Chapter Fourteen

From Susan Isaacs to Lillian Weber and Deborah Meier: A Progressive Legacy in England and the United States

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... the unicellular organism, Amoeba... a naked, jelly-like speck of protoplasm, lives in the debris at the bottom of fresh-water ponds.... If it finds itself suspended in water, completely free of any surface, the organism may throw out “pseudopodia” in every direction until it seems to be nothing but a number of slowly moving filaments of protoplasm... which reach out until contact with some surface is made. Then the pseudopodium in touch with the surface applies itself, the others being gradually withdrawn until the normal shape and movements of the creature are resumed.

—Susan Brierley, An Introduction to Psychology, Methuen, 1921

Susan Fairhurst Brierley Isaacs (1885–1948), English child psychologist, psychoanalyst and school reformer, saw in this instance of an amoeba’s behavior a life energy by which all organisms seek equilibrium between inner processes and environmental changes. Such an analogy is indicative of the use of evolutionary biology to inform psychology in its beginning years. From 1924 to 1927, as director of the experimental Malting House School in Cambridge, for children aged 2 to 10, Isaacs gathered evidence of children “reaching out” to materials, events, plants, and animals, and to peers and adults, much in the way that the amoeba’s pseudopodium, on touching a surface, changed its behavior—an act, Isaacs wrote, of “positive activity towards its environment.”1 The legacy of Susan Isaacs is not so much the founding of a school, as it is the synthesis of a school of thinking about schooling that undergirded reform. Although the Malting House School was short-lived, Isaacs drew from the data to create a persuasive set of guidelines and exemplars for practice. In so doing, she blended ideas from

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Darwinian biology, philosopher John Dewey, and psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein. Isaacs lived the theory that she espoused, through immersion as teacher and researcher in the day-to-day life of the Malting House School, in her own psychoanalyses with J. C. Flugel, Otto Rank, and Joan Riviere, in teaching graduate students in education and psychology, in psychoanalytic practice, and as a training analyst.

Her passion was to improve conditions for children. To that end, Isaacs conducted research and interpreted the results for audiences of parents, childcare providers, nursery and primary teachers, school inspectors, educational researchers, policy makers, psychologists, teacher educators, psychoanalysts, and training analysts. In the field of schooling, Isaacs advocated providing children with a range of environments in which to pursue their interests, with the support of adults, and she contributed to the schooling community a rationale for children's use of fantasy in play as a bridge to thought. She elevated the value of children's interests, questions, and ideas to a position of utmost importance in the endeavor of schooling, and she provided powerful exemplars for the teaching community to follow.

As head of the Department of Child Development at the Institute of Education, the University of London (1933–1943), Isaacs inspired confidence and conviction in teachers, school officials, and future education leaders. Her former student and successor as head of department, Dorothy Gardner, compiled a richly detailed biography that drew from public records, interviews with her friends, relatives, colleagues, former students and psychoanalysts, memorabilia collected by her husband Nathan Isaacs, and correspondence in private collections—the originals of which are, for the most part, no longer available. This essay contributes a reading of Isaacs in the context of the early twentieth century intertwining of evolutionary biology and psychology in school practice and explores how Isaacs's vision subsequently helped Americans to renew their commitment to pragmatic practices of education in the 1960s.

JOHN DEWEY IN THE ENGLISH SCHOOLING COMMUNITY

At the end of the nineteenth century, philosopher John Dewey raised educational issues about the emergence of urban, industrial communities with worldwide markets and easy communication and distribution among all parts. Change in school practice was regarded as a necessary corollary to change in society, and it was Dewey, according to, University Professor of Education John Adams at the University of London, who called the attention of the schooling community to this relationship. The shift from proprietary capitalism to corporate capitalism was accompanied by increased agitation for franchising the working class and women, new concern for social life, and belief in progress. In schooling, the shift led to the addition of vocational education, increased requirements for school attendance, and the use of scientific analogies to inform practice. In creating a naturalistic argument for human psychology, Dewey drew largely from William James's perspective on evolutionary biology in Principles of Psychology (1890): Survival for humans depended on “conscious deliberation and experimentation.” He proposed a model for school reform aimed to psychologize content within the “range and scope of the child’s life” and promote adaptability for participation in society, which was accomplished by continuous reconstruction of children's experiences out into organized bodies of knowledge and by cultivation of inquiry in the context of real problems.

What accounts for the positive response to Dewey's work in sectors of the English schooling world, in this case exemplified by Susan Isaacs, in the first four decades of the