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editors: gene v glass gustavo e. fischman melissa cast-brede

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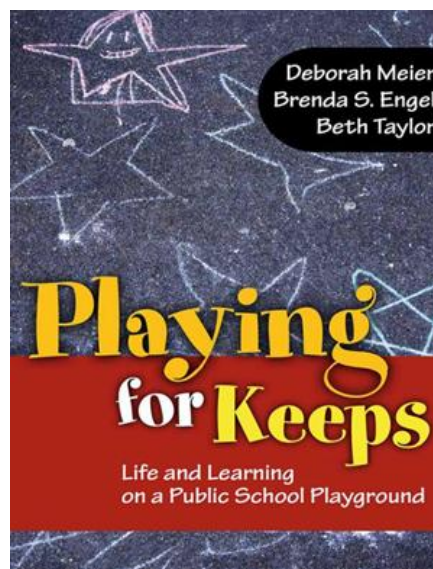


Meier, Deborah; Engel, Brenda S. & Taylor, Beth. (2010)
*Playing for Keeps: Life and Learning on a Public School
Playground*. NY: Teachers College Press

Pp. 127 + xviii ISBN 0807750956

Reviewed by Kenneth J. Bernstein
Eleanor Roosevelt High School, Greenbelt MD

There are few names more honored in education than that of Deborah Meier, who won a MacArthur Foundation “genius” award for her work in founding and running Central Park East and the associated network of schools in New York City in the 1970s and 1980s. Having retired from that endeavor, she was visiting her friend Brenda Engel in Cambridge Massachusetts, when they decided to see if they could establish a similar school in Boston, which was then embarking on a program of “pilot schools” that would empower public schools with some of the flexibility normally associated with charter schools. With the help of a planning committee of local educators, including co-author Beth Taylor, the Mission Hill School opened its



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doors in 1997, based on “old progressive educational ideas explored and brought up to date in a contemporary setting” (p. ix). **Meier** became the first principal, Engel volunteered at the school, Engel and Taylor (then Lerman) worked with students and staff, and Taylor wrote a weekly column in the school newspaper, where her observations became the basis of much of this book, which “makes a case for the importance of free exploration, wonder, imagination and play to the learning and growth of children” (p. x). While none of the authors still worked at Mission Hill at the time of the publication of this volume, they assert that the school still remains true to its founding vision. As for the book, the authors ...

invite readers to appreciate the life of the imagination on the playground, to see the energy children bring to exploring their emotional and physical surrounds, and to share with us the children’s delight in active learning. The book might even trigger for readers echoes of their own childhood experiences in the outdoors. We hope of course, that through the descriptions and comments, readers will gain understanding of the importance of play in the lives of children. (p. x)

Much of the book is based on the columns written by Beth Taylor, under the title “Notes from Outdoors.” It was only after she left the school and the columns ceased that the idea for the book formed, with Engel proposing they be used as the basis for further observation and commentary. As the authors remark in an Introduction that also provides detailed description of the school, the Notes themselves, the playground, and the children,

In face of the current attack on the world of play and childhood, we saw this as an opportunity to reassert our convictions about the value of play - its meaning to growth, education, and life in a democratic society. (p. 3)

More context is provided in appendices that provide more details on the beginnings of Mission Hill, its neighborhood, and the demographics of the school community. There is also a sample of the weekly newsletter, including then Beth Lerman’s Notes From Outdoors. The heart of this slim but valuable volume are



Taylor's observations and the reflections that flow from them.

In some ways it is not really possible to "review" this book in any conventional sense of that term and still do it justice. So much of it depends upon the observations Beth Taylor made in her observations. One needs to read these and then the commentary developed therefrom by Meier and Engle. I assure readers that it will be time more than well-spent, even if one is not - as I am not - primarily focused on the education of young children.

One key section of the book is the 5th chapter, titled "Wishful Thinking." It is a brief essay by Meier, with sections labeled Changes in Childhood, Education and Democracy, The Habits of Democracy, and Habits of the Mind. In four pages, which includes the writing of a ten-year-old student at Mission Hill, one reads the key thrust of what the authors believe about the importance of play and imagination in the lives of children. Let me offer some words of Meier from each of the four sections.

Changes in Childhood:

There is little space, time or opportunity for preschool children to experiment and explore; there is little encouragement to invent, envision other worlds, exercise creative imagination, even to seriously think. Nor do the toys children are given encourage invention or imagination; most have limited possibilities and are designed to develop specific skills or abilities judged necessary for school success. Thus, most children arrive in elementary school without the kind of knowledge we believe furthers the development of independent learners and future members of a democratic society. (p. 67)

Education and Democracy:

Leaving not time or space in education for children's "playful: efforts to make sense of the world risks the future not only of poetry and science but also of our political liberties. The habits of playfulness in early life are the essential foundations upon which we can build a K-12 education that would foster, nourish, and sustain the apparent "absurdity" of democracy. (p. 68)

The Habits of Democracy:

The continuing viability of democratic institutions can't depend entirely on an established body of laws; it requires, in addition, daily practice - inculcated habits of thought and behavior. These habits can be articulated and intentionally practiced in educational settings. (p. 69)

Habits of Mind:

The future of democracy, in my view, depends upon "wishful thinking" in the positive sense, on playing with ideas and being able to imagine better solutions. As adults, we need to cultivate the habit of taking leaps beyond our own self-interest and kinship. It is from such thinking that new realities are invented. If we close ourselves off to the possibility that rocks might be alive, we will lose those opportunities and likely, with them, democracy itself. (p. 70)

I came to this book from the perspective of one who has taught only secondary students. In my 17 years in the public school classroom, my students have ranged from 7th through 12th graders, with 13 of those years working in a high school. Thus I might seem an unlikely person to "review" a book on the importance of play in young children, especially given that most of my teaching has focused on government and civics. Yet this book speaks to issues that are important to my students and in my classroom.

Far too much of the time of our students today is organized for them by adults. As a result they have not developed the skills of self-organization that should be essential for adults in a democratic society. We have organized sports and games for very young children, not allowing them to organize themselves. The adults present them with the rules of the "games" they play, depriving them of the experience of developing and modifying rules collaboratively, based on their own experiences. In school we increasingly spell out how they are to learn; if we put them in groups the adults decide on the groupings, the tasks to be achieved, and the procedures to be followed.

As our education becomes increasingly focused on achieving predetermined results measured by mass-produced tests, we deprive our young people of the benefits of going down and thereby learning from false and unproductive paths. In that sense we are imposing ways of perceiving, thinking, and behaving contrary to much of what we need. Children are natural scientists when we let them explore and interact with things like the natural world, even in its supposedly limited scope on a urban playground. Children are also natural story-tellers, and it is through the telling of stories that truth is most often learned and communicated.

Perhaps most important is that children begin as natural and excited learners, and somehow our approach to education drains that from them, so that our methods of motivation increasingly rely on external levers and the promise of future rewards.

It is not that adults should be totally removed from play any more than they should be from the formal learning environment. We do, after all, have a responsibility to ensure that the environment, be it the playground or the classroom, remains safe, not merely physically, but also emotionally. Yet we cannot allow such responsibility to stifle the natural learning processes with which children begin.

Deborah Meier wrote the brief Epilogue, titled “Wondering about the Future.” Allow me to quickly offer a few snippets from those three pages.

Our impetus for writing this book was, most immediately, awareness of a growing national threat: the loss of play. (p. 105)

By the time children arrive at school at ages 3, 4, or 5, they have already accomplished wonders in a natural and efficient way. We once used all the things children come to their first “public” settings already knowing and able to do. If we broke these pieces of knowledge and abilities into “teachable” units, they would constitute a curriculum that couldn’t be “taught” in roughly a dozen years of

formal schooling. But children have achieved all this more or less on their own initiative. (p. 105)

At the heart of the child's impulse to learn is speculation or wonder. (p.106)

In the process of turning schools into competitive institutions, "racing to the top," we end up threatening the spirit of childhood. (p. 107)

Standardized tests are almost explicitly designed to underplay both intuition and imagination. Through years of training in seeking the "one-and-only" right answer, we've taught generations of children to ignore the possibilities that so-called wrong answers embody. At a time in history when we are crying out for creative alternatives to seemingly intransigent problems, it may prove more perilous than we imagine to cut off at an early age the natural human tendency to seek alternatives, to imagine other viewpoints, to invent solutions that take into account the "wrong" but intriguing answers. Without being able to read the future, we suspect that early childhood play and imagination may be more central to our viability as a species than current educational practice suggests. (p. 107)

This might seem like an appropriate place to end this review. It is not. For all of the insight offered by Meier and her co-authors, the real value of this book is to see into the minds of the children. Perhaps too many of us have lost connection of what it was like to be a small child, to experience what Mission Hill encouraged for its children, the creative use of play and imagination as essential building blocks and skills for life-long learning and habits of the mind. Thus I will end my review with the words of a ten-year-old, whose hand-written note appears in the portion of Chapter Five dealing with Habits of the Mind. Before I turn to his words, let me conclude my observations about the book: it is something all involved with education and children in any capacity ought to take the time to read and consider.

And now to the insights of that young man, who titled his words "My Evidence":

My evidence to prove this is all the evidence I need, but wait a minute what if I rotate this what will happen oh it works it balances thats all the evidence I need, but wait one more minute what if I change the mass oh cool its still the same thats all the evidence I need. But wait another minute I can put an axle on it oh I'm so happy it works thats all the evidence I need, but wait what if I revolve it oh yes it works thats all the evidence I need what ok its time for dinner buy.

About the Reviewer

Kenneth J. Bernstein is a National Board Certified Social Studies teacher. He holds degrees in music from Haverford, Religions from St. Charles Seminary, and teaching from Johns Hopkins University. He did extensive doctoral studies in educational administration and policy studies at The Catholic University of America, and additional studies in reading education at the University of Virginia. He has served as a peer reviewer for a number of professional publications, including *Current Issues in Education* and *Teachers College Record*. He is coauthor of Rotberg, I; Bernstein, K. J. & Ritter, S. B. (2001). *No Child Left Behind: Views About the Potential Impact of the Bush Administration's Education Proposals*. Washington, DC: Institute for Education Policy Studies. He was named 2010 *Washington Post* Agnes Meyer Outstanding Teacher.



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Editors

Gene V Glass

glass@edrev.info

Gustavo Fischman

Melissa Cast-Brede
