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Editorial: On Behalf of Children

“WHY CUTE IS STILL A FOUR-LETTER WORD”

Recently, I had what could best be described as a “turning the corner experience,” a critical incident that forced me to re-examine my role as a teacher educator. I was working with a group of 80 pre-K through third grade teachers in an all-day inservice program. The teachers were asked to identify concepts that the children in their classes find particularly difficult to grasp. Among the items found on their lists were mastering the alphabet, understanding likenesses and differences, and identifying the main idea. They met in small groups to share ideas on how to get these concepts across more effectively, then presented them to the total group. One group described a way to teach children the main idea with a musical parody sung to the tune of “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands,” an idea that one member of the group picked from a workshop she attended. First, the children would trace around one of their hands, cut out the hand shape, and write one key word (who, what, when, where, why) on each of the five fingers. Next, they would sing the first verse that goes, “I’ve got the main idea in my hand...” followed by the second, “I’ve got who did what, when, where, why...”. This suggestion prompted an audible burst of appreciation among the group and most teachers instantly vowed to incorporate the idea into their teaching. I started to point out that the main idea is not necessarily a description of events like a newspaper article, and that it is often a word or phrase rather than a synopsis. Even in the traditional folktales that are appropriate for the very young, the main idea is distinct from a plot summary. The main idea of *Little Red Riding Hood*, for example, is to be wary of strangers and the main idea of *The Little Red Hen* is that people are more amenable to enjoying the fruits of someone else’s labor than pitching in when there is work to be done. But, I succumbed to group peer pressure and let these objections slide. I did that partly because I admit to doing a few superficial activities with young children out of inexperience or desperation myself, partly because I did not want to embarrass the presenters in front of the group, but mainly because I realized that I was powerless in the face of a cute idea enthusiastically endorsed by practitioners.

According to educator and philosopher John Dewey, there are three basic types of experiences: (1) educational, meaning those learning experiences that are relevant and have a lasting impact; (2) noneducative, meaning experiences that are inconsequential and fail to promote learning, and (3) miseducative, meaning destructive experiences that undermine learning, such as damaging the learner’s self-confidence. In everyday parlance, many of the noneducative and miseducative activities encountered in early childhood classrooms can be categorized in a single word—cute.

When it comes to cute, I think of James Hymes (1981), one of the great contemporary early childhood educators who recommended that we think of cute as a four-letter word, a word that has the negative connotation of *childish* rather than *childlike*. Despite Hymes’ sage advice, cute activities frequently prevail. My goal in describing these real life classroom situations is neither to bash teachers nor to spread teaching horror stories. Rather, I realize that every early childhood educator has succumbed at one time or another to the lure of a cute idea and most of us carry around a mental (if not written) list of classroom activities that we would never consider doing again. We need to examine and expose the mindless busywork so that we can, as a profession, have a clearer sense of what to reject, why to discard it, and how to articulate our reasons for doing so to fellow practitioners. Here are my five reasons for railing against cute, accompanied by anecdotal accounts of teachers who have lost their way.

1. Cute activities insult children’s intellects. A very popular idea book for teachers advocates a “multicultural activity” in which children are directed to use toilet paper to create “turbans.” I cannot begin to express how ridiculous and offensive I find this activity to be on several different levels. First, it has nothing whatsoever to do with building an appreciation for other cultures. Second, it wastes children’s time (as well as paper). Third, it makes the condescending assumption that the early childhood teacher’s role consists of “keeping little hands busy” rather than facilitating learning. Interestingly, when I brought this book to class and asked sophomores majoring in early childhood education to critique it, they raised similar objections. If relative newcomers to the field can see the book’s warts, why does it continue to

sell? I suspect it is because it is, to quote one of my colleagues, Sandy Malcolm, "microwave easy." Unless we continually ask, "What are children really learning here?" falling into this sort of mindless busywork happens all too readily and teachers are lulled into believing that their curriculum has been improved when in fact it has deteriorated.

2. Cute activities mistake doing with learning. "How can a teacher tell if she or he is doing, not a great job, but an okay job?" When I posed this question to a group of experienced teachers, most of their responses fell into a "don't make waves" category. They mentioned the absence of complaints from parents and administrators, adhering to school policies, covering the curriculum, getting along with colleagues, and so forth. When I asked them what it takes to be a superlative teacher, a teacher who is a role model for all of us, their answers were dramatically different. Now the teacher was characterized more like an underground resistance fighter who "took on" the system, staunchly defended the rights of children and families, a person who worked diligently to change the very fabric of the social institutions in which she or he worked. In the case of the merely acceptable teacher, going through the motions of teaching and learning was the defining characteristic. Conversely, resisting this pull toward mediocrity is one hallmark of the outstanding teacher. Yet "teaching against the grain" is not easy (Ayers, 1995). As elementary school teacher Bob Strachota (1996) explains,

I have to struggle against both my training and my instincts which strongly urge me to be directive: to tell children what I know, to tell them what to do. ...I had decided that though children often came to understand through doing, this only happened when the doing was combined with struggle and reflection. I began to see that I had come to rely too exclusively on the doing. So I had started trying, as often as I could, to wonder with children what to do about a problem, to have them share in the responsibility of creating a solution instead of telling them what to do. (p. 5)

When early childhood teachers opt for cute activities, they are playing it safe. These activities are usually so silly that they are unlikely to generate much objection from the powers that be, yet doing *something* maintains the illusion that teachers are rising above ho-hum teaching even though they have not.

3. Cute activities often miseducate. After a former student joined an elementary school staff, one veteran kindergarten teacher at the school took me aside to inform me that the new teacher was acquiring a reputation for being uncooperative. Apparently, my former student had refused to participate in a project that had been

in place for many years and the more experienced teacher could not fathom why. To make her point, the veteran teacher gestured toward a child's picture posted on the bulletin board and said that the kindergartners were told that the girl was "an Indian named Princess White Flower" who lived on a reservation and would be corresponding with them. The kindergarten teacher went on to explain, "Actually, I got that picture out of a magazine and she's Korean, I think. The school secretary is the one who really writes to the children, but the kids would never find out. Besides, we just love doing this project. The kids really like it too. Do you see anything wrong with it?" As you can imagine, there is quite a bit wrong about it—dishonesty, perpetuating stereotypes—the list could go on and on. But the kindergarten teacher had a completely romanticized view of childhood, one in which children are totally awestruck, a world where only pleasantness exists. The falsity of the activity did not strike her as inappropriate because in her mind, it was akin to writing to Santa Claus. Significantly, this is the same teacher who later told me, "We used to have a pretty nice little school here until they built those low-income apartments and all these poor kids started moving in." In this experienced kindergarten teacher's case, the cute activity was clearly miseducative.

4. Cute activities undermine professionalism. A student teacher who was assigned to a first-grade classroom confided to a friend that she was demoralized by the expectations of her cooperating teacher. She had heard her university professors' criticisms about overdoing it with the dinosaurs theme, yet this is exactly what the first graders would be studying, even though they had studied dinosaurs at length during the previous 2 years. One of the cute activities that the veteran teacher was particularly excited about was something that was reputed to "teach children how to be archeologists." When the student teacher initially heard about this, she envisioned the children unearthing items in the sand box, then categorizing and labeling them. Instead, her supervising teacher distributed one chocolate chip cookie and a toothpick to each child and directed them to "excavate" the chocolate chips! During another lesson in the same unit, the experienced teacher taught the children "the difference between meat-eaters and plant eaters" by giving each child one lettuce leaf and a piece of beef jerky, then instructing them to use their front teeth only to chew. All of this seemed rather silly to the student teacher because it was so abstract, so far removed from the realities of what archeologists, much less carnivorous dinosaurs, would do. Yet in the interest of keeping peace and earning a positive evaluation, the student teacher felt forced to conform and go along with the program, a decision

that left the outstanding novice wondering if she was cut out for teaching.

Although there is little doubt that the activities the experienced teacher planned were unusual and represented a departure from the dittos that generally dominated her classroom, she was deluded in to thinking that adding a gimmick here and there had magically transformed her into a creative teacher. Creative teaching is an inside-out operation—it is dependent upon original and useful responses from the children, a type of “unpredictable productivity” (Eisner, 1991). Standing up in front of the room and walking children through some invention of the teacher’s mind is a poor substitute for actively fostering children’s creative expression. Something creative has to be going on in children’s minds during a creative activity. More often than not, the apparent ease of the cute activity only leads otherwise competent teachers to make fools of themselves.

I once observed an experienced teacher distribute a ditto of a tipi that had to be colored, cut out, and assembled by inserting tab A into slot B. This cute activity was obviously the product of an artist’s mind rather than a teacher’s. As you have probably surmised, most of the children cut off the tab and ripped the thin paper while trying to cut out the small slot. After the paper tipis were salvaged by the teacher and aide using lots of tape and staples, one child placed the cone shape on his head like a party hat and several others followed suit. The teaching calmly removed them, saying, “No, remember our lesson. It’s a huh... huh... huh...” “Hat!” one child called out delightedly. “No, it’s a huh-ome. It’s a home. It’s a shelter.” By choosing this mindless activity, a teacher who was usually caring and reasonable was behaving in a way that was mystifying to her students and would be equally puzzling to anyone unfamiliar with the peculiarities of education in the United States.

5. Cute activities frequently undermine educational equity. One popular theme that I have seen in many early childhood classrooms is teddy bears. In a childcare center I know, the child who arrives at school wearing the most teddy bear items wins a prize. At first glance, the idea is cute and seems innocuous. Yet critically examining this practice provides a different perspective. First of all, a child’s participation in this activity requires disposable cash to purchase various teddy bear items, thereby excluding economically disadvantaged children. Second, in order for families to be “involved,” they not only need to buy into the notion of a contest but also have to see some value to decorating their child with teddy bears. These criteria effectively eliminate families who value cooperation more than competition. They also tend to rule out families with more serious concerns on their

minds, such as earning enough money to pay the rent and still have enough left over to purchase groceries. As a result, cute activities like the teddy bear competition are correctly perceived by many families as the province of the idle rich. These pursuits have little to do with the realities of their lives and refusing to participate does not make families uncooperative or disinterested in their child’s education. The truth is that such activities have little to do with learning and only serve to underscore existing lines of demarcation between and among cultures and classes.

As a profession, we need to rethink this widespread acceptance of cute ideas as the salvation of harried practitioners, a presumption that often dominates inservice programs that are enthusiastically received by teachers. There is more to effective teaching than methods, however appealing those methods might seem. Bob Strachota’s (1996) powerful book, *On Their Side: Helping Children Take Charge of Their Learning*, does a beautiful job of expressing how real teaching differs from this quest for cute. In the introduction, he writes:

A seven-year-old once said to me, “I like the way you teach soccer. You’re always in the middle, but not in the way.” He had captured what I try to do in all my teaching. I want to inspire the children I teach to be passionate about untangling the mysteries of numbers and spiders and history, and also to care deeply about sorting through the problems of how to be fair and kind. I know, however, that the children are the only ones who can create their understanding of how the world works and how to do the right thing. So while I put myself in the middle of their efforts, I also try not to be in the way. (unpaged)

Perhaps this is the strongest argument against cute ideas, the fact that they do put early childhood educators at all levels “in the way.” They interfere with communication between adults and children, between educators and families by trivializing learning. They make the tacit assumption that teachers should exploit children’s naivete instead of respecting children’s efforts to make sense out of their environments.

I found myself agreeing wholeheartedly with three basic principles that Strachota (1996) had identified after years of reflective practice: (1) ally with children (believe in them, strive to understand, identify with them), (2) pose real questions, and (3) share responsibility (wonder together, set high expectations, help children make responsible choices). In every conceivable way, these principles are a direct contradiction of the protestation used to defend mindless busywork in American early childhood classrooms—“But,, it’s such a *cute* idea!”