



Journal of the International Step by Step Association
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Educating Children for Democracy

The International Step by Step Association (ISSA) is a forum for parents, teachers and faculty to promote the values of open society and equal access to a quality education for all children. ISSA's activities grew out of the Step by Step Program, which fosters democratic principles and strengthens community involvement in early childhood education. ISSA conducts and coordinates international activities on behalf of its membership. Members include non-governmental organizations authorized to operate Step by Step Programs, as well as interested individuals and organizations.

ISSA's goals and objectives are:

- To promote Step by Step's child-centered programs and philosophy internationally
- To facilitate information sharing
- To provide opportunities for professional development
- To encourage and disseminate research on child-centered learning
- To develop international initiatives in early childhood education in partnership with interested organizations
- To assist its members in the building of partnerships and fundraising

ISSA welcomes applications for membership from individuals and organizations that support its goals and objectives. Individual basic memberships (including journal subscription) are available for \$35.

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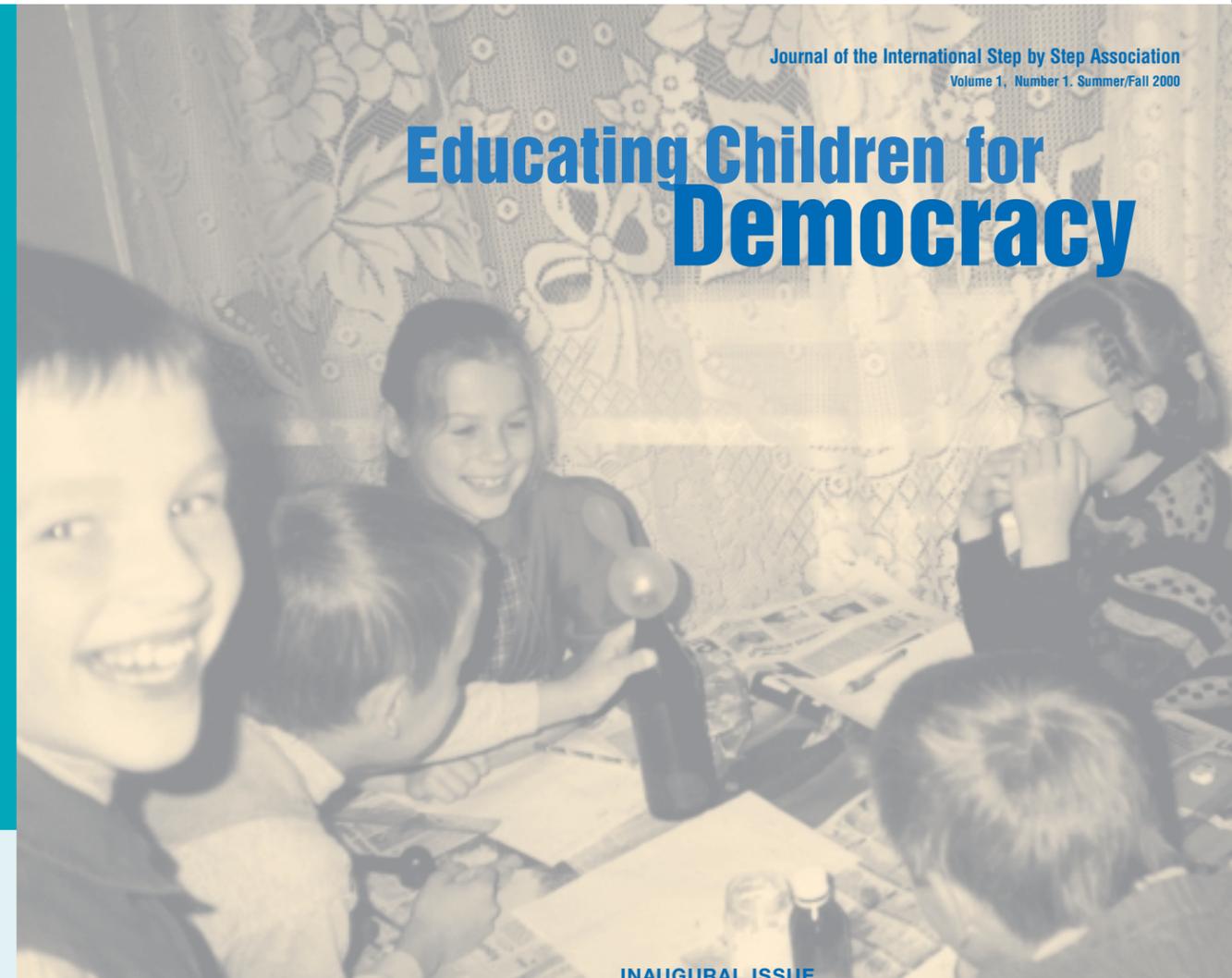
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From the Editor

Welcome to the initial issue of the peer-reviewed journal of the International Step by Step Association (ISSA), *Educating Children for Democracy*. Through practical and scholarly articles, essays, and first-person accounts, this publication will be a forum for sharing information about pedagogical practices that are most compatible with the aims of democratic education. The journal focuses primarily on the transformation to learner-centered education that is occurring in the 28 newly democratic countries and regions participating in the Step by Step Program that are also members of ISSA. However, this journal also addresses the continuing challenge for all democracies to provide the kinds of educational experiences that will ensure the continuation of open and free societies.

The International Step by Step Association is a forum for parents, teachers, and faculty to promote the values of open society and equal access to a quality education for all children. ISSA's activities grew out of the Step by Step Program, which was created in 1994 by the Soros Foundation Network and Children's Resources International, to foster democratic principles and strengthen community involvement in early childhood education. At the present time, 82,000 teachers, faculty members, and student teachers participate in Step by Step's training programs in the emerging democracies in Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Haiti, and South Africa. The aim of the Step by Step Program is to engender democratic ideals and principles within young children and their families. Step by Step methods encourage children to make choices, take responsibility for their decisions, express their ideas with creativity, help each other, develop critical thinking skills, and practice independent thinking.

The program supports educational reform at all levels by:

- Training teachers and administrators at existing preschools and primary schools
- Training faculty at universities and pedagogical institutes on new course content and interactive teaching methods
- Cooperating with education and health ministries regarding educational content and policies
- Establishing associations for parents, teachers, and faculty

The idea to establish this journal emerged during a Step by Step higher education seminar in 1997 when faculty articulated a need for a forum where they could publish articles related to child-centered educational practices. Eager to share their unique experiences regarding change and transformation in the preschools, primary schools, and university and pedagogical teacher training institutions in their countries and regions, higher education faculty and other members of the International Step by Step Association developed a plan for this journal. They determined that the publication would be written for and by teachers of children from birth through grade 8, faculty who instruct preschool and/or primary school teachers, and other educational professionals interested in the learner-centered teaching methods and the relationship between educational practices and a democratic form of government.

John Dewey (1916) was an American educational philosopher of the early twentieth century who wrote extensively about the connections between education and democracy. In his work, he suggested that a democratic society "must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder" (p. 99). Such an education must promote both autonomy and interdependence. Hansen, Kaufmann, and Saifer (1996) concur and state that the development of self initiative, self-efficacy and empowerment in an environment of shared control, freedom of thought and speech, respect, and an appreciation of differences and similarities are essential components of educational approaches that promote democracy. When school is set up as a democratic community, young children learn through experience that "their welfare is inextricably entwined with the welfare of others" (Seefeldt and Barbour, 1994, p. 584). Hoffman (2000) suggests that schools designed

to support democratic society would include, "autonomy in decision making and respect for individual rights (of both students and teachers)...open dialogue that would be open to all voices and perspectives [and] the appearance of chaos or disorganization at times, recognizing that order and direction must emerge and cannot be imposed" (p. 619). He further adds that while in a democracy not all schools, curricula, or instruction would be exactly the same, practices would be child-centered.

What are child-centered educational practices? A child-centered classroom involves children as active participants in their own learning. The classroom environment encourages children to explore, initiate, and create. Teachers use their knowledge of child development and individual children's interests and learning styles to create the environment and to provide the materials for learning. Such a classroom is different from a teacher-directed classroom, where the curriculum is narrowly defined. The teacher dispenses the prescribed curriculum content and skills, and the individual differences of children are not acknowledged. In a child-centered classroom, children learn content, acquire skills, and develop as individual learners.

While many educators argue that child-centered curricular practices are most compatible with the aims of a democratic society, questions remain about how to institute and maintain such practices, not only in newly democratic countries but in established democracies as well. *Educating Children for Democracy* will consider many of these questions in this and in future issues through open dialogue among educators. This initial issue addresses many of the aspects of child-centered curricular practices that relate to the theme of democracy and education. Authors from seven countries have contributed to this issue and a brief overview of each article follows:



T.A. Orusbaeva raises the important question of what kind of education is most suitable in helping children learn to live in a democratic society and provides a fine overview of the Step by Step Program as it has evolved in **Kyrgyzstan**.

Cornelia Cincilei, Judy David, and Betsy Grob bring us the voices of teachers from **Moldova** who talk about their changing attitudes and beliefs as they have learned about and begun implementing child-centered curricular practices. **Nadezhda Mayorova** brings forward many of the barriers that hinder educational transformation in **Russia** and raises the important issue of continuity as children schooled in child-centered ways move on to more traditional approaches in middle school.

Elizabeth J. Erwin and Noreen A. Kipness, two American authors, focus on the aspect of democracy that values the creation of inclusive communities where all children are honored for their individuality and contribution to the group. This article is reprinted by permission of the authors from the American journal, *Early Childhood Education Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1997.

Two related articles from **Yugoslavia** explore the importance of including all members of society in opportunities for democratic schooling. **Tatjana Pavlovski** chronicles the experience of introducing child-centered curriculum to Roma families. **Jadranka Stojanovic** provides a summary of ongoing research that demonstrates the impact of child-centered preschool programs on Roma children's success in primary school.

Velta Kolpakova takes us into a Step by Step classroom in **Latvia** and demonstrates how children learn through their explorations in several activity centers in the classroom.

Renate Lensa brings the parent's perspective as she explains why she appreciates the child-centered approach to preschool education that her daughter experienced in a Step by Step classroom in **Latvia**.

Tiiu Kuurme provides a fascinating introduction to Estonian educational history through the work of Johannes Käis, a progressive educator whose ideas were as influential in **Estonia** as the work of Dewey was in the United States.

We are grateful to the educators who reviewed these articles. The ideas and insights of the following reviewers were most helpful in preparing this publication:

Barbara Bourne, Kathleen Burson, Holly E. Brophy-Herb, Richard Cohen, Joan Moyer, Mary Rivkin, and Edyth J. Wheeler.

Future issues of *Educating Children for Democracy* will cover some of these topics in greater depth and we invite you to suggest ideas for additional topics related to the journal's central purpose of exploring the transformation to child-centered educational practices in newly democratic countries and regions. Future issues will focus on the following areas:

- Inclusion of minority children and children with disabilities
- Family and community involvement
- Play
- Child-centered curriculum in literacy, mathematics, science, social studies
- Individualizing the curriculum
- Active adult learning
- Other topics that emerge

We invite you to add your voice to what promises to be a lively and dynamic exchange of ideas among educators who are interested in what it means to educate children for democracy and to establish education *as* a democracy. Darling-Hammond (1996) suggests that education *as* democracy occurs in a "pluralistic community by talking and making decisions with one another and coming to understand multiple perspectives" (p. 6). We are eager for this journal to provide a forum for the exchange of diverse ideas and unique experiences that can enlighten, encourage, and inspire all of us who are interested in transforming educational practices.

Patricia A. Scully, Ph.D., Editor

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■ Children share experiences and plans for the day at morning meeting, before breaking into activities.

Educating Young Children for Democracy: Perspectives from Kyrgyzstan

—T.A. Orusbaeva

What does it mean to raise young children in the spirit of democracy? Democracy is not anarchy; it does not permit everything. In the process of gaining freedom and rights in the various social spheres of the state, an individual also acquires certain duties. These duties include respect of and obedience to the laws of the country, defense of the motherland, and observance of moral-ethical norms (for example, respect for elders and protection of the young and weak). With such responsibilities come freedom of expression and the right to employment and education. But what kind of education is most suitable in helping children learn to live in a democratic society?

Transitioning to a New System of Education

At the beginning of the new millennium, in addition to addressing political, economic and other problems, the world community is paying great attention to social issues, particularly in the sphere of education (National Report on Human Development, 1997, 1998). Kyrgyzstan is no exception to this tendency and is actively pursuing qualitative new forms and methods of education (Rahinova & Pankova, 1993). The democratization of Kyrgyzstan and its shift to new market relationships call for revisions in the system of education. To some extent, these complex processes will largely reform and establish the real foundations for the democratization and humanization of the schools, preschools, and other areas of the educational system. Educators and parents will also play an important role in this new enterprise. In any society, especially in a democracy, the particular society's experience and unique development should be the basis for the definitive educational model (Hershunsky, 1998). The present diversity of forms and methods of education will provide Kyrgyzstan the opportunity in the near future to determine the optimal system of education for its citizens.

Kyrgyzstan's developing system of education is based on a new principle that establishes freedom from ideology and politicization for educational institutions. Furthermore, democratic conditions promote the creation and free development of educational institutions, both state and private. Educational reform in Kyrgyzstan has accelerated decentralization, providing an opportunity for educational institutions to implement innovative curricula oriented towards the individual student, and to offer a new and more personal approach to education. An increasing number of alternative educational programs that follow these principles have emerged in recent years. Following a model based on democratic and humanist philosophy, these programs in their content, form, and methods provide the individual child with the freedom to choose her activities. Thus, these programs create high motivation that, in turn, promotes cognitive development.

The Step by Step Model of Education

One of the brightest examples of these innovative educational programs in Kyrgyzstan is the Step by Step child-centered curriculum model. Step by Step is based on tolerant humanist principles that can be introduced during the preschool years. For five years, Step by Step has been successfully implemented in Kyrgyzstan's preschools, primary schools, and teacher preparation institutions. Step by Step emphasizes interaction between children and adults, and the involvement of parents. It also stresses the role of the teacher as a facilitator of learning, and various pedagogical strategies designed to help children develop the autonomy and decision-making skills so necessary for democratic life.

Step by Step is based partially on Jean Piaget's theory of human development that outlines specific cognitive stages that children progress through as they mature. Piaget (1953) specified four main stages in the intellectual development of children: the stage of sensory motor development from birth to age two; the stage of pre-operational thought from two until six; the stage of concrete operations from age six to twelve; and the stage of formal activities from twelve to thirteen years of age on. In this sequence, each stage is founded upon and prepared for by the previous stage. According to Piaget's theory, certain specific conditions are necessary for the full realization of a child's development. The Step by Step program provides just such conditions for the development of the whole child.

Parents sharing traditions with children in the classroom.



One of the most important characteristics of the Step by Step program is the involvement of parents. In all societies, families provide the foundation for physical development and personal growth of the individual child during early childhood. For this reason, cooperation between parents and teachers is essential. As the primary influence on the individual child's development, the family has the capacity to greatly strengthen the child's ability to live in a democratic society. Educators can help parents understand strategies that encourage the development of democratic principles at an early age. Parents and educators working together form the future democratic society through their daily teaching.

During the epoch of totalitarianism the role of the family was minimized. Parents of preschool children were not able to play a direct role in their children's education. They were not permitted to observe their child, to know what he ate, and they were not informed of any detail concerning their child's day. In a democratic society, however, one of the general goals of early education is to harmonize children's upbringing at home with their learning in school. Therefore, it is obvious that in their everyday lives, children should have their basic needs met, feel supported and understood, be protected, and have positive relationships. In addition, they must be given appropriate independence, and allowed to develop personal initiative, all with a view to their introduction to democratic principles.

To this end, the Step by Step program works to create an environment that provides the necessary conditions for the development of personal initiative. In the program, each child has the opportunity to choose different kinds of activities where she can discover and realize her own capabilities. These activities foster creativity and strengthen the child's sense of self by building confidence and encouraging independence (Vygotsky, 1994).

“What kind of education is most suitable in helping children learn to live in a democracy?”

Independence is the ability to meet your own needs, to influence your own environment, and to understand and use external and internal resources positively. For the development of such abilities, a specific environment and certain conditions are necessary: children must be able to discuss their problems in order to resolve them and to come to some agreement when there are differing opinions. Just such an environment is created in Step by Step classes. This child-oriented environment plays an important role in promoting independence. In Step by Step classrooms, activity centers give children the opportunity to:

- Choose activities
- Play actively
- Use materials for open-ended projects
- Work cooperatively
- Take care of each other
- Do project activities

Teachers in the Step by Step program are responsible for the content of the day. They offer fulfilling and enjoyable events, plan different kinds of activities designed to promote learning, and remain receptive to children's and parents' ideas and suggestions. This is another area where collaboration between parents and teachers results in the positive development of the individual child's abilities.

The Step by Step Program in Higher Education Institutions in Kyrgyzstan

Step by Step was introduced into the primary schools in Kyrgyzstan in 1996 and expanded to higher educational institutions in 1997. Teachers-in-training are not limited to pedagogical practice and observation, but are actively working on various projects concerning Step by Step activities. For example, undergraduate students in preschool education were engaged in the rather difficult task of gathering materials for a program evaluation of Step by Step. This project involved observing 140 children as they engaged in various activities, and gave the teachers-in-training an opportunity to experience their own creativity. In 1999, four graduate students wrote their diploma papers on science activities for the Step by Step classroom. Other students chose to write diploma papers on the comparative study and analysis of the traditional and the Step by Step approaches to education; others studied and determined the influence of the activity centers on the mental abilities of children. The State Testing Commission gave perfect evaluations for these students' papers. Furthermore, one student was encouraged to continue in postgraduate studies. A postgraduate student is currently engaged in dissertation work on the theme, "Raising Individual and Mental Abilities of Preschool Aged Children," and the focus of her research is children involved in the Step by Step program.

The principles, philosophy, and content of the Step by Step program are purposeful. They actively contribute to forming the personality of an individual child and give him the opportunity to participate in a democratic process (Hansen, Kaufmann, & Saifer, 1997). These positive pedagogical conditions affect the child's whole life, and Step by Step activities promote the child's successful development into a democratic citizen. Once you have entered a Step by Step classroom, however, there is no need for theoretical proof of the program's effectiveness in developing democratic relationships among children and educators, and between parents and teachers. As soon as you observe these active children, filled with curiosity, inquisitiveness, independence, and courage, choosing their activities, you can see the relationship between this program and the development of future democratic citizens. Step by Step has found a home in the hearts of parents and children of Kyrgyzstan who can safely look forward to entering the twenty-first century.

T.A. Orusbaeva is a candidate for a Ph.D. in pedagogical science and is presently a docent and the head of the department of preschool and primary education at the Arabeev Kyrgyz State Pedagogical University in Kyrgyzstan.

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Changing to a Child-Centered Approach: Teachers Reflect on the Moldovan Experience

—Cornelia Cincilei
Judy David
Betsy Grob

My role as teacher has changed. I'm a facilitator and a coordinator of children's learning.

Now we give students choices to represent their learning by drawing, writing, or constructing.

The room is arranged in learning centers. We used to have everyone staring at the board in front of the classroom.

There's collaboration with parents in the classroom, with other teachers, and with administrators. It's a whole new set of adult relationships.

Changing Attitudes and Beliefs

Comments like these came fast and furiously when in March 2000, a group of primary teachers in Moldova's Step by Step program were asked, "What does it mean to have a child-centered approach?" Until five years ago, these teachers had been trained and had been teaching in a traditional, teacher-directed system of education, which was typical of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. But with Moldova's independence in the

early 1990's, new educational methods and approaches began to be introduced, including the child-centered methods of the Step by Step program. The purpose of Step by Step was to prepare young children in Moldova for life in an open, democratic society.

But change in schools is not possible—or really meaningful or permanent—unless teachers' attitudes and beliefs change. Superficial changes in the classroom, such as new furniture or even new teaching materials, do not nurture democratic values in and of themselves. Teachers have to embrace new ideas and over 300 primary teachers in Moldova have done so.

As the teachers talked during the March training, they generated a web, a strategy they often use with their students. To generate the web, teachers brainstormed ideas, testimony to the transformations underway in teachers' thinking. In 1995, training, webbing and brainstorming were novel—and scary—ideas. Many teachers were uncomfortable with these approaches because they were used to having one right answer and deferring to the "experts." Now, in the year 2000, these same teachers are eager to express their own opinions in the group; they show respect for different ideas; they appreciate the many facets of the educational process.

Moldovan teachers who were used to traditional methods that relied on rote learning, whole group instruction, and teacher-dominated pedagogy have embraced a new child-centered approach and adhere to democratic principles in the classroom. They feel empowered as decision-makers and confident as learners. Step by Step teachers describe how they have changed:

Coming together for our training sessions, we've learned not to be afraid of failing, of being seen badly in our colleagues' eyes.

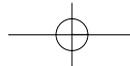
In each school, we have teams working together and we're closer as colleagues. It used to be that others would come into a classroom to criticize and find fault with a teacher doing things differently. Now we're partners.

Finding collegial support is critical to teachers' professional growth (Wasley, 1999). These primary teachers attest to the importance of sharing and valuing ideas in a non-threatening, positive way. These qualities are also essential to a democratic society (Hansen, Kaufmann, & Saifer, 1997). As they have learned to communicate with and trust one another, the teachers appreciate the importance of creating classrooms where children, too, can exchange ideas, discuss, and even disagree in a climate marked by mutual respect.

■ Hands-on math activities.



■ Children cooperate on projects together.



Creating Classroom Community

John Dewey, an American philosopher of education formulated essential ideas about the relationship between education and democracy. Writing in the early part of the 20th century, he states, "a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Cuffaro, 1994). In Dewey's view, the classroom should function as a mini-democracy, where children learn to live together, care about one another, communicate openly, and feel part of a larger whole. When the teachers themselves feel connected as a community of learners as in Moldova, it is no surprise that they create a classroom community with their students. As the three authors visited Step by Step classrooms recently, the evidence for burgeoning classroom communities was overwhelming:

- In a village school, fourth graders generated class rules, including "Let's not be indifferent," and "Let's be attentive to each other." The rules were posted in a visible place, and students had signed off at the bottom of the paper. In traditional classrooms, the teacher usually determines the rules. The children do not have a chance to take "ownership."
- When a teacher was absent for an extended period, her third graders wrote the morning message and conducted the meeting.
- A first-grade teacher directed her students to form a line in alphabetical order according to their last names. Some children weren't sure where to go, but many children knew each other's last names and eagerly helped the others. Cooperation, not competition, is stressed.
- In small groups, third graders had been studying different aspects of the human body, such as the skeletal, muscular, and circulatory systems. Each group wrote about and drew pictures on their subject. All the pages were put together in a class book that became a favorite in the library corner. In traditional classrooms, the teacher (or the textbook) is often considered the sole authority. The experience of discovering together, as a community of learners, is not valued.

As these classroom vignettes demonstrate, students, along with their teacher, function as a whole. The needs, interests, and feelings of the classroom community are taken into account as decisions are made about behavioral expectations, curriculum, and instructional strategies.

In a democracy and in the mini-democracy of a classroom, everyone is connected as members of the same community. They are equals in terms of their rights and responsibilities.

Valuing Children's Individuality

In traditional pedagogy, the emphasis is on uniformity, conformity, and consistency. Students are expected to master the same material and produce the same product—whether it is the drawing of a tree, the recitation of a poem, or the solution to a math problem. Learning the facts and the "right" answers are valued. Children are taught to fit in, not to stand out.

But education for a democratic way of life demands that the individual be recognized. The individual is not subservient to the group, as in an authoritarian educational system, but rather the individual in the context of the community is valued—what Dewey refers to as the *social individual* (Cuffaro, 1995). The uniqueness of the child, with her own constellation of strengths and abilities, is nurtured. Different perspectives and opinions are valued, they add to the richness of the intellectual life of the classroom. In fact, from a Piagetian perspective, cognitive growth requires that children encounter other points of view that will lead them to modify and expand their current thinking (Tudge & Rogoff, 1987).

Time and time again, we heard teachers in Step by Step classrooms value the individuality of their students, respect their differences and nurture their creativity

- When a small group of third graders had completed a painting to depict the emotion "sad," two children, rather than just one, from the group stood up to present their work in front of the class. Why? Because they said their ideas differed— one painted red dots, the other black dots. The teacher accepted their different approaches and wisely asked them to explain their thinking, and they did.
- In a busy classroom in Balti, the second largest city in Moldova, children are encouraged to add to the Tree of Success. On each leaf, a child can write about an accomplishment. Since the start of the school year, the tree has grown, and leaves have sprouted: "I read with nice intonation" and "I can play chess."

Curriculum in a child-centered classroom gives children a chance to express their individuality. In the same classroom in Balti, we observed small groups of children

"Change in schools is not possible unless teachers' attitudes and beliefs change."

studying different aspects of outer space, their thematic unit. Three students were constructing a space shuttle out of cardboard; another group was reading about the first lunar landing and doing related math computations. At the front of the room, Svetlana, the teacher, had drawn a continuum and children were expected to note their progress along it in regard to the space study:

- I know what I'm talking about.
- I can explain the ideas.
- I can give examples.
- I can apply the ideas.

A few students had written their names at the beginning of the continuum, most had indicated they could give some examples. This type of self-assessment affirms that learning is the responsibility of the learner and that children learn at different rates. This is different from a traditional approach where there is one yardstick of success, such as performance on formal tests. When the individual learner is recognized in terms of his personal learning and achievement, the child develops the self-initiative and the sense of self worth necessary for participation in a democratic, open society.

Sergiu, a third grade teacher, describes eloquently how he has created a classroom where children's individuality is valued:

I know my children much better because they have the possibility of expressing themselves at any point during the day. The room arrangement, the classroom management make the children be themselves and forget they are just in an institution (school). I feel much closer to the children. I have the possibility to observe them in greater detail.

His words are echoed by a leading American educator, T.R. Sizer (1999), who claims that the only way to individualize instruction is to know each student well. Accordingly, the teacher's task is "the insistent coaxing out of each child on his or her best terms of profoundly important intellectual habits and tools for enriching a democratic society, habits and tools that provide each individual with the substance and skills to survive well in a rapidly changing culture and economy."

When teachers recognize the individual differences of their students and build on them, they will be able

to make their unique contributions to the growth of a democratic way of life. They will also be better prepared for the changing conditions of modern life.

Another Step by Step teacher, Aurelia, notes how the parents of one student have learned to respect and value their child's individuality. Her sensitivity to the child was key in helping them see their son in a new light:

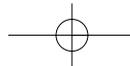
The parents told me their son was stubborn. When I asked him if he wanted to go to the art center in first grade, he said no, he couldn't draw. But in the math center, he discovered art and the pleasure of drawing. I told the parents about his progress at school and they were shocked because he was still the same way at home. I suggested they have patience and follow his lead. By the end of grade 1, they saw some changes. Now he's in grade 4, and the parents are very pleased with their son who is very independent, has his own point of view, and who also helps his mother in the kitchen. The parents think the change is due to the program because together with him, they learned a lot and changed their attitude toward him.

When teachers and parents treat children with respect—as Aurelia says, "follow their lead"—then children gain confidence in their abilities and take risks. Child-centered pedagogy does not mean letting a child determine all of her learning, rather it means allowing the child to express her preferences and try new things when she is ready. Hence the teacher is a guide and a keen observer, rather than a dictator of curriculum.

Becoming Independent Thinkers

A free press and free expression of ideas are essential in a democratic society. Citizens are expected to be informed and thoughtful as they make decisions involving their governance. To support this, the educational system has to nurture independent, critical thinking in students. Children have to learn to think for themselves, to analyze and weigh evidence, and to derive their own conclusions. Teachers have to create rich learning experiences that will stretch and challenge their students. They do this in a number of ways, as illustrated below, in a third grade class in Chisinau, the capital of Moldova, taught by Nadija.

Nadja opened the morning meeting by passing around a mystery box and each child took a turn asking her a question about its contents. She told them, "Do your thinking and then pass it to your neighbor." When at last the box was opened, to reveal a white spring flower, a child remarked, "You made a mistake, you said the object was blue..." Nadja, not at all



embarrassed, admitted her error. Then she handed out a flower to each child, urged them to observe carefully, and children noticed, "it smells, it's small." This was how she began a thematic study of spring and spring flowers.

A few minutes later, children moved into small groups at tables where there were bunches of snowdrops and violets. Each group had a different assignment—write about the attributes of the flowers; if the flowers could speak, what would they tell us? How can we protect them? These imaginative, involving tasks required observing, thinking, and cooperating. Nadija circulated among the groups, offering suggestions and asking questions to probe their thinking. At one point, several children came up with different estimates of the length of a flower. Nadija asked, "How could you measure (accurately)? What unit could you use?" Later, she asked another group, "Why do you think flowers have different colors and smells?" One child responded, "So they can be so beautiful." A second child answered, "We couldn't tell them apart if they were the same." Nadija accepted both responses and told them they would study more about that. Several times, Nadija checked in with the groups, asking if they needed more time. They all said yes.

Finally, she called all the groups together and each one reported out. As she listened, she asked questions or made comments to stimulate more thinking and further investigation. When one group proposed "forest police" to protect the snowdrops growing in the woods, she asked, "Do they have a salary? How could we calculate it?" She described the Catewa Rosie (Red Book) that lists endangered species. Children wanted to find it in a library or bookstore.

What are the lessons to be learned from this example of learning and teaching in a child-centered classroom?

- Nadija defined her role as a guide, not as the conveyor of huge amounts of information or the authority on spring flowers as might be the case in a traditional classroom. Her goal was to encourage the children's own thinking.
- Nadija asked questions that had many possible answers; they gave rise to original and individual responses. They required in-depth thinking and raised even more questions in the children's minds. In contrast, a traditional teacher tends to ask questions to "test" children's correct knowledge.
- Nadija gave the students time to think and resources (including the actual flowers and resource books) to investigate. She respected the children's wish to have more time; she made the learning come "alive" by allowing them to see, smell, and feel the flowers. The children were involved in the scientific process, doing the work that scientists do (Doris, 1991). Traditional learning tends to rely on rote memorization and indirect learning from secondary sources.
- Nadija used small groups for learning; children collaborated and worked on tasks together. They exchanged ideas and sometimes disagreed. They were responsible for sharing their work with the whole group, the classroom community. This is markedly different from frontal teaching in traditional classrooms where teachers do most of the talking and children are not allowed to talk together. In Nadija's class, there was a constant "hum," different from the absolute silence that prevails in many traditional classrooms.

■ Teachers try to experience activities from the children's perspective .

A Child Speaks

Children are often the best witnesses about the value of their educational experiences. They are the ones who feel most directly the changes in the teacher's attitudes, in the classroom community, in the acceptance of their own individuality, and in the active learning process. A new student recently transferred into Aurelia's Step by Step third grade. He came from a traditional school setting. She recounts this transition through his eyes:

I read a poem to the class about a boy's reaction to school. The new student said, "That's like me, waiting for the teacher to tell me what to do, how to do it. We followed along. When I did work, I tried to copy exactly what the teacher was doing. When I came to the Step by Step classroom, I noticed the teacher accepted everyone's point of view and didn't show us models (to copy). I feel much better here because everyone listens to me and they're glad when I succeed. I'm not afraid when I make mistakes because my classmates help me and offer other ways."

This boy feels like a competent learner, knowing that the teacher and his peers will accept him for who he is. No doubt, his self-esteem has risen immeasurably in a classroom where children are valued as individuals and where a safe, nurturing community exists. These are the ingredients that set children on the path to becoming active participants in an open, democratic society.

Cornelia Cincilei is the director of the Step by Step Program in Moldova, and Judy David and Betsy Grob conduct teacher training for Children's Resources International.



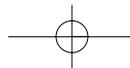
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Editor's Note: An American reviewer made an important point in responding to this article. "It would be a shame for readers to think that education policies in democratic societies invariably support learning through democratic practices. Therefore, I might suggest including references to the universal struggle for implementing child-centered teaching. It may be interesting for readers from emerging democracies to note that educators in historically democratic societies continue to struggle with many of the same questions and often meet resistance from administrators while attempting to build communities of independent and interdependent learners." The following readings explore these issues further.

Related Readings

- Beane, J. A. (1998). Reclaiming a democratic purpose for education. *Educational Leadership* 56(2): 8-11.
- Hoffman, J. V. (2000). The de-democratization of schools and literacy in America. *The Reading Teacher* 53(8): 616-623.



Transforming Educational Practices in Russia: Problems, Contradictions, and the Issue of Continuity

—Nadezhda Mayorova

You cannot set people free to a greater degree than they feel free inwardly. —A.I. Hertzén

Democracy is one of the most complex forms of existence. A democratic society can only develop if each person holds an active and responsible position within it. Whatever each person's individual characteristics, he or she must first of all consciously accept the principles of democracy and actively abide by them. To bring up a citizen willing to actively participate and able to make responsible choices is the primary goal of a democratic society. Society as a whole, as well as families and schools, all work toward this goal.

Problems Inherent in Bringing Democratic Principles into Education

What should education be like in a society built according to democratic principles? The answer appears simple: education should fit the underlying principles of a democratic society. However, despite the logical simplicity of this statement, the implementation of democratic principles in school involves a range of problems. Two of these problems are described briefly below.

Attitudes toward childhood.

The first problem relates to society's attitudes toward childhood. Adults often treat the child as a creature who should be prepared for adult life. It follows that childhood proper is not life, just a preliminary period before adulthood. This attitude puts the child in the position of a socially passive consumer of adult help, adult knowledge, and adult-determined decisions. The most important knowledge gained by the child is the idea that he or she does not know anything and cannot do anything yet; only adults possess skills and knowledge. Paradoxically, the adult still wants the child to grow more independent as she learns, and more active and responsible, in other words, more grown-up. Such an adult does not even realize that

this situation is contrary to her own position as an educator of the next generation. The adult created the environment in which the child cannot develop into an independent and responsible individual. Moreover, the child does not even understand what this means because she has no experience with independent decision-making and actions.

Another attitude towards childhood stems from the belief that childhood is a succession, relatively stable in time, of certain phases of development. These phases are defined and explained by the fields of psychology and physiology. Psychology proposes various approaches to developmental stages. The work of Vygotsky, Piaget, Erikson, and others describe the phenomenon of childhood with a certain degree of scientific validity, in an attempt to understand the child's needs. However, in the current education system there is a trend towards substantial simplification of these scientific approaches and conclusions. This simplification has led to a division of childhood into strictly defined age-related periods: preschool, elementary, middle school, and high school. In fact, this division is convenient for practice. It is not necessarily a problem that different institutions are responsible for each specific period of childhood; the problem is that there is no continuity between these institutions' goals, and they often contradict each other. As a rule, there is no scheme in place for agreeing on goals, therefore the issue of continuity is particularly difficult in education.

Given these attitudes toward childhood, on the part of both parents and teachers, there is a widely shared illusion that once a child gets to the next link of the educational chain, the child automatically reaches the next level of age development. In other words, although he was a preschooler just yesterday, he is an elementary student today. Of course, in reality, such magic transformation never happens, and the child is compelled to adjust to the requirements of a new system, regardless of whether or not he is prepared for it. This position of the adult world with regard to the child leads to different, mostly lamentable consequences. These consequences include higher anxiety, lower independence and creativity, the development of defensive and rather aggressive behavior, and the tendency to avoid independent decisions and possible responsibility for them.

The historic tradition of schools

The second problem in implementing democratic principles in school is that of historic traditions in the educational system. School, an instrument created by society to forward knowledge and experience from the

preceding generations to succeeding ones, certainly must keep pace with the changes occurring in society. However, changes in schools tend to be much slower than changes in society as a whole. With each generation the resulting gap becomes wider and more visible. Thus school fails ever more often to meet the goals set by society.

Contradictions Inherent in Traditional Approaches to Schooling

School is a captive of many contradictions linked to the quality and rate of civilization's development:

Contradiction 1: Traditional schools center on the transmission to the child of a certain amount of partially organized knowledge accumulated by humankind. But, with the volume of modern knowledge growing so quickly these days, the curriculum knowledge the child acquires cannot be sufficient.

Contradiction 2: Traditional schools use a system in which information comes from the teacher and is given directly to the student; the student replicates the given information, which is proof of the learning that occurred. Yet, modern technologies make the opportunities for learning so much broader that an individual today has to be skilled in analysis and systematization, rather than having encyclopedic knowledge. This shift means that the child should be taught how to be a skilled user and how to find the required knowledge independently related to the specific problem, instead of being taught to accumulate all the different information "just in case."

Contradiction 3: Traditional schools have rigid systems for teaching different subject matter. In other words, they teach the various areas of human knowledge in almost complete isolation. There are but weak attempts to integrate the sciences, humanities, and arts. This integration mostly proceeds along factual lines. But, today there is a worldwide practice to link the different areas of scientific knowledge. This linkage is based on more than a factual component; there is a philosophical aspect to it as well. Modern philosophy is increasingly concerned with the need to create something to counter the destructive force of the technocratic civilization. This something is the growing idea concerning the humanization of science and society.

The ideas of humanization are based on psychological theories suggesting that the main subjects for analysis are higher values such as self-actualization, creativity, love, freedom, responsibility, autonomy,

mental health, and interpersonal interaction (A. Maslow, C. Rogers, V. Frankle, S. Bueler, F. Barron, R. May, S. Jurard and others.) The main tenets of humanistic psychology are formulated as follows:

1. A human being is an integral whole.
2. Individual cases are no less valuable than general ones.
3. The main psychological reality is what the person feels.
4. A human life is a single process.
5. A person is open to self-realization.
6. A person is determined by more than external situations.

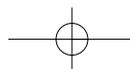
Therefore, humanization in teaching aims to create an environment that will allow a person to develop, using her resources and actively exploring the socio-cultural and natural aspects of the surrounding world. In other words, a humanistic school is not centered on the child in general (as a member of the age group), but on each child and her own life, specific features, needs, desires, and feelings.

Contradiction 4: No matter how much we talk about the actuality of and the social need for a humanistic approach, it is weakly implemented in school. It is a contradiction of, among other things, the model of teacher-student interaction applied in the traditional school. The key points describing this model are:

- The teacher has a lot of skills and knowledge. The child has no skills and knowledge. It is only from the teacher that the child can learn skills and knowledge.
- The teacher is more important because she knows what should be taught and how. The child is subordinate because he cannot determine what to learn.
- The teacher is the leader, because he alone knows the end goal and plans how to attain it. The child is the follower; she cannot act on her own initiative because it will disturb the teacher's plan and prevent attainment of the end goal.

The basis for such traditions is the attitude toward childhood described above. The list of such problems and contradictions could be much longer, but even this short overview illustrates how difficult it is to enact change in the areas of teaching and educating.

■ A hands-on approach to learning.





■ Working on the floor
—a new environment for learning.

The Step by Step Program in Russia

Nevertheless, the modern school is engaged in a worldwide quest for improvement. One markedly different approach is the Step by Step Program, which introduces child-centered teaching methods, and has been implemented in many of the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The program was developed by American educators and designed for preschool and elementary schools.

In Russia, this program has been implemented since 1994 and is successfully developing in the thirteen largest regions of this country. Ever since its introduction, Step by Step has been actively supported by state educational authorities, teachers, and parents. In the past few years, a network of training centers and model sites has been created at preschools and primary schools. In many regions, an overview of this program was included in the curricula of higher educational institutions and teacher retraining institutes. Parents who have children in Step by Step schools set up parent clubs and associations.

This proliferation of Step by Step in the Russian educational system has stimulated interest on the part of Russian research institutions. The findings of the studies carried out by Russian scholars—teachers, psychologists, and sociologists—suggest that this program's child-centered approach helps to solve a number of problems and to remove contradictions plaguing traditional schools. Change occurs in the schools where this program is implemented, affecting children, teachers, parents, and school administrators. Some of the changes include:

1. The children have become more active and independent, and have learned how to make choices and assume responsibility for their work. Their interaction with each other and with the teacher is relaxed and friendly; they plan their projects together with the teacher and help each other.
2. The teachers have mastered new professional skills, have learned how to plan their work considering the children's interests, and are not afraid of changing their own plans. Many teachers now consider their work more interesting and creative, and note that the program helped them become more independent and free professionally.
3. Parents get actively involved in school life, following with interest their children's progress. They have become more attentive to and tolerant of the children's problems, and more respectful of the teacher's labor.

4. School administrators are deeply satisfied with the results of the experimental classrooms' work, inform other teachers about these results, provide assistance to the classroom teachers, and actively cooperate with parents.

Analyzing the Russian scholars' research findings, one can say that the Step by Step preschool and primary program is an effective tool of democratization and humanization of education, as reflected in the higher social and personal activity of all the participants in the process.

The Issue of Continuity

The more successful and effective Step by Step has been in preschool and primary schools, however, the more obvious the problem of continuity between the Step by Step primary and traditional middle school becomes. The solution to this problem of continuity may become a common goal for theorists and practitioners of many countries implementing the Step by Step program.

The basic principles of the Step by Step philosophy help provide the solution to the problem. These are the principles of child-centered teaching, which meets the child's needs, interests and capabilities, and includes active family involvement. Therefore, the teaching and learning process emphasizes ongoing observation, recording, and reflection on the child's personal growth, and modification of the learning environment based on that growth.

The problem of continuity between Step by Step and traditional middle schools could be approached in at least two different ways. One approach would be a gradual adaptation of primary students to the forms and principles of traditional schooling. The implementation of such tactics would force us to relinquish the most significant achievements the child made as a result of the child-centered teaching. It could also weaken the child's responsibility for the outcome of his learning, and lead to a decrease in the child's personal and cognitive activity. The second approach would involve adapting the middle school system by accepting and using the Step by Step principles and methodologies for older children. Certainly, this second option must be regarded as the more effective and advisable.

Current concerns in the traditional school have to do with the quest for new educational approaches that could contribute to the humanization of education, while at the same time retaining its quality. Step by Step

“To bring up a citizen willing to actively participate and able to make responsible choices is the primary goal of a democratic society.”

offers such approaches. Consequently, the main condition for continuity would be the acceptance and use of this program's child-centered principles by middle-school teachers. Those principles include:

- The child's active role in the learning process.
- The creation of an environment for individual learning and teamwork, and for mutual and independent learning.
- Family involvement and reliance on family culture.
- Integrated teaching based on the joint productive work of the teacher and the student.
- Partnership between teachers of various subject matters, including ongoing observation of the students' personal growth.

Achieving continuity, aimed at ensuring the most comfortable transition from each educational level to the next one, will first of all involve training middle school teachers. The acceptance and use of the Step by Step principles by those teachers may not come easily.

The Russian pedagogical community has made the first step toward the solution of this problem. In August 1999, a research and practice conference of Step by Step primary teachers and traditional middle school teachers was held in Moscow. Researchers in educational philosophy, pedagogy, and psychology also attended the conference. Middle school teachers had a chance to learn about the Step by Step philosophy and the teaching strategies and activities used in this program. The conference participants discussed humanizing teaching and the possibilities of using certain primary school strategies with older children. The conference outcome included plans for joint work between primary and middle school teachers. Creative groups, in which primary teachers could act as consultants, were set up. The participants discussed possibilities of involving experts in various fields of study to address the Step by Step-traditional school continuity problem.

In January 2000, a seminar was held in the city of Samara for the middle school teachers now responsible for Step by Step primary graduates. The participants talked about their experiences teaching these children. The teachers noted that Step by Step primary graduates are different from children who have finished traditional primary school. The differences include their greater cognitive activity and independence.

Admittedly, these qualities do not receive a unanimously positive response from their new teachers. Some of them say that the students' higher cognitive activity challenges the teacher to be more flexible in planning the content and the delivery of knowledge, and helps professional growth. Others regard such precocious behavior as a destabilizing factor that breaks learning discipline and that interferes with the teacher's plans.

It should be noted, however, that teachers who have accepted the child-centered approach and those holding more conservative views alike, feel the need for additional professional training and technological support. Therefore, the work to ensure continuity of education and to transfer the Step by Step approach to middle school requires purposeful coordination and additional teacher training.

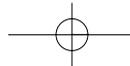
The awareness of their responsibility for the future of the children who have been given the elementary skills of democratic behavior, formed in a humanistic school, prods Russian teachers and parents to continue to raise the continuity issue and to seek a practical solution.

Seeking a Dialogue

We would like educators from other countries implementing the Step by Step program to share their experience in dealing with continuity between primary and middle schools. We invite experts and researchers from those countries to take part in the discussion of opportunities to create an integral educational system from birth through high school, a system based on the Step by Step principles. In this way, education would meet the requirements of a democratic society in terms of bringing up active citizens, who are able to think critically and freely, and who consciously accept democratic principles and abide by them throughout their lives.

Nadezhda Mayorova is a lecturer at the Saint Petersburg Teacher Retraining Institute. She takes an active part in implementing the Step by Step program in Russia.

Editor's Note: To bridge the gap between the primary and middle grades, we recommend that readers investigate the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking Program (RWCT), developed by the Open Society Institute, twenty national Soros Foundations and the International Reading Association. This program offers a series of workshops on active learning, critical thinking, reading, writing, and cooperative learning and has been particularly successful for middle school teachers from all disciplines. The Step by Step program for middle school provides training to supplement the RWCT core program. For more information, contact Astrid Benedek at the Open Society Institute: abenedek@sorosny.org, local Soros Foundation offices and Step by Step teams in the region.



■ In a democratic classroom, all children participate in a meaningful, individualized and active way.

Fostering Democratic Values in Inclusive Early Childhood Settings¹

—Elizabeth J. Erwin
Noreen A. Kipness

Introduction

What is democracy? In a democratic society people are given the power to make a variety of meaningful choices pertaining to their daily lives. The freedom to make these choices is what gives people a strong sense of empowerment. This freedom is extremely important in the role of education. John Dewey (1938), the noted scholar on education, described the vital importance of freedom in educational practices.

Enforced quiet and acquiescence prevent pupils from disclosing their real natures. They enforce artificial uniformity. They put seeming before being. They place a premium upon preserving the outward appearance of attention, decorum, and obedience. And everyone who is acquainted with schools in which this system prevailed well knows that thoughts, imaginations, desire, and sly activities ran their own unchecked course behind this facade (p. 62).

Settings in which passivity and conformity are valued are not appropriate for young children who need to learn about the world by actively exploring, experimenting, discovering, and creating.

The Role of Democracy in Education

The goal of democracy in early education is parallel to that of the government. Democracy in education results in a sense of empowerment by the children. The freedom to make meaningful choices regarding their daily lives and future helps to improve children's self-esteem by naturally fostering a feeling of competence and independence (Erwin, 1994). Too often, well-meaning professionals make decisions for their students without actively involving them. For example, early childhood teachers may find it more expedient to serve one thing only for snack or carry out a teacher-directed art activity than to give choices resulting in a variety of child responses. Unfortunately, the message the teacher may be giving the class is that the students are not capable of making their own decisions or what they want is not very important.

¹ This article is reprinted by permission of the authors from the American journal, *Early Childhood Education Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1997.

If democracy means empowering people to make meaningful decisions, then democracy in early childhood education should result in a similar empowerment of young children. Three ways to empower youngsters have been described by Hendrick (1992) including: (1) the power to make decisions, (2) the power to try, and (3) the power to do.

Hendrick suggested that the power for children to make decisions occurs throughout the day when teachers present choices and honor their decisions. An example would be to give children a choice of what to make during art and then allowing them to do it their own way. In this way children gain confidence in their own abilities. The power to try means allowing children to be independent by supporting their attempts to try to do things for and by themselves (i.e., dressing themselves even though it would be faster for an adult to do it). The power to do includes skill acquisition and mastery by encouraging children to feel good about their accomplishments (i.e., knowing how to use utensils or when to blow their noses). When children feel competent in what they can do, they do not have to rely on others to build their confidence or to realize a sense of accomplishment.

The role of the adult is vital in organizing the early childhood environment as well as the curriculum so that children are participating in a meaningful, individualized, and active way. Democratic classrooms can be characterized as those where frequent opportunities are provided for children to decide what, where, when, and with whom they want to play, work, or relax.

The Importance of Democracy in Early Childhood Education

A discussion of democracy in education would not be complete without acknowledging John Dewey, who was a major contributor to the field of education, particularly his work on democracy. Dewey (1944) believed that education should be tailored to meet each child's unique abilities, and that children should be provided with necessary tools and skills to promote their individual growth and development. Furthermore, he advocated that children must be active participants in an environment that fosters imagination, exploration, and interpersonal interactions.

The need to use a democratic approach in early childhood is vital. Democracy in early care and education reflects the value that young children can be

trusted to make decisions about their own lives. This belief is instrumental in building both self-confidence and skill competence, which are essential for all children, particularly young children with disabilities. Given the growing interest in the value of educating young children with disabilities in community-based environments with their typical peers (also known as inclusion), there is an even greater need to promote understanding of and acceptance among children.

In addition to learning about themselves through a democratic approach, children learn first-hand about social and group dynamics. There are many natural opportunities throughout the day for children to gain an understanding about community spirit and membership. For example, youngsters may experience working together as a group to reach a common goal or through collaborative problem-solving that every member of a classroom has an important contribution to make and a unique voice to share. Greenberg (1992) characterized the true spirit of democracy in early childhood environments: "The essence of democracy is inclusiveness—everyone is to be recognized (politically and otherwise), utilized (everyone can contribute something to the whole), and rewarded (with the fruits of their labors, the blessings of continuing opportunity, and the gratitude of the group)" (p. 54).

Using a democratic approach in early childhood settings, particularly inclusive classrooms where there might be a diverse assortment of children, can produce numerous benefits for youngsters with and without disabilities. For a description of these benefits refer to Table I.

Table I. Benefits to Using a Democratic Approach in Early Childhood Children can acquire the ability to:

- 1) Trust themselves by believing in their own ability to make meaningful decisions.
- 2) Learn to trust others.
- 3) Assume responsibility for their own actions.
- 4) Acknowledge their own value by learning that opinions count.
- 5) Build skill competence and independence.
- 6) Respect authority.
- 7) Discover and treasure their own gifts and talents as well as the gifts and talents of others.
- 8) Understand that diversity is to be celebrated.
- 9) Respect themselves and others.
- 10) Value a sense of community membership and loyalty within a social group.

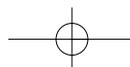
Because children learn so much by example, teachers need to be aware of their own behavior, particularly their interactions with others. Benefits of a democratic approach are abundant, thus practitioners need to integrate systematically the principles of democracy into naturally occurring routines and activities. Table II provides practical suggestions for incorporating democratic practices into inclusive early childhood classrooms.

A democratic early childhood setting is one in which all students, with various abilities, backgrounds, and talents are truly included. It is understood implicitly that each member of the classroom community is valued because every child has a uniqueness that is recognized, understood, and honored. This is especially relevant when considering young children with disabilities since they may not contribute or respond in ways that are consistent with the rest of the group. A democratic approach, therefore, is not only sensitive to children's individual styles, but is responsive to and encourages their diversity.

Implications for Young Children with Disabilities

Although children with disabilities are quite diverse, they share with their non-disabled peers the same need for shelter, rest, nourishment, security, and love (Wolery, Strain, & Bailey, 1992). In other words, children with disabilities are children first, and they have individual needs, preferences, and talents as all children do. Children with disabilities need to make meaningful choices in their daily lives just as typically developing children do. Thus, a democratic approach in early childhood education must apply to all children, regardless of their ability.

Although children with disabilities may require curriculum, environmental, or instructional adaptations, one of the underlying principles of democracy is that each individual has a right to be heard and to contribute. Likewise, the need for an individually appropriate framework is clearly articulated in the National Association for the Education of Young Children's Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) guidelines, which recognize that "each child is a unique person with an individual pattern and timing of growth, as well as individual personality, learning style, and family background" (Bredenkamp, 1991, p. 2). The need for individually appropriate practices in early childhood care and education are paramount to the healthy growth and development of infants, toddlers, and young children.



“The freedom to make choices is what gives people a strong sense of empowerment.”

Table II. Suggestions for Promoting Democracy in Inclusive Early Childhood Environments

SUGGESTIONS	EXAMPLES	IMPLICATIONS
Allow class to make important decisions that affect the whole group.	"It's raining out and we cannot go to the park right now. What could we do instead of going to the park?"	Children learn that the teacher values the group's decision. They experience the process of group decision making (i.e., majority rules or there are many available options to choose from).
Encourage children to address real challenges by problem solving and negotiating.	"We do not have enough apples for the whole class for snack. Let's try to figure out what to do about this"	Children gain first-hand experience and accountability for resolving real life issues. Negotiation skills and collaboration are fostered.
Teach children to respect uniqueness and appreciate commonality.	"Kim is eating rice with chop sticks and George is eating rice with a spoon. There are different ways of eating rice!"	Children learn to recognize differences and similarities among people and to value diversity.
Assist children in assuming responsibility for the classroom environment.	"Thank you Derek and Jill for making and passing out snack today. After we clean the table, maybe we can water our plants so they stay healthy."	Children learn to take pride in their environment and be held accountable for it.
Respect children's right to decide how they want to spend their time and with whom.	"It looks like Jackson, Alyssa, Emma and Harrison have chosen to spend their play time together building a castle."	Children build competence in making decisions by learning that they have control over their lives.
Encourage children to try to do things independently even if they might have difficulty.	"I know you will figure out how to put the brake on your wheelchair. Then maybe you can teach me how to do it."	Children learn that adults trust their competence and respect their right to learn.
Teach children that others also have rights.	"It's not fair to knock over Jocelyn's blocks. Her choice was to continue building an airplane. What could we do to help Jocelyn?"	Children learn that there are social rules to abide by and that others have a right to make their own choices and decisions.

■ Children helping their physically-disabled peer (seated in a specially-designed chair).
—Primary School, Slovenia



Wolery and Bredekamp (1994) suggested that when determining the appropriateness of any practice for youngsters with disabilities, the following five elements must be considered carefully:

1. *Appropriateness*: the extent to which practices are meaningful and beneficial to the child and family, and if the practices are consistent with recommended practices in early care and education.
2. *Effectiveness*: the capacity of the practices to result in observable and appropriate outcomes for children.
3. *Efficiency*: the relative speed in which children acquire skills that foster their growth and development, inhibit secondary handicaps, and promote their autonomy.
4. *Dependence*: the extent to which changes in children's growth and development can be associated with the child's educational program and services.
5. *Social Validity*: extent to which the family values and accepts the goals, practices, and anticipated and observable outcomes of the early education program.

While these considerations can serve as a beginning point for identifying appropriate practices for young children with disabilities, Johnson and Johnson (1994) further asserted that these components should be viewed as a "means to an end, not an end in themselves. The end is generalization (i.e., stability and durability of learning/development) and normalization (i.e., individually optimal participation in our democratic ways of life)" (p. 345). It appears that embedding democratic principles into early childhood classroom practices is a logical and natural approach for young children with and without disabilities.

There are many ways of including children with varying abilities and learning styles when using a democratic approach. For example, a child who uses a communication board to express her preferences would be given ample opportunity to indicate her choice of with what or whom she would like to play by using the symbols on her board. Likewise, during a class vote the teacher might encourage the child with visual impairments to touch all the raised hands so he could count the number of children indicating a certain response. One of the keys to embedding a democratic philosophy into any early childhood setting is the belief that everyone has a valuable contribution to make. When this assumption is strongly recognized and supported, then opportunities for all children to make meaningful contributions and decisions is possible.

Summary

Democracy in early childhood can best be understood as a value. This value reflects the belief that all the members of a particular community are viewed as important, capable, and competent. The true essence of democracy lies in building community spirit that honors every child's right to be heard, even if the voices do not sound the same.

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■ Roma children enthusiastically attend school on a regular basis.



Impact of Step by Step Preschool Experience on Roma Children's Educational Success

—Jadranka Stojanovic

Roma children in Yugoslavia face many obstacles to obtaining a basic, formal education. Often located in remote, less-developed regions and municipalities, Roma communities have little access to electricity, running water, and other government services. Because most Roma speak the Romany language within their community (or Hungarian language in the area near Hungary), children have little exposure to the Serbian language before they enter primary school. Children often cannot afford books and proper clothes, and are unable to maintain adequate hygiene necessary for school. Many drop out of primary school at a young age due to discrimination from teachers, parents, and other children. As a result, some 35% of Roma adults are illiterate, and 79% have not completed elementary school (Mitrovic and Zajic, 1998).

Since 1997, in an effort to support Roma families' right to equal education for their children, the Fund for an Open Society -Yugoslavia together the Center for Interactive Pedagogy (CIP), a non-governmental education organization in Yugoslavia, established ten preschools in Roma settlements. These preschools aim to preserve the culture and traditions of Roma families, while at the same time preparing Roma children for success in primary school.

The CIP implemented the Step by Step program in 18 mixed-age classrooms in the ten sites, working with teachers and administrators to introduce child-centered practices and instructional materials, encourage family involvement, and individualize teaching. The preschools were organized in cooperation with local Roma associations, which assisted the preschools in obtaining food, clothing, and medicine for the children. The teaching team in each Step by Step class included

“Data collected over three years of the Step by Step program show important positive outcomes regarding Roma children's education status and their preparedness for primary school.”

one qualified preschool teacher and two teaching assistants, along with Roma parent volunteers. At least one adult in the classroom was familiar with the Romany language and culture. The preschool program was half-day and instruction took place in both Romany (or Hungarian, in the one site located in the Northern part of Yugoslavia) and Serbian. Where possible, the classes included both Roma and Serbian children.

Data collected over three years of the Step by Step program show important positive outcomes regarding the Roma children's educational status and their preparedness for primary school. Comparison studies show that on entering first grade 100% of the children who attended Step by Step preschools were proficient in Serbian, while only 33% of the children who did not attend preschool knew the Serbian language. During the school year 100% of the children who attended preschool participated in school on a regular basis, while only 47% of the children who did not participate in preschool attended primary school on a regular basis. Finally, 100% of the Roma children who attended Step by Step preschool successfully completed the first grade, as compared to only 40% of Roma children who did not attend preschool. These results offer hard data in support of the claim that adequate pre-school education is one important means of ensuring equity.

Jadranka Stojanovic is the original Roma Coordinator for the Step by Step Program in Yugoslavia and currently works at the Foundation for an Open Society-Yugoslavia.

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■ Working together and learning together: a parent meeting in Surtulica.



Reaching Out to Include Roma Children and Families in Yugoslavian Preschools

—Tatjana Pavlovski

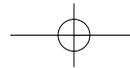
The Step by Step program, an alternative education program offered in preschool and primary schools in Yugoslavia, has as one of its major tenets the inclusion of all members of society. Not long after the program started, the staff of the Step by Step program proposed that the program reach out to include Roma children, who are often marginalized from the education system. When we actually attempted to do so, however, we learned that expanding the program to serve Roma children was not as easy as we thought it would be.

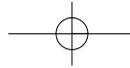
As we thought about how to bring early education to Roma children, we were faced with the fact that in most Roma areas, there is no running water or electricity, and no infrastructure to build new preschool buildings. On the other hand, there were some Roma communities very close to established preschool and school settings, but the children still did not attend school. So what was the reason that Roma children were not attending school? How could this problem be solved?

Initially it was not very easy for us to get into these Roma areas to research the problem. Viewing us as "white faces," the people in the community were not anxious to talk with us directly. None of us knew the Roma language either. We eventually learned that there were many Roma associations and that the community is very hierarchically organized. Our first job then was to find a mediator. We sought a person who spoke the Roma language and was interested in working together with us to improve Roma children's education. This person also had to hold a respected position in a Roma association. When we located a community leader with these qualities, we designated that person the organizer.

The organizer took us into the Roma community and we finally discovered some of the reasons why the children do not participate in the regular school system. We learned that most Roma adults were not aware of the services available to them. This was true not only of educational services, but also of opportunities for free health care and social help. Most of the Roma do not have state identification documents and do not know why it is advantageous to obtain them or even where to get them. We also learned that the children did not have proper shoes and clothing suitable for school. Living conditions (lack of running water, inadequate shelter) made it difficult for children to bathe and wash their hair regularly. In the past when Roma children attended school dirty, barefoot, and infested with lice, the children from local communities would reject them. This rejection made school a very unhappy place for Roma children and discouraged their parents from sending them.

“Just as the Roma children learned from their experiences in Step by Step, we learned from them.”





At the beginning, when we opened preschool classrooms for the Roma children, we needed time to establish new standards of hygiene in personal care, eating, and toileting using indoor facilities. Consequently, we provided washing machines at the school for parents to wash the family's clothing and made bathing facilities available as well. We wanted the parents to feel comfortable coming to school and to understand the value of the activities the children were participating in there. After two years of experience in Step by Step preschool classes, Roma children usually acquire new hygiene skills, improved vocabulary, and an accepted position among other children.

Just as the Roma children learned from their experiences in Step by Step, we learned from them. We discovered that we needed to introduce elements of the learning environment systematically to smooth their transition from home to school. We recognized that Roma children coming to preschool for the first time play and explore together as a large group. Even if many activity centers are available, they tend to crowd together, moving from area to area without spending very long on any one thing. In the beginning, most of the children would follow the teacher, gathering in one activity center together. Eventually they came to be more comfortable working alone or in smaller groups.

Because Roma children do not have exposure to Serbian language outside of the preschool, helping them to develop and use language to express cognitive concepts (like generalization, causation and sequencing) is challenging. Since Roma culture is based on oral rather than written traditions, many Roma people (not only preschool children, but also adults) do not know written Romany very well, a fact we discovered when we made picture vocabularies and bilingual charts around the classroom. The children who joined the school often became the most educated members of their family.

At most of the Roma sites, parents asked the teachers to help them learn to read and write. They also wanted to find jobs and work to do. Without a vocational program for Roma adults, our preschool education efforts were limited. Working with the parents became as important as working with the children. We provided some adult services and workshops for them: sewing, knitting, cooking, and meeting with different kind of doctors including school psychologists. We also developed a brochure explaining the Roma situation to encourage the rest of the population to advocate for their needs and potential.

During the air strike in Yugoslavia, the Step by Step Program stopped for a while, and in its place we used unusual educational practices in some Roma communities. We educated young Roma adults to work with children and refugees in their own community. A learning environment was improvised outdoors with planks and boards, and children would sit on blankets to draw, dramatize, and read. At first we planned to engage only preschool children, but we found out that even nine-year-olds were not going to primary school so we let them stay. Most of the parents would also stay and watch the children learning.

While we are still learning more about how to successfully educate Roma children and to help them avoid isolation from the larger society, we are very pleased that most of the Roma children who attended Step by Step preschools continued with their education, eventually participating in regular primary classes. Some of our Roma teacher assistants also finished teacher academy during their participation in the Step by Step program. And perhaps most important of all, the children enjoyed being in school. We know this by one simple fact: they didn't want to leave at the end of day (Weinreb, 1997).

Tatjana Pavlovski is the Director of the Center for Interactive Pedagogy in Yugoslavia and teaches courses in early childhood psychology and education at the University of Belgrade.

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Encouraging Children's Exploration in Activity Centers: Stories from Latvia

—Velta Kolpakova

“Let's play!” “Come and play with me!” “Show me how to play this game!” These and many other invitations and statements are uttered every day by preschoolers eager to participate in activities with other children. Every day we also hear their curious questions: Why doesn't a ship sink? Why is there day and night? Why...? These “why” questions are the most difficult to answer, yet children often face objects, ideas, relations, and phenomena that are difficult for them to comprehend. But should adults always offer ready answers and explanations? Perhaps the task of the pedagogue in a democratic society is to encourage children's willingness to experiment and seek understanding.

A major belief of the Step by Step program is that interest in the process of learning is the most important precondition of children's development. During activities with adults and other children, preschoolers learn many new things. Activity centers such as blocks, housekeeping, science, art, and natural materials allow children to investigate and to inquire about the world in which they live. Children learn through play as they get to know the world and try models of behavior that help orient them in real situations.

When we joined the Step by Step program in 1998, we discovered that after organizing the classroom into activity centers, children became very interested in exploring the possibilities presented by the various areas. Our group recognized that a carefully arranged environment encourages children to investigate, arouse their initiative, and stimulates their creativity. In Step by Step, we take into account the fact that children play and learn in different ways. A child who learns slowly may master a concept more thoroughly than one who grasps everything quickly. Some children need the presence of others in order to learn but other



■ Preschoolers experiment with bubbles.

■ Second graders experiment with Chemistry in Plavinas gymnasium.



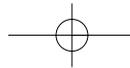
children are more successful when learning alone. Activity centers accommodate these differences in learning styles. With their varying combinations of materials and arrangement of space, activity centers allow children and adults to work alone, in pairs, or in small groups for as little or as long as they wish.

In developing our activity centers, we considered the fact that children's comprehension is based upon their senses. Therefore we made efforts to include tactile hands-on experiences in all of the activity centers. We also provided many images that helped children to use their visual perception and encouraged them to remember definite images. To this end, we displayed information about classroom duties, recipes, songs, reports, and other meaningful texts that children read together with their teacher. Through images, words, and figures displayed on the classroom walls and in the activity centers, children learned reading skills by means of indirect instruction. What follows is a description of how we encouraged children's curiosity and learning in three activity centers in the classroom.

Natural Sciences

At the natural sciences center, we put many different things on the table. At first, the children looked at them without touching, but then they took the things in their hands. As the children studied and touched the different items, they learned which of these were cold, warm, rough, smooth, or slippery. We challenged children to use touch to identify materials in a sack, such as beans, peas, acorns, and macaroni. In the beginning, children only looked at the things and could not name all of them. Later on the task of identification did not present any difficulties.

We continued to investigate different materials and went on to conduct other experiments. For instance, the children learned that burning cotton produces soft ashes in contrast to burning nylon, which produces a liquid that hardens afterwards, similar to the way paraffin hardens after a burning candle has turned it to liquid. The children learned that nylon is an artificial fabric made from oil (coal), while cotton is a natural product that grows on plants. From a burning candle we trickled some wax onto a board, making an uneven surface. The children had the opportunity to remember other times they had seen a surface like this. As we performed different experiments, we recorded the results since the experiments occurred over time. For example, we planted peas and beans and later observed how they germinated, grew, and



“In developing our activity centers, we considered that children’s comprehension [of their environment] is based upon their senses.”

bloomed. The children not only made discoveries about the growth of plants, but also came to understand the value of reading and writing in tracking an experiment.

Children often ask: What time is it? How tall am I? How much do I weigh? What is my temperature? We encouraged the children to discover the answers to these and other questions by helping them learn how to use measuring instruments: scales, clocks, thermometers, and tape measures. Our children were greatly amazed that a big piece of cotton wool and a small metallic weight could have the same weight. While introducing children to the tape measure, we explained the first measure of length, the meter, to them. We had one child lie down on the floor while several other children measured the child’s body with their feet. The results differed because the length of the children’s feet was different. The children concluded that they needed a tape measure, and that they had to know their numerals.

When we explored the globe with our children, we introduced them to the idea that the earth turns around an imaginary line called an axis. With their teacher, they read in the *Encyclopedia of Science* that the sun is a glowing coal, and the earth circles it like a humming top. The children began to understand why there is day and night, why seasons regularly change, and many other things.

Exploration of the outdoor environment provided other positive experiences with natural materials. The children enjoyed learning about various plants and had an opportunity to test their skills. For instance, the children smelled the fragrance of flowers and recalled the flowers’ names. Through outdoor experiences, the children discovered that different plants have different lengths of life. In the spring we planted poppies; they lived only one summer, and then there were poppy seeds. The children also learned that petunias live only one summer in our climate and suffer during a frost. In our climate children observed that petunias planted in pots survived better than those in the ground because we took them in at night. They also noticed that some plants, like aquilegia (also known as columbine), bloom from year to year, and that plants can develop in a variety of ways, for example, from seeds and bulbs.

Housekeeping Center

At the housekeeping center we set up experiments that would be useful in the children’s later lives. They

learned to tell fresh vegetables from boiled ones, and to distinguish prepared food by its smell. The children noticed that most food emits a pleasant smell when cooked. After repeated experiences with the same foods, children could tell what had been prepared without seeing it. Through cooking activities that involved creating and using recipes, children developed the small muscles of their hands and developed some reading and writing skills. The activity of cooking stimulates learning in all aspects of development.

Bookmaking Center

One day we were inspired to make “paper.” We wanted to demonstrate recycling to the children so we made cardboard from old newspapers and magazines. In the evening, we immersed into water the scraps of newspapers and magazines. In the morning, we beat up this mixture with a mixer until a homogeneous mass was obtained. Then we added chopped peppermint, Melissa, or lime-blossom. We put the mass under a press for twenty-four hours. After all the water had evaporated, the cardboard was ready for use. Children used their sense of smell to identify that plants had been added to the cardboard mixture, and chose their favorite scent of cardboard for making book covers or boxes.

Continuing On

The children from our first Step by Step preschool group are first grade pupils now. Many of them attend the first grade at our school, and are still involved in the Step by Step program. We are happy to report that these children are quite knowledgeable and are more interested in life than we could have imagined possible. The exciting experiments they participated in during preschool enabled them to enjoy the pleasures of discovery and invention. Our small scientists and inventors grow up very quickly, and later on they will not share their joys and sorrows with us if we do not devote as much of our time as possible to them now. Therefore teachers must think creatively and act together with children to create the future.

Velta Kolpakova is a specialist in educational methods at the AuseklOtis Kindergarten in Daugavpils, Latvia.

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Opinions Can Change:

A Latvian Parent’s Story

—Renate Lensa

■ Aneta together with her mother and father.



“My involvement is very important to my child and being a part of her nursery school experience gives us both a sense of security.”

Up to the moment when my elder daughter Eliza started attending a nursery school my attitude towards these establishments was very reserved, even skeptical. Now my opinion has changed since Eliza began the Step by Step preschool program. I was pleasantly surprised to see how the attitudes towards children and their parents were different from those of a traditional program for young children. Everything I disliked about nursery schools has been solved very naturally within the Step by Step program.

One of the things I particularly disliked and could not accept was the fact that the child had to be left at the door of the classroom and nothing that went on with the child during the day involved the parents. It seemed that the child was being “separated” from the parents, from the family. With the introduction of the new program, however, the doors of the nursery school were opened to parents, as well. It is very important for my child and me that the small world where she spends time is accessible to her mother. My involvement is very important to my child and being a part of her nursery school experience gives us both a sense of security. I know that school is a place where she feels free, where she is happy, and where she experiences satisfaction with successfully completed tasks.

In the Step by Step preschool program, parents are encouraged to get acquainted with the plans for the particular group, the themes to be discussed and the set up of all the activity centers. Activity centers provide children with opportunities to choose where they wish to play so that their skills can develop in a free and easy way. Since a child who will live in a democracy must learn how to make choices and decisions, so the program is set up to stimulate development of a child’s individuality and personality. The program also fosters the development of community because children are free to gather in small groups. Small groups

allow for a more peaceful atmosphere than is possible in classrooms where children must conform within large groups.

It is very important for the parents to know the pedagogical and methodological principles according to which the staff at the nursery school works, because only when you work in concert can you reach the goals set out by the program. When it comes to raising our children, we, as parents, usually act according to our own experiences and to ideas we have taken from books that we have consulted, sifting out what does not pertain to our child. Materials distributed to the parents by the Step by Step teachers has played an invaluable role in increasing parents’ knowledge of the underlying principles guiding the Step by Step preschool. Drawing the parents into the program has helped parents understand new approaches to working with children and allowed the teaching staff to understand the values that parents hold in regard to raising their children. This bilateral communication has united the parents and the nursery school staff into one family where parents are equally responsible for educating the children while they are still at the nursery school and for preparing them for primary schooling as well.

I found that when Eliza started attending primary school and joined the Step by Step program there, she did not feel any uneasiness or stress because the environment, methods and the teacher’s attitude towards children were the same. My other children, Eliza’s sister and brother, were eager to begin participating in the activities at the nursery school and primary school. I have also realized that when one of their children is attending a Step by Step group, parents inevitably put into practice the ideas they have learned from the program when educating their other children, as well. The program educates parents and, in my case, helped to change my opinion about nursery school.

Renate Lensa is Eliza’s mother. Eliza attended the Zvanins (Bell) Preschool in Jekabpils, Latvia.

Johannes Käis and Child-Centered Education in Estonia

—Tiiu Kuurme

Education that respects children and supports their development is not necessarily self-evident. The historical experience of Estonia illustrates the difficulties of reforming early childhood education, as shown in the changes in education practice that have led to current-day ideas about children and education. Since regaining independence in 1991, Estonia has sought teaching methods that respect individual development, such as the Step by Step Program, returning to the child-centered curricular approaches that had first emerged early in the last century.

Estonian Education in the Early 20th Century

Although a small nation, over the past one and a half centuries, Estonia has consistently made education a priority. Education was always considered the best means for ensuring the freedom of Estonian citizens. In the early 1900s, great effort was invested in children's education, for children were "the future of Estonia." However, education was a project created by adults in which children had no input. Children's right to speak and make independent decisions had to be earned during many years in school and through obedience. Schools were harsh places where praise and punishment were meted out according to the student's ability to behave. This situation was not much different from most European countries at the time.

Nevertheless, many people were ready for the idea of child-centered schools. In the early twentieth century, Estonia became involved in the major pedagogical reform movement, a movement embraced by much of Western civilization. The great educational reformer, Johannes Käis (1885-1950), introduced many important changes in education and influenced Estonia in the same way that Freinet, Froebel, Decroly, and Parkhurst influenced their home countries.

Johannes Käis Introduces Child-Centered Education

Käis offered an alternative to passive and superficial education characterized by mechanically memorized knowledge, learning for the sake of grades or marks, inflexible curricula, and the suppression of individuality. Instead, Käis suggested that education be responsive to individual children who became independent learners through three steps. The first step involved *fostering active learning* through tasks introduced by the teacher but at which children could work at their own pace. The second step was *individual work* that children had the freedom to choose and organize. The third step was *spontaneous activity* in which children chose tasks, organized their work, and set goals for themselves. Käis was deeply influenced by the ideas of the Western educational reformers, especially John Dewey, and was actively advocating these views among the teachers of Estonia. Before World War II, almost one-fourth of primary schools in Estonia were working according to Käis' child-centered system of education.

Although children thrived with this approach to education and can do so now as well, this fact could not and still cannot shake the traditional belief that children are incapable creatures who need strict discipline and direction. These were exactly the beliefs that Käis had to fight against. Although Käis was a completely apolitical man who was dedicated to improving education, he was not tolerated by any political regime during his lifetime. He happened to live during three rather different political regimes, all of which persecuted him. Käis was fired from his job during the first independent Estonian Republic between the two World Wars. He continued sharing his views on child-centered teaching as a freelancer, arranging teacher training courses, publishing textbooks, and designing other learning materials. The last regime—the Soviet State—removed him from public life as well as from the mind of the people because it was considered too dangerous to have schools raise independent people who were able to think for themselves. Johannes Käis died not far from his birthplace, banished from the public life.

Johannes Käis is not world famous today for two reasons. First, his works were not written in English or German, but in Estonian. Second, the Soviet regime, which prohibited independent thinking and independent-thinking people, locked his works in closed archives and forbade remembering or talking about Käis for 50 years. Universities did teach the theories of

Piaget and Vygotsky, but not how to put these theories into practice. The latter was exactly what Käis knew and did. Although his name was forbidden, his idea of child-centered teaching lived on in the hidden memory of people and in the practical work of his students and followers. Therefore, the Step by Step program ideas and practices were not something new to Estonia. Rather, the program was recognized as recalling to life something that had been kept silent for a long time. Step by Step presented an opportunity for Estonian educators to continue from where the development of child-centered pedagogies had stopped during Soviet times. And educators could do so relying on the work of Käis, whose ideas are as fresh and alive in Estonia today as the ideas of Pestalozzi are to the Swiss.

Käis and Present-day Schools

"School is always in the state of renewal," Käis once said. Recalling this famous sentence, one wonders what he would say about today's education and today's schools. How can educators around the world transform his noble and humane ideas about child-centered education into practical reality today? Käis wished to create schools where teaching would be down-to-earth and suitable for children, and would spark their interests. Käis tested all of his ideas in practical school settings. He took children out to study nature, and set up workshops and laboratories for experiments. Through critical evaluation of the European experience and avoidance of extremes, he developed an original pedagogical-didactical system suitable for Estonia. Each new idea was accompanied by theoretical arguments, guidelines, descriptions of methods, teacher training, and new schoolbooks and worksheets compiled by Käis himself. He achieved something quite rare in education—absolute accordance between theory and practice.

New approaches to schooling require changes on the part of teachers. One cannot become a new teacher simply by listening to lectures. A child-centered teacher is born when she experiences learner-centered education. So, Käis founded a teacher training college where students learned through the same methods that they were expected to apply as teachers in school settings: independent study, group work, group discussions, trips, and school or local government journals. Teachers' practical skills were developed through the fine arts, like music, drama, and painting. The Voru Teacher Training College founded in 1921 is considered the first reform pedagogical educational institution in Estonia. More than 300

teachers were trained there. Later, they formed a society, published their own journal, and gathered every year until they reached old age.

These teachers learned not to do for children what children can do for themselves, and to not ask questions to which they already know the answers. They learned to create conditions for learning and to guide teaching. They had to know child psychology, be able to observe and supervise children, and have a good command of teaching methods and ways of organizing learning-centered schools.

A child-centered school is also a learning-centered school. Many educators today can learn from what Käis thought a good school should be. He viewed school as a living organism, an inseparable part of society that evolves through the balance between theory and practice. Schoolwork is organized to encourage students' inventiveness, initiative, interest, and independence, since children take with them only what they have worked through and lived through themselves. Therefore, children's questions, experience, observation results, and experiments are considered the heart of teaching. Schools do not impose passive learning, but make active learning possible in classroom spaces designed to foster independence and sociality. Children are encouraged to follow their interests when learning, to work at their own pace, and to make choices and take responsibility for their actions.

Käis's work did not profess to be the one and only method of teaching, but suggested that teachers become responsive to children and find suitable approaches based on the individual, the topic, and the situation. To nurture a new generation of democratic citizens, schools have to rely on two principles: individuality and sociality. Käis saw the individual as a building block of society: the stronger the individuals, the richer the society. Alternatively, passive learning in schools hinders the democracy. If education is standardized and oriented towards an average student, society suffers a great intellectual loss because children do not identify themselves as the members of a class—small community. While working together with shared goals, students recognize the value of their own activities for others. In this way, the natural kind of discipline and premises of the personal responsibility emerge in the democratic society (Käis 1996, pp. 87-94).

Käis considered the connection between school and everyday life to be of great importance. Young children start to discover the world around them at home

■ Johannes Käis, 1922.
From the collection of the
Võrumaa Museum, Estonia



“A child-centered school is also a learning-centered school.”

and in the neighborhood. Thus, schools build a bridge between the home and neighborhood and the school. According to Käis, the magic power that lets everything be seen in its totality was social studies, the main and central subject at primary school that includes all other subjects like mathematics, language, science, arts, and handicrafts. By studying familiar things, children learn to see larger integral wholes and to understand wider connections while practicing perception, expressing themselves, and developing their abilities and skills. In everyday practice, various forms of study were used: group work, study guides, worksheets, open assignments, and integrated teaching. The teaching of natural sciences was changed the most as the focus moved from reading and written texts to active experimentation and observation of natural phenomena. Democracy was learned through participation in student government and committees, which played an important role in school life.

Ice Drift on a Stormy River

In education, 1988 and 1989—perestroika and glasnost—can be compared with an ice drift on a stormy river. Never before had the whole nation been so active and interested in school and education. School mattered to everyone. The biggest halls in towns were needed to hold educational gatherings because hundreds and thousands of people were present. The newspapers were full of articles protesting distressing school conditions, and articles discussing bright visions about the schools of the future. Groups of people came together spontaneously to discuss the destiny of education because it seemed that finally the people themselves would help decide the kind of school their children would attend.

That time, over ten years ago, was special because of the prevailing mentality. It was a romantic time when the nation seemed to have control over its own destiny and everybody was looking in the same direction, wishing for a fair political system that respected universal values. Everyone was still equally poor, equally idealistic, and equally full of hope. Any school that was not child-centered was unthinkable. During this time, the project of an educational platform was born. Desired directions for education included democratization, humanization, and appraisal of curriculum. Learning and education were seen as part of

a dignified way of living, not merely as a means for achieving something. School itself had to be closely connected with life, and teach through experience, dialogue, and moral situations. In addition, schools should encourage activity, guarantee equal opportunities, respect the learner's independence, and allow individual choices. Representatives of Steiner's pedagogies from Finland and Germany, Freinet proponents from Nordic countries, and Montessori educators from Finland came to Estonia and were warmly welcomed in large halls brimming with teachers from towns and villages. Estonian teachers who had tried child-centered approaches in their schools dared to present their ideas at exhibitions and conferences.

It seemed that nothing could stop schools from developing in the child-centered direction. All at once, seven Steiner schools were founded, teachers studied Montessori, the Johannes Käis Society was founded, and several primary schools started teaching according to Käis' methodology. Freinet's methods were applied at some schools and others were transformed by learning methods born from teachers' inner understanding, a technique later termed “open teaching.” Many small schools in the countryside were reopened because small environments were seen as flexible and intimate.

The Pace of Change Slows

But, little by little, the public grew tired, and transforming schools into child-centered places of learning was entrusted to the officials. Unfortunately, these officials were the same people who had inspected schools in Soviet times. Waking up from the romantic daydream was painful and once more educators had to admit that they had to start fighting for the child-centered schools anew. A short-sighted school inspector could not understand the value of turning the classroom into a cave with the help of drawings and textiles, bringing rocks from the fields into the classroom to study them, or writing stories, songs, and research papers about stones. Such an inspector could only see that the width of the exercise book edge was not the mandated four centimeters because there were no exercise books. Completed works had been gathered into portfolios, and study books had been cut into pieces and made into learning aids for creative tasks. Teachers were reprimanded for these naughty “unpedagogical” activities and the principal received a strict command to restore order at school.

Interest in children's learning behavior has diminished greatly in Estonia. Despite dreams of child-centered

■ Estonian teachers observing child centered methods at a Step by Step Training Center.



education for all children, schools have been divided into “elite schools,” where seven-year-olds have to take difficult entrance examinations, “ordinary schools,” and “hopeless schools.” Children from these hopeless schools cannot go on to colleges and universities since they are not able to compete with other applicants. Entrance into the university is based solely on grades. The democratization of schools has turned into principals' autocracy. Afraid of losing their jobs, teachers avoid expressing their opinion. Few seem to remember the talk about humanization of schools. Many innovative teachers, who have grown tired of indifference and hostility, leave teaching and their good initiatives fade. Many alternative schools, once bravely started, have been abandoned. Recent research suggests that Estonian children in primary grades are increasingly finding learning to read difficult and irrelevant, and that children are afraid to express their opinions outside of familiar settings (Talts, 1999). Estonian children have greater fears connected with relationships than their Finnish peers do, express less initiative, and feel less safe (Kraav & Lahikainen, 1998).

Why is this so? According to official declarations, Estonia is a democratic state, but among its people (including the teachers) still live the same fears and habits learned during the 50 years of the Soviet regime. Despite slogans supporting child-centered schools, official educational policy is often oriented quite the opposite way. A recently introduced highly standardized system for high school graduation examinations values only formal grades and performance, encouraging competition among the schools. Formal indicators and meaningless performance seem to be valued more and more, not only in schools, but in society at large—as opposed to wisdom and humanistic values. Democracy cannot be established by the power of law; individuals and society can only nurture towards it through the slow inner processes. Unfortunately, criticism and practical proposals from teacher unions are not taken into account by the centralized educational administration. Some determined teachers are prepared to start demonstrations on the streets, but educators still have a long way to go.

Islands of Hope

Despite these circumstances, child-centered ways of thinking and teaching still exist in several promising programs. In what seems like a contradiction of current trends, the child-centered early childhood program, Step by Step, is doing well in Estonia at this time. Its child-centered pedagogy is valued in university

teacher training courses, and teaching directed towards child development and focused on active learning is valued in the national curriculum. The ideas of Käis have not been lost. A good example of his practices can be seen in the virtual learning environment MIKSIKE (see <http://www.miksike.com>). It is created and constantly developed by Estonian teachers and students, and translated into English, Russian, and Swedish. MIKSIKE invites students to learn through creative problem solving, discovery and cooperation. Conferences are held on children's concerns; new initiatives and movements have appeared to help unhappy children. What exists now is great variation among Estonian schools. Some are open and optimistic schools that value democracy and creativeness, while other schools are authoritarian with stale spirits. Some of the attitudes about children have changed both at home and at school; children are appreciated for their unique personalities and treated more like equal partners. In Estonia it is a time of continued change. It is clear from Estonian history that progress toward child-centered approaches in education is not obvious and inevitable but connected with hard work and struggle. And maybe one day another Johannes Käis will be born in Estonia.

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Guidelines For Authors

The International Step by Step Association publishes the professional, peer-reviewed journal, *Educating Children for Democracy*, on a semi-annual basis, in English and Russian, and both in print and online. Journal issues are organized around themes. The more appropriate an article submission is for a theme issue, the more likely it will be published. On occasion, editors may accept articles on topics of great interest that are not related to a theme. The next issue of the journal will be "Family and School Partnerships." Articles for this issue must be received no later than October 30, 2000 for consideration.

Educating Children for Democracy seeks:

1. Practical articles with ideas for teaching children and administering education programs that are child-centered in philosophy and implementation.
2. Scholarly articles that link current research and theory to practice, where at least 1/3 of the article describes practical applications of the research. (Note: research studies should be written as articles rather than research reports.)
3. Articles about how an individual or group of people changed a program or a policy to become more child-centered.
4. Essays related to the experience of educational transformation, including such topics as cultural diversity, inclusion of minority children and children with disabilities, family involvement in schools, etc.

Article Format and Style

Interested authors are invited to submit articles of 3 to 6 pages (1,200 to 3,000 words) that meet the following criteria:

1. Ideas must be consistent with child-centered theory and research.
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Articles should be typed, double-spaced, with at least 1.25 inch margins on all sides. All pages should be numbered. Include author(s) name and contact information (name, address, telephone, and fax and e-mail, if available) on the cover page. Submissions on computer disk (format Microsoft Word) or by email are preferred. Please indicate the kind of computer and the name of the word processing program used. Photographs or drawings related to the article are encouraged and should be included with the submission, along with descriptive information about the item sent for use in a caption.

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