children from diverse backgrounds.
- Give teachers of young children first-rate preparation that emphasizes the full development of the child and the importance of play, nurtures children’s innate love of learning, and supports teachers’ own capacities for creativity, autonomy, and integrity.

- Use the crisis of play’s disappearance from kindergarten to rally organizations and individuals to create a national movement for play in schools and communities.

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### End Note

The qualitative research was conducted by Jan Drucker, Margery Franklin, and Barbara Schecter. The quantitative research in New York was performed by Jennifer Astuto and La Rue Allen. The quantitative research in Los Angeles was carried out by Allison Fuligni and Sandra Hong.

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# The Three P's

Chris Mercogliano

**Play, positive emotions, and personal relationships are fundamental to intellectual growth.**

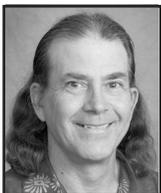
I was heartened to see *The New York Times* recently touting the importance of play in school. In its February 24, 2009 issue, *The New York Times* health writer Tara Parker-Pope focused on children's need for recess. Parker-Pope cited a study in the February, 2009 issue of *Pediatrics* that found that third graders who were permitted more than 15 minutes of recess a day behaved better in class than those who received less recess. The researchers also found that 40% of the schools surveyed had cut back at least one daily recess period and 30% had eliminated recess altogether. The correlation between better behavior and recess time held up even after controlling for ethnicity, class size, and public versus private school attendance.

Parker-Pope bolstered her defense of recess with several other recent reports. One showed that the more physical fitness exams middle school students passed, the better they did on academic tests. A second study indicated that walks outdoors — preferably in natural settings — improved kids' scores on tests measuring attention and concentration. And a third study found that young rats who lack opportunities for rough-and-tumble play have numerous social problems in adulthood. She ended with the declaration by psychiatrist Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play, that play is a "fundamental biological process," and a "major public health issue."

## Play

Kudos to Parker-Pope for opening a conversation about play, but at the same time it's sad that the excommunication of play from American culture has reduced the issue to the question of whether five percent of the school day should be sacrificed to recess; or God forbid, should it be ten?

Let me lay my bias out straight. For 37 years I have been involved with an independent school for students (aged 2 to 14) in which students spend the



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overwhelming majority of their time playing. And by this I don't mean learning games or organized sports, although they sometimes participate in them too. What I'm talking about here is play as defined by Jean Piaget (1951): "actions that are an end in themselves and do not form part of any series of actions imposed by someone else or from outside." Real play, in other words, is its own reward. It involves imagination, improvisation, and quite often the natural world. It's when kids engage in making-believe, horsing around, and inventing their own games. It's when they paint, or draw, or sing, or dance, or write a poem or story, not in order to fulfill an English or art assignment, but to answer the call of the Muse.

A great many observers consider our approach, which I once teasingly described to a dubious Alfie Kohn as the "summer camp" model of education, to be romantic or naïve, if not downright irresponsible or crazy. A dose of play here and there is fine, certainly. As the *Times* article noted, kids' brains need a rest once in a while. Their bodies also need exercise, and everyone recognizes the vital role of play in social development. But at the end of the day, learning is serious business and a lot of hard work.

Or is it? Let's examine the evidence for a moment, which increasingly confirms the fundamental contributions play makes to cognitive growth. We could begin with Piaget's research, which began with detailed observations of his own kids at home. He determined play to be so crucial that he wrote an entire book about it, his reasoning being thus: The kind of learning from which true intellectual growth emerges isn't a matter of passively absorbing and storing skills and information. Rather it is an active construction process, the building blocks of which are the kinds of developments that emerge from real play, whether it is with objects, ideas, or other people (Piaget 1951, 90). As Bill Crain pointed out in the Winter 2004 issue of *Encounter*, Piaget described how early play leads to the use of symbols — hardly a trivial feat. Piaget also showed how older children's unstructured social play helps them learn to cooperate with others, and in the process develop the cognitive capacity to coordinate different perspectives. Indeed, I would suggest that playful discovery underwrites the kind of learning that is supposed to occur

at every stage of the model of development for which he is now famous.

Piaget unfortunately didn't have available to him the hard data that the rapid advances in brain scan and neurochemical analysis technology have provided in the three decades since his death. His goal had been to establish a fully biological theory of learning; but he was a little ahead of his time, leaving his ideas to be dismissed by many as quasi-scientific, and to be ignored by conventional educators almost entirely.

Meanwhile, leading-edge research in biology, cognitive and developmental psychology, and neuroscience, when adequately synthesized, supports Piaget's intuition about the vital role of play. For example, according to psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's (1985) more recent Self-Determination Theory, infants are born with an innate drive to understand and master their worlds. Fueling that drive is the unquenchable desire to investigate the novel aspects of the environment, and to be "persistent in their attempts to make them familiar." And novelty, of course, is the essential ingredient of play.

Deci and Ryan's theory is based on the fact that the brain is by design a novelty-seeking system. Novelty, it turns out, is one of the brain's primary criteria for deciding which input to attend to and which to ignore as it attempts to sort through the constant barrage of incoming stimuli. Then, when we encounter something novel, our brains release increased quantities of the neurotransmitters dopamine and serotonin, two of a handful of powerful hormones that modulate the functioning of the nervous system. At the neural level, dopamine and serotonin activate the brain's attentional networks and energize all of the cognitive areas that cooperate to make learning happen.

### Positive Emotions

Recent brain *and* heart research shows that positive emotions have profoundly beneficial neurological effects on the learning process. In a review of the past 20 years of research in positive psychology, psychologist Barbara Fredrickson et al. (2003) state that feelings such as joy, amusement, and affection significantly heightens the brain's ability to focus and

problem solve. The bottom-line reasoning once again is that positive emotions increase the overall circulation of dopamine in the nervous system. Not that it takes a neuroscientist to tell us what any observant teacher already knows: happy children freely pursuing challenges that are interesting and meaningful learn almost without effort. But perhaps herein lies the biological foundation for learning that Piaget was seeking.

As for the heart, according to neurocardiologist Rollin McCraty (2006), positive emotions cause it to send out harmonious electromagnetic signals so powerful that they synchronize the other organs in the body into the same coherent pattern. When the coherence is sustained, the brain, which also operates electromagnetically, shifts into the kinds of alpha wave activity that are most conducive to learning. McCraty has conducted numerous experiments that have yielded results almost identical to Fredrickson's: positive emotions increase attention and memory, facilitate open thinking and innovative problem solving, and promote cooperation and sociability (McCraty 2006, 30-32).

### Personal Relationships

That takes care of the first two P's, play and positive emotions. Now for the third: personal relationships. Psychiatrist Allan Schore (1994) points out that when an infant is born, the emotional and social centers in the brain are fully operational, while the cognitive centers largely begin as a vast sea of undifferentiated and unconnected neurons. This means that the young child's "thinking brain" depends almost entirely on a combination of social and emotional experience to awaken and shape the neural networks that will support the unfolding of intelligence.

A great deal of early learning, then, occurs within the context of relationships with others, beginning of course with mom. When mother and baby are enjoying the nurturing bond that nature intended, they merge in a state of shared pleasure that floods both of their brains with dopamine, meaning that this relational exchange plays a huge role in the baby's neural development (Schore 1994, 77-84).

A careful reading of Piaget (e.g., 1968) supports the essential role of social interactions as children

grow older. Piaget is known for a theory of scientific thinking, but he found that there is a consistent parallel between social and scientific thought. For example, the consideration of alternative perspectives in our relations with other people has its counterpart in scientific thinking. It is quite possible that progress in social development feeds academic progress. The educational strategies of the Piagetian Constance Kamii frequently develop thinking through playful social games (Crain 2005, 139-140).

When I add the above theory to my decades of practical experience with children who spend their school days playing, laughing, relating, and enjoying nearly everything they do, I am quite convinced that an approach to education based on play, positive emotions, and personal relationships isn't so crazy after all. Indeed, in a school where the three P's are the real curriculum, mastering the three R's really isn't hard work. That's why the majority of our students, unless they come to us with significant learning or emotional difficulties, are able to achieve the same skill sets as children in conventional schools in a fraction of the time. For them, there's nothing serious at all about the business of learning — and why should there be?

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# Rooks

Polly Devlin

## A distinguished writer's memory of birds and loss

"They'll start building their nests tomorrow," my father said, looking out of the window at the constellation of rooks, watching their undulations, sinking downwards and then sheer up, flapping, shifting, settling, swaying on the edges of the tall old trees around the house in which I grew up, the family house, like crepe decorations at Dracula's house.

"Why tomorrow?" I said.

"It's the first of March," he said, "their anniversary, and they always start then, except if it's a Sunday. They won't start on a Sunday."

He was the sanest of men except when he was dealing with folklore, superstition, and charms. And now we're coming round to believing in what he believed in, what so many of his generation and generations before him, reeling back into history, believed in, before we got so clever and so cynical. There was magic that has nearly been lost, of the cures and charms which were intrinsic and corporeal in our lives when we were children and are now so rare as to be almost vanished. A Charm was a gift, an attribute for a particular form of healing often passed down from one member of a family to another. It often possessed a seer's vision, knowing in advance what form of cure someone needed before they had made a formal request. When I was a child, in my country district in Ireland, as many people went to have their illness or the illness of an animal charmed away as went to a vet or a doctor; and all the many children with warts at school had them charmed off.

I went out to look at what preparations the rooks were making for this vast new nesting operation on the morrow, but they seemed as impudently relaxed as ever, apparently undriven by any biological urge other than to behave like the hooligans of the bird world, raucous, bullying, swaggering on the wing.



POLLY DEVLIN is a writer, broadcaster, film-maker, art critic, and conservationist. Her first book, *All of Us There*, is now a Virago Modern Classic. In 1993, she was named an Officer of the British Empire (OBE) for services to literature. Her most recent book, *A Year in the Life of an English Meadow* (with Andy Garnett), was published in 2007.

In fact they looked and sounded as they always do, handsome scoundrels, small-time gangsters, hanging around the street corners of the sky, giving any passer-by a hard time and the once-over, and making a real racket about it. The idea of them starting to build a cosy nest the next day seemed improbable.

"You should always tell the rooks the news in the house," my father's friend Willie said. Willie knows all the folklore; if he gets stuck he makes it up.

"Surely you mean the bees?" I said. "You tell the bees."

"Not a hait of the crack," he said. "You wouldn't tell themens anything, they'd sting the face off you as soon as listen. Its rooks you tell; if you don't and then the thing happens they'll leave and build their rookery someplace else."

I tried to think of some exciting piece of news I could withhold from them, to occasion the sulk and the exodus. "Rooks have schools," Willie said. "There's times when they'll all be perched on the branches and not a peep out of them and that's when they're teaching the young."

If those are schools, I thought, then they were like the schools I sometimes see let out on London for a day-outing — anarchic swarms of pupils with a defeated teacher trying to make himself heard, lost in the muddle.

"They say that if they leave a house it's bad luck," my father said.

"That's the honest truth," Willie said. "There's not a house they left that's not derelict."

I did not say that philosophy can be made to fit the facts and vice versa, and the sad raw history of Ireland is tied up with folklore and superstition. I thought to myself that dereliction of the houses had little to do with the rooks either coming or leaving, but I kept my peace.

"I would miss them if they left," my father said.

I thought how much I wouldn't. That incessant cawing that punctuated my childhood; the muddle of sticks on the lawns; the endless circling shapes against the sky; the vast flurries when they all poured themselves upwards at some internal alarm, the early morning chorus; the way they ruined the trees tearing at the branches.

And I thought too, of how quiet the place would be without them and how lonely, and how much my

father loved and celebrated them as he loved and celebrated so much, seeing interest and amusement in things that I, left to myself, would only find irritating. He could always shift the world a little on its axis by the nudge of his humour.

\* \* \*

I was going back to England and I was frightened and before I left I went down under the trees and told them that I had no news and didn't want any news; all I wanted was that my father would see them build their nests for a little while longer.

"You were down with them all the same," he said, when I came back in. "What were you telling them?" "Nothing," I said, and he looked at me sharply. "Do you remember what your mother used to recite ... *I climbed a hill as light fell...*" he hesitated.

"As light fell short," I prompted, the tears about to trip me. "Short," he said, pleased. "*Short... And rooks came home in scramble sort; and filled the trees and flapped and fought, and sang themselves to sleep.* Whoever wrote that had looked their fill at rooks all right."

To cover the moment I said, "You couldn't exactly call it singing."

"I do, daughter," he said. "It's singing to me. I'd hate not to hear them singing themselves to sleep."

The next morning as I drove away, along the road by the lough shore, I saw one rook and then another and another, a kind of disconnected rosary of black shapes, fly to the top of the trees with twigs and straws in their beaks to start their nests. It was the first of March and it wasn't a Sunday, and I knew he would be at the window smiling.

I went back again this year, on a different kind of anniversary and there they were busily about their nests as though nothing had happened. I went down to them, perched in their trees and I told them too that there was no-one left who thought their noise was singing, and as I watched their great black wings rising in scramble sort, I remembered those lines from *In Memoriam*: "The last red leaf is whirl'd away,/ The rooks are blown about the skies..." and their movement and colour matched my mourning.

# Children and Urban Gardens

Tom Goodridge

**Gardens help inner-city children connect to the rich and broad community of living things.**

Witnessing the bulldozing of the Garden of Love shook my assumptions. It forced me to change course. The school garden we had tended for five years on the empty lot across from our Harlem elementary school had become the heart of my teaching. The garden was created as a place for city children to dwell in the arms of Mother Nature. The bulldozer had destroyed the garden's 14 trees, woody plants, wildflowers, herbs, and vegetables. But, despite this loss, I believe the children's sense of the natural world they had taken from the garden could not be bulldozed away.

As a child I had spent summers by a glacial lake in western Connecticut where I was free to roam and meet up with the diverse inhabitants of that ancient hemlock forest: foxes, flying squirrels, copperhead snakes, maidenhair ferns, mountain laurel. Long afternoons were spent chasing the bullfrogs and painted turtles of the lake. As a child I came to feel that I belonged to a wide, wonderful, wild family. My sense of continuity with this ancient and diverse lineage has continued to sustain me into middle age. My childhood experience of feeling that I belonged to this great Earthen family has encouraged me to take on adventures throughout my life like teaching in Harlem. This rooted sense of connection to the Earth has given me the resilience to carry out my mission of connecting city children with nature, even after the bulldozing of the the Garden of Love.

As a teacher, I wanted the 5- to 8-year-old students in my special education class, who faced so many challenges in life, to feel the same kind of connection to a natural community that had sustained me at that age. I often felt inadequate to address the issues of poverty, violence, divorce, and developmental disabilities that my students faced at such a tender age. In the garden, I was able to guide my students' learning by following their innate curiosity about the natural world.



TOM GOODRIDGE worked 11 years as a special education teacher in a Harlem, NY, elementary school. He is currently a doctoral candidate at Union Institute and University, where he is conducting research on the impact of gardens on inner city children.

### A Sample Lesson

The garden taught some students profound lessons. One example is 5-year-old Chantel, whose father had sole custody of her because her mother continued to use crack. When Harry, the jack-o-lantern our class had carved for Halloween, was ready for the garden's compost pile, Chantel insisted on carrying Harry's heavy, smelly, moldy remains to its final resting place in the earth. She had closely watched Harry's transformation from a firm pumpkin to a rotting mess. In the garden, the class held hands to make a circle around Harry's remains atop the compost pile as we sang this song, "Goodbye Harry, go to Earth, so more pumpkins may have birth. Goodbye Harry, go to soil, so that little pumpkins have less toil." Over the next two years I taught Chantel, and when we passed that section of the garden she would often say something about Harry. I believe Chantel's keen interest in Harry and his life cycle might have suggested something to her about the perpetuation of life.

### My New Awareness

The Garden of Love had served as a sanctuary for me from the pressures of urban teaching, a place to escape from all that I found wrong with education and a place where I could provide children like Chantel with a direct experience of their connection to the living Earth. When I was interviewed on national television news after the bulldozing, a cook in the school's kitchen who had seen the interview commented that she had never before seen me angry. The violent loss of this garden sanctuary did, indeed, make me angry, but confronting that anger led me through a personal transformative process that allowed me to discover my individual mission. I came to realize that the Garden of Love's destruction was symptomatic of something much larger: our culture's alienation from the natural world. I made a life decision that I needed to address this problem in my own personal and professional life. Through a process of personal development and a study of ecology I have come to understand that I am an integral part of the living earth. I now understand that my personal identity is a part of a much larger ecological community. On this earthen stage I now believe that I

can only realize my whole identity through integration with this larger ecological community.

### Green Man

One recent avenue has been to develop as a performance art my personal interpretation of the Green Man of Western mythology. For an audience of children, I dress in green and silently animate a large green hand puppet, a praying mantis. The Green Man image represents the primordial human connection to the living earth. In my interactive performances I attempt to awaken the slumbering greenness of my audience. In May Day rituals still practiced in parts of England and Austria the sacrificed Green Man returns from his winter death to once again beckon humans back to their earthen home and family. After the garden's loss, I felt Green Man's inspiration in shaping my mission to claim our fuller humanity by integrating ourselves within the larger ecological community.

### A New Garden

After the public outcry against the Garden's bulldozing, the city offered us another empty lot that was adjacent to the school. I then decided to take a leave from teaching and become the volunteer Garden Coordinator to help develop a new garden. At the same time I enrolled in Union Institute and University's doctoral program to study how city children played, learned, and developed in a school garden.

Education is like gardening in that both cultivate that which is native or "wild" into something more useful to society. Educators of young children are asked to cultivate conformity to cultural norms in the "natural" children that arrive in their classrooms. The relationship teachers develop with their young students acts as a bridge to introduce the child to the world of the classroom. This is similar to how a gardener must cultivate a wild plant into their garden. As an educator of special children, I attempt to reach out to meet my students "where they are at" and create a classroom culture that supports children's individual and cultural diversity. Every gardener knows that one must respect the laws of growth particular to each kind of plant. The gardener must learn how much sun and moisture, what soil and what com-

panion plants a particular species requires. These needs may change over the life cycle of the plant. What's more, even within a species, not all plants are the same. Individual plants have their own needs, and individual plants can adapt in unique ways to changing conditions.

Metaphorically, I attempted to treat my students as if they were seeds of unknown plants. I tried to remain open to the unknown potential held within each mysterious seed. My students all had well-documented disabilities, but I wanted to discover what they *did* know and what gift they might bring to our classroom and eventually into our world.

When children were weeding in the garden, they would sometimes ask, "Why are we taking out this plant?" I had to admit to them that if we could not identify the "weed," we might be unintentionally removing the plant which could someday provide a cure for asthma, a condition with which they are very familiar as it affects so many in their school.

### Play and Language

To continue the "education as gardening" metaphor, play could be said to be to children what soil is to plants. Play is a kind of universal medium in which children are able to express themselves and forge relationships with others. I attempted to create a safe environment in which different kinds of play might spontaneously emerge from the children whether in the classroom or the garden.

Play is an essential medium for children to represent their understanding of the world and communicate it to others. Especially when they are still acquiring functional language, play helps children mobilize and organize their lives.

Language may be understood as the primary cultivator of children. As children learn to name their experience according to their culture's code, they achieve a new status and enhance their agency within their human community. But even without language children are able to relate with plants, animals and other natural elements.

The land of play is so wide that the leading developmentalists have each been able to map only limited regions of it. Piaget closely observed how children came to know the properties of their physical environment through play. Piaget identified how

children progress through a sequence of stages on their way to the acquisition of the abstract laws that frame western rational/scientific ways of knowing (Crain 2005, 122. 230). Vygotsky observed how children's social play develops children's capacity for culture and language. Vygotsky also observed how social play promoted collaborative meaning-making among children (Vygotsky 1978, Ch. 7).

My classroom had a block area and a drama area filled with cultural props for children to make meaning from their shared world. The Garden of Love had provided another as yet unmapped land for play. I observed how contact with plants, worms, rocks, and other garden elements encouraged novel and collaborative play from these urban children. Even children who had not acquired language were able to relate to the plants and bugs they found in the garden. Their play in the garden seemed less confined by cultural expectations than did their classroom play. I am still learning how urban children who were not yet fully socialized to cultural expectations experience gardens and the natural world.

### Conclusion

The ecological crisis, with its pollution of the air, water and earth, the warming of the planet, and the loss of species, has shaken many of the assumptions of Western culture. Unrestrained industrial development must be reexamined. If humans are to continue to live on this planet they will need to learn how to balance their own needs with the needs of other natural systems. Addressing this crisis will require learning new ways, more mutually enhancing and integrated ways, to co-exist with the wider ecological community. What might young children who spend meaningful time in a school garden teach us about more ecologically integrated ways to live with the natural world?

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# Dog Trust

## Lessons from Our Companions

Marc Bekoff

**Trust often comes down to faith in our good intentions, and we should never betray this faith.**

We often hear that the companion animal beings with whom we share our lives have unqualified trust in us — that they believe we will always have their best interests in mind, that they love us unconditionally and would do anything for us. And, indeed, they often do, taking care of us and causing themselves harm in selflessly doing so.

From time to time I think it's a good idea to revisit, if only briefly, some common beliefs we have about relationships between ourselves and other animals. I've been asked on many occasions about trust among animals, so I wrote this short essay to get some of my thoughts on the table for discussion.

What does it mean to say our companions trust us? The notion of "trust" is difficult to discuss because it's very broad and also has many different sides. Trust is related to intention — what a person (or other animal) intends to do, and whether their actions are in the best interest of another being. It's possible to have the best of intentions and to do something that harms another being. This doesn't mean that the individual who erred shouldn't ever be trusted again.

Now, what about the trust that our companion animals have in us? Their wide eyes that pierce our souls tell us clearly that they just know we'll always do the best we can for them. I find it easiest to think about dog trust in terms of what they expect from us, their innate, ancestral, and deep faith in us, their unwavering belief that we will take our responsibilities to them as seriously as we assume responsibility for other humans.

Basically, they expect that we always will have their best interests in mind, that we will care for them and be concerned with maximizing their

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well-being. So, we feed and exercise our companions regularly, we scratch them behind their ears that vary in size and shape, rub their bellies and watch them succumb to our touch, melting like hot butter as our fingers massage them into deep relaxation. We also hug them, love them, and welcome them into our homes as family members (which pleases them immensely because they're such social beings), and we take them to a veterinarian when they need medical care. They feel better because of our devotion to them.

We are our companions' trusted guardians, not their owners. We don't own our companions like we own such property as our bicycles and backpacks. Recently the Boulder City Council overwhelmingly agreed that dogs are not owned commodities <[www.bouldernews.com/news/local/12lpets.html](http://www.bouldernews.com/news/local/12lpets.html)>.

Having said this, on occasion we may also intentionally expose our companions to painful situations, such as allowing them to receive vaccinations or to undergo surgery, when we believe that it's in their best interests. We haven't betrayed our trust by causing them intentional pain. My ever-trusting companion dog, Jethro, recently needed acupuncture for bad arthritis in his left elbow, and he clearly didn't like it the first two times he was stuck with the needles. But afterwards he settled in and went through the treatments with no hesitancy, even dragging me into the veterinarian's office!

The pain to which I exposed Jethro was caused intentionally by me and the veterinarian. But we did not betray his trust in us. However, if we beat our companions or otherwise abuse them, leave them in a hot car, starve them, neglect their need for love, or allow them to be abused in horrible experiments, we have betrayed them, we have let them down.

But in most instances they'll still trust us in the future. It's just who they are — who they have become via the evolutionary process of domestication. Dogs are so attached to humans that many people have seen dogs being abused in experiments and in other situations, only to look up at the human and wag their tails as if to say, "This hurts me, but you must mean well — how could you possibly mean otherwise?" Their "dog-talk" says it all.

It breaks my heart to know that some people can be so evil. And I know that many others agree that

betraying the trust that our companions have in us simply unacceptable behavior that must never be tolerated. Dogs and other animals tell us they trust us by their actions, their willingness to allow us to do just about anything to them. Remember this when you interact with our animal companions. They trust us unconditionally, and it's a malicious double-cross to betray their deep feelings of trust in our having their best interests in mind. Remember also that in most cases they'll joyfully prance back for more of what we dish out, always expecting that we really do have their best interests in mind. They're that trusting and confident.

It's indisputable that we severely psychologically and physically harm our companions when we let them down, when we neglect them or dominate them selfishly with no interest in the deep hurt for which we're responsible. When we betray our companion's innocence and trust, our actions are ethically indefensible and we become less than human; it's simply wrong, so let's not do it — ever.

Let's work hard to instill a deep-caring ethic in all people and in our children, ambassadors of goodwill (for other animals and ourselves) in the future. Humane education is critical. In addition to teaching children through books and other second-hand materials, we need to provide clear examples of compassion, respect, and love in our own behavior. Children are such keen observers.

The hearts of our companion animals, like our own hearts, are fragile, so we must be gentle with them. You can never be too nice or too generous with your love for our dear and trusting companions, who are so deeply pure of heart. Indeed, by honoring our companion's trust in us we tap into our own spirituality.

These wonderful beings make us more human. Let's openly and graciously thank them for who they are, for their unfiltered love, and embrace their lessons in passion, compassion, devotion, respect, spirituality, and love. Surely, we will never have any regrets by doing so, and much pure joy will come our way as we clear the path for deep and rich two-way interdependent relationships based on immutable trust with our companions and all other beings.

# Let Kids Be Free

Elana Davidson

**All too often, adult beliefs and practices limit children's freedom and prevent them from developing their unique abilities.**

As adults we have been socialized into certain views about the nature of children and our role in their lives. Our conceptions of children are often social constructions; they come from society and shape children's experience, often without reflecting the true nature of children or their capacities. Social constructions also prevent us from relating to children with respect, care, and equality. In this essay I will describe some of the ways we routinely limit children and our relationships with them, and I will suggest some alternatives.

## Homogenization

Accepting our social construction of childhood, we make such statements as, "Kids are ..." and "Kids need..." While there may be some things that apply to all children, and some things that all children need, our rhetoric too often lumps a diverse group of people under one heading. It creates a homogeneous group rather than recognizing unique people with unique aptitudes, talents, and needs. There are very few statements that apply universally to all members of a group (be it a gender, ethnic, class, religious, or age group), and this is true of children as well. Rather than seeing the unique persons in front of us, we see our own labels.

Lumping people together on the basis of a particular, non-changeable characteristic is common toward socially disadvantaged groups. In such statements as "Women are ..." and "What women need is ..." there is a paternalistic tone suggesting that someone besides the particular women knows what's in their best interest. It's as if to say, "I, not being part of your group, am going to tell you what your experience is and what you need without consulting you in the least." In this way we exert power over rather than share power with. We do not allow them to be actors in their own lives. And this is true with respect to children.



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Perhaps I, as an adult, have some insight into the needs of the children with whom I have relationships, but it is important to me that I do not impose my ideas of what children need (or even an individual child needs) without evaluating the situation, my motivation, and the child involved. To make sure I understand what they are saying, it is important that I get some confirmation of my insights either through words or by taking a small action on my hunch and seeing how the child responds. If we do this, then the way we respond in one instance may be very different than how we respond in another (Gordon 1970). By listening to what kids need and not simply inserting pre-formed ideas, we begin to share power and give children opportunities to be actors in their own lives.

### Adult Imperialism

Children are actors and autonomous beings, not solely to be acted upon by adult ideology. Emma Goldman said, "The key question for people interested in freedom is whether 'The child is to be considered as an individuality, or an object to be molded to the whims and fancies of those about it'" (What Methods... 2006).

All too often we, as adults, are more interested in molding children to *our* whims and fancies than in *their* freedom. Our focus so often is not about developing a relationship with another interesting and interested human being, but about turning the child into something other than what he or she is. We have come to view childhood as preparation for life, not part of life itself. Unfortunately such an idea has led us to view children not as fellow human beings engaged with living their lives but for the future persons they will someday become. This is a devaluing experience. Who you are right now matters only in the ways that it assists the development of the future adult you will someday become (and that adult society thinks you should become). Children are then no longer people in their own right but possess value only as future adults (Crain 2003).

I experienced this first hand while working at a daycare center. There was little scope for relating to the children as fellow interesting and interested human beings. Instead, there was an underlying attempt to change the kids and to turn them into some-

thing different, most often toward an adult-defined goal. (And this was at a play-based center.)

It's a dishonest and subtly manipulative way of trying, through your interactions, to make someone into something else. This is not to say that adults do not have knowledge and wisdom to share with children, but that to see children as deficient and to always be imposing on them your idea of who they should become is devaluing, imperialistic, and does not respect them as the persons they currently are.

### Teachers and Students in Constant Flux

Institutional arrangements also affect adult/child relationships. One of the child's most prominent relationships to a non-family adult is with his or her teacher. However, most students switch teachers every year, which gives little time to develop a significant relationship. The students never really get to know the teacher, and the teachers, before they've learned anything of real value about the students, have a whole fresh group of students to teach. (One exception is Waldorf Schools where the students and teacher are together for eight years — ideally.) In addition, most children also switch schools (e.g., from elementary to middle school), which further limits the scope of their relationships and adds to students' bewilderment and confusion at constantly adjusting to new settings.

Constant change in the adult/child relationship keeps school impersonal. No wonder kids feel like adults don't care about them! Most of the kids I came to know at the daycare center where I worked just a year and a half ago are probably gone by now — to new schools, new teachers, and new peers. Although this constant switching undermines meaningful or lasting relationships, most people probably never even think about it.

As is often mentioned, the constant switching reflects the factory model of education. Children are like products on an assembly line, moved from one school employee (teacher) to another. But we should also note that the social construct of the child as nothing but a "learner" does not allow him/her to be someone sufficiently important with whom to develop a relationship (Crain 2009). The child is not really a full person with whom an adult would like to deepen mutuality.

### Power With, Not Power Over

If we want to put an end to actions based on rhetoric, ideology, and positions of imperialism with children, we must examine our privilege and positions of power. We must learn not to use our advantaged position (of having more knowledge, skills, and power, and being both physically and psychologically larger than children) to act upon children and control them.

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*Perhaps I, as an adult, have some insight into the needs of the children with whom I have relationships, but it is important to me that I do not impose my ideas of what children need (or even an individual child needs) without evaluating the situation, my motivation, and the child involved*

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Nor must we let ourselves be acted upon. Supporting child autonomy and self-determination is about mutual respect and cooperation. Sharing power with children is not about permissiveness and just passively accepting everything a child does or is in direct conflict with our needs. It is not about avoiding conflict, but constructive engagement with it. It is about giving and receiving with equal respect, and finding ways in which everyone's needs can be met.

For many adults who are accustomed to having an unequal and authoritarian share of power, giving that up may feel threatening, even inconceivable. We have been taught that it is our responsibility to control children's behavior and it can be difficult to imagine interacting with them in any other way. For those interested in exploring schools that give children self-determination, I recommend reading A.S. Neill's *Summerhill* (1960), as well as Matt Hern's *Field Day* (2003) and Chris Mercogliano's *In Defense of Childhood* (2007). In

these books, schools experiment with real child autonomy and decision-making. For a list of schools that use democratic decision-making processes and give students the freedom to decide what they want to learn and how they want to learn it, see <educationrevolution.org>.

### "It's Unsafe"

One of the ways we interfere with children's autonomy, rather than cultivating relationships of mutual respect, is through our belief in children's limited capabilities. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We don't allow kids to do things of which we think they are incapable, and they therefore never have an opportunity to prove otherwise. We give them limited opportunities to gain the skills needed for tasks that are at first challenging.

A particular way we restrict children's autonomy is through our preoccupation with their "safety." "It's not safe" — to me these words are often a subtle form of manipulation that undermine kids' ability to trust themselves.

Matt Hern writes in his book *Field Day* (2003, 138),

We have entered an era in which children's ability to explore the world on their own terms has become increasingly constricted, largely under a rubric of "safety." Both in and out of schools, it has become acceptable to obsessively monitor and supervise children for their own good, and the idea of "safety first" has become a cliché.

New skills and tasks often involve some level of risk. Fumbling is part of learning. Yes, kids fall down when they ride their bikes, and even get nasty scrapes and bruises, but eventually they get it and learn how to stay upright. Should we keep a kid from learning to ride a bike because of the risk involved?

Adults hurt themselves all the time doing a number of things, but we don't use that as justification to bar them from a particular activity. Just because someone hits his finger with a hammer is not proof that he should not use one. Plenty of adults cut themselves while using sharp knives, yet we do not consider this a sign of their incompetence as we do with children. Kids, with the proper guidance, can use such tools. Kids may hurt themselves from time to time but this is no reason to assume total incompe-

tence. Instead we should help them gain the skills needed for success. As one Free School learned,

As it turns out, the daily dangers are challenges to the children, to be met with patience, determination, concentration and most of all, care. People are naturally protective of their welfare, not self-destructive. The real danger lies in placing a web of restrictions around people. The restrictions become challenges in themselves and breaking them becomes such a high priority that even personal safety can be ignored. (Hern 2003, 139).

I am friends with a young child, Ana, who has not had a web of restrictions placed around her. She possesses a striking confidence. She is not timid or afraid and indeed meets the daily challenges of life with patience, care, and poise. I remember one day (when Ana was 1½) when she and I were walking down the path in the woods. She was naked and barefoot (as usual). We were walking together and I waited for her as she made her way slowly. I offered my hand from time to time when it seemed needed. She did not ask to be picked up and, even though there are sticks in the path and some thorns, I let her make her own way. She was confident in her ability, maybe because no one ever taught her not to be. She was able to trust herself and her own ability and to find her own limits.

Thus, predetermining what is safe for children, we decide their limits and do not give them the chance to test or expand the limits of their current capabilities (which may be entirely different from what we think they are). We also limit them from developing abilities in areas where they may at first have limited skills. Thomas Gordon (1970, 85) said,

Professionals [therapists, psychologists] learn from experience that you can have faith in the capacity of children to deal constructively with their own life problems. Parents underestimate this capability.

### Children Trusting Themselves

Believing children are incompetent keeps us managing their lives. Such acts foster a relationship of dependence and enforce inequality. By constantly deciding for children, we teach them to look to external

authority for answers and permission. In his book, *Escape From Childhood*, John Holt (1974, 49) writes, that we have set ourselves up as helpers of children, but that “[t]he trouble with one person defining himself as a helper of others is that unless he is very careful he is almost certain to define them as *people who cannot get along without his help* (emphasis in the original). Children can most likely get along without our help far better than we think they can.

I once lived and worked on a small family homestead, where I paid particular attention to the lives of the children and wrote about childhood. The children there were much freer to manage their own lives than most children. They come and go freely, playing their own games and entertaining themselves independent of adult involvement.

Trusting them to manage their own lives takes such a burden off of parent or adult caretaker! It frees up both the child’s and the adult’s energy. And in my experience, children who are entrusted with their own lives will take greater care of themselves than if it is someone else’s responsibility (see also Hern 2003).

When I worked at an elementary school, I remember how frustrated I was at being asked to make decisions for children, such as whether they could take their coat off. I wanted to say, “You decide. I don’t care. If you feel like taking it off, if you are hot and would feel better without your coat on, do so.” Instead the children had become dependent on adult permission, or the fear of admonishment or punishment. They had to seek outside approval for the validity of their experience. How long does it take to unlearn such behavior and learn to trust oneself and one’s own internal sense again? Some people probably never get there.

### Knowing What Children Need

Another incredibly devaluing belief is that children are incapable of evaluating their own interests in such a way that would prepare them for their future. The primary social mechanism for the imposition of this belief is the school. Our society assumes that anyone who does not receive the body of knowledge and information that the state deems necessary will be ill-prepared for adult life.

Ironically, the assumption is usually that the child will, as an adult, have many options, but we underestimate the growing child's ability to make any decisions or to figure out her own interests. Requiring a child to attend school and to be exposed to all sorts of things that are of no interest, limits her opportunity to develop her unique passions.

I know a young man who left school after the sixth grade to follow a more self-directed educational

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***If we truly wish to change our cultural construction of childhood to a more empowering one, in all that we do we must not assume that solely by virtue of being adults we have the best or right answers.***

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path. He enjoyed music and was able to devote much time to it. By the time he was eighteen he was a well-established musician. Had he been in school he wouldn't have had the time to develop his talent and may have found his options in the musical field limited. He was able to spend time on his true passion, and was not forced to learn things uninteresting or irrelevant to his desired direction in life.

### Conclusion

I have suggested how many beliefs and practices limit and control children. If children have greater opportunities to participate in society and to meet their own needs, not only will they have increased liberty and freedom, but the quality of relationship between adults and children, and indeed the quality of life for everyone, can be much improved.

What would it start to look like if we were to seriously examine our beliefs and practices and start to do things differently? What would it mean to take children's interests and opinions seriously and to let them be actors in their own lives rather than acting for them? What if we supported them in exploring

their own capacities and limits instead of imposing ours?

Changing individual behavior and practice will inevitably be constrained by the larger society. Implicit in my writing is not only the need for change at an individual level but at a societal and cultural level as well.

The cultural shifts needed for the true autonomy and freedom of children are many and vast. How might we begin to reconstruct society in ways that give children freedom? The task may seem daunting. Indeed, I have raised more questions than I have given answers, but I hope this questioning leads to possible answers. I do not believe that there is one answer, but many answers that arise from the needs of particular children and particular communities.

If we truly wish to change our cultural construction of childhood to a more empowering one, in all that we do we must not assume that solely by virtue of being adults we have the best or right answers. We must learn to listen to children and to take their experience and perspective into account as being equally valuable as our own. Children have a unique perspective on the world — a way of relating to the world and viewing things, which is special to each new generation. By discounting this perspective and not allowing children's participation in the larger adult society and culture until we have trained them into our way of thinking, we are missing an important perspective and perhaps inhibiting our own social and cultural evolution.

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# Unschooling

## An Oasis for Development and Democracy

Karl F. Wheatley

**Children can pursue their deepest interests and develop as autonomous individuals when they are freed from the confines of traditional schooling.**

Millions of years of evolution have created children who love to learn on their own — it's how nature has ensured our survival. Humankind has eaten from the tree of knowledge and continues to seek out this delicious fruit from the first moments of life — no force-feeding is necessary.

— Hirsch-Pasek and Golinkoff (2003, 21)

I live in a different universe from most parents and educators, and my dual life has made me question much of what I once believed about education. My wife and I are teacher-educators who “unschool” our two children, meaning that our children learn from their interests and daily life. In my university job, I teach about curriculum and lesson planning, while our children learn *without* any lesson plans, pre-planned curricula, or tests. I have colleagues who believe that learning to read is enormously difficult and requires specialized instruction, yet our own children learned to read without any formal instruction. While I have taught and written about the importance of content standards (Wheatley 2003), we rarely glance at them at home. Instead, we pay much more attention to “missing standards” such as positive emotions, love of learning, initiative, creativity, and persistence.

Unlike school people, who often think learning mostly happens in schools and requires a lesson led by a teacher, unschoolers believe that *people learn all the time and everywhere* (Holt 1989; McKee 2002). If their basic needs are met, children are excellent learners, but by changing learning into something called education that is forced on children, formal schooling undermines healthy development and learning. The title of a book chapter by Falbel (1996)



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captures this viewpoint: “Learning? Yes, of course. Education? No Thanks.”

In this article, I describe how unschooling offers many families a wonderful oasis for children’s development and for democratic living. Although unschooling purists might object, I use here the terms “unschoolers” and “unschooling” to refer those families who primarily or entirely let children learn about whatever they are interested in, and use little or no formal adult-chosen curricula.

### **An Oasis for Learning from Life and Play**

When children spend their days learning outside the four classroom walls, they can learn from fertile, moment-to-moment real life in a way that schools cannot match. For example, a wonderful opportunity for learning from life can be found in examining the erosion on a beach on a Tuesday in October, rather than reading about it in a textbook. While many teachers can’t imagine taking their classes on even four field trips a year, unschoolers might do one hundred. Learning from life is also found in discussing how advertisements on TV aim to create wants, turn wants into needs, and make people dissatisfied or unhappy if they cannot buy a particular product advertised on TV in four easy payments.

This oasis for learning from life is found in getting better at reading by trying to understand the instruction manual for a great computer game that is not only fun, but engages players with dozens of content standards — although it was not designed for education. It is learning to write and spell by writing a letter to a friend or making a menu for your pretend restaurant, not by learning the letter or sight word of the day for a worksheet or spelling test. It is also in learning about subjects like wars by arguing with a brother or sister, and learning from the rich and every-changing tapestry of real play. As someone who teaches about content standards, I am continually amazed by the way in which simple daily activities embody in a meaningful way so many content standards and benchmarks.

Equally important is what is learned *about* learning when children learn from life rather than artificial, skill-focused activities. They learn that learning can and should be natural, meaningful, and relevant to life, and that you learn for reasons that are obvi-

ous: curiosity, to solve a problem, etc. Moreover, they learn that life itself provides the richest ground for learning, that people learn all the time, and that they are good at learning and can learn whether or not an adult or “teacher” is present.

In contrast, as John Holt noted (1989), the “un-asked-for teaching” and spoon-feeding common in formal education send a powerful message that learning is something very difficult and unnatural, and that you, the learner, cannot possibly do it without the teacher leading you every step of the way. The assumption that learning always requires formal instruction, an assumption that is central to most schooling, communicates profoundly low expectations to students about their capacity as learners. Internalizing these low expectations is debilitating, making learners passive and dependent. Gatto (2005) sharply echoed this critique of the hidden curriculum of traditional schooling, arguing that American schools have always been designed to create emotional and intellectual dependence — to intentionally dumb us down.

### **An Oasis for Individualization**

Perhaps the most important aspect of unschooling is that it allows children to learn from experiences and activities that are matched to their own abilities, interests, rate of learning, and learning styles. Of all the principles that I and my teacher-education colleagues espouse, perhaps none is violated more consistently and blatantly in today’s factory schooling than the idea that education should be individualized according to children’s interests, abilities, and learning styles.

In unschooling, however, individualized education is not an abstraction; it occurs all the time, is largely designed by the learner, and includes individualization of content and methods. One child wants to read, another is playing piano, and the third is climbing trees. That’s fine, for unschoolers agree with Dennis Littky’s (2004, 75) remark that “there is no content that’s right for every kid.” Real individualization coupled with radical child choice turns some practices of institutional schooling on their heads. For example, I tell teachers to not rely on workbooks. However, a child who *chooses* to complete three math workbooks in two weeks is doing

something very different and much more developmentally appropriate than a child completing the same workbooks at the teachers' demand.

### An Oasis of Time

In our culture of microwave impatience, American schools have fallen for the three-headed lie that in education: earlier is better, faster is better, and teaching more is better. In reality, children learn best when they can learn at their own pace, can have as little or as much time as they need to learn, can learn at a time when they are motivated to learn, and when there is an appropriate balance of play, work, and rest (Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff 2003). Young children can fruitfully spend *hours* building with blocks, painting, digging in sand, or reading alone.

Most schools do not provide long or flexible time blocks, and while play has been eliminated, homework has crowded out time at home for healthy leisure activities and adequate sleep. Kindergartens where children only have 20 minutes of time for learning centers — if they have it all — are serious neither about individualization nor about whole child development. Neither are high schools with 6 to 9 time blocks crammed into a single day — a schedule that reflects the principles of the Prussian schools that were designed to produce obedient but unthinking workers and soldiers (Gatto 1996).

Not faced with the frantic pace and choppy scheduling of most schools, unschooled children can work on a project or “drop everything and read” all day if they wish. For example, our 10-year-old son read a 238-page book one day, and our daughter sometimes does art projects most of the day.

The unschooling oasis provides a relaxed tranquility about time that most schooled children only know during vacations. We live near two schools, so we see lots of families and kids racing to school, and sometimes you can see the tension on the mom's face as she tries to get her kids there before the bell. Meanwhile, our family may have stayed up a little late the night before talking about outer space, playing a new game, catching the total lunar eclipse, or watching election results roll in — so the kids are still in their pajamas. I help everyone get breakfast and then might play a card game with one child while the other searches on the laptop for information about

roller coasters. We sometimes get so engrossed in some activity that when we think to ask what time it is, we can be off by as much as an hour. In the words of motivation researchers (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi 1990), it is easy to get in a state of “flow” when learning and living this way.

This peaceful oasis of time exists across the months and years too. In contrast with artificially truncated 1- or 2-week curriculum units, the home learner who wants to only design roller coasters could spend most days on the activity for three months. Such a thought induces panic in many curriculum coordinators and teachers: “But how will they learn all those things they need to cover?!”

Unschoolers can go slowly because they have learned that children learn more effectively when they are interested and not pushed, and that if something is important to learn, the opportunity to learn it will come up. Indeed, much of the time panic of public schools results from the fact that the American curriculum is overcrowded to begin with, and children don't learn a standardized curriculum very well, especially not at a breakneck pace. Thus, every year teachers have to find time to re-teach all things that were never learned the first time.

### An Oasis for Loving Learning

Love of learning has long been one of teachers' and parents' most cherished goals for children, but tragically, some of the most poignant stories that parents tell are about the way in which their child's love of learning disappeared after entering school. As someone who teaches others about motivation, I find it profoundly disturbing how many people glumly resign themselves to the idea that this is just the way it is, and must be. From parents to doctoral students, it is breathtaking the degree to which people assume that these motivational declines are just “natural,” when in fact they are caused by factory schooling.

Unschoolers reject the idea that children must be coerced to learn with threats and bribes. They create lush spaces in which the abundant intrinsic motivation of childhood is kept alive.

What does a love of learning look like? It is a girl who is just becoming a fluent reader sitting curled up in a soft chair and reading a Junie B. Jones book for as long as she wants. It is children in their driveway at

night, looking with flashlights in bushes and under rocks — trying to figure out where *do* the slugs come from at night? It is a boy reading for three hours about the sinking of the Andrea Doria, and discussing with his father what the sinkings of the Andrea Doria and Titanic — and many human disasters — have in common. It is girls who gleefully exclaim “AGAIN!” after going off a diving board for the first time. It is the child who cannot stop thinking of things at night — why does this happen? What if? How come?

As Edward Deci (1995) pointed out, it’s human nature to have a great deal of intrinsic motivation to learn when our needs are met, just as it is in the nature of an avocado seed to sprout when placed in water. Unschooling parents, *with effort*, can provide this oasis for intrinsic motivation by meeting children’s needs and giving them the materials, space, flexibility, and time for growth. Furthermore, people who choose to unschool are often those who are also curious about life, and share their curiosity with their children. These parents foster the values and internalized motivation that propel kids’ learning even when it isn’t fun (e.g., Ryan & Deci 2000).

#### **An Oasis for Initiative, Creativity, and Better Boredom**

Initiative is a prized commodity in America, and unschooling offers endless opportunities for children to take initiative. It gives children practice deciding what they want to do or learn, planning how they will do it, and exercising the self-motivation and persistence necessary to make it happen. While traditional education mostly provides practice in being reactive and following instructions, unschooling makes space for children to be proactive and creative much of the day.

One of the most familiar and tragic sights in American elementary schools is the collection of 25 virtually identical art projects hanging in the hall. The child who learns to make his penguin look like everyone else’s loses initiative and creativity, while a child who has the freedom to decide not to make a penguin at all, or to build with Legos instead develops both initiative and creativity, and becomes more empowered by the experience.

One side benefit of all this choice is better boredom. Of course, unschooled children and their parents often experience boredom. However, it matters enormously if you are bored doing a task someone else made you do, or bored because of your own choices — and recognize that getting un-bored is partly or largely your responsibility. While school also often involves the kind of boredom that requires numb accommodation, and can be blamed on the teacher, boredom that *you* own supports developing self-regulation and true responsibility for one’s actions. One day our children and a large group of other unschoolers created hours of play together in the lake, using a giant log big enough for several of them to ride on. Children who have taken more responsibility for their own time and their own learning make amazing things happen.

#### **An Oasis for the Whole Child**

Schools have habitually neglected the arts, physical education, and important aspects of socio-emotional and character development (e.g., assertiveness). This unhealthy tendency has reached a critical stage under the misnamed “accountability” movement, which has led to reduced recess time and physical education, children vomiting on tests (Ohanian 2002), alarming increases in mental health issues (Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff 2003), and reduced time for science and social studies in order to raise test scores. Test-driven education ignores most areas of children’s development and cannot meet learners’ needs for security, fun, freedom, competence, and genuine relatedness. By not meeting children’s basic needs, the very foundations of healthy development are weakened. As Deborah Meier noted:

Thousands of years of history suggest that the schoolhouse as we know it is an absurd way to rear our young; it’s contrary to everything we know about what it is to be a human being. (cited in Littky 2004, vii)

Unschooling shelters children from the scorching heat of current educational policies and practices, and seeks a harmonious balance between the cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical; of play, work, and rest; and of all sorts of personal challenges. Thus,

the unschooled child who has had his fill of reading about inventions heads outside to ride his scooter, and the unschooled girl who has had enough trips to the beach or playground lobbies to not make the trip, and draws pictures instead. The child who is stressed from too many activities slows down his day; the child who is bored seeks more stimulation and challenge. Children learn to self-regulate because they are allowed to self-regulate, which is very different than just obeying.

### **An Oasis from Nonsense, Acceleration, and Other Harms**

Some schools have taken to teaching children to decode nonsense syllables — a skill that is useless in the real world but raises reading test scores — because some reading tests include nonsense syllables! This seems silly when viewed from outside of school culture, as do giant pep rallies to fire up children to take standardized tests. As many schools have turned into giant test prep centers, teaching and learning have been dumbed-down, distorted, and accelerated beyond reason (learning more low-level content faster). Even before schooling took this unhealthy turn, Howard Gardner (1991,202) concluded that “Attendance in most schools today does risk ruining the children.” Thus, many parents have said “Enough!” Unschooling allows us to escape from the unhealthy acceleration of teaching and learning.

Meanwhile, society has pushed children to grow up faster and buy more faster, while younger and younger children are exposed to profane language and music, violence, inappropriate behaviors, and sexual themes (Levin & Kilbourne 2008). For parents who do not want their 8-year-old exposed to language and behaviors that they would consider inappropriate even for a 14-year-old, unschooling provides a safe oasis. People may say “Oh, but you can’t keep your child in a bubble.” True, but homeschool parents have much more control over what young children see and hear (and the age at which they hear it) than do parents whose children attend school with children who have seen and heard who knows what. It matters greatly whether children first learn about mature subject matter at age twelve rather than at age six or eight.

### **An Oasis for Democracy**

“What shall we do today?” the unschooling mother or father asks the children. The parent will repeat variants of this question throughout the day, as activities take longer or shorter than expected, as interests ebb and flow, and as plans are negotiated among children and between adults and children. Sometimes the choices are bigger and sometimes smaller, and sometimes the adult decides what will happen next, for children also need to fit their ideas into the needs of everyone else in the family and the demands of running a household. Even within these constraints, the children have a staggering range of choices: what to do or learn, where to do it, how to do it, how long to do it, and when it is “finished.”

American democracy began in part with the Declaration of Independence, in which the signers refused to put up with King George’s unreasonable use of power, and declared the right of people to be self-governed and to overthrow any government that used power unreasonably. *This* is central to the American spirit and thus, homeschooling author David Albert (2003) describes preparing children for responsible exercise of freedom as a central concern of any meaningful education. To learn the sharing of power inherent in American democracy, children should practice it daily. Few schools attempt this, and long-term immersion in an autocracy *undermines* children’s preparedness for democracy. As Dennis Littky, principal of The Met high school, remarked,

No wonder our citizenry doesn’t feel empowered to bring about change. Most of us spend the 18 years before we cast our first vote with absolutely no say in any of the decisions that affect the place we spend the majority of our days. (Littky 2004, 51)

So, even if negotiating with children is mentally and emotionally challenging, unschooling provides an oasis in which children can engage in meaningful decision-making daily. Children develop the skills, habits, and values needed to become active citizens in a participatory democracy. While few education authors write about freedom in education (see Ayers 2004 for an exception), and freedom in education largely disappears after preschool, unschoolers and even homeschoolers using a more structured ap-

proach write about it all the time. In a chapter titled "Sweet Land of Liberty," Grace Llewellyn quoted a 12-year-old homeschooled boy: "Comparing me to those who are conventionally schooled is like comparing the freedoms of a wild stallion to those of cattle in a feedlot" (Llewellyn 1996, 34).

Unschooling also provides a helpful perspective for evaluating the relationship of educational practices to democracy. Thus, from an unschoolers' perspective, homework is a bizarre intrusion into the freedoms and lives of families, made even stranger by the lack of research indicating its effectiveness in the elementary grades. That parents do not stand up to this intrusion reflects, in part, an old but unhealthy power relationship between teachers and parents.

Even more deeply, why on earth do teachers get to decide that all children must make penguins today? Or that everyone must write essays on George Washington? If a compelling reason can be given, fine, but drawing elephants or writing about Thomas Jefferson would often serve the same purpose. Why don't children have more choice over what they are to learn? Countless authors have argued that the real core curriculum of schools is unquestioning obedience, and unschoolers object strongly to this deeply undemocratic aspect of most schooling.

Harriet Tubman said, "I freed a thousand slaves. I could have freed a thousand more if only they knew they were slaves." As unschoolers see it, schooled children and parents are certainly not slaves, but like slaves, schoolchildren and their parents have come to take for granted their lack of freedom in areas in which they should have a great deal of freedom.

### Conclusion

There has been endless discussion of educational reform in the past two decades, but the reforms have been limited to a very small aspect of learning: test scores. Unschooling may help American educators make the paradigm change that America's schools so desperately need. The classrooms of many wonderful teachers notwithstanding, most of American education is based upon a paradigm that is largely consistent with behaviorist psychology and an assembly line view of education. I believe that research on unschooling will ultimately show that kids are wired to learn; and if their basic needs are met, they are

very good at learning without rewards, punishments, competition, and without teacher-planned lessons aimed at low-level objectives or at passing standardized tests.

It is a great irony that our "schooling" might be improved the most if only educators would learn from "unschooling," a change that would make our schools a much better oasis for children's healthy development and learning, for strong families, and for democracy. This change would help make American schools a beacon for educators from all over the world.

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# Engaging Communities Outside the Classroom

J. Cynthia McDermott and Sylvie Taylor

**When students reach out to their communities, learning becomes engaging and meaningful.**

A wide variety of resources that can support and enhance student learning are generally overlooked. This is because teachers at all levels (K-12 as well as university faculty) too frequently work only within the confines of the four walls of their classrooms, in relative isolation from others, relying heavily on standardized curricula and textbooks as the primary tools for instruction. This article will encourage readers to step beyond their classrooms and connect to the opportunities that the surrounding community provides. Ecological principles of community psychology and the Foxfire Approach will serve as the primary tools for conceptualizing the creation of community-engaged classrooms and pedagogy.

## Ecological Principles

When teachers view their classrooms as communities, with each individual in the classroom serving as a link to the larger communities beyond the school or university, engaged classrooms begin to emerge. The ecological metaphor of community psychology, which views all social settings in much the way one would view a biological ecosystem, focuses on the interaction between individuals and the multiple social systems in which they are rooted. The ecological principles of community psychology provide a framework for understanding these relationships. Proposed by Kelly, the ecological model is based on four guiding principles: interdependence, adaptation, cycling of resources, and succession (Kelly 2006).



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*Interdependence* refers to the notion that all social settings (communities) are interconnected in such a way that changes in any part of the setting impact other parts of that setting. For example, the noise and constant motion of a road construction crew working outside of a school may distract students and teachers in a classroom and have an impact on students' ability to learn. Closely related to interdependence is the concept of *adaptation*, the notion that communities adjust to changes that occur within their systems. For example, a teacher in the classroom described above might adapt to the outside noise by shutting a window and talking louder.

*Cycling of resources* refers to how resources are allocated and maintained within a community. For example, educational technologies serve as resources, and their acquisition, use, and maintenance are integrated into the classroom. Finally, *succession* refers to historical contexts and future planning that contribute to preferred outcomes. For example, educators are mindful of the skill sets and knowledge bases necessary for their students to be successful in the future.

### A Case Example

These principles were covered in a Master's level course at Antioch University Los Angeles entitled Program Development and Evaluation. The course was taught by the second author, Sylvie Taylor, whose goal was that students learn how to develop and evaluate programs in community-based settings. The course readings provided theoretical content, and class lectures focused on the practical applications of the theoretical material. However, it was evident that experiential opportunities would be necessary for students to fully understand the complex processes described in the course and to apply them effectively in the real world. The instructor therefore engaged a community-based agency, the Los Angeles office of the Jewish Labor Committee, to provide students with real-world experiences. Because the Labor Committee's Executive Director functioned largely as a one-woman show, she was eager for the students to help her with her organizing activities.

As students learned about the history and work of the Jewish Labor Committee, several of the Jewish students in the course recommended that students could gain further insights into the Jewish community from

University Hillels (Jewish campus organizations). So students went to Hillel meetings and participated in thematic Seders, dinners with focused discussions of issues of importance to the Jewish community. In turn, the students gave talks to the Hillel community on the history of the Jewish Labor Committee.

At the same time, workers at three major grocery store chains in the greater Los Angeles area went on strike over wages and benefits. This event propelled the students into yet another set of new experiences. The Jewish Labor Committee helped train people to work picket lines, and the students attended the training sessions as observers. The students did not themselves participate in the picket lines, although the majority of the students made the personal decision to honor the picket lines and not shop at the stores where workers were on strike.

Through these projects, students learned about the ecological principles of communities. First, the grocery strike illustrated the principle of *interdependence*: Students saw how consumer choices directly affected working conditions of grocery store employees. Indeed, the students recognized that they themselves were consumers with the power to make a difference in the labor dispute by either honoring or crossing the picket lines. For the students who honored the picket lines, the *recycling* of resources altered dramatically, as they searched for alternatives to the grocery stores that had been their primary source for food and household goods. Students also had to *adapt* to the ever-changing activities of the Jewish Labor Committee. Finally, students witnessed first-hand the principle of *succession*; they saw how a strike could alter the future of workers and businesses and the future power of labor unions in Los Angeles.

In combination, these community experiences provided students with much more than an instructor could provide in the classroom. In turn, the experiences altered the way in which this course continues to be taught, with instructors actively seeking community-based opportunities for student engagement and participation.

### The Foxfire Approach

Another example of working outside of the classroom is found in the creation of the Foxfire Ap-

proach. It began in a Georgia high school English class, with a frustrated teacher named Eliot Wigginton (“Wig”). He recalls,

On one of the bleakest fall days in 1966, I walked into my first-period class, sat down on top of my desk and crossed my legs and said, very slowly and very quietly, “Look, this isn’t working. You know it isn’t and I know it isn’t. Now what are we going to do together to make it through the rest of the year?” The class was silent. (Wigginton 1985, 32)

Wig wanted his students to engage in activities that would make learning meaningful. Many hours and discussions later, the class decided to initiate a magazine project. As they envisioned the magazine, it would contain works by local students and students at other schools, as well as works by professional writers and authors from the surrounding community. This last decision produced a response from the community that affirmed the students’ work and became the basis of the teaching approach.

Wig began to teach the skills that would later become known as cultural journalism. Armed with tape recorder and camera, his students interviewed their neighbors and relatives and began to tap into the historical, cultural, and trade knowledge that was everywhere. His local students began to better appreciate the culture of the southern Appalachians and the students began to move away from the sense of being inferior hillbillies toward more positive attitudes about themselves as part of that culture.

About half the members of his classes were residential students from other parts of the nation, and they, too, looked on Appalachian culture with more appreciation. As students worked together to create the magazines, they came to rely on each other to accomplish the task at hand. Former enemies had to put aside their differences and eventually learn from each other. The process of cultural journalism provided an avenue of understanding.

The Foxfire students discovered that intellectual learning often occurs outside the school building. This lesson became part of the Foxfire Approach and has been applied over the years in other situations. Many Foxfire classrooms exist today, particularly at

the K-12 level. Increasing interest has led to Foxfire courses for college teachers as well.

In one instance, an instructor in a middle school English class got together with the first author of this article, Cynthia McDermott, in a graduate school literature class. Both wanted to help students understand the value of adolescent literature in a meaningful context. After surveying the classes on which book to choose, the winner was a novel about students who raised money for a statue for their school.

The two classes came together one evening and decided to do something like the students in the story. Many activities spiraled out of this first idea, including making quilts for children with AIDS. All the students came away with an appreciation about working with individuals different from themselves. Each individual had the opportunity to have an equal say in what was decided and all were able to bring their individual skills to the tasks. The middle school students and the graduate students worked together to create the quilts, raise money for the book author’s visit, and to arrange speaking engagements for her to help them achieve their goals.

At the root of Foxfire’s practices is the belief that work must be meaningful and engaging. In order for students to feel committed to the learning, the teacher and students must collaborate in the creation of the work. In essence they must become a community of learners linked to each other and to the communities beyond the classroom walls. When implemented, the Foxfire’s Core Practices (see Appendix) define just such an active, learner-centered, community-focused approach to teaching and learning. Regardless of a teacher’s experience — or the school context, subject matter, or population served — the Foxfire Approach can be adapted in meaningful ways.

As schools reach out to communities, students develop knowledge and insights that can benefit them throughout their lives. Students learn what it means to become engaged citizens. Their experiential knowledge, in turn, deepens their theoretical understandings. They become more fully educated.

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**Foxfire Core Practices with Comments\***  
(See <[www.foxfire.org/teaching.html](http://www.foxfire.org/teaching.html)>)

- (1) **The work teachers and learners do together is infused from the beginning with learner choice, design, and revision.** The central focus of the work grows out of learners' interests and concerns. Most problems that arise during classroom activity are solved in collaboration with learners, and learners are supported in the development of their ability to solve problems and accept responsibility.
- (2) **The academic integrity of the work teachers and learners do together is clear.** Mandated skills and learning expectations are identified to the class. Through collaborative planning and implementation, students engage and accomplish the mandates. In addition, activities assist learners in discovering the value and potential of the curricula and its connections to other disciplines.
- (3) **The role of the teacher is that of facilitator and collaborator.** Teachers are responsible for assessing and attending to learners' developmental needs, providing guidance, identifying academic givens, monitoring each learner's academic and social growth, and leading each into new areas of understanding and competence.
- (4) **The work is characterized by active learning.** Learners are thoughtfully engaged in the learning process, posing and solving problems, making meaning, producing products, and building understandings. Because learners engaged in these kinds of activities are risk takers operating on the edge of their competence, the classroom environment provides an atmosphere of trust where the consequence of a mistake is the opportunity for further learning.
- (5) **Peer teaching, small group work, and teamwork are all consistent features of classroom activities.** Every learner is not only included, but needed, and, in the end, each can identify her or his specific stamp upon the effort.
- (6) **There is an audience beyond the teacher for learner work.** It may be another individual, or a small group, or the community, but it is an audience the learners want to serve or engage. The audience, in turn, affirms the work is important, needed, and worth doing.
- (7) **New activities spiral gracefully out of the old, incorporating lessons learned from past experiences, building on skills and understandings that can now be amplified.** Rather than completion of a study being regarded as the conclusion of a series of activities, it is regarded as the starting point for a new series.
- (8) **Reflection is an essential activity that takes place at key points throughout the work.** Teachers and learners engage in conscious and thoughtful consideration of the work and the process. It is this reflective activity that evokes insight and gives rise to revisions and refinements.
- (9) **Connections between the classroom work, the surrounding communities, and the world beyond the community are clear.** Course content is connected to the community in which the learners live. Learners' work will "bring home" larger issues by identifying attitudes about and illustrations and implications of those issues in their home communities.
- (10) **Imagination and creativity are encouraged in the completion of learning activities.** It is the learner's freedom to express and explore, to observe and investigate, and to discover that are the basis for aesthetic experiences. These experiences provide a sense of enjoyment and satisfaction and lead to deeper understanding and an internal thirst for knowledge.
- (11) **The work teachers and learners do together includes rigorous, ongoing assessment and evaluation.** Teachers and learners employ a variety of strategies to demonstrate their mastery of teaching and learning objectives.

\* The Foxfire Core Practices are in boldfaced print. The authors' comments are in regular type.

# Literacy Education

## The Big Picture

Joseph Sanacore

**Instead of teaching literacy as an isolated activity, we need to address the whole child who lives in a real world.**

*Note: This article is adapted with permission from the author's "Needed: Critics of literacy education with a more inclusive perspective," which originally appeared in the online publication, International Journal of Progressive Education, 2007, 3.*



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The professional literature and the media are blitzed with publications that are critical of educational ideology, research, and practice. Many critics are concerned about basic skills in literacy, which they perceive to be inadequately taught in schools. They approach the problem from a variety of perspectives, including neuroscience, pediatrics, special education, speech-language pathology, and educational psychology. The critics are usually accomplished in their respective fields, and their insights can add to scientific knowledge. They have not, however, dealt with real children who are trying to learn in a real schools and the real world.

Because students bring their real-world experiences to school, caring educators realize that they must respond to their students' learning needs in big-picture ways, considering both emotional and academic perspectives. Only uninformed or naïve critics would view teaching and learning as pure cognitive functions. More than a half-century ago, Hight (1950) viewed teaching as an art involving human values and emotions. Supporting this notion of teaching as an art form is Parini's (2005) poignant reflection, which considers the classroom to be a kind of theater with the teacher playing a variety of roles, including actor and dramatist. Moreover, the results of Winograd's (2003, 1651-1652) research suggest that teaching is profoundly emotional work, which involves several dimensions:

- (1) There are rules that govern teachers' emotional behavior in schools.
- (2) Teachers do emotion work, or emotional labor, in response to these emotion rules.
- (3) Teachers experience emotions that have functional uses; that is, the emotions alert teachers to problems in their work and then action to address these prob-

lems. (4) Teachers experience emotions that have dysfunctional uses; that is, the emotions lead to self-accusatory behavior by the teachers, or they lead to the blaming of others, such as students, parents, or administrators.

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***More than a half-century ago,  
Gilbert Highet viewed  
teaching as an art involving  
human values and emotions.***

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As whole people, children (and adults) are primarily emotional and secondarily intellectual, and they are more likely to learn effectively when their emotional needs are considered in the framework of their learning. As Eisner (2005, 16) says

To neglect the social and emotional aspects of their development, to focus all our attention on measured academic performance, is to blind us to these youngsters' need to live a satisfying life.

Lacking this inclusive perspective, some critics have relegated the teaching-learning process to a vacuous context in which children's brains are considered disconnected receptacles for acquiring systematic skills.

#### **No Child Left Behind Act**

A contributor to this limited viewpoint is the No Child Left Behind Act, which promotes various reading programs designed to teach isolated skills and elevate standardized test scores. The programs put a heavy emphasis on systematic phonics, even though literacy educators have known for decades that effective classrooms are based mostly on effective teachers who focus on children's individual needs rather than on any singular approach to teaching reading (e.g., Bond & Dykstra 1997; Haycock 1998; Stewart 2004). While no responsible literacy educator would negate the importance of teaching skills, teachers are typically concerned with a variety of related issues, including the intensity of skills instruction, the need for differentiated instruction, and the extent to which skills are connected to meaningful contexts. My observations nationwide suggest that school administrators and teachers are working steadfastly to match

instructional practices with students' individual learning needs and, at the same time, are facing increasing pressure to implement a system of one-size-fits-all. In fact, all children do not need the same skills instruction and the same instructional intensity. Instead, effective teachers are needed who teach students, not programs (Allington 2002).

The current emphasis on test results creates its own problems. Howard Gardner thoughtfully reminds us that we must avoid the herd mentality because improving test performance is a dreadful goal for any education system. As Gardner (2005, 44) says,

A transient numerical result, due to any number of reasons, becomes the *raison d'être* for the whole educational process. What a depressing prospect.

Instead, we should focus our efforts on cultivating the minds we truly need in the future, including a disciplined mind, a synthesizing mind, a creative mind, a respectful mind, and an ethical mind (Gardner 2005). Furthermore, we should not forget the vitally important role of imagination and its connection to the growth and development of the human mind in both children and adults (Sanacore 2006). We need to nurture playful environments that encourage imagination and provide the groundwork for the advancement of knowledge into adulthood (Kane & Carpenter 2003). This big-picture perspective is substantially different from the teach-to-the-test regimen, which at best will result in temporary achievement gains and at worse will dissuade children from the lifetime love of learning.

#### **What Can Be Done?**

I encourage those who want to improve literacy to explore a variety of interesting research findings and innovative approaches.

For example, Treiman's (1985) findings suggest that breaking a word into its rime and onset is easier than breaking a word into its individual letters and sounds. Thus, the word *mask* is easier to break into its rime *ask* and its onset *m* than *m-a-s-k* or *ma-sk*. (See Wylie and Durrell's (1970) work in which 37 high-frequency phonograms, or rimes, were identified.) Children also can use some of the words they know in reading and in spelling to unlock new words

(Goswami & Bryant 1990). For instance, the known word *bank* might help to unlock *sank* or *blank*.

In addition to word study, I highly recommend Allington's (2005) thoughtful synthesis of literacy instruction. It includes (a) a daily balance of whole-class, small-group, and individual lessons (Taylor & Pearson 2005); (b) differentiated instruction of texts and tasks so that children are matched with appropriate resources and activities (International Reading Association 2000); (c) easy access to a variety of interesting reading materials, freedom of choice in what to read, and opportunity to share with peers during reading (Guthrie & Humenick 2004); (d) support of the reciprocal relationship of reading and writing (Tierney & Shanahan 1991); and (e) expert tutoring (D'Agostino & Murphy 2004).

Other big-picture efforts include the School Development Program, developed by Dr. James Comer and his colleagues at the Yale University School of Medicine's Child Study Center (Comer, 2004, 2005; Comer, Joyner, & Ben-Avie 2004; Yale Child Study Center, n.d.). The framework of this effective program values students' total development as essential for success in school and in life. While highlighting total development, the framework involves six important developmental pathways: psycho-emotional, social-interactive, physical, linguistic, cognitive, and ethical. This caring and comprehensive context receives broad support from the School Planning and Management Team (teachers, administrators, support staff, and parents), the Student and Staff Support Team (principal, psychologists, social workers, counselors, nurses, and others with expertise in mental health), and the Parent Team. Through dedicated efforts, the key players engage in genuine collaboration aimed at all aspects that contribute to children's learning. This broad-based focus on nurturing children's total development substantially increases the chances that children will fulfill their powerful learning potential (Comer 2004).

Such a commitment also complements the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's Position Statement on the Whole Child (2005). The ASCD statement includes contributions of what communities should provide (e.g., civic, government, and business support and resources), what schools should provide (e.g., a climate that

supports strong relationships between adults and students), and what teachers should provide (e.g., demonstrations of healthy behaviors). As Freeley (2005, 6) observes,

This stance takes us well beyond the current emphasis on academic achievement and assessment, which are only small components of student learning and development, and educational accountability.

Exposure to the School Development Program, the ASCD Position Statement, and other important big-picture perspectives (Kilgore 2005) will help critics

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***L*iteracy educators have known for decades that effective classrooms are based mostly on effective teachers who focus on children's individual needs rather than on any singular approach to teaching reading.**

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realize that becoming a successful student requires more than learning systematic skills in isolation and being prepped for high-stakes assessments, both of which are often separated from interesting, meaningful learning.

All professional fields, including literacy education, benefit from criticisms by responsible professionals who are genuinely knowledgeable, objective, and balanced in their criticisms. I respect such critical analyses. Educating whole people, however, involves more than supporting their proficiency in reading and mathematics. Children also need practice in dealing effectively with real-world problems both in and out of school. Among the many ways of providing such support is to address, with sensitivity and respect, the emotional, social, aesthetic, and moral questions that arise across the curriculum (Noddings 2005; Simon 2001).

Complementing this perspective is the need to revive a progressive vision of education. For example,

educators can (a) recognize and nurture the talents of individual children; (b) focus on how students respond to instruction, not only cognitively but also imaginatively, socially, and emotionally; (c) use forms of assessments that create a better awareness of how to nourish the developing child; and (d) consider the emotional and social lives of children as much a priority as academic achievement (Eisner 2005).

Progressive education should also include A Learner's Bill of Rights, which "all educators should embrace and protect" (Rathbone 2005, 471). Among these rights are the right to choose, the right to remain engaged, the right to wallow, the right to err, and the right to take learning personally. Supporting children's total development is vitally important because it will help them deal more effectively with today's demographic realities and will increase their chances of success in the academic arena (Haynes 1998; Sanacore 2000). Throughout my career as a teacher, administrator, and professor, I have learned that the more we support big-picture perspectives on children's lives, the more likely we are to help them realize their many ways of knowing.

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# Take Two Poems and Call Me in the Morning (Or Why Teachers Need Poetry)

Amy L. Eva

**Poetry can slow us down and help us see the world from a different perspective.**

And you — what of your rushed and useful life? Imagine setting it all down — papers, plans, appointments, everything — leaving only a note: “Gone to the fields to be lovely. Be back when I’m through with blooming.”

— Lynn Ungar, 1995

What strikes me most about teaching and living is how easily I fall into an unremitting pace and lose track of myself. Days and weeks pass, and I realize that I haven’t taken a few moments to stop and breathe and consciously take in the world. The other day I parked my car near Puget Sound and watched a small group of sea gulls surfing on pockets of wind. A simple act, yet only ten minutes later I left the coast feeling invigorated, telling myself for the five-hundredth time, “I can’t forget to do little things like this.”

Poetry frequently offers me this same sort of gift. It slows me down and forces me to pause and be present to the words — and the moment. Reading good poetry can be a quiet, centering act.

Poetry’s packaging forces us to attend. Its language, often dense with imagery, demands close and thoughtful consideration. With the music of linguistic precision, poems render the details of our lives. I admire poets for their ability to be fully alive to the world, to savor experiences, and to foreground them with just the right words. Poems feature language that is specific, focused, and precise. And poetry reading as a practice requires sharp yet quiet concentration. I believe that our students deserve the same sort of approach — we need to see them clearly and fully but with soft, gentle eyes.



AMY L. EVA is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education at Seattle University. A former language arts teacher, she continues to enjoy studying poetry and the psychology of reading. She also conducts research in teacher education.

### Openness to Others

Poems heighten our feelings of resonance with the human beings around us. I remember, for example, the first time that I read Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1993). Her poetic rendering of little Pecola Breedlove, the central character, hunched over, folded into herself, unseen, and ignored, seared itself into my psyche. Pecola Breedlove, the African American girl, who yearned for blue eyes and acceptance. I still carry her with me as I go about my days, noticing the forlorn child playing alone on the sidewalk — with emptiness behind her eyes. We all want to be seen and known, and so many of our students silently crave our acknowledgement and understanding.

Poetic language can jar its reader into new ways of seeing and knowing. A poignant line or turn of phrase can challenge default perceptions. Billy Collins (2001) claims that the study of poetry provides a model for learning:

When we read a poem, we enter the consciousness of another. It requires that we loosen some of our fixed notions in order to accommodate another point of view — which is a model of the kind of intellectual openness and conceptual sympathy that a liberal education seeks to encourage.

If poetry does inspire greater openness, “conceptual sympathy,” or even empathy, this is a strong argument for exposing ourselves to multiple poets with diverse perspectives. Certainly, there is also plenty of evidence (theoretical and research-based) to link good literature with empathy development (Dadlez 1997; Feagin 1996; Kohn 1990). And, I am arguably a better teacher when I am fully attuned to my students with my whole self.

### A Meditative Act

Spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle (2005) draws on a number of religious traditions to emphasize the powerful shift in consciousness that can occur when we learn to focus on the present moment despite the constant pull to ruminate about the past or worry about the future. He celebrates silence, attention, and the denial of ego in favor of a deeper level of awareness. Reading poetry, as a meditative act, sometimes

sparks the shift that Tolle describes. In that sense, it takes on a spiritual quality, which has

nothing to do with what you believe but everything to do with your state of consciousness. This, in turn, determines how you act in the world and interact with others (2005, 18).

So, in the spirit of Billy Collins's “Poetry 180” project (where students hear a poem a day at school), I recently introduced a simple weekly ritual for the pre-service teachers in my University's Master in Teaching program. We call it “Monday Morning Musings” — a time where students and professors gather voluntarily to share favorite poems before class begins each week. Throughout the school year a few dozen attend. I have been surprised by their interest and devotion to this brief weekly encounter. Participants find that it provides them a moment to slow down, be together, and think about things that really matter to them. I invite you to consider Monday Morning Poetry Musings and any other way of taking time for poetry.

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# Book Reviews

## Escaping Education: Living as Learning Within Grassroots Cultures

by Madhu Prakash and Gustavo Esteva

Published by Peter Lang (New York, 2nd ed., 2008)

Reviewed by Chris Mercogliano

Readers fasten your seatbelts — the authors forewarn us in their very first sentence that they are about to take the Western tradition's most sacred of all cows and stand it squarely on its head. But how dare they suggest that education, the master key that unlocks the doors to knowledge, status, and power, is something to be escaped? What a brazenly outrageous notion, especially when one considers its source — two university professors.

The fact that Madhu Prakash and Gustavo Esteva are whistleblowers, insiders calling out the very system that has conferred upon them their professional standing, makes their argument against the relentless export of Western-style schooling to what they call the "Two-Thirds World" all the more compelling. The essence of their exposé is this: Over the past half-millennium, education, with its promise to bestow salvation upon the "uneducated," has become a secular religion. Like the missionaries of earlier times, educators have fanned out across every continent delivering the good news that they alone can lead the poor and disenfranchised out of their ignorant darkness and into the light of modern ways and ideas.

Prakash and Esteva argue that the whole, exalted enterprise is a trap. What Western-style education really does to members of grassroots cultures is rob them of their souls. It teaches them that their indige-

nous ways of being, doing, and knowing are antiquated, "unscientific," and in a word, inferior. Ultimately, instead of increasing their ability to sustain self, community, and tradition, it diminishes their humanity and fosters an ever-growing dependence on outside sources of sustenance and expertise.

### Illich Redux

Here Prakash and Esteva have been heavily influenced by their mentor Ivan Illich, who spent his long and distinguished career debunking the many myths that underlie modern institutions. Illich, too, liked to turn established truths upside down. It was he who first coined the term *homo educandus* to refer to the new form of human brought into existence by the beliefs that all learning requires teaching, that it can only take place within institutionalized settings, and that it is valid solely when certified by a credentializing body. Illich (1979) was taking off from anthropologist Louis Dumont's *homo economicus*, a human produced by a society in which basic needs are increasingly defined in terms of packaged goods and services designed and prescribed by professionals, and produced under their control. In a world in which health is supplied by doctors and hospitals, safety by police departments, and knowledge by schools, *homo economicus* has largely replaced *homo habilis* — literally handy man — who formerly had the requisite skills and relationships with which to provide for his own material, social, and spiritual welfare. Economic man is a helpless consumer, not a creative producer, and is content to live disconnected from others and the sources of his well-being.

*Escaping Education* is in many ways an updating of Illich's (1979) brilliant essay "Vernacular Values and Education," in which he explored the causes and the ramifications of this kind of human devolution. "Vernacular," Illich observed, comes from an Indo-Germanic root that implies "rootedness." As a Latin word, it referred to whatever was homebred, home-

CHRIS MERCUGLIANO recently concluded a thirty-five-year career at the Albany Free School. He is the author of four books, including *Making It Up As We Go Along, the Story of the Albany Free School* (Heinemann 1998,) and *In Defense of Childhood: Protecting Kids' Inner Wildness* (Beacon Press 2007).

spun, homegrown, or homemade, as opposed to what was obtained in formal exchange; and since then it has come to mean language forms that are colloquial and not formally taught.

Illich, as was his way, then took the reader on a historical journey to late 15th-century Spain. At precisely the time Columbus was petitioning Queen Isabella to underwrite his naïve search for a sea route to the Orient, the Spanish scholar and grammarian Antonio de Nebrija approached her for support for his mission to stamp out the use of local Castilian dialects and replace them with a national language, one that he would personally configure and that would thereafter be known as “Spanish.” De Nebrija’s concern was that far too many of his contemporaries were frittering away their time reading a rapidly expanding genre of novels printed in the vernacular that he viewed as trashy, and not increasing state authority. He convinced the Queen that requiring her subjects to learn and use *her* language would greatly enhance the Crown’s ability to control their thoughts and actions. Not surprisingly, Isabella agreed to support de Nebrija’s project, and soon thereafter he published the first grammar for a modern European tongue, with a dictionary soon to follow. Ultimately, Illich reminded us, de Nebrija’s creation would contribute more to the development of empire than the erstwhile “discoveries” of Columbus and the conquistadors’ swords combined.

### The New Empire

Prakash and Esteva fast-forward the story to January 1949, to the inauguration speech of Harry Truman. The evil of empire by brute force having just been laid bare by the horrors of WWII, Truman (1967) proposed the basis for a new form:

We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas.... The old imperialism — exploitation for foreign profit — has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair dealing.

In proper Illichian fashion, the authors point out that Truman was the first to ever use the term “develop-

ment” in such a context, and because his words received such immediate and widespread acceptance, it marked a tipping point of monumental proportions. Two-thirds of the world’s people instantly became “underdeveloped.” They stopped being who they had always been — a social majority with an immense diversity of cultural identities and cultural wealth — and instead were reduced to the homogenizing and demeaning terms of a white, European-American minority. Now, Truman was implying, they needed to be improved, which meant, of course, that they had to become like “developed” people.

Thus the stage was set for global compulsory schooling, and as Prakash and Esteva observe, “The literate started their fullest persecution of the illiterate in all of human history.” Unschooled peoples simply had no defense against the developed world’s definitions of their so-called “deficiencies,” and so they readily agreed to abandon the indigenous ways of transmitting knowledge, morality, and culture that had served them so well for so long and put in their place a model of education that views learning as an artifice and an act of consumption.

The end result of the conversion has become all too familiar: Young people in “underdeveloped” nations “get” their educations, become professional people, and inexorably divorce themselves from their native ways as they exercise the mobility their degrees and certificates have afforded them. Or as is equally the case, their professional training fails to gain them entrée into the economy of the developed world, and they are left to languish in no-man’s land.

### Hope

While *Escaping Education* is a deeply disturbing book, it is by no means without hope. In fact, the authors make a point of reminding us that hope remained securely in Pandora’s box after her insatiable curiosity caused her to release the ills of humankind upon the earth. They ground their optimism in the increasing numbers who now see through the false promises of the Truman Doctrine and have learned to recognize the emperor in all his nakedness. These enlightened people are content to live on the margins of the surrounding, dominant societies, determined

not to give birth, as the authors glibly put it, to *homo miserabilis* — miserable man.

As an example, the book takes us to the states of Oaxaca and Chiapas in southern Mexico. There for the past 500 years diverse indigenous groups have somewhat miraculously managed to defend their ancestral identity against the ravages of colonialism, a national government that has never represented their points of view, and the real linchpin: a system of education hell-bent on “Mexicanizing the Indians,” to quote former Mexican President Lazaro Cardenas. The key to their cultural survival, according to Prakash and Esteva, has been their refusal to abandon the communal social, political, and educational practices that have sustained them over the centuries.

By the 1990s, however, the pressure on Oaxacans and Chiapans to assimilate, fueled in part by massive World Bank “education” loans, had become intolerable, and so in January 1994 a few thousand poorly armed Indians decided to revolt. It was hardly the first guerilla uprising in Mexican history, but what made this one different was that these rebels had no interest in seizing political power and imposing their regime on everyone else. Mostly they just wanted to protect their commons and to be left alone, and to that effect they began setting up autonomous, self-governing communities throughout the region.

The story of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, which is ongoing, is well-known. It quickly became a rallying point for the rest of the nation and for “underdeveloped” people around the world. The important point to be made here is that one of the essential ingredients of the movement has been the Zapatista’s determination to continue to maintain an alternative system of schools in which children learn in their own indigenous languages, and in which the content is centered on their own heritage and traditional means of self-sustainability.

And according to a recent report by Latin American journalist John Ross (2009), despite the fact that the Zapatistas continue to be surrounded by over 60 thousand federal troops, the revolution is working. Ross cites a variety of indicators showing that the quality of life in Zapatista communities is significantly higher than in neighboring non-Zapatista towns and villages.

Prakash and Esteva go on to present other examples of local resistance to development, such as Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú’s Quiche villages in the Guatemalan highlands, where villagers physically throw government teachers out of their communities in order to protect themselves from the outside economy and culture that the teachers bring with them. Faced with institutions and practices conceived to educate indigenous peoples everywhere into cultural extinction, resistance is the only answer, repeat the authors, and this is why education is indeed something to be escaped.

### Second Edition

*Escaping Education* occupies a special place in my heart because it was Illich’s close friend and collaborator Lee Hoinacki, very pleased with the work of his protégés, who gave me my first-edition copy. I had sent Illich — even though we had not yet met — a draft of my first book, *Making It Up As We Go Along: The Story of the Albany Free School*, and asked for his feedback. He and Lee responded by inviting me to join them for a weekend at Penn State University where they were conducting their annual Fall seminars.

I arrived on a Friday, and Ivan, then in the latter stages of cancer, greeted me with a warm, albeit threadbare hug and told me I was welcome to attend his seminar later that afternoon. This gave me the opportunity to witness firsthand how his medium was wholly consistent with his message. As he spoke to his students, he embodied the ideas he was expressing; there was no doubt that he viewed knowledge as a living organism which should be freely shared by everyone. This was very clearly the case with the off-the-record sessions that took place every Saturday morning in his university office, where the format was free-flowing and participants sat in a circle on the floor.

Later in conversation Ivan would share with me that what had drawn him to my writing was the fact that I had described a school where, had he ever had children of his own, he would have felt entirely comfortable sending them. His sentiments led him to endorse my book at the time of publication by writing, “More convincing than any book I have had the privilege to read, this one proves that learning by chil-

dren ought, once and for all, to be institutionally disembedded." Because Ivan's ideas have had such a profound influence on my thinking about education, this is a validation I will treasure to the end of my days.

Thus, I was most pleased to learn that *Escaping Education* has come out in a second edition. As the romance with globalization becomes increasingly hormonal, the need for a blunt and truthful analysis of its shadow side is greater than ever. And again, Prakash and Esteva were just the ones to provide it because they have feet firmly planted in both the "educated" and the "uneducated" worlds. They have emerged from the latter into the former without sacrificing their vernacular values, and they have witnessed firsthand people's successful efforts to defend themselves and their cultures from the insidious tendrils of development.

This book is urgent reading for all who call themselves educators.

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## Alex and Me

By Irene M. Pepperberg

Published by Harper-Collins (New York, 2008)

Reviewed by Lawrence Nyman

This is a fun read. It is also a profound treatise exploring the collaborative worlds of Alex, an African grey parrot, and his handlers. It is a narrative that touches on a wide range of relationship, cognitive, and communicative issues that challenge long held

LAWRENCE NYMAN, a clinical psychologist and family therapist, taught psychology at The City College of New York from 1956 to 1995. Dr. Nyman is the author of "An Interview with Kenneth B. Clark: Teacher, Psychologist, and Fighter for Justice," which appeared in the Summer 2005 issue of *Encounter*.

notions of "bird-brain" behavior. It is an account of a pioneering animal study that was rigorous in its experimental methodology and yet was forced by Alex's alpha-male personality to reexamine and broaden design parameters.

Alex not only learned from his formal lessons but also proved to be an astute observer, learning new words without training and finding ways to intimidate and manipulate graduate student handlers. Sometimes he would play head games with his trainers by giving only incorrect answers, avoiding the correct answer. When a "time-out" was called and he was placed in a closed door room, he called out the correct answer. "Two ... two .... I'm sorry ... come here!"

Pepperberg suggests that the training and learning models utilized with Alex may be helpful in working with autistic children. She examined several training models and found that "a rich social context is essential to teaching communication skills" (p. 133).

An enthusiastic and supportive team model was created in the lab by using two trainers who questioned one another about a task object with Alex listening. Then either trainer interacted with Alex using the same words. The team model proved to be the most effective of the training models.

The book is a love story of sorts, reviewing the highs and lows of a brave woman's thirty-year career struggle in academia while telling a very special tale of deep human-animal bonding. As scientists become more aware of children's affinity to animals, scientists also are learning about the remarkable qualities of animals. "The idea of humans' separateness from the rest of nature is no longer tenable. Alex taught us that we are *a part of nature*, not *apart from nature*" (p. 222).

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## Autism's False Prophets

by Paul A. Offit, M.D.

Published by Columbia University Press (New York, 2008)

Reviewed by Roberta Wiener

When you enter "autism" into Google you get some 2,900,000 entries. That is just one indicator of the massive attention that the topic has garnered. To appreciate the emotional intensity of some parent and disability advocates who believe there is a connection between autism and the MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccine, consider that Dr. Paul Offit, author of *Autism's False Prophets*, will not attend book signings because he has received death threats for discrediting such beliefs.

Dr. Paul Offit is an infectious disease specialist at one of the nation's top pediatric hospitals and holds a patent on the rotovirus vaccine that is responsible for saving children worldwide from acute gastroenteritis. Offit brings scientific accuracy to the public in this clearly written and professionally referenced book. This book will convince readers that autism is not caused by any of the popularized theories.

Offit reviews the recent history of autism and all its attendant research — good and bad — and he explains how solid medical research has repeatedly invalidated the notion that the MMR vaccine or its mercury-based preservative has a cause and effect relationship to autism. There is a sizable body of bad research that suggests otherwise, attracting believers and profiteers alike. The believers include some emotionally distraught parents and autism advocacy groups. Parents with a child with autism desperately seek ways to help their autistic child and to prevent having another. Tragically, their desperation makes them vulnerable to those claiming to have answers, including some grant-hungry researchers, ambulance-chasing attorneys, and misguided environmental activists. Offit also exposes the problems that occur when medical "truth" is left to the courts and popular media.

Roberta M. Wiener is an Assistant Professor of Education at Pace University. She received her doctorate in special education from Teachers College, Columbia University, and has worked in public education for over thirty years.

Bad science has ample historic precedent. Offit notes the centuries-long belief in a flat earth, defended by the church long after Copernicus. Not long ago it was commonly believed that "refrigerator moms" caused autism, and it took a decade to discredit that notion. The proposed link between a vaccine and autism came from seriously flawed "research" originally published in a prestigious international medical journal and greeted by a rush to believe it. The popular media picked up the story and promoted it without scrutiny. Television and radio talk shows introduced the public to bogus causes and sham cures. The nation was inundated with this false information, and it quickly became the popular truth. Sadly, many parents decided to withhold basic vaccinations from their children. As a result, the incidence of measles and other diseases, once eradicated by the MMR vaccine, has now increased.

Ironically, the frequency of autism diagnoses also has increased. The public is exceptionally alert to the disorder, and the diagnostic category has been broadened by specialists. Unfortunately, the public is also vulnerable to the conclusions generated by bad research wrapped in the trappings of science.

Advocates for a vaccine/autism link number well into the thousands, including many high profile celebrities and well-organized and litigious groups. Not surprisingly, thousands of lawsuits have been filed — so many that a special federal court with three judges or "special masters" has been established to review these cases. The first test case ruling was released on February 12, 2009, and it fully upheld the Department of Health and Human Services against the plaintiff parents' argument that MMR caused autism in their children. Will this ruling, together with Offit's thoroughly researched book with lengthy and detailed end notes, put an end to the false controversy about autism? No; plaintiffs' lawyers promise an appeal.

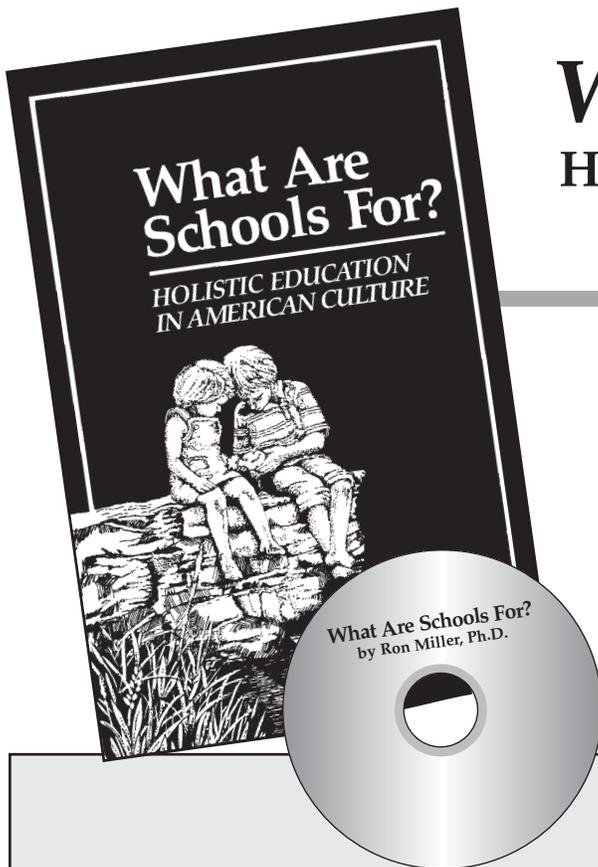
One final note about Dr. Paul Offit. He has no personal self-interest in the issue. His mission is to expose the truth and reinstate confidence in childhood vaccines. All proceeds from his book are committed to supporting autism research. *Autism's False Prophets* is a well-written, carefully organized, and detailed review of the medical research on autism.

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by Ron Miller, Ph.D.



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## Table of Contents

### Introduction

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Education for a Postmodern Age  
Pioneers of Holistic Education  
John Dewey and Progressive Education  
Imported Holistic Movements  
The Education Crisis: 1967-1972  
Education for Human Potential  
Goals 2000: Triumph of the Megamachine  
Education for the 21st Century

### Bibliography

### Index

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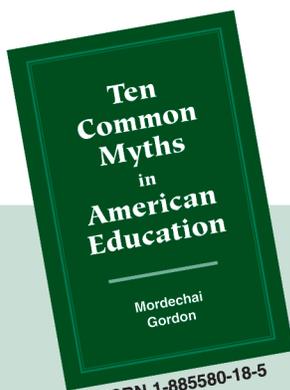
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### Table of Contents

Foreword by Joe L. Kincheloe	
Introduction	Technology is the Cure for All Problems in Education
Good Teaching Means Following a Recipe	Good Techniques Are Those that Seem to "Work"
Theories Can Be Applied Directly to Practice	More Testing Results in Higher Standards
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