

Education Revolution

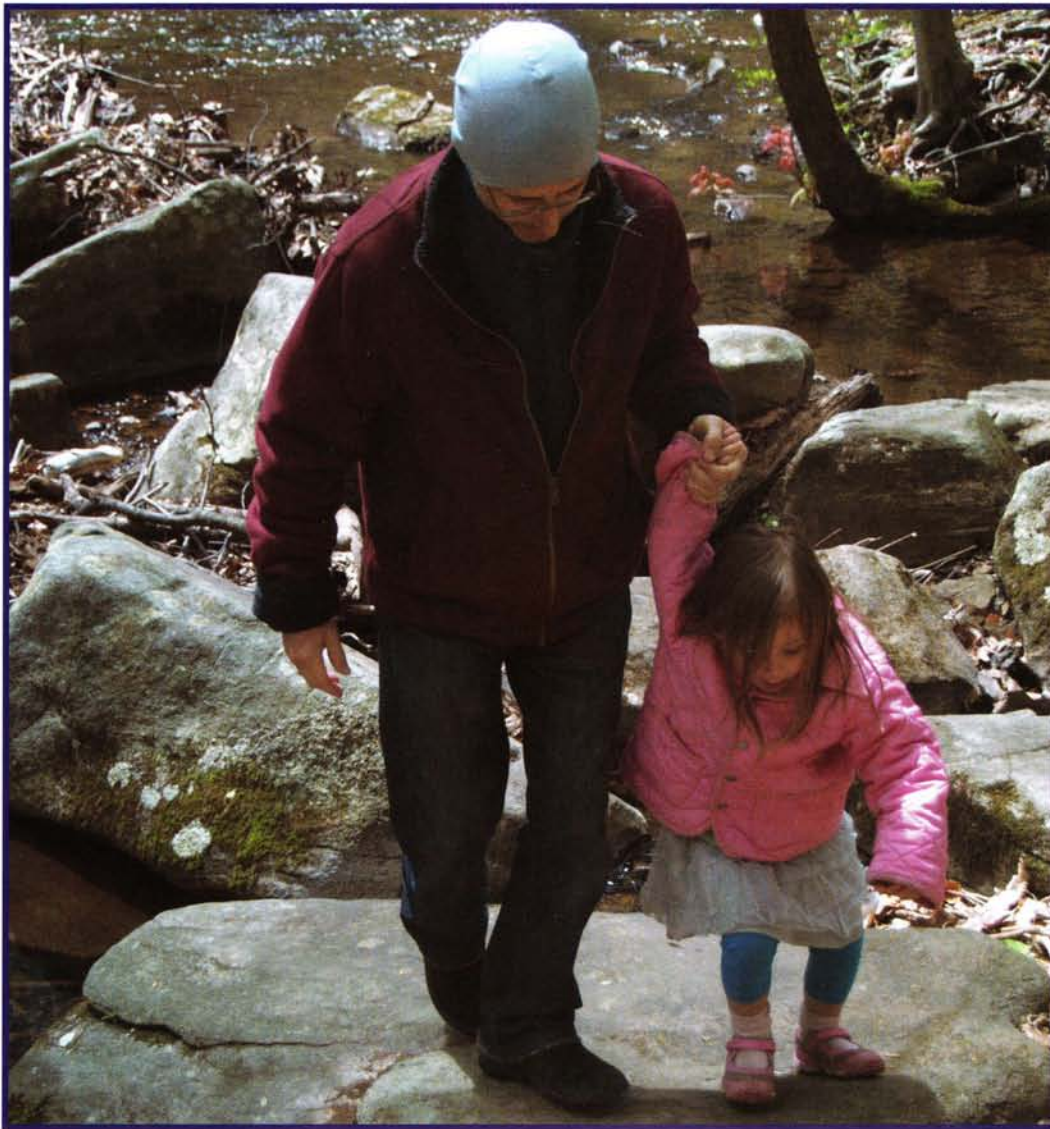
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Supporting Children's Freedom to Discover Themselves and Their World



INSIDE:

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



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.

References

1. Angeline Lillard, *Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 3.
2. http://thinkexist.com/quotes/Norman_Cousins/
3. *ibid.*
4. Maria Montessori, *Education and Peace*. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1972, p. 35.
5. <http://www.whywaldorfworks.org/>

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