



Child-Centered, Play-Based **INSIGHT** Noncoercive, Democratic

An Invitation to Rethink Education and How that Transforms Being a Parent (draft)

Bev Bos, an icon in early childhood development, gave over 6,000 workshops for parents and professionals, in addition to monthly parent meetings at her Roseville Preschool. Contrary to mainstream, and even many 'alternatives,' parents were required to spend time in this unique environment. "Look at that," Bev would whisper. "See how the children are digging in the sand together. That's what we talked about the other night." She mentored her parents. The play-based learning environment she created for children, was, at the same time, a living school for parents and educators. Challenging parents to rethink their assumptions about how children learn, and therefore what real education looks like, was to Bev, at least, if not more, important than nurturing children.

Bev's passion, wisdom and her preschool center drew parents into a community where they inquired, questioned, explored deep and life changing questions about education and how to best prepare their children for a future that is changing faster than a speeding bullet. One thing was certain. Like a rusting assembly line, mainstream education is incapable of meeting this challenge.

Walking through this door one is slapped in the face, having to face the challenge of possibly deconstructing basic assumptions that define "schooling;" the structure, schedules, technologies, age segregated classes, common curriculum, tests and grades with implicit comparison and competition, which physical and psychological "states" do children naturally learn at their highest levels, and does the compulsory school structure elicit this optimum state? Is getting a degree from an ivy league school, and therefore a good job, the end goal, becoming successful in a toxic culture? Can real sustainability and ecological leadership be 'learned' in an abstract classroom with digital screens and neat rows of chairs? Does the curriculum shape the student or does the student shape the curriculum? Is schooling simply a cultural skinner box, behavior modification, or is it designed to draw out and expand the magnificent qualities that make every child unique? Is this really what mass education is designed to do? Is parent participation confined to dropping off and picking up, sticking a painting on the fridge, or are parents active learners, challenging, learning and growing their own curriculum every step of the way? What is that curriculum?

How do ruthlessly independent parents, often opinionated, busy, skilled or not in sustained inquiry and dialogue, more or less uninformed about the origins or compulsory schooling (the only thing most have experienced), or the rich traditions that have created true alternatives, morph into such an active learning community? Especially the home or un-school families who are even more isolated? How do they bridge the gap between "It takes a village," and being isolated? Having been deeply conditioned by mainstream to not be actively involved in their child's real education, how do these well-meaning parents come together and invest the time to question what they think they know, what they think is "right?" How can they prepare their children for a completely different world, without this honest, passionate and sustained self-inquiry with others? "Na, I'll do it by myself. Thanks."

To explore these and other challenges we are inviting you to participate in an ongoing dialogue with likeminded parents. (Who, when, what time, what will be the structure, how subjects will emerge and be explored, etc.)

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We Are Responsible

We have all been deeply conditioned to not be responsible for our children's education. We are too busy. Not qualified. Don't want to. Leave it to the professionals. Forget all that. We are responsible, which does not mean that we have to do everything. Accept the fact. You are responsible. Now, what do you do?

What qualities, capacities, knowledge and experiences will prepare my child to live in our emerging Brave New World, in right relationship with every other human being, with society, culture, the environment, and living nature? And do so with sensitivity, with kindness, entangled empathy and altruism, full of creative optimism, initiative, energy and passion, with appropriateness and care, feeling responsible, knowing that every action may impact seven generations, cultivating the ability to manage themselves, inner and outer, and help others do the same? How do we build this foundation, and upon that, academics rest? As David Orr observed: "Our most pressing challenges have been created by very educated people. More of the same education will only deepen our crisis. It is not more education, but education of a certain kind that will save us." What are our priorities? We begin right here.

A Few Definitions: (books have been written on each)

Non Coercive (Free to Learn): No punishments, no rewards, no comparisons, nonjudgmental, not compulsory. If a child isn't interested in a given subject or activity, they have the responsibility to invest their time in creative ways that meet their needs and goals, without distracting or interrupting others.

Child Centered: Do parents have the courage to assume competence. Every child's interest, developmental stages, personal needs, capacities, and family needs (expectations) are unique. It is our (child, parent and educators) challenge to evolve a curriculum based on these unique qualities for each child.

If your child learned to stand upright and speak the mother language, the two most complex challenges they will ever encounter, with little formal instruction, the same applies to anything "they want to learn." Research found that only 5% of lifelong learning occurs through formal training, including schooling, and of that 5%, most retain only 3% to 5% for any length of time. Schooling is mostly conditioning. Real learning is something else. Our priority is real learning, not conditioning.

Democratic: Children participate in defining how the program looks, feels and functions, along with parents and educators. They participate in conflict resolution via 'council,' a group democratic process.

Play-Based: Authentic or original "play," what athletes call the zone and researchers call flow, is nature's design for optimum learning and performance, at any age or activity. This state involves complete, entrained attention, experimentation, patience, risk taking, humor, creative imagination, and much more. Play Based means that our top priority is to find ways to encourage and nurture this optimum state as each child meets the challenges and goals they have created for themselves.

Community Learning: To involve and engage the local community in meeting the above.

Form and Function

Rarely are any of the above qualities found in mainstream compulsory models, nor in most so-called alternatives, such as Waldorf or Montessori. This instantly makes the collection baffling. How can such a program exist? How does it function? What happens each day? Will my child learn anything? What about academics? Getting into college? Managing their time? Setting and meeting goals? The simple answer is; we all (children, parents and staff) make it up as we go along, together. There are no passive participants. Everyone is responsible. That simple fact, and its implicit challenge, changes everything. Children are treated with respect. Their interest and needs matter. It is their program, including staff selection and correcting disruptive behaviors. We begin with the above guidelines, plus a basic structure; time, place and the unique needs of the group. An assessment is gathered in dialogue with parents, each young learner and staff, where interests, needs, expectations, and goals are explored. A list of creative projects emerges along with local tutors and resources to facilitate. From this, and using our democratic process, we 'make it up as we go along' and adapt as needed. From this engaging, creative chaos, order emerges and with it the passion and positive life skills that the future demands. Compulsory, parents and children being told what to do, negates the most important life skills.