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# SUCCESS ACADEMY'S RADICAL EDUCATIONAL EXPERIMENT

*Inside Eva Moskowitz's quest to combine rigid discipline with a progressive curriculum.*

**By Rebecca Mead**

One of the most celebrated educational experiments in history was performed by James Mill, the British historian, on his eldest son, John Stuart Mill, who was born outside London in 1806. John began learning Greek when he was three, and read Herodotus and other historians and philosophers before commencing Latin, at the age of seven. By the time he was twelve, he was widely read in history and had studied experimental science, mathematics, philosophy, and economics. James Mill's pedagogical approach reflected the influence of Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarian philosophy, and was intended to discover whether a child of unexceptional intellectual capacities could, through rigorous exposure, learn material that was typically acquired in adulthood, if at all. The answer, according to the research subject, was yes. "I started, I may fairly say, with a quarter of a century over my contemporaries," J. S. Mill wrote in his 1873 "Autobiography."

Mill's remarkable upbringing is cited by Eva Moskowitz, the founder of the Success Academy Charter School network, in her own autobiography, "The Education of Eva Moskowitz," which was published in September. The book recounts Moskowitz's learning curve, from her youth in the Morningside Heights area of Manhattan—where she was brought up by leftist intellectuals and attended public school—to her time on the New York City Council, where she developed a reputation for courting controversy while chairing the Education Committee, to her founding of the Success Academy, the city's largest charter-school network. She is now the reliable scourge of the public-education establishment in New York City and, outside its borders, a favorite of the national education-reform movement.

Success Academy began in 2006, with a single elementary school in Harlem, and now has forty-six schools, in every borough except Staten Island. The overwhelming majority of the students are black or Latino, and in most of the schools at least two-thirds of them come from poor families. More than fifteen thousand children are enrolled, from kindergarten to twelfth grade. Students hardly follow Mill's curriculum—there is no Greek or Latin in kindergarten, or even in later grades. But the schools do well by the favored metric of twenty-first-century public education: they get consistently high scores on standardized tests administered by the State of New York. In the most recent available results, ninety-five per cent of Success Academy students achieved proficiency in math, and eighty-four per cent in English Language Arts; citywide, the respective rates were thirty-six and thirty-eight per cent. This spring, Success Academy was awarded the Broad Prize, a quarter-million-dollar grant given to charter-school organizations, particularly those serving low-income student populations, that have delivered consistently high performances on standardized tests. Moskowitz has said that, within a decade, she hopes to be running a hundred schools. This year, a Success high school, on Thirty-third Street, will produce the network's first graduating class: seventeen students. This pioneering class originated with a cohort of seventy-three first graders.

As a charter school, Success Academy is required to admit children by lottery. But prominent critics, such as Diane Ravitch, the historian and public-education advocate, have alleged that Success Academy essentially weeds out students, by maintaining unreasonably high expectations of behavior and academic achievement. Similarly, critics claim that the program reduces class size by not accepting new students beyond fourth grade, whereas zoned public schools must accept all comers. To Moskowitz's detractors, Success's celebration of standardized test-taking—students attend "Slam the Exam" rallies—is a cynical capitulation to a bureaucratic mode of learning. Success Academy has attracted large donations—in the past two years, the hedge-fund manager Julian Robertson has given forty-five million dollars to the group—and Moskowitz's opponents say that such gifts erode the principle that a quality education should be provided by the government. Last fall, Donald Trump summoned Moskowitz, who is a Democrat, shortly after he was elected President. Although she declined to be considered as his Education Secretary, she was widely criticized for agreeing to the meeting, including by members of her own staff, who noted that

Trump's racist and anti-immigrant rhetoric on the campaign trail had stoked fear in the kind of families served by Success Academy schools.

For all the controversy, one question has, surprisingly, been overlooked: What are the distinguishing characteristics of a Success Academy education? Moskowitz's memoir, which recounts her battles with union leaders, journalists, and bureaucrats, does not focus on her pedagogical preferences; she directs readers interested in curricular details to Success Academy's Web site. Her book portrays the school network as an evolving experiment that regularly incorporates new teaching methods in the hope of nudging student achievement ever higher. At one point, she cites the inspiring example of John Stuart Mill. "Can children learn as much today?" Moskowitz writes. "And if so, how much can they learn? I don't know, but I do know that what we're achieving at Success today is far short of what is possible, and that people will someday look at the education Success offers today much as we now look at travel by horse and buggy."

Parents have flocked to Success Academy schools, in part, because Moskowitz has convinced them that their children can tackle more than the local public school demands. But Moskowitz's book glosses over the fact that James Mill's experiment on his son was not entirely positive in its impact. At the age of twenty, J. S. Mill sank into what we would now call a severe depression. He ascribed his mental breakdown to his education, which had been entirely directed toward developing his rational and analytic powers; as he later wrote, his curriculum lacked any cultivation of feeling, and any valuation of poetry, "and of Imagination generally, as an element in human nature." He described himself as "stranded at the commencement of my voyage, with a well-equipped ship and a rudder, but no sail." Mill recovered—reading Wordsworth helped—and went on to become one of the leading philosophers and political theorists of the Victorian era. His example is a triumphant one, but it also offers a warning: that grand educational experiments can have unintended consequences.

Success Academy Springfield Gardens, in Queens, opened in the fall of 2014. The neighborhood, close to J.F.K. Airport, has many Caribbean immigrants, as well as a large African-American population. The school is on an upper floor of a building that it shares with a zoned middle school, I.S. 59; both schools principally serve students of color whose families qualify for public assistance. The floor tiles of Springfield Gardens' freshly painted hallways are labelled with spelling words, so that children can absorb

information even as they file, in silence, from one room to another. The classrooms are carpeted, muffling the baseline din that usually accompanies students at work—the scraping of chairs, the dropping of pencils—and imbuing even a space occupied by more than two dozen second graders with the hush of a corporate conference room.

One morning earlier this year, the second graders were engaged in a group reading lesson. (Over several weeks, I was permitted to observe classes at eight Success Academies around the city, from the elementary to the high-school level.) The teacher sat on a chair at the front of the classroom. Her students—or “scholars,” as they are known at Success—sat at her feet on a deep-blue rug patterned with a grid. They wore uniforms: plaid dresses or navy pants for the girls, pants and polo shirts for the boys. Everyone wore black slip-on shoes, as prescribed in the Success Academy parents’ manual; Moskowitz does not want teachers to waste instructional time tying errant laces.

For decades, a rug has been a desired amenity for early-childhood classrooms. Children are more comfortable sitting on the floor than squirming on a chair, and during “circle time” they can interact with one another and with the teacher more easily. Mary Hammett Lewis, an educator who founded a school in Buffalo a hundred and five years ago, observed the transformative effect of placing a “big, friendly rug” in her classroom. In “Loving Learning,” a 2015 book by the educator Tom Little and the journalist Kathryn Ellison, Lewis is quoted saying, “It became a sort of magic carpet in my adventure. The attitude of the children changed completely the moment they set foot on the rug. Language lessons became confidential chats about all sorts of experience. One day the rug became early Manhattan Island; another day it was the boat of Hendrick Hudson.”

In the second-grade classroom in Queens, the gridded rug seemed less like a magic carpet than like a chessboard at the start of a game. Within each square was a large colored spot the size of a chair cushion. The children sat in rows, facing forward, each within his or her assigned square, with their legs crossed and their hands clasped or folded in their laps. Success students can expect to be called to answer a teacher’s question at any moment, not just when they raise their hand, and must keep their eyes trained on the speaker at all times, a practice known as “tracking.” Staring off into space, or avoiding eye contact, is not acceptable. “Sometimes when kids look like they’re

daydreaming, it's because they are, and we can't allow that possibility," Moskowitz wrote a few years ago, in an editorial for the *Wall Street Journal*. Students who stop tracking are prodded both by their teachers and by their peers, who are expected to point out classmates who aren't looking at them when they are speaking.

On a Smart Board at the front of the classroom, a digital clock marked the seconds. Every moment in a Success classroom is timed, often with Cape Canaveral-style countdowns, as students transition from one activity to another: "Three, two, one, and *done*." Some teachers use kitchen timers with beeping alarms that notify students when the ten seconds allotted for finding a space on the rug, or retrieving a book from a backpack, are up.

That morning, the students were engaged in a "shared text" exercise. They read and analyzed together a short story, "The Family Tree," that had been projected onto a screen. It was about a grandmother who was moving, unhappily, to a smaller house. Her two grandchildren, a brother and a sister, were helping her with the move, and cheered her up by making a collage of intergenerational family photographs for her. The text had been adapted from a picture book; in its condensed form, it consisted of a single page containing two dozen short paragraphs, and just two illustrations. Each paragraph was numbered, as it would be if the story were encountered during a standardized test, rather than pulled from a library shelf.

The teacher, after establishing that the story's genre was realistic fiction, reminded the class of the necessary "thinking job" required in approaching such a text: to identify the character, the problem, the solution, and the "lesson learned." A girl with pierced ears and a sober expression made a stab at an answer: "The problem here is that the sister thinks that her grandmother is mad, because they already broke lots of stuff."

Several children looked skeptical. "You have a couple of friends disagreeing with you," the teacher said. She called on one of the dissenters, another girl, who said, "I disagree with you, because the grandmother is already upset, because her new house does not feel like a home." Success Academy students are required to speak in complete sentences, often adhering to a script: "I disagree with X"; "I agree with X, and I want to add on."

The teacher addressed the girl with pierced ears: “I’m a little confused. Prove to me that something broke.” The girl replied, warily, “It says so on the second line.” The teacher asked her to look again at the line—in which the sister warned her brother not to break anything, because their grandmother was already upset—and said, “Did anything break? No. She’s warning him.”

It was an impressive demonstration of close reading by seven-year-olds, as far as it went. Moskowitz recently told me that she saw no reason the principles that govern a graduate seminar in English literature—“You read a book, and you discuss it, and you look for the big ideas”—couldn’t be applied to a class with young children. The text being studied by the second graders wasn’t particularly easy; even in its original picture-book form, it was intended for third graders. The teacher spoke to the children in a firm, unsmiling tone, as she might have done to a class of students fifteen years their senior. Moskowitz abhors the singsong voice that some adults often adopt with young children, characterizing it as “an insult to the scholars’ intelligence,” and her teachers are trained to avoid it.

The teacher led a brief discussion of the difference between a house and a home—a material distinction possibly familiar to some of the children in the room. One in twenty students at Springfield Gardens had experienced homelessness at some point during that academic year. “A home is where you feel comfortable, and you make your memories,” the teacher said, before a student gave an admirably succinct summation: “A house is where you are just moving in, and a home is where you have lived for a long time.” The students were quiet and attentive, as neatly aligned on the rug as the blinds at the windows, all of which had been lowered to precisely the same height.

But the lesson seemed to be as much about mastering a formula as about appreciating the nuances of narrative. When the students were called to “turn and talk,” they swivelled, inside their grids, to face a partner, and discussed the section of the text that had been examined collectively. The exchanges I heard consisted of repeating the conclusions that had just been reached, rather than independently extending them. Some students seemed to be going through the motions of analysis and comprehension—*performing* thought. “The grandmother’s house is too small—she doesn’t have the space to put her memories,” one child informed her partner, garbling the story’s sense in her effort to comply with expectations.

Nor was there time for more imaginative or personally inflected interpretations of the text—the interrogation of “big ideas” that happens in the kinds of graduate seminars Moskowitz held up as a model. When one child proposed that the grandmother was feeling uncomfortable in her new home because she was lonely—a reasonable inference, given the absence of her husband, who was pictured in the family photographs—the teacher asked for textual evidence, and the student was unable to provide it. With the clock ticking, the discussion moved on, and the question of the grandmother’s loneliness—of what else the story might be saying to a reader, beyond the surface meaning of the words in the numbered paragraphs—was left unexplored.

For nearly a century, public education in America has been influenced by two opposing pedagogical approaches: traditionalism and progressivism. Broadly speaking, in the traditional approach to education a teacher imparts knowledge to students through direct instruction, and embodies a disciplinary culture in which obedience is both prized and rewarded. The purpose of the classroom is to equip all students to meet measurable academic standards. At a progressive institution, a teacher develops a curriculum but urges students to treat it as a staging ground for their own intellectual discoveries, often through hands-on activities and group work. Allowances are made for differences in the way individual students learn. Progressivism was inspired, in large part, by the work of John Dewey, the American philosopher and educational theorist, who died in 1952. For Dewey, the classroom was not simply a place for acquiring academic credentials; it was also a venue in which students learned crucial values about being citizens in a democracy. Traditionalism is easily caricatured as rote learning—or, in the contemporary classroom, as endless test prep. Progressivism, in its most exaggerated form, can look like an absence of standards and discipline, and an unhelpful abdication of authority on the part of the teacher.

Many effective contemporary public-school classrooms exist somewhere between these extremes. Teachers in such classrooms incorporate some progressive methods—circle time on the classroom rug; interdisciplinary projects that encompass math, science, social studies, and literacy—while insuring that their students know how to bubble in the answers on a multiple-choice test form. But many charter schools that have flourished in cities in the past two decades are extremely traditional in their approach; teachers emphasize direct instruction, drilling, and test prep, and enforce strict codes of discipline. Success Academy’s vigilance in tracking and in regulating students’ posture

are hallmarks of urban charter chains, including the K.I.P.P. schools, a national network established in 1994. K.I.P.P. adopted the slogan “No Shortcuts, No Excuses” as part of its effort to instill a sense of purpose and determination in its students. The chain encapsulates its method with the acronym SLANT, which stands for “Sit up straight, Listen, Ask and Answer questions, Nod if you understand, and Track the speaker.”

Moskowitz disavows K.I.P.P.'s “No Excuses” label. She says that the codes of discipline at her schools exist only to establish the foundation for an effective and nurturing learning environment. But Success Academy permits its charges little leeway in deviating from its standards. Students are constantly monitored for compliance with expectations about comportment and behavior. In elementary-school classrooms, an assistant teacher often roams the room, tapping the shoulders of students who are slumped forward on an elbow rather than sitting erect with their hands folded. The Success network has two high schools, and at the one I visited, on East Thirty-third Street, the principal does not hesitate to tell students to tuck in their shirttails. Expectations for academic performance are equally high for students, and for their families, who sign a pledge committing to reading with their children every evening and to monitoring the completion of homework. This fall, Success began sending home “Parent Investment Cards”—essentially, grading parents on how well they are holding up their end of the deal.

A Success Academy classroom is a highly controlled, even repressive, place. In some classrooms that I observed, there were even expectations for how pencils should be laid down when not in use: at Springfield Gardens, the pencils had all been placed to the right of the desks, aligned with the edge. The atmosphere can be tense, and sometimes tips over into abuse, as was documented by the *Times* last year. The newspaper obtained a video that had been recorded secretly by an assistant teacher. It showed a teacher berating a first-grade girl who had made an error on her math worksheet, ripping up the sheet, and sending the child to sit in a “Calm Down” chair. Moskowitz has insisted that the event was an outlier, but the teacher in the video was an experienced educator who had been considered an exemplar of the Success Academy approach. Among some Success teachers, “rip and redo” was a term of art.

Oppressive degrees of rigor at other schools in the network occasionally provoke resistance. According to the *Daily News*, an anonymous group of parents at one of



Success Academy's newest schools, a middle school in Hudson Yards, sent an e-mail to Moskowitz in October complaining about an excessively punitive atmosphere. Children, they claimed, were being given detention for not clasping their hands when seated, or for burping accidentally. The students, the parents wrote, were having nightmares and meltdowns; some were vomiting at the prospect of going to school. (A Success Academy representative disputed the allegations. Several parents contacted me to say that their children were happy, and that the controversy was overblown. One wrote, "The school set out a rigorous pace that, in hindsight, could have been a little lighter. But that has the hallmarks of Eva, I think. Shock them a little, get them into the groove.")

At some Success Academy schools, as many as twenty per cent of students are suspended at least once during the academic year. Moskowitz calls suspension "one tool in the toolkit," and says that most occur during the first weeks of school, when students haven't yet assimilated the school's expectations. "I think some people have a fairly idealized view of the kind of language that even young children can use," she told me. "We have young children who threaten to *kill* other people. And, yes, they are angelic, and, yes, we love them, but I think when you are outside schooling it is hard to imagine." According to data from the New York State Education Department, three years ago, when Success Academy Springfield Gardens was starting up and had only kindergartners and first graders, eighteen per cent of the students were suspended at least once. It's entirely believable that lots of children between the ages of four and seven found it impossible to meet the school's stringent behavioral expectations. But it's also fair to wonder whether, if one out of five young children cannot comply with the rules, there might not be something wrong with the rules.

A few years ago, some school districts, including the New York City public schools, began attempting to reduce suspension rates by experimenting with "restorative justice," a progressive approach in which students, in concert with teachers, would decide how a classmate who had violated the rules might best repair the misdeed. K.I.P.P. schools adopted the method with considerable success, as did other charter networks formerly known for punitive disciplinary practices. Moskowitz's response to the innovation was scathing. "Suspensions convey the critical message to students and parents that certain behavior is inconsistent with being a member of the school community," she wrote in another editorial for the *Wall Street Journal*. "Pretend

suspensions, in which a student is allowed to remain in the school community, do not convey that message.”

But, even as Success seeks to inculcate its students with its strict behavioral codes, Moskowitz has embraced certain teaching methods that would not seem out of place in a much more permissive environment. Surprisingly, she cites John Dewey as an important influence on her thinking, and she champions hands-on science labs, frequent field trips, and long stretches of time for independent reading. Moskowitz has recruited as a consultant Anna Switzer, the former principal of P.S. 234, a highly regarded public school, in Tribeca. Before Switzer retired from P.S. 234, in 2003, she developed a progressive social-studies curriculum in which students undertake months-long projects on, say, the native populations that originally lived on Manhattan Island. At Success Academy, Switzer has been helping to build similar “modules,” such as an intensive six-week study, in the third grade, of the Brooklyn Bridge. For kindergartners, Success offers a six-week interdisciplinary study of bread. After students read about bread and baking—the importance of bread in different global cultures; the grains that go into making various breads—they take a field trip to a bakery, and bake bread as a classroom activity. Success modules remain heavy on reading and writing, Switzer acknowledges: when the kindergartners study bread, “shared texts” play a more prominent role than they would at a very progressive public school. Still, the curriculum for these projects belies the stereotype of Success as a rigid test-prep factory. “Being a progressive pedagogue is hard,” Moskowitz told me. “Your level of preparation has to be much higher, because you have to be responsive to the kids, and you have to allow the kid to have the eureka moment, while still mastering the material.”

Adding to the difficulty of implementing such ideals is the youth and relative inexperience of Success’s staff. On average, a school loses a quarter of its teachers every year; at some schools, more than half leave. Moskowitz told me that teachers typically stay with Success for just three years. This may be consistent with the job-hopping habits of millennials, but according to veteran educators it generally takes at least three years to become a decent teacher. An unseasoned workforce is not Moskowitz’s ideal, but, given the rapid growth of Success and the network’s projected expansion, it may be a structural inevitability. The system compensates for the inexperience of many of its teachers by having a highly centralized organization. Teachers do not develop their own lesson plans; rather, they teach precisely what the network demands. Like the students

in their classrooms, Success's teachers operate within tightly defined boundaries, with high expectations and frequent assessment.

Some of the mandated curriculum, however, is progressive. Kindergartners spend part of every day having "block time," in which students collaborate on building structures with wooden blocks of various shapes and sizes. Block play was one of the first mainstays of a progressive approach to education. Dewey and other American educators borrowed the method from the German pedagogue Friedrich Froebel, who, in the mid-nineteenth century, invented the word *Kindergarten*—"children's garden"—to characterize a school dedicated to purposeful play. Progressive educators hold that, in early childhood, play is not a distraction from learning but the very means of learning itself.

But in recent years kindergarten teachers have become increasingly focussed on imparting academic skills—largely in response to pressure to achieve measurable, testable results. Blocks and other play-based activities, such as sand tables and dress-up corners, have disappeared from many classrooms. "Most affluent kids get block building in their expensive nursery schools," Moskowitz told me. "Most poor kids never get block building. So we have achieved a level of equity in block building."

The most unusual aspect of Moskowitz's experiment is not her "Slam the Exam" sloganeering. Rather, it's her attempt to combine aspects of a very traditional approach—rigid discipline, tracking, countdowns, rigorous accountability—with elements of a highly progressive curriculum. It can be an awkward straddle. "It is very challenging to have a kind of data-driven performance-oriented culture, and to do progressive pedagogy," Moskowitz acknowledged. "These things don't naturally, or easily, go together." She went on, "One of the biggest reasons that teachers have trouble with student-centered learning is that they have to give over a level of control to the kids. And, when you do that, you can have chaos, or you can have high levels of learning. Often, teachers are afraid of the chaos." It is as if Moskowitz had looked at the traditional/progressive spectrum and, instead of occupying a space along it, had bent its ends toward each other, to see whether they can meet.

The results of this experiment remain unclear. In 2014, Success opened its first high school, the one on East Thirty-third Street. Moskowitz hoped to create a more relaxed and collegiate environment, with seminars led by experts supplanting classes with pre-

formulated lesson plans. There was to be a lot more free time, in which students would be the stewards of their own studies.

“It just didn’t work,” Andrew Malone, the school’s current principal, told me. “There wasn’t an intentional enough gradual release of where they were.” Many of the students slacked off academically, and there was a resurgence of behavioral issues, such as lateness to school, that had been eradicated in the younger grades. “There were a *lot* of sweatpants,” Malone added. Students accustomed to second-by-second vigilance found it difficult to manage their time when left unsupervised. Malone arrived at the high school in its second year, and decided to “re-set” the culture by instituting stricter and clearer rules.

In college, of course, students have to flourish without constant supervision. Although charter students are admitted to college at higher rates than students from comparable public schools, their graduation rates are dispiritingly low. Seventy per cent of charter-school students who enroll in college fail to complete their degrees within six years. While there are many reasons for this problem—most notably, insufficient money for food and housing—charter-school leaders, including those at Success, are also considering the impact of their own teaching precepts. Malone and his colleagues realize that getting students to succeed at standardized tests isn’t enough; they must prepare students for a future in which their professors—and employers—won’t be providing their parents with weekly updates. “College graduation was always the goal,” Malone said. “But only now that we have a high school do I think we are seriously thinking about what the pedagogy should be *through* the years.” How can a highly supervised child be transformed into an independent learner? Do you allow students the freedom to fail, or do you continue to provide constant hand-holding? “It’s an incredible design tension,” he said.

**S**hael Polakow-Suransky is the president of the Bank Street College of Education, in Manhattan, which has long promoted a progressive philosophy. He is skeptical that Moskowitz can successfully introduce a looser form of pedagogy into an institutional environment where strict compliance is demanded from students, teachers, and parents alike. Polakow-Suransky said, “They have a philosophy that, to create a context for learning, it’s necessary to build a total institutional culture that is very strong, enveloping, and quite authoritarian. This produces a level of compliance from

children that allows for pretty much any approach to instruction, and eliminates many of the typical challenges of classroom management.” He continued, “There is a reason why there is a continuing pull in human organizations toward authoritarian approaches. You can get a lot done. But what kind of citizens are you producing? What kind of learners are you developing when the core values are around compliance? Can you educate children in an authoritarian context and also empower them to be active agents in their own lives, who think critically and question injustice in the world around them?”

Moskowitz would say yes. So would other urban educators who maintain that strict codes of conduct are a necessary condition for a healthy learning environment—or, at least, that it has worked for them. Depending on the observer’s perspective, a Success classroom can appear either alarmingly regimented or blissfully calm. Practices such as tracking can be viewed as part of a system of overweening surveillance or merely as respectful listening. In a recent essay about K.I.P.P., Andrew R. Ratner, a professor of education at CUNY, writes, “What could be a more auspicious first step than children learning to make each other feel that they will be heard and their individual voices have value?”

One of the core tenets of John Dewey’s educational philosophy was the belief that, in school, children learn not only the explicit content of lessons but also an implicit message about the ideal organization of society. A school, he argued, was a civilization in microcosm. “I believe that the school must represent present life—life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, or the neighborhood, or on the playground,” Dewey wrote in “My Pedagogic Creed,” which was published in 1897. The society for which the child was being prepared should not be conceived of as an abstraction from the remote future, Dewey believed. It should be replicated, in simplified form, within the structure and culture of the school itself.

“A school should be a model of what democratic adult culture is about,” Deborah Meier, a veteran progressive educator, and a theorist in the tradition of Dewey, told me. “Most of what we learn in life we learn from the company we keep. What is taught didactically is often forgotten.” A corollary of Dewey’s belief is that, if children are exposed in school to an authoritarian model of society, that is the kind of society in which they may prefer to live.

At Success Academy Springfield Gardens, I spent part of a morning observing a group of kindergartners at block time. The school has dedicated a special classroom to the activity, and shelves were filled with an enviable supply of blocks. The walls of the room were decorated with pictures of architectural structures that the students might seek to emulate, from the Empire State Building to the Taj Mahal. There was also a list of rules: always walk; carry two small blocks or hug one large block; speak in a whisper.

At the start of the session, two boys picked up the longest blocks and brandished them, pretending that they were lightsabres, before a teacher reminded them of the dangers of doing so. Other children quickly settled into building. One boy was making a tall structure with symmetrically arranged arches and towers—and, thus, exploring principles of geometry—while a girl pretended to snap photographs of it with a small block. The students were happy, engaged, and proud of their accomplishments.

A girl with a big smile and a forceful manner had used blocks of different sizes to build a kind of frame. She stood behind it while her classmates lined up in front. She was using it to challenge her classmates in an elaborate guessing game, in which she was the master of ceremonies. Upon reaching the front of the line, each student was asked a question. A correct answer earned a cheer, but, if the student erred, the girl pretended to pour a bucket of slime—another block—over the transgressor's head.

Her questions were wide-ranging and sometimes surreal—the delightful products of a five-year-old imagination given full rein: “How do bugs die?” “What are granola bars made of?” “What are jewels made of?” The adults in the room joined in the game, and when one of the young teachers reached the head of the line the girl asked, “How do you learn words?”

“I’m going to flip the question—how do *you* learn words?” the teacher replied.

“I go to school,” the student said. “How did you learn?”

“The same way,” the teacher said.

“You went to school,” the student said. “Did you play?”

“I played in preschool,” the teacher said.

At this, the girl adopted a stern expression. “You’re not supposed to play!” she said, commandingly. She seemed pleased that the game afforded her an opportunity to reprimand her teacher—a chance to express a different facet of her imagination. “You are not supposed to play in preschool,” she said, with conviction. “You are supposed to *work*.” The girl had absorbed both the explicit and the implicit lessons of the schoolroom in which she spent her days. So far, it seemed, her education was a success. ♦

An earlier version of this article misidentified the author of the essay about K.I.P.P. It also misstated the date a Buffalo school was founded.

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*Rebecca Mead joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 1997. She is the author of “My Life in Middlemarch.” [Read more »](#)*

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Video

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*The Underground University That Won't Be Stopped*  
*In Georgia, undocumented immigrants, who are banned from the top public universities, have a school of their own.*

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