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# Education Revolution

THE MAGAZINE OF EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES



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Volume 21, Number 1

## Unschooling, Reschooling, and Alternative Schooling— Options for Everyone



### INSIDE:

Writings on education & democracy, plus book reviews, current news,  
and previews of this summer's conferences



# A Stirring Manifesto for the Education Revolution

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

***"marvelously lucid and thought-provoking"***

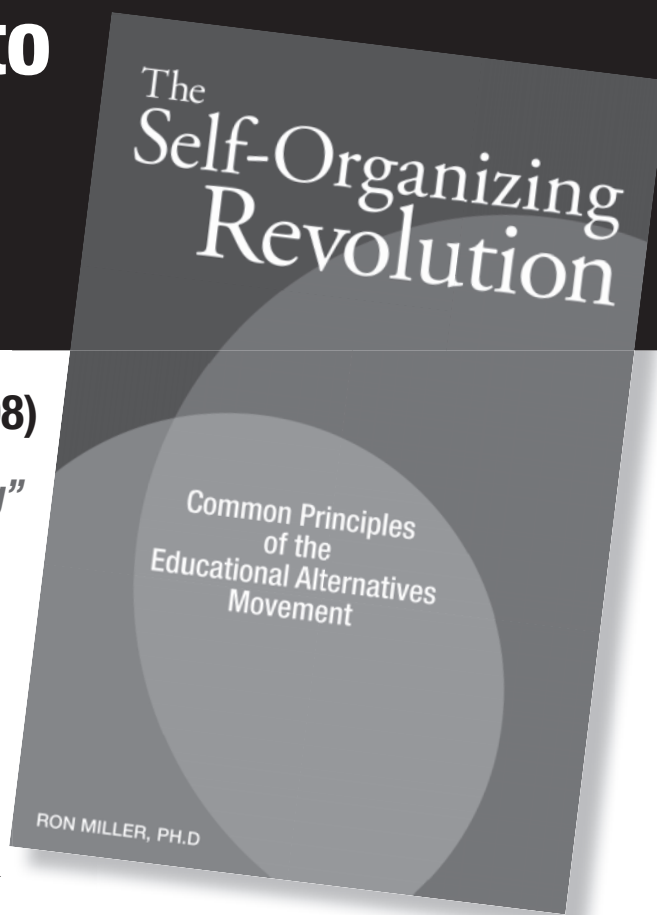
*The Self-Organizing Revolution* provides the clearest and most perceptive description of alternative education movements I have read. Drawing on the wisdom of the great educational pioneers of the past as well as the emerging paradigms of today, Miller suggests how a new consciousness can guide the 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"***

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



***"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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THE MAGAZINE OF EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES



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 student-driven, 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, Home-school, 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:** A quiet moment at North Star: Self-Directed Learning for Teens, in Hadley, Mass.

Photo by Catherine Gobron.

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# Being There

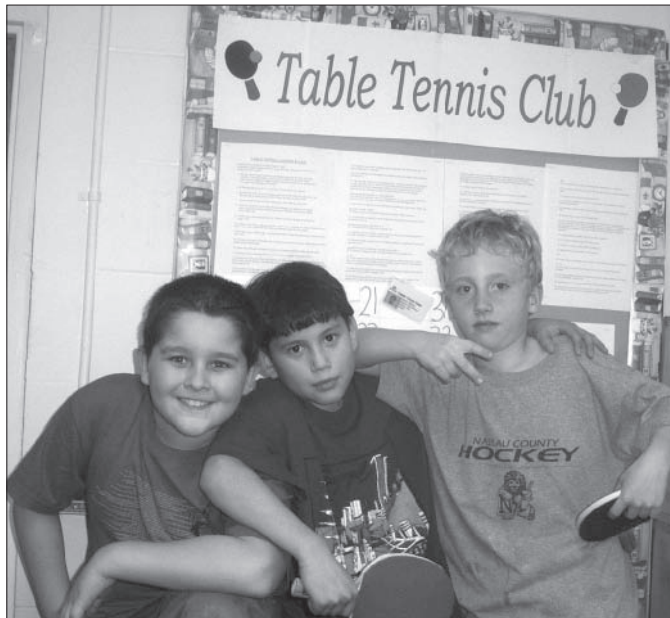
TAHL LIEBOVITZ INTERVIEWS JERRY MINTZ

This interview is also being published in *Table Tennis Magazine*.

**T**ahl Liebovitz is one of the top table tennis players in the USA. Because of a genetic bone disease, he has become the #1 handicapped player in the USA and won the bronze medal in the Paralympics. He started playing at a Boys and Girls Club in Queens. He is currently also the USA University champion.

The Grenville Baker Boys and Girls Club is in Locust Valley, New York, on the north shore of Long Island. The club has a wide variety of children, racially, economically, and in nationality, from ages 5 to 17. Jerry Mintz has been a long time volunteer table tennis coach at the club. He is there every Wednesday and Friday from 6 to 8 PM. The club sponsors at least two USATT sanctioned tournaments every year, the Long Island Open Junior Championship and the New York State Open Junior Championship. Nine years ago Jerry restructured the program so that it could be more self governing and work with more younger students. The result was a broadly expanded program with many students becoming state champions in the age brackets.

**Tahl:** Jerry, I have been paying close attention to your program at the Grenville Baker Boys and Girls Club over the past few years. Can you tell me why the program has become so successful? What are some of the things about the program that make it so unique?



Kevin Cuertes, John J. Jimenez and Nicholas Hornosky, members of the Grenville Baker Boys and Girls Club Table Tennis Program.

**Jerry:** I've been volunteering there for over fifteen years. At first I mostly worked with teenagers. But they would usually leave the club after a year or two. Everything changed about eight years ago when I tried working with the younger students. There was an explosion of interest and I had to schedule sessions at the club twice a week for a couple of hours each. But that wasn't enough. So I turned to something from my other life, as an educational consultant specializing in democratic process.

**Tahl:** I have heard that the program you originally put in place is run by the kids or can be run by the kids. Is that really possible? Can these kids at such a young age take on a huge responsibility of running such a complex program?

**Jerry:** Not only is it possible, but the democratic process we established has enabled the program to operate six days a week. The students elect supervisors, age 8-13. They are the ones who control the challenge ladder, referee matches when asked, resolve disputes, etc. And the democratic meeting has passed over sixty-five major decisions that affect the conditions of the club and even organize USATT sanctioned tournaments. Actually our club has never been beaten in a head to head match and we've had many state champions in various age divisions.

**Tahl:** Can you tell me how that democratic process works?

**Jerry:** We have regular meetings of all the table tennis club members in which any problem or good idea can be put on the agenda. All decisions concerning the club have been made by the meeting with each student having one vote. They also elect the supervisors. The meeting has dealt with a wide variety of issues, including how to run the challenge ladder, fundraisers, discipline problems, tournaments, etc.

**Tahl:** A lot of people have been talking about what it really takes to make a program of this magnitude work. What made you decide to start the program?

**Jerry:** I've been a table tennis player since I was a kid playing in the garage with my father. Table tennis has always been a part of my life and when I founded an alternative school, it became part of that program. Now, as an educational consultant working around the world, people know to have a ping-pong table wherever I go. One of the reasons I love teaching table tennis is that it is a non-threatening, non-academic activity



that can help students become confident in their ability to learn. As a teacher it's great to get that "Wow! I don't believe I did that!" moment all the time. Modern brain research has shown that table tennis stimulates areas of the brain involved with memory and learning. So it isn't a coincidence that my students have also become good students in their schools. I think that the democratic process is also a key to that.

**Tahl:** I understand at the beginning of the program you were able to beat these kids quite easily and now some of them are able to win against you. Did you expect that they would improve so quickly?

**Jerry:** I've been lucky that I had good table tennis teachers such as Lim Ming Chui and more recently Li Yuxiang, former world champion and over 50 world champion. I've been playing table tennis for nearly fifty years. Amazingly, my current rating is the highest it's ever been, one of the highest in my age division. Yet it is true. Some of my first students of the younger group are still playing at age 15 and 16, and do sometimes take matches from me. Lately they have become more serious about playing. Sometimes I use you as a role model, mentioning that you didn't even start playing until you were 15, at a Boys and Girls Club not far from here.

**Tahl:** What is the plan for these kids? Where do you want to see them go with the sport of table tennis? Are you looking to create top players? Are you looking for the kids to eventually use table tennis as a vehicle for a college scholarship?

**Jerry:** Of course, that is up to them. But they now seem to realize that this is a sport in which they can excel. It would be great if some of them became top players and some have expressed that ambition. One of my first good players is now a freshman at St. Johns University with a scholarship. But I think they enjoy the challenge of playing tournaments and getting better. I'll be happy if this experience simply helps them become successful in life. In fact, it is clear they have become very responsible and mature. One indication is that many have been picked to be junior counselors at the club's summer program.

**Tahl:** What are some of the things from which you take personal enjoyment in the program? Is it the coaching, the success of the kids or actually seeing the kids run the program themselves?

**Jerry:** I've enjoyed seeing the program become successful and grow. I was pleased when the club honored me as volunteer of the year. But I would like to see this program widely replicated and I've already helped some clubs get programs started. In fact, we are developing a kit to help people start similar programs. They will include DVDs of a new weekly cable access TV show that we now have which features instruction and a window to the table tennis world. Table tennis students shoot and edit the show. We hope that people will contact us who would like to set up a similar program. ●

## FROM THE Editor's Desk

BY RON MILLER

Wonderful writings keep coming in to *Education Revolution*! We know that thousands of parents, educators and activists are out in the world, re-inventing teaching and learning for a postmodern age. It's encouraging to see that some of them are willing to take some time to tell us what they're thinking and doing. These essays and stories demonstrate that the grassroots movement for educational liberation is alive and well.

A social "movement" takes shape when people realize that their critique of the established culture is not merely their own personal disgruntlement but is shared by others, when they see that their novel, countercultural experiments in living are not entirely unique but are also being tried—in different variations, perhaps—by people in different places and circumstances. A movement grows when we tell our stories to each other and discover that our experiences and dreams are significantly similar.

Homeschooling, or working in a small struggling alternative school, or trying to be a progressive change agent in the educational system at large can all be lonely endeavors. They are demanding and often frustrating. Social conventions and expectations, lack of funding, and the absence of a larger support network make this work more difficult than fitting in with the system and playing by its rules. That's why collaboration and communication within our movement is so essential. This magazine, and AERO's networking efforts, are dedicated to building a visible and vibrant movement that will support what you are doing.

Our work is more relevant and vital than ever, because the established system is disintegrating. The modern age of industrialism and empire is coming to an end, and human scale ways of living are on the rise. Celebrate the fact that your hard work is worth the effort. Join us at the AERO conference in Albany this June, and we can celebrate together. Meanwhile, enjoy the wonderful stories and ideas in this issue of *Education Revolution*. ●

# Yesterday was Your Last Day of School

North Star program for teens

BY KENNETH DANFORD

In an era when hybrid cars may be the solution to our energy concerns, North Star serves as a hybrid learning model that may be a solution to many of our concerns about traditional schooling. Now in our thirteenth year, North Star combines principles from both the homeschooling movement and the free school movement. Founded by two disillusioned public school teachers seeking to have the maximum impact for their students and the community, North Star makes homeschooling a viable and inspiring option for any interested teen in the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts. North Star has grown to a relatively stable program with 40-50 members and a budget of approximately \$200,000, and, in February 2009, hired a full-time Outreach Director to double those numbers.

While interest in our model from people in the AERO network has been high, attempts to replicate the North Star model have been few and short-lived. At this year's AERO conference, I will offer workshops about our model, including one for people interested in generating their own versions of North Star. Our ongoing question is whether North Star, like hybrid cars, offers a visionary model on the cusp of social acceptance, or simply an intriguing alternative with limited appeal unlikely to spread beyond its original experiment.

Joshua Hornick and I met in the Amherst Regional Junior High School in 1994, where we taught together for two years. We discussed our dissatisfaction with the traditional schooling system daily. I felt discouraged that many of my students treated my history assignments as temporary chores to be thrown in the trash as soon as the unit was over, and I chafed at the school's authoritarian culture. Joshua expressed his dismay that so many teens stated that they hated learning, particularly that they hated science. He felt that he was contributing to a negative spiral regarding curiosity and wonder about the world.

Fortunately, prior to coming to Amherst, Joshua had earned a Master's degree writing about how homeschoolers learn science. He carried around a case of Grace Llewellyn's *Teenage Liberation Handbook* for those he thought might be ready to read it. Despite my ignorance and resistance to the topic of homeschooling, I finally accepted his gift of this book. I was overwhelmed: homeschooling doesn't have to mean school at home with teens being taught by their parents! If homeschooling means learning what you want, where you want, with whom you want, for as long as you want (with

parental involvement and agreement), then why wouldn't everyone want to homeschool?

Clearly, this lifestyle could transform the lives of our public school students who were simply going through the motions at school day after day, year after year, until age 18. I realized that homeschooling is a giant "Get out of school free" ticket for anyone with the gumption to attempt it. The only problem was that most of the teens we knew in school who needed this approach didn't know about homeschooling, and, if they did, felt they didn't have the confidence or family structure to embrace it.

**If homeschooling means learning  
what you want, where you want,  
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How could two teachers most effectively encourage students who feel constrained, trapped, or bored by conventional schooling to leave school and use homeschooling to improve their lives? What structure would be necessary for teens and families to make the leap into the unknown of life without school?

Joshua and I imagined a simple model: an inexpensive, centrally located gathering space where we could meet with teens, coach them and their parents about homeschooling, and offer classes and tutoring. Further, we would be a clearinghouse for internships, volunteer work, and jobs. Finally, we would provide long-term support to our members as they moved beyond North Star to college and the work world.

We chose to operate as a non-profit so that we could seek funding and contributions as we are committed to making

this approach available to all interested teens regardless of their family's financial situation. We consider our annual fee, \$4,000, to be modest given our range of services, but we work with many families that struggle to pay, raise, or otherwise contribute that sum. This fee is one more way in which North Star is a hybrid in between homeschooling and alternative schools: it feels like a large amount of money to long-term homeschoolers, while it is far below the tuition of most private schools.

The model has changed very little in our thirteen years of operation. One significant change is that Joshua left the staff in 2002; he now serves as the President of North Star's Board of Directors. Our Associate Director, Catherine Gobron, is a veteran homeschooling parent now in her sixth year with North Star. Catherine's professionalism, initiative, and cheerfulness are largely responsible for the full calendar and warm atmosphere inside North Star.

We see now that the core service we provide, above all, is individual attention. Whether it's a private writing tutorial with a teen who has never seen herself as a writer, or the facilitation of a family meeting to resolve a conflict in priorities between a teen and his parents, North Star staff spend a good deal of time working one-on-one with each member. (A full description of how we work with teens and families would be an entirely different article.)

Inspired as we are by the idea of homeschooling, North Star is not a homeschooling co-op. It's more of a community center, where teens have the opportunity to be away from their parents and siblings and make some independent choices. Parents are welcome to volunteer at North Star, but many rarely visit. Further, unlike at most co-ops, teens are welcome to be at North Star even when they are not participating in a scheduled activity or tutorial. Most homeschooling co-ops are supportive to new homeschoolers, but none have it as their mission to coach students attending school unhappily to become homeschoolers (please note that we have always welcomed existing homeschoolers and have had important roles in the lives of many such teens).

Similarly, although we have found much that inspires us among the various free schools and democratic schools that make up AERO, from the start we knew we did not want or need to start a school. We did not want to have compulsory attendance, curriculum requirements, or the authority to evaluate and measure our members. We did not want to confer or deny credits or diplomas. We did not want the legal complications involved in being a school.

This mixed heritage of homeschooling and free schools has some drawbacks. First, it creates confusion. Many people see us in our building, with classes and books, and assume that we are a school. Others assume we are a program only for existing homeschoolers, and don't understand our larger mission. Second, as a community center, there is never a moment that all of our members are present. The frequent coming and going of members creates an unpredictability that is both lively and challenging. Third, the average member stays at North Star only for about two years. We are sometimes too successful at coaching 16- and 17-year-olds to develop an independent life, and their need for North Star diminishes.

Our vision is concisely summarized in our slogan, "Learning is natural. School is optional." When we say, "school is optional," we mean a few interesting things. First, we mean school is optional for learning; that one hardly needs to go to school to learn. Second, we mean that school is optional for success, that one does not need to go to school in order to go to college, start a business, or otherwise successfully enter our mainstream adult culture. Third, we do in fact mean that school is an option! Many of our teens have siblings who are still in school, and many of our members choose to return to school after a year or two of homeschooling. We embrace the idea that schools can be good places for those who affirmatively choose to be there! We do not categorically believe that all teens and families should homeschool, though we do wish that every teen would consider it at some point.

North Star has seen its members thrive in the long term. Our alumni attend or have graduated from schools including Brown, Columbia, M.I.T., Amherst, Smith, Mt. Holyoke, Reed, Worcester Polytechnic, UMass, and many more. I frequently tell inquiring families that there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that they can do with a traditional high school diploma that they will not be able to do if they choose homeschooling.

However, it's not the long-term success of our members that has kept North Star going all these years. It's the immediate shift in the psyche of a teen who has felt trapped in school, dead-ended, dreading the next several years of their lives, when we tell them that yesterday can be the last day of their schooling. The relief shifts their posture mid-meeting, and parents call me up to describe how their teens started chatting on the way home about ideas and topics that had been submerged for years. Parents say, "I feel like I have my child back, the way they were before they ever started school." After thirteen years and hundreds of experiences, this moment still brings tears to my eyes.

In 2007, North Star moved into its present home, a beautiful brick school building built in 1894, quadrupling our space. We continue to celebrate the freedom of homeschooling and the inherent power within each of us to learn effectively under our own direction. We have created an open model to support as many teens as possible to feel that they can use homeschooling as a means to improve their lives.

Meanwhile, we continue to believe that what we have generated is a useful model for alternative education. We see that financing is the major impediment to replication, but we are doubtful that money is the only issue. I look forward to sharing our stories and our model with you in June, and I anticipate considering these questions together. Perhaps a handful of AERO readers are ready to seize what we have learned to further challenge the myths, structures, and limits of traditional education.

**Kenneth Danford** is the Executive Director of North Star: Self-Directed Learning for Teens in Hadley, MA. Prior to co-founding North Star in 1996, he taught 8th grade U.S. History in the Amherst, MA and the Prince George's County, MD public school systems. He is originally from Shaker Hts., OH, and now lives in Montague, MA. Ken's two children currently attend public school. ●

# Profit by Partnering

How germinating schools can team-up with established programs to ease the weight of “start-up stagger”

BY WENDELIN WAGNER



At the School Down Under. Photo by Wendelin Wagner

Starting up a new school is, to say the least, an exercise in extreme multi-tasking. It is perhaps best undertaken partnering a team of both *the experienced* and *the enthusiastic*. The enthusiastic team can benefit enormously from the experienced team by borrowing the credibility of an already existing program. This goes a long way in relieving the lack of a solid reputation.

But there are many other reasons to partner. Established schools have worked hard to develop and refine their programs and can benefit from “sharing the wealth.” New schools need to spread the load of start-up tasks, one of which is exactly this: developing curriculum. As Sally Carless, the director of Global Village School, notes: “It takes a lot of time, energy and money to create the infrastructure of a school, and by the time the founders realize how involved it is they may be despairingly overburdened.”

Providing curricular support allows young schools to focus on getting organized while adopting a temporary, immediate curriculum that is in line with their own philosophy. This allows the new school time to slowly implement its own courses and teachers. Also, small schools may need to associate with an established program in order to provide official accredited transcripts to their college-bound students.

Such is the case at Full Circle Teen School, which partners with Global Village School (GVS) for official transcripts and record keeping. Full Circle teachers submit course descriptions and student portfolios to Global Village for review, and GVS then provides official transcripts.

Global Village School is an accredited, international, K-12 homeschool diploma program with a creative, flexible approach and an emphasis on peace, justice, diversity, and sustainability. Our goal is to provide children with an atmosphere that nurtures their individual gifts and empowers them to become confident and capable stewards of the planet and each other. This philosophy resonated with the Full Circle founders who were drawn to the flexibility of GVS and the emphasis on peace, and peacemaker principles, which form the basis of the cultural mentoring model used at Full Circle Teen School (FCTS).

Donna Helete, co-founder of FCTS, says the two schools “are kindred spirits with shared values. It’s a blessing to partner with a sister organization that helps meet our needs. This way we’re not alone in the good work we do and we don’t have to do everything ourselves.” It’s a bit like receiving a leg up at a critical point on a steep climb. Donna



points out that “as an established and accredited alternative educational organization, Global Village adds credibility and experience to our new program.”

A wide variety of text and online courses become immediately available to young schools participating in a Global Village partnership. Themes such as sustainability and respect for diversity are woven into the core academic areas of English, science, math and so on, along with unique course offerings like *Reflections on Peacemaking*, *Global Spirituality and Activism*, *Planetary Stewardship*, *Green Gardening*, *Technology Education* and *Service Learning*. Students earn elective credit for many different kinds of life experiences, such as traveling, participating in cultural events, film-making, activism, performing in community theater, pursuing a career in athletics, or starting their own business.

With so many options, schools like Full Circle can gain some breathing room to create their own classes while continuing to supplement their curriculum with the larger course offerings of another program. This also allows new schools to open their doors without having to hire teachers in every subject and gives them the flexibility to accept inquiring students in grade levels outside the current scope of their program.

**Beyond the more tangible benefits of partner schooling is the energizing aspect of working with other alternative educators who understand the nature of the endeavor and provide a sense of camaraderie along the trail blazer’s road.**

Examples of other beneficial partner school pairings include K-8 schools wanting to:

- a) offer a homeschool/ high school option by providing tutors and classrooms (during the day or after hours) OR
- b) add a high school immediately by using Global Village’s courses, teachers, accredited classes, and transcript and diploma service.

This was precisely the case with the School Down Under, an abroad program in New Zealand that found a perfect match in working with GVS. The School Down Under staff provided classroom instruction and a high quality outdoor and elective program while Global Village supplied the structure for the academic courses, kept student transcripts, and granted diplomas. This allowed the School Down Under to focus on the challenges of establishing the campus, training the staff and teachers, developing the wider program,

and tackling all the business aspects such as immigration, marketing, and recruitment. The simple result was that the staff and teachers had more time for quality interactions with the students.

Beyond the more tangible benefits of partner schooling is the energizing aspect of working with other alternative educators who understand the nature of the endeavor and provide a sense of camaraderie along the trail blazer’s road.

For more information about Global Village’s School Partners program, visit [www.globalvillageschool.org/partnerschool.html](http://www.globalvillageschool.org/partnerschool.html) or call (805) 646-9792.

**Wendelin Wagner** taught science at the Santa Barbara Middle School for 11 years. She is co-founder of the School Down Under in New Zealand and recently joined the team at Global Village School. ●



Campfire at the Salmonberry School, Orcas Island, Washington  
Photo by Paul Freedman

# Learning is Children's Work

BY WENDY PRIESNITZ

Children's ability to learn experientially through day-to-day living is the foundation of what happens in democratic schools and unschooling homes alike. Part of that experience is kids doing real work in the real world, motivated by their own real interests and goals. It is not pseudo work where kids are "allowed" to "help" adults or where they pretend to do real work with the aid of toy tools.

Unfortunately, there are few places where children can experience the adult world in that way. Most children – and even many homeschooled ones – don't have nearly enough opportunities to be with adults who are doing their own thing in the real world and not, as John Holt once put it, "just hanging around entertaining or instructing or being nice to children."

The working world of adults is not very accessible to children because we fear they will get hurt, get in the way of or slow down production, or abuse or break the equipment. But in my experience, that has not been the case. Take my own family as an example.

Our unschooled daughters Melanie and Heidi (now 35 and 37) grew up living, learning and working in the midst of our busy home-based publishing business. They had access to all the tools of that business and never abused them. They mimicked the careful manner in which we used those tools and respected them as necessary for making our family's living. More importantly, they used those tools in creating their own businesses, which we respected in return.

But one of my friends, who also happened to be a writer, was horrified to discover that our children were able to use my typewriter, then my word processor, then later my computer, as well as various photocopiers, typesetters and other related equipment. She said her kids would wreck hers for sure if allowed anywhere near them. Unfortunately, she wasn't able to trust her kids enough to test that theory.

There are many opportunities for children and young people to learn in and be of service to the real world. They include volunteering with community organizations, participating in their parents' businesses or at their workplaces, working for pay or as apprentices at neighborhood businesses and running their own enterprises.

Although I don't want to romanticize the past or ignore abuses against children, at other times and in other places, children had or are given the opportunity to do real work at their parents' side, as well as on their own accord, and to be involved in the life of their communities. In our more

complex society, this same type of opportunity and respect for children's abilities is still possible if we all share a sense of responsibility for helping develop the minds and attitudes that will lead us into the future. Today, no one has all the experience and information necessary to prepare young people for a rapidly developing future. But we can share our skills and experiences with our children or take on other people's kids as apprentices in order to pass along our knowledge and attitudes.

**Kids need the sense of accomplishment that comes from being trusted with a real job to do in the real world. They benefit from the increased self-esteem that comes from participating – at whatever level – in a functioning group**

Unfortunately, that sort of real world learning experience is often easier to describe than to arrange. A group of parents came together in a community park in Toronto to build a series of cob structures housing a sink, cooking fireplace, baby-changing station and, ultimately, a composting toilet with a rammed earth foundation. (Cob is a traditional style of construction that uses a mixture of sand, straw, clay and water and is people-friendly, low-tech and community-building.) Aside from filling a need for those facilities in the park, the project was designed to offer people of all ages a chance to learn how to build low impact shelter. But the municipal bureaucracy decided to enforce labor code regulations, which required a six-foot-high fence and excluded the participation of children. Georgie Donais, a life learning mom who coordinated the project, devised a "workaround" whereby people mixing cob materials on tarps were located outside the fence and only work-booted adults were allowed inside the fence. Unfortunately, besides segregating people by functions, this relegated children to the mixing function and prevented them from being involved in some of the more ex-

citing jobs like shoveling, hauling materials or filling bags of dirt. Georgie, trying to see the situation through the bureaucracy's eyes, admits, "I imagine it is a truly strange thing to be asked to listen to and support some woman who wants to – with barely any money and very few power tools, but with many bare feet and children involved – create a building out of mud that houses a toilet."

That "strange thing" is something our children need much more of, especially if the adults can sort out the mindless bureaucratic requirements from the necessary safety concerns. Kids need the sense of accomplishment that comes from being trusted with a real job to do in the real world. They benefit from the increased self-esteem that comes from participating – at whatever level – in a functioning group. Everyone benefits when kids develop the confidence that accompanies being in control of themselves and of their surroundings. And they don't need the sort of "protection" that results from lack of adult trust and preparation and that keeps them sitting on the sidelines and away from meaningful work.

Aside from safety, there are other reasons for sidelining children. Showing respect for a child's developing skills takes patience and skills. Doing a task ourselves is usually easier and more efficient than allowing the time needed for a child to do it. Children's results might be not good enough for the satisfaction of perfectionist adults. And some people just underestimate what a child can do.

However, personal empowerment begins with realizing the value of our own life experience and potential to affect the world. Our children deserve the opportunity to be part of – and learn from – the daily lives of their families and communities.

Excerpted from the book *Life Learning: Lessons from the Educational Frontier*, edited by Wendy Priesnitz (The Alternate Press, 2009)

**Wendy Priesnitz** was the founding editor of *Life Learning* magazine, which was published between 2002 and 2008. She and her husband Rolf unschooled their two daughters, beginning in the early 1970s, when she established the home-schooling/unschooling movement in Canada. Two of her ten books – *Challenging Assumptions in Education* and *School Free: The Homeschooling Handbook* – are bestsellers. She currently edits *Natural Life* magazine, which she and Rolf founded in 1976 in order to stay home and help their two daughters learn without school and is working on a book of memoir-style essays about life and learning, entitled *It Hasn't Shut Me Up*. She can be reached at [wendy@lifemedia.ca](mailto:wendy@lifemedia.ca). ●

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# Reschool Yourself

## Lessons from a Grown-Up Who Went Back to Kindergarten

BY MELIA DICKER

I had to admit it. I was jealous of my own students. Decorating cakes, designing websites, or painting in watercolor — you name it, these kids were learning to do it, and they were only in middle school. They were enrolled in Spark, the youth program I'd started with my friend Chris Balme to give kids the type of hands-on education that we weren't able to have. Our idea worked. My students were excited about what they were doing, and they were learning things that I still didn't know at age 27.

I felt happy for my students, and pleased that I'd had a hand in developing their passion for learning. However, a part of me still felt unfulfilled. It was the part of me that wondered, "What about me? What about the rest of us grown-ups?" It seemed unfortunate to have just one shot at our education, and if we didn't emerge from it happy — well, better luck for other kids.

If I could go back and do school over again, I thought, I'd change a lot about my experience. I'd be able to explore freely, without the pressure of grades. I'd have a lot of independent study time, so I could follow my curiosity and develop my talents. Without the pressure to achieve and rewards for doing so, I would be less likely to develop the habits — workaholicism, people-pleasing, and perfectionism — that were making me unhappy in my adult life.

I decided that I wouldn't be able to make real change in myself, or in the education system, if I didn't make peace with my past first. I wanted a do-over. I wanted to go back and do my education again, knowing what I know now.

### How to Reschool Yourself

**1** If you have regrets about school, understand how you lost your way so that you can get back on track now.

*Dredge up old baggage about your education, in order to let it go.*

**Ask yourself:** How did my school experiences shape me into the person I am today? If they were to happen again now, how would I feel better equipped to handle them?

**2** Appreciate the positive ways in which school influenced you.

*Even if school limited you in some ways, it probably also opened up opportunities. Be grateful for them.*

**Ask yourself:** Which teachers were role models for me? Which projects or activities introduced me to things I still remember today? How did my schooling help lead me to my current life?

**3** Realize that it's never too late to change — and do it.

*Now that you've made peace with your past, move forward into your future, no matter what your age.*

**Ask yourself:** What beliefs and habits, if I were to change them, would make me happier? What things do I still want to learn and do, and how can I learn them?

If I could go back and do school over again, I thought, I'd change a lot about my experience. I'd be able to explore freely, without the pressure of grades. I'd have a lot of independent study time, so I could follow my curiosity and develop my talents.

Slowly, an idea came to me. Why *not* do school over again? All my schools were within a two-hour radius of each other, and I still knew teachers at all of them. Surely they would know that I intended not to criticize my schooling, but rather to understand it. The ideas kept coming, and the project began to take shape. I decided to return to each of my classrooms and do school over again, grade by grade, from kindergarten through college, and write about the experience.

I named the project Reschool Yourself, to communicate that it was not just about me, but rather about all of us





Melia in kindergarten. Photo by Adair Catalan (kindergarten student)

adults. I chose the word as a twist on “deschooling,” to mean not just healing any wounds developed in school, but also “reschooling” by shaping your own future from now on: that is, learning and doing what you choose to. I hoped that the project would not only help myself and others make peace with their past, but also to create an inspiring vision for what education could look like in the future.

My plans went smoothly, and I spent the next three months, from August to December, at my old schools, doing whatever the students did in the classroom and on the playground. I spent roughly a week in each grade and blogged about it on my website ([www.reschoolyourself.com](http://www.reschoolyourself.com)). I described being the most popular girl in elementary school for the first time, and remembering childhood moments of punishment and reward. In middle school, I wrote about running the mile in P.E., and going to an after-school dance. In high school, I took algebra tests and did chemistry labs. Finally, in college, I stayed three days in one of my old dorms and attended courses taught by my old professors. I also did a “memory walk” around campus for hours, visiting every place that had significance for me.

Over the holidays, I was able to reflect on what I had experienced. As expected, I had observed things in the classroom that were hard to watch: young students not being

permitted to drink water when they asked for it, and older ones sacrificing their health and happiness for achievement the way I had done. On the other hand, I had also seen things that gave me hope for education: school communities where each member had an important niche, and the type of hands-on projects that inspired true excitement and learning.

I changed more in those three months of reschooling than I had over the previous few years. By spending time with young children, I remembered how to laugh, play, and imagine throughout the day. I realized how much more confident I am as an adult than I was as a student. I grew to appreciate the teachers and school experiences that had shaped me in a positive way, and I understood how even the painful moments brought me to where I am in life today. By the end of the fall, I felt that my reschooling had neutralized the emotional charge that school once had for me. That is, when I set foot on the campus of my old schools today, memories still come back to me — only they’re not loaded with the upsetting feelings that they once carried.

One of my most important conclusions was that the education system will not change unless the adults making the rules can see school from a child’s perspective. Otherwise, they will tend to recreate their own school experience for the children they parent or teach — even those parts of school



Math with the 4th graders. Photo by Dave Kohnhorst

that they resented, like homework or grades — because they assume school has to be that way. Those of us attempting to transform the system will continue to meet resistance unless policy makers, principals, and parents remember what school was once like for them, as well as experience what it's like today.

**I changed more in those three months of reschooling than I had over the previous few years. By spending time with young children, I remembered how to laugh, play, and imagine throughout the day. I realized how much more confident I am as an adult than I was as a student.**

Reschooling is particularly important for those of us who have ended up working in education because we felt unsatisfied with our own schooling. I realized that my motivation once came from a place of anger and regret, and that I often criticized what was wrong with the current system instead of envisioning what education *could* look like. Putting old resentments to rest and forgiving the people involved in my

education, including myself, equipped me to approach educational change in a new way: from a place of excitement and possibility.

The most important lesson that you can draw from the project is that you can reschool yourself, too. You don't have to quit your job and go back to all your old schools like I did. Instead, sort through your old writings and photo albums, triggering old memories so you can intentionally stop clinging to them. Visit your old schools for even an afternoon, if you can. Recall the positive aspects of your schooling, and realize how even the painful experiences made you who you are today. Recognize that even if you didn't get to learn piano or scuba diving when you were a kid, it's not too late now. Take a class. Watch a documentary. Put down this article now and spend five minutes researching how you can learn something new.

Above all, remember that whether your age is 27 or 97, it's never too late to reschool yourself.

*To read about what it was like to go back to kindergarten as a grown-up or to donate to the project, visit [www.reschoolyourself.com](http://www.reschoolyourself.com).*

**Melia Dicker** is a writer and educator who has worked with students of all ages in the U.S. and abroad. She co-founded Spark, a nonprofit youth organization in the San Francisco Bay Area, and is active in the democratic education community. When she's not dressed in costume or thinking about food, she blogs about education and personal development at [www.reschoolyourself.com](http://www.reschoolyourself.com). ●



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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

AERO is very proud to announce two great new resources:

# [www.EducationFinder.net](http://www.EducationFinder.net)

Search for and find the alternative, Montessori, democratic, and progressive schools and homeschool programs in your area at [educationfinder.net](http://educationfinder.net).

# [www.AlternativeAlumni.com](http://www.AlternativeAlumni.com)

Find the alternative school you attended and register in our Alternative Alumni interactive website for graduates and former students in alternative schools and home education at [alternativealumni.com](http://alternativealumni.com).

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AERO is also proud to announce the newly redesigned:

# [www.EducationRevolution.org](http://www.EducationRevolution.org)

EducationRevolution.org is the main website for the

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It provides information on educational alternatives, conferences, resources, starting schools, publications, job opportunities, and so much more!

# Compulsory Schooling and the Revolution of Democracy

BY JIM STRICKLAND

There is a scenario that plays itself out over and over again in the backseat of my van. It goes something like this: my seven-year-old son, Owen, starts doing something that just happens to strike an annoying chord with Jamison, his ten-year-old sister. It could be anything...tapping on the seat in front of him, imitating Darth Vader, putting Trix cereal pieces up his nose – you know, typical backseat diversions for a kid that age. The tension builds to a predictable crescendo when Jamison suddenly snaps and yells, “Owen! Stop it!”

As if on cue, Owen immediately doubles his efforts, thereby eliciting an even stronger response from Jamison, which is then countered by Owen in what quickly degenerates into a chain reaction similar to that of a nuclear explosion. Since I don't have a soundproof divider in the car (at least not yet), I am compelled to intervene in the melee. When I am finally able to get their attention, my response is something along these lines:

“Jamison, I understand that you didn't like what Owen was doing, but no one likes being told what to do. The more you try to control Owen, the more he is going to do the opposite of what you want. Capiche?” After a moment of powerful silence, Jamison contritely says, “Wow. You're exactly right, Dad. I *don't* like being told what to do, so I shouldn't try to control others. What did I do to deserve such a wise father?”

Ha! Just kidding. My words of wisdom are usually met by the glassy-eyed stares of people hearing a foreign language for the first time, which, if I'm lucky, will last until the next explosive excursion in what I've come to think of as our mobile particle accelerator.

But the truth is (and I'm sure my kids realize this at some level) that people really *don't* like being told what to do. It is human nature to resist being controlled, and it is the genius of democracy that it takes this aspect of human nature seriously. In my 20 years of teaching students with disabilities, I've given a lot of thought to what motivates us as human beings. After doing considerable research, I would challenge anyone to find a list of basic human needs and motivations by a reputable thinker that doesn't include one of the following: freedom, independence, autonomy, or self-direction. With this in mind, I've really struggled with the compulsory nature of our society's approach to education. I mean, if freedom and self-direction are indeed basic human needs and preconditions for human growth, isn't *compulsory education* an oxymoron? How can we facilitate growth in an environment that thwarts the very conditions necessary for that growth to occur?

For many years now I have advocated the abolition of compulsory attendance laws as the single most powerful step we could take to transform our educational system in the

direction of democratic values and respect for basic human nature. It would be an understatement to say that this idea scares most people to death. In his 1969 introduction to George Dennison's *The Lives of Children*, John Holt wrote:

*“I have for some time now urged that we abolish or at least greatly relax the laws requiring compulsory attendance. No other change I advocate, however radical, provokes such a terrified and hysterical response.”*

Forty years later and we are still shaking in our boots. Why? Because people worry about the millions of kids from impoverished, dysfunctional, and otherwise marginal families who could get lost if not required to be in school. Yes, it is also sadly true that some people count on compulsory schooling to homogenize our society and keep a lid on minority groups from other religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. But there are many more people out there who support compulsory school attendance simply because they care about children and our society has nothing else in place to ensure their growth and well-being.

In light of these realities, it has helped me to think about compulsion at two different levels: 1) compulsory school *attendance*, and 2) compulsory *learning*. While I admit having a personal aversion to the mere mention of the word “compulsory” in almost any context, I do understand and support the concept of *compulsory justice*. And it is this passion for justice that leads many people to support compulsory schooling in an effort to fulfill our mandate to provide education for *all* as a basic human right. Advocates note that compulsory school attendance:

- 1) Forces us to accept every student, regardless of their cultural background, intellectual ability, or socioeconomic level, and to commit to their continuous growth and well-being.
- 2) Compensates for weak or dysfunctional family or community environments.
- 3) Acknowledges our responsibility to prepare all children to live and function in an interdependent, democratic society.

It is this perspective that led to the inclusion of compulsory schooling in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 26 states that:

- 1) *Everyone has a right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental states. Elementary education shall be compulsory...*
- 2) *Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human*



*rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups...*

3) *Parents shall have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.*

These are powerful statements and deserve fuller consideration in another essay. But suffice it to say that many people support compulsory schooling because they care about children and envision a world where every person matters. It's hard to argue with that.

The problem is when we violate the spirit of these words by trying to turn compulsory *attendance* into compulsory *learning*. While the former may be construed as a commitment to justice and human rights, *compulsory learning* is a distorted, futile, and ultimately destructive exercise in social engineering. For one thing, compulsory learning is a complete contradiction in terms. Real learning cannot occur in a climate of coercion and fear, and good teachers know this. A more accurate description of this process would be *indoctrination* or *manipulation*. Not very inspiring!

Compulsory learning also undermines the deepest, most fundamental values of our democracy – the values of freedom, voice, shared power, and creative self-direction. We cannot hope to produce humane, democratic ends using inhumane, authoritarian means. In the case of democracy, the means are the ends!

**I believe the revolution that will save us is the revolution of democracy. Not a weak democracy consisting only of an occasional trip to the polling booth, but a living democracy that pervades every dimension of our lives**

Compulsory learning produces alienation, fosters antagonism, diminishes the sense of self, undermines creativity and self-direction, creates dependence... I could go on, but you get the point – when it comes to learning, coercion kills.

So, what to do? Can compulsory school attendance co-exist with a non-coercive approach to education that truly promotes growth, health, and – dare we say – happiness? Well, the answer remains to be seen, and one way or the other, those of us exploring the possibilities of educational alternatives will be living our way to that answer in the work we do over the next few years.

It looks like compulsory attendance laws are not going away anytime soon, and perhaps for good reason. It is interesting to note, however, that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights only mentions compulsory education at the elementary level. Maybe there is some wisdom in this age

limitation that deserves our further consideration?

In the meantime, our efforts must be to ensure that the education we are providing is aligned in both content and practice with the values we claim to believe in. These values include freedom, choice, and a real voice in the decisions that affect our lives. They include collaborative planning, decision-making, and problem solving that takes everyone's needs into account. They include meaningful connections with each other and with our communities, as well as mutual respect and a sophisticated awareness of the interdependence of our world. These values, along with an active commitment to justice, equity, and compassion, are the values of democracy.

In his book, *Education for Everyone: Agenda for Education in a Democracy*, educator John Goodlad and his co-authors define democracy as much more than a political system. "*Democracy, first and foremost, is a shared way of life. It begins with who we are as individuals and the relationships we have with those around us, and it radiates outward from that center to encompass all of humanity.*" Democracy is the ultimate antidote to compulsion. Even in the shadow of compulsory attendance laws, actually living democracy in the classroom serves as a potent inoculation against the forces of authoritarianism both in our schools and in our larger society.

In a letter to John Holt, writer and social thinker Paul Goodman wrote: "*Suppose you had the revolution you are talking and dreaming about. Suppose your side had won, and you had the kind of society you wanted. How would you live, you personally, in that society? Start living that way now! Whatever you would do then, do it now. When you run up against obstacles, people, or things that won't let you live that way, then begin to think about how to get over or around or under that obstacle, or how to push it out of the way, and your politics will be concrete and practical.*"

I believe the revolution that will save us is the revolution of democracy. Not a weak democracy consisting only of an occasional trip to the polling booth, but a living democracy that pervades every dimension of our lives. And as we live this revolution of democracy both inside and outside our schools, we *will* encounter obstacles – obstacles that inhibit our children's growth, squelch curiosity, extinguish creativity, and undermine democratic learning. We will butt up against obstacles that deny children their educational rights, powerfully described by holistic educator Ron Miller as *human rights, extended to young people so that they may experience, and participate in building, a society that truly cares for everyone*. And when this happens, we'll know what to do. Our politics will be concrete and practical.

And if the scaffolding of compulsory school attendance stands in our way... well, we'll just have to take it down, one piece at a time.

**Jim Strickland** lives in Everett, WA with his wife Dana and three children, Avery, Jamison, and Owen. He is a community-based educator in nearby Marysville and works to promote democratic, non-coercive education that naturally integrates learning and living. Jim welcomes your comments and ideas at [livedemocracy@hotmail.com](mailto:livedemocracy@hotmail.com). ●

# Collecting Books on the History of Childhood

BY TODD PRATUM

When I was a kid my vision of a great school looked more like a giant library than a school. Books were a big passion for a nerd like me, especially books on chemistry, herpetology, “arcane” books, hard science, fantasy, and various weird & curious subjects that captivated my pre-teen years. I collected books then and I can remember being at a SBS book fair and wanting a copy of every book they had. At the age of 23, I opened my first book store, in San Francisco. A lifetime of buying and selling antiquarian & scholarly books for a living has exposed me to a vast realm of printed materials rarely encountered by the ordinary book lover and my 40,000-volume library is rich with standard and forgotten classics and little known gems from past eras. Philosophy, psychology, mythology and religion have been my main collecting focus, but education, parenting and childhood have been primary for the last six years.

While Aries believed that before modern childhood children (“small adults”) had more freedom, deMause uncovers, with a mass of disturbing historical information, a brutal and secret history of childhood.

The subject of childhood entered my purview when I met my first wife who was an award winning kindergarten teacher. Later, by reading through Neill, Reich, Russell and Goodman I discovered the history of radical, free and alternative education & parenting, and I began to work on opening my own democratic school. Here I will share some of the more interesting books in my library regarding the history of childhood, specifically the new field that is the historical study of the *idea* of childhood

## THE HISTORY OF CHILDHOOD IN WESTERN EUROPEAN SOCIETY

I’ve tried over the years to gather every historical work on childhood but there are far too few. The earliest are anthropological and folkloric studies published in the early and middle 19<sup>th</sup> century. For our western civilization the oldest knowledge we have of childhood is encoded in fairy tales and folklore. This oral tradition takes us back to the very beginnings of society and is an endlessly fascinating subject. A. F. Chamberlain’s scarce book *The Child and Childhood in Folklore* (Macmillan, 1896) takes us through every aspect of this subject from the birth of child-song to the tales of the child as teacher, peppered with many wonderful quotations from ancient and literary sources. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century there have been many specialized studies of childhood such as *Children in English Society* by Pinchbeck and Hewitt (Routledge, 1969, two volumes) which covers the rise of industrial childhood in detail.

The first serious history of the *idea* of childhood is a famous and still controversial work by the renowned French historian Philippe Aries, (1914-1984). His book, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, (Knopf/Vintage, 1962) touched off an ongoing wave of interest. When Aries began his study he could find almost no writings on children, and by this we mean the stage of development that occurs after weaning when a child is able to speak and walk, so Aries was forced to study civil code, diaries, portrait painting, dress, and furniture.

According to Aries, before the 17<sup>th</sup> century there was no childhood as we know it today. Rather, children—as soon as they were able to more or less take care of themselves—were treated as little adults in western European society, holding the same civil rights and moral and economic obligations as full grown people. Then, at the beginning of the industrial revolution poor children were virtually enslaved in factories, and royalty and the wealthy began to distinguish their children as special from the poor and dress them and educate them in new ways, and as the middle classes emulated this new childhood it led to increasing segregation of children which continues today to such a degree that most western children now spend as much time in institutions as with their families. This last issue of child freedom was taken up with considerable force by Aries but has been almost totally ignored by both holistic educators and modern historians

of his work. *A History of Private Life* (Harvard, 1989, 4 volumes), is a massive work edited by Ariès that adds further evidence to his thesis.

Thirteen years after *Centuries of Childhood* there appeared an astounding and even more controversial book, *The History of Childhood*, edited by Lloyd deMause, (Psychohistory Press, 1974), which turned the field upside down. DeMause is an American social philosopher, lay psychiatrist and principal founder of Psychohistory, a new school of research. For many Lloyd deMause, "...is probably the first scholar who has made a thorough study of the history of childhood without glossing over the facts" (Alice Miller). DeMause's central thesis is the opposite of Ariès. While Ariès believed that before modern childhood children ("small adults") had more freedom, deMause uncovers, with a mass of disturbing historical information, a brutal and secret history of childhood. He found that rape, torture, mutilation, infanticide, chattel slavery, child sacrifice, incest, child soldiers and other forms of suffering were common, not rare. Ariès makes little mention of these facts and for that he has been roundly criticized by psychohistorians and other modern social historians.

I think it is possible that both may be right in different ways. Could it be that these small adults did have more freedom, but at the same time faced dangers now mostly condemned in the west? The fecundity here is compelling. DeMause publishes *The Journal of Psychohistory* which layers with each issue additional evidence along with many interesting childhood histories such as those of Joseph Stalin and George Bush. His latest book, *The Emotional Life of Nations* (Karnak, 2002) aims to prove the premise that abusive childhoods lead to war. I highly recommend it. Inciden-

tally I discovered through correspondence with deMause (pronounced 'd'moss') that he is an advocate of democratic education and named his first son after A. S. Neill.

Psychohistory has spawned some remarkable recent scholarship such as John Boswell's *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe*, (Pantheon, 1988). One shortcoming, in my view, is that psychohistorians are unconcerned with spiritual or esoteric philosophy.

## INDIVIDUAL CHILDHOOD

I also find books on *individual* childhoods to be very satisfying. *Child Prodigies and Exceptional Early Learners* by John Radford (Free Press, 1990) is laced with bits of dull pedantry but the rest is a scholarly delight to read. One of my favorites is an obscure one, *Lessons From Childhood: Some Aspects of the Early Life of Unusual Men and Women* by R. S. Illingworth, (Livingstone, 1966). The author details many curious, strange childhoods and ends with a chapter on the childhoods of "evil men." Hundreds of famous and notable childhoods are here; John Stuart Mill, Robespierre, Hans Christian Andersen, Charles Dickens, all covered in a crisp and factual style. While reading this, one is struck with amazement at the diversity of childhood, from the idyllic to the severe, from ivory towers to dungeons, and we marvel as Illingworth opens up alternative possibilities for childhood.

**Todd Pratum** is an antiquarian bookdealer, literacy consultant and teacher in Oakland California and has been working with homeless and foster kids for the last six years and working on starting a school. He looks forward to communicating with interested individuals and institutions. [www.Pratum.com](http://www.Pratum.com). ●



Todd Pratum sharing his love of books with young people.



# Resources and Conferences

## *Substance*

Substance is a monthly print newspaper and website documenting the politics of school reform in Chicago. Now that the recent head of Chicago Public Schools, Arne Duncan, is the U.S. Secretary of Education, the struggle over Chicago's schools is especially relevant to public education policy across the U.S. *Substance* exposes the agenda behind the efforts of Duncan and Chicago Mayor Richard Daley. The "Chicago Model," it says, "is a smokescreen for privatization, union busting, and corruption."

### *Substance*

5132 W. Berteau  
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[www.substancenews.net](http://www.substancenews.net)

## **NATIONAL COALITION OF ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

Upattinas School in Glenmoore, PA  
April 23-26, 2009

The theme is "Own your Education: Alternative Teens Grab Hold of Their Future"

Multiage workshops and inspiring speakers.

[www.ncacs.org](http://www.ncacs.org)

## **NORTH AMERICAN DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION CONFERENCE**

Albany, New York  
June 23-25, 2009

The NADEC conference aims to build a stronger and more cohesive community of democratic schools and programs across North America. This is a conference for anyone looking to be intimately involved in democratic education, including teachers, mentors, students, parents, administrators and supporters.

[www.nadecconference.org/](http://www.nadecconference.org/)

For information call (518) 465-2575 or  
email: [nadec2009@gmail.com](mailto:nadec2009@gmail.com)

## **FREE MINDS, FREE PEOPLE**

Houston, Texas  
June 25 to 28, 2009

**Free Minds, Free People** is a national conference that brings together teachers, high school and college students, researchers, parents and community-based activists/educators from across the country to build a movement to develop and promote Education for Liberation. Education for liberation prepares the most excluded, under-served members of our society, in particular low-income youth and youth of color, to fight for a more just world by:

- Teaching students the causes of inequalities and injustices in society and how communities have fought against them.
- Helping them develop both the belief in themselves that they can challenge those injustices and the skills necessary to do that.
- Supporting them in taking action that leads to disenfranchised communities having more power.

Education for Liberation is taking place in a variety of settings—schools, community centers, homes, churches, and college campuses. It is being practiced by teachers, parents, youth and community activists. But these educators often find themselves isolated, with few resources, little support and limited connection to others who share their concerns. This conference represents a unique and exciting opportunity for all of us to come together to learn and build strength from each other. This is a critical first step in the process of transforming ourselves from a collection of individuals trying to make a difference in our neighborhoods or schools into a strong movement for education justice.

[www.freemindsfreepeople.org/](http://www.freemindsfreepeople.org/)

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# Book Reviews

## ***The Self-Organizing Revolution: Common Principles of the Educational Alternatives Movement***

By Ron Miller

Holistic Education Press ([www.great-ideas.org](http://www.great-ideas.org))  
2008

REVIEWED BY KELLY TAYLOR

This small but densely-packed volume from our illustrious editor is like a little meme-bomb waiting to go off in the hands of anyone who picks it up and reads even a few paragraphs. I recommend buying extra copies and leaving them lying about heavily-literate areas.

The book's basic message can be summed up as follows: Everyone knows the education system is broken, but nobody can seem to agree on why or which parts to replace, but that's because it's not that any particular pieces are broken, it's that the whole thing is the wrong size, shape and color for the world that is emerging. The world that Miller envisions has a place for all of the different types of "educational alternatives," the major shapes of which he clearly and succinctly describes. It's clear that although very little, if any, of the principles and core values of current mainstream public schooling should be carried forward past the coming education revolution, there are many core principles of educational alternatives that can and should be continued.

The types of education currently available are sorted into four basic types of pedagogical and theoretical models: freedom-based, social-constructivist, critical, and spiritual developmentalism. Examples of these first four are the various types of "alternative education" with which we are familiar: Sudbury and Summerhill, Reggio and Quaker schools, public school reformers, Waldorf and Montessorians. The fifth model that Miller presents is an "integral or holistic" model of education which is the radical idea that all of these models provide essential elements, as long as they are helping to create "meaningful connections between self and society, humanity and nature, intellect and emotion, adult and child, and so on."

A holistic approach puts the bulk of the responsibility on the individual school or educator to evaluate a student's needs and respond accordingly, using whatever and however many of the various approaches available. As Miller explains, "Any particular learner, in a particular setting, in a particular culture, at a particular point in historical time, should be addressed in that moment, and not according to a fixed model meant to apply to all individuals in all learning situations."

There are two sets of paradigms on which education should, and Miller argues, will be based. One set is the core set of values or principles that are necessary for the next level of human development, probably in all areas, but especially edu-

cation. They are: respect for the person (even children), balance, decentralization of authority, Steiner's principle of noninterference between political, economic and cultural spheres, and a holistic or integral perspective, of which the entire book is an excellent example. Miller discusses each of these principles individually, and then in relationship to each other and as a whole, a set of values that constitute an entirely different worldview when working together. Although various existing educational alternatives are founded on or use some or many of these principles individually, the key is using them all together.

The second is a larger societally-based movement to an entirely new and holistically-minded set of values that fundamentally re-shape our perceptions, priorities and actions. This shift is already happening in many places, both on a national and global level, away from the top-down, authoritarian, corporate, power-and-profit oriented models of human interaction to a model that is globally-aware, based on mutual-aid and empowerment of individuals, groups, cultures and entire nations. This shift, eloquently summarized in *The Self-Organizing Revolution*, is a vision of what Spiral Dynamics theorists refer to as a "meme-shift," from blue/orange to green/yellow/turquoise, and is not necessarily just about becoming a "better" society, but a deeper, broader, more complex one, that is capable of integrating many options and possibilities into a functioning whole, i.e. "holistic."

In addition to providing an excellent look at the reasons why educational alternatives are necessary, this book provides an even more exciting look at the future of where educational alternatives and how they must grow and flow, as must our Western culture, in its entirety, if it is to survive and thrive.

## ***Learners In a Changing Learning Landscape: Reflections from a Dialogue on New Roles and Expectations***

Edited by Jan Visser and Muriel Visser-Valfrey

Springer ([www.springerpub.com](http://www.springerpub.com))  
2008

REVIEWED BY DEL BERGER

This is basically a textbook for those unfamiliar with the many facets of learning in the modern world. The contributing authors provide an easy transition from the curriculum centered to the learner centered approach to education and recognize throughout the existence of many different learning styles. In other words it is a manual for the classically trained to better understand what learning can be outside the closed capacity of traditional classroom environments. Parts of this volume bring deeper understanding of what learning really is and explain its place in human development and evolution, while others express the gap between digital natives and digital immigrants and discuss the relevancy of learning environments such as the Internet and video games..

For anyone foreign to the ideas of unschooling or free schooling this book provides an understanding of why they work. The authors also facilitate a necessary transit of the pop-

ular compulsory, mechanical perception towards understanding a learner-centered, natural discovery of all things and their relevancy to one another as the truth of learning. In chapter 6 (Getting to Know the Feral Learner), Mary Hall writes, "... learning is seamless – but institutions aren't. Moving from one to another can create the illusion of discontinuities throughout the lifetime that do not really exist." Absolutely! Life is one long learning experience. For me this chapter was perfect. Hall expresses more clearly than ever I could, my experiences over the past 3 years; transitioning from a public school reject into a seeker of knowledge for the sake of growth. She also describes different groups of feral learners and explains the damage done to intuitive, Visual-Spatial processes by the rote memorization and mental tedium forced upon students in an institutional setting.

These essays point out the need for all educators, including those involved in post secondary teaching, to adjust for the changing landscape while fostering learning in whichever form it appears. Again, this book is a good transition for the classically trained educator from a paradigm of disconnected subjects and pupils to a more holistic understanding of learning. It is also a call to duty, requesting the incorporation of a greater world (technological and natural) into a curriculum that fits learners' unique interests, talents, perspectives and lives.

## ***When the White House Was Ours***

By Porter Shreve

Houghton Mifflin ([www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com](http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com))  
2008

REVIEWED BY DAVID HARRISON

*When the White House was Ours* is a rich and complex novel, one that intertwines a young boy's journey of discovery with the story of a bare-bones alternative school in Washington, D.C. Full of detailed descriptions and intuitive narration, the book unfolds childhood rites of passage while taking the reader right to the core of major issues in democratic education.

The heart of the book is its narrator Daniel Truitt. The reader quickly finds themselves in capable, sensitive, and insightful hands as Daniel reveals his world with thoughtful candor. He openly discusses the "diminishments" he suffers at an upscale prep school, and asks the reader to join him in wondering why he gets C's and D's in history despite his love of the subject and his voluminous knowledge of U.S. presidents. The main drama of Daniel's story centers around his efforts to sort through his relationship with his parents, and more particularly, coming to grips with his father's failures and shortcomings. This in fact is Daniel's main rite of passage—witnessing and making sense of the marital strife, dishonesty, and adult foibles exposing themselves all around him. In addition, Daniel constantly finds himself in an unenviable role as a "vessel of secrets." If there is tragedy in the book, it is not the failure of his parents' school, but rather the fact that Daniel is left to decide which secrets to keep and which to reveal, and that a secret he decides to keep is the final nail in the coffin of the ill-fated school.

As a work of fiction, *When the White House was Ours* is obviously not a how-to guide for starting a school. But the story of the fictional school called "Our House" reveals much of the optimism surrounding such a venture, and exposes many of the pitfalls that can all too easily undermine such a tricky and tenuous project. Like many real schools of its kind, Our House starts out as a desperate and exciting idea, one requiring an almost saintly amount of ingenuity and hard work to even get off the ground. There is a lot that goes right for Our House, as the staff and students quickly unite around shared projects like weather-proofing their vast and drafty headquarters, combining research into winterizing options with the hands-on work of doing it yourself. There are rewarding individual courses of study in photography, art, music, history, and zeppelin building, and the school is able to operate on its almost non-existent budget by scrounging furniture on garbage nights and securing donations of day-old and damaged food.

Unfortunately, most of the positives are undermined by the shortcomings of the adults. Too often the adults—for all their good points—are secretive, sneaky, unhappy, passive-aggressive, panicked, and sometimes just outright incompetent. Affairs between staff members, pandering to their landlord, keeping secrets from each other, vindictiveness, and outright illegalities all combine to create a tense and unsafe learning environment. This all comes to a head in the most extreme way with the discovery that a staff member is having sex with a student.

In her review of *When the White House was Ours* for the *New York Times*, Julia Scheeres uses the novel's plot to call democratic education "bunk" and a "70's conceit." By saying so, Ms. Scheeres reveals the confusion and complexity that surrounds starting a school like Our House. It is not the idea of democratic education itself that is flawed, as witnessed by the long-term successes of schools like Summerhill, the Albany Free School, and Sudbury Valley, all of which are mentioned in Mr. Shreve's book. Rather, it is the personalities, maturity, and leadership of the adults involved that hold the ultimate keys to success—whatever unresolved issues and gaps in wisdom the adults have will invariably permeate the personality of the school. Success also relies on a dual understanding of what freedom means and the proper relationship between adults and students. As A.S. Neill was quick to point out, freedom is not to be confused with license—a democratic school cannot survive as a free-for-all. And just because students and adults are equal does not mean they are the same—there is a proper boundary-setting role adults must play, a delicate balance that can be achieved while maintaining the genuine freedom and equality of the students. These misunderstandings are the root causes behind the symptoms that doom Our House.

All in all, *When the White House was Ours* is a thoroughly enjoyable story, well-written and thought-provoking. Read in combination with the non-fiction classics of alternative education, it provides a unique and entertaining glimpse into the do's and don'ts of starting, running, and attending an independent democratic school. ●

# More New Books to Check Out

BRIEF REVIEWS BY RON MILLER

## ***Life Learning: Lessons from the Educational Frontier***

Edited by Wendy Priesnitz

Life Media ([www.lifemedia.ca/altpress](http://www.lifemedia.ca/altpress))

2008

A collection of thirty essays from *Life Learning* magazine, by parents, youths, and educational scholars who explain the benefits of non-coercive learning based in the family and community. Learning through living supports intellectual development but also enables young people to better understand themselves and their place in the world. Wendy Priesnitz, longtime activist and publisher/editor of *Life Learning* and *Natural Life*, writes in the introduction, “life learning is a lifestyle, even a worldview, a way of looking at the world, at children and at knowledge, rather than a method of education or a place where an education is expected to happen.”

## ***What’s the Point of School? Rediscovering the Heart of Education***

Guy Claxton

Oneworld Publications

([www.oneworld-publications.com](http://www.oneworld-publications.com))

2008

Guy Claxton is a British psychologist who has described a dynamic, holistic model of human intelligence and learning in provocative books such as *The Wayward Mind*, *Wise Up: The Challenge of Lifelong Learning*, and *Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind*. His works are relatively unknown in the U.S., but it is time they become part of the literature on educational alternatives. In *What’s the Point of School?*, Claxton argues that the mission of education in our age must have less to do with enforced memorization of subject matter and more with the cultivation of the intrinsic joy of learning. He celebrates “our brilliant natural learning ability” which includes our capacities for emotion, intuition, and self-motivation. He defines learning as exploration and explains the “quiet revolution” in education that is based on this understanding.

## ***Wounded by School: Recapturing the Joy in Learning and Standing Up to Old School Culture***

Kirsten Olson

Teachers College Press ([www.tcpres.com](http://www.tcpres.com))

2009

Kirsten Olson is an educational writer and consultant who brings a sharp eye and critical perspective to the hidden curriculum of modern schooling. In her previous book, *Schools as Colonizers*, and again in *Wounded by School*, Olson sees beyond the shallow nonsense of contemporary educational rhetoric and reveals the actual effects that schooling has on young people’s lives and identities. Telling the stories of many young people and adults she has interviewed, Olson identifies various categories of intellectual and emotional wounds caused by schooling. These wounds, she says, “are produced in educational environments that are intolerant of cognitive, emotional, or identity differences, where feelings about being different provoke disapproval and shame. They are produced in school climates where there is pressure to comply to relatively narrow standards of performance, and where there is little choice for the learner in the educational task. They are produced in environments where schools are more focused on labeling and tracking students, and driving down differences between learners, rather than on celebrating and acknowledging variation. School wounds induce alienation from ourselves as learners and reduce pleasure in our experiences of learning.”



# News & Communications

COMPILED BY CAROL MORLEY AND RON MILLER

## National.....

From **More and More, Schools Got Game**, by Michael Alison Chandler, *Washington Post*: As Net-generation teachers reach out to gamers, classrooms across the country are becoming portals to elaborate virtual worlds. The Software and Information Industry Association estimates that instructional games make up only a tiny portion of the \$2 billion-a-year educational software industry. But lately, researchers and educators say sentiment toward gaming is changing. Advocates argue that games teach vital skills overlooked in the age of high-stakes tests, such as teamwork, decision-making and digital literacy. And they admire the way good games challenge players just enough to keep them engaged and pushing to reach the next level. A new generation of game designers is borrowing from the sophisticated platforms and stunning graphics that captivate students for hours after school. They hope to channel the kind of feverish determination students exhibit when stealing a car in *Grand Theft Auto* and redirect it toward more wholesome pursuits, such as algebra. Compelling games can help schools compete for students' attention, advocates say, even as many teenagers are tackling complex projects on the Internet in their free time. Private foundations and the National Science Foundation have contributed millions of dollars to developing or studying games. The U.S. Education Department awarded a \$9 million grant in September to a New York-based education firm to develop games for the hand-held Nintendo DS to weave into middle school science lessons. Some research has shown that games such as *Quest Atlantis* and *Tabula Digita* can boost the time that students spend on problems, depth of responses, even test scores. Larger-scale studies are still under way. A revision to the Higher Education Act approved last summer authorizes the creation of a research center for assessing and developing educational technologies such as simulations and video games.

From **Home Schooling Grows**, by Janice Lloyd, *USA Today*: The ranks of America's home-schooled children have continued a steady climb over the past five years, and new research suggests broader reasons for the appeal. The number of home-schooled kids hit 1.5 million in 2007, up 74% from when the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics started keeping track in 1999, and up 36% since 2003. The percentage of the school-age population that was home-schooled increased from 2.2% in 2003 to 2.9% in 2007. Traditionally, the biggest motivations for

parents to teach their children at home have been moral or religious reasons, and that remains a top pick when parents are asked to explain their choice. The 2003 survey gave parents six reasons to pick as their motivation. (They could choose more than one.) The 2007 survey added a seventh: an interest in a "non-traditional approach," a reference to parents dubbed "unschoolers," who regard standard curriculum methods and standardized testing as counterproductive to a quality education. The category of "other reasons" rose to 32% in 2007 from 20% in 2003 and included family time and finances. That suggests the demographics are expanding beyond conservative Christian groups, says Robert Kunzman, an associate professor at Indiana University's School of Education. Anecdotal evidence indicates many parents want their kids to learn at their own pace, he says. Fewer home-schoolers were enrolled part time in traditional schools to study subjects their parents lack knowledge to teach. Eighteen percent were enrolled part time in 1999 and 2003, compared with 16% in 2007. Kunzman says this might be because of the availability of online instruction. The 2007 estimates are based on data from the Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey of the National Household Education Surveys. Brian Ray, president of the National Home Education Research Institute, says the estimates are low because home-schooling parents "are significantly less likely to answer government-sponsored surveys."

From **Online Courses Helping More Students Meet Goals**, by Joshunda Sanders, *Austin American Statesman*: Online offerings have been popular with military personnel and rural residents seeking access to higher education. The Sloan Consortium, which keeps online education statistics, reported that 3.9 million students took at least one online course in an accredited program in 2007. That is more than 20 percent of all U.S. higher education students and 12 percent more students than those reported in the previous year. The U.S. Department of Education said that between 2006 and 2007, almost 10 million undergraduates and 2 million graduate students at accredited colleges participated in online or blended classes, which have an on-campus component in addition to online course material. The consortium estimates that online education will continue to grow for large institutions that can afford to offer more online courses. "Online learning is no longer the exception" in higher education, said Bill Stewart, assistant vice president for institutional advancement at Excel-

# National

sior College, a private school based in Albany, N.Y., that has an enrollment of more than 33,000 students. Entirely online degree programs like those offered by Excelsior and University of Phoenix are popular, but Central Texas professors and students say that blended classes offer the best of both worlds by pairing flexibility with personal interaction. St. Edward's University, for instance, has offered online coursework since 1997. Assistant psychology professor Sara Dixon said her re-

search shows that students learn as effectively taking a blended course as they do taking a traditional class. Online degrees were once viewed as less rigorous than on-campus programs, but that perspective has been changing, and online degrees are gaining more widespread acceptance, said Renée Trudeau, president of Career Strategists, a firm that specializes in career planning for mid- to senior-level professionals.

# International

## CANADA

**Parental Sine Qua Non**, *GlobeCampus.ca*: While parents cast about at great expense looking for programs to improve their children's brainpower, a magic bullet exists at low cost that has never quite received its due. It is a life-enhancing, literacy-inducing, time-travelling device, colloquially known as a "book." It works optimally when a parent or two read it out loud. Best of all, it is free at public libraries, though woe betide the person who returns it late. This device – sold separately, as they say (the book and the parental reading unit) – is far, far better than a Baby Einstein video. Imagine, if it only had the name. Let's do the Baby Einstein before bed. Think how eagerly parents would embrace it. What parent-child reading needs is marketing. It is getting some. Thousands of Canadian adults and children are attempting to enter the Guinness World Records, for "most children reading with an adult, multiple locations," trying to grab the record of 78,791 from the Americans, who set it in 2006. At last word, Canada had 187,043 people registered. Everyone is reading the same five books by the Canadian author Robert Munsch. Corny? No. Not when research has found that parental involvement in their children's reading is a more important influence on literacy than family wealth, or the level of parental education. Not when, of all school subjects, reading is the most sensitive to parental involvement, according to the research. And not when literacy is the *sine qua non* of school success, and much else that is good in life. Even if it is corny, it is the right kind of corny. And it pales next to Britain's focus on literacy. Canada has an annual Family Literacy Day sponsored by the ABC Canada Literacy Foundation and Honda Canada; Britain just finished a National Year of Reading, which is being followed by a national Reading for Life campaign. Young fathers, particularly working-class fathers, are one focus of that campaign; research has found that fathers' role in reading to their children has been undervalued. The goal is for all families "to see reading as an important part of their daily lives and part of the culture of their home." Teaching children to love reading is not a job that can be offloaded on a video, or a daycare centre or the schools. The joy of reading is either in the air at home or it is not, and children, even small ones, can detect the difference.

## UNITED KINGDOM

From **No Escape from Turning up to Class**, by Jessica Shepherd, *Guardian UK*: School inspectors dampened ministers' hopes that tens of thousands of students would soon be logging on to online classrooms. Ofsted said many schools and colleges in England were reluctant to embrace new technology which enables teaching and learning to continue online and out-of-hours. In 2005, the government asked its agency which promotes learning through technology — Becta — to ensure the majority of schools and colleges made more effective use of technology. But today's study by the inspectorate found the take up of online classrooms was currently more of a "cottage industry than a national technological revolution". Virtual learning environments (VLEs) are similar to intranet sites. Teachers can return coursework on them, provide notes for pupils who have missed lessons and post mock exam questions. Schools and colleges started using them in 2000. Christine Gilbert, chief inspector, said: "Although young people use computers and the internet routinely in their personal lives, there was no great expectations on their part that a VLE would replace a significant part of their face-to-face learning. Melanie Hunt, director of learning and skills at Ofsted, said take up of VLEs had been slower than hoped partly because teachers may not have had sufficient encouragement from their managers. She said some teachers had not been trained to use the online classrooms and, particularly in primary schools, could not spare the time to keep the VLE up to date and post materials on it.

**Traditional Lessons Axed in Favor of Life Skills**, by Graeme Paton, *Telegraph UK*: They have imposed a new curriculum that merges lessons such as history, geography and RE - creating more time to teach children key "competencies" needed as they grow up. The timetable – developed by the Royal Society for the Arts – focuses on the application and use of information in everyday situations. Some schools run three-hour lessons for as many as 90 pupils under the new curriculum. But the "trendy" approach has been criticized for lacking academic rigor and leaving children without proper subject knowledge. The disclosure came as one school following a similar curriculum plunged to the bottom of GCSE league tables this week. Bishops Park College in Essex

# International.....

was praised by Ofsted after themed lessons were introduced in 2003. The Government's Qualifications and Curriculum Authority also held it up as a model to other schools, saying its "innovative approach to curriculum thinking and planning" should be replicated elsewhere. But it was ranked third worst in the country for raw GCSE results after only eight per cent of pupils gained five good grades. The school also came bottom in an alternative list showing the progress pupils make between the age of 11 and 16. The number of school using the RSA's "Opening Minds" curriculum has grown from eight five years ago to 204.

**British Teenagers have Lower IQ Scores than a Generation Ago, New Study Reveals, by Laura Clark, *UK Daily Mail*:** Middle-class teenagers are less intelligent than a generation ago due to the dumbing down of youth culture and school tests, a new study suggests. The authority on IQ testing who conducted the study said the demands made on teenagers' brainpower by today's youth culture may be 'stagnating'. Leisure time is increasingly taken up with playing computer games and watching TV instead of reading and holding conversations, he said. Education experts said a growing tendency in schools to 'teach to the test' was affecting youngsters' ability to think lat-

erally. For the study, Professor James Flynn, of the University of Otago in New Zealand, analyzed UK children's scores in IQ tests over time. He found that IQs increased among children aged between five and 10 over the 28-year-period, at the rate of up to half a point a year. He believes these gains are linked to changes to the home environment children experience when they are young, with parents increasingly providing stimulating activities. But Professor Flynn also found that teenagers' scores had dipped slightly over the past generation. It is the first time IQ scores have fallen for any age group during the past century, his research suggests. Professor Flynn's study, published in the *Journal of Economics and Human Biology*, was conducted using a IQ test known as Raven's Progressive Matrices, where questions involve matching a series of patterns and sequences, so that even people with no education can take the test. Dr. Richard House, a senior lecturer in therapeutic education at Roehampton University and a researcher into the effects of television on children, said: "Taking these findings at face value, it appears that there is something happening to teenagers. Computer games and computer culture has led to a decrease in reading books. The tendency for teachers to now 'teach to the test' has also led to a decrease in the capacity to think in lateral ways." ●



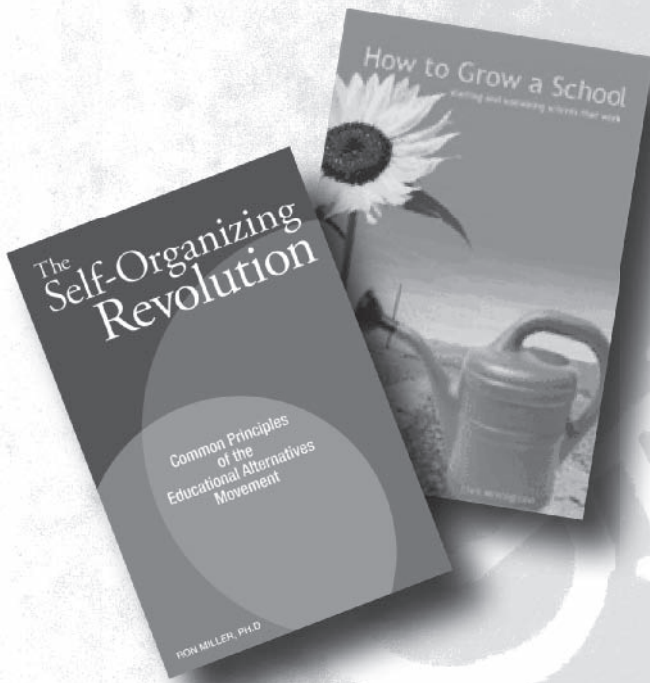
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