

Reflections

Learning by Doing

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with Marilyn Saltzman

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Dr. BJ Meadows has shared a delightfully personal tour of her life journey from a young precocious naturalist to an accomplished environmental educator. There are vividly described lessons to be learned from this detailed memoir for budding and mature environmentalists.

– Harold Pratt, Science Education Consultant and former
President, National Science Teachers Association

BJ Meadows realized early on how experiential learning in the outdoors captivated her, resulting in an excitement for learning. Recognizing the value of learning by experience, BJ dedicated her career to creating experiential learning opportunities for her students and peers, overcoming opposition and many obstacles to do so. Because of her dedication, countless students have been, and continue to be positively impacted by the programs and curricula she has created, that have withstood the test of time and are still in practice today.

– Sharon R Moore, 4-H Environmental Discovery
Coordinator, CSU Extension – Jefferson County, Colorado

*I have been honored to be mentored by BJ Meadows. She first gave me the courage to lead as the Chair of the Industrial Advisory Board at the University of Colorado. Next she showed me the power of encouragement. Then she helped me internalize effectiveness of participative leadership. Her powerful message has been captured in her books, first *Building School Communities: Strategies for Leaders* and now *Reflections, Learning by Doing*. BJ demonstrates the courage it takes to invite others into the decision-making process and the effectiveness of inclusion.*

– Dan Rose, Director of Software Development,
Oracle Corporation

Through her early challenge of experiencing a different way of perceiving from the mainstream, BJ Meadows made it an asset and developed a teaching style that reached all children. She loved her students and wanted them to succeed. Currently BJ is using the skills that resulted from her childhood experiences and work with Jefferson County Schools, to teach adults in the OLLI, Denver University Lifelong Learning program. Her book is filled with specific examples, told in story form, that keep the reader interested as well as informed.

— Pat Pendleton, Artist and Life Coach

In the Environmental Discovery Program, BJ Meadows incorporated the open space parks and lands as classrooms. This program continues after forty years as dedicated staff take on learning adventures through the Owl's Roost, Eagle's Nest and Falcon's Aerie programs. Students learn strategies to influence the natural and human world in positive ways.

– Tony Tochtrop, teacher-librarian,
Jefferson County Schools, Colorado

Having witnessed the many contributions that the author has made to education outdoors, it was a privilege to read her book. The dramatic influence that her mother had on BJ Meadows' love of nature is a firm reminder of the important role a parent plays. The valuable roles that educators such as Miss Rankin, Dr. Webster and Dr. Shepard had on her life were also dramatically apparent. The memorable theme of this most interesting book is "turn fear of failure into success."

– Sondra Jackson Kellog, retired principal

*To the mentors and teachers who honored
and nurtured me to become
a lifelong learner and educator.*

*“Education is not the learning of facts,
but the training of the mind to think.”*

– Albert Einstein

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Preface: In School Outdoors

As far back as I can remember, I loved being outdoors and learning in the natural world. The woodlot near my Indiana home was my favorite classroom. I enjoyed the music of bird calls as I played among sprouting spring flowers. When I began my formal school years, I had difficulty sitting still and reading.

When my teachers praised my artistic skills instead of focusing on my reading and test-taking struggles, I began to love school and learning. They honored my need for hands-on experiences and focused on my strengths rather than my weaknesses. By fourth grade I was a successful reader who couldn't wait to learn more.

Throughout my school years, I was fortunate to have teachers who loved, honored and respected me and my learning style. Being a young idealistic student at age twenty, I decided to devote my life to teaching and learning, so I could be that mentor for others. To me there was nothing more important than helping students learn successfully. I wanted to encourage them to appreciate, enjoy and pursue a meaningful education.

I believe the commitment to educate all students, regardless of learning style, is essential to maintaining a healthy public school system. The stories in this book paint pictures of the teaching strategies and environments I experienced and created to fuel a passion for learning.

For example, when students have the opportunity to spend time in nature, they can observe plants and animals firsthand and more effectively analyze the environment, draw conclusions and solve problems. They may also identify new problems to solve. Just reading facts, acquiring information and spitting it out on a test are not enough.

Unfortunately the current trend of high-stakes testing has put pressure on teachers to teach only skills that are tested rather than fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Diane Ravich, research professor of education at New York University and a historian of education, was instrumental in implementing the federal focus on testing when she was assistant secretary of education under President George W. Bush. She now admits this was the wrong approach.

In her recently published book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*, Ravich says “Our schools will not improve if we value only what tests measure. The tests we have now provide useful information about student’s progress in reading and mathematics, but they cannot measure what matters most in education. Not everything that matters can be quantified. What is tested may ultimately be less important than what is untested, such as a student’s ability to seek alternative explanations, to raise questions, to pursue knowledge on his own and to think differently. If we do not treasure our individualists, we will lose the spirit of innovation, inquiry, imagination, and dissent that has

contributed powerfully to the success of our society in many different fields of endeavor.”

Her words echo what I believe and is my lifelong passion and work. Come join me on my journey through diverse educational challenges, adventures and opportunities.

Fitting in as a Misfit

A big smile spread across my face as I sat in my new office at Ryan Elementary School. I had just returned from visiting a first grade classroom. I remembered the hugs I received and students calling out, "Look at this, Dr. Meadows. Look at my doggie picture."

It now seemed that the long, sometimes challenging journey to this place had been well worth it. I savored my thoughts and gazed out the window. This certainly beat writing another teacher evaluation.

I was the principal in a very special school community. I loved the children, and they loved me....well that was true most of the time. It was sometimes difficult to be consistently popular as a principal, the chief disciplinarian.

Based on my early learning experiences, I haven't always felt that school was a comfortable, welcoming place. There were times when it felt more like a prison than a friendly home. In fact, there were times when school was a hostile environment for me.

For example, I loved being outdoors and learning while being surrounded by birds, trees, meadows, mountains and fellow students. I loved learning with others and sharing

ideas as we developed new thoughts and skills together. I felt free and motivated in these natural surroundings. In comparison, the classroom seemed confining, cold and boring.

As a young child, I spent many happy, carefree hours playing in a woodlot near our home. I had carefully built a "fort" out of fallen tree branches. Huge beech and maple trees towered over me. In the spring, the intense blue of chiming bells and the gold of wild lilies made my home in the woods quite festive. There were blankets of color as far as I could see.

In addition to enjoying the flowers, I loved hearing the cheerful spring calls of the ever-present, flaming red cardinals. Time flew by as I captured butterflies and turtles while listening to bird songs and romping in the mud.

I spent hours watching and catching tadpoles in a nearby pond. The fun didn't end there for I could watch the wiggly creatures sprout legs, lose their tails and become frogs.

Then there were the exciting contests with the adult frogs. My neighborhood buddies and I would each choose a lively frog, line them up in a row, and see which one jumped across the finish line first.

When I entered first grade, my carefree and fun-filled life was immediately interrupted. Instead of sitting among the flowers and frogs, I sat in a row lined with cold, hard desks. The subject matter was boring and beyond my comprehension. I was told not to talk to my neighbor.

Many of my classmates were excited about numbers and learning to read. As hard as I tried, I couldn't read. I could understand nature, but letters and numbers just didn't make sense. I was labeled a poor reader and placed in the slowest reading group - the cowbirds, an unpopular, parasitic bird that lays its eggs in other birds' nests. In

contrast, the other reading groups bore the names of more exciting, colorful birds like bluebirds and robins.

As you will discover in the following chapters, my difficulty with reading haunted me well into the fourth grade. Being judged primarily on my ability to read and being a very slow reader, I believed I didn't account for much. I felt ashamed, dumb and incompetent. If I were smart, I would be able to read like everyone else. I knew cowbirds weren't as beautiful as bluebirds, and so did my classmates.

Then one day as a fourth grader, a miracle happened. Our assignment was to paint a picture of the story we were reading. The story was about early explorers crossing the ocean and discovering America. On a three-by-five foot sheet of paper, armed with many bold colors, I painted my perception of the Mayflower.

I drew sails puffed up with wind, and by using our imaginations, my classmates and I could almost see the ship moving across the paper. I was able to apply the skills I had learned in my weekend painting classes. The teacher said it was the best art in the class.

Suddenly, I was transformed from a cowbird into a robin. My self-esteem began to change immediately.

Because I began feeling better about myself as a student, I became more motivated to read. My teacher helped me sound out words, and they began making more sense. My mother continued believing in me and reading with me at home.

Pretty soon, the words began painting colorful pictures in my mind. I continued to paint pictures in my head and on paper. I felt excited and successful when I received abundant strokes for my achievements.

I continued trying harder while still enjoying the solace

of my woodlot retreat at home. Its magical plants and animals continued filling me with joy and confidence.

By fifth grade, I was definitely a robin. Although I couldn't read with equal ease, I could often sing like a proud bird with my fellow classmates.

As a young child, I didn't realize my life would be a series of stepping stones – changing learning to make it healthier for myself and others. I am grateful I didn't know the difficulty of this journey then, or I might have given up before I got started.

In almost every chapter of my life, I have spent time bucking the system. I have definitely been the square peg attempting to fit into round holes. I have consistently had ideas and actions that didn't jive with those in authority. I have lived in a system that often spoke a different language and defined learning in ways I considered foreign.

If there was an expected way to get things done, I'd come in through the back door.

By telling my story, I hope to help others with similar learning challenges. I know I am not alone in experiencing pain and isolation in some learning environments. In the book, I will describe how I used my experiences to create different educational approaches and classrooms. I am grateful for my successes in transforming my struggles into positive actions for myself, students, parents and educators.

Coloring Outside the Lines

Sit still, color inside the lines, make grass green, not brown,
Don't get up, and don't move!
Take your assignment seriously and don't talk to your neighbor.
I'll grade you in ten minutes.

Frustration, anger, feelings of failure

Desperately wanting to create my own lines and colors.

"Mom, I hate kindergarten. The teacher is mean and she doesn't know how to do art."

"How about a different class? One that will help you create your own art and honor your imaginative spirit."

Grab any color you want. Dribble it on your wet paper.

Watch the paint create new patterns and colors.

Joy and celebrations! I know this is worth an A.

Growing to love school!

Kindergarten Days: Following the Directions

Sitting still for more than five minutes at a time was seldom comfortable for me. Like a jack-in-the box, I needed to be jumping up and down and moving around to feel good. As a child, I was able to remain in my active mode until my mother enrolled me in kindergarten. Once there, I discovered there was no end to the instructions and directions I was ordered to follow.

“You must color within the lines, Betty Jane,” my teacher demanded. “It doesn’t look good when your colors go ‘outside the box.’ What’s more, you must always use the right colors. You know that grass is always green, don’t you?”

Yes, unless it is brown, I thought as I slumped down in my chair. My mind shifted to my delights of the previous day. I had embraced a warm fall day spending hours playing in the grassy meadow near my home. I had marveled at the abundant colors of grass. They ranged from red, yellow and orange to dark chocolate brown. The lime green of summer had magically changed into many fall flavors. I could almost taste them as my body and mind played in the grass.

Some grass towered above my head while the shorter varieties tickled my legs as I ran through them. Some kinds grew in circles while others had seeds poking out in all directions. I was fascinated by their different shapes and sizes.

Why can't I make my own shapes and figures rather than following someone else's? my rebellious thoughts rambled on. *My shapes are just as good as theirs, maybe even better.* I continued staring at the boring, repetitive patterns on my assigned coloring sheet.

As I resentfully completed the assignment, the tyrannical voice shouted, "Sit still in your chair and do as I say. You have ten more pages to color before you can do your next assignment."

I couldn't wait until the morning was over, and I could go home and draw my own pictures using whatever shapes and colors looked best to me. It seemed like days before the teacher told us our class had ended. In reality, it was only an hour. Though my teacher's name and appearance are long forgotten, her commanding tone still invokes fear.

Sensing my frustrations with kindergarten, my mother enrolled me in private art lessons. Fortunately, the teacher, Miss Helen, valued my creativity and rewarded me for making my own designs. I enjoyed putting colors on wet paper and watching them flow together to make new colors and shapes. Yellow and red mixed together made a bright orange. Purple behind orange made it jump off the page. Instead of being boring and tedious, art became fun and exciting.

To make the class even more enjoyable, our teacher allowed us to move around. I spent more time on the floor than in my chair. While looking up at my teacher from below, I was surprised to discover she had holes in her underwear.

I could see sprouts of hair poking through the abundant holes. "You need to buy new underwear," I shouted with authority.

I could hear my classmates snickering and repressing their giggles all around me.

"You have the ability to create the best art and the most chaos of anyone in this class, Betty Jane," Miss Helen scolded.

I could tell she was struggling to remain firm, in control of the class, and repress her amusement all at once.

"I love school, Mom!" I said upon returning home. "Look at my picture. My art teacher gave us three basic colors and asked us to paint grass. First we covered our paper with water. Then we dropped in the colors. I made beautiful shapes and formed new colors. This was a fun lesson, not boring like coloring green grass inside the lines."

Upon reflection, I continue understanding why the art class was a much more valuable learning experience for me than kindergarten. My teacher, trying to manage twenty kindergartners, instructed us to follow the directions and do as we were told. There was one right way, the only way, her way. My art teacher, with fewer students, gave us time to experiment and make the picture our own. She gave us directions while allowing us to experiment. We were encouraged to incorporate our personal experiences, thoughts and feelings into our pictures. Our creativity and interpretations were valued.

Although kindergarten was a painful time, I now appreciate the lessons I learned from it. When learning anything new, it is important for me to receive accurate background information. Specific instructions and step-by-step recipes are a necessary part of my learning. Since I automatically reverse letters and numbers, I am a slow reader. I learn better by doing rather than by just reading