

CHILD'S PLAY

By Martha Egnal
Photographs by Steve Larese

IN A SCHOOL GARDEN, THE LESSONS ARE MORE LIKE FUN THAN LECTURE



At 9 A.M. on a late summer day, I am sitting in the garden at Guadalupe Montessori School in Silver City, in the mountains of southwest New Mexico. The first students through the gate this morning are two sixth-grade boys. I offer them a choice of projects, and they go for harvesting pinto beans—pulling dried pods off the plants and filling buckets. It's a bit of a scavenger hunt, and every newfound cache of beans is celebrated with a cry of victory. When the plots are scoured and they are satisfied with their haul, the boys bring their beans to the picnic table to shell them. As they open each pod and empty the contents into a bowl, the observations begin to flow.

"This is a lot of work," says one of the boys after they have about 2 cups' worth of beans in the bowl. "Can you imagine how many beans it takes to fill one of those huge bags at the grocery store," the other replies. "Think about what it would take to produce a truckload," I say. They fall silent for a moment, and keep on shelling.

Soon they notice the variety in the individual beans they have shelled. Pinto beans range from mostly white with a few brown speckles to almost completely brown, and the boys decide that they prefer the brown ones. As they work down into their buckets of beans, they sort out a small pile of the brownest beans they can find, with the plan of growing them out next year to see if the plants from those beans produce browner beans. Spontaneous garden science.

While the bean sorting continues, two third-grade students arrive and stand in front of the chicken coop. Fingers curled through the wire, they ask, "Martha, can we go see the chickens?" I think about it for a moment, because I always

prefer to say yes to their requests, but the coop is a mess. "You're welcome to

go in—if you'd be willing to clean it," I answer. Their whoops of excitement sound more like the response of 10-year-old boys who are getting a new video game, rather than the opportunity to shovel manure.

As the third graders enthusiastically rake out the chicken coop, four primary (kindergarten) students are escorted to the garden by their classroom assistants. As usual, they come bounding into the garden wanting to know what they can eat. Lucky for them, the cucumbers, carrots, tomatoes, and peas are all ready. These kids like nothing better than harvesting, and would happily empty a carrot patch in one morning, leaving none for the kids who follow. Now I am in the unique position of limiting how many veggies eager children can eat.

But the rations are reasonable and they are satisfied with their share, and so they happily work their way through the garden looking for lemon cucumbers, ripe tomatoes, fat peas, and plump carrots. When they have gathered their finds, they wash and munch their fresh-picked snacks before going to the digging area. With small shovels that fit them well, our primary students usually do their first "work" in the digging area. Sometimes, elaborate stories accompany the digging—they will dig all the way to Australia or build a moat for a castle. Sometimes they just dig. I recognize the zone they are entering: close to the earth and carefree on a fine day in the garden.

"Why don't chickens clean their own room?"

When I am confident that all shovels are safe distances from faces and limbs, I'm back to the chicken coop, watching the boys get the pile of stuff ready for the compost heap. As I stand back for a moment, delighted at their pure enjoyment, a mother of one of the boys approaches. She's here to get him early from school, and she, too, is impressed. "If only I could get him that excited to clean his room," she says.

A primary student has drifted near us and hears the conversation. "Why don't the chickens clean their own room?" he asks. I smile and begin to explain some of the differences between



people and chickens to the curious student. The mother informs her son that it's time to go. He gives me an "aw shucks" look and hangs up his rake. I assure him that, just like his room at home, the coop will be messy again, and he'll have another opportunity to clean it.

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Meanwhile, a few primary kids are finished digging and raking in their holes. They are ready for another project. We have grown 'Greystripe' sunflowers, and the enormous heads are drying up, nodding over, and ready to be harvested. So we get our clippers and a saw to take down these giants. The kids can hardly believe the behemoths are single flowers. And when we begin to pull out the sunflower seeds and crack them open, my students are even more amazed to see a familiar snack inside. They are all so engaged that I decide to send one head to each classroom.

With only the tall, prickly stalks and leaves left, we turn to the school's goats. We trim off the leaves and branches, har-



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