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LOVING LEARNING

How Progressive Education Can Save America's Schools

Tom Little and Katherine Ellison

FOREWORD BY AYELET WALDMAN

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school as a secular ministry—and with my role as its virtual village pastor—despite my somewhat checkered past as a former altar boy who has not attended mass for more than forty years. All the same, even I have been surprised over the years by the way our families have turned to me in times of crisis. I've been called on to deliver eulogies at half a dozen funerals of parents and students, some of them held right here at school. Similarly, it came as no surprise to most of our families that on the day of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, when many other local schools sent students home early, we kept our doors open, as families flocked in to seek comfort with one another.

A PIECE OF CAKE

I arrived at the site of the experiment that was to become Park Day School in July 1976, as a twenty-two-year-old graduate student, sporting a large red Afro, bushy mustache, and braces on my teeth.

It was a time of great excitement about the possibilities of public education. An anti-authoritarian mood that had grown in the wake of the Vietnam War was challenging the status quo in schools. Teaching institutions were rediscovering the decades-old works of the developmental psychologists Jean Piaget, from Switzerland, who said, "Education means making creators. . . . You have to make inventors, innovators—not conformists," and Lev Vygotsky, from Belarus, who said, "People with great passions, people who accomplish great deeds, people who possess strong feelings, even people with great minds and a strong personality, rarely come out of good little boys and girls."

"Child-centered" strategies were newly in vogue. In a trend imported from Great Britain in the late 1960s, some U.S.

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schools were building classrooms without walls, in which students could wander between "learning stations," following their interests. As part of my teaching credential program at San Francisco State, I was working with a visionary public schoolteacher named Roni Howard, whose sixth-grade classroom was a wonderland of attractions, including a large enclosed wooden maze, designed and built by the eleven-year-olds, to train a group of Norway rats.

In Oakland, a group of ambitious parents and teachers had just split off from another private school and were setting up a classroom of their own at the Beth Jacob Orthodox Jewish Synagogue on Park Boulevard, the street from which our school would later take its name. The new director, Gerri Shapiro, had heard of me from my college adviser and asked if I could "help out."

"We can't pay you," she said.

I came anyway. And after just one day spent painting the walls of the new school, I was hooked for the rest of my career.

The chief lure, at that point, was my first meeting with Susan Erb, a founding teacher of the new school, and, as I was soon to realize, one of the most talented educators I've ever known. Tall and willowy, Susan conveys a serene confidence with adults that quickly morphs into gentle wackiness with a young child. When speaking with children, she'll rarely look down at them; instead, she squats or kneels to address them at eye-level, as she calls their attention to wonders they haven't yet noticed. She has convinced several generations of young students that fairies live in the trees in the courtyard—the children write notes to them, which always receive answers—and decorates her first-grade classroom with a "magic detector," a small disco ball that she turns on, illuminating every corner of her classroom, as a ritual to start each day.

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I realized right away that serving as Susan's apprentice would teach me more than anything I'd learn in graduate school. So I quit the program and took a chance that the volunteer work might lead to a paid job.

As the weeks passed, Susan and I were joined by another gifted teacher, Harriet Cohen, who by our good fortune had spotted a want-ad for a teacher posted at the YMCA. Harriet had a master's degree in music from Smith College and had taught kindergarten in Spanish Harlem in New York. She brought a love of the arts and a particularly strong sense of social justice to her work with the children, and so deeply shared our passion for teaching that the three of us became a long-lasting nucleus for the school. Together, we maintained a continuity of spirit amid changing management and settings in those early years, remaining together at Park Day School for the next three decades. After Harriet retired in 2009, she continued to work as a substitute teacher at Park Day as well as at Emerson Elementary, a nearby public school, well into her seventies.

Back then, of course, I had no idea what the next thirty years were to bring. The summer was soon over, and by September we had finished painting, visited Dumpsters for cast-off furniture, and appealed to established schools for books they might be ready to give away. Gerri, our director, and her hastily assembled board of parents had corralled a group of twenty-two children and each contributed funds which barely covered our initial expenses. They let me teach the occasional class, but I was still working without pay.

All this time, Susan, Harriet, and I were talking constantly about the kind of school and community we wanted to create. We still joke today about how, every once in a while, as we were setting up the classrooms, we'd try to catch Gerri's ear as she rushed by, to ask about her plans for the new curriculum.

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"Piece of cake!" was all she ever said, implying that this was the least of our challenges.

And so we made things up, creating lesson plans and routines and minting traditions from whim, serendipity, and necessity. Our cramped classroom and limited resources pushed us outside on frequent field trips, as did the synagogue's requirement that we vacate the classrooms every Friday afternoon to make room for Shabbat celebrations. We got in the habit of holding Friday classes in a nearby park, which is why some students from those years mistakenly think that's how we got our name.

By October of our first year as a school, we had expanded our enrollment to twenty-eight. I was given my own class to teach, and finally got my first paycheck.

We moved locations twice over the next six years, expanding our enrollment tenfold and finally settling into our current site at the former orphanage. In 1986, at the age of thirty-two, I was chosen to lead the school. My hair has since turned white, and I now keep it cut short. I celebrated my sixtieth birthday in November, coinciding with my retirement—an event that, were it not for my illness, I would have happily put off indefinitely.

Over nearly forty years, I've watched hundreds of uncivilized kindergartners grow into interesting, thoughtful teens, and seen many a nervous parent become more confident. All the while, our small private school has increasingly cultivated a public mission. We not only practice our values on our campus but make an effort to explain them to the wider world. As our Web site says: "We believe a successful learner is one who is confident, caring, and creative. We believe success is measured by a student's ability to define his or her place in the world, guided by intellectual skills and a social perspective."

In practice, of course, we are much more specific in the way we face the challenges weighing on all American schools today.

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In an era of teaching to the test, we've chosen to focus our energy on higher-minded goals. We believe our students will lead more productive and fulfilled lives as resilient collaborators than as insecure competitors. As school curricula become increasingly standardized, we encourage a love of learning by recognizing and responding to students' individual interests. And in an age when young people are too often cynics, we prioritize social awareness and activism.

None of these policies has interfered with our students earning high GPAs and test scores once they enter high school. Often, they excel compared to students who've been burned out by years of high-stakes exams. Many are accepted by top colleges—with most, even more important, finding colleges that fit their interests and needs—and go on to interesting and satisfying lives.

Thus, if what we offer them in grade school truly seems countercultural, I'd say it's time to reconsider what we want from our culture.

THE FORMULA

As I've mentioned, throughout our early history at Park Day, we thought we were making it all up. None of us knew there was a formula for our success. We followed our best instincts, improvising away, creating and adding strategies as we found they proved successful in building a strong community of learners. Yet in everything we did, we held true to three main principles: we considered children's emotional needs and development just as seriously as their academic progress; we worked to build a strong, supportive community; and we encouraged students to develop a sense of social justice.

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