# Education Revolution



Volume 20, Number 4

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#### Winter 2008-09, Issue #55

# Exploring many ways of learning

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**INSIDE:** Inspiring stories about diverse educational options



# A Stirring Manifesto for the Education Revolution

# Self-Organizing Revolution

### Ron Miller's newest book (Fall, 2008)

#### "marvelously lucid and thought-provoking"

*The Self-Organizing Revolution* provides the clearest and most perceptive description of alternative education movements I have read. Drawing on the wisdom of the great educational pioneers of the past as well as the emerging paradigms of today, Miller suggests how a new consciousness can guide the liberation of children's potentials and the restoration of life on the planet. This is a marvelously lucid and thought-provoking book.

---WILLIAM CRAIN, author of *Reclaiming Childhood* and editor of *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice* 

#### "essential reading"

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For any one who cares about the future of education, Miller is essential reading. With fluid prose and a personal style, he lays out the imperative to revolutionize our industrial-age educational system to align with the needs of our children and the transformational nature of our times. What makes this book so hopeful is that Miller shows we don't have to start from scratch to invent an educational system appropriate to the 21st century. We simply need to recognize that our society's current mania for tests and standards is the last gasp of an outmoded system and welcome the revolution already underway in our diverse, holistic, alternative systems flourishing across the nation.

-FRAN KORTEN, Publisher, YES! Magazine

#### Common Principles of the Educational Alternatives Movement

RON MILLER, PH

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### "brilliant synthesis"

In this bold vision of educational possibilities, Ron Miller brings his clear thinking and historical insight to the vexing problem of how to transform education so that it might align with the emerging holistic worldview and dynamic, "deeply democratic," decentralized culture. Miller's gift to us is the brilliant synthesis of contemporary intellectual currents in such a way as to bring the ideal into reach. His challenge to us is to transcend the current boundaries and limitations in our thinking and embrace the possibilities.

—KATHLEEN KESSON, Professor of Teaching and Learning at the Brooklyn Campus of Long Island University, co-author of *Curriculum Wisdom: Educational Decisions in Democratic Societies and Defending Public Schools: Teaching for a Democratic Society* 

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## Education Revolution THE MAGAZINE OF EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES



Alternative Education Resource Organization

The Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO) was founded in 1989 by Jerry Mintz. AERO is a branch of the School of Living, a non-profit organization founded in 1934 by Ralph Borsodi. AERO's goal is to advance studentdriven, learner-centered approaches to education. AERO is considered by many to be the primary hub of communications and support for educational alternatives around the world. Education Alternatives include, but are not limited to, Montessori, Waldorf (Steiner), Choice, Democratic, Homeschool, Open, Charter, Free, Sudbury, Holistic, Virtual, Magnet, Early Childhood, Reggio Emilia, Indigo, Krishnamurti, Quaker, Libertarian, Independent, Progressive, Community, Cooperative, and Unschooling. One of AERO's areas of expertise is democratic process and democratic education, but equally important is the networking of all forms of educational alternatives. It is through our work and mission that we hope to create an education revolution.

**AERO**'s mission is to help create an education revolution to make student-centered alternatives available to everyone.

Towards this end, **AERO** provides information, resources and guidance to families, schools and organizations regarding their educational choices. **AERO** disseminates information internationally on topics such as: homeschooling, public and private alternative schools, and charter schools. **AERO**'s long-term goal is to become a more effective catalyst for educational change by providing books, magazines, conferences, online courses, consultations, support groups, and organizational information and seminars in the field of alternative education.

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**Cover photo:** Leif Gustafson, age 8, a student at the Salmonberry School on Orcas Island, WA, enjoys a day of exploring the coastline at low tide. The school emphasizes place-based learning, ecoliteracy and marine stewardship. Photo by Dennis DeHart.

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## **Education Revolution**

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# Being There



Jerry brought Manhattan Free School students to the Teddy McArdle Free School in New Jersey, where they helped build an adobe house.

The last few months have been exciting for democratic education, locally and globally, as well as a bit frenetic for the AERO office and me.

Among other things, we now have two AERO offices, one here on Long Island and another in Albany, where the bookstore is housed, orders are processed, database updates are now made, etc.

Here on Long Island, in addition to responding to all the 800 number and other calls and e mail from the AERO website, the biggest thrust has been the support of the local democratic schools and the online courses for school starters.

We helped start Brooklyn Free School, which grew out of the International Democratic Education Conference that we hosted in 2003. The school opened in 2004 and is now in its fifth year. It ended up last year with 48 students and 65 on with Jerry Mintz

the waiting list. I'm on the board of the school and have volunteered once a week for the last four years. Alan Berger is the director and founder of the school. He and I agreed that we must do something to find room for all the people on the waiting list.

There had been talk off and on for several years about a possible Manhattan free school. There were a variety of meetings by different groups working bring this about. Pat Werner, a veteran teacher in the New York City school system, had dreams of starting a democratic school for years. She had partnered with another person AERO referred to her and they had a small meeting about this in the middle of last year. But nothing further seemed to come of it.

Later in the school year I did a consultation with a family in Manhattan that was homeschooling their 16 year old daughter. She expressed interest in organizing more Manhattan area homeschoolers and I suggested that maybe she could bring about a homeschool resource center that might evolve into a Manhattan free school.

The 16 year old homeschooler picked up this idea and ran with it, organizing three meetings, including

a demonstration free school day. About 15-20 adults and children came to each. We invited Pat Werner to the meetings, and this rekindled her interest in starting a democratic school. She began organizing her own meetings and we attended each other's gatherings.

Pat continued to have meetings weekly and eventually made the bold decision to announce the opening of the school in September, only about two months away. It was an example of the "If we open it, they will come" theory. And they did come. The school has now beenopen for three months and has nearly 20 students.

I am on the steering committee and have been putting a lot of my effort into helping the school get off the ground. In addition to helping with the steering committee I've helped them with the development of the meeting process as well

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as taught table tennis (AERO recently bought a table for the school). We are in the midst of the difficult transition from the adult group, which gave birth to the school, transferring much decision making power to the regular school meeting.

Another school we have been working with is the Teddy McArdle Free School, currently in Little Falls, New Jersey. Alex Khost, a student in AERO's online "Start a School 101" class had founded the school last year. Suddenly, a personal family crisis forced him to step into the background. The new director is Elizabeth McCarthy, who was simply a volunteer parent intern last year. She attended the AERO conference as well as the post conference school starters workshop and is currently in the online class.

The school is running very well this year with a tremendous variety of activities and programs. The big problem is not enough students and not enough funds. Because they have been on the verge of having to move out of the church space they rent, parents of potential new students have been hesitant to enroll them. We were able to provide a small grant and have lately been raising funds to help them through this sticky period. One of the projects the school has been working on is building an adobe building in the back yard of one of the students' houses. This project is being organized by the other full time teacher, Liliana, who is from Colombia, and whose daughter also attends the school. One day we brought a group of students from Manhattan Free School to help with the project.

Meanwhile Brooklyn Free School was able to rent the minister's house next door to the church site they have been renting, and have been able to take about a dozen more students, bringing the total to 60, still with 50 on the waiting list. One recently admitted student is Kai, from Japan, whose mother, Megumi, wrote an article about her search for a school for her son in the Spring issue of Education Revolution. One of the school families is hosting him while he is here. We also attended their Thanksgiving dinner, with more than 100 in attendance.

This is just a taste of the activity of some of the local democratic schools. On December 6th we had a gathering of staff members from seven New York area democratic schools at Hudson Valley Sudbury School, near Kingston, NY. There were over 30 staff members in attendance. They spent the day comparing approaches to similar problems, discussing philosophy, socializing, even played some football! It was an important indicator of the steady growth of democratic education in the area.

We are in the midst of our third "Start a School 101" online course. Our other course, the History and Theory of Educational Alternatives, led by Ron Miller, is now in its second year. The 25 total students are from all over the United States, as well as from England, Canada, Colombia, Australia, Germany, and Taiwan. So clearly there continues to be great interest in creating more learner centered educational alternatives as AERO works to achieve its mission of making these choices available to all children, everywhere. ●

# Editor's Desk

BY RON MILLER

"m anxious to find out whether the election of Barack Obama, like that of John F. Kennedy nearly fifty years ago, will open up a new sense of possibilities for social and cultural evolution. Obama inspires hope, idealism, and democratic engagement, and he comes into office at a time when the modern world, facing a deep crisis on all fronts, is ready for genuinely new solutions.

Perhaps the time has come for the triumphant emergence of the "green" movement, which has been quietly germinating and spreading for the past several years. This is a multifaceted cultural revolution grounded in a fundamental respect for the organic processes of life and for the interdependence of social and natural systems. The movement calls for caring, human scale institutions, direct democracy, simple justice and decency, and a celebration of diversity. The educational alternatives movement is one expression of this larger cultural shift.

Since the abrupt end of the '60s "Movement," which included the spontaneous appearance of hundreds of free schools and new alternatives in public education (see Dave Lehman's article in this issue), the educational alternatives movement has unfolded quietly and gradually beneath the culture's radar. But today, I am aware of several efforts to knit its diverse components into an effective political and social force. These efforts are not led by any central organization or charismatic figure, but represent a "self-organizing revolution" based on the local, personal efforts of families, educators and communities.

Most people involved in educational alternatives are pouring their hearts and energies into these local efforts small schools and learning centers, homeschooling collaboratives, consultations and courses. Very few have the time or resources to build a national organization, to mount an intensive media campaign, to lobby policymakers, to commission or conduct research. There are no influential think tanks, wealthy foundations, or large membership organizations promoting our cause. We are it.

The time may be ripe, however, for this movement to gain a foothold. The corporate economy is tottering and the twin crises of peak oil and global climate change demand systemic change. A progressive government is taking shape, and it may empower numerous social and political initiatives. Thousands of educators and parents are demonstrating that learner-centered education, *by whatever name*, is more caring, more democratic, more decent, and more "green" than mass production schooling. It's time to get out from under the radar, and let the world know what we have to offer.  $\bullet$ 

# An Argument for "Many Paths"

#### By Cooper Zale

**S** tarting in third grade with learning the multiplication tables, our son Eric began having a problem with school. By seventh grade he would not do any homework, had been diagnosed with ADD, was taking Aderall, had been through an IEP, had had a number of sessions with an educational therapist, and resisted in any way he could think of going to school each morning. When he got to the point in eighth grade of writing "F\*\*k Math" on his standardized math test, we pulled him out of school.

We looked at alternative schools with a more holistic approach to learning. The few public alternative schools we found were not really that different, they were equally bound by the standardized curriculum and high-stakes testing. We identified one or two very alternative private schools, but they were too expensive for us, and it seemed our now school-phobic son would have resisted them as well. After he also resisted our attempt to homeschool him in the academic subjects – English, social studies, math and science – we seemed to be out of the normal alternatives. Luckily we had read John Holt and Matt Hern and were willing to let Eric try the radical approach of unschooling.

So Eric, now 22, has launched a business with three partners installing and maintaining Apple computer systems for video editing businesses in Hollywood and repairing Apple computers. Eric, the math-phobic kid, is the Chief Operating Officer, dealing with all the personnel, logistical and financial issues for the business.

#### THE KEY AXIOM: ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

From Eric's experience, as well as the experience of many other families and youth we know or have read about, and the sobering statistic that up to 50% of our youth in our big city public school districts (including our son Eric) are not graduating from high school, I have come to the conclusion that the ubiquitous, "one size fits all" conventional instructional school does not, and cannot, work for every youth, no matter how fully it is funded or how much it is "reformed." Yet I have talked to plenty of youth who go to conventional schools, do very well, and enjoy going to school each day. I have attended John Lofton's excellent workshops at AERO conferences where he makes a compelling case that many people in the African-American community believe strongly in the conventional instructional school, if fairly resourced, to be the best shot for their youth to have a chance to succeed.

So given all of the above, I am dragged inexorably to the conclusion that when it comes to education, don't even try to argue that any one learning path can fit everybody. *One size does not and cannot fit all!* 

## MAKING CONVENTIONAL INSTRUCTIONAL SCHOOLS BETTER

From my own past experience in classrooms, from talking to my kids and other youth about their school experience, and talking to friends who are public school teachers, it seems one of the main things that drags down the conventional instructional school is that *teachers have to try to teach all the youth who don't want to be there*. There is a mythology that if teachers are good they can motivate any student to learn the

> So many of the features of a standard classroom—rules clamping down classroom behavior, required graded homework, and copious little behavior modification techniques—are there to try to motivate or coerce youth to learn who do not want to be there.

required material. But despite that, I hear teacher after teacher I know complain about having to spend so much time and effort trying to motivate many of their students to learn and at the same time deal with the behavior problems of those who won't.

So many of the features of a standard classroom—rules clamping down classroom behavior, required graded homework, and copious little behavior modification techniques – are there to try to motivate or coerce youth to learn who do not want to be there. For the youth who are happy to be in class and are interested in what the teacher has to teach them, these strong-arm tactics and the general negative energy of the other youth can poison the classroom environment.

I ask teachers I know how different it would be if every youth in their class wanted to be there. They generally roll

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their eyes and tell me that it would be wonderful, for them and for their students. *Wouldn't the conventional instructional school be transformed by just that one profound change, a teacher interacting with a classroom full of students truly interested in and grateful for the lessons the teacher was providing?* 

#### PRACTICAL TRANSFORMATION

As a firm believer in unschooling, I have made an argument in the past that conventional instructional schooling – with its compartmentalized subjects, standardized academic curriculum, and bureaucratic mechanisms – is not an appropriate learning environment for any youth. Nine out of ten parents hearing my argument don't buy it and write me off as naïve, if not delusional.

So how do we realistically get from where we are now with few educational options for most of our youth to many paths for learning for all our youth? We need to create an environment of community will and public policy that encourages rather than discourages profoundly alternative learning settings – schools, learning centers, homes, businesses, whatever – so that every family can find the environment where their youth can bring their positive learning energy and interact with adults bringing the same. We can reach out to teachers and administrators, toiling in the conventional instructional schools, and make them our allies rather than our adversaries. Because our plan is *to make their classrooms what they ought to be, a room full of students ready and eager to learn and grateful to the adult teacher who will help them do so.* 

#### A THIRD VOICE IN THE EDUCATION DEBATE

Education is a hot-button political issue, but liberals and conservatives really embrace this idea of "Many Paths." This is evidenced by the continuing bipartisan support for the federal No Child Left Behind legislation, with the main issues of disagreement on the margins of funding levels.

As a lifelong liberal and Democrat, I find it ironic that Republicans are often closer to the "Many Paths" position, in supporting homeschooling, "school choice," giving more educational decision making to parents. But then in almost big brother fashion, Republicans have also been the strongest proponents of the kind of high-stakes testing, mandated by No Child Left Behind that makes it nearly impossible for truly alternative public schools to pass muster.

I would like to see the dialog and debate on education and educational policy include a third position that champions "Many Paths" behind a banner of liberty, democracy, and self-direction, within a context of local community responsibility for nurturing the creation and ongoing support of profound educational options.

I believe that embracing the idea of "Many Paths" to transform our education system is sound policy for the 21st century. As our species continues to evolve on this planet, the dimensions, complexities, knowledge-base and skill sets needed to maintain human society and facilitate our continuing evolution require a profound move away from the "command and control," one-size-fits-all education system that we developed in the 19th century to address an earlier phase of our evolution. Today's challenge is to create an enriched environment for learning so that our youth can find satisfying and rewarding careers that also contribute to their communities, which in turn would contribute to our larger common good, and move our culture forward.

**Cooper Zale** is a parent, systems analyst, and alternative education advocate in Los Angeles, California. His son and daughter, now young adults, were both unschooled during their high school years. Cooper invites your responses via email at czale@scoal.rr.com. ●

**Marshall Fritz** passed away Tuesday, November 4, 2008, after a battle with pancreatic cancer. In 1994 Marshall founded the Alliance for the Separation of School & State and was Chairman of the Board until his death. He was a leading spokesman in how ending state, federal, and local government involvement in schooling can improve education for all children, strengthen the family, and even lead to a turnaround of our collapsing society.

Prior to founding the Alliance in 1994, Marshall was president of the unaccredited Pioneer Christian Academy. His ideas for high quality education were so advanced that his school received endorsements of educators from William Glasser to Nobel Laureate Milton Friedman to New York State Teacher of the Year John Taylor Gatto.

Prior to his work in K-12 education, Marshall was the founder of the Advocates for Self-Government, an educational organization that teaches Americans who ardently love liberty how to express their views positively. Marshall began his career with IBM in computer sales, education, and design. He was active in Christian Businessmen's Committee, Serra Club (not Sierra), Toastmasters, and Overeaters Anonymous. He also coached and refereed youth soccer and worked as a volunteer in a homeless shelter.

Marshall has been published in the *Wall Street Journal, Educational Leadership, Current Thoughts and Trends*, and *Family Voice*. He is the publisher of *The Education Liberator, The School Liberator*, and the lead author of the "Proclamation for the Separation of School and State," which states simply "I proclaim publicly that I favor ending government involvement in education." Worldwide, more than 30,000 individuals have endorsed the Proclamation.

## Holding Tensions, Seeking Balance: One Educator's Holistic Pedagogy in Action

#### By Paul Freedman

am an incredibly fortunate teacher. I teach in a very nearly ideal school setting, which a small group of parents and I helped to create eight years ago. I teach at The Salmonberry School, in a multi-age elementary class, with fourteen students age 6-9, in a home-like building, on lovely grounds, including a large vegetable garden and an old orchard of terrific climbing trees, all on an exquisitely beautiful island in north Puget Sound. I am bound by no state standards, district mandates, or other bureaucratic constraints. In this privileged setting, I seek to craft my holistic pedagogy and bring my educational ideals to life.

When I refer to my pedagogical vision as holistic, I aim to call attention to my emphasis on three things: first the wholeness of the learners. These are not just cognitive beings of mathematical and linguistic intelligences. They are each unique whole beings of head, heart and hands. I strive to educate in a way that deeply touches their physical, social, emotional and spiritual selves. Second, I seek to emphasize the wholeness of the curriculum. As much as possible, I try not to conceive of the

> Teaching is an art, a dance. It requires openness, receptivity, mutuality and dialogue between real people. There is no way I could adhere to a fixed place along the structure vs. freedom continuum.

curriculum in terms of fractured disciplines, semesters, courses, periods. I use a multidisciplinary, integrated, thematic approach that recognizes the simple truth that any subject is more than an accumulation of its constituent parts, and in any in-depth study of the microcosm, the universal can be revealed. Third, I seek to emphasize the children's connections to and placement within whole systems: their community, bio-region, earth and cosmos. School is not an artificial construction separate from the world. It is itself one whole, firmly rooted within this world. The class recognizes and celebrates this location and the resulting sense of place and mutuality partly through our practice of ecological literacy, place-based education and service learning. Despite the relative privilege of my educational setting, I realize that I am continually engaged in the balancing act of holding tensions just as holistically minded teachers must be in any setting. Alternative educators seem to continually define their practice in juxtaposition to the mainstream dominant paradigm by using the language and concept of linear polar opposites, much like the north and south poles of a bar magnet. The key I believe to successful holistic education is to hold these tensions not by choosing a fixed position along a continuum but rather to embrace both extremes of a conceptual polarized tension and in this way call into question the entire dichotomous construction.

One example of such a tension is the intense pull between "freedom" and "structure."<sup>1</sup> Many books have been written on the question of what is educational freedom and how we attain it. (See the many titles in the AERO bookstore with "Freedom" in the title for example.) Spokespeople within generally standards-driven paradigms are inevitably calling for increased structure as well as higher standards (though there are certainly reformers reminding us of the importance of choice and flexibility in public schools) while more humanistic and libertarian pedagogues often call for more freedom (though again, certain holistic pedagogies point out that structure is necessary and developmentally appropriate for young learners.). In defining our pedagogical beliefs, we are somehow compelled, it seems, to choose a place along this scale. How much structure is appropriate for a holistic school?

In response to such a question I am apt to reject the notion that we have to make such a limiting choice at all. After all, it is partly through a safe structure that children gain true freedom. And conversely it is through their practice of freedom that learners are able to create the structures they need for themselves in order to grow and thrive. Also, from a holistic perspective the teacher must be absolutely responsive to the individual child, the particular developmental stage, the precise historical moment, the unique social context, etc. Teaching is an art, a dance. It requires openness, receptivity, mutuality and dialogue between real people. There is no way I could adhere to a fixed place along the structure vs. freedom continuum.

Other tensions can be held, with attentiveness and care, in a similar fashion: do students need rigor or comfort? Yes! Both. Unbridled rigor for its own sake is oppressive. Ease with no rigor is unlikely to capture the heart or mind of the learner. Both polarities are necessary. We can only learn in a safe environment, but a little charge to the atmosphere stimulates growth, passion and attentiveness to the learning.

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Students at the Salmonberry School.

Should our goal for holistic learning for the optimal unfolding of the individual or for the social justice of humanity on earth? Yes, both!

Should the curriculum be emergent or carefully constructed? Yes!

Experiential or theoretical? Absolutely!

Viewing an educational practice or pedagogy through a series of "either-or" lenses is symptomatic of a rather simplistic, dualistic, modernist and stereotypically "male" (sorry guys) way of thinking. If we are to create a vision of education that is truly transformative and radical (changing from the roots) we will have to move beyond our western propensity of thinking in dualism, and drive the dialogue a little deeper. We'll have to recognize the complexities of any whole system (such as a school) or whole living being, (such as a human child,) while we embrace a more postmodern lens of multiplicity.

Here's a more in depth example: A common question about educational pedagogies is: are they child-centered or teacher-directed? In my practice I once again strive to embrace both ends of the continuum and answer the question with, "yes." There is no doubt that conventional mainstream standards-driven education tends too far toward teacher-directed methods and adult-defined standards. The state sets the standards, the school district adopts the curriculum, the textbook company scripts the lessons, the teacher delivers the instruction. The learner is the receptacle for the required material.

A number of alternative pedagogies, partly as a natural and health-seeking reaction to this oppressive top-down hierarchical model, propose a child-centered approach. In the extreme, these educators urge the child to be at the center of his/her own education. No activities should be compulsory, and any guidance or direction offered by an uninvited adult will be unavoidably corrupting and coercive, and necessarily inauthentic and antieducational. Again, we are caught between the two ends of the spectrum, each position defined in stark opposition to the other.

A third, more complex holistic understanding, might include posing the question: what does the subject ask of us as learners? Maybe it is possible to conceive of an education that is neither teacher-directed, nor student-centered but subject-centered. This approach is akin to what Parker Palmer describes as "The Community of Truth."<sup>2</sup> In gathering around the subject and embarking on a subject-centered education, we will be most interested in exploring our own learning process. We will focus on neither the teacher nor the student in isolation but on the relationships and the spaces between. We will learn about the subject but we will also learn how to learn. We will particularly learn about how to learn within community, how to come together and share as well as challenge one another's perspectives; how to be in right relationship to the subject as well as each other.<sup>3</sup> We will dig deep and explore with our heads, hearts and hands.

Within the exploration there will undoubtedly be teacherdirected lessons, and some compulsory learning. There will also be a huge amount of choice and freedom for the learners. The teacher will both carefully craft lessons as well as remain always flexible to emergent impulses and spontaneous learning opportunities. We will "dance" in mutual dialogue together. Rigor and care for our learning will be expected. Comfort, ease and joy will at the same time be a necessary prerequisite, not a polar opposite. All these potential tensions will be carefully held as we seek balance in the learning process.

Holistic education seeks to keep learning whole. This can be achieved through the shared authentic processes of a learning community. In the end holistic education is all about engagement, connections and relationships. It can be more accurately conceived not as a series of fixed placements along linear continua but as a three dimensional whole with depth, texture and endless multiplicity and complexity. In this non-linear richness can be found the joy and wonder of the learning adventure.

#### **NOTES:**

1. Rocha, D. L. D. (2003). *Schools Where Children Matter: Exploring Educational Alternatives.* Brandon, VT: Foundation for Educational Renewal.

2. Palmer, P. J. (1998). *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (1st ed.). San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass.

3. Krishnamurti, J. (1993). *A Flame of Learning*. Den Haag: Mirananda

Paul Freedman holds an MA in Education from Goddard College. He has taught elementary grades for 15 years, and is the Founding Head of the Salmonberry School in Eastsound, WA (www.salmonberryschool.org). He is co-directing Goddard's August 2009 Progressive Educators Institute in Port Townsend, WA. His interests include bringing Holistic Educational theory into practice in elementary schools. E-mail: dancingmonkey@rockisland.com ●

## The Reggio Inspired Approach to Education: An Interview with Louise Boyd Cadwell

By Meghan Mulqueen

ducators, psychologists, and researchers from all over the world acknowledge that the Reggio Emilia approach is the most exceptional example of high quality early education in the world. Given the complexity of the approach, it is difficult to explain it briefly. To understand it better, I interviewed Louise Boyd Cadwell, an educator inspired by the Reggio approach.



From 1991-1992 Louise lived in the city of Reggio Emilia, Italy, where she

worked as an intern in two of its internationally acclaimed, municipally funded preschools. She returned to St. Louis, Missouri in 1992, where a 3-year Danforth Foundation grant was awarded to ten schools, both public and private, from the city and county, to study the Reggio approach. Louise was hired as the lead consultant for this grant funded work and was based at The College School, where she continued to work until 2008.

Louise Boyd Cadwell

Louise told me that "the Reggio educators' approach to school is centered on what is most important in life. The Reggio Emilia schools for young children are organized to nurture and foster our highest potential as human beings. In my experience, this is the foundation that the Reggio Emilia approach is based on."

In her book *Bringing Learning to Life: The Reggio Approach to Early Childhood Education*, Louise describes the key elements of the Reggio Emilia approach:

- The Child as the Protagonist: All children have preparedness, potential, curiosity, and interest in constructing their learning.
- The Child as the Collaborator: There is an emphasis on working in small groups, which is based on the idea that we form ourselves through our interaction with peers, adults, things in the world, and symbols.
- The Environment as a Third Teacher: The design and use of the space encourages encounters, communication, and relationships.

- The Child as the Communicator: This approach fosters children's intellectual development through a systematic focus on symbolic representation, including words, movement, drawing, painting, building, sculpture, shadow play, collage, dramatic play, and music.
- The Teacher as Partner, Nurturer and Guide: To know how to plan and proceed with their work, teachers listen and observe the children closely. Teachers ask questions, discover children's ideas, hypotheses, and theories and provide occasions for discovery and learning.
- The Teacher as the Researcher: Teachers work in pairs and engage in continuous discussion and interpretation of their work and the work of the children with all other staff.
- The Documentation as Communication: Teachers' commentary on the purposes of study and the children's learning process, transcriptions of children's verbal language, photographs of their activity, and representations of their thinking in many media are composed in carefully designed panels or books to present the process of learning in the schools.
- Parents as Partners: Parent Participation is considered essential and takes many forms. The ideas and skills that the families bring to the school as well as the exchange of ideas between parents and teachers, favor the development of a new way of education.
- Organization as Foundational: Intricate and complex organization appears at every level and within every context in the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia. It serves a larger purpose. It is not neat and tidy. It reflects the complexity and the order of the Universe.

In our interview, Louise described what she feels makes the Reggio Emilia approach so extraordinary. "One of the main benefits in the classroom is that most of the children develop a high level of skills in many of the '100 languages,' which refers to the many ways in which children acquire knowledge. This means that they become confident in their own voice, and their ability to describe, wonder, and offer their ideas on how they see the world. Also, they see themselves as active participants in learning, discovering, and creating as a part of a group. There is a sense of participation, almost like participatory democracy, that they are experiencing at a very young age. Their connection with the natural world is nurtured and developed in this approach so that they

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have a strong sense of place in terms of where they live and the community that they belong to."

Although there are many benefits to working with the Reggio Emilia approach, they do not come without challenges. Louise has experienced these challenges directly because as a teacher, she worked alongside others to reconstruct and reshape the way that early childhood education has often been viewed in the United States.

"It takes energy, courage and many extra hours to commit to rethinking what a classroom is and is for. For example, with the Reggio approach, the intention is to build a beautiful, home-like environment that is regularly refreshed with the children and parents so that the children understand the richness and importance of the environment as their learning home, the importance and respect for the materials, and of the care for all of it. If you look at the images of the environment in schools that are really working on this, they are very different then the average school. They are full of green plants, pillows and rugs and spaces large and small that are clean and aesthetically organized."

Additional challenges that Louise experienced with bringing Reggio to life in the classroom were related to the organization of the children into small groups. This often entails working with the ideas and thoughts of the children in a way that enables the teacher to follow along and observe in close detail. It is also a challenge for the teachers and staff to find time to meet, organize, discuss, and present their captured and recorded experiences to their peers because this is not part of the normal school day.

The final challenge that Louise described was that of parent involvement: "The challenge is that you want to involve the parents and link them and their opinions in so that they feel heard. Each parent has his or her own role to play and they are all very important to the community."

For those schools and educators who are interested in adapting the Reggio approach into their schools or starting a Reggio Emilia inspired school, Louise suggests connecting with the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA), as well as subscribing to *Innovations*, a quarterly newsletter. Additionally, there are conferences and workshops in many places in North America and also in Reggio Emilia, which are listed on the NAREA website **www.regglioalliance.org**. Another way to learn about the approach and to research opportunities for learning and publications, is to visit the official Reggio Children site, **http://zerosei.comune.re.it/inter/reggiochildren.htm**.

"There are many places and ways to start," Louise told me. "Start by asking open-ended questions to children and taking notes on what they say or organize an area of the classroom with materials and work with children to take care of them. Take pictures of interesting things going on around the classroom and have a discussion with children about them. Embrace the idea that school is life and that you want to create wonderful experiences that are remembered and grow and develop over time. Instead of viewing children from where you think they should be developmentally, seek to discover the children at the level that they are actually at. It is impor-



A Reggio-inspired learning environment

tant to know the materials that you are working with, along with the multiple languages of learning, because there are so many ways to uncover and express ideas."

In order to assist more schools in realizing their dreams, Louise along with her husband have launched a consulting company called Cadwell Collaborative: Sustainability Education and School Design. She said that it "is a pioneer consulting group that provides school leaders and teacher leaders with the tools, ideas, and skills for curricular innovation in pre-K through grade 12 education. We offer resources, workshops, and consulting services in support of systemic change."

Louise believes that the Reggio approach has much to offer the growing field of sustainability education which includes place based education, learning from multiple perspectives in many ways, and understanding our interdependence with natural systems.

The Reggio approach has much to offer the world of education no matter the field or the age that we are. It is centered on identifying and developing the uniqueness and strengths of each child, each person and all of our capacities to collaborate, invent and create the world that we want to live in together.

**Meghan Mulqueen** currently resides in Southern California where she lives and works as a writer, and a yoga for kids instructor. Her interest in the numerous different methods of child-led co-creation and co-learning has led to an interest in writing articles on alternative education. ●

# A VISION for a Pre-School/Kindergarten

#### By Kanika Al Diges

**MS** ampoorna", meaning "complete," is the name my mother gave to my vision for a pre-school / kindergarten. She said it is an apt name because the vision integrates all aspects of holistic education arising from different view points and weaves them with real life, to demonstrate that education must be fluid, resilient and nurture wisdom as the foundation for being integral. I loved the name immediately.

One of 13 children, I was born in Mumbai, India. I had a rich and fulfilling childhood and most importantly one that gave me the courage to question, dispute, reject, welcome and embrace change without fear, and face trials and tribulations

> We believe that given the right environment, every child has the capacity to develop and reach a level of "excellence" in their own area of interest, that is unique and must be interpreted as such, with no comparisons nor coercion through competitive goal setting and benchmarks.

without cynicism. As far back as I can remember, I was a child who observed closely the approach adults took to us children and how they related to the animate and inanimate world in general. The lessons I learnt from observing adult attitudes stemming from a genuine and warm heart are those that I drew from as life transpired.

Schooling in general had made very little impact upon me. I mostly found it limiting and I felt suffocated, to the extent that by the time I reached high school I lost all interest in higher academic education, but this did not deter me from excelling in everything I subsequently did in life, because, some very deeply caring adults had made lasting impressions on me. In two words I would sum that up as "facilitating trust."

I began working with children quite by chance after immigrating to Australia in 2004 and found that, despite their best efforts, educational models were caught in a trap of infallible self belief, unable to receive the child in deep reverence nor nurture the whole potential of the child. I questioned this and began to study the philosophies, pedagogies and methodologies of erstwhile educators. The deeper I delved the more archetypal links I began to see, whilst discovering the vital role spiritual development, family & community as well as the sense of interconnectedness with all, played in educating.

It also dawned on me that children are master teachers, adept natural learners and rooted in spirituality, which became the spring board for my personal spiritual journey. Slowly it became clear to me what I wanted to do and discovered for the first time my unique talents and life long goal. By 2010 I hope to open the doors to Sampoorna, a pre-school & kindergarten in the city of Pune in India.

With intentions clear I realized I needed to articulate my ideas into a vision. During one of my internet research sessions I had discovered AERO and amongst other valuable information and links on their website, I had also come across their course "School Starters 101." I can truly say that this is one of the most important and beneficial steps I could have taken towards shaping my ideas for a pre-school & kindergarten.

The School Starters course starts with defining one's vision and the facilitators guide us along on how to give it a body. The outcome of what AERO helped me define and shape was the first blue print of the vision and thus the birth of Sampoorna.

#### THE SAMPOORNA VISION

Our vision is to facilitate the blooming of the unique potentials within each child, in an integral atmosphere conducive for the spiritually unfolding child, so that they may engage with life by being fully present in the moment and develop their spiritual, physical, emotional and mental domains in a loving and nurturing environment that honors the child's life, family, friends, community, culture, traditions and the natural world that we all live in.

Our mission is to embrace the archetypal truths that run through many of the early childhood educational philosophies, pedagogies & methodologies and weave an integral tapestry of wisdom, spiritual insights, knowledge and skills that will assist our vision in preparing the foundation in early childhood for the subsequent desire to 'discover ones higher purpose'.

Our core values are based on values of social ethics and personal practices that sustain the foundations of Family, Culture & Traditions, Spiritual Development of the Child

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and Adult, Community, Education and Learning. Our values build an environment that is infused with joy so as to receive the child and their environment with reverence, educate in love & compassion, whilst performing our tasks in the spirit of service and a deep sense of being interconnected with our natural world.

#### **OUR PHILOSOPHY**

We see human development as an unfolding of potential from within and believe that the first 7 years of the child are crucial to their holistic development and as such consider, that children come to us still spiritually connected to the natural world. They bring to the adult the opportunity of reconnecting and rediscovering our interconnectedness to the natural world and in so doing, we also learn to respect the world of the child and thus be able to genuinely facilitate their natural affinity to learning.

We believe that given the right environment, every child has the capacity to develop and reach a level of "excellence" in their own area of interest, that is unique and must be interpreted as such, with no comparisons nor coercion through competitive goal setting and benchmarks. Instead we should be able to facilitate the unfolding of the child's potential and destiny in the fullest, deepest and most sustainable way by loving and caring for the child from our hearts. To this end we genuinely believe that engaging the child, family and the community are essential in forming a sustainable educational model that "loves and educates the adult and community, thus facilitates the educating of the whole child" through an Organic, Flexible, Fluid, Inclusive, Wise, Collaborative and Integrative design.

#### THE 12 PILLARS INCLUDE:

- Handwork and craft
- Art 🖉
- Music & Movement
- Literacy Language/Numeric
- Family Culture & Traditions
- Spiritual Development of Adult and Child
- Participation in Community Based Projects
- Personal Service
- Play in all its forms
- Story Telling listen, create & perform
- Celebrating the Seasons & Festivals
- Interconnectedness to Our Natural World

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#### **12 PILLARS**

Our approach considers a 12-fold path which we have termed our "12 Pillars," under which most early childhood curricula will find it easy to incorporate an organic educational program to meet the learning needs of a young child and prepare them towards attaining "excellence" and building a strong foundation that sustains the whole child and their world i.e. the spiritual, thinking, feeling and willing child, as well as the ongoing holistic education of the teacher and the other adults that make up the child's larger world within the cosmic stage.

The 12 Pillars are directly related to the development of the spiritual, mental, emotional and physical domains—the physical body, the senses, the intellect, and spirituality (imagination, intuition, insight, universal love, awareness of interconnectedness, realization of higher consciousness).

The tenets of the 12 Pillars have been selected after insightful considerations based on their ability to provide learning opportunities in one, more than one or all of the 12 pillars and different domains of consciousness of child development.

Our task is to endeavor to discover activities that lend themselves to the 12 Pillars and are based on a deeper understanding of their archetypal origins, as this then allows the activities to be truly free of dogma, prejudices and constraints and thus help circumvent the possibility of directly or indirectly indoctrinating, rather than facilitating the child's and every one else's unique development.

#### A SYNOPSIS OF THE SAMPOORNA VISION

By no means is our vision exhaustive and complete and neither has it been able to eloquently refer to the erstwhile philosophies it takes it's cues from. However, it suffices to say that we have been influenced by the works of many visionaries of which we mention just a few: P.R. Sarkar , Rudolf Steiner. Maria Montessori, Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo. J. Krishnamurthi, Howard Gardner and many others. We also keep our vision open to the works of contemporary educationists from the main and the alternative streams who have conducted research in early childhood education, as well as scientific and spiritual works that are directly or indirectly connected to early childhood development in particular.

Kanika al Diges lives and works in Sydney, Australia and may be contacted by email at kanika\_al\_diges@hotmail. com or by mail at 6/63 Underwood Road, Homebush NSW 2140, Australia. ●  $(\mathbf{\Phi})$ 

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## Wellsprings of Joy: Tapping the Passion for Authentic Learning

By Sue Haynes

#### **TWO KINDS OF INTELLIGENCE**

There are two kinds of intelligence: one acquired, as a child in school memorizes facts and concepts from books and from what the teacher says, collecting information from the traditional sciences as well as from the new sciences.

With such intelligence you rise in the world. You get ranked ahead or behind others in regard to your competence in retaining information. You stroll with this intelligence in and out of fields of knowledge, getting always more marks on your preserving tablets.

There is another kind of tablet, one already completed and preserved inside you. A spring overflowing its springbox. A freshness in the center of the chest. This other intelligence does not turn yellow or stagnate. It's fluid, and it doesn't move from outside to inside through the conduits of plumbing-learning.

The second knowing is a fountainhead from within you, moving out.

#### Rumi<sup>1</sup>

ver the past thirty years of teaching, I have had the privilege of working with a unique population of learners who, in their struggle with and often resistance to standardized education, have revealed a quality of learning that stems from a deeply sourced creative vitality. These maverick learners explore the frontiers of possibilities "outside of the box." In their resistance to paying tribute to superficial and often bogus learning agendas, they have become for me beacons of authentic learning—a level of learning which has the potential to enliven, empower and transform us.

These qualities of learning transcend our culturally conditioned, functional self. They are sourced from the "bejeweled self" of our innermost being and flower on their own timetable of unique expression. Thus they cannot be honored within a standardized "scope and sequence" curriculum. I believe that the purpose of education is to awaken and support this bejeweled treasure within us and to infuse its creative vitality and wisdom into our functional personality. The following vignettes spotlight a kind of teaching and learning that has the potential to tap the wellsprings of joy within us all.

> These maverick learners explore the frontiers of possibilities "outside of the box." In their resistance to paying tribute to superficial and often bogus learning agendas, they have become for me beacons of authentic learning—a level of learning which has the potential to enliven, empower and transform us.

Ashley Bryan is an author, illustrator and former teacher of art at Dartmouth College. In an interview with me, Ashley shared the following perceptions about teaching and learning.

If you want to do something because it means something to you, then you go on. It's that sense of the urgency of making things alive that is so important. It's not a pressure; it becomes a natural breathing. It's just the way you are. When I taught art classes at Dartmouth College, I tried to encourage my students to seek that deep engagement.

My son Matt, during his homeschooled third grade year, spent every spare moment developing his drawing skills. One day he said to me,

#### When drawing works, I feel nice and get that tingling feeling.

On another occasion, Matt compared the difference between seeking outside approval and self-approval to the difference between cold-blooded and warm-blooded animals.

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Cold-blooded depends on outside conditions whereas warmblooded stays the same no matter what happens on the outside.

David, a professional dancer, recalled two significant learning experiences in fifth grade, a light in the midst of his frustrating years of elementary schooling.

I remember a frontier project that involved building a log cabin in the classroom with a few other students. I remember how excited I was when I found an old refrigerator box on my walk to school one morning. That became the main part of our cabin. We had to do research, because the project involved doing a living history presentation while touring kids through the cabin. I remember being really engaged in both the building of the cabin and the research, because I had a definite goal in mind, and I was discovering the steps on my own. That's what gets my energy going. It was not like somebody walking me through *their* steps.

Another neat thing that my teacher did was a class talent show. I had a great time with it, and I actually choreographed a dance! I talked a friend into doing a movement piece to some music. Back then, I wouldn't have known what to call it, but we used our bodies, basically to music, and it was dancing!

The crux of it all is that each of us has a unique gift, a talent that we may not even recognize as special. If we could be encouraged to pursue that, this could so enhance our learning. We could pick up the skills we needed in service of that. And most importantly, we would feel a validation of our own inner learning strengths.

Emily, currently a special education and reading teacher in rural Alaska, spent a good deal of her elementary schooling in a resource room because she wouldn't do classwork and homework (although she tested above grade level in most skill areas). Finding her own way through the support of an alternative high school and college, she became a remarkable teacher. Reflecting on her teaching in a resource room at a middle school in California she said,

I've had lots of comments at my school about how amazing I am. But I want to say, "Hey, I'm not doing anything out of the ordinary." I draw upon my own experiences of school, giving the kids what I had needed. For all the children who are struggling as I struggled, I wish for them to have teachers who can see them for who they are and can see past what they want the kids to produce, finding other ways to see that they are meeting specific requirements. This is not a time for narrowing consciousness by focusing on measurable, objective learning goals within prescriptive curriculums; it is a time to recognize and bring forth the gifts of our deep wisdom sourced from within.

In this era of growing consciousness, we are awakening to an expanded understanding of our true nature. Responding to this awakening will transform our understanding of the purpose of education. This is not a time for narrowing consciousness by focusing on measurable, objective learning goals within prescriptive curriculums; it is a time to recognize and bring forth the gifts of our deep wisdom sourced from within. Commitment to developing our full potential in our education systems can transform the reductionist mentality that has limited us and release the wellsprings of joy that are our natural heritage.

#### NOTE:

1. *The Essential Rumi* (1995) translated by Coleman Barks with John Moyne. HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY. p.178.

**Sue Haynes** has taught students in a variety of educational settings including preschool, elementary school, high s chool, college and adult education. With Masters degrees in Special Education and Literacy, she has focused on empowering at-risk, highly creative learners who don't fit the mold of standardized education. This article was adapted from her self-published book, *Creative Mavericks: Beacons of Authentic Learning* (2007, XLibris). Contact her at **sue@ creativemavericks.com** •

The Winter, 2008/09 issue of *Green Money Journal* contains a series of articles on "whole mind education." Guest editors Joan Jaeckel and Eric Utne have brought together a provocative group of writings on "A New Paradigm: Calling for the transformation of childhood education through developmentally-intelligent design." Among the 15 contributors are Deborah Meier, Linda Lantieri, Thomas Armstrong, and Ron Miller. See **www.greenmoney.com**. We Stand on the Shoulders of Those Who've Come Before Us:

# Looking Back at the Alternative/Free School Periodicals of the Past

by Dave Lehman

A lternative and free school communication has, from the beginning, been done by people actually involved with these schools and not by professional journalists, writers, or educational publishers. Thus, their style, format, and content reflected the struggle of people breaking new ground, trying to reach out to others like themselves for comradeship, insight, and criticism. Over roughly the twenty year period from the late-1960s to the mid-1980s, there were at least eighteen different magazines, newspapers, newsletters, and journals for and about free schools and alternative education.

The **New Schools Exchange Newsletter** was the "grandmother" of all these alternative school periodicals having begun publishing in April 1969 in Santa Barbara, California. Nine years, 140 issues, several staff changes later (my wife Judy and I worked with NSE when the **Newsletter** was published out of Shanti Gardens, an organic farm and garden outside St. Paris, Ohio), with moves from California to Ohio to Arkansas, NSE published its final issue in February 1978.

**Edcentric: A Journal of Educational Change** was published usually on a quarterly basis for about the same period of time during the early 1970s. Produced in Eugene, Oregon, the **Edcentric** staff described their publication as ".... The only magazine that consistently links the movement for educational change to other liberation movements both within and beyond the U.S. borders." Different from the NSE newsletters which had much of their space devoted to descriptions of schools and a genuine "exchange" of information about people looking for new schools and new schools looking for new staff, **Edcentric** devoted its pages to a wide-range of political and educational articles.

The alternative education movement was, and is, by no means confined to the U.S. borders; much influence has come from such schools as Summerhill in England, the Lile Skoles of Denmark, and the Montesssori schools originally from Italy. Many articles and exchanges of letters with such schools and their founders or prime-movers appeared regularly in the pages of the alternative education publications. One journal in particular, **This Magazine Is About Schools**  was produced in Canada, and actually was begun before NSE in 1967. Although it often contained material from alternative schools and political developments in Canada, they also published pieces from and about developments in the U.S. **This Magazine** changed its small, glossy magazine format to a tabloid, newsprint format under the new name, **This Magazine: Education, Culture, Politics** in 1973, and ceased publishing a few years later.

The alternative education movement has had numerous major inspiring writer/teachers, and Herb Kohl from California has been, and continues to be one of them. One of his early articles was published in **The Teacher Paper** out of Portland, Oregon, which was produced by an all-volunteer staff, devoted to publishing articles written by and for innovative, experimenting classroom teachers. Another teachers' publication was **No More Teachers Dirty Looks** published in San Francisco by BARTOC, the "Bay Area Radical Teachers Organizing Collective."

Several of the alternative ed periodicals had a more regional focus, yet were often exchanged or subscribed to on a national basis. For example, the **Alternative Schools Network News** was the major voice of the "Alternative Schools Network," a well organized group of alternative schools in the greater Chicago area which finally stopped publishing in 1983. Another regional type of publication was the **Washington Area Free School Clearinghouse Newsletter** (which later became the **CHOICE Newsletter** – "Clearing House for Options in Children's Education") which mainly provided news of alternative school activities in the greater Washington, D.C. area. Yet, they drew on material from beyond the D.C. area, such as a number of resources on sexism from the "Emma Willard Task Force on Education" out of Minneapolis.

Other regional efforts included the Alternative Schooling News, published by the Horizons School in Atlanta, Georgia, focusing primarily on what was happening in alternative education in the Southeastern U.S.; The Innovative Education News, begun in 1970 which lasted through the late 1970s and served the greater New Orleans area; Centerpeace: A Free School Magazine that primarily serviced

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the New England area; and **Return to Learning**, out of Fort Wayne, Indiana, serving the Midwest.

The "humanistic education movement" overlapped considerably with alternative/free schoolers, and the **Alternatives for Education** journal from San Pedro, California reflected this. Then, too, there was the unique publication of the **Teacher Drop-Out Center**, produced initially out of Cambridge, Massachusetts and later Ithaca College in Ithaca, New York, which was a sort of classified ads publication, providing listings in a job search network for a pool of teachers looking to become involved with alternative schools. Frequently the publishers or editors or the authors of articles for these various journals would publish each others writings, or sometimes do joint publications as a means of promoting each others publications, as in a combined **Edcentric/Centerpeace** issue.

> These grassroots periodicals covered the country at a crucial time in the early struggles initially of free schools, then alternative schools; building relationships, developing community, and providing much needed communication to counter the all too often feeling of isolation. We take strength knowing of those who've come before us.

The development of "public" alternative schools was greatly enhanced by two university-based organizations - NCOPE, the "National Consortium for Options in Public Education" out of Indiana University, and the work of NASP, the "National Alternative Schools Project" at the University of Massachusetts. In 1971, NCOPE first published the periodical Changing Schools: The Journal of Alternative Education, which later became independent of Indiana University, held a regular national conference, published a national directory of public alternative schools, and several pamphlets on such topics as funding for public alternative schools. Besides producing a series of professionally printed resource booklets for and about alternative schools, as well as their own national directory, NASP began in October 1974 to publish Applesauce, "a blend of ideas and happenings in alternative education." They continued publishing for five years before turning over their mailing list and other resources to us at the Alternative Community School (ACS) in Ithaca, New York.

Several ACS students and I began publishing the Alternative Schools Exchange: The Unicorn in the spring of 1980 in an effort to fill the communication gap left when both Applesauce and the New Schools Exchange Newsletter stopped publishing. It was printed in the Ithaca High

School print shop with the help of a teacher who split his time with IHS and ACS (we were a "school-within-a-school" located in the shop wing of IHS at the time). Although we had a small list of actual subscribers, we sold our magazine at various local, regional, and national conferences over the four years of The Unicorn's existence. Jonathan Kozol, another frequent voice in these periodicals, in the Appendix to his book, Alternative Schools: A Guide for Educators and Parents (an updated re-make of his original Free Schools book of 1972) described The Unicorn as the ".... best politically oriented newsletter on alternative education, with quarterly publication, book reviews, and curriculum resources." As far as I know, at the time, the early 1980s, along with Changing Schools, we were the only national magazine produced by and devoted to alternative education, other than the newsletter of the National Coalition of Alternative Community Schools out of Ann Arbor, Michigan and a handful or regional newsletters.

Today, there are a number of alternative newsletters, primarily serving the public alternative schools and/or programs in specific states, e.g. the New York State Alternative Education Association, Washington [State] Association of Learning Alternatives, Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs, and California Association of Alternative Schools and Programs—all of which are under the umbrella of IALA, the International Association of Learning Alternatives, which continues to produce an on-line, monthly newsletter at **www.learningalternatives.net**. And lastly, our editor Ron Miller began the journal Holistic Education Review in 1988, which later became what it is today, Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice. This magazine was started by Jerry Mintz as AERO-Gramme in 1989, and for a while included Changing Schools when that stopped publishing.

These grassroots periodicals covered the country at a crucial time in the early struggles initially of free schools, then alternative schools; building relationships, developing community, and providing much needed communication to counter the all too often feeling of isolation. We take strength knowing of those who've come before us.

**Dave Lehman** was for many years the Principal of the Alternative Community School in Ithaca, New York. ●

Dr. Ronald Swartz, a professor at Oakland University in Michigan, has been writing about democratic education for thirty years. He has explored the relevance of ideas of John Dewey, Paul Goodman, Homer Lane, A.S. Neill and others who are less familiar to many of us in the educational alternatives movement. Because his work has been published in academic journals, it has been neglected by the larger audience it deserves. His writings are posted **at http://personalwebs.oakland.edu/~swartz/articles.html**.

# Memetics, Schools and Education

#### by Kelly Taylor

e educational revolutionaries are interested in challenging the status quo of one-size-fits-all education. We want to create a paradigm shift. In order to do so, we have to understand what we're up against, be aware of how current paradigms are upheld by "memes," how the memes we use are perceived, and how we can use memes more effectively. A meme ("meem") is any piece of culturally transmitted information, large or small. They are the building blocks of human social existence.

Much has been written on the topic of memetics, but Richard Dawkins, who coined the term "meme" in his 1976 book, The Selfish Gene, provides the best definition: Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.<sup>1</sup>

It is essential that we as educational revolutionaries learn to perceive and understand memes and memetics, how they function, and their relevance to education so that we can effect change and create the world we want to see.

Like a gene in genetics, a meme's purpose in the realm of memetics is to replicate itself, to move from one host to another; however memes are created by people, often intentionally, to propagate specific ideas and paradigms. Obviously some memes carry large pieces of our cultural makeup, and are made up of lots of smaller memes in what's called a meme-complex. As we encounter various memes, we evaluate them and either accept them and then pass them on to others, or reject them and we don't pass them on.

How exactly can memes be used in this way? Some memes evolve over time, but many are consciously created to support or counter pre-existing memes, and the field of education is a teeming, writhing mass of contradictory memes, each of which is seen as positive by its "host," to use a biological analogy. These hosts are clamoring for "change," "a return to older values," "back to basics," "diversity," "new math," "traditional subjects," "hand-on, interactive," "reform," "integrated learning," "increased success," "better grades," "lower drop-out rates," "higher test scores," and the like. Each of these is a meme complex with layers of smaller memes developed and working together as co-memes.

If we are to truly revolutionize education, we need to be able to take these apart, understand them, and put them back together or destroy them as we see fit for our individual school's needs. We can choose to encourage some memes, such as "consensus-based decision making," "small mixed-age class sizes," or "non-compulsory classes" to mold the future into something that we think will be more positive for everyone.

As a way of looking at education-related memes, let's take apart "school" as a meme complex by creating a short list of memes associated with traditional school: principal, teacher, pupils, building, grades, friends, clothes, classes, subjects, academics, specials, grade-levels, tests, supplies, pencils,

> Dissatisfaction with the existing school system is rampant, and this is an excellent time to work towards creating new memes that promote the idea that we don't just have to take whatever "they" dish out, that we can create our own realities and paradigms.

chalkboards, books, papers, uniforms, halls, lockers, sports, discipline, control. Note that many of these sub-memes form common phrases or compound words with "school," such as "schoolbooks" and "schoolteacher." Of course each of those sub-memes can be analyzed further, breaking down each idea into many component parts, and doing so may be useful to us, depending on what we are trying to accomplish.

The questions of which memes and how to break them down can and should only be answered on an individual or organizational level (what's right for you or your school in Manhattan may be very different for folks in the mountains of West Virginia), and an exciting component of answering them is recognizing, creating, supporting and propagating counter-memes. They are popping up in the mainstream, from the New York Times running a favorable article on unschooling to films like "Accepted" and "Mean Girls." Dissatisfaction with the existing school system is rampant, and this is an excellent time to work towards creating new memes that promote the idea that we don't just have to take whatever "they" dish out, that we can create our own realities and paradigms.

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The best way to start this process is by looking at an issue that is near to us. There have been some hot debates recently as to the best definitions and applications of the word "democracy," specifically in relationship to schools, education and socalled alternative education. People are beginning to really unpack a particularly powerful meme which is undergoing a very sudden and very public paradigm shift. What does it mean that a word that was once positive - "people power" - is now associated with war, bombings, fascism, torture and rigged elections? What does this mean for "democratic" education? All of a sudden the definition of the word has become critical before even contemplating the practicalities or impracticalities of applying and employing a particular decision-making model in their schools.

This is more than an argument about semantics, as if words are interchangeable and should mean the same things to everyone. It's important to recognize what words are significant to a range of different groups and life conditions in order to choose the appropriate language in the expression of our new and radical ideas. Do we want to push out into the farthest boundaries of alternative education, attracting other radicals and early adopters? Do we want to use more inclusive language to try to bring alternative education to those who would otherwise never consider it? When we create and use memes with careful intent, we can be more secure in our communication, and have confidence in our message.

#### NOTE:

1. www.rubinghscience.org/memetics/dawkinsmemes.html

**Kelly Taylor** has a BA from Hampshire College, and is passionate about creating educational alternatives for anyone and everyone, not just those who can afford it. She lives in southern New Hampshire with her partner, two kids, a cat, a dog, and a snake. **ninjagoggles@gmail.com** 

#### **PROJECT IDEA**

Make an "idea map" with school in the middle and start making first-level sub-memes. Then list as many memes as you can think of that comprise those sub-memes, as with "schools." It can be an eye-opening experiment in breaking down assumptions. Now do the same for your school or educational program or project. What are the sub-memes of a freeschool? An unschoolers collective? A Friends' school? What sort of "meme-trees" would your students create?



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# Communications

Compiled by Carol Morley and Ron Miller

## National·····

From FairTest: Test-optional colleges list soars past 775 as leading admissions group urges more schools to reconsider SAT/ACT exam requirements. As the nation's leading organization of college admissions professionals calls for more schools to reevaluate their use of SAT and ACT test results, a new survey concludes that more than 775 bachelor-degree granting colleges and universities already do not require most applicants to submit scores from either exam.

News

The number of "test-optional" schools has soared since "new" versions of the SAT and ACT were introduced, according to the National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest), which applauded the report released today by the National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC). The NACAC Commission on the Use of Standardized Tests in Undergraduate Admission echoed many recommendations long advocated by FairTest and other assessment reformers, including:

- encouraging additional institutions to consider ending their admissions exam mandates;
- stopping the use of "cut-scores," or minimum test requirements, for determining tuition aid eligibility; particularly in programs such as the National Merit Scholarship competition; and
- condemning reliance on ACT/SAT results for "ranking" institutional quality;

"The NACAC report accurately captures the concerns about test score misuse and overuse shared by many high school guidance counselors and college admissions officers," said FairTest Executive Director Jesse Mermell. "The test scores obsession is undermining both equity and educational quality in our nation's schools." More than 40 institutions have dropped admissions testing requirements for all or most applicants in the past four years.

FairTest Public Education Director Bob Schaeffer added, "We expect the ACT/SAT optional list to continue growing as more institutions recognize that the tests remain biased, coachable, educationally damaging and irrelevant to sound admissions practices." A recent report from the College Board, the test's owner, concluded that high school grades predict college performance more accurately than does the SAT. Several of the nation's most selective institutions, including Smith College and Wake Forest University, are among those recently dropping admissions testing requirements.

A regularly updated FairTest directory of test score schools is available free online at **www.fairtest.org/university/optional**.

Nearly 200,000 students, parents, and guidance counselors use these lists each year. A chronology of recent test-optional policy adoptions and a list of top schools which do not require ACT or SAT scores are available on request.

**The SAT inches its way to oblivion.** By Peter Sacks (author of *Tearing Down the Gates: Confronting the Class Divide in American Education*). **Newsday.com** October 5, 2008. "Society likes to think that the SAT measures people's ability or merit. But no one in college admissions who visits the range of secondary schools we visit, and goes to the communities we visit - where you see the contrast between opportunities and fancy suburbs and some of the high schools that aren't so fancy – can come away thinking that standardized tests can be a measure of someone's true worth or ability." The speaker wasn't some rabble-rousing outsider to the higher education establishment – like me, for instance - taking another pot shot at the venerable SAT. No, that was William Fitzsimmons, dean of admissions and financial aid at Harvard, who was now rocking the SAT's boat.

He was referring to his work on a commission sponsored by the National Association of College Admissions Counseling, which has called upon the nation's colleges and universities to reconsider their heavy reliance on standardized admission tests like the SAT.

The commission's report is eye-opening, not necessarily for the substance of its message, which isn't really new, but for the individuals and institutions now advocating this message of testing reform. Indeed, many university presidents and higher education leaders have been talking like Fitzsimmons lately: People like Anthony Marks, the president of Amherst; Gene R. Nichol, the former president at William and Mary; and Colin Diver, the president of Reed College. Dozens of smaller, liberal arts colleges have already dropped the SAT as a requirement for admission. The most notable example is Bates College, which quit the SAT more than two decades ago, at wit's end with an SAT-obsessed culture that produced good test-takers but not necessarily good students for the intellectually rigorous college.

In the current system, dominated by privilege, elitism and money, a marginally bright rich kid can get into a top college because of a well-prepped SAT performance, while the creative genius from an impoverished family is lucky to attend a community college – or to go to college at all. An SAT score for the daughter of a neurosurgeon growing up with every conceivable advantage is a far different indicator than the

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SAT score of the second-generation immigrant whose parents never finished grade school.

Perhaps the writing is on the wall. In time, Harvard itself could make test scores optional for undergraduate admissions. Its Ivy League competitors would begin to follow suit. The University of Michigan and other elite public universities would be next. As traditional admissions tests decline in importance, the marketplace will be forced to find other, more reliable measures of college quality and student performance.

From Experts Bemoan Loss of Kids' Play Time, by David Crary, AP. Some of the factors behind kids' diminished play time have been evolving for decades, others are more recent. Added together, they have resulted in eight to 12 fewer hours of free play time per week for the average American child since the 1980s, experts say. Among the key factors, according to psychologist and author Michael Thompson: • Parents' reluctance to let their kids play outside on their own, for fear of abduction or injury, and the companion trend of scheduling lessons, supervised sports and other structured activities that consume a large chunk of a child's non-school hours. • More hours per week spent by kids watching TV, playing video games, using the Internet, communicating on cellphones. • Shortening or eliminating recess at many schools - a trend so pronounced that the National Parent Teacher Association has launched a "Rescuing Recess" campaign. • More emphasis on formal learning in preschool, more homework for elementary school students and more pressure from parents on young children to quickly acquire academic skills. The consequences are potentially dire, according to Thompson. He contends that diminished time to play freely with other children is producing a generation of socially inept young people and is a factor behind high rates of youth obesity, anxiety, attention-deficit disorder and depression. Many families turn to organized sports as a principal non-school activity, but Thompson noted that this option doesn't necessary breed creativity and can lead to burnout for good young athletes and frustration for the less skilled.

#### From New Effort Aims to Test Theories of Education,

by Javier C Hernandez, *NY Times*. Roland G. Fryer Jr., a Harvard economist, has often complained that while pharmaceutical companies have poured billions of dollars each year into studying new drugs and Boeing devoted \$3 billion to develop the 777 jet, there has been little spent on efforts to scientifically test educational theories. Now Dr. Fryer has quit his part-time post as chief equality officer of the New York City public schools to lead a \$44 million effort, called the Educational Innovation Laboratory, to bring the rigor of research and development to education. The initiative will team economists, marketers and others interested in turning around struggling schools with educators in New York, Washington and Chicago. Backed by the Broad Foundation, founded by the billionaire philanthropist Eli Broad, and other private groups, the research is intended to infuse education

with the data-driven approach that is common in science and business, Dr. Fryer said. In its first year, the research group plans to focus on incentive programs, including controversial ideas like giving students cash for good test scores, an approach that Dr. Fryer has tested in New York since June 2007. Each of the three school districts working with the institute will use a different plan to encourage high achievement, with researchers tracking the effect of each on student performance. Conclusive evidence about the effectiveness of such programs has been scant, and Dr. Fryer said officials are still examining the data on last year's cash incentives. Dr. Fryer said the new institute would be able to identify what works so that educators across the country could prioritize their spending. "We will have the willingness to try new things and be wrong — the type of humbleness to say, 'I have no idea whether this will work, but I'm going to try," he said.

#### Putting the Nature Back in the Nurture of our Children,

by Julia Steiny, projo.com. Family physicians don't see as many broken bones among children as they did in the days when kids were sent "outside to play." Now they see computer-related repetitive motion injuries. The free-for-all, unstructured play — which did occasionally result in a broken bone back when we were shooed outdoors - has been replaced by organized activities run by people keenly aware of liability issues. Nearly gone are gaggles of kids bounding around the neighborhood or into the local woods — where any is left — free to explore the world as Mother Nature made it. Richard Louv, author of The Last Child in the Woods, says this generation of children suffers from "nature-deficit disorder." He's collected much research to support his cause. For example, on average, kids spend 44 hours a week plugged into electronic gadgets. Bike sales have dropped by a third in a generation. Childhood obesity is now out of control. Attendance at national parks has plummeted. Since the 2001 federal No Child Left Behind act passed, 40 percent of U.S. schools have cut or completely eliminated recess and field trips. Furthermore, "Parents are scared to death of stranger danger, and nature is a stranger. When we don't let them get outside much, we're setting them up to fear the outdoors."

Most intriguing to me was Louv's discussion of nature's effect on our brain's "executive function," which he described as "the voice in your head." I would add that executive function governs your ability to assimilate lots of different kinds of information, and to act or make choices as a result. Louv said, "The best way to develop executive function is through imaginative, made-up games. But both independent play and nature have been disappearing. "On a playground, leaders tend to be the physically strongest. But in nature, leaders are the smartest because they are the ones making up the games." "If you really want to get into Harvard, go outside," he intones. However infuriating it is that test scores are the only metric that matters, getting kids into nature in fact improves achievement. And teachers who get outside with their kids experience

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far less burn-out. He cites studies at the University of Illinois that show that the symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder all but disappear when the kids have regular, sustained contact with the natural world. Louv is very excited that Rhode Island Sen. Jack Reed and Maryland Rep. John Sarbanes submitted the "No Child Left Inside Act," which passed the House on Sept.19. The victory in the House was largely symbolic, since environmental science will be folded in to the revision — or replacement — of the No Child Left Behind education law.

#### From Universal preschool hasn't delivered results, by

Shikha Dalmia, Lisa Snell, SFGate.com. Early education advocates want you to believe that the case for universal preschool is so airtight that raising any questions about it is an act of heresy. But there is a strong and growing body of literature showing that preschool produces virtually no lasting benefits for the majority of kids. More kids who attend preschool enter kindergarten knowing their ABCs and counting their numbers than their stay-at-home peers, it is true. But these gains fade, as study after study has shown. Georgia's fourth-grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading score in 1992, when it embraced universal preschool, was 212 - three points below the national average. Last year, after years of universal preschool, it was 219 – still one point below the national average. Its math score was three points below the average in 1992. Last year, it was 235 - four points below the national average. And that's the good news. Oklahoma's fourth-grade NAEP reading score

in 1998, when it adopted universal preschool, was 219 – six points above the national average. Last year, it had dropped to 217 - three points below the national average. Similarly, its math score was at par with the national average in 2000. Last year, it had dropped two points below. Since employing universal preschool, not only is Oklahoma doing worse compared with the nation – but also its own prior performance. In Tennessee, a comprehensive study last month – commissioned by the government itself – concluded that, barring at-risk kids, there was "no statistically significant difference" between the educational performance of second-graders who attended preschool and those who did not. Activists cannot blame this on 'poor quality' preschool, given that the Tennessee program is regarded as the gold standard of preschool - meeting 9 of the 10 criteria for a high-quality program set by the National Institute for Early Education Research.

What's more, a joint analysis that Bruce Fuller, a UC Berkeley professor, conducted with Stanford University researchers found extended preschool may actually emotionally harm mainstream kids. He found that kindergartners with 15 or more hours of preschool every week were less motivated and more aggressive in class. Likewise, Canada's C.D. Howe Institute found a higher incidence of anxiety, hyperactivity and poor social skills among kids in Quebec after universal preschool. All of this suggests that we are very far from having the degree of confidence needed to justify billions of dollars in taxpayer spending on universal preschool.

## Resources and Conferences

*Re-Opening Einstein's Thought: About What Can't Be Learned From Textbooks* **Conrad P. Pritscher** 

Sense Publishers (available through Amazon.com or Barnes & Noble)

"Conrad Pritscher provides us with a breathtaking view of education as it is and can be, one focal point of which is Albert Einstein's wise views on the subject. There is abundant genius in this book, one that parents and policymakers, as well as teachers and students, must read. Then, all can see what Pritscher sees. Then, all can find the path to improving the schools." William F. Pinar, *Professor and Canada Research Chair, University of British Columbia*.

Conrad P. Pritscher taught philosophy of education and multicultural education and several other courses at Bowling Green State University, Ohio, from 1971 to 2002.

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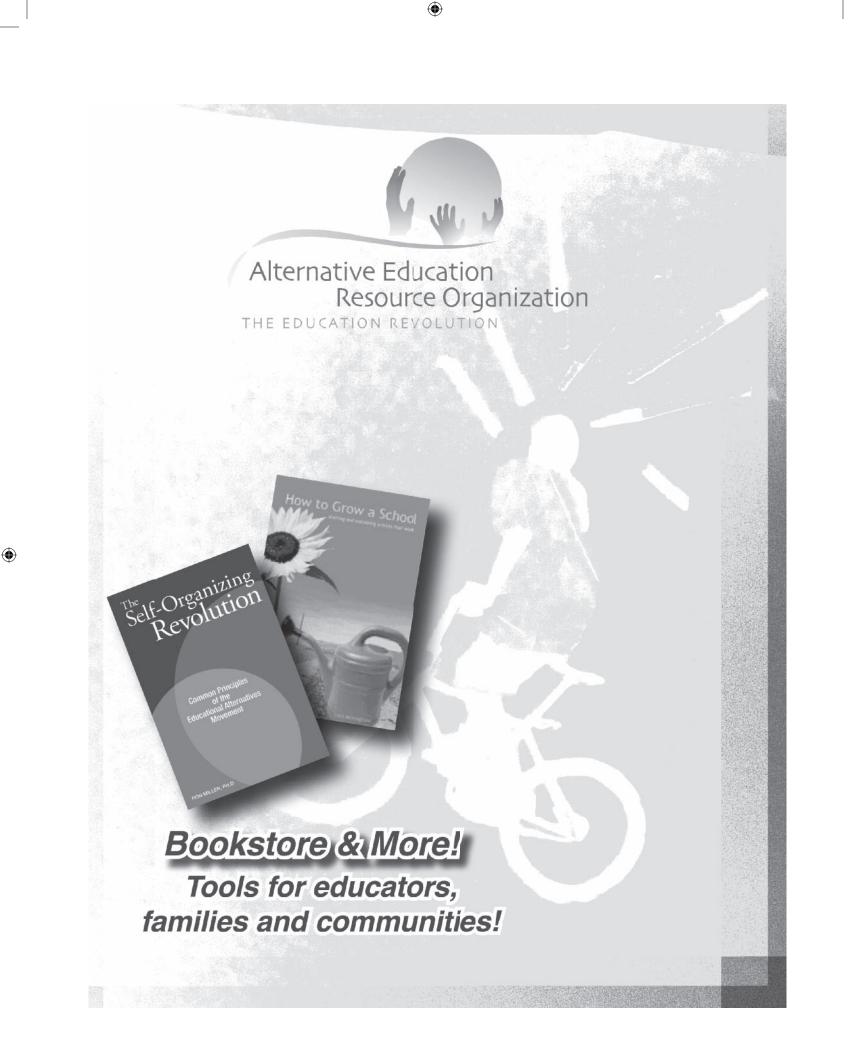
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