Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning 2012 Vol. 6 Issue 12.

LETTING THE CHILD WORK: REAL LEARNING, REAL PLAY IN SCHOOL

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Abstract

Unschoolers, and those who practice democratic, free, and progressive education philosophies, are often uncomfortable with a particular choice their children make: as Summerhill's A. S. Neill observed: "Every child under freedom plays most of the time for years" (1964, p. 116). Those who see children as active, motivated learners can be disappointed when, given an environment rich with fascinating choices, their children spend most of their time in fantasy. The families' discomfort can result in a reversion to more conventional schooling. Beginning with an early encounter with educational democracy during the 1970s at Toronto's ALPHA Alternative School, supported with commentary from educators from schools that took a parallel path, and from psychologists and education critics both historic and contemporary, this article gathers arguments that support play as not only a pleasure but a necessity for growth, learning and mental health.

Theoretical Framework

This article draws on research from my 2010 Masters thesis *Defining and Defending a Democratic Education Site*, which examined the democratic relations within

ISSN:1916-8128

ALPHA Alternative School, and between it and its public Board of Education. This research includes interviews of parents, teachers and students from Toronto's ALPHA Alternative School. ALPHA grew from the Free School Movement of the 1960s and 70s, influenced by the work of Summerhill founder A. S. Neill and the radical education critics of the day. Darder, Baltodano and Torres (2009, p. 4-5) place the work of radical critics Herbert Kohl, Jonathan Kozol and Ivan Illich within the stream of theory that was named *critical pedagogy* by Henry Giroux in 1983 (p. 2). In 2004, Pat Hinchey proposed "critical theory has roots reaching into the… work of [John Dewey], one of education's greatest theoreticians" (2004, p. 75). Dewey's democratic thought permeates the Hall-Dennis Report of 1968, which also influenced ALPHA's founding parents. I see critical theory embedded in the action and words of activist educators such as A. S. Neill and the Albany Free School's Chris Mercogliano, who bring to the argument decades of experience with children in free schools. The main support for these radical schools has come not from educators but psychologists: I refer to the work of mid-century psychoanalysts Erich Fromm and Wilhelm Reich and, for a contemporary perspective, call on the work of psychologist Peter Gray, of Boston College.

Democratic, free, and progressive education philosophies are based on a concept of children as active, motivated learners. These approaches propose to offer students options, and sometimes even a measure of "freedom" and democracy. But many parents and educators who try to apply these ideas have no practical sense of what such "natural" learning might look like. Often echoed in the disapproving comments of relatives, the question haunts us: "Without coercion, what will these kids do with their time?" Initially

attracted to an alternative school by its humane treatment of children, as the months pass parents often find themselves wondering if the kids "just play." As they struggle to practice the values they want their schools—and their children—to embody, many liberal-minded parents and educators find their ideals challenged by their children's insistence on spending much of their lives in active play and fantasy.

After living with free children for forty years in the school he founded for them, A. S. Neill noted: "Every child under freedom plays most of the time for years" (1964, p. 116). He defined Summerhill as "a school in which play is of the greatest importance" (p. 62). Play was valued by critics, psychologists and foundational thinkers of the radical education movements that gave rise to schools like Sudbury Valley (1968), the Albany Free School (1969), and the public alternative schools that began to take root in Canadian cities during the 'sixties and 'seventies, such as Windsor House (1971) in Vancouver and ALPHA (1972) in Toronto. Ontario's 1968 Hall-Dennis Report affirmed: "Children need to play… Play provides a psychological safety zone in which children can test their competence without fear of failure" (Hall, Dennis et al, 1968, *Areas of Emphasis for the Learning Experience*).

This body of research and critique, and Neill's 1960 book *Summerhill: a Radical Approach to Child Rearing*, inspired a group of parents to approach the Toronto School Board in December, 1971 and propose the creation of its first alternative elementary school. They wanted ALPHA Alternative School to foster "initiative…inner-directedness… and autonomy", and "afford the opportunity for 4 – 13 year olds to choose not only what they learn, but how and when they learn" (The ALPHA Community, 1971). But during ALPHA's first year, as 100 kids, three teachers and a few volunteer

parents roiled around on the top floor of an old YMCA building, what they experienced was “chaos”. The founding community was torn by divisive arguments about what their “inner-directed” kids should be doing with their time. One parent recalled: “We ended up really with these two factions fighting and very much the issue really was over the amount of structure… You could call it, how free should a free school be” (O’Rourke, 2010, p. 153). ALPHA barely survived this chaos: its three teachers and over half of its founding families were gone by the end of June, 1973.

As ALPHA entered its second year, teacher Susan Garrard was dropped into this controversy. Her first week in September 1973 was an adult’s worst nightmare about “self-directed” children. She recalled:

> I thought I was going to have this interested group of children who really wanted to learn and they were going to have the freedom to learn and I was going to have so many lovely things for them to learn. I remember setting up an interest center. I think it was creatures of the sea—books and seashells. They actually came and swept it onto the floor... My kids, who were supposed to be the little kids, went the furthest corner away that they could.
>
> I thought that's probably natural; it's hard to get used to a new teacher. But what really worried me was that they played “doggie” all day long. That's all they did. There was nothing educational that I could see. They just kept putting the leash on each other and taking each other for walks. (O’Rourke, 2010, p. 186)

Most kids are fascinated by sea creatures, so the ugly act of sweeping Garrard’s shells onto the floor would not appear to serve their best interests. It’s worthwhile to examine why these students, who would turn out to be quite good-natured and capable, made this sacrifice, then fixated on such a deadening game.

Given the chaos they had lived through during ALPHA’s first year and the new people they were expected to cope with, the students could have been practicing the form of resistance Herbert Kohl named *not-learning*:

> Not-learning tends to take place when someone has to deal with unavoidable challenges to her or his personal and family loyalties, integrity and identity… To agree to learn from a stranger who does not respect your integrity causes a major loss of self. The only alternative is to not-learn and reject the stranger's world. (1994, p. 6)

The repetitive, imaginatively stilted "doggy" fantasy, carried on for hours or days, would sow seeds of self-doubt in the most confident educator, and send most of us scrambling to put the desks back into rows. But Susan Garrard had taught for ten years and "had learned a lot from all those kids" (O'Rourke, 2010, p. 374). Determined to no longer teach in the "old way," she saw ALPHA as an opportunity not to be wasted. When she broke through the impasse, it was by asking to enter her students' world on their terms.

> **Susan Garrard**: I thought: "How long can this go on?"… I kept trying to make friends, but nothing worked. So I finally went to their corner and went down on my hands and knees and barked… that's how I made friends and then they came to my corner. They put the leash around me and took me for a little walk. That taught me a lot because it never occurred to me in all of our discussions that I wasn't going to have a captive audience. (O'Rourke, 2010, p. 188)

Garrard didn't spend the rest of her teaching career on her knees. Until her retirement in 1996, her main teaching practice would be "fishing," a strategy special to a site where students were largely self-occupied: working and playing with peers, volunteers or other teaching team members. As ALPHA's "littlekids"—the 4-9 year olds—went about their self-directed activities, she offered early literacy and numeracy:

> If you weren't building something magnificent; if you were kind of at loose ends, then I'd say "How about some reading now?"…I had my own little list of whom I'd worked with… And also I would roam around and say, "Come on, let's do some math!" (O'Rourke, 2010, p. 205-206)

Chris Mercogliano described a similar learning environment at the Albany Free School, where "Mostly they play in a world of their own creation, and the teachers move about the periphery, where the kids can seek us out as needed" (1998, p. 26). ALPHA's early

archives show that as its teachers and volunteers learned how to function with a non-captive audience, something none of them had tried before in the context of a school, Garrard's faith in the students was fulfilled. A September-October 1973 edition of the school newspaper *Alpha Centauri*, "a genuine 'alpha kid' approved publication," showed interesting children's perspectives on what constitutes *work* and *play*. It contained a mongoose story, comics, an illustration of diver gear, jokes, and interviews in which students were asked what they thought of the school. One student compared ALPHA to a regular public school: "In the other school we have to write and do art and all that junk—here you can do woodwork, read in the library, you don't have to do work all the time." Asked if he "just plays around all the time," the student replied: "Here I'm always bothering myself to do something." Another child compared ALPHA to her two years at Sunflower, a short-lived private free school:

> Sunflower was just fine, it was more free, like at Alpha, you can't really go out so much, at Sunflower it was so hot nobody was hardly ever inside, and there was always a lot of fights, somebody's always swearing…
>
> I like Alpha, but I liked Sunflower better. We were going to dissect a baby snake and I missed that. I was learning more there, but I've only been here two weeks so I can't tell yet. (Interviews with Alpha Kids, *Alpha Centauri*, Sept/Oct, 1973) (O'Rourke, 2010, p. 189)

These students expressed interesting opinions about important matters, such as what constitutes "work." The former Sunflower student felt she was "learning more" in her previous independent school where she spent most of her time outside and there was plenty of conflict.

Even during such a relatively relaxed period as the 1970s, the amount of time students spent in play was an issue in free schools. Mark Novak described a situation at a Toronto-area public free school to which he gave the pseudonym *ASPE*. A group of

students who "seemed remarkably busy and involved in what they were doing… more eagerly engaged in their projects than were many other students in the school" came to be known as the "hall boys". Because their activities were self-initiated, play-based and did not follow the classroom activities laid out by teachers, they were judged to be "uninvolved, *ergo* deviant" (Novak, 1975, p. 57). This kind of judgment, often of active young males, is a frequent reaction to the free choices children make. But during Susan Garrard's time at ALPHA, there were no "hall-boys," because a substantial portion of the classroom space for the kindergarten to Grade 3 group was devoted to creativity and free play.

Supporting choice and free play in a school entails expending a great deal of energy dealing with the consequences of individual choice on the rights and desires of others: a process that contemporary psychologist Peter Gray identifies as a crucial, democratizing function of play (2011, *The decline of…*, p. 457). Neill emphasized that Summerhill offered *freedom, not license*: "Freedom means doing what you like, so long as you don't interfere with the freedom of others. The result is self-discipline" (1964, p. 114). But many free schools, including ALPHA, began operating without creating processes for working through such inevitable, vital, and rich conflict. Sylvia Ashton-Warner gave an unforgettable description of a condition that many pioneering schools found themselves in, with privileged American children heady with the "intoxication" of life without limits:

> I like children's voices, high, wild or low, solo or in unison, but the beat and boom of stereo and the hitting of the suffering piano in the foyer… what is this thing, freedom, supplied to the children in overspilling glassfuls, in tankards, in brimming kegs? Must glorious freedom mean all this? Is this, indeed, freedom? If it is, what good is it? (1972, p. 45)

ALPHA's founding parents declared that at ALPHA an "individual's rights are always subject to the rights of the community." But the conclusion of some, that it would therefore "not be a free school" (O'Rourke, 2010, p.217), may have led to the very condition they sought to avoid. OISE professor Malcolm Levin, an early Toronto area alternative school creator, would point out in 1984: "[W]hile Neill regarded community self-government as the cornerstone of Summerhill, those who took up the free school label, including early supporters of public alternatives, did not stress the centrality of this theme." (Levin, 1984, n. p). ALPHA survived its hard lesson: during its second year, its community of teachers, volunteers and students worked out a democratic structure, including daily meetings and a child-run justice system, to ensure that the school-day would not be ruled by the strong and the loud.

Play and participatory democracy would, during Susan Garrard's time from 1973-1996, define ALPHA as a *free school* despite numerous compromises dictated by the site, the resources, the constraints of working within a public Board of Education, and frequent pressure from parents. In an interview for *Recess Magazine* in 1986, Garrard described play as "a pooling of the children's resources":

> The kids basically play. Many people have problems with the amount of time that they spend playing but whenever I get discouraged about it, I just go and listen in on their conversations as they play and I find that their dialogue is amazingly rich. In fact, it is far richer than any lesson I could prepare for them. What they are doing is sharing all of their knowledge, their experiences, their imagination and their ideas. Children are very resourceful. (Smith, 1986, p. 14)

The *ALPHA Parent Handbook* affirmed, "Play is the child's work" (The ALPHA Community, circa 1988, p. 1). While concerns about how their children spent their time would often be expressed, the pro-play aspect of ALPHA received the unqualified support of parents like this oral history participant:

> **Parent 1992-2002:** You don't need to keep them busy. You don't need to make them do anything. They exchanged and interplayed and spoke and made things up and got along and fought and figured it out all by themselves. So you really don't need to be controlling and manipulating people at all. And they learn by playing. They're awfully little; let them play. (O'Rourke, 2010, p. 228)

This kind of conviction had to resist considerable pressure from the surrounding culture. An early student recalled a common experience: families were frequently confronted by relatives concerned that their children, in the absence of forced teaching, wouldn't learn anything:

> **Student 1974-1982**: …there was a lot of almost hostility that I could perceive from the outside world in terms of parents of kids who didn't go to ALPHA who wanted to know how I got any work done. You know: "Do you just sit around and play all day?" (O'Rourke, 2010, p. 183)

Neill found a "vague moral idea behind the disapproval of play," and "fear of the child's future."

> Fear is at the root of adult antagonism to children's play. Hundreds of times I have heard the anxious query, "But if my boy plays all day, how will he ever learn anything; how will he ever pass exams?" Very few will accept my answer, "If your child plays all he wants to play, he will be able to pass college entrance exams after two years' extensive study, instead of the usual five, six, or seven years of learning in a school that discounts play as a factor in life." (Neill, 1964, p. 64)

But Neill added an important qualification: "That is—if he ever wants to pass the exams!" He related families' feelings about play to their ambitions for their children. His analysis challenged parents' class biases: "Indifferent scholars who, under discipline, scrape through college or university and become unimaginative teachers, mediocre doctors, and incompetent lawyers would possibly be good mechanics or excellent bricklayers or first-rate policemen" (1964, p. 27). He received positive reports with respect to his former students' ability to apply themselves as adults:

> The reason we here at Summerhill keep getting such good reports about the industrious performance of our old pupils on responsible jobs is that these boys and girls have lived out their self-centered fantasy stage at Summerhill. As young adults they are able to face the realities of life without any unconscious longing for the play of childhood. (Neill, 1964, p. 61)

Reflecting on over thirty years of alumni from Windsor House, a public free school in Vancouver, Canada, its founding teacher Helen Hughes agreed: "I observe kids who are left to choose what it is that they are doing maturing into fine, responsible people, over and over again" (Hern, 2003, p. 88).

For all his support, Neill didn't understand why children play (1964, p. 62). But his successors in education and psychology have many ideas. Helen Hughes thinks "children should pretty well play most of the time until about the age of twelve." She described play as "laying down the actual experiences that your body and mind can take in and not forget… what happens when liquid comes up a straw… when you pick up something that you thought was heavy but was light… a zillion different experiences" (Hern, 2003, p. 86). The Albany Free School's Chris Mercogliano observed: "children are constantly learning on a myriad of levels while they play—about time and space and proportion, about the power of language, about themselves and each other" (1998, p.26). Psychologist Peter Gray of Boston College sees play as a complex, inner-directed pedagogy and, stemming from mammal and primate behavior, even as a biological necessity:

> Play functions as the major means by which children (a) develop intrinsic interests and competencies; (b) learn how to make decisions, solve problems, exert self-control, and follow rules; (c) learn to regulate their emotions; (d) make friends and learn to get along with others as equals; and (e) experience joy. Through all of these effects, play promotes mental health. (2011, *The decline of…*, p. 443)

The play that Gray is talking about here is free-play: child-controlled active and "pretend" games. Organized sports and adult-manipulated play of any sort—such as directed play for the purposes of fulfilling a curriculum requirement in a "fun" way—are specifically excluded from the analysis in this article.

The emotions and ideas children work through in their self-directed play come from their needs, their lives and the problematic greater culture, and are not always easy to hear. They may involve sad or violent stories, and reflect their culture's materialism, gender biases and preoccupations with power. Baby bunny rabbits, big trucks and tea parties are still in the mix: so are princesses, monsters, dissing, shouts, swords, guns and their later versions like tasers, light-sabres and wands. Vivian Gussin Paley learned from her teacher Rena Wilson in 1947 that play is the "work of children," where a child is "always busy making up its own work assignments" (Paley, 2004, p. 1). Over fifty years later, Paley recorded observations of kindergarten students who had assigned themselves the difficult work of processing the events in New York City on Sept 11, 2001 (2004, p. 7). John Holt argued that children need long hours of conversation and play during which they can problem-solve, make decisions and exercise what he called their considerable "self-curing powers" (1972, p. 77). He wrote of a child who had lost her mother: every day, in a large free-flowing group fantasy game, she played an animal with a hurt leg. Holt recalled that after a few months of this self-assigned therapy, she simply "stopped, and never asked for that particular part again" (p. 79). He asked:

> Would she have been able to put into words what she felt about her mother's not being with her? Would she have been willing to? Would she have had from other children the kind of understanding and support that she got from the fact that day after day in the animal game the other animals were willing to take care of her? It seems hardly possible. (Holt, 1972, pp. 79-80)

Holt pointed out "In most open schools and classrooms, even kindly ones, she would have been very unlikely to be allowed to play this game and so express, reveal, and meet her deep needs… Nor would any other activity have served her as well" (p. 79). This self-therapy, in which intractable grief is addressed with the child's friends and community, is organic and intricate beyond anyone's ability to engineer.

That was the humbling discovery made by A. S. Neill, most of whose early students were "problem children sent in despair by parents and schools." Neill confessed: "I cured them by analysis, I thought, but discovered that the ones who refused to come to my analysis sessions were cured also, and had to conclude that freedom, not analysis, was the active agent" (1995, p. 6). Peter Gray draws on the work of Lev Vygotsky to explain how this can happen:

> Vygotsky pointed out that children's strong desires to play and to keep the game going lead them to accept restrictions on their behavior that they would not accept in real life, and this is how they acquire the capacities for self-control that are so crucial to social existence. They learn in play that self-control itself is a source of pleasure… (2011, *The decline of...*, p. 455-456)

I have seen this phenomenon among emotionally and socially challenged children at ALPHA, including some on the autism spectrum. Gray describes how children learn emotional control in the context of such play:

> Beyond the physically challenging situations, children also put themselves into socially challenging situations in their social play. All varieties of social play can generate conflict as well as cooperation; and to keep playing, children must learn to control the emotions, especially anger and fear, that such conflict can induce. (*Ibid*)

Radical educators find that academic achievement is not compromised by the long hours of age-mixed play that can confer such social benefits. In New York City's First Street School, George Dennison worked largely with students whom we now call *at-risk*:

"routinely classified as underprivileged, delinquent, rebellious…" (1970, p. 30). He claimed "we were accomplishing in fifteen minutes what the public schools could not accomplish in weeks" (p. 288). John Holt challenged:

> If we knew how to make a learning environment for children that was truly effective, the children would gain what we have come to think of as five or six years worth of ability in reading in a matter of months. They might not all do this when they were six years old, but what difference would that make? (1972, p.76)

The kind of *effective* environment needed for such accomplishment is simple, described by Holt as a situation in which the students are unafraid, learning "for their own reasons" and the task is "not made needlessly obscure or difficult" (1972, p. 77). Jonathan Kozol encapsulated:

> Twelve years of lockstep labor in the field of math or language arts are manifestly wasteful of a child's learning energies and learning hours. Freire teaches basic literacy in forty days. No child who is not brain-injured or otherwise impeded in his powers of comprehension needs six years to learn to write ten sentences with reasonable cogency and power. The three-year French or Spanish language-block required by most high schools and by certain of the college-entrance stipulations can usually be transcended in three months by methods such as those used by both [Ivan] Illich and by the U.S. State Department. (1972, p. 39-40)

John Taylor Gatto, a former New York City Teacher of the Year, believes "genius is an exceedingly common human quality, probably natural to most of us" (2005, p. xxxiii). He says, "reading, writing and arithmetic only take about one hundred hours to transmit as long as the audience is eager and willing to learn. The trick is to wait until someone asks and then move fast while the mood is on" (2005, p. 12). Daniel Greenberg describes teaching a dozen Sudbury Valley students all the skills of reckoning - addition, subtraction, multiplication and division—including fractions, decimals, percentages and square roots—in twenty hours of lessons (Greenberg. 1995, p.17). It's depressing to contemplate all the childhood joy that is wasted in schools, if these educators are right.

Even if play is not of great intrinsic value (What kind of culture fails to value the joy of its children?) much of the time spent force-teaching them may be essentially wasted.

In free schools, some students learn their skills without being taught by staff at all. Peter Gray observed that many children at Sudbury Valley learn to read and write "with no formal instruction at all, primarily through age-mixed play with older children" (2011, *The value of…*, p. 508). He referred to the work of Kay Emfinger, who "found many instances in which older children exposed younger ones to numerical concepts beyond the younger children's abilities to understand or use alone." Counting drops of medicine for a sick doll or adding up purchases in a play store, "Such concepts appear far more meaningful to children in their own, self-directed pretend play than in the more abstract and less voluntary setting of typical classroom instruction" (2011, p. 507). Ivan Illich, a literacy educator who worked with Paulo Freire in Central America, maintained: "Most learning happens casually, and even most intentional learning is not the result of programmed instruction."

> Teaching, it is true, may contribute to certain kinds of learning under certain circumstances. But most people learn most of their knowledge outside school, and in school only insofar as school, in a few rich countries, has become their place of confinement during an increasing part of their lives. (Illich, 1970, p. 12)

Illich found free time to be essential for consolidating even basic skills, observing: "Fluency in reading is also more often than not a result of such extracurricular activities…" (1970, p. 13).

Holt, Neill, Gray, Gatto and Illich agree that retained learning that provides a functional base of skill and knowledge, is primarily attained through voluntary activities. Kozol and Dennison add to the argument an awareness that many students, including

children from oppressed and at-risk communities, are in need of direct and supportive mentorship. Thus, letting kids play doesn't mean ignoring them or their needs: free schools are caring environments with supportive, pro-active approaches to building skill and knowledge. Independent free schools like Albany and Sudbury Valley achieve family-like staffing ratios with smaller per-student funding than public schools (Mercogliano, 1998, p. xxii; Greenberg, 1995, pp.138-139). The progressive public school system John Dewey imagined had student/staff ratios of no more than 10:1 (1900/1990, p. xv). Through paid internships and local school control of budgets, American educator Debra Meier created that ratio in public schools in at-risk neighbourhoods in New York City and Boston (2002, p. 31-32), without additional funding.

If we can accept that play has deep, if often subtle, value: if we acknowledge that time spent in play does not interfere with skill acquisition, there is yet another issue that adds urgency to the debate. Neill felt strongly that the repression of an activity that children are so driven to do, and that is largely safe for them, had severe personal and social consequences. He declared: "One could, with some truth, claim that the evils of civilization are due to the fact that no child has ever had enough play" (Neill, 1964, p. 64). He encouraged the questioning of authority, declaring "Totalitarianism began, and totalitarianism still begins in the nursery" (p. 177). Neill refused to impose politics on children but he was a vocal anti-fascist and the one political ideology he permitted in Summerhill was its egalitarian democratic structure, which he valued far above the three Rs:

> I'm thinking about the dynamics of life, the dynamic in a child, how we're going to prevent that child from becoming a Gestapo, or becoming a color hater and all

> these things. The sickness of the world. I'm interested in what we're going to do for children to stop them from being haters, to stop them from being anti-life. (Radical Private Schools, 1966, p. 8-9)

As Neill created Summerhill, fascism took hold in Spain, Italy and Germany, and was in the process of conquering Europe. His strongest supporters were pioneering psychoanalysts Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm, who watched totalitarianism grow in their homelands, then fled Nazi persecution. A close friend of Reich, Neill shared his commitment to foster *self-regulation* (Neill, 1964, p. 104). He was determined that his school would not create the deep frustration and anger that Reich and Fromm felt was a factor in the racist scape-goating manifested in fascism. One can see logic in their convictions, when one thinks about the relentless restraint that, during the long school day, turns adults into wardens. Play is such a strong compulsion that adults who don't want children to play must stop them somehow—and keep stopping them, hour after hour, day after day, creating an atmosphere of permanent repression. Arguably, students either become acclimatized to arbitrary control or risk themselves and their futures by rebelling.

Neill's argument for play in childhood as a foundation for mental health and humane, democratic life is supported by the contemporary work of psychologist Peter Gray, whose cross-disciplinary arguments combine his observations at Sudbury Valley School with findings of other researchers in psychology and anthropology. Gray posits: "Social play, by its nature, is an egalitarian activity.... Children by nature want to play with other children, but to succeed in doing so, they have to learn and practice the means of getting along with others as equals." He even argues that "learning to get along and cooperate with others as equals may be the most crucial evolutionary function of human

social play" (2011, *The decline of…*, p. 457). Gray is clear that "free play's value for the psychological development of children depends on its self-directed and intrinsically rewarding nature" (p. 444). This position is compatible with Neill and Fromm's conviction that, where choice is limited to a more playful or learning-style-friendly bit of curriculum, authority is not absent but masked, "perverting" the aims of progressive education (Neill, 1964, p. ix). John Holt described traditional schooling as a situation in which children must jump through "hoops": a series of non-voluntary tasks of varying difficulty. He objected that in a "progressive" curriculum where the student is expected to "discover" predetermined facts, the student is saddled with the additional task of finding the hoop (1972, p.87). Since the academic goals in these situations can also elude parents and even teachers, such "soft" tactics can set the stage for a return of the back-to-basics movement.

This is the movement that, with arts cut in school systems, and the rise of standardized curricula and testing and increased homework, currently rules education. Each initiative at school board or ministry level, especially the current drive toward standardization, impacts alternative public schools and has resulted in serious attacks on private schools like Summerhill (A. S. Neill's Summerhill School [nd]). ALPHA has been profoundly affected by staff cuts and public school pressures so, though it's still play-friendly as public schools go, it cannot always be said "The kids basically play." But Kindergarten to Grade 3 students still spend much of their time on freely-chosen and self-invented activities. Cooperative inter-student relations are fostered within a non-competitive, ungraded, multi-age, democratic school culture, and they learn at their own pace beginning with organic, individualized approaches to literacy. But Board of

Education regulations won't permit the kids to go outside anytime they want, so rambunctious play is restricted to recess. Since most ALPHA students enter the regular system after grade 6, students in Grades 4 to 6 grapple with subjects like French and fractions in scheduled classes.

Yet comparatively, ALPHA is still an oasis. Peter Gray demonstrates a reduction in children's playtime since the 1960s that "all of the historians of play suggest… has been continuous and great" (2011, *The decline of…*, p. 445). The research, as Gray interprets it, points to a childhood increasingly controlled by anxiety-ridden adults. Gray correlates "the decline of play and the rise of psychopathology in young people over the past several decades." He argues:

> Somehow, as a society, we have come to the conclusion that to protect children from danger and to educate them, we must deprive them of the very activity that makes them happiest and place them for ever more hours in settings where they are more or less continually directed and evaluated by adults, settings almost designed to produce anxiety and depression. (2011, p. 458)

The greatest factor behind the reduction in playtime Gray points to is the increase in time spent in schooled activities: homework, lessons, organized sports, and school itself. Alfie Kohn writes that excessive homework, now extending to kindergarten, amounts to demanding that children regularly pull a double work-shift (2006, p. 11), resulting in "the loss of cheer, the loss of self-confidence, the loss of sleep…the loss of childhood" (p. 12). In Gray's view, the decline in playtime is a factor in a quadrupled suicide rate for people under-fifteen between 1950 and 2005 (2011, *The decline of…*, p.449).

Since the education system is such a great part of the problem, it's difficult to see how balance can be restored to children's lives without its cooperation. Schools might address such issues as obesity, hyperactivity and stress, as well as deal with many

learning differences, by allowing plenty of play time for energetic people whose school-day, week and year are long, and who no longer can meet one another in their streets or backyards for fun and fantasy. In increasingly private, anonymous, traffic-choked urban centers, schools are the main places where children gather and that can be designed to meet their needs. Yet there is no play space factored into the assignment of space given to each child in Ontario's public schools, and even teachers who want to use holistic and arts-based techniques find it a severe challenge in their cramped classrooms. Schoolyards are used for free recreation for no more than an hour a day, in brief bursts of frantic physical release that often carry considerable limitations on the kinds of activity children can engage in. Among various models of independent schools, and in the famous public primary schools of Reggio Emilia, good models exist for creating play-friendly school environments. The Albany Free School is a fine urban free-school model: several properties in one block integrating its old parochial school-building, adventure playground and gardens in a downtown neighbourhood.

The democrats who have nurtured free schools for decades are well able to demonstrate how an environment can be play-friendly and respectful of children, without treating them like spoiled royalty. As John Dewey proposed, they have made school into "a genuine form of active community life, instead of a place set apart in which to learn lessons" (Dewey, 1900/1990, p. 14). The alumni of Summerhill, and its diverse descendants like Sudbury Valley, the Albany Free School, Windsor House and ALPHA, show that to respect the child's expressed wants and needs does not threaten their future. John Dewey puzzled over the fact that to "many, if not most, people the normal processes of life appear to be incompatible with getting information and discipline:"

> Life is the great thing after all; the life of the child at its time and in its measure no less than the life of the adult. Strange it would be, indeed, if intelligent and serious attention to what the child now needs and is capable of in the way of a rich, valuable, and expanded life should somehow conflict with the needs and possibilities of later, adult life." (Dewey, 1900/1990, p. 60)

Wherever healthy children are allowed to be themselves, play manifests as a "normal process of life." Peter Gray posits, "Everywhere, to live in human society, people must behave in accordance with conscious, shared mental conceptions of what is appropriate; and that is what children practice constantly in their play. In play, from their own desires, children practice the art of being human" (2008, p. 4). It's hard to imagine a more urgent, relevant curriculum.

Deb O'Rourke's commitment to education reform began with her participation in the free school movement as a high school student in 1969. She was a parent volunteer at Toronto's ALPHA Alternative School from 1985-1995, and later rounded out her education experience by visiting 20 Ontario classrooms as a touring arts educator. A professional artist for thirty years, she focused on education in 2004: working as ALPHA's lunch supervisor and volunteer coordinator while earning a Masters in Education degree at York University (2010). Her thesis, *Defining and Defending a Democratic Public Education Site,* is based on research about ALPHA: about the rigors of self-governing with children and with the parent/teacher community, in partnership with a public system that has little awareness of community schooling or free-schooling. It can be accessed at http://gradworks.umi.com/MR/62/MR62436.html. Deb is currently trying to get a book published based on her thesis. She is also a writer and community

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