

Vitamins

Starting Strong: A Different Look at Children, Schools, and Standards Patricia F. Carini. New York: Teachers College Press, 2001. 219 pp.

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The title comes from a story told by Toni Morrison in her Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech. Uppity children badger an older woman: “Is there no context for our lives? No song, no literature, no poem full of vitamins, no history connected to experience that you can pass along to help us start strong?... You are an adult... Stop thinking about saving your face. Think of our lives and tell us your particularized world.”

Carini’s collection of essays concerns itself with responsibility, what we adults owe to the young generation. Throughout the volume, Carini makes it clear which schools she envisions as the context for fulfilling this responsibility. She emphatically does not restrict her discussion to only some of America's schools, such as, only those which are well-financed to serve a privileged elite. As Carini says (p. 145), “I, you, and humans everywhere have the capacity enacted daily to make and remake, to work and rework, whatever there is to work with.” This “human capacity, widely distributed” is a starting point for the ideas in this book. Starting with humanity, the book starts strong.

The nine essays are arranged in four parts, “On a Human Scale: Works, Lives, Schools”, “The Politics of Educating/the Politics of Work,” “Standards in the Making.” “Generation/Regeneration.” Each essay is broken up with helpful subheadings, unobtrusive signposts guiding the reader along the vector of thought. The Index offers a way of entering the text across chapters (see such headings as: Measurement, Democracy, Number, Fear, Description, Desire). There are color plates from the Prospect Archive. There is poetry from Karen Brodine, from Robert Frost, from William Carlos Williams. Joseph Featherstone wrote the sassy introduction.

In 1964 I began my years of teaching in public schools in Philadelphia neighborhoods. I remember the buoyancy of that early start, riding a national consensus that children of all backgrounds, in all parts of the nation, could and should become members of the Great Society. Though I was not aware of it at the time, those were also the years when Prospect School was starting out in North Bennington, Vermont. In that era, no one thought it strange that a small independent school in rural Vermont was being called to work with city teachers in Paterson, New Jersey, in the Bronx, in Philadelphia. We were not saying, back then, that some children should be given progressive education rich in developing possibilities while other children should be handed over to private corporations for the cheapest possible delivery of higher test scores.

Carini’s personal involvement in American public education intensified in the late 1980s and ‘90s. The essays in *Starting Strong* are a product of that work. They are based on talks Carini gave between 1989 and 1998. The audiences were colleagues, teachers and parents Carini was

working with, in cities and towns such as Ithaca, Phoenix, Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Mamaroneck. Typically, Carini and these colleagues would have been planning a one- or two-week institute, days filled with reviews of children and of their works, days focused on the details of classroom life, seminars of collegial discussion by a group sitting in a circle, informed also by intense sessions of classroom observation by Carini. That is one reason these essays seem so embedded in the real world of real classrooms.

But the essays are also embedded in a very large world of ideas. The list of References at the back gives a feel for the breathtaking scope of Carini's reading and thinking. Isaiah Berlin ends up sitting next to kindergarten children from West Philadelphia; Goethe and Newton alongside a four-year-old in a laundromat; Milan Kundera alongside Jenny from Phoenix; Walt Whitman alongside pictures and poetry from Iris (taken from nine years of her work collected in the Prospect Archive); Pat Barker alongside a play yard in Ithaca. Large ideas inform specific classroom events. The particularized classroom stories inform the large ideas.

Carini's words, in these essays, bring sustenance to teachers isolated in neglected city neighborhoods. Our children are something other than the low-achieving, poorly-taught Problems we hear politicians moan about. Our schools carry value that is not appropriately expressed in numbers. *Starting Strong* brings us back into a world where teaching and learning are possible, a world of hope.

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