



Education

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Julia Steiny: Just like my old Magic Garage, learning should be fun

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When I was a kid, the official beginning of my frequent visits to my grandparents' house began when my grandmother Maybelle or her sister, Aunt Florence, would ask me, "What do you want to do today?"

Maybelle and Florence had both been public elementary schoolteachers in Los Angeles for 30 years, minus whatever time my grandmother took to have her two sons. Both women were surprisingly awkward about showing physical affection to the extended family's large brood of grandchildren and grand-nieces and nephews.

Teaching was how they knew and loved children.

So the question really being asked was: "What do you want to learn today?"

Over 30 years, the family's one-car garage had become a store room for the old ladies' vast collection of materials proven to have the power to intrigue a child. Everything was sorted by type into drawers in a huge collection of old dressers stacked one atop the other along the walls. I visited that household between the ages of 4 and nearly 7, so a stepladder helped me get to the upper reaches.

The collection included fabric scraps, chalk, paints, paper of all sorts and colors, musical instruments, yarn, crochet hooks, counting games, books, poker chips, and so on. Pieces of clean lumber leaned against a corner at the back, near the drawers that held the family's random tool collection.

Most magical of all, though, were the child-sized costumes that the old ladies had helped their students make. The kids had made an outfit for a boy and a girl for each country they studied in school. The costumes had fabulous accessories —actual wooden shoes and a big white flying-nun hat for the Dutch girl, a sequined mantilla and bejeweled comb for the Spanish costume, and pearl opera glasses for the Germans. For years, I had the best Halloween costumes on my block.

The adults opened the garage door and left me alone to choose what I wanted to play with. What with dawdling and daydreaming, just poking through the drawers could take hours. The adults went off and did whatever it is adults do.

When I was ready with my plan for the day, Florence and Maybelle would appear, and we'd be off on our journey.

For example, I never liked dolls themselves, but I loved making elaborate doll clothes, using simple hand-stitching or later the household's foot-peddle sewing machine. I drew and explained what the clothes should look like. Then they used geometric shapes cut out of cardboard to create the dress pattern and explain about halves, quarters, and fractions. Florence played the piano, teaching me the folk songs, while illustrating whole and quarter notes with the shapes. (The edu-industry now calls these "manipulatives" and makes the shapes out of plastic.)

The lessons got irritating only when I wasn't interested. I hated the flashcards. Also, Aunt Florence's obsession with roses drove me nuts. I didn't want to learn any flower names, never mind sniff them and describe distinctions in their smells.

But I did those things anyway, basically as a tradeoff. They richly satisfied my curiosity and in exchange, I learned what they insisted on. Of course, I was learning the whole time. It only felt like drudgery, as so much modern learning does, when I resisted.

In edu-jargon, the old ladies were "child-centered" teachers, who would be condemned these days by many school reformers, especially conservatives, as practicing "progressive," John Dewey bunk.

Granted, supporting a child's interests may not be the most efficient way of producing high test scores, at least in the short run. But no tests measure the exploration of the world's materials, the joy of mastering skills, or the nuances of making friends and negotiating well with adults. But those are the skills that ultimately give kids both an academic platform and the personal drive to seek out more information and competence.

What so many reformers don't seem to get is that a kid needs to WANT to learn first.

Learning is a palpable pleasure to the young human brain. This is not news. If a kid doesn't want to learn, something is wrong. Take the time to figure out what's in the way. Then open up some version of my childhood's Magic Garage and let those kids show us what they DO want to learn. Fan that ember. Win them back.

I would bet serious money that many kids would ace the almighty tests if schools could embrace kids' natural curiosity.

Whetting their appetite for learning is the patently obvious first step to proficiency.

Julia Steiny, a former member of the Providence School Board, consults on schools and government initiatives, such as Information Works!, Rhode Island's school-accountability project. She can be reached at juliasteiny@gmail.com, or c/o EdWatch, The Providence Journal, 75 Fountain St., Providence, RI 02902.