

Education Revolution

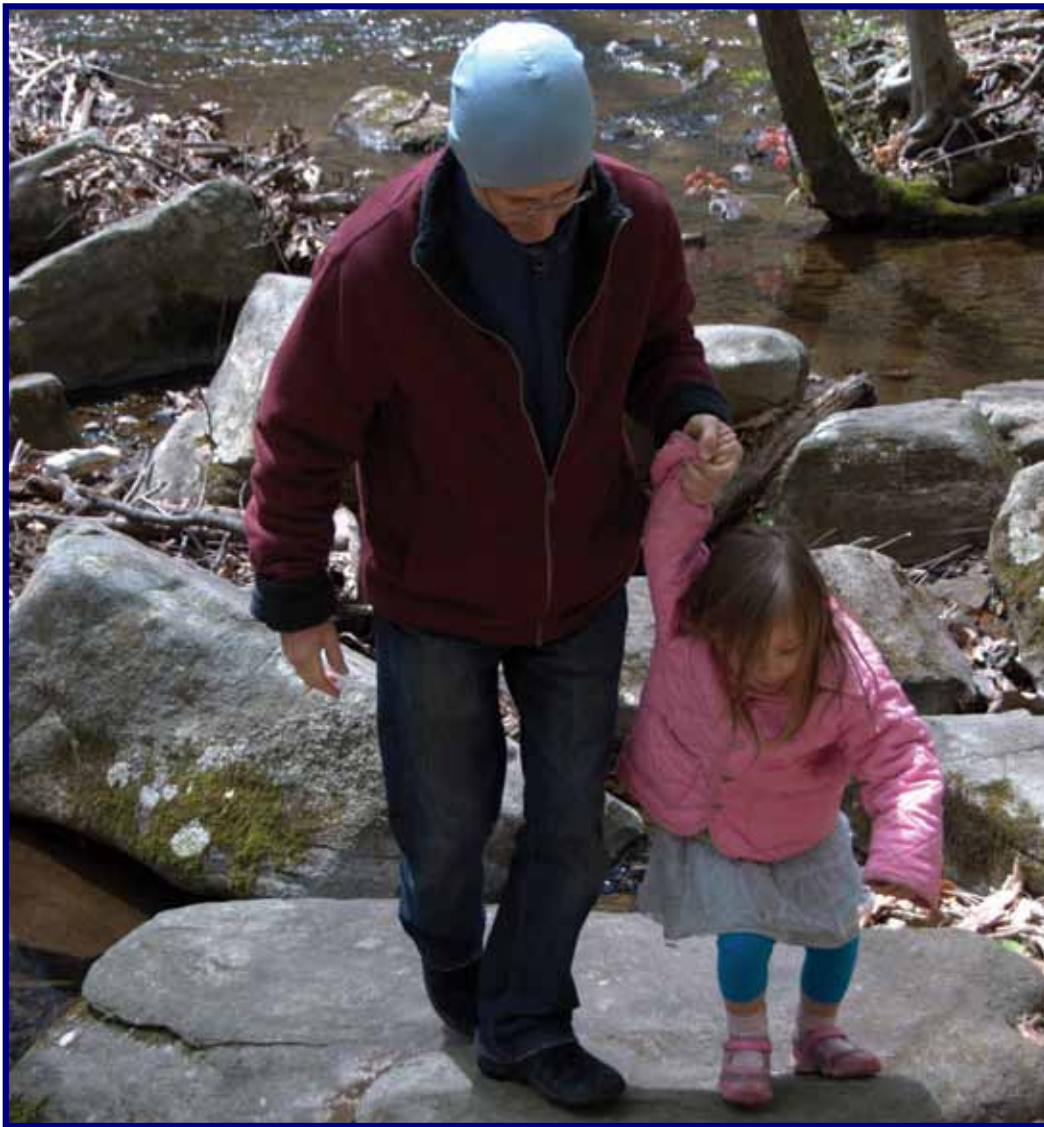
THE MAGAZINE OF EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES



Summer 2010, Issue #61

Volume 22, Number 2

Supporting Children's Freedom to Discover Themselves and Their World



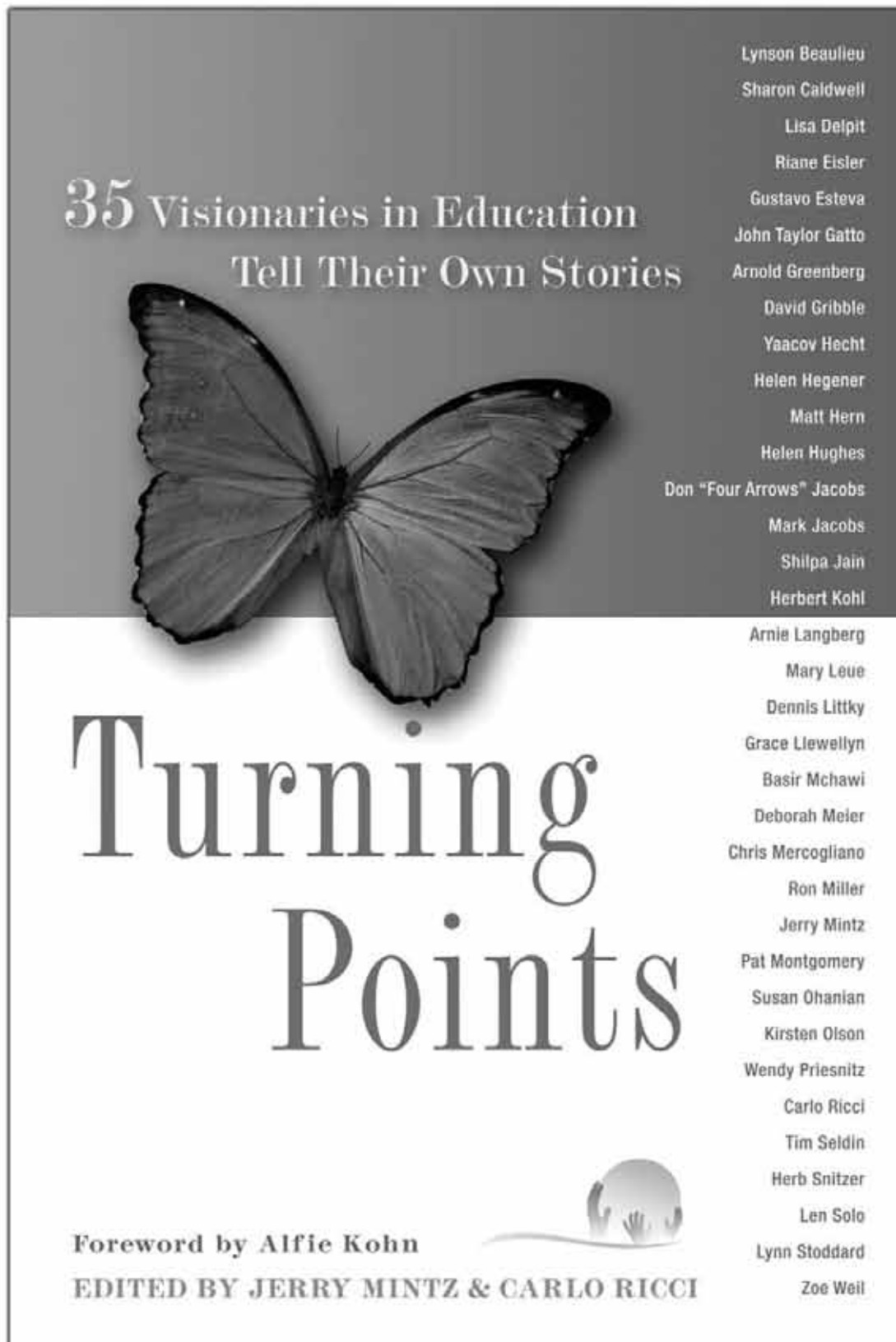
INSIDE:

Educating the whole child, using social media, taking responsibility for educational choice, and introducing the Institute for Democratic Education in America

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Education Revolution

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), Public Choice and At-Risk, Democratic, Homeschool, Open, Charter, Free, Sudbury, Holistic, Virtual, Magnet, Early Childhood, Reggio Emilia, Indigo, Krishnamurti, Quaker, Libertarian, Independent, Progressive, Community, Cooperative, and Unschooling. One of **AERO's** areas of expertise is democratic process and democratic education, but equally important is the networking of all forms of educational alternatives. It is through our work and mission that we hope to create an education revolution.

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

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

Education Revolution

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ISSN#: 110679219

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Printer: Brenneman Printing Inc., Lancaster, PA

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Being There

BY JERRY MINTZ

From April 6-13 I participated in the 19th International Democratic Education Conference. It was held in Israel, at the Seminar Hakibutzim, a progressive college campus in Tel Aviv. This is also where the conference's organizer, the Institute for Democratic Education, has its offices.

The first IDEC was held in 1993 at the Democratic School of Hadera, a radical public K-12 school that was founded by Yaacov Hecht. There were only a dozen of us at that meeting, some of whom had just presented at a multicultural education conference in Tel Aviv. We could hardly imagine that this small meeting would lead to democratic education conferences in England, Austria, Ukraine, Japan, New Zealand, the United States, India, Germany, Australia, Brazil, Canada and Korea. Now it was back in Israel.

Since that first meeting in 1993 some remarkable things have happened in education in Israel. At the beginning there was a national administration that was very impressed with the Democratic School of Hadera and Yaacov Hecht's work. They supported the creation of over twenty-five more democratic schools. To support them, Hecht started the IDE to train teachers to teach in democratic schools. As someone said at the conference, if you ask the average Israeli about democratic education, most of them have heard of it and know what it is.

As we heard in some of the presentations and workshops, this process has greatly escalated in recent years. Now, entire municipalities have approached the IDE to help them democratize all of the schools and institutions in their towns and cities. This happened after it had been demonstrated in one run down seaside city that went from doormat to a destination as a result of these changes. Hecht had showed us a slide show about that at the IDEC in Vancouver in 2008. We heard that there are now ten municipalities using IDE's services.

At this conference there were over 250 people from 14 countries outside of Israel, in addition to over 1000 Israelis who participated. The country with the most participants was Germany, with over 50, but even Ukraine sent 15 students and teachers, mostly from the Stork Family School in Vinitsa.

This was an eight day conference. It is designed that way so that people who have traveled such long distances can come together as a community. Although there is an "official" IDEC meeting at every conference to plan future gatherings, the international communication throughout the year is through the IDEC listserv which AERO maintains. By decision of the group there has been no official IDEC organization or administration. Each year a different school on

a rotating schedule around the world volunteers to organize the next IDEC or two. They take full responsibility for its organization and funding. The general purpose is to network the democratic schools and help in the growth of democratic education.

Next year's IDEC will be in Devon, England. The organizers are part of the EUDEC, the European Democratic Education Community which grew out of the IDEC. The IDEC and EUDEC will be cosponsors. It will center near Sands School, a democratic school that hosted the IDEC in 1994 and 1997. In fact, the students who organized that latter conference set many precedents, including naming it the IDEC (previously it was variously called the Hadera Conference). One of the coordinators, Chloe Duff, is a graduate of Sands School. She can be reached at chloe_duff@yahoo.co.uk.

Some other highlights of this conference included music by a band that featured a tuba player, a beautiful Shabbat ceremony, and lots of networking. But my favorites were two half-day visits to two nearby democratic schools, Kfar Saba and the Democratic School of Hadera. I spent another three days at the latter, which I think is one of the most remarkable schools anywhere. It has four hundred students from age 4 through high school graduation. The many small outbuildings, constructed mostly by parents, make a giant square around a big, central playing field with soccer, playgrounds, trees, and a climbing wall. The buildings house different age groups, art rooms, computer rooms, a library, a video editing room, a staff room, and a school store. It is like a big children's village.

One of the days I was there was Shoa day, in remembrance of the Holocaust. On that day sirens blow all over the country and there are two minutes of silence. Everything stops. People stop in their tracks. Cars stop on the highway. Even trains stop. People at the school gathered and read poetry, sang songs and otherwise expressed their feelings about the day. Then everyone squeezed into the library where a video documentary was shown. It was made by one of the students about a trip they made to Poland to see Auschwitz and other sites of the holocaust.

I was gone for a month in all, first stopping in England and visiting Summerhill, and on the way back spending another 9 days in England, waiting for the volcanic ash cloud to clear. Next year I hope to be back again in England for the next IDEC. ●

FROM THE

Editor's Desk

BY RON MILLER

I cannot think or write about educational questions without considering the larger crisis that humanity is now facing. We live in troubled and precarious times. The global economy hovers on the edge of collapse. Environmental disasters are seriously degrading the earth's biosphere. International tensions are on the rise, and American politics are increasingly divisive and ugly. People everywhere, including the young, are stressed out, coping with global threats as well as the toxic life-style of our insanely fast-paced, competitive, artificial, and materialist culture.

**We can begin building a more
compassionate, person-centered,
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As both a historian and a holistic thinker, I have been reading a wide range of perspectives to try to get a handle on what's happening and where it might be leading. No one knows for sure, but it does seem quite evident that our entire civilization is entering a transitional phase. The age of modernity—the historical phase characterized by industrialism and technology, colonial imperialism and globalization, mass media and massive institutions—is apparently drawing to a close. As fossil fuels run out, and as we foul the ecosystem of the entire planet, the resource base that underpins modernity has become exhausted. Our current civilization is not sustainable.

Journalist Richard Heinberg, an especially astute observer of current trends, has said of the Gulf oil spill, "This is what the end of the oil age looks like. The cheap, easy petroleum is gone; from now on, we will pay steadily more and more for what we put in our

gas tanks—more not just in dollars, but in lives and health, in a failed foreign policy that spawns foreign wars and military occupations, and in the lost integrity of the biological systems that sustain life on this planet." (www.postcarbon.org). From a holistic perspective, our many crises are interrelated. We are not dealing with discrete technical problems but with the decline and eventual fall of an entire way of life.

In the short run, this crisis makes our work as education activists more difficult. For one thing, the weakened economy has diminished families' ability to pay independent school tuition and philanthropists' capacity to support innovative projects. In addition, the public is too swamped with deeply serious problems to make our ideas about children's learning a high priority. However, in the long run, the transition from modernity to some "post-carbon" civilization could mean that large institutions, including public schooling, will be replaced by local, ecologically rooted human communities. The learning models we have pioneered on the fringes of industrial/technocratic culture may well sprout like grass after a refreshing rain. It is possible that our time has come.

Obviously, the collapse of economic, cultural and environmental systems will be enormously difficult and destructive. In my reading, I've come across various "doomers" who predict widespread chaos, suffering and violence. But I've been encouraged by other commentators who remind us that industrialism is itself the most violent and destructive human culture ever to exist, and we can welcome its demise as a rare opportunity for a fresh start. We can begin building a more compassionate, person-centered, life-affirming civilization right now, and have the elements in place when the technocracy falls apart. Each of our schools, learning communities and homeschooling endeavors contributes to that new beginning. Our efforts have never been more vitally important. ●

Evolving towards IDEA

Introducing the Institute for Democratic Education in America

BY DANA BENNIS

This spring I worked with a team of colleagues to launch IDEA. The Institute for Democratic Education in America is a national organization dedicated to ensuring that all young people can participate meaningfully in their education and gain the tools to learn about who they are and build a just, democratic, and sustainable world.

I will explain more about why we founded IDEA and what it will be doing, but first I want to describe the path that led me to co-founding IDEA. I first learned about non-conventional education 10 years ago, while studying music education at the University of Michigan. Through experiences at schools and summer camps, I knew I greatly enjoyed helping young people grow as individuals. Yet I was turned off from teaching when my professors told me I should go by “Mr. Bennis” and use an iron fist for discipline and control.

Luckily I had one professor who mentioned Summerhill School and I quickly began reading everything I could find about student-centered and freedom-based education. I learned about AERO and found democratic and open schools in Michigan for student teaching. When I first discovered there was something beyond conventional schooling, I was hooked. The concepts of non-coercion and freedom in learning became my mantras and the root of what I saw as good education.

I began to see that for some families, joining a democratic school was a huge risk, when the question of whether their children would learn the language and culture of power could determine whether those children would rise up out of the cycle of poverty and racism.

In 2001, I joined the teaching staff of Albany Free School in New York. I learned a great deal from working at the school, especially about the role of the adult and the fundamental importance of building strong relationships between adults and youth. In my early explorations of democratic education, I believed that the adult must always step back and take extra care not to subtly influence young people. Gradually, I found that as I got to know students, I could bring my full self, with opinions and suggestions, into

the exchange, while they could still freely make their own choices.

In my early explorations of democratic education, I believed that the adult must always step back and take extra care not to subtly influence young people. Gradually, I found that as I got to know students, I could bring my full self, with opinions and suggestions, into the exchange, while they could still freely make their own choices.

As George Dennison describes in *The Lives of Children*, when trust is built between an adult and young person such that the student knows he or she can take or refuse a suggestion without guilt, the “natural authority” and experience of the adult is welcome and can be helpful. I began asking myself whether the neat and tidy distinction between what was coercive and what was a healthy exchange between adults and youth was really so simple and stark?

During my time in Albany, I also became more aware of the inequity, class divisions, and power dynamics present in our society and their impact on education and learning. Albany Free School, as many readers know, is located in a downtown, low-income, and racially diverse neighborhood — one of the few democratic schools in such a community.

Although it has taken me several years to understand it in this way, I was beginning, at the time, to consider my own privilege as a white male from a secure middle-class family. By virtue of this “invisible knapsack,”¹ I had an “in” to the culture of power in society, which is also largely white, male, and affluent. I knew how to speak standard English with “correct” grammar, I was not judged negatively due to the color of my skin, and I could fall back on the security net of my family if things didn’t work out for me.

Meanwhile, many of the students at Albany Free School (and in many lower income communities and communities of color around the country) do not have the same privileges and support mechanisms I had taken for granted. I began to see that for some families, joining a democratic school was a huge risk, when the question of whether their children would learn the language and culture of power could determine whether those children would rise up out of the cycle of poverty and racism.

I began to wonder, do we democratic education advocates lose an entire audience of teachers, students, and parents by speaking about freedom and choice without recognition of the history and impact of inequity, classism, and racism?

Does democratic education have to look the same in each community?

Can’t democratic education support young people in the development of the tools of literacy and communication while also practicing self-directed learning?

Can youth, without tools of literacy and communication, access the power structures in society as it currently exists?

And can we change society without empowering those who are disempowered, even if it means creating new concepts and shedding some older ones?

These questions stayed with me during my experiences in the following years organizing the 2003 International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC), visiting the education work in Israel led by Yaacov Hecht and the Institute for Democratic Education (IDE), and earning a masters degree in education.

My partner and fellow educator, Julie Hill, and my graduate advisor Connie Krosney, introduced me to the writings of Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and Lisa Delpit, each of whom examines the interconnected issues of freedom and justice in education. Connie challenged me to consider whether democratic education is only for the privileged few who can afford it, or if it could be relevant to the majority of young people in public schools.

I knew, then, that I wanted to work on a broad level for democratic education. And I knew this work had to address these essential questions.

In 2008, Jonah Canner of Fertile Grounds Project in New York joined me at the IDEC in Vancouver ready to create an educational change organization that would face these questions head on. We joined with Scott Nine, Melia Dicker, Adam Fletcher, Laura Stine, and several others to plan the development of an organization that would dedicate itself to

providing credibility and support for democratic education, that would ask these hard questions, work openly with those often seen as the “enemy,” and use social media, web technology, and pragmatic organizing to catalyze democratic educational change.

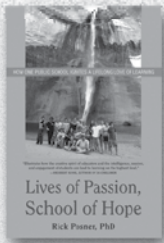
This organization is IDEA. The Institute for Democratic Education in America officially took flight in May, 2010. IDEA’s website is growing and our first video, “Democratic Education: Make Your Voice Heard,” has so far been seen over 3,000 times on YouTube and at more than 15 launch parties around the United States (links at end of article).

IDEA’s strategy is based on fueling an education double movement: both on the ground and through political and civic leadership. Three steps guide our work:

1 Frame democratic education as something just, nuanced, and accessible. Our website includes descriptions of this conception of democratic education; blogs by educators, students, parents, and others; and research materials that can be downloaded.

2 Connect and listen to a strong network of youth, teachers, youth workers, parents, and policy makers. We must engage with others in conversation and be humble enough to know that we do not have all the answers. This involves collaborating with others through local gatherings and social networking tools to raise awareness, build momentum, and inspire action.

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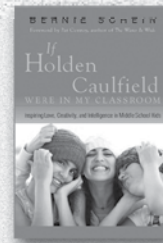
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3 Catalyze action by fueling the small fires that already exist to generate a more credible and potent capacity to make substantial change. We do this through identifying and supporting a dozen regional organizers around the country to listen, network, and support educational change processes. A pool of consultants will provide direct support for the specific needs of schools and communities. Workshops, training programs, and youth leadership development are all on the horizon.

IDEA's ultimate goal is to change the national culture and practice of education to one that values a broad definition of learning and success and that provides all young people with meaningful involvement in their learning. We believe that democratic education can and must grow in multiple settings. This includes individual schools that call themselves democratic as well as others, especially public schools, such as Jefferson County Open School in Colorado, the 40 EdVisions schools, and the 60 Big Picture Schools around the U.S. and the world, that practice student-directed learning in profound ways, yet do not use the term democratic school.

Democratic education is also found in the classrooms of courageous teachers who give their students a chance to actively participate and pursue their interests. Many non-profit and out-of-school programs working with youth use democratic education in practice, as do many progressive universities, early childhood programs, homeschooling networks, summer camps, youth advisory groups for elected officials, and even pioneering businesses and organizations that give their employees more autonomy and room for creativity.

IDEA is working to highlight, develop, and support the growth of democratic education in all these sectors. My colleagues and I recognize, as do Kirsten Olson and Ron Miller in their dialogue from the Spring 2010 issue of *Education Revolution*, that educational change is not an either/or: either work for change inside *or* outside the system. We resonate with Kirsten's point that "we radically disempower ourselves by withdrawing from mainstream talk – that stuff going on in mainstream educational publications, blogs, statehouses, and over at the Department of Education."

We believe it is not only possible, but necessary, for us to stay true to our roots of student freedom and democracy while working with allies in the public sector for deep educational and societal change. Indeed there are many potential allies who are frustrated with the continual march towards greater standardization. And most especially, we at IDEA believe strongly in the democratic goal of public education to

provide all young people with a quality – that is, democratic and meaningful – educational experience.

We are not arrogant in thinking this will be easy. We know that change, and especially educational change, is very difficult. We recognize and are humble in our awareness that many previous and current efforts for educational change, as Ron reminds us in the dialogue with Kirsten, have been thwarted by strong powers seeking to maintain the testing industry and other aspects of conventional education.

Yet, we believe that rapid social, economic, and environmental changes, new forms of technology, the current activism of young people, and the widespread frustration of educators, youth, and parents provide us with a strong opportunity to have a real impact.

We believe that rapid social, economic, and environmental changes, new forms of technology, the current activism of young people, and the widespread frustration of educators, youth, and parents provide us with a strong opportunity to have a real impact.

IDEA stands on the shoulders of those who have worked and continue to work for change in education, civil rights, women's rights, youth rights, and environmental protection. We see that these groups found success when humility, potency, strategy, accountability, and sacrifice stepped forward and dogma, division, and fear stepped down.

If these ideas and values resonate with you, please join us in this work. We know that we do not have the sufficient time, experience, or wisdom to do this on our own.

Visit our website. Watch our 3-minute video and send the link to your friends. Join the dialogue by commenting on our blogs and "liking" us on Facebook. Check out our online resources and send us research and activities to add. Get in touch with us to volunteer or intern, and consider applying on the website to be an IDEA Organizer.

Most especially, contact us anytime with suggestions, feedback, and criticism.

We look forward to hearing from you and working with you.

Dana Bennis is co-founder and Research and Policy Director of IDEA. He can be reached at dbennis@democraticeducation.org.

Note

1. Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," excerpted from Working Paper 189, published in *Peace and Freedom*: July/August 1989. ●

Learn more about IDEA

WEBSITE: www.democraticeducation.org

VIDEO: www.bit.ly/idea-video

FACEBOOK: www.facebook.com/democraticeducation

Overcoming Fear and Moving Forward

BY KELLY COYLE DiNORCIA

Our small independent school in New Jersey has recently hosted a number of outreach events that have brought many new people into our midst – educators, grandparents, parents, children, and other members of our community. Parents, especially, frequently comment about how welcoming and appealing our space and people are, and often leave full of enthusiasm for our particular embodiment of the philosophy of holistic education. However, more often than not they ultimately select a more traditional educational setting for their children.

We often wonder why people are so full of interest after visiting us, only to later decide that our school is not a good choice for them. Parents who have a viscerally positive reaction while in our classroom go home and create a boatload of excuses as to why our school would not fulfill their children's needs. Why is this? How can we better reach potential families with our vision of filling the world with inspired children who are happy, creative, and active members of a local and global community?

This is a vital question for the future of progressive education, and I imagine it is one asked around the world by those of us seeking to grow a larger movement while sustaining our schools. I think the answer to this question lies in our willingness as a culture to abdicate responsibility for our lives and our children in a very fundamental way. (I would like to insert here a recognition of the fact that not all families are biological, and that families who are borne of adoption or other non-biological means often must jump through all manner of hoops in order to secure their rights as parents, whether they like it or not.) This begins even before children are even born, when many parents choose a physician and follow her orders without questioning them at all. Once a child is born, the pediatrician becomes the arbiter of good parenting in many ways. Parents are beholden to their doctors' advice when it comes time to choose which if any drugs they put into their children's bodies, how to ensure that the young people in their care reach developmental milestones "on time", even what detergent they use to wash an infant's clothing.

For questions that arise between well-visits to the pediatrician, parents consult any of a burgeoning number of books that can be found at bookstores or libraries. These books are granted the status of user manuals (if not religious texts) as parents use the authors' advice to guide them through the difficult, messy and exhausting terrain of living with young children. If you want sleep, leave your child to cry in his crib

for this number of minutes before going in to comfort (but not hold) him, and then leave him for this number of minutes and so on until he is quiet. A fever of this particular degree warrants a call to the doctor, and this other temperature should send you straight to the emergency room. Even clothing for young children is labeled by age, so that my two year old who is still wearing eighteen month clothing is somehow not quite right, at least according to Carter's or Gymboree or Gap Kids.

Soon it is time for the young child to begin school, and parents are faced with a decision that is often perceived to be the most momentous of all, namely how their children will be educated. In our country in particular, education is seen as preparation for adulthood and career (or at least work), so the start of a child's school years is make it or break it time. Most



Stephanie Field, Director and co-founder of Wellspring Community School in Gladstone, New Jersey with her three children, Skyler, Leah, and Keanu Mack. Photo by Parvathi Kumar.

parents, when faced with this milestone in a child's life, send their children to public school or, if they can afford it, to a traditionally-structured private school.

A growing number of parents are beginning to have niggling doubts about what is going on in American schools. Large class sizes, high-stakes testing, curriculum developed by bureaucrats rather than educators, teachers hired by their position on the pay scale rather than their qualifications, even school lunches made from highly processed government-purchased surplus rather than fresh, healthy, local ingredients – these things make many parents uncomfortable. However, these parents set aside their discomfort and send their children off to the neighborhood kindergarten anyway. Some of them are not aware of the alternatives. Some are aware but simply cannot afford the expense of a private education or do not have the option of homeschooling due to employment or other concerns. Other parents are genuinely committed to the ideal of quality free education for all children and work to improve the system from within. Some of these parents are the ones who visit progressive schools like ours, are enchanted by what they see happening there, and still choose public or conservative private schools.

By abdicating responsibility, we also free ourselves from accountability. If we send our child to school and she doesn't read "on time" or fails to achieve acceptable scores on standardized tests, then the school has failed her despite our best efforts. After all, we did what the experts told us to do.

Why? The short answer, in my opinion, is fear. By abdicating responsibility, we also free ourselves from accountability. If we do what the doctor says and things don't turn out well it's the doctor's fault, or if not the doctor then it's the medical system, or the pharmaceutical companies, or the malpractice insurance providers. In any case, the fault is definitely not ours. If we send our child to school and she doesn't read "on time" or fails to achieve acceptable scores on standardized tests, then the school has failed her despite our best efforts. After all, we did what the experts told us to do. We did our part. Once we take on the responsibility of researching our options and making our own choices, we become responsible for the outcome as well. We have no one to blame but ourselves if things turn out to be less than perfect. That scares parents.

When parents come to visit our school, they do not ask us if our students are content, or motivated, or curious. Naturally visitors do not really have to ask because they can clearly see that our students are all these things.

But the sad truth is that these are not the things parents are really concerned with anyway. They want to know when the children learn to read and write, and how they compare to their contemporaries in mathematical abilities. They want to know if their children, if educated in this way, will be able to compete with their traditionally-schooled peers when it comes time for high school or college or "life". Even parents who realize that a child's learning and potential cannot and should not be quantified still find some reassurance in assigning numbers as indicators of educational performance and possibility. They are comforted in the belief that test scores provide some useful information, as well as providing a clear, attainable goal. Eschewing statistics in favor of more esoteric things like portfolios and subjective observation takes a leap of faith. That scares parents, too.

As a parent, I can certainly relate to the fear. Of course I worry that my children may not find success and happiness. I want them to be safe, and healthy, and fulfilled. But in the words of Antoine De Saint-Exupery, "those of us who understand life couldn't care less about numbers!" As an educator I know that numbers are less a guarantee and more a security blanket. I know that doing things the way they have always been done is often a sign of stagnation rather than success. I know that children are better served in the long-term by learning about cooperation and community than conformity. Most importantly for me, as a product of the traditional school system who was considered a model student – a "gifted" student, even – I know that I have spent the entirety of my adult life trying to overcome the training I received there.

More and more parents are choosing progressive educational settings for their children, both in schools and at home. Instead of being motivated by fear of what they do not want for their children, these parents are courageously setting their sights on what they do want. It is encouraging to see the availability of educational alternatives growing, yet the original question still remains. How can we get more people to set aside the fear, step outside their comfort zone, and join us as we build a new system of education where children's bodies, minds and spirits are valued and nurtured?

In the end, when visitors to our school ask how our students compare to traditionally-schooled children, the true answer is that we really do not know. Insofar as we reject the quantification of children's essential qualities, we may never be able to answer this question to anyone's satisfaction since the evidence we offer is anecdotal. Yet on the other hand, the very fact that the traditionally-schooled individual is held up as the benchmark against whom alternatively schooled children are measured is based on a rather bold assumption that the predominant system for schooling children is effective. In our rapidly changing world, no one can say with any degree of certainty that any system of education will adequately prepare young people to be adult members of society in ten or twenty years. No one even knows what that means; much less does anyone know how to prepare children for it. We are all taking a huge leap of faith when it comes to raising and teaching our children,

albeit some of us with a greater sense of security (false or otherwise) than others.

I wish that there were some easy answer whereby we could quickly grow a broad and strong progressive education movement based on respecting children and equipping them

The very fact that the traditionally-schooled individual is held up as the benchmark against whom alternatively schooled children are measured is based on a rather bold assumption that the predominant system for schooling children is effective.

with self-confidence, curiosity, problem-solving skills and a deeply-ingrained sense of community. I believe that such a system of education will benefit not only my own children but the entire Earth and all her inhabitants. I am grateful that our movement is gaining traction and momentum, even if

this is happening at a slower pace than I would like.

We must continue to grow a movement for progressive educational alternatives by seeking out educational communities that speak to us as parents, educators and individuals while recognizing that this means something different for each child and family. We must support all manner and type of alternatives, because freedom is only meaningful when options exist. We can spread the word within our circle of friends, family and acquaintances about the choices we make and the reasons behind these choices. We should make use of the tools of social media to reach an even wider audience with our ideas. The people who share our vision will find us, and we will continue to grow as a grassroots movement of people seeking a stronger, more sustainable future for our children and our planet. As Krishnamurti says, true revolution “comes about through cultivating the integration and intelligence of human beings who, by their very life, will gradually create radical changes in society,” and we must continue to cultivate our young children to bring about change.

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Educating the Whole Child

Why Nurturing the Spirit Matters

BY CATHLEEN HASKINS



Third year students at the end of the school year. These children had been together for three years. They knew each other intimately, and had formed deep bonds and strong relationships.

Readers of this publication need not be convinced that most schools are inherently malfunctioning and our children are suffering because of it. They do not need to be told of the misguided notions upon which schools are structured and the lifelong harmful effects waged on children and society in terms of distressed, dispirited lives and unclaimed human potential.

Our schools do not function for two reasons: the basic structure (reminiscent of the early twentieth century factory model) of mass production, and the theory of *tabula rasa*, in which the child is viewed as a blank slate, still reign. “Students of child development know that these ideas are obsolete,” writes Angeline Lillard in *Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius*, “but they continue to have a profound impact on how schooling is done. The persistence of these outmoded ideas explains why so few children really flour-

ish in school and why so many strongly prefer snow days to school days.”¹

Both the factory model and *tabula rasa* are, when dealing with human lives, fatally flawed ideas, of course, and the combination in practice preys upon the spiritual nature of our children. The blank slate theory is overtly oppressive and authoritarian, filled with arrogance and ignorance. It steals self-confidence, eats away at enthusiasm for learning, and encourages students to be dependent on external sources, rather than cultivating self-reliance. There is no attempt to help children discover the resource tools that lie within themselves. The factory model ignores the true needs of the individual, granting few freedoms and limiting liberties. The force feeding we insist upon, the rewards we think must be doled out, the rigid schedule, the fragmented work periods—all are acts of disrespect paid to human beings deemed too young to be respected.

American journalist, peace advocate, and former editor of the *Saturday Review*, Norman Cousins once said, “The purpose of education is to develop to the fullest that which is inside us.”² Few persons would argue with his comment as an ideological statement. Unfortunately, schools are too busy pushing facts, figures, and testing material into the minds of children; there is no curriculum or class time for imparting tools with which a child can contemplate their own infinite potential. We fail in education to introduce the resources of the inner self, thereby leaving students with a distorted depiction of the self as solely intellect, a devastatingly limited view of humanity. Cousins also remarked, “Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside of us while we live.”³ We are burying human potential, for when the spirit is neglected, all elements of reasoning suffers.

It’s worth noting that established Montessori and Waldorf schools are alternative models for learning that strike a balance in addressing both the intellectual and spiritual needs of the child. In classrooms that successfully incorporate the essential ideas of their founders, Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner, one finds the child regarded as more than an intellect within a body. Montessori, nearly one hundred years ago asserted that human beings are born “spiritual embryos” whose protection and cultivation should be entrusted to the realm of education.⁴ Waldorf education “encourages the development of each child’s sense of truth, beauty, and goodness, and provides an antidote to violence, alienation, and cynicism... Through these experiences, Waldorf students cultivate a lifelong love of learning as well as

the intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual capacities to be individuals certain of their paths and to be of service to the world.”⁵

What does a classroom look like when the spirit of the child is given as much attention as the intellect? I suggest that such a classroom would embrace the following:

Freedom to:

- Choose meaningful activity
- Learn in a self-directed manner
- Move about naturally

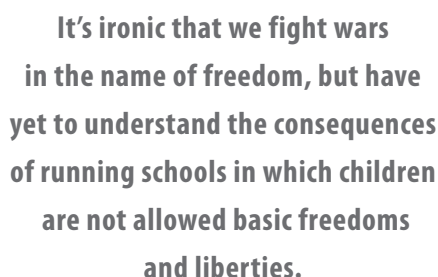
Activities that cultivate a peaceful inner spirit, including:

- Experiences in stillness and silence
- Experiences in mindful awareness and presence
- Activities that stimulate attitudes of gratitude
- A connection with nature

A beautiful physical space

FREEDOM

A visit to a well-run Montessori school offers plenty of proof that even preschool age children are able to choose their activities within a carefully (some might say meticulously) prepared setting. This is a fundamental underpinning of a classroom in which children are granted freedom and tremendous time and effort must be channeled into creating an environment that genuinely meets the needs of the children and supports them as they learn to balance liberty with responsibility. It's ironic that we fight wars in the name of freedom, but have yet to understand the consequences of running schools in which children are not allowed basic freedoms and liberties.



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Whole class instruction may occasionally be a good choice, but it is straight from the old factory model of efficiency, which by the way, supports preparing-for-the-tests teaching. Children who are empowered to be responsible for their own learning are empowered for life, bringing authenticity to the rhetorical mission statement we see in print but rarely in educational practice: “helping students to become lifelong learners.” When students at a young age are granted

the freedom to choose what to work on, when to work on it, and how long to work on a given project or task, they develop a passion for learning.

When I was teaching in a public Montessori program, a (traditional) 2nd grade teaching position opened up in a little country school around the corner from my home. The thought of teaching in a neighborhood school and being able to walk to work was compelling. That is, until I stopped by to pick up an application, walked the halls, and peeked into the classroom for which the position was posted. Seeing 25 wooden desks, rigidly positioned in rows and nearly filling the room, I felt close to being sick. The thought crossed my mind right then that I could never teach again in a system that locked children in, both physically and spiritually. Spiritually nourishing spaces allow students to move about naturally and with experience they learn to move with purpose, grace, and courtesy.

ACTIVITIES THAT CULTIVATE A PEACEFUL INNER SPIRIT

Young children today are bombarded with a deluge of daily activity lacking private moments and infiltrated with adult oversight. Their school days are sliced into fragmented periods of learning and they are rushed from one after school activity to another, hurriedly shuttled off to summer classes, daycare, and camps when they could be reading on a blanket under a tree, gazing out a window, or sitting by a stream noticing pebbles, twigs, tadpoles or the movement of the water. For these children, the slow, easy freedoms of childhood barely exist. They have been denied, by adults who have lost their own way in this noisy world, the tools of quiet, solitude, and contemplation.

Exercises in stillness and silence, the practice of mindful awareness and presence, the development of gratitude and appreciation and outdoor activities that help children experience nature's peaceful energy, provide an inner toolbox of resources which promote self awareness, lowers stress, improves, impulse control, develop concentration, and increase compassion. Inward experiences give the child access to his inner self, which he can learn is a place of wisdom, authentic power, and creativity.

BEAUTY IN THE CLASSROOM

We need beauty because it soothes the soul. It causes us to gasp, to pause in awe, and to feel eternally grateful. Yet we seem not to have made the connection between learning environments and beauty, for early childhood classrooms of today are certainly lacking in aesthetics, dominated by bright primary colors and animated posters plastering walls. The preschool spaces are overwhelmed with bold color and plastic. What beauty is found in plastic? Here again, I refer the reader to Montessori or Waldorf classrooms in which beauty is an essential component, and classroom materials are designed to be beautiful in ways that invites the child to explore the material and to encourage care and respect. In caring for the spirit of the child, we must strive to create spaces for them that are filled with art, plants, and objects made from natural materials.



Children from the author's class delivering decorated baskets filled with Christmas cookies (baked from scratch), small gifts, and cards, all of which were made during class time. They were bringing them to (unsuspecting) neighbors who lived near the school.

CONCLUSION

If education is to affirm and support the unfolding of the individual potential of each child, the current paradigm must be transformed beginning with the earliest educational experiences. The present practice of authoritarian rule over children and young people without regard for protection of the inner spirit has had more than a century to prove its validity, and it has failed miserably. We have paid a high cost in terms of lost potential and diminished spirit; we must now seek a more ethical and holistic pedagogy for supporting human growth. As dedicated, passionate reformers move forward in their relentless efforts to eradicate a failed education system, let them remember the child as a whole human being who will bestow unforeseen gifts to the world when she is granted freedom to choose, to move, and to direct her own learning. When the educational environment is structured to embrace this kind of freedom, when it is rich with purposeful activities and material to satisfy the inherent thirst for understanding, when there is beauty to feed the soul, and when the inner spirit is well-tended, the child will reveal her true potential and will bear witness to the beginning of a universal transformation of humanity.

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Blogging for the People

Using Digital Media Tools to Cross Borders

BY ROB WILLIAMS

As a media literacy consultant, historian, and classroom educator for two decades, I am always trying to figure out how to balance so-called F2F (face-to-face) education – my weekly interactions with students in our classroom – with new media tools. Those of us who’ve been teaching a while may remember the days of filmstrips, textbooks, VCR video tapes, and even (for the wisest among us) mimeograph machines. The 21st century, of course, has ushered in a bewildering variety of “new media” communication tools collectively referred to as “Web 2.0 social media,” a term which describes the emerging web-iverse of personalized, networked, participatory digital media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Blogger, and YouTube are among the most well known.

Why should educators even consider using blogging, Facebook, or YouTube with our students in the classroom? Simply summarized, new Web 2.0 social media tools allow students to engage in cross-cultural conversations and projects in both F2F (face-to-face) and online settings, a potentially powerful blending of educational arenas simply not possible even just a few years ago. The most effective use of social media tools, as Clay Shirky points out in his widely-cited book *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, results from a fusion of the technological and the social. “There is no [single] recipe for the successful use of social media tools,” Shirky explains. “Instead, every working system is a mix of social and technological factors.”

In other words, new media technologies like blogging can complement, reinforce and support more traditional face-to-face learning experiences, but only if teachers and students thoughtfully consider how to blend the technological and social in ways that make good pedagogical sense.

Having been a classroom teacher for twenty years, I am well aware that many thoughtful educators rightly regard any heavily-hyped new digital media technology with skepticism. On even numbered days, I am among them. But I also recognize the reality that for most of my students, new social media tools are increasingly becoming an important part of their lives.

During the past few years, I’ve begun asking how educators might best fuse these social media tools with our own pedagogical and professional goals, driven, in no small measure, by the interests, questions and conclusions of my own students themselves. “Web 2.0 social media represents the future of democracy, and the future of information globally,” stated one of my brightest high schoolers in a recent blog post. “Learning how to use Web 2.0 social media tools prepares us to be more active individuals as this media revolution unfolds.”

“Web 2.0 social media represents the future of democracy, and the future of information globally,” stated one of my brightest high schoolers in a recent blog post. “Learning how to use Web 2.0 social media tools prepares us to be more active individuals as this media revolution unfolds.”

This may seem like an exaggerated claim by an open-eyed if somewhat idealistic student. After all, how can “social/digital media” – from the Googleverse on down – actually reinforce or support “democracy”? The answer lies in thoughtful social media pedagogy, fused with real face-to-face learning, if possible.

Many educators and media scholars such as *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* author Robert McChesney assert that for “democracy” as a political system to exist, a “democratic” society must have a free, vibrant and open media culture marked by equal access to journalism outlets, a diversity of voices (rich and poor, black and white, old and young, male and female) and a wide range of expressed opinion on important issues of the day.

In the United States, where the vast majority of our traditional mass media outlets are owned and operated by large for-profit commercially-focused corporations with “nothing to tell and everything to sell” (to quote George Gerbner), new digital media technologies help level the playing field, providing students with new authorship opportunities, and a chance to raise their voice in the service of their learning – about themselves, about the texts and experiences we as their teachers believe are important to their development, and about the larger 21st century world around them.

For more on the DOTCOM project, see

<http://dotcomprojectharmonyinternational.blogspot.com/>

or

www.youtube.com/phdotcom2010

The foundation in fusing democratic practice with new digital media is the use of “blogs.” A “blog” is shorthand for “web log,” a free multimedia online platform that gives any student with access to a computer and an Internet connection easy access to the explosion of articles, photos, music, and videos on the web. What makes blogs so democratic? A blog is free and simple to create, easy to edit and update, and provides an information-rich multimedia learning platform that is easily networked with other blogs to create participatory multi-way conversational and reflective platforms. Most importantly, blogs provide students with what I call “authorship ability,” allowing them an almost unlimited opportunity to analyze texts, synthesize projects, and reflect on their learning. Finally, blogs can be rendered as private or as public as the author and/or teacher requires, as well as providing public and visible accountability for any classroom learning experience.

During the past two years, I was granted a unique opportunity to push some educational boundaries using new social media tools with veteran Vermont-based non-profit PH International’s DOTCOM program. Funded by the Educational and Cultural Affairs branch of the U.S. State Department, DOTCOM stands for “Developing Online Tools for Civic Outreach and Mobilization.” Our DOTCOM cross-cultural teaching team recruited 30 students – 10 each from 3 countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the United States) – to participate in our 16 month program, a pilot project that combined new, free, universally accessible social media tools with 2 face-to-face cross-cultural visits to the United States

and the Caucasus (Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia), marked by immersive “host family” stays, educational touring, and visits to famous historical, religious and cultural sites, schools, and media organizations.

In January 2009, we formally launched DOTCOM. None of our thirty students had ever met one another before, so we created shared online YouTube, Netvibes, Facebook, and Twitter platforms, and asked our students to create and personalize individual blogs. At our blog platforms, we introduced ourselves online by building “Knowledge Trees” – describing our families, our communities, and what we valued in our lives. Once we shared our Knowledge Trees with one another, each of us created personal media inventories, where we constructed detailed “media maps” of our favorite books, magazines, newspapers, games, films, and music – and why we enjoyed each media experience.

We asked the participants to introduce themselves to the group by shooting, editing, and uploading a creative and fun “90 second introductory video” using a simple digital video camera. By first “meeting” each other online as DOTCOM’ers, our students were able to use their individual blogs to learn about one another from afar, and find common connections among their varied interests. Such an approach is vital in a shared global media culture marked by ethnic, religious and political tension. Azerbaijan and Armenia, for example, are two countries with borders closed to one another, having both emerged from Soviet control as independent republics in the early 1990s, only to fight for control over a contested region of land – the Nagorno-Karabakh region of the Caucasus.

July 2009 saw us all gather together in the United States (Washington, D.C. and Vermont) for our first of two cross-cultural exchanges, complete with immersive host family stays, and, in groups of three, we completed our three week digital video REEL ACTION collaborative film projects, with “globalocal” topics as diverse as Peak Oil, human rights, stereotyping, media ownership, and climate change. In the Caucasus region, because Azerbaijan and Armenia are two countries at odds with one another, we found that getting these two groups of students in the same room together, let alone working with one another, proved provocative, challenging, and ultimately, a learning experience for all, even after our months of online social media conversations. As the mediating “third party” at the table, our American students helped broker conversations, find consensus, establish common ground, and provide laughter and a sense of perspective for all involved.

After early fall blog reflections on our intense DOTCOM summer together, and continued Web 2.0 dialogue, we launched a second digital video project within each of our three countries, called MOBILE EYES, designed to leverage the emerging media mojo of shared “smart phone” technology, and to test our thirty DOTCOM students to see if they could plan and produce Web 2.0 projects on their own in their own communities. Finally, we embarked on our second of two cross-cultural exchanges – traveling to the Caucasus region (Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia), where we launched a final digital video project asking DOTCOM students to produce and upload a short film reflecting on their experi-



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– Judith Harris, Ass. Professor, University of Winnipeg, Canada

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– Ilene Val-Essen, Author, Culver City, CA



Americans Jacob Rasch (left) and David Sackstein (center) visit with Armenian Shahan Mailyan in Armenia's capital city, Yerevan, this past spring.

ence, what they learned, and how DOTCOM changed their outlook (if at all) on the world and their place in it.

Our DOTCOM results were promising. All thirty of our students are now adept at blogging, and producing and distributing digital videos. They can now go and teach these storytelling skills in their communities. And certainly, the students in all three countries have a deeper appreciation for and understanding of the power of media to shape their understandings of the world.

Maybe the most powerful pedagogical result, however, is the most difficult to measure: increased cross-cultural conversation among students conditioned to see their neighbors as the Other. Indeed, if there is to be greater understanding and potential peace between the citizens of Azerbaijan and Armenia (or any two nations or groups currently at odds), then social media, properly applied, can support this. As Armenian DOTCOM'er Sona observed: "Just because the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict exists, doesn't mean we can't have Azeri friends."

But like all media experiences, the use of social media and a program like DOTCOM can be a double-edged sword. "When I meet the Other face-to-face, I see how fragile he is, and I know that I can harm them," stated one DOTCOM student in an "offline" private email exchange. Another student finished her blogging on a more optimistic note. "DOTCOM has taught me that there is no one objective reality," summed up Danielle, one of our U.S. DOTCOM participants. "This is an important lesson – and I find myself

pondering other people's perspectives from other cultures."

"I think the greatest form of social media is face to face communication," one DOTCOM student joked. Indeed, if we could instantly be transported anywhere in the world to learn about another culture's history, politics, science, religion or daily folkways, we might come to better understandings of the world's complexity. In the meantime, however, at this unique historical moment for 21st century education, media tools may offer some our best opportunities to connect with other cultures. Our hope is that our DOTCOM pilot program offered some insights into how educators might harness the power of new digital communications tools for meaningful educational work, blending the "social" and the "technological," as Clay Shirky suggests, in new ways.

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News Reports

COMPILED BY CAROL MORLEY

National

Dumbing Down? Move Toward Ed Standards Has Problems, *EducationNews.org*: The Pioneer Institute has recently published a report critical of the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI). The CCSSI are a national unified set of reading and math standards. These standards must be adopted by states in order to receive funding from the Obama administration's Race to the Top program. The paper reports "how a lack of public input, poor writing, misconceptions and outright errors have plagued the work of the Common Core State Standards Initiative." The report, "Why Race to the Middle?" warns that CCSSI's standards are "far below the admission requirements of almost all state colleges and universities in this country." The paper finds fault with the development to date of national standards that are both "incomplete and demonstrably subpar."

No Magic Bullet for Education, *LA Times Opinion*: "If there's a single aspect of schooling that ought to end, it's the decades of abrupt and destructive swings from one extreme to another. There is no magic in the magic-bullet approach to learning." Not in phonics for reading, not in unschooling, not in whole language instruction, not in back-to-basics, not in holding students/teachers/parents/schools liable for failure, and not in the latest trend in education: teacher evaluations. This latest development has students' standardized test results counting for up to 50% or more of teachers' evaluations. "Standardized tests have their uses ... [They] were never designed to be the determinant of a teacher's mettle. The creators of these tests have repeatedly warned against using the results for more than they were intended, but that has stopped no one from hopping on the latest educational bandwagon." Meaningful reforms in education will not come from using test scores heavily to judge teachers. "This country's tendency to see education reform in simplistic terms is what got us into eight years of trouble under the No Child Left Behind Act. Schools switched overnight from protecting teachers from any accountability for student progress to putting the entire burden on their shoulders, as though they could and should singlehandedly overcome uninvolved parents, troubled neighborhoods and indifferent students."

Obama's Vision for Education, Daniel Willingham, *Washington Post*: In spite of some positives to be found in Obama's revision of the nation's education law – broader accountability, school evaluations based on their ability to improve outcomes – there is not much to be excited about concerning the changes, as they are built on the flawed No Child Left Behind. NCLB failed in its aims because it "mandated improvement without guidance

as to how to make things better." Under NCLB, teachers became accountable for students' performance and began to "game the system to make it appear that kids were learning." The new regulations do essentially the same thing – a lot of "what's" but very few "how's," except to make "someone else take on the job if it's being done poorly. For failing schools, fire the principal and rehire some teachers, or turn it into a charter school. If schools can't close the achievement gap, the state is to take over the school's Title I funding. States have greater flexibility in how to intervene in troubled schools, which many see as positive. Again, this assumes that states know what to do. These interventions are reserved for the bottom 5 percent of schools, so the lowest performing schools will, as in the days of No Child Left Behind, focus on ways to game the system. We will not have a race to the top. We will have a scramble from the bottom."

School's Out, But Should it Be? Jeremy P. Meyer, *The Denver Post*: U.S. Education Secretary, Arne Duncan, and many other reformers, are pushing to increase the length of the school year, or to "at least provide students with year-round academic enrichment to prevent 'the summer slide'" in order to "level the playing field" with "competitive countries that send students 20 or 30 days longer." According to the National Summer Learning Association, students fall behind two to three months during the summer, the biggest losses occurring in low-income children. A bill coming up for a vote before Congress will allocate \$23 billion in emergency education funding, including summer programs.

Less Testing, More Learning, Lisa Guisbond and Monty Neill, *WashingtonPost.com*: FairTest believes that the current administration's education reform measures reveal a "failure to learn from No Child Left Behind's many ... big mistakes." On the positive side, "it's good to see that Obama has finally ditched the preposterous demand that all students make 'adequate yearly progress' toward 100% 'proficiency' on state tests by 2014." However, the law still makes standardized testing its focus. If one of the "less is more" testing approach programs were adopted, such as those proposed by the Joint Organizational Statement (www.fairtest.org/node/30) and the Forum on Educational Accountability (www.edaccountability.org), NCLB could be greatly improved. "In a nutshell, the feds should help states develop systems that build on the assessments teachers already do, ensure the quality is good and reasonably comparable across the state, and then use statewide tests as an occasional supplement. That will enable teachers to go back to teaching, not running test prep programs."

International

INDIA

Outsourcing Homework to India, Saritha Rai, *Global Post*:

The 1500 tutors of TutorVista, an Indian company, provide unlimited help to students from the United States and elsewhere for \$99 a month. There are several companies in India offering the service, and most operate like call centers. TutorVista, however, is now extending their job opportunities to coaches who work out of their homes. The company tutors about 3500 students a day, including up to 2500 from the United States. “The economic downturn has pushed education to the top of the average American family’s monthly household budget,” said Krishnan Ganesh, CEO and founder of TutorVista. “More Americans feel that education is their only safety anchor, the only thing that can help them stay competitive in this world.”

CAMBODIA

Cambodia’s Impoverished Education System, Bill Costello,

EducationNews.org: Since the fall of the Khmer Rouge government in 1979, Cambodia has been attempting to rebuild its education system. But teacher salaries are so woefully low that many teachers must take on second jobs in order to survive. This means that they have less time for school-related duties, and some of them also charge their pupils for class attendance. This in turn means that poorer students are shut out of the system, and often drop out of school. Cambodia spends just 1.6% of its GDP on education, far below other countries. While most of the rest of Asia is now experiencing rising standards of living and quality of education, “Cambodia is being left behind, largely because its education system is unable to produce a skilled workforce. To join the regional and international economies, Cambodia needs to significantly increase its budget for education. Until education becomes a top priority and teachers earn a decent wage, the Cambodian government will continue to deny its citizens the opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to contribute meaningfully to the economy.”

UNITED KINGDOM

Climbing Trees and Snowball Fights ‘Should be Encouraged by Schools,’ Graeme Paton, *Telegraph.co.uk*:

Graham Gorton, headmaster of Howe Green House School and chairman of the Independent Schools Association, says that schools have become so cautious and restrictive of student activities that the children’s “confidence and independence is being eroded.” He calls for schools to return to a “common sense approach” to inspire kids’ “self awareness and sense of adventure.” Play England agrees; they say that children’s lives have become “much more restricted and controlled” than ever before, in part no doubt because of an increase in lawsuits filed against schools where accidents have occurred. Mr. Gorton says that banning climbing trees and snowball fights robs children of “valuable and special childhood occasions and memories,” inhibits children from thinking for themselves, developing independence, and making “inspired choices.” Anthony Thomas, chairman of the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom, says, “You are seeing a decline in youngsters actually using parks and playgrounds.

We are becoming entombed in our homes. Part of it is about security – parents worried about youngsters – and part of it is about the inclination of youngsters themselves.”

A fifth of children have no idea where they live – because they no longer walk to school, Tamara Cohen, *dailymail.co.uk*:

Thousands of children have no idea where they live because they no longer walk to school. Being ferried around in the car by their parents has destroyed their local awareness and knowledge, a survey has found. Three-quarters of primary school children in South-East England could not give their postcode, and a fifth did not know their home address. When asked what they could see during their journey to school, the majority could not identify landmarks, instead picking up on houses and trees. Some 22 per cent of children in Bristol and 21 per cent in Newcastle did not know their postcode. In both cases, a little more than half walked to school. In England, vehicle usage peaked in the South-East where 48 per cent of primary school children are driven each day. The highest car usage is in Wales, where 57 per cent of youngsters are driven and one in five could not identify the route from home to school. Just 61 per cent of Welsh school children knew their home address. In London where driving is less common, schoolchildren were the most savvy about their local area. More than three-quarters (76 per cent) walked to school each day, 86 per cent knew their home address and 61 per cent could say their postcode. Steve Kitson, of Kia Motors UK, which commissioned the survey of 2,000 primary schoolchildren, said: ‘Just like a proper breakfast, walking to school is a great way for children to start the day. ‘Not only are they more alert when they arrive at school, it is good exercise and improves children’s awareness of their local area. ‘More than three-quarters of British kids (78 per cent) live within two miles of their school, so there’s every reason for parents and children to ditch unnecessary car journeys and travel to school on foot.’

School Children Registered for Home Education Trebles,

Niall Murray, *IrishExaminer.com*: Home education is very much on the rise in Ireland. In 2004 there were 138 children being homeschooled. By the end of 2008, there were 439 children. By the first quarter of 2010, there were 661. The figures are compiled by the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB), which is tasked with seeing that all school-age children (6 to 16) are getting a minimal education, and assesses families who are homeschooling their children. “Plans are being made to start visiting previously assessed families in the next year ... While there is no obligation to follow the curriculum taught in the country’s 4,000 primary and second level schools, assessors must be satisfied that literacy, language and numeracy skills are being learned. The NEWB does not require the same kind of daily teaching structure or for parents to follow the school calendar, but many families choose to prepare children for the Junior Certificate or Leaving Certificate or similar state exams for other countries.” ●



Book Reviews

BY RON MILLER

Three recent, self-published works by respected elders in the educational alternatives movement.

Making an Extraordinary School: The Work of Ordinary People

By Len Solo
Baltimore: PublishAmerica, 2010
www.publishamerica.com

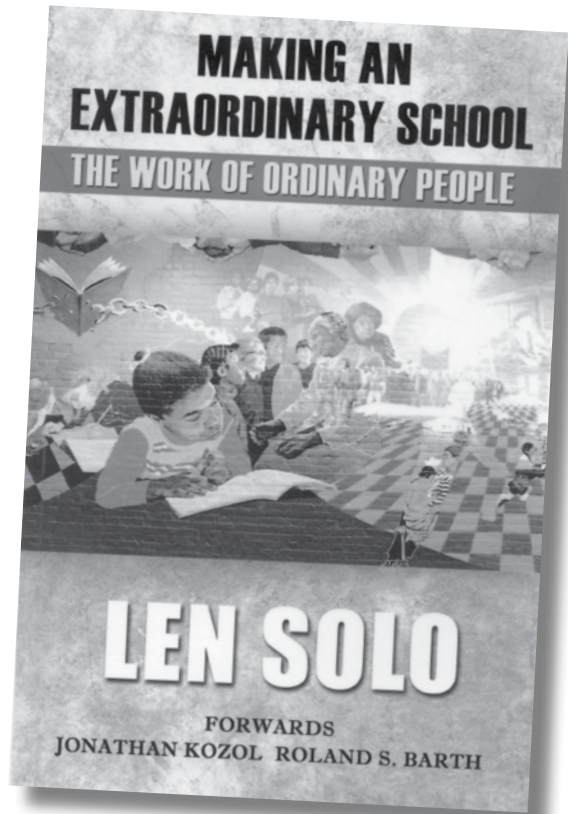
Graham & Parks School is a highly successful public alternative school in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Len Solo was its principal from 1974 to 2001, and in this new book, he tells its story in intimate detail. He recounts the educational idealism, political struggles, and community involvement that sustained a dynamic urban school over the course of a generation. It is remarkable that a publicly funded learner-focused school founded during the resurgence of progressivism that came out of the 1960s has survived the long reactionary period that followed. Solo's leadership, and the determination of staff members and parents that he describes, made this survival possible. There are many lessons here for education activists both within and outside the public school system.

One of these lessons is the school community's commitment to democracy. Their mission statement boldly declared where they stood:

We believe in building a learning community. For us, community is the quality of people's lives as they live and work together and the responsibility they take for making and keeping a place going and growing. It involves a shared philosophy, yet encompasses the need for diversity and heterogeneity. It involves bringing this diversity together in organized, democratic ways so that participants decide how they live and work together. (p. 23).

This aim could hardly be put more clearly or succinctly, and rarely has. Throughout the book, Solo recalls incidents, processes and decisions that demonstrate the day-to-day practice of democracy at Graham & Parks and how it evolved over many years. One key to this practice, as Solo emphasizes, is *flexibility*—an experimental rather than ideological attitude. The school community tried various arrangements and methods, and carefully reflected on their success. This is the very essence of Deweyan pedagogy, which Solo (who is also a published poet) again expresses succinctly:

No one knows truly how a child learns, and so no one really knows how a teacher should teach or a school must function. Educational beliefs, like scientific truths, are guesses and arguments, stabs at understanding reality, not certainties. (p. 20).



Later Solo comments that community “has to be made on a daily basis through the interactions of the students and the staff” (pp. 95-6). Graham & Parks is an evolving, organic learning environment, and this is the key to its success.

Another lesson we glean from this book is how a successful school supports the members of its community. Solo's administration respected teachers and encouraged their ingenuity, judgment, and growth. And the school established a Student Support Team—a diverse group of staff members—to help families and kids in distress. No one is assigned an impersonal role and evaluated on one's performance of it; instead, everyone is treated as a whole person, with a unique blend of strengths and challenges, needs and desires, life histories and personal goals. A democratic learning community nourishes people; it doesn't attempt to harness them to purposes foreign to their lives.

Solo's story is relevant, too, for activists contemplating strategies for educational change. Solo emphasizes the importance of making good education accessible to all, and he celebrates his school's embrace of diverse and marginalized populations, including the local Haitian community.

Still, he acknowledges that maintaining progressive ideals is exceedingly difficult within the politics of public schooling. He recounts the fierce advocacy he and his community had to practice, and admits that “more often than not. . . I had to build a fence around the school to protect it from the school system” (p. 134). The story of Graham & Parks shows us that it is *possible* to establish a democratic oasis amidst the desert of public schooling, but also that it takes exhausting persistence and political engagement. Solo and his troops emerge from this story as heroes, but all education activists should not be expected to wage the constant battles that are necessary to maintain such oases.

Making an Extraordinary School is a welcome addition to the literature on educational alternatives. It tells an important story and reveals many insights. In some ways the book could have been even better. While there are flashes of brilliance, such as those quoted here, the book as a whole has been patched together from essays published previously, and from the writings of teachers at the school and other documents. Solo could have integrated these materials more carefully, and provided a stronger organizing context for the book. There are intriguing photos showing Solo with Rosa Parks (for whom the school was partly named) and Edward Kennedy, which suggest that the school had wider social and political meanings that the book did not adequately explore. Solo himself played a key role in the free school movement of the 1960s, as the organizer of the Teacher Dropout Center, a vital networking hub—yet he neglects that historical setting of the founding of Graham & Parks. Maybe he’s saving that narrative for another book. I hope so.

***Educating for Human Greatness* (Expanded Second Edition)**

By Lynn Stoddard

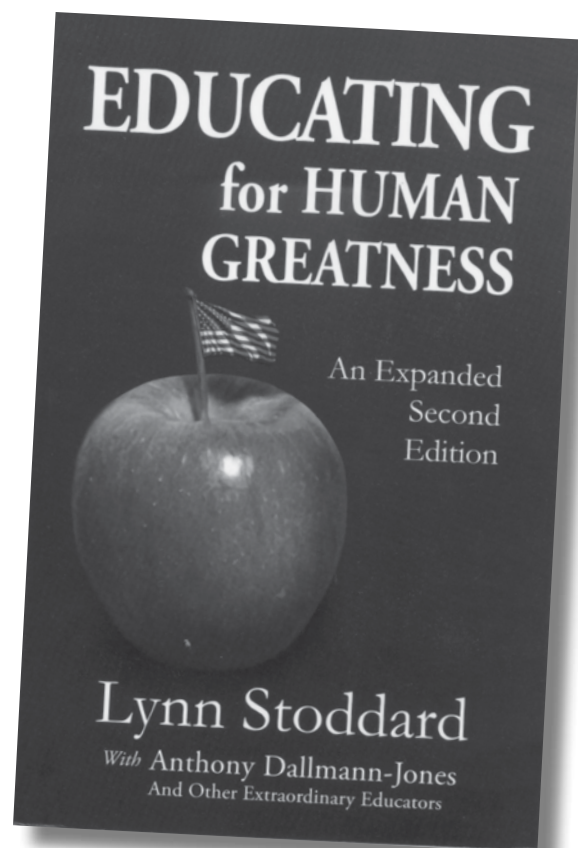
Sarasota, FL: Peppertree Press, 2010

www.peppertreepublishing.com

Lynn Stoddard was a public school principal in Utah in the 1970s, who decided to consult with the parents in his community about their priorities in the education of their children. Stoddard was not a radical activist, and his town was not Berkeley or Boulder, but his simple and sincere interest in his constituency revealed an amazing discovery:

First, parents wanted us to respect children as individuals. . . and help youngsters develop their unique talents and abilities. Second, they wanted children to increase in curiosity and passion for knowledge. . . Third, parents wanted teachers to help children learn how to express themselves, communicate and get along” (p. 2).

Stoddard called these three educational goals Identity, Inquiry, and Interaction, and recognized that to honor them, schools would need to dethrone “curriculum” as the consuming end of education. Independently of the progressive activism of the time, he began to develop an “education for human greatness” that closely paralleled the aims of more radical alternative educators. However, when the standards and testing movement



took shape in the 1980s, Stoddard’s common sense approach was left behind, and he has spent the past thirty years seeking allies to promote a more person-centered education. He published *Redesigning Education: A Guide for Developing Human Greatness* in 1991, and then the first edition of *Educating for Human Greatness* in 2003. When it went out of print, a group of Stoddard’s colleagues and admirers who attended his talk at the 2009 AERO conference got together to sponsor the publication of this new edition. This is a book that was published by popular demand!

The original three goals have been expanded into seven, and Stoddard describes the principles for attaining them. Drawing on his extensive experience and clear vision, Stoddard illustrates how educators can nurture diversity, draw forth human potential, invite inquiry, develop community, and otherwise support the cultivation of “great human beings” who contribute to society. He shows that schools can work with, rather than against, young people’s natural proclivity to learn and participate in community.

Stoddard writes in a modest, understated voice. *Educating for Human Greatness* is a radical challenge to conventional schooling, but its critique is respectful and disarming. For Stoddard, the whole thrust of public policy in education is wrong; standardization damages students’ learning and discourages teachers. But rather than condemn policymakers or the technocratic system (as I, for one, have frequently done), Stoddard brings the reader into classrooms, into children’s lives in school, and expects that their experience speaks for itself. “The solution seems obvious,” he says. “Provide opportunities for teachers to make curriculum fit the needs of students” (p. 36).

Stoddard gently observes that “strong traditions” keep schools locked into their dysfunctional and counterproductive ways, and he proposes that we replace them with “more beneficial traditions.” Of course, if it were this easy, education would have been transformed decades ago. There certainly are cultural, political, and systemic obstacles that stifle new approaches, no matter how beneficial. But Stoddard’s challenge can stir the conscience of many teachers, school board members, and possibly some decision makers higher up the line. What argument can there be against assertions as obvious and sensible as this one:

All of us were born curious. We want to find personal meaning in our lives. The problem with a standardized curriculum is that when we are asked to learn other people’s knowledge, our curiosity shuts down and we are not engaged, except perhaps to learn enough to pass the test (pp. 86-7).

The group of Lynn Stoddard fans who made sure that *Educating for Human Greatness* would remain in print are convinced that this book can touch the hearts and change the minds of many in the educational world.

Turning the Titanic: Forty Years of Living In School and Community

Edited by Mary Leue

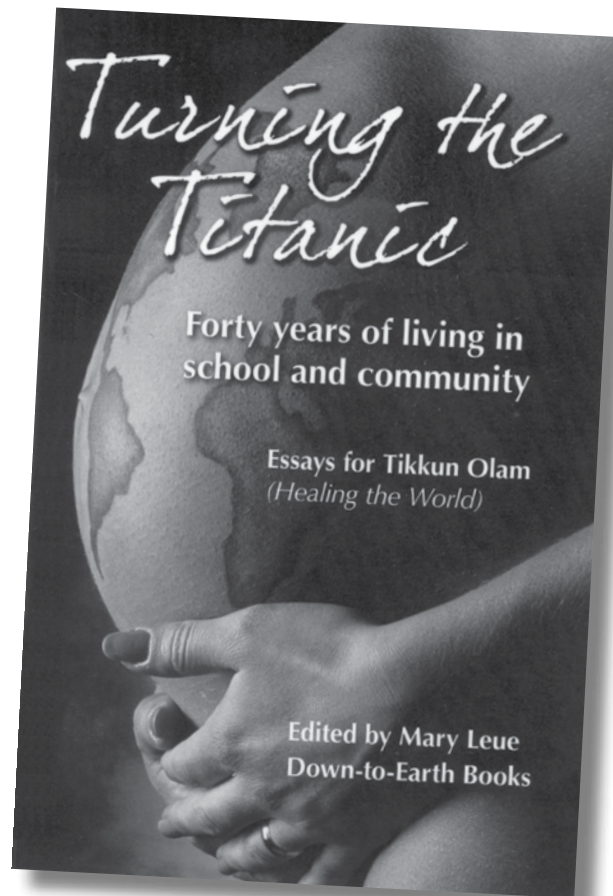
Ashfield, MA: Down-to-Earth Books, 2010

www.spinninglobe.net/dtepub.htm

Like an artist putting on a retrospective showing of work from a long and productive career, Mary Leue has pulled together diverse writings by herself and comrades Chris and Betsy Mercogliano and Nat Needle that document their remarkable exploration of education, community and democracy through four turbulent decades. This is a delightfully quirky and engaging collection of ideas and experiences, ranging freely over numerous topics. The writings are organized chronologically, but again like an art exhibition, each piece tells its own story, and what holds them all together is the genius of a creative visionary.

Mary Leue has been a countercultural leader since she founded the Albany Free School in 1969. It was a place, a community, for questioning the basic practices of modern American culture, not only education but childbirth, nutrition, race and class privilege, consumerism, and human relations. Mary wrote frequently and passionately about her search for a more natural, democratic, and fulfilling way of living. She integrated ideas from many sources, particularly radical psychologists and social critics. Many of her best writings are brought back to life in this volume.

Chris Mercogliano came to the Free School community as a young seeker, and worked closely with Mary for decades. He developed his own powerful voice as well, writing essays and books that gracefully, poignantly go the heart of basic questions about learning, child development, and community. His wife Betsy taught at the school for years, then became a midwife and activist. Nat Needle taught in other democratic



schools and has reflected deeply on his own path of learning.

Some of the selections in this book describe magical moments in the life of the Free School, while others explore questions of psychological wholeness and integrity, the learning process, fear, aging, family, and flaws in the American dream. The writers meditate on ideas from Plato, Kropotkin, Jane Addams, Wilhelm Reich and A.S. Neill (among others), and discuss the influence of their contemporaries including Ivan Illich and Jonathan Kozol. These are dissident voices, but they are not alone.

The attitude these writers take toward the big issues that concern them is well captured in Mary’s comment that “I have come to believe that it is impossible to think of ‘education’ in the abstract. For me, it has to do with people—pupils, teachers, parents. And these folks come in all sizes and flavors” (p. 97). The stories and essays collected here are all deeply grounded in a personal, existential search for wholeness and meaning. The writings are more autobiographical than ideological. The authors wrestle with big questions and invite all of us, no matter what sizes and flavors, to engage in this search for ourselves. They do not pretend to have found all the answers. Isn’t that the very essence of what is called “democratic” education? Mary’s own words nicely summarize what this collection of writings is about:

Permitting the unfolding of true selfhood as the sole and proper end of real education involves transforming an institution to a community—and this means allowing for real democracy in action. (p. 104) ●

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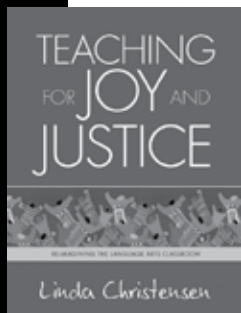


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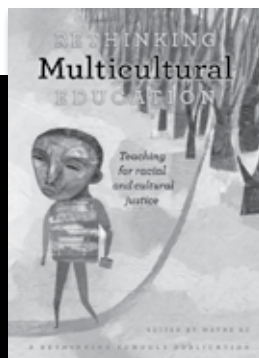
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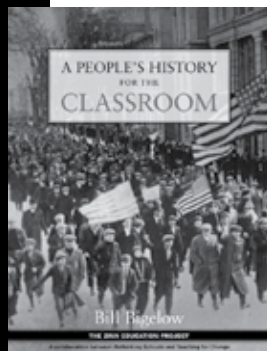
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