

Natural Education – Part 2



Education
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Westchester, New York



A year ago, I went to visit a friend who is a first grade teacher in public school in Westchester County. She is an amazing person, very versatile and talented, funny and creative, and has been teaching first grade

for 20 years. Because I was just embarking on teaching kindergarten for the first time myself, I wanted to see what it was, essentially, that I would be preparing my students for the following year.

I offered to assist my friend in her class as much as I could while visiting, not wanting to simply sit and observe. She was really pleased to have the assistance with nearly 25 children in the classroom. My first shock was that the children were actually kept in the classroom for four hours before they had a break for lunch and recess. From 9:00am to 1:00pm, she kept them going with all of the required learning activities, but it meant that one way or another those six to seven year olds were sitting or standing in a focused way for four hours.

My second shock was about what they were required to be able to do and know. In one segment of the day, children were given a worksheet that asked them to choose a type of whale to study, then look it up in a reference book, and write down information, such as where the whales lived, what they ate, how they behaved, etc. In my volunteer position as a helper that day, I had one child after another approach me, with their hands shaking as they held the worksheet, asking me to please help them. As we looked up the information for their research report, and discovered that these particular whales lived in a “temperate zone,” children repeatedly asked me, “What does ‘temperate’ mean?” My question was, do they really need to know this in first grade?

The third shock was about the approach to learning. Certainly in first grade, a great deal of the conditioning is toward acceptable behavior in a group circumstance. Standing in lines quietly, working at your desk, stopping and starting at the sound of a bell – this is all essential training for the future. As schools were originally designed to prepare a person for work in factories, or today in offices or stores, these are necessary skills to get at an early age. Too much freedom and you could have a riot on your hands. I have often noted during assemblies where I have performed in front of hundreds of children that the teachers will “shush” them if they laugh a little too loudly, in case it gets out of control. There are, after all, more children than there are teachers.

In this first grade class, as is common in many schools, children were given “stations” at which to work and a time frame. For 10 minutes, they could build with blocks. Then at the sound of the bell, regardless of whether the child had just reached a zenith of construction or a potentially important learning experience, the blocks must come down and be put away instantly, and then the children must move on to the next station. The next activity was to sit at a table with a coin and toss it 100 times, writing down how many

times they got tails, and how many times they got heads. I understand that this has to do with mathematics and probability studies, but just the sound of that repetitively clinking coin would be enough to make anyone depressed. The rest of the stations were listening to a book on tape, working on a computer, or doing another worksheet. This is first grade.

Snack was at one’s desk because quite simply there wasn’t space to go anywhere else. Reading practice was done in groups of varying levels, with the slowest group encouraged to “sky write” their words (which was some welcome physical movement). Throughout all of this there was one teacher; one valiantly attempting human life trying to give love, warmth, encouragement, humor and support to 25 children. If you want to see a true testament to this kind of work, watch the documentary film *Etre et Avoir (To Be and To Have)*, which shows a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse in rural France teaching kindergarten through fifth grade simultaneously for 30 years. There is nothing more beautiful than a dedicated teacher, and no one more deserving of a ballplayer’s salary.

After three hours of academic work, the children were then shuttled to music class, which I was strongly encouraged to observe because the teacher was said to be excellent. Here, the children were again made to stand in lines, hands by their sides. They were rehearsing for a concert, and were singing a whole range of patriotic songs. The boys were

in the most difficulty here, stuffing their hands in their pockets as they tried to control themselves from acting up, but simply couldn’t and ended up being sent to sit by me instead of being sent to the principal’s office. During this time of observing, I noticed one little girl with her hand up in the air, seeking the teacher’s attention. She was the quintessential well-behaved child, not calling out, following the rules. Unfortunately for her, the teacher was so overtaken with the five boys who were misbehaving that he didn’t see her hand. He was really just trying to get his job done, banging on the piano and conducting feverishly. But I saw the girl’s face growing more and more anxious, until tears began to roll down her cheeks, and I knew what was wrong. I strode into the semi-circle and whispered, “Do you need to go to the bathroom?” She nodded through the tears. I quickly took her by the hand and led her down off the stage. Then I told her, “If the teacher doesn’t see you next time, you just tell him you have to go to the bathroom, don’t wait.” She smiled and ran to the toilet.

Now, no blame on the teachers for any of this. In fact, my friend did a fantastic job all day long, especially considering that many of her students spoke English as a second language, and some knew only Spanish. This teacher had taught herself as much Spanish as she could to be able to communicate with her students, and there were some six-year-old

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WHAT'S THERE A view of the Josie Robertson Plaza of Lincoln Center. "On nights when there are performances, the Metropolitan Opera House and Avery Fisher Hall are lit up in yellow and there are dots of people on each level, like an Andreas Gursky photograph."

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bilingual children helping to translate whenever possible. She did everything she could to keep the classroom alive and vibrant, clean and organized, with all her good humor and good will. With 25 children in the confines of a single room for six hours a day, under fluorescent lights, with no fresh air, and intensive requirements from the Department of Education with regard to expectations for children's achievements (on which they will be tested), even with a great teacher, you are still dealing with a certain system of education which may not be the best suited to...learning.

A few weeks ago, I was teaching sixth grade as an artist-in-residence in an upscale public school in Westchester. I noticed that the behavior of at least five to ten students in each class of the grade was unusually bizarre. One child was sleeping, drooling even; an aide attempted to wake him and eventually had to lead him from the room. Several children could not refrain at any time from shouting or calling out answers or comments at random. One child repeatedly flung his arms into the air involuntarily, as if he were experiencing little internal explosions. The other students in the room were continually distracted by these noises and movements, making it very difficult for anyone to concentrate on the arts-in-education program that was being presented. Finally, after three classes in a row, I asked a teacher politely about the school's philosophy of integrating what seemed like children with special needs (or learning differences) within the classroom. She told me that 49 out of 150 children in the grade had been assigned IEPs (Individualized Educational Programs), which means they have been evaluated by a professional, diagnosed as having learning difficul-

ties, and are all in need of various forms of ongoing therapy and assistance. When I asked her what she thought was going on that the ratio should be so high – how could a third of the student body have these needs? – she wondered if it was something in the town water.

Increasingly this year, as I travel from school district to school district throughout the county, every day of the week, all year long, in what are mostly modest to wealthy environments, I am finding that an increasingly large percentage of the children cannot sit still, cannot focus, cannot respond in a relevant way with regard to the information being presented, and are not able to control themselves. I am seeing that roughly one third of the student population, from kindergarten through eighth grade, is able to think and process in an "academically inclined" way, according to the training methods of the institution they attend. About one third are struggling and just getting by, and with not much enthusiasm, mostly with a lot of fear. Around one third seem unable to cope at all. As many teachers and parents have expressed to me, while they murmur their distress at what is the current trend in children's downward spiraling behavioral patterns, these are the people who will be running the world in the future.

In my last article in *Fizz*, I described several international studies by many people who are concerned with the current state of affairs, and who are proponents of a more natural approach to education, especially as it applies to birth, infancy and preschool ages. The findings of these studies have to be taken into account with what is being said in this column, else someone mistakenly blames the problems in today's children on the school system alone. Behavioral issues start much earlier in life, but the school system can reinforce or worsen the situation. Perhaps it would be good to look at these findings, to see what might be causing some of the problems that children are having in school.

In looking at the results of studies conducted in Uganda in the 1950s, it was seen that children who were born at home in a natural setting, then kept "in arms" by the parents and family during their infancy, breastfed, allowed to sleep with their parents, and living alongside adults and children of all ages, integrated into the common environment, had greater mental and physical advances, sitting up, smiling, speaking, and walking sooner than their technologically advanced counterparts in Europe and America.

However, in the book *Magical Child*, author Joseph Chilton Pearce notes that a change happens at preschool age that does not necessarily allow a continuation of well-being in the Ugandan child. At this time in life, there is a split, and the Westernized child has the opportunity to develop greater mental capacity and capability based on his or her experiences and schooling. So in other words, the technological world may produce young children who are at a disadvantage by being born in hospitals, bottle fed, left alone to cry in cribs, and raised in daycare facilities for much of their early lives, while parents work full-time jobs to be able to provide their child with the best that modern society can offer. But, once children reach the age where formal schooling becomes possible, then there is actually a potential for greater development. That would, of course, depend on the kind of educational institution in which a child is schooled.

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The next step in a natural education process might be to seek out an approach to academic learning that encourages children to think for themselves, to be creative and imaginative, and to integrate academics with the development of ethics and principles. There are many examples of this in the world, some of these being within the Golden Education Template (GET) system, the Waldorf method, the Montessori approach, and home schooling, among others.

The writer and philosopher Jean Houston (www.jeanhouston.org), speaks of how education needs to be “hands-on, sensory rich, and experience laden, which calls forth the whole mind of the whole child.” She describes the best style of learning as one in which “children run in delight and expectation...where learning is creation, performing, thinking across subjects, exploring ideas through images, sounds, songs, dances, and artistic expression.” She calls for education that assists a child to become “myriad-minded” so they might consciously participate in their own development. As they learn to read and write, they are also encouraged “to imagine, dream, and expand the limits of the possible.” In particular she brings up the need in current times for training the mind to reach into the unknown and the inexplicable.

The anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, “No education that is not founded on art

will ever succeed.” An approach to education that is rich in the arts is something that most people know is essential for true learning; direct experience leads to retention of information. Research has shown that less than 15% of students can retain information by only hearing it. Forty percent of students are visual learners, needing to see images to retain information. But overall, most people are kinesthetic learners, responding best to physical, hands-on approaches: 45% of students require sensory stimulation to retain information. It is of course the kinesthetic learners who suffer the most in public school classrooms. Parents would do well to support educational systems that are integrated with the arts.

Parents can also help their children to develop naturally by increasing their exposure to nature and natural sensory stimulation: playing outdoors, hiking in the woods, camping, etc. In a disturbing study conducted by the German Psychological Institute (www.psi-institute.org) over 20 years with 4,000 people, it has been shown that sensory sensitivity in children has diminished by 1% each year, so that over 20 years, children have lost 20% of their ability to register information through their senses. It seems that the only kind of stimulus that most children can respond to today is a kind of over-stimulation: loud sounds, touch that includes an impact, and intense visuals.

Further, researchers have shown that just watching television can have negative effects on a child’s development by introducing too many “startle effects,” such as sudden and dramatic changes of intensity in light or sound. It seems that over time, the television industry has chosen to increase such effects, by making startling imagery bigger, louder, and more violent, causing an overstimulus to the brain that causes confusion in children. Basically, children cannot distinguish sensorially between what is real and what is not, having lost awareness of the natural environment, and cannot detect subtleties at all. According to Pearce, by the age of six the average child has watched 6,000 hours of television, leading to a kind of neuro-cognitive breakdown (*Journal of Family Life*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1999). The effects of the overuse of computers and video games fall into a similar category.

Recommendations from writers such as Houston and Pearce include encouraging children to learn how to think first, and then to make use of computer technology to enhance what they already know. During the first 12 years of life, as suggested by Piaget, “the structures of knowledge that enable young people to grasp abstract, metaphoric, symbolic types of information” should be put into place. The computer, if misused, can interrupt such a development process. The kind of instant, click-sensitive mechanism of the computer experience seems to cause in children the expectation of that kind of response in everything: instant success, immediate gratification, impatience with process-oriented activities, and tremendous disappointment in self. Most of my kindergarten students who learned to read books easily have had less access to computers, video games and television.

A suggestion from many educators to parents is to realize how powerful an impact television has on children and to seriously consider limiting its use. It’s been said that Bob Pittman, founder of MTV, once said, “We don’t just shoot for 14-year-olds, we own them.” If nothing else, don’t leave a child with the television alone – watch programs with your child and talk through what you are seeing.

Pearce believes that it’s possible to be optimistic about the future. The overall system may not change, but there are “parents who have the ears to hear and are willing to take the risk of getting their children out of this madness.” If one looks at the development of global human consciousness at this time, there are many examples of “true coherency in a massively incoherent system...These small pockets of coherent intelligence will then manifest themselves and provide the impetus and the wisdom for the changes necessary to create a world in which children can reach their full potential.” *

Barbara Sarbin is a freelance educator and artist-in-residence whose “Earth School” programs are supported by the Westchester Arts Council and BOCES. For more information about Earth School and the Golden Education Template in America, please visit www.somethinggoodintheworld.org.

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