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## The Making of Beautiful People

by Ruth A. Wilson

The poet Walt Whitman once said, “Now I know the secret of the making of the best person. It is to grow in the open air; and to eat and sleep with the earth.” While we may not use Whitman’s poetic words, we, as early childhood educators, probably think of our work as contributing to the “making of the best persons.” Exactly how we define this, however, might be a bit fuzzy.

In March, 2010, I was privileged to participate in a professional forum focusing on the integration of peace, nature, and spirituality as a way to enhance or transform early childhood education. During this forum — supported by the Biosophical Institute and hosted by the Schlitz Audubon Nature Center in Milwaukee — we shared ideas on what we considered desired outcomes for children participating in our programs. To frame this discussion, Ann Pelo — author, teacher educator, and program consultant — suggested that we reflect on how we would like a child to finish the statement, “I am a person who . . . .” We then generated a list of desired dispositions, attitudes, and inclinations we would like to see fostered in our programs. This list included respect, empathy, quiet reflecting, attention, appreciation of diversity, and the ability to adapt to different situations.

Instead of using the term ‘best persons,’ we decided to use the term ‘beautiful people.’ We described ‘beautiful people’ as people who live with a sense of wonder, sensitivity to beauty, respect and compassion for others, a deep appreciation of the natural world, and an interest in creating a more peaceful society. ‘Beautiful people,’ as we described them, certainly had nothing to do with the winning of beauty pageants!



Dr. Ruth Wilson has been a teacher, teacher educator, and consultant in early childhood education for over 30 years. She currently devotes most of her time to developing curriculum in the area of environmental education for young children. Most recently, Dr. Wilson worked as a curriculum writer for California’s Education and Environment Initiative and as a consultant with Sesame Street in planning environmental programs for young children. Dr.

Wilson has published several books and numerous articles. Her most recent book is *Nature and Young Children: Encouraging Creative Play and Learning in Natural Environments* (Routledge, 2008). Dr. Wilson can be contacted at [wilson.ruth@gmail.com](mailto:wilson.ruth@gmail.com).

Unfortunately, child beauty pageants have become a reality in our society and can influence public opinion as to what we want for our children. Child beauty pageants — some including children less than six months old — often involve dance and the modeling of sportswear and evening attire. Child contestants compete based on looks, capability, poise, perfection, and confidence. Beauty pageant judges sometimes call this “the complete package.” We might ask, however, what is meant by ‘complete’? Wouldn’t ‘complete’ include such spiritual characteristics as empathy, joy, and respect for others?

After sharing our ideas at the peace/nature/spirituality forum about what we mean by ‘beautiful people,’ we discussed what would be involved in the making of ‘beautiful people.’ We knew we’d have to go deeper than what we currently refer to as ‘competencies.’ Dr. Julia Torquati, Associate Professor of Child, Youth, and Family Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, noted how what we currently refer to as ‘competencies’ doesn’t really address the ‘wholeness’ of what we’re working toward in the “making of beautiful people.”

‘Competency’ — generally defined as an “ability to perform” — doesn’t include dispositions, inclinations, or tendencies. Forum participants noted how what one is able to do (competency) isn’t what one may be inclined to do (disposition). From this, we concluded that, in addition to fostering competencies, early childhood educators would do well to also intentionally foster dispositions. In fact, forum participants discussed the importance of bringing desired dispositions to the forefront in education.

Fostering desired dispositions in young children matches well some of the guidelines developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). In “Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8” (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), NAEYC outlines a set of goals for children. These goals include what we want for young children, both in their present lives and as they grow into adulthood. These goals also include personal charac-

teristics relating to the establishment of a peaceful, prosperous, and democratic society. In other words, NAEYC's articulation of goals for young children includes a focus on the child and on the larger society.

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Some of the specific goals outlined in “Developmentally Appropriate Practices” are skill-related goals and state what children should be able to do, including the following:

- communicate well, respect others, and engage with them to work through differences of opinion, and function well as members of a team;
- analyze situations, make reasoned judgments, and solve new problems as they emerge;
- access information through various modes, including spoken and written language, and intelligently employ complex tools and technologies as they are developed;
- continue to learn new approaches, skills, and knowledge as conditions and needs change.

NAEYC (2009) – and many others in the early childhood professional community – recognize that, in addition to knowledge and skills, children must also develop positive dispositions and attitudes. Some examples proposed by NAEYC include:

- the need to understand that effort is necessary for achievement and [children] need to have curiosity and confidence in themselves as learners;
- the need to develop a positive self-identity and a tolerance for others whose perspective and experience may be different from their own.

Maria Montessori, one of our historical leaders in early childhood education, also called for educational goals focusing on both the holistic development of the child and “the bettering of humanity’s

future.” She posed the question, “What is the use of transmitting knowledge if the individual’s total development lags behind?” In reference to “total development,” Montessori said, “We must take into account a psychic entity, a social personality, a new world

force, innumerable in the totality of its membership, which is at present hidden and ignored” (as cited in Mische, 2006).

## Purpose of Education

Liberty Hyde Bailey – botanist, author, and academic dean – once wrote that “Sensitiveness to life is the highest product of education.” Today’s educational environment – with its emphasis on competencies and standards – may suggest otherwise. In fact, public education today seems to focus more on acquiring a predetermined set of facts and skills (competencies) than on developing dispositions relating to “sensitiveness to life.”

It would probably be unwise to suggest that “sensitiveness to life” or any other desired outcome – including the “making of beautiful people” – be adopted as the one ultimate goal of education. Better to recognize that the purposes of education are multiple and vary according to setting, age, and individual children.

Yet, to serve our children well – and based on what is best for them and the larger society of people – we might give serious thought as to what we want our early childhood programs to accomplish. Are we trying to produce smart, self-reliant children who won’t hesitate in their efforts to get

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ahead? Do we want to produce children who are programmed to compete for the highest grades and the best positions, and who are willing to do almost anything to come out on top? As early childhood educators, we know that's not what our profession and our programs are all about. Yet, are we really clear about what we are trying to accomplish?

Some might suggest that one important purpose or goal of education — including early childhood education — is character development. This may be especially so in recent years, as bullying and violent behavior in children have increased dramatically. Today, many schools in the United States have some type of character education program in place. “Doing your personal best” and “Becoming the best person you can become” are themes running through some of these programs. While these themes may seem consistent with the “making of beautiful people,” we would do well to reflect carefully on some of their underlying messages.

Dr. Nel Noddings, Professor of Philosophy and Education at Columbia University, suggests that focusing on your ‘personal best’ may place too much emphasis on individualism and present “virtues as personal possessions, hard-won through a grueling process of character building” (Noddings, 2005). This approach may actually work against what we are trying to accomplish in our early childhood programs. We recognize that ‘beautiful people’ care about the healthy development of the group, not just self. They realize that self-realization — or becoming their ‘best

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oneselves’ — includes a concern for what happens in the larger community (Maslow, 1954; Wilson, 2011).

Another point Noddings (2005) makes about the fostering of ‘virtues’ in students has to do with the relational

aspect of the process — an aspect, she says, that is often neglected. Fostering desired dispositions and inclinations, Noddings explains, isn’t something one person (such as a teacher) can do for another person (such as a child). “We cannot shape students as we do pottery,” Noddings says, because interdependence plays a significant role in the fostering of caring and other desired dispositions. “How good (or bad) I can be,” Noddings explains, “depends in substantial part on how you treat me.” As teachers, we might read this as “How good (or bad) children can be depends in substantial part on how I treat them.” It logically follows that helping children become beautiful people means that we need to be beautiful people ourselves.

## Schon's Corner

## Jonah's Corner



Much of Noddings (1992, 2005) work centers on the issue of caring in education. The caring Noddings speaks of goes far beyond 'taking care of' — as in doing something for another person. Caring, as a critical component in education, she says, means more than sincerely 'caring' about children and working hard to help (or coerce) students to achieve certain goals. Perhaps another way of saying this is that "Good intentions and hard work aren't enough." We need to also establish caring relations with each other — including children, colleagues, parents, and anyone else who may come into our classrooms.

One outcome of the peace/nature/spirituality forum was the development of a two-day professional development workshop. Forum participants struggled with what to call this workshop, but finally adopted "Deep Teaching — Growing Peace" as its title. The term 'deep teaching' is based, in part, on the idea that the relationship between teacher and students needs to go beyond role definitions (as in 'teacher role' and 'student role') and focus instead on mutual respect.

The term 'deep teaching' also reflects an understanding that the purpose of education goes far beyond the gaining of knowledge and skills (competencies) and includes a call to strengthen and deepen our own humanity (Mische, 2006). This call, while understood and accepted during the early days of public education in the United States, has been pushed aside by a multitude of competing forces.

Dr. Patricia Mische, a forum participant and internationally-known peace scholar and educator, talks about the purpose of education as being nothing less than deep humanization and profound social transformation. In an article published in Global Education Associates, Breakthrough News (2006), Dr. Mische explains how Horace Mann, the father of U.S. public education, "hoped that free and equitable access to quality schools would prepare the soul of America for a deeper humanity and truer democracy, one in which men and women of diverse races and beliefs would together develop a society of greater freedom, justice and peace."

In this same article, Dr. Mische elaborates on Mann's ideas about "the social mission of education" which, she says, "was to generate a deeper, more compassionate humanity." "What is needed," Mische states, "is not only education of human reason, but education that addresses development of the whole person — body, mind, emotions, spirit — within the context of a community."

The Deep Teaching — Growing Peace workshop represents an attempt to re-focus on the deeper purposes of education, including the development of 'beautiful people' who can live rich, fulfilling lives and make significant contributions to the creation of a more peaceful society where people live in harmony with each other and with the natural environment.

## Summary

If we want our classrooms to be nurturing places where the making of beautiful people is supported, we need to not only be clear about the dispositions and inclinations involved but also reflect these in everything we do. We can't expect children to become beautiful people and create a peaceful society without showing them how by being beautiful people ourselves.



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