



A Noncoercive, Child-Centered, Democratic, Play-Based Community Learning Center

Our Intrinsic Learning Center uses the local community as the primary learning environment, supported by tutor-mentors as needed to enrich 'what each child wants to learn,' accessing private homes, libraries, parks and tutor studios for group explorations; math, writing, reading. Museums for history. City Hall for Civics, etc.

Assuming five to ten families to begin, and a five to six-hour day, four days a week, our program is a place for children to spend at least half of their time in and around the local community and related natural environments.

An Appetite for Chaos - A Master of Improvisation

The mobile classroom implies a flexible structure. Each day begins at a starting place, what we call 'base camp or homeroom;' a home, public library, space at the park, to begin and end each day, changing with the seasons. A place and time for discussion, review, planning, perhaps extending into reading, writing, research, etc. There are also times for moving physically, sitting and focusing, council sharing and group dreaming, tea, snacks, making lunch, visiting tutors, building things, computer searches, etc. And, regular 'field trips,' perhaps 50% of the time.

Curriculum is improvised through a process that respects and reflects each child's individual learning interests. Our focus is on strengths, personal interests and needs. We meet each child where they are and support them in becoming whomever they want to be. Rather than focusing on weaknesses, we ask: "What are you good at? What do you love to do?" and build from there. Academic plans are based on the child's interests while respecting the needs of parents.

Relationship to each other, the community and natural world is our core. Children pursue topics and long-term projects in fields as diverse as natural sciences (including biology, chemistry, Earth science, and physics), history, creative movement and dance, foreign languages, gardening, health and nutrition, cooking, reading, art, yoga, music, civics, entrepreneurship, finance, charity, fashion design, carpentry, sports, meditation, and more. The program is governed through a participatory democratic process. Conflicts are studied and resolved with 'council,' a group process engaging the entire community.

Why alternative?

The Hidden Agenda of Compulsory Schooling

Consider the words of a young Albert Einstein: "One had to cram all of this stuff into one's mind, whether one liked it or not," he wrote in his university diary. "This coercion had such a deterring effect that after I had passed the final examination I found the consideration of any scientific problem distasteful for an entire year... It is, in fact, nothing short of a miracle," Einstein concluded, "that modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry." Critic of compulsory John Taylor Gatto, Teacher of the Year in New York City and State, the author of numerous book including "Dumbing Us Down," notes,

"The more standardized and costly schooling becomes – the less literate and truly educated the population grows. Habit and attitude training is imposed by the structure. This is what mass schooling is really all about. Making people predictable, therefore controllable, is the first purpose or goal of intuitional schooling. What's being done is a trade of liberty for security and stability. You have to cash in your liberty, your individuality, your imagination, creativity and freedom to get that. All the insights about crowd management that have accumulated throughout human history are now put into play in the form of social structures, with compulsory schooling being the base. The development of the critical mind is strictly forbidden in school.

You're not allowed to learn how to think critically, period. We're taking our real wealth – our children and their potential - and we're throwing it away. We are burning it. We are smashing it. What the young brain offers in any moment in history is a new way to see things, unquenchable energy that can be beaten down and it will rise back up again. And we're just pitching it out in exchange for this stable, predictable order."

Looking forward, Big Tech began infiltrating public schools in the 1990s, promoting the use of technology in early childhood education. Today, there is a major push to replace human teachers and direct interaction with nature with Machine Learning algorithms, virtual reality and distant learning, turning public schools into global data mining and predicative behavior control systems, with every click on every device being monitored from birth, an exponential leap from what John described above; obedience to authority, habit and attitude training being imposed by the structure.

See attachment: Map of the Alternative Education Landscape, A School Wroth Growing and History of Alternative Models

Organizing Philosophy and Core Values

One: Learning is Intrinsic, Natural, School is Optional

We believe that children are natural learners who don't need to be "motivated" to learn. Children are naturally curious and inquisitive, who strive for understanding and competence. We support their basic drive to learn and grow by providing the opportunity to direct and regulate their learning in the manner that they choose, at their own place and pace, and for as long as they want and need.

Conventional wisdom says that children "go to school to learn," as though learning can only occur in places specially designed for that purpose. Learning happens everywhere, and it happens best when children are immersed in authentic environments and experiences. Not through rote or forced instruction in rigid artificial settings. It doesn't have to look like school or feel like school to be valuable, and it's not necessary to make distinctions between "schoolwork" and "hobbies" or "for credit" and "not for credit." As one teenager who had recently left school observed, "Everything I do counts now."

A student who doesn't thrive in a classroom environment may become successful when allowed to learn through apprenticeships or in one-on-one tutorials. When we change the approach, the structure, and their assumptions, all kinds of other changes often follow.

We therefore, take full advantage of the riches and resources available in our community. We create partnerships with different educational and cultural organizations to provide and facilitate access to different events and resources. We regularly invite visiting teachers or mentors who are professionals and educators in specialized fields that correspond to the children's interests.

Children and adults learn together and from each other, despite presumed or identified abilities, disabilities, challenges, and labels. More importantly, mentors and tutors teach by example, how to be socially conscious; how to pursue learning journeys; and live harmoniously in a community where one's freedom ends when it interferes with the freedom of others. Low child to teacher ratio and small-size group ensure that each child gets the individual guidance and support he or she needs.

Two: Child Centered and Led

Years ago researchers placed before toddlers' trays with assorted delights representing the basic food groups, allowing each toddler to select and consume anything they wish. In the end, each child selected and maintained a well-balanced diet, providing all the essential nutrients without being coerced. Over the entrance of the Albany Free School reads a sign; "Every child comes with their unique curriculum. It is our job to discover and nurture what this is." Child led means; each child participates and is free to select what and how they will invest their attention.

Taking cues from the child, embracing and respecting the interests and needs of others, our responsibility is to facilitate, nurture and enrich each child's natural interests and leaning styles, assuming, as with the toddlers above, that each child will select a balanced diet of interest and

related skills, necessary for he or she to flourish, in their own time, in their own way, often exceeding the expectations and standards imposed by traditional models. Appreciating that nearly all parents have been conditioned by their own compulsory-competitive school experience, we acknowledge this 'freedom-to-learn' requires unprecedented courage and bravery on the part of parents, until they see for themselves the proven benefits of our approach. See the attached.

Three: Democracy: the empowerment of people to make real decisions about their lives.

Our children have the responsibility and freedom to govern their personal learning, but also their community. Each child and teacher has an equal voice in decisions that affect the daily operation and educational programs.

Sir Ken Robinson on Democratic Schools

In fully democratic schools, students have executive powers in the governance of their own learning and in all the decisions that affect it, including how the school is run, the schedule, curriculum, assessment, facilities and even the hiring of faculty. Democratic schools may seem the polar opposite of the adult-directed and custodial nature of much of conventional education. In many ways they are. And yet, they are the practical embodiment of principles that school systems everywhere typically proclaim: the need to develop independent learners, to cultivate diverse talents, to produce thoughtful, compassionate and productive citizens. So why and how are democratic schools so different from regular ones?

The first is that learning is a natural process. Human beings are intensely curious organisms and children are endlessly interested in the world around them. They love to learn and want to learn.

It's a sad irony that so many of them seem to lose interest in learning as they make their way through regular schools. Too many become bored and stressed by the whole process. One reason is that the rituals of conventional schooling often contradict the rhythms of natural learning. Democratic schools aim to resonate with those rhythms and in doing so to nourish children's natural appetite for learning. That has implications for the curriculum and who shapes it, for teaching and who does it, and for the schedule and who decides it.

A second theme is that learning is largely a social process. Learning is a personal accomplishment but children learn hugely from those around them. Take language.

Young children readily absorb the spoken language (or languages) of the people they're most exposed to, and the local dialect and accents too. It would create a stir if a child who's raised in an exclusively Italian or Russian-speaking community suddenly started to speak Inuit or Gaelic.

So-called feral children, who grow up away from human culture, may never learn to speak at all. If they're raised by apes or dogs they may growl or bark, but they don't speak in complex sentences and slip into the subjunctive. In learning to speak, children also absorb the values, beliefs, and behaviors of their communities. Consequently, although the impulse to learn is natural, much of what we do learn is cultural. Democratic schools are inherently social institutions, which facilitate a deep sense of community, of collaborative learning, and collective responsibility.

A third theme is a firm belief in the rights and abilities of young people to make decisions about their own lives and the conditions of their own education. In conventional schools, the main decisions are taken by adults and the students follow the program. They may have some options along the way but the path is pretty well staked out in advance, irrespective of the young people who are obliged to take it. Democratic schools operate on the principle that if they are trusted and entrusted, young people are capable of fine judgments in matters that affect their education and are entitled to make them. That has implications for structures of responsibility and for who decides what and for whom.

Four: Real Play is Real Learning

Ashley Montagu, author of fifty books on being human, described authentic play as the 'genius of childhood.' This natural, intrinsic state, coupled with what Maria Montessori called the child's 'absorbent mind' is nature's design for optimum learning and performance, in any field, at any age, if retained, allowed to expand, distill and mature. Consider that every child masters its two most difficult tasks, learning to walk upright and spoken language with little or no formal instruction. Athletes call this explosive learning and performance state, *The Zone*. Researchers call it *Flow*, Children call it *Play*. Einstein is the poster child for this 'genius of childhood,' mature play.

Culture, and therefor traditional authoritarian-compulsory-schooling, demands that this optimum capacity for learning and performance be domesticated, tethered, limited and constrained to conform to the needs, expectations and predictable patterns that support culture. The genius of being fully human is subjected, conditioned, sacrificed for predictability and control. The form and structure we call mass schooling, with its rules, schedules, bells, neat rows, classrooms, authority, control and conveyor belt curriculum, was specifically designed to bring about this conversion.

So complete, successful and near universal is this conversion that nearly all accept cultural conditioning as the essence of learning, having forgotten and sacrificed their innate genius long ago. But not all. Among the first to challenge the educational status quo was the eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, soon followed by with Swiss-born Heinrich Pestalozzi. Later in Germany, by Friedrich Froebel. Then Tolstoy, Francisco Ferrer, Montessori in Italy, Rudolf Steiner, A. S. Neill, John Holt, the founder of the homeschool movement in the United States, and humanist psychologist, Carl Rogers. All united in the realization that learning is intrinsic and natural, school is optional, and most often counterproductive to the child's true potential.

Five: Complete Attention, Practice and Mastery

Sing, as if no one is listening. Dance, as if no one is watching. Mainstream confuses knowledge, standardized and IO tests with intelligence. True intelligence is a vast, unnamable realm of infinite potential, the ground or context that makes conditioned knowledge possible. Early translator of Eastern philosophy, Alan Watts, described the difference; "You can't catch the wind in a paper sack." Conditioned knowledge and thought is limited. Intelligence is unlimited. For growth, inviting the unlimited, the limited, including our personal defense reflex, the ego, must be suspended. "Safe enough to play," is the axiom.

In his book "Outliers," Malcolm Gladwell, proposed that mastery requires an estimated 10,000 hours. Two hours per-day, five-days-a-week of focused, playful practice, reaps five-hundred-and-twenty hours per year, or nineteen years to reach true mastery in a given field. Playful practice, we must note, negates any possibility of failure. What may appear as failure is simply feedback on the lighthearted, passionate-playful road to mastery.

Original Play researcher, Fred Donaldson notes, "when I play Fred disappears." Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes in "Flow, the Psychology of Optimum Experience," the optimum experience demands 100% attention, leaving no attention remaining to be self-conscious at that moment. The teacher J. Krishnamurti observes, "with complete attention there is no observer." Mastery, in any field, is built on complete, playful attention.

On the morning of May 6, 1954, having invested his 10,000 hours, Sir Roger Bannister was the first to run a mile in less than four minutes. Later he said, "The world seemed to stand still. I felt like I was running slow. I felt no pain and no strain." And he was running faster than any man alive. Billy Jean King said, when she was at her best she would transport herself beyond the turmoil of the court to a place of total peace and calm. Compulsory schooling and adult organized competition during childhood, conditions in children a different state, comparison, with its implicit need to defend. We must therefore, subtract times spent in self-centered, defensive, anxious states, from our mastery bank account, which is the essence of John Taylor Gatto's classic phrase, "Dumbing Us Down."

Being watched, compared, graded, judged, creates a different state where attention is split between looking good and true performance. Feeling judged, compared, builds mastery of a different kind, defense, stealing attention from mastery in growth, learning and performance. The high road to mastery is being safe enough to play, meaning zero attention is needed to defend. Not needing to win transforms self-centered will and forced concentration into authentic play, the absence of self-imposed resistance with its complete attention. Form is content. Learning is 'state' specific. The state of the learning experience is the primary content learned. Our intent is to optimize the 'state' of the learning experience, inviting each child to sing and dance on their rode to mastery, in their own way.

Six: Relationship; Empathic-Entangled Identity

So preoccupied with our daily thoughts, we forget; life is relationship. The actual nature and quality of our relationship, to others and the living world, is primary, with empathy and entanglement as our core identity defining how we think, feel and behave. The higher meaning and use of knowledge is defined by this identity-context, exemplified by the Golden Rule: "treating others, including nature, as oneself would wish to be treated." Doing so is called 'goodness' or 'virtue.'

"The essence of greatness is the perception that virtue is enough." Ralph Waldo Emerson.

"The true goal of human development, and therefore parenting and education, is the flowering of goodness." J. Krishnamurti.

Virtue includes: being upright, modest, straightforward, sane, corporative, honest, patient, caring, kind, brave, calm, clear, gentle, forgiving, and more. Qualities learned best and only by experiencing these in relationship with others, by modeling. Virtue is moral and civic excellence in daily life, a sense of authentic rightness that emerges from our true nature, our soul, and is made real by the actions we take. Our goal is to model that virtue is, indeed, the highest goal, higher than "A's" on tests or winning anything.

Helping children discover, expand and understand what they actually are, and therefore how they relate to everything, is our primary focus, with the skillful use of abstract knowledge aligning with, and supporting, our true nature and identity.

As ecologist-educator David Orr observed; "our most pressing challenges; poverty, pollution, aggression and wars are created by very educated people. More of the same education will only make matters worse. It is not education, but education of a certain kind that will save us."

Physicist David Bohm, Einstein's protégée, relates Orr's realization to the intrinsic nature of thought, language, and implicitly identity.

We don't really understand the nature of our thought process; we're not aware of how it works and how it's disrupting, not only our society and our individual lives but also the way the brain and nervous system operate, making us unhealthy or perhaps even somehow damaging the system.

The kind of thought we need to understand is self-centered thought. At first sight one might wonder why self-centered thought is so dangerous. If the self were really there then perhaps it would correct to center on the self because the self would be so important, but if the self is a kind of illusion, at least the self as we know it, then to center our thought on something illusory, which is assumed to have supreme importance, is going to disrupt the whole process and it will not only make thought about yourself wrong, it will make thought about everything wrong so that thought becomes a dangerous and destructive instrument all around.

It is easy to see how the coercive, authoritarian, comparison-competitive, form and structure of compulsory schooling reinforces an isolated and selfish identity, one that grows to view oneself and nature as a commodity to be extracted and used for personal gain, rather than identifying ourselves as a living part of a web in which we are all apart, to be protected, with each daily response taken carefully, with seven generations in mind.

Cultivating states of attention that include and embrace our authentic nature is therefore central. Attention is not thinking.

Empathy, kindness, compassion, and creative insight, for example, are not conditioned thoughts, rather embodied states of lived relationship, in the moment. Culture's preoccupation with language in early childhood, and years of formal training, pushes aside these and other embodied states. Abstracted intellect-ego drives the bus with knowledge empowering that driver.

Our priority is balancing the rich and skillful use of knowledge and academics, with sensitive, still, empathic attention, with its implicit action. Modeling and cultivating this balance of distilled thought and mindful attention helps each child, parents and the entire community, reset the ground of their core identity in alignment with our authentic nature, which is nature, and to use abstract knowledge and creative imagination as powerful tools in service – with earth in mind.

Seven: Different Brains, Bodies, Temperaments and Preferences (Learning Styles)

Like eating a rich, nutritious, organic diet, information, data, facts or generally 'curriculum,' is never the final goal rather, knowledge is the means to something bigger, 'capacity.' Bigger still, capacity derives its meaning in relationship, relationship to others, to community, to a creative challenge, the environment, our relationship to life. Building capacity and mastery create an endless horizon. The farther we go the further we can go. In this long view, comparison and failure don't exist. Having interviewed over thirty PGA and LPGA athletes, several world champions, members of the Hall of Fame, the parents and coaches of these outstanding performers never asked; "did you win?" Rather, their common questions were; "did you have a good time," which is relationship and, "what did you learn," capacity? Two sides of the same developmental process. While physical, cognitive and temperamental preferences matter, we place emphasis on optimizing the way a subject is presented and equally, the quality of relationships created along the way. By optimizing what sport psychologist Tim Gallwey called the 'inner game,' which is how we relate to the outer, including curriculum, learning and performance is simultaneously optimized. Relationship is primary. How we relate to a subject or challenge defines what we learn and how we perform.

Eight: Assessment

Our assessment doesn't arrive from some statistical measure of achievement compared with predetermined, bottom lines for "success" and "failure." Each child represents their own curriculum, and can only be evaluated or measured against itself. Our assessment emerges from our core philosophy; that children are natural learners, that they don't need to be "motivated" to learn. Children are naturally curious and inquisitive, who strive for understanding and competence. We assemble a cumulative portfolio of each student's work and let it speak for itself. This includes the student's self-evaluation, and may at times or when appropriate take the form of a community presentation of accomplishments the preceding period. This can involve friends, family, mentors, and advisors responding with written feedback and recommendations. Each quarter advisors write student narratives to families updating each student's learning plan.

Nine: Who We Serve

Our primary audience are families who have explored and embraced both non-curriculum, child led homeschooling and unschooling models, including parents that embrace these approaches but lack the time needed to make them work independently. In simple terms; parents who understand that compulsory schooling is not essential for creating rich, creative, highly successful lives, a big challenge for many to embrace. A second demographic are parents dissatisfied with compulsory mainstream approaches, who are looking for kinder, more individualized models, but have yet to fully research what unschooling means. While these families are welcome, they may find 'closer to mainstream' models more comforting. We also acknowledge the difference between engaged, active learning and child care. Traditional schools, extending into early pre-preschool, liberate many parents from the time and attention needed to meet the needs of their children every day. With the extended family more or less broken, many parents simply don't have the freedom, luxury, or feel they lack the skills to provide this quality engaged attention.

Our approach respects and attempts to balance these different needs and priorities.

Ten: Coaches, Coordinators and Teachers

The first and overarching challenge in our child-led, non-compulsory approach is to listen without judging, to discover who each child is, what they find interesting, are passionate about and need, a degree of openness, empathy and understanding many parents lack with their own children.

The Program Coordinator, our Pied-Piper, serves in this coach-friend-councilor-facilitator-coordinator role. While this individual may have teaching skills or certifications, these skills alone are not enough. Our Pied-Piper-Coach Coordinator leads with heart, empathy, and lighthearted creative imagination, meeting each child where they are and dancing with them into discovery and mastery.

Teachers are subject specialists who love what they do and do what they love plus, have a passion to inspire and engage young people with their light, skill, craft and passion. Our vision is to compile and invite a diverse and talented pool of subject specialist to meet the needs of our children on demand; including fields as diverse as natural sciences (including biology, chemistry, Earth science, and physics), history, creative movement and dance, foreign languages, gardening, health and nutrition, cooking, reading, art, yoga, music, civics, entrepreneurship, finance, charity, fashion design, carpentry, sports, meditation, and more.

Think of our intrinsic learning community as a family, different personalities, different interests, negotiating priorities, sharing resources, prioritizing schedules on a regular basis using council, open dialogue, and a democratic process to distill daily, weekly and long term schedules. Non-compulsory implies that each child is free to participate in an activity or not. If not, yet being part of the community any given day, less interested learners are responsible to support those who are, using the time and venue in creative ways that meet their interests and needs, without acting-out or distracting.

Eleven: Parents, Advisors and Interns.

Expecting a single adult to hold the space is asking an awful lot, especially with that many children who are probably less ready to be as independent. We will begin with perhaps five children, which is manageable for one Pied Piper. As word spreads this will quickly grow to ten, and with that, the need for a second person. Even with 'an appetite for chaos - a master of improvisation,' it is not realistic for one person to keep the ever-changing flow of possibilities moving. The 'leading into discovery adult,' must be supported by others who are current with the chaos de jure, anticipating and suggesting ways to enhance and expand, a 'think tank' of supporting adults on the ground.

As an advisory board is to a nonprofit or a corporation, parents are to Insight. Their primary role is to facilitate, encourage, imagine, provide resources and ideas, expand awareness and networking in the local community.

Twelve: Tuition (draft)

A tiered tuition schedule allows families to pay what they can afford, balancing financial needs with staff wages that reflects the valued work they do. Four day/week tuition:

Base: \$6,750/yearly (9 months) or \$750/month (x 5 learners \$33,750)
(less 25% for program expenses -\$8,450 = \$25,210 for salaries)

Sustaining: \$7,650 yearly (9 months) or \$850/month (x 5 learners \$38,250)
(less 25% for program expenses -\$9,565 = \$28,685 for salaries)

Patron: \$8,550 yearly (9 months) or \$950/month (x 5 learners \$42,750)
(less 25% for program expenses -\$10,687 = \$32,063 for salaries)

Notes: We anticipate a range of program fees; transportation, supplies, tutor-fees, insurance, etc. One program coordinator for the first five learners, and one assistant for each additional five learners is the base.

Dunn Middle School (grades 6–8) Non-Resident Day Student \$28,000

(Dunn's tuition fee includes annual tuition, text books, classroom supplies, annual outdoor trips, most academic field trips, on-campus guest speakers, college counseling, dining hall services, basic health office services, and many other enrichment programs.)

Santa Ynez Christina Academy K-8th \$10,400

Los Olivos Family School Four Day Week \$9,560

Average base salary for teachers (3-6 years' experience) in Solvang;
\$22.00/hr. \$2,483/mo. \$35,072/year (45% above the national average)





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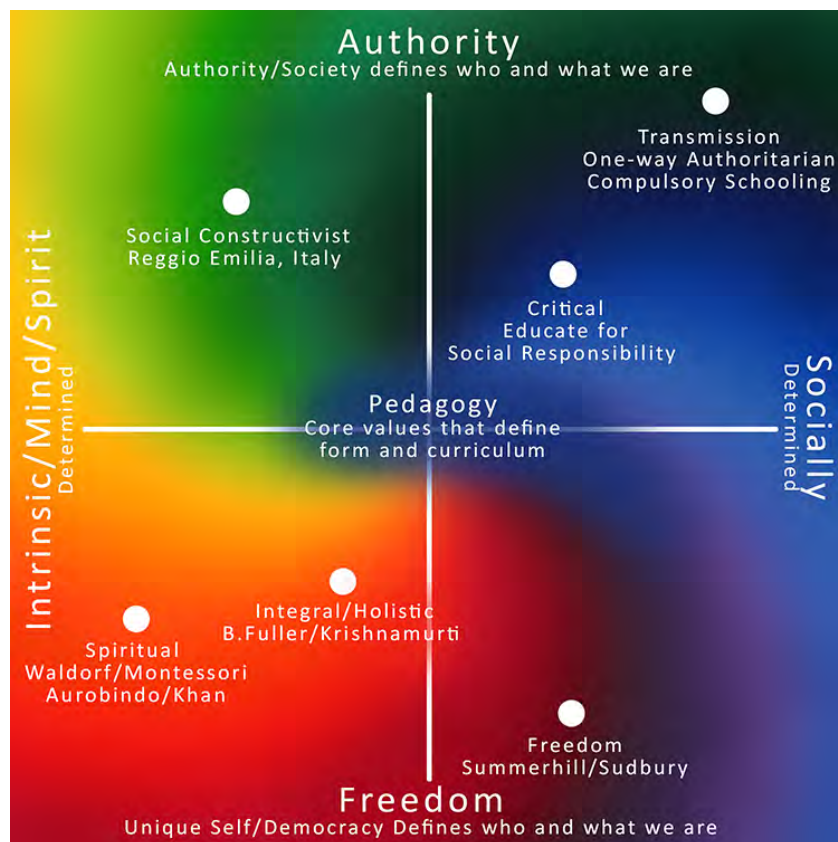
A Map of the Alternative Education Landscape

by Ron Miller

What type of learning environment is right for *your* child? Choosing a school, or choosing to educate your child outside the institution of schooling, is an important decision — and today, with many educational choices available to families, a complicated one. There are significant differences among the diverse teaching and learning approaches that often get lumped together as “alternative education.”

One directory published in 1997, *The Parents’ Guide to Alternatives in Education*, by Ronald E. Koetzsch, described over twenty distinct types of alternative schools and six innovative “trends” in public education. The differences among them reflect diverse moral and philosophical orientations: Some aim to maximize freedom in learning; others provide what they consider to be a child-nurturing structure of one sort or another. Some are rooted in specific religious or cultural understandings; others, in ideals of social justice or ecological wisdom. As a parent with no training in educational philosophy, you might find it confusing to try to figure out which approach would best address the needs of your child and the values of your family.

In sorting through these diverse approaches, I have found it useful to place them into several broad categories, and, using these categories, I created a conceptual map that I have presented in workshops and courses. This map enables us to compare apples to oranges, so to speak. It can help answer numerous basic questions: What makes a Waldorf school different from a progressive school? In what ways does “unschooling” work well for some children but not as well for others? How much adult authority is appropriate or necessary to allow children to achieve specific learning goals?



Graph added by Michael Mendizza

With this map, we can take the twenty or thirty different educational orientations and group them into six basic clusters: the transmission model, freedom-based learning, social constructivism, critical pedagogy, spiritual developmentalism, and integral or holistic education. A particular school or learning situation might contain elements from two or more of these groups, making it difficult for us to classify perfectly, but the map still helps us understand the issues and variables that we need to consider when we compare and evaluate educational approaches.

Transmission model

This term refers to conventional educational thinking — to the dominant, mainstream approach to which educational alternatives are alternative. What defines mainstream education is its view of the learning process: Knowledge is seen as an established, objective, authoritative body of facts outside the learner's experiences or personal preferences, and the role of the educator is to *transmit* this knowledge, along with accompanying academic skills and attitudes, to the learner's mind.

The transmission model denotes a one-way, largely authoritarian process. The educator is in charge and holds the authority to evaluate learning according to how well learners meet his or her expectations. According to a transmission understanding of education, instruction is “delivered” and classrooms are “managed” as efficiently as possible. In public schools, the educator is backed by an entire system of demands, inducements, punishments, measuring devices, and packaging of knowledge: testing, grades, standards, curriculum units, textbooks, psychological and medical labels, detention slips, and much, much more.

Many critics have complained about this model's narrow vision of the learning process and its effects on students' motivation and sense of self. Philosopher John Dewey, for example, argued that a transmission model of education is more appropriate to an authoritarian, controlled society than to the democratic and open society we claim to want in the U.S. Yet, in many educational situations, some degree of transmission is appropriate and even necessary. Professional and technical training requires novices to learn established bodies of knowledge if they are to master their trades.

Closely knit cultural or religious groups do need to transmit their heritage if they are to maintain their traditions. Even in most alternative educational approaches, there is some transmission of more or less objective knowledge about the world. One key question that alternative educators and parents need to address is just how much, and in what specific ways, their students' learning experiences should be determined by external factors. What cultural, social, political, religious, or intellectual values, if any, might be important enough to impose on the individual learner, regardless of the educational approach being chosen?

Freedom-based learning

Some proponents of educational alternatives have insisted that the learner's freedom and autonomy should be limited as little as possible, even not at all. They believe that learning always starts with the individual's needs, goals, and desires, and not with any supposed body of knowledge or societal demands. For these alternative educators, the ideal education embraces the exact opposite of transmission: It centers on a learner's entirely self-motivated exploration of whatever the world has to offer that seems relevant to the learner's own life. This full-bodied individualism has a long and colorful history in education.

Leo Tolstoy, Francisco Ferrer, and other radical critics of the modern state, for example, developed an anarchist theory of education in the late nineteenth century that led to the founding of a vibrant “modern school” movement in the years before World War One. A. S. Neill built his freedom based Summerhill School a few years later on the basis of a psychological, rather than explicitly political, interest in freedom. In the 1960s, the rise of student activism and a radical counterculture created a surge of interest in both the psychological and political aspects of freedom, resulting in a “free school” movement that at its peak included nearly a thousand schools across the U.S. Neill's book *Summerhill* was a best seller, and other articulate critics of mainstream schooling, including Paul Goodman, George Dennison, Ivan Illich, and John Holt, also wrote boldly and passionately about freedom in learning.

Holt's insistence that genuine learning is generated from the person's own experience led him to question the existence of all school environments, even the free schools, as being artificially separated from the real world; eventually, he became a pioneering advocate of unstructured family-based learning, which he called "unschooling." For years, many homeschooling families have considered Holt to be the founder of the modern-day homeschooling movement.

Another example of freedom-oriented education, becoming quite popular today, is the Sudbury model, which originated at the Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts in the 1960s. The developers and advocates of this approach refer to their pedagogy as "democratic" education. They argue that the freedom their students enjoy is no different from the liberty guaranteed to citizens in a true democratic society, and indeed, prepares young people effectively for a life of active citizenship in a democracy.

Social constructivist models

In contrast to the individualism often reflected in theories of freedom-based learning, many educators argue that learning is a social endeavor, requiring meaningful interaction between and among persons within an environment that deliberately encourages collaboration, inquiry, and creative problem solving. For educators holding this view, knowledge is neither entirely objective (out in the world) nor entirely subjective (relevant only to the individual's interests); rather, it is dynamically *constructed* through the relationship between and among persons and their social and physical environment.

This understanding embraces ideas that John Dewey and his followers, and developmental psychologists such as Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, expressed early in the twentieth century and has since been developed further by numerous other theorists and educators, for example those who practice approaches such as "cooperative learning" and "whole language" instruction.

The broad term "progressive education" often refers to schools or teaching methods based in this tradition (though it also means other things). Although these ideas have influenced many alternative educators and independent schools, they are also commonly practiced by progressive public school educators. Perhaps the most complete and explicit example of this orientation is the model of early childhood education developed in the city of Reggio Emilia, Italy. The Reggio schools have inspired thousands of educators around the world with their emphasis on young children's innate creative abilities and the importance of developing a collaborative and supportive learning community. These schools encourage children to engage in extensive projects that reflect their interests, and the teachers help them to work together and find meaning in their activities.

Social constructivism has often been called "child-centered" education because it strives to be "developmentally appropriate" (that is, it respects human capacities and tendencies as these naturally unfold during a child's life) and engages students so fully in their learning; it is clearly an alternative to the transmission model. Its emphasis on community and collaboration also gives it a social dimension that often extends to a larger concern for social justice and participatory democracy, although constructivist educators might be cautious about explicitly politicizing their teaching.

Usually constructivism is expressed in secular language and non-religious contexts (such as public schools), but it can be congruent with religious educational approaches, too; to give one important example, it is practiced in many of the Friends (Quaker) schools, where learning often takes place through projects, discussions, and social action in the context of a caring school community.

Critical pedagogy

Dewey explicitly argued that progressive education should not be entirely "child-centered" but needed to address social problems in the child's world. Many of Dewey's more overtly political followers have therefore emphasized the importance of "social reconstruction" or "social responsibility" as primary goals of education. In the 1970s, after the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by the radical Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, the term "critical pedagogy" came into use and many progressive theorists now use it to mean a deliberate effort to educate for social responsibility.

They believe that the main purpose of education is not to transmit knowledge and preserve social traditions but to *transform* society by helping students develop a perceptive and inquisitive consciousness of the conditions of their culture.

This literature speaks about freedom and liberation, but it is important to note that these educators do not hold an individualistic view of freedom. They are concerned with changing cultural, economic, and political institutions and believe that a functioning democracy requires purposeful collective action, not simply personal choice.

Proponents of critical pedagogy tend to be strong supporters of the public school ideal (though they certainly want to change the actual conditions in most schools) and generally view privatization of education as being elitist or a retreat from social responsibility. So homeschoolers and independent alternative educators generally do not find many enthusiastic allies among this group. Yet critical pedagogy represents an important segment of the alternative education map, for it raises basic questions about the very purpose of education.

In a world suffering from excessive violence and exploitation, racism and class division, and the devastating effects of globalization and corporate expansion, teachers and parents simply cannot afford to treat knowledge and academic skills from a morally neutral, disengaged perspective, as they often do. In the context of an unequal and often unfair society, say the advocates of critical pedagogy, students' personal interests and desires cannot be the only measure of educational value. In a democracy, if we want to educate young people to become active, engaged citizens, can we truly do so by "getting out of their way," as some of the freedom-based educators explicitly say, or is it necessary to provoke their learning deliberately, following a clear moral and ethical vision?

According to critical pedagogy theory, these are essential issues for every educator to ponder. Even "alternative" educators need to consider whether their approach is overly "child-centered" in a troubled world, because, they assert, being neutral or indifferent to the moral condition of the world into which we are educating children ultimately amounts to an endorsement of the transmission model; it is to say, in effect, that learning is an objective process and that the purpose of education is to transmit "knowledge" into young minds, even if the form of transmission doesn't look as harsh or artificial as it does in conventional schooling.

Spiritual developmentalism

This is a bit of an unwieldy label, but it is the most precise one I have found. It encompasses educational models based on very specific ideas about the unfolding of the human soul through specific stages of development. Both terms in the description are essential: The educators who practice these models insist that there is a spiritual dimension to human existence — i.e., the soul is nourished by universal creative energies that are not explained by the laws of physical science or conventional psychology or learning theory. And the models carefully prescribe what sorts of teaching and learning experiences are appropriate and beneficial at each level of development.

The two best known examples of this educational approach are Montessori and Waldorf education, which are firmly rooted in observations and beliefs about developmental cycles. In addition to Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner (founder of Waldorf education), other spiritual teachers, notably the yogi/mystic Aurobindo and the Sufi master Hazrat Inayat Khan, have proposed educational models corresponding to stages of the soul's unfolding. According to educational scholar David Marshak, who has studied these four approaches extensively, although the models come from very different cultures and traditions and differ in many details, they view the development of human capacities in remarkably similar ways. So whatever we might think of these specific educational practices, there does appear to be some archetypal reality underlying them.

These types of educational alternatives are "child-centered" in a paradoxical way. The learning environment is generally highly structured, with the teacher having a very active and authoritative role. These are not free schools! Yet the structure provided is intended to meet the authentic (if often unconscious) developmental needs of the growing child.

Unlike transmission education, education grounded in spiritual developmentalism does not invoke authority for the sake of authority; rather, it intends to establish a structure meant to support the unfolding of each child's latent potentials. In contrast to freedom-based and even social constructionist approaches, this educational model asserts that a specially trained, self-disciplined, and caring teacher can know a student's true potentials better than the student knows them him or herself — because an immature young person is still gaining the capacity to know and understand deeply.

Integral or holistic education

The final corner of my proposed map comprises not only a separate category of its own, but also an integrative category in which we find all of the other parts as well. This orientation has been developed only fairly recently. In the past fifteen or twenty years, a small number of philosophers and educational theorists have been exploring what they variously call an “integral,” “ecological,” or “holistic” worldview.

Essentially, they are trying to describe the interconnected nature of the world and human experience; in this view, all things need to be seen in their wholeness rather than in fragmented and detached ways. Every object, idea, or living being is both whole in itself and part of an endless series of larger wholes that give meaning to it: Each successive whole is greater than the mere sum of its parts. This perspective has been described at length in the writings of Ken Wilber, and is also found in thinkers such as David Bohm, Alfred North Whitehead, Fritjof Capra, Anna Lemkow, Ervin Laszlo, Gregory Bateson, David Ray Griffin, and Buckminster Fuller, among others. It also reflects the principles of many religious and mystical traditions. In education, a similar understanding was expressed in the writings of the well known teacher Krishnamurti (see, e.g., *Education and the Significance of Life*), who also founded several schools. By the early 1980s, the concept of “holistic education” began to take shape as a recognizable field of study and practice.

A holistic educator recognizes that all five of the other orientations on the educational map have value: They all have something important to say about the nature of the human being and the process of learning. From a holistic perspective, however, each one of them contains only a *partial* truth, because human existence and the world of which we are a part are so enormously complex and dynamic that they cannot be fully grasped by any one ideology. A holistic educator attempts to balance freedom and structure, individuality and social responsibility, spiritual wisdom and spontaneity, in order to respond to each learning situation in its immediate presence. Any particular learner, in a particular setting, in a particular culture, at a particular point in historical time, should be addressed in that moment, and not according to a fixed model meant to apply to all individuals in all learning situations.

There are educators, in both public schools and alternative settings, who practice in this way even if they do not label themselves “holistic” or “integral.” For example, a teacher development program called *The Courage to Teach*, based on the inspiring work of Quaker educator/author Parker Palmer, encourages educators to teach from their hearts, from their whole selves, to be wholly present in their relationships to students and colleagues. Many other educators bring into their classrooms their spiritual practices, their commitment to social justice and healing, and their profound respect for young people. These teachers transcend the boundaries of the models I have described, integrating into their work the wisdom to be found in each. These are holistic educators.

Although many alternative (and some public) schools have many holistic qualities, few schools are fully, explicitly committed to practicing an integral or holistic philosophy of education.

Recently, I have been learning about interesting educational movements growing out of spiritual traditions from India. One of them, called “neo-humanist” education, is being developed by the international Ananda Marga organization, whose work is grounded in the teachings of a philosopher named P.R. Sarkar.

Another approach, called KPM, has been developed by the Atma Vidya Educational Foundation. Still another integral approach can be found at The Robert Muller School, in Texas; named after a former United Nations official and global peace activist who developed a “world core curriculum.”

This school is often cited as a model for holistic education. There are others scattered about that would consider themselves to be “holistic” schools, as well, and certainly there are many homeschooling families who live and teach according to the principles of an integral worldview. The main point to keep in mind is that holistic education is not a specifiable model or ideology, but an attitude or orientation of openness to the living presence of our children/students and to the complex and dynamic world around us.

The map is not the territory. If I am to be faithful to my own holistic principles, I must acknowledge the limitations of the conceptual map I have just laid out. The actual beliefs and practices of any individual parent, teacher, or school are too alive, too real, to be pinned down by such concepts and labels. It is not the purpose of this map to stick people into rigid categories so we can make confident assumptions about what they do or believe.

Rather, the map offers a way of sorting out different belief systems so we can examine these assumptions (our own and others’) and appreciate both their strengths and flaws. We can each place ourselves on the map and ask ourselves why we seem to fit better in some places than in others. Then, we need to ask ourselves: Are we satisfied to remain in these places, or do other perspectives challenge us with their own partial understandings of the wholeness of education? Once we find where we are most comfortable, then we can choose, more wisely and meaningfully, those educational approaches that resonate most closely with our own experiences, beliefs, and values—and also respect those of our fellow educational travelers who make other choices.

This article was originally published in *Paths of Learning* #20 (Spring, 2004).

How to Grow a School

Abridged; Chris Mercogliano

Introduction:

You will find the words *sprout* and *grow* throughout this discussion because a good learning environment, the kind that meets children's real physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual needs, is like a garden. It begins with a seed, a vision of a better way. Then comes a sprout that must be carefully tended until it matures and bears the fruit of happy, competent, purposeful, autonomous young people.

There is another reason I have used horticultural terms in the same sentence with *school*. In addition to teaching in and helping to run the Albany Free school a noncoercive, democratic inner-city school, for more than thirty years, I am an inveterate gardener. And over my many years of teaching and gardening, I have gradually discovered how similar are the growth requirements of plants and children. Both need to be loved and nourished. Both need warmth and sunshine and open space. Both need to be appreciated and admired. Both need to be left alone to do their own thing, while at the same time they need to be protected from intruders and toxic influences. *Neither* need the addition of synthetic chemicals to regulate their development.

What my time in the garden has taught me is that plants don't require constant attention in order to reach their greatest height and beauty. If the conditions in the garden are right and everything is well established, then there is often not much for the gardener to do—aside from a little weeding, mulching, and watering—except observe and be patient.

There are warning signals to watch for when a plant is not thriving: a discoloration in the leaves, an infestation of insects, the failure of blossoms to set fruit. Each signal is associated with a set of possible causes. Perhaps there is a deficiency of an essential element in the soil. Or the pH might be off. Or maybe the plant isn't getting enough water or sunlight—or too much. The gardener's job is to interpret the signals correctly and make the necessary adjustments. Otherwise it's back to watching and waiting and, yes, admiring, because plants can feel the gardener's loving presence. Carefully controlled experiments have established this as scientific fact.

Patience is called for because growth cannot be rushed; it happens in its own time. There is no place in the garden for anxious managers. They make the plants feel anxious, too, and this only drags them down. And so it is with children. The learning process is as natural as the ripening of an apple or the blooming of a rose—a truth easily unseen in this era of hypertechnology and obsession with higher standards. Children are learners even before birth. Their education begins inside the womb, where, bathed in their mothers' emotional experience and the mellifluous sounds of the immediate environment, they are already busy forming images of the unseen world outside. Some would go so far as to say that, just as the oak tree is contained inside the acorn, a fully developed intelligence already exists within every newborn, waiting only for the right models and external stimuli to trigger its unfolding.

We have gradually been conditioned to rely on the advice of so-called experts rather than to trust in our ability to learn from our own experience. We no longer risk letting our mistakes guide us to creative solutions to stubborn problems.

The entropic slide toward looking to others for answers lurks at the core of the issue I wish to address. Nowhere is it more evident than in the realm of education, where schools are at once its cause and its effect. The ultimate—and

most insidious—result of the conventional educational model, as Ivan Illich pointed out many years ago in *Deschooling Society*, is that our minds themselves become schooled. Our ideas, our beliefs—our very thought processes—become dependent on outside sources for validation. Our schools, in turn, simply mirror the culture that surrounds them. It's a vicious cycle.

Thus, I sense a certain danger in continuing, because we have no use for any more formulaic approaches, any more warmed-over copies of what was once a very natural and individualized task: helping our young learn what they need to know in order to be competent and happy as they move through life.

Above all, it will be my attempt to demythologize the artificial construct known as “school,” which, like the Wizard of Oz behind his curtain of illusion, has inflated itself into something mysterious and foreboding. The following represents my attempt to throw back the curtain so that all may see how simple and basic is the process of educating children, so that we can reclaim it from the jealous hands of experts, bureaucrats, and academicians.

Chapter 1

Schools Worth Growing

Children brought the rest of their lives with them to school every day. She got to know their parents and learned about the goings-on at home. If a child came in angry or depressed, she likely knew why, and if she didn't, she would always find out.

Thus, a good school is an integral part of the child's whole world, not an out-of-the-way warehouse for the dry storage of youthful exuberance and imagination. It involves the child's whole being, addressing the needs of the heart as well as the head. This means that it fosters vivid emotional, intellectual, and physical experience. It is alive with motion, sound, and color. What is learned therein has tangible meaning and purpose. The goal isn't to “get through” a “curriculum” that consists of “subject matter”; rather it is to explore areas of genuine import and interest. Learning is relevant and exciting, and it is grounded in real activities that integrate different skills and branches of knowledge.

A good school recognizes the value of the exchanges between students. Again from *Teacher*:

From long sitting, watching and pondering (all so unprofessional), I have found out the worst enemies to what we call teaching. The first is the children's interest in each other. It plays the very devil with the orthodox method. If only they'd stop talking with each other, fighting each other and loving each other. This unseemly and unlawful communication! In self-defense I've got to use the damn thing. So I harness the communication, since I can't control it, and base my method on it. They read in pairs, sentence and sentence about. There's no time for either to get bored. Each checks the other's mistakes and hurries him up if he's too slow, since after all, his own turn depends on it. They teach each other all their work, sitting cross-legged knee to knee on the mat or on their tables, arguing with, correcting, abusing or smiling at each other. And between them all the time is this togetherness, so that learning is so mixed up with relationship that it becomes a part of it. What an unsung creative medium is relationship!

In an organic learning environment, order isn't externally imposed. It isn't derived from some standardized, sanitized, prepackaged source, because, as George Dennison wrote in *The Lives of Children* (Random House, 1969), “The principle of true order lies within the persons themselves.” Dennison once had a small school for children on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and, like Ashton-Warner, he quickly discovered how the imposition of artificial order via teacher-generated rules, routines, and curricula only stifles the vital energy that fuels true learning.

A good school is a community, too—the real, not the euphemistic kind. It is a place of cooperative endeavor where everyone has a say. This is because communities are based on mutual consent, not the rule of force and top-down authority. In an educational setting that is at the same time a community, the children will be empowered to participate in school governance. They will have a true democratic voice in matters of substance, not just token participation in some form of adult-contrived “student council” that deals only with peripheral issues. In this way, students will consider the school to be just as much theirs as it is the teachers' and administrators'. They will

assume a natural responsibility for themselves, for each other, and for the school's well-being. Moreover, children who practice democracy at a young age are far better prepared to assume the mantle of citizenship when they take their place as adult members of society. (Perhaps here lies one solution to the growing apathy of the American electorate.)

The competitive grading and ranking of students eats away at a school's sense of community. It pits students against one another, creating instead an atmosphere of separation and isolation—especially for the losers. Competition belongs on athletic fields and in gymnasiums, where the openly stated and mutually agreed upon goal is surpassing the opponent. It has no place in a community.

In schools that are communities, evaluation isn't a static, numerical measure of relative performance. Rather, it is a dynamic individual assessment of a child's overall intellectual, emotional, physical, and social development. Many schools accomplish this kind of evaluation by maintaining portfolios of a student's accomplishments throughout the year. Here at the Albany Free School, teachers, in consultation with the students and one another, write a narrative report about each student at midyear. The report highlights the student's achievements and outlines any areas of possible concern. The teachers then meet with parents to go over the report in greater depth.

Communities are inclusive by their very nature. Groups that exclude those who don't fit the mold or meet a certain standard are cliques, not communities. A community respects the individual differences of its members rather than demanding a uniform sameness.

It is important to remember here, however, that one of compulsory public schooling's founding missions was to "Americanize" those who came to this country in the nineteenth-century flood of immigrants, to create a homogenized consumer culture that would service both ends of the emerging industrial economy—a goal that has more than effectively been met. Recent efforts to introduce "multicultural education" into the schools are at least helping children build an awareness of traditions other than their own. A true learning community, however, will find ways to create and support an actual diversity among its members.

You may have noted that I have yet to use the term *freedom*. This might seem a bit incongruous, given that all of my professional experience has been in a "free school," but there is a good reason: Freedom, especially in the context of children, can be a volatile, misunderstood notion. For some it evokes *Lord of the Flies*-like scenarios of a bunch of out-of-control young ruffians running wild and doing whatever they please.

In order to dispel such images of lawless anarchy, A. S. Neill, in his book *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing* (Hart Publishing, 1960), was careful to differentiate between freedom and what he called "license." Students at Summerhill, in other words, are free to do what they want *as long as* they stay within the democratically arrived at laws of the community and aren't violating the sanctity and sensibilities of others. No one is ever free to cry "Fire!" in a crowded theater. That is license.

For others the idea of children being free in school suggests a bunch of spaced-out hippie kids wandering aimlessly through daisy-strewn meadows. It elicits the question "How will my child ever learn if he has the option to play all day?" Such a line of inquiry is quick to form on the lips of most parents visiting our school for the first time. I can only reply that here a lack of learning has seldom been a problem. It simply isn't necessary to coerce or manipulate children into learning, because they are naturally curious. They want to read compelling literature, to write down their fantasies and dreams, to master numeracy, to discover how things work, to delve into the past and find out how it influences the present and future—in short, to become competent, knowledgeable, and independent.

Consider the words of a young Albert Einstein on the subject of schooling: "One had to cram all of this stuff into one's mind, whether one liked it or not," he wrote in his university diary. "This coercion

had such a deterring effect that after I had passed the final examination I found the consideration of any scientific problem distasteful for an entire year.”

“It is, in fact, nothing short of a miracle,” Einstein concluded, “that modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry. For this delicate little plan, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom.”

When children are free to learn in the absence of carrots and sticks, when they engage in the process of their own accord and on their own terms, learning becomes a lifelong affair. Besides, children who learn for learning’s sake, because they have located an inherent joy in the process itself, learn faster and more easily. And they retain what they have taken in because they are continually integrating the new skills and information into their daily lives.

a good school, whether or not it calls itself “free,” allows children to make choices, and lots of them, because it recognizes that becoming adept at making good choices is a prerequisite to any life well-lived. The practice of exercising daily choice over matters of work and play provides kids with an important opportunity to explore their own interests and passions. They discover what it feels like to have their inner motivation propel them forward, rather than a set of external rewards and punishments.

Any school that is a true community recognizes that love is the most essential element of all. It bonds the group and generates the sense of oneness and belonging that all humans need to strive toward their highest purposes. In a great many schools, however, the kind of caring and intimacy that go hand in hand with love are inhibited by the tightly defined roles everyone is forced to play. When students are allowed to be only students, teachers to be only teachers, and administrators to be only administrators, the possibilities for interaction are greatly reduced. In a community, participants are encouraged to go beyond merely *playing* their roles. They are supported in *being* themselves. Only then do love and caring flourish.

The age segregation that is part and parcel of the conventional school model also limits the potential for togetherness. The mixing of ages in a school setting, on the other hand, creates an atmosphere that is much more congenial and familial. It is not at all uncommon in good schools for kids of different ages to become good friends, drawn to each other by mutual interests that transcend the number of years spent on the earth.

Love involves spontaneity, touching, and always, of course, conflict—all of which most schools carefully try to keep out of their daily routines. Meanwhile, George Dennison’s brilliant insight at the First Street School was that there are valuable lessons to be derived from allowing conflicts to play themselves out. Conflicts bring people closer when they are worked all the way through. If, however, conflict is suppressed by strict regimen and constant surveillance, then everyone is frozen at “safe” distances from one another, and the unpredictable contact that contributes so much to love seldom occurs. Given the recent epidemic of school shootings, the actual safety of such an environment has been thrown open to question.

The Albany Free School has a council meeting system to mediate the interpersonal rumblings that are inevitable in an environment where the participants aren’t kept too busy and separate to be in close contact with one another. When members of the school community—teachers included—have a problem that they can’t resolve on their own, they can call to order the entire school (except for the preschoolers) to help them resolve it. By prior mutual consent, everyone drops everything and gathers in a large circle on the floor in the school’s meeting room (the preschoolers generally aren’t included because it’s hard for them to sit still long enough). The problem might be a conflict between two or more individuals; or maybe a precious belonging has been lost, stolen or broken; or perhaps someone wants to create or change a rule or policy.

The meetings are usually led by a student chairperson and are run according to *Robert’s Rules of Order*. If the presenting problem is a fight of some sort, then the assembled group will begin helping the combatants to sort out what happened - who did what/said what to whom and why, how did it

start, and so on. The goal will be to try to bring the various stories in line with one another, to air out the emotional content of the problem, and, above all, to get the upset parties talking to each other again, instead of *at* each other. A meeting will generally continue for as long as it takes to help them reach a mutual resolution. Such forums take the toxicity out of anger by providing a safe space for people to air their grievances. They aren't a cure-all, but they are an effective way to keep resentment from festering, and to empower children to protect themselves from harassment or unfair treatment.

Perhaps most important, a good school will "fit the child, and not the other way around," as Neill wrote in *Summerhill*. To illustrate this crucial point, he told the story of the time he encountered a boy breaking windows in Neill's cherished greenhouse. The young lad had only recently come to live at Summerhill and was filled with antisocial impulses. Rather than reprimand his angry new student, Neill decided to join him in his stone throwing. The very surprised boy, no longer feeling isolated and alone, soon laid down his ammunition and began to tell Neill what it was that was bothering him. After that he was able to put his destructive tendencies behind him and get more into the flow of the school.

Such flexibility is the hallmark of good schools. They will formulate individualized strategies for children who are intellectually, emotionally, or physically stuck rather than insist that all students adapt to the same standard approach. Good schools will nurture individuality, not suppress it. They will continue experimenting with new ways of doing things instead of always relying on tried and true formulas that work for the majority most of the time. They will take chances and dare to make exceptions to their rules and policies.

At the risk of repeating myself, there is no single formula for a good learning environment, the essence of which is not to be found in external structures but rather in the people who make them up and the daily interactions among those people. Provided, that is, the foundational principles of a good school— organicity, relationship, community, democracy, flexibility, freedom, trust, responsibility, choice, love—are valued and nourished. When they are, the possibilities, as we shall see, are nearly endless.

Chapter 2 Deep Roots

In order for a new school to operate in a well-grounded fashion, it first needs to learn about its roots—the origins of the guiding ideals on which it is based. Moreover, any organization or social movement that fails to understand and honor its past is likely to lose its sense of direction along the way, perhaps permanently. This is because guiding principles are abstract concepts that can mean very different things to different people. Becoming familiar with the principles in their historical context ensures that their original meanings will be preserved and passed on to the next generation.

Also, anyone setting out to start an unconventional school would do well to know that there already exists a large body of accumulated wisdom—the best kind, the kind tempered by experience. Drawing on that wisdom can make it possible to avoid some of the pitfalls and blind alleys. Of course, everyone will still have to make his or her own mistakes. They are a necessary part of every experiment.

There is another, indirect benefit of a school's knowing the traditions from which it springs: In cases in which a school is trying something different in a place that is hesitant to embrace new ideas, or finds itself dealing with doubting parents, references to the work of earlier pioneers can create needed credibility and an air of reassurance.

The urge to find better ways to foster healthy, positive development in children is by no means new. It wasn't until the Renaissance, however, that any significant protest arose against the traditional means and methods of teaching children. The predominant approach to education until that time could be neatly summed up by the inscription found by archaeologists on an Egyptian clay tablet: "Thou didst beat me and knowledge entered my head." What schools did exist

were often staffed by teachers barely educated themselves. Discipline was harsh. The methodology consisted almost entirely of rote memorization and drill. Most children of the lower classes received no schooling at all, though they perhaps were the better for it, given the conditions in the schools they would have been forced to attend.

Among the first to challenge the educational status quo in any systematic way was the eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It is to Rousseau's natural philosophy of education that almost all present-day alternatives to teaching and learning can trace their roots.

Others soon followed, beginning with Swiss-born Heinrich Pestalozzi, who attempted to put Rousseau's radical ideas into practice in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Prussia. Pestalozzi was followed a generation later in Germany by Friedrich Froebel. Froebel, like Pestalozzi, formulated an educational "method" that would later be co-opted by mainstream schools around the world.

As Froebel was nearing retirement, Count Leo Tolstoy decided to delay a promising literary career in order to start a freedom-based school on his ancestral estate not far from Moscow. Then, influenced by Rousseau and Tolstoy, Francisco Ferrer opposed the educational establishment in early-twentieth-century Spain by founding the libertarian Modern School in Barcelona. Both Tolstoy and Ferrer were persecuted by the State because of their anti-establishment beliefs, with Ferrer ultimately being put to death by the Spanish government in 1909.

At about the same time, the Italian physician Maria Montessori sought to develop the therapeutic value of education, first in the asylums and later in her Children's Houses in the slums of Rome. Her contemporary Rudolf Steiner, meanwhile, was working to establish education as a means of personal and spiritual transformation. Like Pestalozzi and Froebel, Montessori and Steiner had a worldwide influence. Their educational philosophies and methodologies became the basis for international chains of schools bearing their names.

In England in the 1920s, a young teacher named A. S. Neill was so shocked by the authoritarianism of the schools in his native Scotland that he founded a residential school where children could share power and responsibility with the adults. The publication of Neill's book *Summerhill* established the school as a model for a number of similar schools, found mainly in the United States.

The tumultuous decade of the 1960s in the United States brought forth a host of widely varied educational innovators and critics too numerous to mention. One whose influence surpassed that of all others, however, was John Holt. Holt started out as a teacher in a series of progressive private schools and later became so disenchanted with the state of American education that he ultimately challenged the very idea of schools. His voluminous writings would eventually influence an entire generation of parents to consider teaching their children at home instead.

Also in the sixties, the humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers strove to counter the dominance of Skinnerian behavioral conditioning in mainstream educational methodology. In *Freedom to Learn*, Rogers advocated a shift in emphasis from the conventional reward-and-punishment approach to teaching in favor of self-initiated and self-directed learning.

Here is a closer look at the seminal figures that developed and refined the principles underlying good schools:

Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) stood the contemporary model of education completely on its head. He began by taking a sledgehammer to its philosophical foundation, namely the Calvinist notion that children are inherently lazy and untrustworthy and that it is society's role to mold their minds and characters into socially acceptable form. Rousseau assumed the opposing starting point: The child is innately good. Or, as he wrote in *Emile* (Basic Books, 1979), "There is no original perversity in the human heart."

It is society that is evil, not children, Rousseau contended, and they must be safeguarded from its contaminating influence. The problem is the way in which social institutions, especially schools, distort children into their own image, forcing them all into the same mold, regardless of the fit.

Rousseau proposed that the development of the child is a natural unfolding, not a mechanical process that needs adult management and regulation at every turn. Children are born to learn, and, if given a nurturing, stimulating environment in which they are allowed to follow their own natural rhythms and mature at their own pace, they will largely educate themselves. Thus, he doubted that there should be formal schools at all. Whether there were or not, however, he believed that the aim of education should be the free and uninhibited development of the learner.

Rousseau was a much better philosopher than he was a child psychologist or father. He assumed that babies come into the world without awareness or feelings, and he gave up his own children soon after they were born. Nevertheless, he presaged by more than two hundred years Jean Piaget's widely accepted theory that children go through a universal set of developmental stages as opposed to their being miniature adults with only quantitative differences in understanding and capability. "Childhood has its ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling that are proper to it," he argued in *Emile*. "Each mind has its own form, according to which it needs to be governed."

The early intellectual training of children that was about to be institutionalized throughout the Western world was anathema to Rousseau. He recommended that formal academic pursuits, such as the study of mathematics, science, or geography wait until at least the age of twelve. Prior to that time, he said, children learn best by actively engaging with the natural world through firsthand experience. Rousseau believed, like Maria Montessori would a century and a half later, that education should begin with a cultivation of the senses and not the abstract intellect:

"No, if nature gives the child's brain the suppleness that fits it to receive all sorts of impressions, it is not in order to engrave on this brain the names of kings, dates, the terms of heraldry, globes and geography, and all those words without any sense for the child's age, and devoid of utility for any age whatsoever, with which his sad and sterile childhood is burdened." (*Emile*).

With regard to basic skills such as reading, Rousseau's attitude was equally relaxed:

"A great business is made of seeking the best methods of teaching reading. Desks and cards are invented; a child's room is made into a printing shop. Locke wants him to learn to read with dice. Now is that not a clever invention? What a pity. A means surer than all these, and the one always forgotten, is the desire to learn. Give the child this desire; then let your desks and your dice go. Any method will be good for him."

Rousseau also attacked the prevailing teaching style of his time. For him, true teaching was based not on authority and control but on a loving bond between teacher and student, within which the two could explore matters of interest together. He strongly advocated what he called the "inactive method," which in plain language meant letting kids find things out for themselves. Or in his words in *Emile*:

"Young teacher, I am preaching a difficult art to you, that of governing without precepts and doing everything by doing nothing. . . . In the first place, you should be well aware that it is rarely up to you to suggest to him what he ought to learn. It is up to him to desire it, to seek it, to find it. It is up to you to put it within his reach, skillfully to give birth to this desire and to furnish him with the means of satisfying it. It follows, therefore, that your questions should be infrequent but well chosen."

Rousseau was aware of how paradoxical a figure he was—"Common reader, pardon me my paradoxes. I prefer to be a paradoxical man than a prejudiced one." Nowhere is this trait more evident than in the elaboration of his concept of "well-regulated freedom." One last time from *Emile*:

“Let him always believe he is the master, but let it always be you who are. There is no subjection so perfect as that which keeps the appearance of freedom. Doubtless he ought to do only what he wants; but he ought to

want only what you want him to. He ought not to make a step without your having foreseen it; he ought not to open his mouth without your knowing what he is going to say.”

Over the next three centuries, every freedom movement in education would wrestle with this very same paradox.

Pestalozzi

Though a native of Switzerland—the homeland of the Protestant reformer John Calvin—Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827) followed Rousseau in his rejection of the pessimistic and essentially Calvinist view of human nature that was providing the philosophical underpinnings for the then-emerging system of universal compulsory education in neighboring Prussia. The Prussian initiative was the first of its kind in the world’s history and would soon become the model for similar systems throughout Europe and the United States.

Pestalozzi strongly opposed the Prussian educational methodology, with its military-style discipline and rigid routines of rote memorization and drill. From *Evening Hours of a Hermit* (University Publications of America, 1977):

“Yet there is nothing hard and compulsory in the methods of nature. . . .

The nightingale’s song vibrates through the darkness, and all natural objects move in thrilling freedom—not a sign of intrusive compulsion anywhere. . . .

. . . Man loses the equilibrium of his power, the strength of his wisdom, in proportion as his mind is compulsorily given up to the pursuit of an object. Hence the natural way of teaching is not coercive.”

Children, Pestalozzi believed, are born with innate gifts coupled with a natural desire to learn. Early education should be centered on immediate experience. According to Pestalozzi, all learning begins with firsthand observation of an object and moves gradually toward the abstract realm of language and ideas. In *The Education of Man* (Greenwood Press, 1951) he wrote, “To arrive at knowledge slowly, by one’s own experience, is better than to learn by rote, in a hurry, facts that other people know, and then glutted with words, to lose one’s own free, observant and inquisitive ability to study. . . . Life itself is the true basis of teaching and education.”

Pestalozzi developed his own approach to education in a series of residential schools on working farms for displaced war orphans. He insisted that his teachers respect children’s own interests. The teachers were instructed to serve as guides and role models and to be more concerned with the needs of the learner than the subject matter.

For Pestalozzi, it is love that is at the heart of real education. Also from *The Education of Man*:

“Pity the educator who feels he needs only to practice patience. What he really needs is a sense of love and happiness. Teaching, by itself and in itself, does not make for love, any more than it makes for hatred. That is why teaching is by no means the essence of education. It is love that is its essence. Love alone is the eternal effluvia of the divinity that is enthroned within us. It is the central point from which the essentials of education flow.”

Pestalozzi’s success made him an international figure in education. Prussia’s nascent public schools sent representatives to study directly under him and bring back his ideas. Later in the century, Horace Mann and other American educators would visit Prussian schools and return with their template, thus indirectly importing Pestalozzi to the United States. In both cases, however, only the mechanical aspects of Pestalozzi’s approach to teaching and learning were extracted, and the spirit was left behind. As Ron Miller notes in *What Are Schools For?* (Holistic Education Press,

1990), the institutions that ultimately touted Pestalozzi as “the father of modern pedagogy” bore little resemblance to the intimate, happy orphan schools where he first worked out his approach.

Perhaps it was the following contradiction at the core of Pestalozzi’s vision that proved to be its ultimate undoing: At the same time that he was passionately advocating noncoercion, spontaneity, organic learning, and a loving relationship between teacher and student, he was also swept away by the messianic hope that a system of education based on his methods would rescue the masses of children who were suffering from centuries of feudalism and internecine warfare. He was unable to foresee the deadening effect that systematization would ultimately have on his ideas.

Froebel

Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852), who studied under Pestalozzi for a time, shared Pestalozzi’s faith in the power of a child’s innate desire to learn. He gave great value to children’s natural insight and intelligence, believing that they, like other growing, living things, should be nurtured according to their own inborn developmental program, not some externally imposed plan. From Froebel’s treatise on education, which was also entitled *The Education of Man* (University Press of the Pacific, 1986):

To young plants and animals we give space and time, knowing that they will grow correctly according to inherent laws. We give them rest and avoid any violent interference such as disturbs healthy growth. But the human being is regarded as a piece of wax or a lump of clay that can be molded into any shape we choose. Why is it that we close our minds to the lessons that Nature silently teaches? Wild plants that grow where they are crowded and confined scarcely suggest any shape of their own, but if we see them growing freely in the fields we can then observe their ordered life and form

—a sun’s shape, a radiant star springs from the earth. So children who are early forced by their parents into a pattern and purpose unsuited to their nature might have grown in beauty and in the fullness of their powers.

A forester before becoming a teacher, Froebel saw learning as a process that must be rooted in natural relationships and conditions. He was convinced that when children are free to learn in their own spontaneous, self-directed ways, with play an integral part of the process, they will learn joyfully and of their own accord. External rewards and punishments are entirely unnecessary.

Like Pestalozzi before him, Froebel was adamantly opposed to the rigid methodology and standardization of the state-controlled school systems emerging throughout Europe. Again from *The Education of Man*:

Each successive generation and each successive individual should go through the entire pattern of earlier human development—as does in fact happen—otherwise past and present would be incomprehensible. He should not do this by copying and imitating, which is a dead approach, but by the living way of free and independent activity. Every human being should reinterpret this pattern freely, and express human potentiality in an entirely personal and unique manner, so that the nature of man and of God in its infinity and its diversity becomes ever more easily discerned. Must we go on stamping out our children like coins, instead of seeing them walk among us as the images of God?

In 1816 Froebel started an experimental school for young children known as a Kindergarten—“garden of children”—that would later become an educational model throughout the German states. Froebel’s philosophy ran so counter to mainstream thought that Kindergartens were eventually banned in Prussia in the 1850s.

Meanwhile, however, Froebel and his Kindergartens had attracted sufficient attention to spark an international movement. His ideas quickly spread to the United States, where they were incorporated into conventional educational practice in a circumscribed form never intended by Froebel—as an optional year of fun and games before the “real work” of education begins at age six.

Thus unfolded the very same irony found in the legacy of Pestalozzi: Froebel's conviction that childhood should be steeped in freedom, spontaneity, play, and individuality—which he was all too eager to bottle and sell—ultimately became the property of a mainstream approach to education that to this day remains largely antithetical to these principles.

Tolstoy

Few people are aware that Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) once started a school for as many as seventy peasant children at Yasnaya Polyana, his feudal estate in mid-nineteenth-century Russia. The school occupied an entire wing of the ancestral manor house.

Tolstoy was motivated, in part, by his own scathing critique of the systems of compulsory education that were already well established in the German states and the rest of Europe and that were soon to arrive in Russia as well. From *Tolstoy on Education* (University of Chicago Press, 1967):

[Schools are] an institution in which children are deprived of their chief pleasure and youthful need of free motion, where obedience and quiet are the chief condition, where every misdeed is punished with a ruler . . . Not only does such a school breed loathing for education, but in these six years it inculcates upon its pupils hypocrisy and deceit, arising from the unnatural position in which the pupils are placed, and that condition of incoherence and confusion of ideas, which is called the rudiments of education.

Tolstoy objected not only to the prisonlike conditions of the schools, but also to the dumbed-down mentality that created them in the first place:

That strange psychological condition that I call the scholastic condition of the soul, and which all of us unfortunately know too well, consists in that all the higher faculties—imagination, creativeness, inventiveness—give way to other semi-animal faculties, which consist in pronouncing sounds independently from any concept, in counting numbers in succession, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, in perceiving words without allowing imagination to substitute images for these sounds, in short in developing a faculty for crushing all higher faculties, so that only those might be evolved as coincide with the scholastic condition of fear, and of straining memory and attention.

Tolstoy saw through the official rhetoric that trumpeted public education as the salvation of the common man. He witnessed firsthand people's resistance to having the state assume control of a substantial portion of their children's lives, as discussed in *Tolstoy on Education*:

Germany, the founder of the school, has not been able during a struggle of two hundred years to overcome the counteraction of the masses to the school. . . . In spite of the Germans' feeling of obedience to the law, compulsory education even to this moment lies as a heavy burden on the people, and the German governments cannot bring themselves to abolish the law of compulsory education. Germany can pride itself on the education of its people by statistical data, but the masses, as before, for the greater part take away nothing but contempt for them..

. . . Even the new country, the United States of North America, has not evaded that difficulty and has made education semi-compulsory. And it is even worse in our own country, where the most cultivated people dream of the introduction of the German law of compulsory education; and where all the schools, even those intended for the higher classes, exist only as bait for preferments of rank and for the advantages accruing therefrom.

. . . More than that, school is not satisfied with tearing the child away from life for six hours a day, during the best years of a child—it wants to tear three-year-old children away from the influence of their mothers. All that is lacking now is the invention of a steam engine to take the place of wet nurses.

Prior to opening Yasnaya Polyana, Tolstoy took an exploratory tour of German, Swiss, and English

schools and was appalled by the authoritarian posturing. After a visit to one German school, he wrote in a diary entry (vol. 1, p. 157), "Terrible. A prayer for the king, beatings, everything by heart, frightened, morally crippled children."

Tolstoy met with an elderly Froebel while he was in Europe. Although impressed with Froebel's more liberal ideas toward education, he returned home with the resolve to take them even farther. Tolstoy was also influenced by Rousseau's philosophy of education; however, he entirely rejected his Social Contract, which was based on the Platonic notion that an orderly society depends on the subjugation of individual freedom to the will of the society. This pointed toward one of Tolstoy's biggest complaints about conventional schools: the rigid conformity by which they operate. From *Tolstoy on Education*:

From this conception has sprung and even now springs that eternal tendency of pedagogy to arrange matters in such a way that, no matter who the teacher and who the pupil may be, the method should remain one and the same. . . . Education is the tendency of one man to make another just like himself.

. . . School is good only when it has taken cognizance of the fundamental laws by which the people live. A beautiful school for a Russian village on the Steppes, which satisfies all the wants of its pupils, will be a very poor school for a Parisian; and the best school of the seventeenth century will be an exceedingly bad school in our time. Tolstoy's commitment to freedom and individuality in education was unwavering during the three-year existence of his school, which was immediately made clear by the sign above the door that read, "Do As You Like." He firmly believed that education has no ultimate aim and that all learning should be freely chosen. Reasoned Tolstoy, as recorded by his friend and biographer Aylmer Maude in *Life of Tolstoy* (Oxford University Press, 1930), "No one, probably, will deny that the best relation between a teacher and his pupils is a natural one, and that the opposite of a natural one is a compulsory one. If that be so, then the measure of all scholastic methods consists of the greater or lesser naturalness, and consequently of the greater or lesser compulsion employed. The less the children are compelled, the better is the method."

By all accounts Yasnaya Polyana was a vibrant, joyful, exciting place, the atmosphere freewheeling and intimate. Learning was centered around the children's own interests, inclinations, and rhythms. The following are Tolstoy's own comments about the school, gleaned from the closing section of *Tolstoy on Education*:

Like all living beings, the school not only becomes modified with every year, day, and hour, but also is subject to temporary crises, hardships, ailments, and evil moods.

. . . The children bring nothing with them—neither books nor copybooks. No lessons are given for home. Not only do they carry nothing in their hands, but they have nothing to carry in their heads. They are not obliged to remember any lesson—nothing that they were doing the day before. They are not vexed by the thought of the impending lesson. They bring with them nothing but their impressionable natures and their convictions that today will be as jolly in school as it was yesterday.

. . . The school has evolved freely from the principles introduced into it by teachers and pupils. In spite of the preponderating influence of the teacher, the pupil has always had the right not to come to school, or having come, not to listen to the teacher. The teacher has had the right not to admit a pupil, and has had the possibility of bringing to bear all the force of his influence on the majority of pupils.

. . . They sit down wherever they please: on the benches, the tables, the windowsill, the floor, and in the armchair. . . . In my opinion, this external disorder is useful and not to be replaced by anything else, however strange and inconvenient it may be for the teacher. This disorder, or free order, is terrible to us only because we are accustomed to something quite

different, in which we have been educated. Secondly, in this case, as in many similar cases, force is used only through haste and through insufficient respect for human nature. We think that the disorder is growing greater and greater, and that there are no limits to it—whereas we only need to wait a little and the disorder (or animation) calms down naturally by itself, growing into a much better and more permanent order than we could have created.

. . . I am convinced that the school ought not to interfere in that part of the education which belongs to the family; that the school has no right and ought not to reward and punish; that the best administration of a school consists in giving full liberty to the pupils to study and settle their disputes as they know best.

The school at Yasnaya Polyana was highly successful, but it came to an abrupt end when it was raided for the second time by the tsar's secret police, who claimed they were searching for "subversive material." Although Tolstoy's prominent standing as a member of the Russian ruling class enabled him to win an apology from the government, he suddenly sensed that he had lost the trust of his students' parents, whose deep anxiety was aroused by the repeated appearance of the police. As a result, Tolstoy decided to close the little school and return his full attention to his writing. *War and Peace* was published two years later.

Ferrer

Intending to challenge the church-controlled school system that was available only to male children of the rich, Francisco Ferrer (1859–1909) opened a series of coeducational secular schools in Barcelona for middle- and working-class children. He was a devout anarchist and saw education as a perfect meeting ground for his political agenda and his concern for the well-being of children. His "Modern Schools," as they were known, were to be places where students would be motivated by curiosity and not fear, and where they would learn to think for themselves based on their own observations and experience.

Centrally controlled compulsory schooling, contended Ferrer, was one of the primary means by which elite groups in society seek to control the rest of the population. Or, as he observed about the educational status quo in *The Origin and Ideals of the Modern School* (Putnam, 1913):

The children must learn to obey, to believe, and to think according to the prevailing social dogmas. . . . There is no question of promoting the spontaneous development of the child's faculties, or encouraging it to seek freely the satisfaction of physical, intellectual, and moral needs. There is question only of imposing ready-made ideas on it, of preventing it from ever thinking otherwise than is required for the maintenance of existing social institutions.

. . . Much of the knowledge actually imparted in schools is useless; and the hope of the reformers has been void because the organization of the school, instead of serving an ideal purpose, has become one of the most powerful instruments of servitude in the hands of the ruling class "Education" means, in practice, domination or domestication.

In the tradition of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Tolstoy, Ferrer placed great faith in children's innate curiosity and desire to learn. His Modern Schools neither rewarded success nor punished failure, and no exams were given to measure or rank student performance. Moreover, Ferrer wrote at length in support of the movement away from the authoritarian and fundamentalistic character of his nation's schools, which he felt was based on the irrational and unscientific tenets of the Catholic Church. Also from *The Origin and Ideals of the Modern School*:

It is evident that the progress of psychology and physiology must lead to important changes in educational methods; that teachers, being now in a better position to understand the child, will make their teaching more in conformity with natural laws. I further grant that this evolution will proceed in the direction of greater liberty, as I am convinced that

violence is the method of ignorance, and that the educator who is really worthy of his name will gain everything by spontaneity; he will know the child's needs and will be able to promote its development by giving it the greatest possible satisfaction. The true educator is the man who does not impose his own ideas and will on the child, but appeals to its own energies.

Thus, the Modern Schools gave great value to individual freedom, and to independent thinking as well. Education was viewed as a process where by students developed their own beliefs and values. Such ideas, not surprisingly, were not well received by the Spanish monarchy. The government arrested Ferrer in 1909 on trumped up charges of inciting a riot and executed him shortly thereafter.

The death of Ferrer marked the end of the Modern School movement in Spain. However, his martyrdom drew the attention of a circle of radical activists and thinkers in New York City—Emma Goldman and Will Durant among the most notable—who opened up a school modeled after Ferrer's on the Lower East Side in 1911. Another twenty or so groups around the United States soon followed suit, marking the transfer of the Modern School movement to this side of the Atlantic. In 1913 the New York City group decided to form a land-based intentional community in conjunction with its Ferrer School in rural New Jersey. The Stelton School and Community, as it was then known, lived on into the 1950s.

Some years later, the historian Paul Avrich would note in *The Modern School Movement* (Princeton University Press, 1980) how ironic it was that just as the latest freedom in education movement was gathering strength in the late 1950s, its immediate predecessor was passing away unnoticed.

Montessori

Maria Montessori (1870–1952) started her career as a physician, the first woman in Italy to receive a medical degree. She worked in the insane asylums of Rome with what at the time were known as “idiot children,” the mentally retarded, the emotionally disturbed, and the delinquent. A student of psychiatry as well—her mentor was Jean Itard, the teacher of the “wild child of Aveyron”—Montessori was determined to show that the children's learning deficits were the result of environmental deprivation in early childhood and not organic defects. She assailed the prevailing belief that such children are uneducable, finding again and again that when they were provided with large quantities of sensory stimulation and a nurturing, family-like environment, they learned at a rate that was in many cases comparable to that of so-called normal children.

Montessori was also disturbed by the lack of achievement in school by nondisabled kids. She suspected that the conventional educational model actually stifled development and wondered whether her methods would produce better results. In 1907 she was given the chance to find out when she was placed in charge of the *Casa dei Bambini* (Children's Houses), schools for three- to seven-year-olds in the slums of the Italian capital.

The Children's Houses were community-based institutions in every sense. They were located right in the tenements themselves, where the teachers also lived. The specialized learning materials developed by Montessori were manufactured in workshops located in the same building. Children returned home for their naps, and parents, welcome at all times, reportedly felt a strong sense of ownership and involvement in the schools.

Presaging John Holt and others in the 1960s, Montessori vehemently opposed the growing trend toward isolating children from the rest of society. Or, as she wrote in *Childhood Education* (Regnery, 1974): “If the child, from birth onwards, has to create his personality at the expense of his environment, he must be brought into contact with the *world*, with the outward life of man. He ought to take part in, or better still, he ought to be in touch with the life of adults. If he is to adapt himself to the environment he ought to take part in public life and be a witness to the customs that characterize his race.”

Montessori, like her predecessors above, abhorred the educational methodology of traditional schools, where children spent the day being led through endless mental drills by the teacher. In her words from *The Montessori Method* (Bentley, 1965): “In such a school the children, like butterflies mounted on pins, are fastened each to their places, the desks, spreading the useless wings of barren and eaningless knowledge that they have acquired . . . The principle of slavery still pervades pedagogy, and therefore, the same principle pervades the school.”

Though elsewhere in *The Montessori Method* she disparages Rousseau’s “impracticable principles and vague aspirations for the liberty of the child,” Montessori was in many ways a practitioner of his notion of “well-regulated freedom.” The Children’s Houses—they were actually set up as little homes, complete with kitchen, dining room, and bathing facilities—were meticulously structured and highly ordered environments within which students had a great deal of freedom of choice and movement. Also from *Childhood Education*:

Here among these children, order came from mysterious, hidden, inner directives, which can manifest themselves only if the freedom permitting them to be heeded is given. To give this type of freedom, it was precisely necessary that nobody interfere with the constructive, spontaneous activity of the children in an environment prepared so that their need for development could find satisfaction.

. . . The fundamental principle [of scientific pedagogy] must be, indeed, the liberty of the pupil—such liberty as shall permit the development of individual, spontaneous manifestations of the child’s nature.

Montessori’s version of liberty in school included far more management and control of the environment than that practiced by Tolstoy at Yasnaya Polyana before her or by A. S. Neill at Summerhill soon to follow, but it still stood in stark contrast to the schools of her day. She wrote in *The Montessori Method*, “The first idea that a child must acquire, in order to be actively disciplined, is that of the difference between good and evil; and the task of the educator lies in seeing that the child does not confound good with immobility, and evil with activity, as often happens in the case of the old-time discipline. And all this because our aim is to discipline for activity, for work, for good; not for immobility, not for passivity, not for obedience.”

Montessori believed that children should be independent and self-directing at as early an age as possible. In the Children’s Houses, they took part in the daily upkeep of the school/house and shared meals that they served to one another. The majority of the learning materials were self-teaching ones, and teachers were instructed to be sensitive observers rather than directors of activity, to take care not to place themselves between the children and their experience. Learning, Montessori felt, should occur for learning’s sake, and not in order to please adults or meet some artificial societal standard. She entirely rejected the conventional educational model’s use of external rewards and punishments, writing in *Childhood Education*, “The prize and the punishment are incentives toward unnatural or forced effort, and, therefore, we cannot speak of the natural development of the child in connection with them. . . . Punishments! I had not realized that they were an indispensable institution holding sway over the whole of child humanity. All men have grown up under this humiliation.”

According to Montessori, children are guided by a divine life force, which she called *horme*. They are endowed with an “absorbent mind,” a term she coined to describe the unconscious instinct that propels the growth process. Thus, learning is not an act of will, but rather an automatic response to this internal imperative. Or as she reasoned in *Childhood Education*, “It is clear that there must be a secret fact in the psychic ‘creation’ of man. If we learn everything through attention, volition, and intelligence, how then can the child undertake this great construction—since he is not yet endowed with intelligence, willpower or attention?”

Montessori’s emphasis on order, cleanliness, and a “rational education” that held the promise of accelerated learning eventually won her mainstream appeal. Ironically, her success with the

marginalized children of the dispossessed made her a darling of the bourgeoisie throughout Europe and the United States. Today Montessori schools number in the thousands worldwide.

Steiner

Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) formulated an approach to education based on his own highly esoteric system of philosophy, known as anthroposophy. A mystic who had experiences of clairvoyance even as a child, he was heavily influenced by Goethe, whose science writings he edited while he was still in his early twenties. Goethe opposed materialism, the idea that physical matter is the only reality.

It wasn't until late in life that Steiner turned his attention toward the education of children, when one of his followers, the owner of the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory in Germany, asked him to set up an adult education program for employees and a school for their children.

Echoing Rousseau, Steiner disavowed early intellectual training. According to his developmental scheme, children from birth to age seven explore their world primarily through the senses and learn by imitation. Focused education should not begin until the emergence of the second teeth, at which point children learn best by engaging their imaginations and their emotional lives. It is not until puberty, Steiner argued, that the thinking function becomes predominant and kids develop the ability to analyze, conceptualize, and think critically.

Steiner's predominant concern, however, was with the mainstream educational model's exclusive focus on empiricism and the rational mind. He believed there to be other equally if not more important dimensions of existence, and he set out to design an approach to education that would help children discover them. He wrote in *The Roots of Education* (Rudolf Steiner Press, 1968), "The world is permeated by spirit, and true knowledge of the world must be spiritual knowledge." He expanded on this idea in *The Education of the Child* (Rudolf Steiner Press, 1965):

A materialistic way of thought is so easily led to believe that any further penetration into things, beyond the intellectual concepts that are, as it were, extracted from them, simply does not exist; and only with great difficulty will it fight its way through to the perception that the other forces of the soul are at least as necessary as the intellect, if we are to gain a comprehension of things. ...Intellectual concepts are only one of the means we have to understand the things of this world.

. . . All perceptions must be spiritualized. We ought not to be satisfied, for instance, with presenting a plant, a seed, and a flower to the child merely as it can be perceived with the senses. Everything should become a parable of the spiritual. In a grain of corn there is far more than meets the eye. There is a whole new plant invisible within it. That such a thing as a seed has more within it than can be perceived with the senses, this the child must grasp with his feeling and imagination. He must, in feeling, divine the secrets of existence.

Steiner eschewed religious instruction in his school, opposing the kind of spiritual indoctrination that was prevalent in the church-based schools of his day. Instead, he advocated that by "carefully guiding their imaginations" through a set of experiences involving nature, art, music, and creativity, children can be led to discover spiritual principles on their own.

In Steiner's view, education itself is an art, not simply a method of instruction, and the phrase "art of education" can be found throughout his educational writings. From *The Younger Generation* (Anthroposophic Press, 1967): "Waldorf School education is not a pedagogical system, but an Art—the Art of awakening what is actually there within the human being."

Like Montessori, Steiner saw human development as an unfolding of potential from within. Her *horme* became his "vital force," which for Steiner was a kind of guiding spiritual energy emanating from the soul. Again from *The Roots of Education*:

With its power of seeing right into man himself, a concrete knowledge of man is the only possible basis for a true art of education—an art of education whereby men may find their place in life, and subject to the laws of their own destiny develop all their powers to the full. Education should never work against a person's destiny, but should achieve the full development of his own predispositions. The education of a man today so often lags behind the talents and the tendencies which destiny has implanted in him. We must keep pace with these powers to the extent that the human being in our care can win his way to all that his destiny will allow—to the fullest clarity of thought, the most loving deepening of his feeling, and the greatest possible energy and ability of will.

In the 1990s the Waldorf approach would fall squarely under the rubric of “holistic education,” a paradigm that, according to Ron Miller, founder of the *Holistic Education Review*, recognizes and attempts to integrate “the inner human qualities, such as mind, emotion, creativity, imagination, compassion, a sense of wonder and reverence, and the urge for self-realization.” Or as Steiner expressed it in *The Essential Steiner* (Harper and Row, 1984), “We need a knowledge of man that works on the whole human being, as physical nourishment works on the blood. We need a kind of human knowledge which gives us blood in our souls, too, which not only makes us sensible, clever and intelligent, but which can also make us enthusiastic, and inwardly mobile, which can enkindle love in us—for an art of education which springs forth from a true knowledge of man must be borne by love.”

Steiner did not harbor hopes of spreading salvation by means of his Waldorf principles—the later proliferation of Waldorf schools around the world was the work of his followers—but he did want his school to serve as a practical example of effective teaching. He placed great emphasis on the role of the teacher as a model that students will strive to emulate (students in Waldorf schools remain with the same teacher throughout their school career) and urged his teachers to devote themselves to their own intellectual and spiritual development.

To be educators we must have a sense of responsibility. This sense of responsibility is very strongly aroused by such considerations as I have put before you, and must lay hold of your hearts. For if you take up educational work knowing that what affects the young child will continue through the whole life as happiness or unhappiness, sickness or health, then at first this knowledge may seem a burden on your souls, but it will also spur you on to develop your forces and capacities, and above all, an attitude of mind as a teacher strong enough to sow “seeds of the soul” in the young child which will only blossom later in life.
(*The Roots of Education*)

Today there are more than four hundred Waldorf schools worldwide.

Neill

A young English teacher, A. S. Neill fled the rigidity and brutality of the schools of his native Scotland in 1920 and founded Summerhill, a residential school for boys and girls, elementary age through high school, in a small village about a hundred miles from London. He had come under the influence of Homer Lane, an American who set up several radically different reformatories for delinquent teenagers in the United States and England. Reflecting back on his association with Lane in the introduction to Lane's posthumously published *Talks to Parents and Teachers* (Schocken Books, 1969), Neill wrote:

Homer Tyrell Lane, of all the men I have known, was the one who inspired me the most. I first met him in 1917, when I visited his Little Commonwealth in Dorset, England, where in 1913 he had been appointed superintendent of a colony of delinquent boys and girls who governed themselves in a small democracy, each person—including Lane himself—having one vote. . . . I sat up until three o'clock in the morning listening to Lane's descriptions of his methods. That night he showed me the solution

—that the only way to be was, as he phrased it, “on the side of the child.” It meant

abolishing all punishment and fear and external discipline. It meant trusting children to grow in their own way without any pressure from outside, save that of communal self-government. It meant putting learning in its place—below living.

Neill decided to model Summerhill after Lane's democratic, communal, self-governing reform schools. All policy decisions, including the hiring and firing of teachers and disciplinary matters, were to be carried out in general school meetings in which students and teachers each had an equal vote. Classes were entirely noncompulsory, and children were free to learn in their own time according to their own inclinations.

In the tradition of Rousseau, Neill placed great faith in a child's inborn motivation to learn and grow. Or as he wrote in *Summerhill*:

My view is that a child is innately wise and realistic. If left to himself without adult suggestion of any kind, he will develop as far as he is capable of developing. Logically, Summerhill is a place in which people who have the innate ability and wish to be scholars will be scholars; while those who are only fit to sweep the streets will sweep the streets. But we have not produced a street cleaner so far. Nor do I write this snobbishly, for I would rather see a school produce a happy street cleaner than a neurotic scholar.

For Neill, freedom meant, more than anything else, respecting the right of children to make their own choices regarding their lives. His natural anarchism in the tradition of Tolstoy is clearly evident in these words from *Summerhill*:

The function of the child is to live his own life—not the life that his anxious parents think he should live, nor a life according to the purpose of the educator who thinks he knows better. All this interference and guidance on the part of adults only produces a generation of robots. . . . You fashion them into acceptors of the *status quo*—a good thing for a society that needs obedient sitters at dreary desks, standers in shops, mechanical catchers of the 8:30 train—a society, in short, that is carried on the shabby shoulders of the scared little man—the scared to death conformist.

. . . I believe that to impose anything by authority is wrong. The child should not do anything until he comes to the opinion—his own opinion—that it should be done. The curse of humanity is external compulsion, whether it comes from the Pope or the state or the teacher or the parent. It is fascism *in toto*.

Neill was also influenced by Wilhelm Reich, the radical psychiatrist who would become his close friend and ally. Reich was deeply interested in the prevention of neurosis in children so that they wouldn't need a therapist's services when they reached adulthood. He believed that children are inherently good and that they possess an instinctive awareness of their own needs and how best to meet them. A primary cause of neurosis, argued Reich, is adult interference with this natural learning process. The answer, according to Reich, is "self-regulation," a term he coined to describe the ability to govern one's own impulses and manage one's own daily affairs. He was delighted to discover that there was a school for children operating on this very principle.

An ardent advocate of freedom for children throughout his long career, Neill was always careful to distinguish it from what he called "license." Students at Summerhill are free to do as they please, as long as they are not impinging on the rights and sensibilities of others. For instance, Neill never hesitated to defend his greenhouse from a marauding youngster—unless he was new to the school and going through a difficult phase of adjustment, in which case Neill was known to join him in the destruction. He explained in *Summerhill* that parents could not always grasp the difference between freedom and license: "In the disciplined home, the children have *no* rights. In the spoiled home, they have *all* the rights. The proper home is the one in which children and adults have *equal* rights. And the same applies to school. . . . If a baby of three wants to walk across the dining table, you simply tell him he must not. He must obey, that's true. But on the other hand, you must obey him when necessary. I get out of small children's rooms if they tell me to get out."

Neill also credited Homer Lane with showing him the power of love in the learning process, an idea that, according to W. David Wills in *Homer Lane: A Biography* (Allen and Unwin, 1964), Lane borrowed from Pestalozzi and his orphan schools. Again from *Summerhill*: “Love means approving of children, and that is essential in any school. You can’t be on the side of children if you punish them and storm at them. Summerhill is a school in which the child knows that he is approved of.”

At Summerhill, emotional learning and emotional health are valued more highly than academic learning. Neill believed that happiness and the ability to understand and express one’s motives and feelings are the cornerstones of development. He considered the greatest mark of success to be the ability to work joyfully and live positively: “To sum up, my contention is that unfree education results in life that cannot be fully lived. Such an education almost entirely ignores the *emotions* of life; and because these emotions are dynamic, their lack of opportunity for expression must and does result in cheapness and ugliness and hatefulness. Only the head is educated. If the emotions are permitted to be really free, the intellect will look after itself.”

Like Rousseau, Neill scoffed at the efforts of educational reformers scurrying around trying to invent new and improved teaching approaches and curriculums, explaining in *Summerhill*, “We have no new methods of teaching, because we do not consider that teaching in itself matters very much. Whether a school has or has not a special method for teaching long division is of no significance, for long division is of no importance except to those who *want* to learn it. And the child who *wants* to learn long division *will* learn it no matter how it is taught.” Since the publication of *Summerhill*, a growing number of Summerhill-type schools have been founded around the world. Today, despite ongoing harassment from the British government, Summerhill itself lives on under the leadership of Neill’s only child, Zoë Readhead.

Holt

A submarine officer in the Second World War, John Holt (1923–1985) was horrified by the inhumanity of the U.S. atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He entered the teaching profession after the war with an eye turned toward the need for fundamental social change and the role that education might play in it.

Holt was far from alone in his criticism of mainstream schooling during the tumultuous 1960s. But his impassioned writing, first about his observations of individual kids engaged in the learning process and later about the stultifying effects of the conventional school model on children as a whole, placed him in the forefront of the loosely organized movement to reexamine American education all the way to its core.

The overriding conviction propelling Holt’s thinking was the belief that children possess an enormous capacity to make sense of the world on their own terms—when they are free to inquire, explore, and experiment, and when they are able to participate actively in real world events. Although he was considered by some to be an idealistic romantic, there was a staunchly pragmatic side to his ideas, as shown in his contribution to the September 1972 issue of *Edcentric* magazine:

The main reason for giving young people self-direction, autonomy, and choice in their learning is not so they will grow up to be revolutionary fighters against Fortress Amerika, or preserve some mythical innocence and purity, or know how to live in harmony with nature and the universe, but quite simply because that is how people learn best.

. . . We learn best when we are deciding what we want to learn, when we learn for our own reasons and not someone else’s, and when we have maximum control over the pace and the manner in which we learn.

But, concluded Holt, American schools, with their increasing obsession with grades and standards, had become bastions of fear and control. By the mid- sixties compulsory learning was already an oxymoron in his lexicon. In *How Children Fail* (Pitman, 1964), his first in a series of more than a

dozen books on education, he addressed the mental and emotional harm being done to children by the carrot-and-stick approach to education—even in the so-called progressive private schools for the children of the well heeled where he had been doing his teaching: “We adults destroy most of the intellectual and creative capacity of children by the things we do to them or make them do. We destroy this capacity above all by making them afraid, afraid of not doing what other people want, of not pleasing, of making mistakes, of failing, of being wrong. Thus, we make them afraid to gamble, afraid to experiment, afraid to try the difficult and the unknown.”

After a decade in the classroom, Holt was ready to reject the idea of a set curriculum. He considered it preposterous that there exists an essential body of knowledge that every child should be required to know. Again from *How Children Fail*:

We will not have true education or real learning in our schools until we sweep this nonsense out of the way. Schools should be places where children learn most what they want to know, instead of what we think they ought to know. The child who wants to know something remembers it and uses it once he has it; the child who learns something to please or appease someone else forgets it when the need for pleasing or the danger of not appeasing is past. This is why children quickly forget all but a small part of what they learn in school.

In the early 1970s, Holt increasingly came under the influence of Ivan Illich, who at the time was attempting to expand the discussion of American education beyond schools to include all social institutions. An insidious, seldom considered effect of institutionalized schooling, according to Illich, is the way it takes learning out of its living context and turns it into both an abstraction and a prepackaged article of consumption. The idea that one has to “get” an education in order to succeed in life has reached mythological proportions, he lamented. And all the complaints notwithstanding, our schools are carrying out exactly the function they were intended to perform: maintaining the class system by sorting out privileged winners from not-so-lucky losers by means of bell curve grading, and programming kids for the boring and routine nature of most modern work. Echoing Illich, Holt wrote in *Freedom and Beyond* (Boynton Cook, 1995), “We cannot be in the business of education and at the same time in the business of testing, grading, labeling, sorting, and deciding who goes where and gets what. . . . It is the business of turning people into commodities.”

In the end, Holt, like Illich, became convinced that the idea of reforming America’s system of public and private schools was a Sisyphean task. After nearly two decades of trying to contribute to the nationwide push for educational change, a discouraged Holt observed in *Instead of Education* (Dutton, 1976), “Movements to reform schools never last very long. They quickly fall out of fashion, reaction sets in, and most of the few schools that attempt to make humane changes give them up. Usually when this happens, the public gives a great cry of relief, and all of the long-term failings of the conventional schools are *blamed on the reformers*. Any evidence that, where carried out, the reforms actually worked is soon forgotten.”

Holt’s radical critique of American education spurred him to look for solutions beyond the realm of schools entirely: “I don’t want children to have to spend all of their time in places specially prepared for children, with people specially trained to look after them, no matter how nice those places and people might be. Children need much more than that—a society that is open, accessible, visible to all its citizens, young and old, and in which every citizen, however young or old, has the right to play an active, serious, responsible and useful part” (*Instead of Education*). The only way to achieve such a goal, reasoned Holt, is for parents to stop turning over the task of educating their kids to the society at large and instead to allow their learning to unfold in their homes and communities. “Homeschooling,” as it came to be known, became a fast-growing, essentially leaderless movement. Holt founded the magazine *Growing Without Schooling* in order to provide inspiration and guidance to those willing to take the leap of faith involved in turning away from institutional education. Aware that many anxious parents were turning their homes into miniature

schoolrooms, Holt quickly coined the term “unschooling” to describe the kind of spontaneous, organic, learner-directed education he envisioned.

For Holt, freedom in the learning process was always paramount, a point he made indelibly clear in his closing statement in *Instead of Education*: “Compulsory learning is a tyranny, and a crime against the human mind and spirit.”

Rogers

A contemporary of Holt’s, Carl Rogers (1902–1987) attempted to add a psychological underpinning to the freedom in education movement of the 1960s. He was one of the leaders of a parallel thrust that was trying to release psychotherapy from the strictures of Freudian psychoanalysis.

Rogers named his new approach “humanistic psychology.” Its goal was the development of the “fully functioning person,” one who is, according to Rogers in *Freedom to Learn* (Merrill, 1969), “a creative person whose specific forms of behavior are not easily predictable; a person who is ever-changing, ever-developing, always discovering himself and the newness in himself in each succeeding moment of time.”

Freedom to Learn was an educational manifesto aimed at professionals manning the mainstream. In it Rogers urged that the true purpose of education should be to assist young people in the search for authenticity, meaning, and connection, not to stuff their heads full of abstract information and force them to compete for standardized measures of success. This goal can be reached only to the extent that students are in charge of their own learning process—free to choose and then learn from the consequences of their actions.

A key ingredient in every individual’s growth, believed Rogers, is self-awareness, which, again, develops only when children have control over their own experience and their relationships with others. He cited as a prime example a study set up to measure the factors most likely to predict the behavior of adolescent delinquents. Researchers concluded that it was the individual’s degree of self-understanding that had the greatest effect. Reflected Rogers in *Freedom to Learn*: “The significance of the study was only slowly driven home to me. I began to see the importance of inner autonomy. The individual who sees himself and his situation clearly, and who freely takes responsibility for that self and for that situation is a very different person from the one who is simply in the grip of outside circumstances. The difference shows up in important aspects of his behavior.”

Rogers exhorted American schools to apply the same principle to the education of all children. Like Holt, he was convinced that freedom and self-direction are essential conditions of true learning. His call to grant classroom teachers flexibility and local control enjoyed a fleeting audience at the height of the cry for educational reform in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but it has fallen on deaf ears ever since.

The progression of ideas from Rousseau to Rogers is not as simple and direct as I have portrayed it here. Each individual had his or her own overarching agenda, which was influenced by the political, economic, and philosophical conditions of the times, and each had his or her own style and emphasis. For Tolstoy, Ferrer, Neill, and Holt, children need to be free to direct their own learning, whereas many of the others—to varying degrees—saw the need for adult guidance and structural overlay. Rousseau, a source of inspiration to them all, paradoxically advocated both. Pestalozzi valued love above all else; Froebel, nature; Montessori, cognitive development; Steiner, creativity; Rogers, authenticity and self-awareness; and Neill, democratic, self-governing community.

And yet there is a definite thread that runs through the principles on which these forerunners believed true education must be based. All were grounded in the conviction that learning is a natural, spontaneous impulse and that fear, compulsion, and control are its enemies. Together they

represent a tradition of dissent against mainstream educational theory and practice that has managed to survive four centuries of increasing centralization and standardization, one that is alive and well in the new millennium.