

TRIBUTE TO SYLVIA FEINBURG

On behalf of the students, staff and faculty of the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development, I offer to you these remarks on the retirement of Professor Sylvia Feinburg.

This academic year, 1998-1999, marks the 37th year of Professor Feinburg's association with Eliot-Pearson and Tufts University. Professor Feinburg arrived as an instructor at the Eliot-Pearson School in 1962. At that time, the School was a teacher training institution -- originally the Nursery Training School of Boston -- affiliated with Tufts University, but not a real part of it. Soon after, in 1964, Eliot-Pearson became an academic department within Tufts -- the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study. There is no doubt that absorption into the University stabilized Eliot-Pearson and facilitated its growth into a premier applied child development department. It is also true, however, that the rich and proud tradition of the Nursery Training School of Boston and its training site -- the Ruggles Street Nursery -- set a clear path for what the Eliot-Pearson Department was to become. Back in the 1920's, way ahead of their time, Abigail Eliot and Elizabeth Pearson took their constructivist notions of how young children develop -- from the inside out, through exploration and passion, with guidance not pedantry -- and implemented them in early childhood classrooms. Highborn themselves, Eliot and Pearson were, nonetheless, deeply committed to the belief that opportunities for success should be available to all children, perhaps especially poor children, and that in the service of attaining success as adults, only the highest quality early childhood programming would do. The Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development, rooted in this tradition, remains committed to these ideals.

No person in the Department has lived those ideals as fully and deliberately as has Sylvia Feinburg. Originally trained as an artist and art educator, and armed with a Bachelor's degree, Professor Feinburg began her career at the Eliot-Pearson School teaching children's art part-time. Soon after the school became an academic department, Professor Feinburg became a full-time faculty member, assuming a leadership role in early childhood teacher education -- a role she has retained to this day. While working at Eliot-Pearson Professor Feinburg completed her Masters degree in child development at Tufts, and then went off to the Harvard Graduate School of Education for her doctoral studies, completing them in 1976. That same year, Professor Feinburg was promoted to Associate Professor and received tenure. She was promoted to Full Professor in 1997. Professor Feinburg served as Department Chairperson twice -- once in the late 1970's, and again in the mid-1980's.

Professor Feinburg's scholarship focuses on two broad areas: developmental education within the early childhood field, and the artistic development of children. In its simplest sense, developmental education represents the application or translation of stage theory to the practice of teaching, and it views self-expression and creativity as fundamental to the learning experience. This approach considers the child's

individual, personal developmental trajectory in the context of what would be expected in a particular developmental domain for a child of a certain age. Rather than teachers or curriculum developers simply charting what children need to know in a given grade, developmentally oriented education poses that children learn best in the early years when they are both motivated by their own curiosity and tastes, and given materials that follow a carefully-considered developmental sequence.

Over the past 30 years, Professor Feinburg has been instrumental in articulating and refining the concept of developmental education and disseminating it broadly to practitioners and scholars alike. Her two texts – Helping Young Children Learn (with Evelyn Pitcher and others), and Eliciting Children’s Full Potential (with Mary Mindess) are considered of central importance to the field. The text, Helping Young Children Learn, operationalizes developmental theory in the form of curricula for early childhood classrooms. It was originally published in 1966 and it is currently in its fifth edition. In addition to conceptualizing and writing much of this text, Professor Feinburg provided the majority of illustrations for several of the editions. Eliciting Children’s Full Potential is a recent work (1994), already used widely by scholars and teachers; it has been described repeatedly as a “superb” text for teacher training and child development courses.

Professor Feinburg’s second major area of scholarship is the development of children’s artistic abilities. Her published work has focussed on the psychological and developmental uses of children’s selections of subject matter, and the nature and meaning of children’s artistic expressions, such as pictorial representations. A deep understanding of children and their development, and a long, profound engagement with art itself, inform this scholarship. Rather than a straightforward process of skill building, Professor Feinburg has shown that artistic development is both an expression of broader developmental processes and an influence on those processes. She also has helped illuminate gender continuities and discontinuities in children’s artistic expression, contributing important data to the discussion about gender and identity development.

Although a significant scholar according to conventional measures, Professor Feinburg is more accurately described as a model scholar/teacher practitioner. Her “applied work,” – administering and supervising teacher education programs, designing laboratory schools, developing classroom observational instruments, lecturing and demonstrating classroom practice in literally hundreds of locations – is inextricably linked to her scholarship, and to how she sees her mission as a child developmentalist and teacher educator. And in Sylvia’s case, the medium is also the message: She is a brilliant, original, and truly inspired teacher, as it should be, but sadly often is not for those individuals training our future teachers. The positive influence Professor Feinburg has had on generations of students preparing to be teachers, and through them, on the thousands of children in their classrooms – in Boston and Chicago, Iowa and California, Japan and India, in child care settings and elementary schools – seems to us an exemplary life’s work.

In 1975, early in Sylvia’s teaching career, Tufts formally recognized her talent by awarding her one of its first Leibner Awards for Distinguished Teaching and Advising.

Last month Professor Feinburg received the Simches Award for Distinguished Teaching and Advising for her many years of extraordinary service to the University. To be sure, her contributions to the broader university community have been impressive. Over these many years I know of no task of substance that has been asked of her that she has not been undertaken wholeheartedly, with grace, intelligence and good humor. But however sorely she will be missed by her friends and colleagues across the campus, the effects of her retirement on Eliot-Pearson are infinitely more profound. With this retirement and that of her longtime associate, Charna Levine, we lose the last links to the Ruggles Street Nursery, to the Eliot-Pearson School, to Eliot and Pearson themselves, and to the first-hand, lived experience of crusading for young children at a time when they were not considered much worth the effort. More importantly, of course, we lose much of the heart and soul of this department. Year in and year out, Sylvia has provided us, the next generation of faculty, a model for how to do this job: How to teach, how to listen, how to appreciate the privilege we share as teachers, how to enjoy each day, how to keep our “eyes on the prize”, which for us is a better world for children. This loss, simply put, is inestimable and irreplaceable.

On the other hand, we appreciate Sylvia’s desire to start this next phase of her life. She has long neglected her painting, and will now have the opportunity to turn her attention to it; we know there are many other interests that call as well. So we wish her the perfect balance of work and play, solitude and company, and activity and rest. Good luck and good health, Sylvia.

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