

What's Old is New and What's New is Old

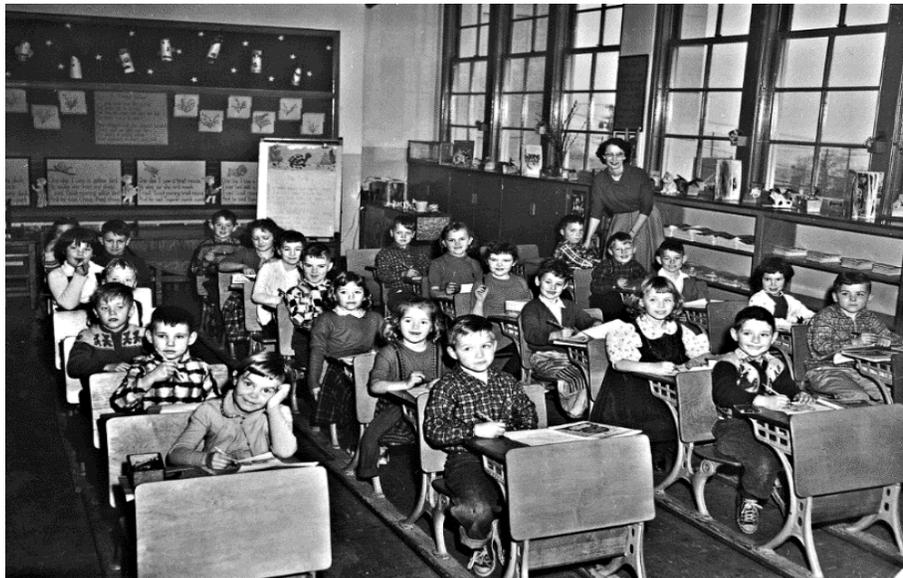
The changes and the personalized learning approach in the new BC curriculum led me to consider the history of the past hundred plus years and reflect on what I have experienced both as a student and as Vancouver teacher over the past seventy.

For instance, a personalized approach may seem to be new but it is old. Notable educators in the past such as John Amos Comenius (1618-1648), considered by many to be the father of modern education influenced Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) who gave birth to the Kindergarten and who also knew the work of Swiss educator, Johann Pestalozzi (1746-1827). John Dewey (1859-1952) emphasized learning by doing and A. S. Neill (1883-1973) started an open outdoor program with an emphasis on play at Summerhill with the realization that "forced education" is futile. In Italy, Maria Montessori stressed the development of a child's own initiative and natural abilities, especially through practical play, and Loris Malaguzzi started preschool programs after World War II based on children learning through a self-guided curriculum in Reggio Emilia.

These early educators

1. Recognized that each child is unique
2. Recognized the importance of play as central to the child learning
3. Encouraged rather than punished the children
4. Offered a child-centred approach
5. Emphasized the importance of learning by doing
6. Devoted themselves to public education

Despite their efforts, during the past 100 or more years, public education has followed rigid formal paths with little focus on previous understandings.



My friend with her class of 35 young children in the nineteen fifties

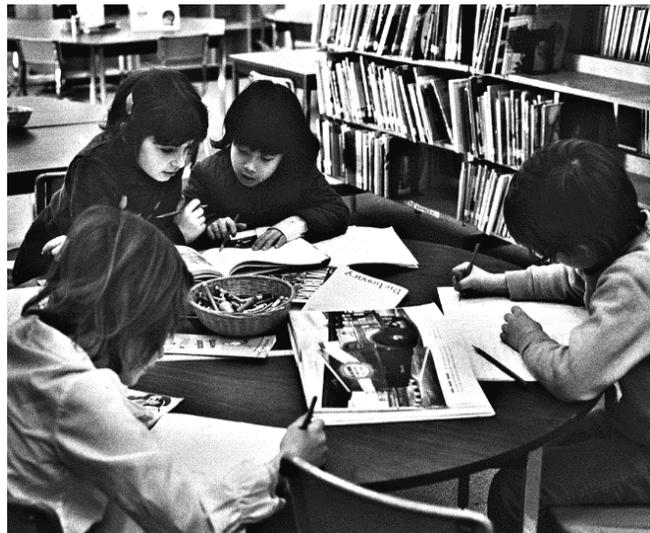
My experience as a student in school in BC was in formal settings with the teacher dominating and sometimes using the strap if a student was uncooperative. At age 17, I went to UBC to become a Primary Teacher. I learned and continued with the same methods as those by which I had been taught. After teaching lessons to groups in a silent classroom in Vancouver for five years, I went to Britain on exchange in 1964. The way of working and the tone of the school

there were very different and I was concerned. The children were noisy and as far as I could see, no one was teaching. However, with some help from a fellow teacher, I gradually overcame my negative impressions and, realizing the benefits of the approach, I gradually changed. Back in Vancouver, where the classrooms remained silent and children continued to receive lesson in groups, I introduced new ways little by little. Eventually in 1971, with like-minded colleagues, I had the privilege of starting a program inspired by the philosophy of the British Infant (Primary) school at Charles Dickens Annex, a new small Primary school. As a team of five, we were encouraged by what we read, by the visits of British educators who came to Vancouver to give workshops, and by other teachers who also changed. Rows of desks gave way to tables and chairs. The strong focus on the 3 R's gave way to the full inclusion of the Arts and Physical education. Group lessons and seatwork gave way to play-based programs with children choosing from array of manipulative materials and actively learning in cooperation with others. There was greater parent involvement and many volunteered to help.

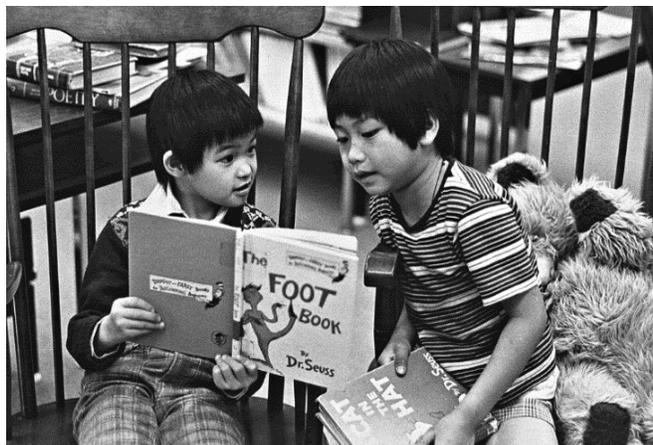
Even though we were well supported by school board officials, it took time to change. The rigid methods we had been taught were ingrained in us, as well as in the school system, and had seemed to serve us well. It was in talking together, observing the children's positive response and noting their progress that we were able to shed the old ways and implement the new.



Teacher works with child while others look on



Children collaborate in the language area



Children read and learn together



Sewing in the creative area



Discussing plans and building



Children work on chosen activities in Math area



A father shares his newly carved mask

Fast forward to 1992. A group of teachers produced a new comprehensive primary curricula called "The Year 2000" which I helped to edit. Presented in several documents, it was very similar to our program at Dickens Annex. Sadly, soon after it was introduced, government support dropped and prescribed learning outcomes and testing were put in place forcing many teachers to return to the more familiar formal methods.

Since 2010 or even before, teachers have once again taken the initiative in instigating "new" programs. Some reflect those in the pre-schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, adapted for children ages 5-10. Teachers are also involved in environmentally focused place based outdoor programs. And Charles Dickens Annex continues with some of the elements we began in 1971, now 45 years ago.

Their Mission Statement is as follows:

Together we bring alive our commitment to develop each child's potential in all domains through a long established philosophy built on mutual respect, continuous learning and opportunities for leadership within child-centred, multi-age framework.

There is a strong positive response by all concerned about the value of the more open approach as there was for us at Dickens Annex. As if to illustrate, at the time of writing, I received this email from Dan, a former student, who is now about 50 years old.

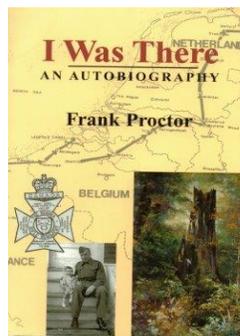
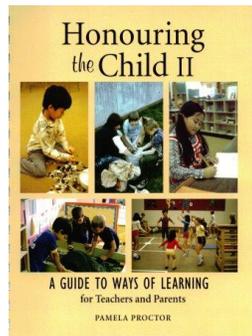
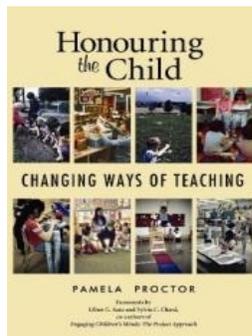
You played a very crucial role in my life in many ways emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Probably the thing I'm most grateful for is you instilling experiential learning in me at a very young age.

For some teachers, parents and the general public, there may be confusion. Each year the Fraser Institute reports test results comparing schools and announcing superior results from private schools as opposed to those in the public system. Further, cutbacks and possible school closures in many districts are announced, forcing attention away from the new curriculum and begging the question about support for the personalized learning initiative.

Having changed my ways of teaching and been rewarded by my students' responses, I share my experiences by writing, speaking, and mentoring, and I invite you to visit or contact me at my website. www.honouringthechild.com

Pamela Proctor, Primary Consultant

Author of: *Honouring the Child – Changing Ways of teaching*
Honouring the Child II – A Guide to Ways of Learning



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