

The Right Place: Nursery School in the Twenty-first Century
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It is my earliest memory, I approach the building feeling my mother's hand clutching mine. We walk up the stairs to the front entrance, I notice the stone benches on either side of the door as my mother rings the bell. In my memory, I spend just one day at the Nursery school, playing with the wooden toys and puzzles, which are the answer to my childhood dreams. I remember the easels and paint set, the books, the dolls, the blocks. When I look back, they are like treasures that I take down from the shelf and turn over and over in my mind. In reality, I am enrolled at the Nursery School in the small town of Williamsport, Pennsylvania for three weeks.

I was three years old and though it seems impossible that at such an early age I would have thought that I was in the right place, that was how I always remembered the Nursery school. The environment was a safe, nurturing, creative and intellectually exciting place and I remember longing to return. Much to my regret, my days at the Nursery school were all too brief. The year was 1953 and my dear mother, who had enrolled me at the school so that she could work part time at the local factory, was overcome with guilt at the thought of leaving me in the care of others. It was a time when all mothers were "stay at home" and she believed that leaving me at the school would be irresponsible.

Many years passed before the powerful memory of my three weeks in the Nursery school fully returned to me. It was when I first walked into the Little Folks Nursery School in Washington, DC. The small tables and chairs, the wooden toys, the layout of the playroom, all brought me back to that earlier experience. The year was 1979, and though I had no way of knowing it at the time, this feeling of being in the right place would lead me to remain at the school as a Teacher Director for the next 28 years.

I begin this essay with my own nursery school experience because even though the world has changed significantly in the last half century, *the needs of young children have not*. Much of what makes the Little Folks School the right kind of Nursery school for the twenty-first century was in place in 1979, and in many ways, present in the Nursery School I briefly attended in 1953.

As I attempt to describe the Little Folks School, I will be referring to a study by the National Research Council entitled Eager to Learn, Educating Our Preschoolers, that looked at a broad range of behavioral and social science research on early learning and development of young children that was conducted in 2000. The findings, conclusions and recommendations of the

study closely reflect the program that has been designed and implemented for children at the Little Folks School for the past 30 years

The Little Folks School, located in the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, DC is a small, independent nursery school for children ages 2 1/2 through age 5. Founded in 1972, it has a total enrollment of 56 students. Little Folks is small by design. Young children's first experiences away from home should be in an environment where they know everyone's name and they feel as if they are part of an extended family. Research shows that children who feel a secure emotional attachment to their teachers are better socialized and able to "exploit learning opportunities" 1. This emotional attachment happens more easily in an environment where turnover among staff is infrequent and teachers are highly trained and experienced. Though it is extremely unusual in the field of early childhood education, four of the six teachers on our staff have been working at the Little Folks School for twelve years or longer.

The philosophy of the Little Folks School is based on meeting the needs of the "whole" child, all activities are assessed on their potential to develop the cognitive and intellectual, the physical, both large and small motor, and the social and emotional needs of children. As stated in the Research Council Report, "Cognitive, social-emotional (mental health), and physical development are complementary, mutually supportive areas of growth all requiring active attention in the preschool years."2

Our program is "play based" with a significant emphasis in the arts. We believe that experiences in the arts have intrinsic value in their own right, while also developing skills that are necessary for future learning. The school has enjoyed a collaboration with the Wolf Trap Performing Arts Center for many years, which places performing artists in twice-weekly seven-week classroom residencies. Our arts rich curriculum is a tremendous vehicle for "whole" child development. Our open-ended art projects promote fine motor skills, visual discrimination, hand eye coordination, and spatial understanding. In addition, experience in the arts, visual as well as performing (music, movement and drama) promote the ability to express and understand language, the ability to listen and follow directions and the ability to concentrate and stay on task. A high quality nursery school program should provide opportunity to extend and enrich these experiences.

In a world where the emphasis on academics has pushed advanced placement college level courses into our high schools, high school subjects like algebra and biology into our middle schools, the race for more academics sooner, is even felt in many kindergartens and nursery schools. Little Folks is not one of them. Our approach is influenced by the teaching of John Dewey who believed that children learn best by a process of discovery and exploration. At Little Folks School, children learn by interacting with materials, other children and the teachers. Though there is a definite

structure and routine to the day, there are also built in blocks of time for children to become immersed in play.

In his book, The Power of Play, David Elkind states, "it is vitally important to support and encourage self-directed activities by the young child. Even if those activities appear meaningless to us, they can have great purpose and significance for the child. These activities are not random and have a pattern and organization in keeping with the child's level of mental ability. Allowing the child time and freedom to complete these activities to her personal satisfaction nourishes that child's powers of concentration and attention. We run the risk of impairing these powers if we don't respect and value the young child's self-initiated activities."³

A child's day, even at the preschool level, is often overscheduled or dominated by "screen time" -television, DVD players (now in many cars) and computers. There is often little opportunity for self-directed, imaginary play. According to the Kaiser Family Report, a study released in 2006 that documented how much time infants, toddlers and preschoolers are spending with media, the types of media they are using, and what role media is playing in their environments, 83% of children 6 and under are spending close to two hours using screen media on a typical day. While the research about the long term effects of this viewing has not kept pace with the increased use of technology, Educational Psychologist Jane Healy believes that not only does this screen time subtract from more concrete experiences that children need for healthy brain development but "since virtually all parts of the brain are active during these early years, anything that limits appropriate experiences or sets up undesirable emotional/motivational patterns will have profound and lasting effects."⁴ Computers are not present in the Little Folks School classrooms.

I remember my professors in the Department of Education at Pennsylvania State University in the sixties, predicting the information explosion that we witness today. Their advice that the most important things to teach children were how to learn, how to problem solve and how to be critical thinkers remains especially true in today's world. This ability to gather information, process it in a creative and critical way begins in the early years, and an early childhood learning environment should provide endless opportunities to practice these skills.

As noted in the National Research Council report, "no single curriculum or pedagogical approach can be identified as best"⁵ there are however, principles of learning that should be incorporated into the early childhood environment. The idea that learning is progressive and that young children can build on their concrete experiences when they are actively engaged with materials, staff and other children, are central themes. "If there is a single critical component to quality, it rests in the relationship between the child and the teacher, and in the ability of the adult to be responsive to the child.

But responsiveness extends in many directions: to the child's cognitive, social, emotional and physical characteristics and development"6.

On any given day, a visitor to the Little Folks School could enter a classroom or playground area and witness children busy at play. They would observe a well-organized room, full of beautiful open-ended art projects created by the children. They would notice various interest areas, such as the doll house, Duplo table, train set or sand/water table. They would see a Library (books are present in every area, even the playroom and outdoor playground) a corner rich with musical instruments, and shelves stocked with various manipulatives. In addition to these open-ended materials, there would be shelves lined with puzzles and equipment that require more preset solutions. They would see materials that children can use alone as well as equipment that encourages cooperative play.

If the visitor arrived on the first Thursday of the month they could join in "Sandwich Patrol". Children would be constructing ham and cheese sandwiches, and for young children making a sandwich is like a construction project. Applying mustard and mayonnaise to bread, putting sandwiches into zip locks and counting the results of their labor is a multi-task project, loaded with learning. However, the biggest lesson learned by all involved, is that one of the rules of our school and one of the rules of life, is that we take care of each other, whether that is a family member, friend, or a member of our community. This project grew from the children's encounters with homeless people on the streets of Georgetown back in the early 1990's. I would be frequently asked for money as I walked with the children to area parks. When children asked why I was being asked for money, I explained that the people we encountered did not have enough to eat. It seemed logical that a project that involved the children making food for the homeless would give them a very concrete experience with the concept of sharing, something that every teacher strives to impart. This approach to developing pro-social behavior is one of many projects in place at the Little Folks School. Parents and children alike have responded very favorably to our community service projects such as Sandwich Patrol. Parents and teachers appreciate these very real activities that provide an excellent altruistic model for young children.

At other times, visitors would see children actively creating, using -among other things- unit blocks (large and small), various art materials, even recycled junk. The children's interaction with their teachers and each other would be rich with language, describing the structures they have built, the pictures they have made, or the adventures they are embarking on. Teachers would be supporting the activity with meaningful questions and encouraging remarks. Children would be encouraged to "reflect, predict, question and hypothesize"7. Children might eagerly document their adventures with a drawing, and narrative added by the teacher. Questions by children or staff might prompt a visit to the Library to gather information. The visitor would observe children who are independent and self-directed and who view themselves as learners. They would witness a certain harmony as

well-trained teachers nurture young children as they navigate their way through the rapidly changing world of the twenty-first century. They would see children in the right place.