

Young Children

MIMI BRODSKY CHENFELD

Schools Children Run To

No question about it: as a major national issue, early childhood is *in*. Full- or half-day kindergartens? What kind of day care? Who should fund "latchkey" programs? Researchers add information on a daily basis. Educators and parents churn with activity as they strive to meet the new challenge.

I'm a simple person. I like to hang out with the kids: play with them, talk to them. Young children tell us how they want to be taught. We don't always listen.

Observe young children on their way to school: knapsacks on their backs, colorful lunch boxes gripped in their hands, their feet barely touch the ground as they bound eagerly to school. They can't wait to start the day. They insist on coming to school even if they feel under the weather. The climate in the school has healing powers.

What is happening in such schools? No matter the building structure or newness of materials, these schools are filled with love, fun, surprises, interesting experiences, and activities that promise success. The children know they will be safe at any speed.

A teacher paints a large ice-cream container, cuts a small hole in it, and turns it into a "mouse house." Every day, she reaches into the mouse house

and finds—ta tum!—letters from the mouse to the children.

Very early one still-dark morning, a family hears sounds downstairs near their front door. Nervously they tiptoe down to confront the intruder. There they discover their kindergartner—dressed and ready for school—two hours early.

"What are you doing up so soon?" they ask, astonished.

"I've got to get to school early today!" Their child jumps with impatience. "I think I have a letter from the mouse!"

Is today the day the children will wrap bean seeds in moist paper towels, place them neatly in plastic sandwich bags, and tuck them cozily into their pockets to make "pocket gardens"? Or is today the day they will see their bean seeds sprout with their own eyes?

You can bet that in such schools, young students are learning in holistic, integrated, joyful, playful, open-ended ways. Their days are rich with diverse materials, a wide variety of experiences that help them make connections, find meanings, and make sense of the world. I'm impressed with programs kids *run* to.

But there is a flip side. Observe those schools that repel their students. Watch downcast, reluctant kids on

their way to school—a dreary, stiff, scary place. Here children come to school healthy and get sick.

Mark's favorite things to play with are blocks. He *loves* blocks. But his is a school where blocks, sandboxes, puppets, stuffed animals, and play areas have been replaced by reading groups, workbooks, and flash cards. Stories, singing games, and free play have taken a back seat to language drills. In this class, the children sit around a chart that explains short vowel sounds, long vowel sounds. The tone of the class is muted, flat. Ask Mark how he likes kindergarten. His response is melancholy: "There are no blocks in kindergarten," he states, still trying to fathom that reality.

Which way will we go with early childhood education? Will we enhance children's lives or diminish them? It's a crucial choice—and there's no neutral when we're dealing with the strong but delicate spirits of our young children. □

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The Teacher

PATRICIA MCDANIEL DOMBART

Life Within the Walls

A friend of mine went straight from high school into the convent. After her first six months as a postulant, she was allowed to have visitors, and I was one of the first. I had missed Elizabeth—her wit, sensitivity, and vivacity. We met in the convent parlor under the eyes of the novice mistress, and to my

dismay, I found Elizabeth as bounded and diminished as her setting. In hushed tones, she related stories from her probationary period. After hearing her complain about another postulant because she always took the dust cloth Elizabeth wanted, I realized that the restraints and confines of the convent had warped Elizabeth's perspective.

About February of every school year, I observe this "dust cloth" mentality in full force at the high school where I teach. I myself become prey to it. Suddenly, margins on composition papers become more important than content, and I lecture on the evils of turning in papers written in red or green ink. I almost ram the side of the

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