



## BOOK REVIEW

### ***All Work and No Play...How Educational Reforms Are Harming Our Preschoolers, by Sharna Olfman*** (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003).

*William Ward*

When you hear the prominent political slogan for educational reform, "No Child Left Behind," do you feel, "It's about time!" or do you shudder? The positively slanted sound bite would evoke a universal outcry if this egalitarian impulse meant conditioning the youngest children within a system that systematically undermines the love of learning characteristic of childhood. Plausibly laudable goals of "educational excellence" based on "universal standards" and "accountability" (read "high stakes testing") may have the rhetorical ring of good stuff. What if the unforeseen consequence of well-meaning educational reform results in narrowing education to mere teaching to tests oblivious of individual differences and blind to the childhood gifts of wonder and imagination? The disconnect between the economic-political-technological agenda for educational reform and the essential nature of childhood has never been greater. The remedies are poison.

In this context, *All Work and No Play...* belongs in the hands of every parent, educator, and policy maker who questions the fundamental assumptions underpinning our educational system. Editor Sharna Olfman, Ph.D., partner in the Alliance for Childhood and editor of the book series *Childhood in America*, has harvested a definitive body of research on the meaning of children's "play" by leading experts from a variety of disciplines, including those of developmental psycholo-

gy, learning and developmental disorders, developmental neuropsychology, neurology, and educational philosophy and policy. For young children the fundamental, indispensable role of symbolic play as the life's blood of sensory integration, socialization, creative imagination, and intellectual development is established with scientific certainty and existential urgency at precisely the cultural moment when play is most threatened by virtual substitutes, educational policy, the acceleration of childhood, and a host of diffuse societal fears.

It would be wrong to infer from the title that this book may be of primary interest to childcare providers. The challenges to the existing educational paradigm raised by *All Work and No Play...* expand the language of discourse about educational reform beyond the box of the information processing metaphor that determines much of educational policy and budget priorities. This well-documented book uses the insightful research surrounding play/imagination/creativity to confront the reader with fundamental questions about the nature of consciousness, the relationship of the will to brain development, the integrated balance of emotional intelligence with academic development, and, ultimately, how we view the self.

The spectrum of thematically connected essays in *All Work and No Play...* are grouped under four major headings: "The Power of Play in Early

Childhood Education"; "Wired Classrooms/Wired Brains"; "Building Blocks of Intellectual Development: Emotion and Imagination"; and "A Mental Health Crisis among Our Children: the Rise of Technologies and Demise of Play." Dr. Olman's colleagues in the Alliance for Childhood were pioneers in taking a courageously critical stance against the early introduction of computers in elementary education in their publication *Fool's Gold*. Their prophetic warnings have since been born out by subsequent research.

This anthology seeks to "reclaim the language of *standards* and *accountability*, and ground that language in principles of child development and humane pedagogy in the service of educating children to be caring, ethical, creative human beings, who prize humanity and nature, and who will be masters rather than servants of the technologies they help to create." Several well-known exponents of Waldorf education are included among the diverse contributors, including Joan Almon, Christopher Clouder, and Jeffrey Kane.

Taken together, the perceptive and eloquent essays of *All Work and No Play...* expose the fallacy at the heart of current education policy. They advocate the core importance of play for the development of the *self* connected with life, meaning, and purpose, where thinking is not information processing but "infused with emotion, sensory and bodily kinesthetic experience, artistry, imagination, and

soulfulness." Education which fails to recognize the dynamic energy of play as a positive force for lifelong love of learning does not recognize the wisdom of childhood and offers stones instead of bread as tests displace the exploration, wonder, and health of play.

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