

Encounters in Education: A Tribute to Ernest Boyer

By Eugene Schwartz

Editor's note: Encounters in Education will be a regularly appearing feature. In this column, Eugene Schwartz will share his encounters with the world of mainstream education, comparing, contrasting, praising or protesting—but, above all, looking for insights that Waldorf educators and researchers can utilize in their efforts to keep Waldorf vital and relevant. In this first column, Eugene, who served as a Fellow of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, assesses the contribution of its late President, Dr. Ernest Boyer, who died this past December.

Ernest Boyer, 1928-1995

The recent death of Ernest Boyer leaves an enormous vacuum in the educational reform movement in the United States. In a movement that is dominated by ivory tower researchers with little or no direct experience of children or classrooms, Boyer was a figure who relished his visits to schoolrooms and who respected the experiences and insights of schoolteachers. Amidst an educational establishment that worships the quantitative approach to pedagogical problems, Boyer dared to question aptitude tests and to stress the importance of the qualitative factors in the lives of children. Where many academicians see value only in the attainments of the head, Boyer championed the values of the human heart.

For over a decade, Ernest Boyer served as President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Since its founding in 1911, the Carnegie Foundation has been a preeminent influence on institutions of higher learning in the United States.

Among its achievements was the first practical nationwide pension fund for university professors, which later became the TIAA, now the nation's largest securities investor. The Carnegie Foundation was also responsible for a landmark study of American medical schools which contributed greatly to the rigorous standards and scientific methods for which American medical schools are famous, and the Foundation's research led to the "Carnegie credit hour," the benchmark for all credit transfers between institutions of higher learning. Perhaps most significant, it was research done by the Foundation in the early 1930s that was to lead to the development of the SAT's. The Carnegie Foundation had become so synonymous with education on the university level that it was headline news when Dr. Boyer authored a study entitled *The High School* in 1985. At that time Dr. Boyer was one of many who recognized that the erosion of academic excellence that was becoming endemic in American universities was symptomatic of a malaise whose cause was undoubtedly to be found in the sphere of secondary education. Yet barely had that report been released than Ernest Boyer was at work guiding research in an area never before examined by his Foundation, research which was to culminate in the 1991 volume, *Ready to Learn*.

This report, Ready to Learn, is about our nation's children and how we can be sure that all of them are ready for school. Its origins go back to the mid-eighties. At that time, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching had just released two policy reports, one on high school, and the other on college. We were participating actively in what's become known as "the school reform movement."

I was impressed ... that much of the focus on reform was on secondary schools, failing to acknowledge the importance of early education. Thus I came to believe that we needed to step back and look at very young children, and consider the context in which they are coming of age to begin formal schooling.¹

Early this century, the Foundation's founder, Andrew Carnegie, had understood that the thinking capacities of young Americans could best be fostered in superb universities, and so devoted a portion of his energy and wealth to the "advancement of teaching" in institutions of higher education. As the century comes to an end, Ernest Boyer has directed his energy (and Andrew's sizable endowment) to understanding how to better support the forces of will that percolate so powerfully in today's children. As is indicated by his study of nursery and kindergarten-age children, *Ready to Learn* (1991) and his study of the needs of kindergarten children through fourth graders, *The Basic School* (1995), Boyer has come to recognize that the key to the educational needs of children at the century's end is no longer to be found in institutions of higher education.

As one who worked under Ernest Boyer as a Carnegie Teaching Fellow during the period of *The Basic School*'s creation, I was able to witness firsthand what a radical departure he effected among the Carnegie Foundation's staff and research associates. By shifting the focus of its research from the high-profile, government research-supported, well-endowed male enclaves of the great universities (virtually the only institutions in America that still provide a degree of continuity with the 18th and 19th centuries) to the obscure and quiet kindergartens, staffed by underpaid and overworked women, Ernest Boyer brought about a 180 degree shift in the priorities of educational studies. His work, I am certain, is but a first step towards the gradual recognition that the path to understanding—and, in the wrong hands, to controlling—the soul and spirit of the children of the '90s lies in fathoming the educational needs of children in their very earliest years.

Pathfinder though he is in this regard, Dr. Boyer had on a number of occasions acknowledged that seventy-five years before *The Basic School* appeared, an educational method was already in place which, with remarkable prescience, laid down the principles of a "Will-First" pedagogy that paved the way for the children of the end of the century. It is not widely known that, although he was a passionate proponent of public schooling, Ernest Boyer had several grandchildren enrolled in the Waldorf School of Princeton; their mother, Beverly Boyer Coye, has recently completed the Waldorf training in the Waldorf program at Antioch College.

The positive experiences that his daughter and grandchildren had at the Princeton school led Ernest Boyer to regard Waldorf education as the single exception to his opposition to independent schools.

Indeed, although his primary task was to support and improve the quality of public education, Dr. Boyer was always willing to be quoted publicly on behalf of the Waldorf movement. This support may prove to have been of inestimable value to Waldorf education in America.

Early in this century, Rudolf Steiner recognized that the greatest potential for molding and shaping the forces of will lies in the earliest years of a child's life, especially during those years of infancy when the parents' influence is followed, in descending order, by the child's nursery and kindergarten teachers (or "daycare providers," as is increasingly the case in America) and, finally, by the teachers the child encounters in the first four grades. In terms of the will, the education that the child receives from fifth grade through college is of relatively little formative importance, although in those years the unfolding of the child's feeling life and, of course, his cognitive activity, is increasingly important.

In the 1920s, Rudolf Steiner had predicted that an ever-more technological world would create a fragmented society in which childhood itself would be at risk. Without a healthy community, its rhythms and its sense of connection, education cannot flourish. Seventy years later, Boyer witnessed all that Steiner had foreseen:

....In less mobile, more insular times, children were born at home with neighbors and midwives in attendance. Family doctors made housecalls. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins often stopped by for casual conversation. Neighbors watched over kids, patching up cuts and bruises. The corner grocer kept an eye out for trouble. Pastors, priests, and rabbis ministered at times of joy and grief.

This loosely organized network of support—spreading outward from the extended family—was quite informal, even unreliable at times. Yet, when parents were anxious and confused, it was reassuring to have a wide circle of support.

Gradually, the protective ring eroded. New work patterns and increased mobility uprooted small-town life. Relatives moved away. Families became isolated, disconnected, struggling alone. Neighbors became strangers, doors were bolted, and friendliness was replaced by fear. A climate of anonymity blanketed communities. Children were warned to avoid people they didn't know, and "reaching out to touch someone" came to mean pushing electronic buttons. Modern life, which offered more conveniences and more options, destabilized former certainties and weakened traditional networks of support In many households, child-care providers, counselors, social workers, even television personalities are as influential in the lives of children as are parents who, feeling deeply the responsibility of child rearing, have become more vulnerable and less empowered.²

Children coming out of home-settings as fragmented as those described by Ernest Boyer are, indeed, hardly "ready to learn" when they enter first grade. And schools generally seem ill-prepared to heal whatever wounds those children have already suffered, or to provide an atmosphere which counterbalances the deprivations that the child continues to undergo at home. As Boyer, and Steiner, recognized, education must be increasingly an activity of healing.

Ernest Boyer lived long enough to see the culmination of his efforts on behalf of public schools, the book *The Basic School*, be widely disseminated, discussed and put into action in a number of pilot school projects. Without his warm, self-effacing and yet charismatic presence, it is an open question whether his vision will be fully realized by his successors. Ernest Boyer's presence will be missed by all of those whose first concern is not for theories and statistics but for the welfare of the world's children.

Notes

¹ Ernest Boyer, *Ready to Learn*, Princeton, 1991, xv-xvi.

² *Ibid.*, 9-10

Suggestions for further reading:

Ernest Boyer, *Ready to Learn*, Princeton, 1991.

_____, *The Basic School*, Princeton, 1995.

More information on *The Basic School* can be obtained from The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 5 Ivy Lane, Princeton, NJ 08540; there is also a *Basic School* site on the Internet.