



IN PURSUIT OF A creative learning process IN EDUCATION

*An Interview
with Chris Mercogliano*

by Linda Sechrist

A passionate advocate for a democratic learning process, Chris Mercogliano practiced what he taught for 35 years at the Albany Free School. The author of essays and books such as *Making It Up As We Go Along*, *The Story of the Albany Free School* and *Teaching the Restless, One School's Remarkable No-Ritalin Approach to Helping Children Learn and Succeed*, Mercogliano stepped down as the school's director in June to concentrate on writing and speaking about non-controlling education.

Located in Albany, New York, the school resembles a community much more than an educational institution. Its inner-city, multi-cultural, freedom-based learning space was founded 39 years ago on participatory democratic principles. No testing, no grading, entrusting children with the responsibility of their own learning and rampant play are a few of the hallmarks of the school.

Mercogliano's most recent book *In Defense of Childhood: Protecting Kids' Inner Wildness* garnered the attention of *Natural Awakenings*. In it, this passionate advocate of the creative learning process warns that "imagination, the gift

of childhood" is not a frivolous thing to be taken lightly in or out of the education arena. He also advises that education's intent of amassing facts about the world is in truth aiding in the domestication of children and hindering the learning process. Most importantly it is turning out ill-prepared adolescents who are unable to adapt to the world's continually changing frame of references.

Using his myriad experiences, Mercogliano predicts that staying our present education course and continuing the domestication of childhood for the next 35 to 70 years means turning out two generations of "sci-fi robotic humans." Says Mercogliano, "Viewing learning as passive storage rather than active engagement, public education is squeezing the human qualities out of our children." After attending one of his lectures or reading any of his essays, books or reference material, it is impossible to ponder our present social, economic and political dilemmas without wondering if we can rely on our current public education system to turn out original thinkers with the intellect to produce creative solutions.

So we asked:

Q *What do you consider an ideal learning environment?*

A An ideal environment for learning comes into existence naturally when neither the child nor the teacher is playing a role. An adult who shares skills and information and who offers guidance, love and nurturing is a teacher. Freedom to offer instruction on subjects that they and their students enjoy is a basic necessity in this setting where classes would not be developed around a predetermined curriculum aimed at passing tests. The classroom would be full of exciting and interesting information that satisfies children's inquisitiveness and inspires learning without the application of artificial goals or standards. The teaching/learning process would be a cooperative one without competition or performance for external rewards. Children would have input about what subjects and activities were offered so that the learning environment was fueled by everyone's passions.

Q *Can the present public education system be fixed?*

A The system can't be fixed because it's doing what it was consciously designed to do. In comprehending its history, of which most people are unaware, one understands how the forces in society came together in the mid-1800s and 1900s to establish a universal compulsory education system that sorts children. It was intentionally designed to inculcate them with patriotism and obedience and teach children to accept routine so they could be good little workers that do as they are told in order that they fit into the economy as needed. Education isn't about children discovering what they are passionate about and where it might lead them. Rather it is designed to establish where they will be most useful. At every turn the system blocks learning and is intricately locked into our society.

It is impossible to treat the school in isolation from other economical and political institutions because they are designed to fit together like a hand in a glove. Public education, first reformed in the mid-1800s by Horace Mann, an

American education reformer, and later influenced in the early-1900s by Andrew Carnegie, an American Industrialist, was and still is designed to serve our economic and political system. Mann and Carnegie were up front about their intentions and weren't ashamed to tell people what they ultimately intended to do—create a patriotic, obedient and pliant work force that would serve a modern economic power. Nor were they bashful about their intention to take away the culture of immigrants who they believed needed to be Americanized and instilled with Anglo-Saxon values. They weren't interested in turning out independent thinkers who wouldn't be willing to work in modern factories.

Unfortunately, this antiquated mindset is hidden in the rhetoric of equal opportunity and No Child Left Behind, myths that perpetuate the concept that education creates equal opportunity and levels the playing field. Though it appears we can't change the current system, we must try.

Q *What can parents do to influence the system?*

A Parents should be participants in their child's education. Being proactive means talking with children, teachers, principals and attending school board meetings. These actions for effecting change go hand-in-hand with mentoring and modeling appropri-

ate behavior. The most significant action parents can take is to tune into their child's feelings, particularly in the first few moments after they arrive home from school. This is the time to ask questions that determine if they are thriving and eager to attend school. If school isn't going well, then parents need to consult with one another before taking the next step of discussing specific situations with the teacher. Don't be too quick to blame the child if school isn't going well. For certain, do not take the advice of school authorities on medicating children they suspect of having ADD or ADHD. Instead, investigate and discuss all aspects of the situation before taking the next step of getting together with other parents. Nothing scares a school more than parents getting together to discuss the circumstances surrounding their children's education. After meeting as a group, talk with the principal and let the local newspaper in on what is going on.

Q *What if parents are unable to shape their child's education?*

A There is always the option of home schooling. If both parents are working and don't have the time, they can cooperate with other parents and share homeschooling responsibilities. Homeschooling is not rocket science, nor is it expensive. When enough people gather who can support one another they always have the option of starting a small independent school that can be

tailored to meet the particular needs of the children. It is possible that families might be faced with the challenge of relocating in order to accomplish this. Nothing is more important to the world than a child's well-being.

Q *Are you aware of a parent who has made a difference in her child's classroom experience?*

A My *Teaching the Restless* editor had a seven-year-old son in a Boston public school. The school labeled him ADHD and they recommended Ritalin. After reading my manuscript, she successfully negotiated with the teacher and principal to change his classroom routine of sitting for long periods of time. Once the child enjoyed some freedom of movement, the mother heard no more about ADHD behavior or the need for Ritalin. The book, not yet published, had made a difference and provided me a sign that I was on to something.



For a schedule of speaking engagements and workshops or to purchase books visit

ChrisMercogliano.com. To learn more about the Albany Free School visit AlbanyFreeSchool.com *or call 518-434-3072.*