

April 2, 2008

Dear Families,

A few 4th/5th graders came running up the path at their overnight trip a few weeks ago. They had just come from a nature hike that had ended near a parking lot and wanted to go back to the lot. They were flushed with excitement because they were SURE that the parking lot had been shaped into its present form by a prehistoric sea. They also had noticed DINOSAUR BONES down the path and wanted to go back and dig them up! We found the “fossil deposit” of the dinosaur bones and the children set to work. One child rubbed the “fossil” gently with a cloth to remove the soil while the other two dug carefully around it to loosen it. When it was free, one of the children grabbed it and held it up high, shouting happily, “It’s not a fossil it’s a stone!”

I will treasure that memory and use that story for a long time. It reminds us that children want to be intellectual, that they want to use what they know for really important purposes. We, adults, have to watch out about making learning small and contained. We can obsess about homework, or doing well on tests, or completing worksheets. We sometimes can forget about the larger purposes that drive all people, adults and children alike, to learn and how they use what they have learned. We, as adults, have settled for being bored in class as part of getting through school, or playing the game of how to get “good” test scores or “good” grades - not necessarily learning much at all except how to get by. And others of us were not good at playing those games and did not get by. That is not the way it has to be and not what we want for our children - that is why we are all here at our school and why our practice is what it is.

It is in this larger sense of purpose that values of progressive education are found, in the idea of school being a laboratory to learn about life. Ideas about learning how to participate collaboratively with others, about making healthy and good choices based on self knowledge and self worth, about taking action to learn, about asking questions and not settling for superficial answers, about questioning the status quo and thinking for yourself - all these are the ideas of progressive education.*

Dara has a couple of 2nd graders who still reverse numbers, and she spoke with Milo about creating some work to address that. Milo thought to ask the upper grade children (who are learning how to use a technology program, Scratch,) whether anyone was interested in creating a program that the second graders could use. One child volunteered and created a brilliant program. He used what he was learning, and accepted the intellectual challenge to do something that would contribute to the school and help younger children.

We had some high school teachers from across the country visiting this morning. They are attending a conference entitled *Math and Social Justice* and are visiting progressive schools around the city. They visited Lauren P’s class during open work time. Children were “playing” with figures that they had made.

Instead of making assumptions about what they saw, turning around and visiting another class where a more traditional teacher might think that “real” learning was going on, they stayed - and watched and listened carefully. They found that children were so invested in their figures, that they cared deeply about what was happening in their little society groups to their figures. One group was talking about pregnancy and child care, another about taxes and health care.

*When I had my first child, Beryl, I was in a parenting group and our first discussion was about how to teach your child to question authority - but not your authority!

One child said that their society should have free health care. Another child in the group protested, saying that if there is free health care there won't be any doctors because they wouldn't be able to get paid. The high school teachers said that just this - discussing these large social issues - is what they are trying to get their older students to do.

Progressive education is about providing children a context in which to learn and care deeply about their work in a way that holds meaning to them. It is about children being apprentices to adult social roles, trying out what it means to be adult in a way that holds meaning to them.

Progressive education is not just about being humane to children and dressing learning in fun activities, it is about equipping children to lead informed and caring lives as strong and skilled adults. It is not just about teaching reading but about helping kids engage with text in a way that makes one's life richer and more meaningful and pushes one's thinking - when you are not reading the kind of mysteries that help you relax.

It is not just about teaching children to write different forms. It is about teaching children to write in forms that capture their biggest ideas and wonderings. For example from a kindergartener:

Moths

**Your
Mothy ways
In turn a phrase
You glide
Upon the sky
Do you have a home?**

And from a 4th grader:

Freedom
By Tsejin Khando Bhotia

You are like a fierce tiger eating
us. We are innocent rabbits, but you take
over our little territory. We need
freedom like other animals. Instead of
shooting, you grab us and tear us to pieces!
If you keep killing us, you will make us
extinct. We do not want to be endangered.
We live in Asia. We are peaceful, we want no
violence with you. Make friends with
us, otherwise all there is left of us are two.
We'll fight for our freedom. One day, just one
day.....we'll get our land back.