HOLDING VALUES
What We Mean by Progressive Education

Essays by members of the North Dakota Study Group

Edited by Brenda S. Engel with Anne C. Martin
2005

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH
Racing Through Childhood

DEBORAH MEIER

I have a picture in my head of what a good early childhood classroom might look like: a kindergarten ("children's garden") with color and light, open spaces and smaller cozy ones. There would be animals and plants, earth and water, books and pictures, plenty of natural and man-made materials. It would be a place where children would be drawn to explore, try out, investigate possibilities, invent, create new forms—and play. The "garden" would be populated by other children and adults, available for consultation and collaboration, also engaged in their own projects—serious or seriously playful.

From where do these images come—personal experience, imagination, history, or fiction? Have children lived in such near-ideal settings in the distant or recent past? Do they still, somewhere, in the present? There was a time when the worlds of home and work were not so separate as they are today. It was usual in agricultural societies, for instance, for children to share in adult tasks and still have a measure of independence for exploration and discovery. They lived alongside the adult world. Even the surrounds of my own childhood in the 1930s had some of the qualities of a "garden," which allowed us freedom to play with friends of many ages in the context of a familiar, safe neighborhood, with adults within easy call. The kindergarten in which I first taught was pale by comparison and not integrated among the generations, but it did at least offer children time, space, and materials. The early childhood classrooms I visited in England in the early seventies came closer to the ideal: children encouraged to initiate projects, allowed to move freely on their own between indoors and outdoors with adults from the neighborhood frequently supplementing the professional staff. One more example: the Reggio Emilia preschools in northern Italy, which I have read about, are carefully designed, materials-rich, aesthetically pleasing learning environments for largely low-income children. A central space in each school is designated the atelier (workshop). This space, shared by children and adults (including parents), is used for a variety of educational projects and art activities.

It is easy and tempting to romanticize other places and other times, easy to forget the abuses, hardships, and dangers faced by children under other circumstances. Yet the appealing images here, even if a bit romanticized, can serve to point up some of what has been lost in the current way in which we raise our young; what we seem to have for the first time, perhaps in history, abandoned along the way.

What then is missing these days? First of all, time and space for young children to play—unscheduled time and unorganized space that invite the child to improvise and invent. Second, the company of adults engaged in adult activities for authentic purposes—cooking, cleaning, reading, drawing, building, gardening, talking, adults conversing about adult matters. My argument, in short, is that children need both: time and space for childish pursuits as well as the company of adults engaged in adult work. Artists, carpenters, cooks, computer technicians, writers, farmers, scientists, engineers, as well as trades people, need to be working where children can observe, imitate, and learn from them—maybe even be helpful to them. Children need settings in which they too have authentic chores to do, suitable to their growing competence. In this country, these responsibilities and opportunities have been disappearing during our times.

One characteristic that distinguishes humans from other parent-loved mammals is the prolonged length of protected time they allow their children before they are expected to confront the demands and judgments of the adult world. Five years of such protection used to be a bare minimum and in some ways, and for some individuals, it lasted considerably longer. As Lillian Weber used to chide us impatient schoolteachers, "mother wit" seemed to know something about childhood that it has taken a long time for science to confirm. That "something" was play, stemming from the child's spontaneous and persistent interest in making sense of the world; imitative play as well as novel or inventive play, exercised within a protected space created by tolerant caretaking adults who were, at the same time, engaged in their own enterprises. The apparently random nature of children's early investigations of how things go together (and come apart) later evolve into more organized rule-constructed play.

The development of language is a case in point. Language first appears as a form of play—of imitation, invention, trying out, and observing the effects of experimentation. The brain's "capacity" to make language does not
alone account for the ingenuity exercised by children in learning to speak, a skill practiced in the context of the nonjudgmental, forever forgiving, indulgent adults. In working out the details of language, the infant asks (and answers) which of all the possible sounds humans can make are used in her home tongue, which sounds work for a particular purpose, what intonation produces which response (questions, statements, demands, complaints), and the other subtleties of language that most children have mastered well before the age of five. All this, and much, much more, is achieved within the community created by an accepting family in which each child novice is presumed to be capable of becoming competent if largely left to his or her own devices.

As Frank Smith pointed out in Understanding Reading (1978), which we all read and argued over at NDSSG meetings, children learn about ten new words a day if left to their own devices. In the typical school, we'd be lucky to formally teach ten a week, not to mention ten that stayed in their memory bank. Something about schooling reduces a child's likelihood of learning material of comparable complexity efficiently, and apparently effortlessly. Experts today speak as though it was not natural to learn, that preschool must help little ones "learn" to learn—hence the focus on "readiness" skills.

In schools we are in fact losing two important sources of learning: the child's world of play and inquiry and children's familiarity with the world of engaged, skilled adults and somewhat older peers. Maybe the image I presented at the start of this article are too far removed from present reality, lost causes, "pie in the sky" and thus an invitation to pessimism. Changes in the life of families and the workplace have made early childhood very different. The introduction of the mass media and the world of advertising into the home life of young children complicates it still further. Nonetheless, pointing out what is being lost in most present-day educational institutions, as well as in life at home, may help us think about what could be done to restore, whenever and wherever possible, at least some positive elements of an earlier version of infancy.

The losses have been coming on us gradually. Children's natural ways of learning the world—through exploration, invention, and imitation—have been traded in for mandated curriculum, direct instruction, and prescribed standards backed up by the authority of the state and measured by standardized testing. There were, of course, early warnings of the direction education was taking. When the NDSSG gathered that first time in 1972, at Vito Perrone's invitation, it was in response to these new and gathering threats to two promising federal programs—Head Start and Follow Through. Maybe the very name, "Head Start," should have warned us of what was ahead—the sense of education as a race.

Head Start, begun in the mid-sixties, was designed to help poor children "catch up" to middle-class children. With it the idea of early schooling as a garden was disappearing. The image of education as a race was substituted at an ever-earlier age. In fact, the adults closest to the child were often seen to be the obstacle to academic success, they themselves in need of teaching about how to be good influences on their own children. Now the idea was that, with the help of middle-class teachers and a proper middle-class curriculum (trips to zoos; letter recognition; reading good books; learning colors and numbers; and learning to share, raise their hands, and stand quietly in line), poor children would enter kindergarten or first grade on a par with their competitors "ready to learn." (Note the presumption again that before school they hadn't been learning.)

President Johnson's War on Poverty was meant to narrow the gaps between the rich and the poor. The U.S. Office of Education introduced several legislative initiatives to that end. But when federal monies were involved, legislators thought they needed to know whether the efforts were working. Were Head Start, and later Follow Through, really closing the gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children? There were many competitors for the honor of sponsoring the one "best way"—from advocates of direct instruction of academic skills to advocates of child-initiated play, with a host of in-betweens and variations. And, of course, in the controversy over how to determine what works best, descriptive and qualitative methods of assessment were deemed unacceptable and "hard data"—numerical measurement by tests—became the standard.

When I taught Head Start in Philadelphia in 1965, we gave a pretest (September) and posttest (June) to see whether kids were mastering their shapes, colors, alphabet, and so on. That was all and it seemed to be enough to satisfy Congress. Later, as federal intervention increased, pressure grew to identify "the one best way" based on standardized test results. A massive protest by parents and child-development advocates put a temporary stop to the testing mania but the idea of finding the best way periodically reemerged, and along with it test scores as the significant data.

One could see the shape of things to come. Despite ups and downs in an uneven history, the thrust over the last forty years has been to start schooling ever earlier—and not just for poor people's children—and to measure children by standard paper-and-pencil tests focused on standard "school" skills (and again, not only poor children). This despite the fact that substantial evidence noted that test reliability was statistically very low the younger children were. Most pre-post testing programs were, furthermore, carried out consistently for only a year or two, thus ignoring side effects and long-term consequences. (Only one significant longitudinal study was
conducted—the High Scope project.) In the meantime, the expected level of kindergarten skills was simply reset to match those previously taught in first grade, while the measure of prekindergarten was raised accordingly. Today, children are deemed not ready for kindergarten if they don’t know what the average six-year-old child was expected to learn in early first grade twenty-five years ago! And which in Finland, with the highest reading levels in the world, isn’t introduced until children are seven years old!

As kindergarten became the norm—appearing less and less as a children’s garden—what was happening to family life? Children were keeping less and less company with adults engaged in adult occupations. I was first concerned about this when I became involved with secondary school kids and realized how the closer they came to adulthood, the fewer adults they knew well. It came as a surprise then to realize when I returned to working with younger children, that this was happening at both ends of the spectrum of childhood. Even when children were at home—and annually the amount of such time has gradually and steadily decreased—busy, overworked parents were anxiously trying to prepare their children to meet the standards set by the school.

The schools’ pedagogy and curriculum have become the preferred mode of “instruction” at home as well as at school. Flash cards, early learning-to-read books, and other skills-oriented activities (often mislabeled academic) are fed to children by dutiful parents and caretakers to ensure that they are ready for the race. The more natural forms of home teaching and learning have become obsolete—less oral exchange, once common in the dialogue between parents and young children. Even normal household chores are less frequently assigned to children as their useful roles within the family decrease. These have been replaced by direct instruction (children asked to read and respond to prescribed questions), formal counting games, and other commercial “teaching” tools. TV and the computer are the tools of choice. Families are swamped by well-meaning books and articles about how they should mimic the school’s agenda and style to help prepare their children for school success.

The impact of the popular media on young children cannot be overstated. The advertising industry has stepped up its effort to shape the ideas and desires of even one-year-olds—away from simple open-ended toys that require imagination and initiative. In Consuming Kids (2004), Susan Linn describes the ruthless corporate strategies to turn children into early consumers. Child psychologists are hired to figure out how to strengthen babies’ desires in ways that undermine family and school authority (e.g., to test out the degree of whining and nagging that parents can tolerate before they give in). Schools, instead of being a powerful antidote to such well-funded efforts, too often either parody them or present such a pale alternative as to increase their lure.

This is not a case of simply not having the resources to do otherwise. It’s a conscious plan of action. Middle-class children, in spite of their presumed advantages (more educated parents with more available time), are subjected to similar pressures. I spent time a year ago watching a richly funded, academically sponsored preschool program for professional families in which every child spent three hours in a group of no more than two or three peers under the direct supervision of a trained adult manipulating children’s games, materials, and toys. Each child and each piece of material was designed for a single cognitive purpose, and his or her IEP (individualized educational plan) was regularly updated. One-way glass allowed parents to watch and learn what they should be doing more of at home. I saw neither tears nor joy, just relentless pursuit of adult-designed goals. When asked about “creativity,” the director assured us that some children’s IEPs included that and materials were offered to respond to such needs. It wasn’t for lack of money! (The only bright spot was the one Head Start class where a tradition of children’s play still prevailed.)

Is this early programmatic instruction at home, at school, and in the media causing something else to be forced out, something critical to the health of our species, something fundamental to our capacity for coping with the world in a humane and creative way? This capacity may be even more essential in a world where change occurs more rapidly than ever before. A study conducted in Florida by Rebecca Marcon, reported on in a major research journal, suggests that deprivation of imaginative opportunities and play may be harmful even in the most limited school sense. A six-year study of a random sample of four-year-olds who attended three different kinds of preschools in the same school district showed startlingly different results. Children in the more directed, academic style preschool had somewhat better results in kindergarten on standard school tasks but worse on social behavior. By fourth grade, the children who had spent that one year in the program designed around child-initiated activities had outperformed the others in both academic and social tasks.

Although some insist that despite its risks such a regimen is the only way to close the gaps between rich and poor, this would only make some logical sense if we could withhold such advantages (plus) from the rich. In fact, test-oriented approaches exacerbate the mismatch between home and school that undermines the natural strengths of most children of low-income homes. While in an increasingly unequal society no program of schooling can be expected to undo the damage of poverty, some forms of early childhood support can do a better job of maximizing all children’s
strengths (see the results of the Marcon 2002 study). By celebrating what even the most economically and socially disadvantaged come with, not just what they are missing, we undercut social status differentials rather than increase them.

When I feel most despairing I am buoyed up by my daily experience of the resiliency of children. I was happy to discover that even in the year 2000 little kids, at recess, are still digging holes to China, creating fairy castles in backyard bushes, and inventing all manner of imaginary worlds when left to their own resources. There is no way, however, to get conclusive evidence about the price society and its children may be paying for the loss of childhood; but, there are good reasons to be even more alarmed than we were during the seventies. As we place greater reliance on institutional care for young people from early infancy to well into their twenties, the consequences of schooling policies become even more crucial. This remains true even though the other primary educator—the mass media—has grown far more powerful and may already have greater influence than schools over children’s views of the world and its values. The increasingly dry, controlling, programmatic schools, along with curtailed home life and the pervasive, seductive influence of the media, have together usurped the traditional invitation to children to join the world of adults. This “joining with” (in Lillian Weber’s words) is a form of education we may be abandoning to our peril—disastrously if a central purpose of education is conceived as preparing the young for full membership in a community of equals.

PART FIVE

Teachers and Teacher Preparation

Progressive educators and progressive schools respect teachers as potentially creative, intelligent, and trustworthy guardians of children’s welfare and education. Rather than being constrained by prescribed methodologies and scripted curricula or threatened by the outcomes of high-stakes standardized testing, teachers can be truly responsible and thoughtful about the children in their care.

Helen Featherstone writes from personal experience about the crucial importance of respecting and listening seriously to learners on all levels—from teachers of teachers and classroom teachers to children in classrooms. Diane Mullins gives an account of her own unusual, inclusive, democratic classroom-as-community. She exemplifies respect as an active reaching out to, and learning from, the experience of others, often of different ages and backgrounds. Eleanor Duckworth writes about the relationship between the world and the learner/scientist: the excitement and deep satisfaction that come from both teachers and students using mind and imagination to explore the “reality to which each belongs.”

Leslie Alexander’s chapter opens with the resonant sentence, “The power in a classroom lies in the autonomy of teacher voice.” Her story of the Muscota New School, a teacher collaborative, exemplifies the educational benefits of respecting and trusting teachers’ intelligence and serious intentions. It is also the only direct account in this book of a “small school”—a movement that has been important to progressive education. Small schools have built-in possibilities for flexibility, responsiveness to need, and attention to individuals (staff and children all know each other well).

The Philadelphia Teachers’ Learning Cooperative, during its twenty-five-year history as a voluntary, informal (though structured) group, has supported its members in maintaining progressive, democratic values in the midst of an alien system. The three authors of this chapter, Rhoda Kanevsky, Lynne Strieb, and Betsy Wicke, have been instrumental in introducing to the Cooperative methods of observation, reflection, and recordkeeping developed at the Prospect Center in Vermont (see article by Patricia Carini in Part VI of this book).