

Reflections in Education: Considering the Impact of Schooling on the Learner

By Kathleen Anderson

Abstract:

Each child has unique gifts waiting to be discovered and cultivated. Unfortunately, our current school system does not always provide children with the opportunity to develop their special interests. The following article is a personal narrative structured as a series of reflections, and aims to reconsider schooling's role in assisting the crucial development of creativity. Drawing from ideas of researchers in the field of alternative education, I present reflections on my role as an elementary school teacher, and I examine the impact of teaching, curriculum and our current evaluation system on the development of children's creativity.

Introduction:

“The predicament is simple: A great deal of energy is expended by those in power to craft an illusory world designed to benefit only a very small percentage of the population”

-The Institute of Unlearning

Although the above statement may have an alarmist overtone, it also captures the entrenched essence of the classic North American education system. This semester, in *Principals of Curriculum and Instruction*, an M.Ed. course taught by Dr. C. Ricci, I was introduced to alternative ideologies that reshaped my personal philosophy of education, and affected the manner in which I interact with students.

This paper is structured as a series of reflections on material presented and discussed over the course of the term. I chose topics that inspired and deepened my understanding towards students, my role as a teacher, and the overall purpose of education.

I begin by reflecting on the thoughts of Ken Robinson in his presentation “Do Schools Today Kill Creativity?” Next, I focus on ideas from John Holt in an interview for the magazine *Mothering*, titled “Mothering Interviews John Holt” and reflect on his words in relation to my role as a teacher and the demands of our language and math programs. And finally, I reflect on the purpose of public education as John Taylor Gatto presents it in his article “Against School: How Public Education Cripples our Kids, and Why”.

Reflection One:

The Importance of Creativity in School

Ken Robinson’s presentation “Do schools today kill creativity?” highlighted in the TEDTalks lecture series, touched on many points that as an educator I feel are necessary to consider. He discusses the importance of human creativity and says that “children who we believe possess exceptional talents, aren’t necessarily exceptional, but were simply able to discover their talents” (Robinson, 2006). He explains that children have the capacity for creativity but school prevents them from finding and developing it (Robinson, 2006).

As a teacher, I believe that we do not provide children with nearly enough opportunity to discover and develop their talents. My students cannot realize their abilities because my lessons and the curriculum content do not necessarily reflect their interests and allow for any creativity. Instead, I tell students how to do everything from a science experiment to creating a piece of art. Their time to explore, be creative and choose activities is very limited or even nonexistent most days.

I am beginning to change the way I handle students' disinterest towards classroom work. I find myself becoming more lenient in regards to how and when they choose to complete assignments. I realize when students seem disengaged; it is probably because I have chosen the activities for the day. I basically give instructions and they follow them, always responding the way they are taught. There is no creativity involved.

Robinson (2006) also believes:

Kids take chances because they are not scared of being wrong. However, as they get older, teachers and the school system continuously tell them that there is no room for mistakes. If they aren't prepared to be wrong, then they will never come up with anything original.

In the classroom, even when students are given the opportunity to be creative within subject areas, such as to create and present plays, we evaluate the work. We grade everything students do throughout the day from socializing and participating to their attendance and the work they produce. They are constantly being evaluated.

Evaluating will always limit their creativity and prevent them from producing original work, no matter how flexible teachers are in our classrooms. As a result, students often go through the system liking subjects they are good at in school and sticking with

them because they become afraid to fail or be judged when they attempt something new (C. Ricci, personal communication, November 30, 2007).

As a teacher, part of my job is to teach children that there are certain ways to do our work. There are expectations in art, dance, writing a paragraph, reading a book and even behaving. Students learn to rely on marks and seek approval from teachers to know if what they have produced is acceptable. In class I try to give less direction and more choice in how my students do their work. However, I am still very limited in the ways I can let them be creative.

Ken Robinson goes on to point out that the most useful subjects are valued in schools. He says “children are told not to take music because they will never be a musician, or art because they will not be an artist. Children are pushed away from this because they are told that they will not get a job” (Robinson, 2006). This is another way the school system prevents students from finding and developing their talents. Teachers fit in drama, dance, art and even science and social studies whenever they can be integrated into the language and math programs. Along the way, “highly talented people think they aren’t [talented] because they were told that what they are good at isn’t important and isn’t valuable” (Robinson, 2006). They then get older and find a regular job instead of creating a life for themselves around their talents and interests.

In addition to limiting our focus to teaching math and language, we discourage children from developing talents that are not taught in school because they are not valued. We even place subjects in order of importance with the highest ranking being on language and math, then science and social studies and then the arts (Robinson, 2006). So if students are talented in areas other than those which are valued, they may put aside

a possible brilliant career because they fear they will not get a “real job” (Robinson, 2006).

Also, many of our students possess talents that are not taught in school at all. I remember Dr. Ricci showing a video in class of a person who made shadow puppets and was able to turn this skill into a successful career (personal communication, November 30, 2007). This is a great example of a talent and career that was not developed in or by our school system. Many students are taught to put talents like this aside. This made me wonder, how many wonderful talents have been squandered by our education system?

I think that we get so busy trying to make sure our students are reading, writing and understanding math that we forget that they need to play, be creative and learn on their own. When I have yard duty, I often watch the students play and I notice how creative they can be. As an example, I can think of a student who loves acting and creating plays. He will do this at recess time even if no one else wants to join him. The expressions he uses, the characters he invents and the life he brings to his plays is amazing. However, he was in my class last year and never had the chance to do this. I did touch on plays in class, and we even created one, but never to the extent required by his talent. I think this is just one example of how limiting the curriculum can be for children with unique interests.

Another part that I really enjoyed in Ted Robinson’s talk was about Gillian Lynne, the choreographer of the Broadway musical CATS, and how she discovered her talent for dance. Robinson (2006) explains:

As a young girl, she was disruptive and was not doing well in school so her mother brought her to see a specialist. He told her mother that there was nothing

wrong with Gillian but that she was a dancer. She soon after went to dance school and was happy because there were people just like her there who had to move to think. Someone else may have put her on medication and told her to calm down.

This part of his presentation made me consider the impact we as teachers have on our students when we label them as struggling or needing to be identified. Teachers fill out checklists from doctors in order for students to be diagnosed as having ADHD, we spend time researching possible reasons why students are not meeting our expectations and diagnose them with learning disabilities.

I think about the example of Ms. Lynne and the way she discovered her talent. How often we must misdiagnose students in our school and steer them away from what they are really meant to do. As educators we are quick to label and blame children for their unwillingness to learn in ways that we demand. If a child does not fit into the mold we create, then something is wrong with the child and we label it as a learning problem. We then spend countless hours trying to find ways to help them attain our expectations.

I look at my students this year and recognize that they each possess special talents. I often wonder if they will have the chance to develop them. I know that because of the topics covered in this presentation and classroom discussions with Dr. Ricci, the way that I interact with my students has changed and so have my expectations. In my classroom, I try to provide opportunities for creative thinking and choice of activities. I also try to talk about grades and evaluations as little as possible and not judge their daily work. However, I also understand that in today's system, no matter what I decide to do in the classroom, my program will never allow students to develop their talents and interests the way they would on their own. There must be a better way?

Reflection Two:

Ideas on Teaching and Learning

Throughout the term, we discussed some of John Holt's ideas. I was inspired by his theories so I began reading some of his material and past interviews. The following are his responses from an interview with Dr. Marlene Bumgarner for the magazine *Mothering* conducted in 1981. The responses I found of particular interest touch on the topics of learning, home schooling, teaching as well as language and math programs.

In this interview, John Holt comments "we like to learn; we need to learn; we are good at it; we don't need to be shown how or be made to do it. What kills the processes are the people interfering with it or trying to regulate it or control it" (1981). Reading his ideas on how teachers impact student learning has reshaped my view of my role as an educator.

When I began teaching, I believed my job was to guide students to learn new skills, encourage them to develop their talents and provide opportunities that allow them to appreciate our world. I desperately wanted to get them hooked on all the subjects. I thought that if I made lessons fun, they would learn to like everything. I am now realizing, that unwittingly, I am still forcing curriculum onto my students and I am actually impeding their true learning.

Do we (the education system) have to decide for all children what they will learn? Is it worth spending the effort trying to inspire students, or will they inspire themselves if given the proper forum? Children know better than teachers what they want and need to

discover at each step of the way. If humans are creatures that naturally like, want and need to learn, than my students will do so when the need arises, in their own way and at their own pace. This is difficult, if not impossible to accomplish in our school system where there exists curricular demands and prescribed ways of learning.

I now understand that great lessons will not make all students more curious about the subject nor will it make them remember the material taught. John Holt (1981) says “if we try to make students learn something other than what they want to learn, they probably will not learn it, or they will soon forget most of what they have learned, or worst of all, will lose their desire to learn anything”. Teachers teach and students have no choice but to listen and learn. We are therefore part of the reason they are often bored and uninterested in learning.

In this interview, John Holt also highlights the advantages of home schooling. He states that “the great advantage [of home schooling] is intimacy, control of your time, flexibility of schedule, and the ability to respond to the needs of the child, and to the inclinations” (Holt, 1981). If a child is feeling tired, sick, or unhappy, then home schooling allows them to take it easy. When the child is full of energy, then they can tackle bigger projects (Holt, 1981). We do not offer this type of flexibility. School seems very artificial when compared to home schooling. We do not allow children the option to feel like not working. We expect them to give their best performance each day, no matter how they are feeling. As teachers, is this a realistic expectation?

When it comes to correcting students and grading their work, John Holt (1981) believes that teachers don't always have to immediately correct their students' mistakes. Instead, he says “we can afford to give them time to notice and correct them themselves.

And the more they do this, the better they will become at doing it, and the less they will need and depend on us to do it for them” (Holt, 1981). He goes on to say that tests and evaluations are ways of telling learners that we have no confidence in them. The fact that teachers even check on what the students have learned proves to students that we fear they have not learned the material (Holt, 1981).

This quote made me conscious of the impact I have on my students when I grade them, tag a reading level to them, and correct their mistakes. By doing so, I am making my students dependent on me to provide them with the right answers. They will not take chances and problem solve to find their own solutions. They become afraid of being wrong and learn to play it safe by doing work that gets them good marks. They learn taking chances may lead to bad marks and therefore stop taking chances, discovering and being creative.

Furthermore, the grading we do is not standardized and therefore the marks we give students are not a true reflection of what they can do. I remember discussing in Dr. Ricci’s class that it can be just as damaging to assign a good mark to a child as it is to assign a bad mark to a child. The child with the good mark will continue to do work they have been told they are good at instead of taking chances and discovering other talents. The student who receives a bad mark may not pursue interests in those areas because they were told it was not their strength (C. Ricci, personal communication, November 30, 2007). As a result, I am experiencing difficulty marking and completing report cards without thinking of the effects I am having on these children. I try not to discourage students in any way through marking. I talk about it as little as possible in class and I

always tell them they did a great job, no matter what they hand in. However, this part of my job is unavoidable.

In the interview, John Holt also discusses his beliefs on reading programs. He explains that teaching reading is actually what prevents children from reading because children learn in different ways (Holt, 1981). He says “reading aloud is fun, but I would never read aloud to a kid so that the kid would learn to read. You read aloud because it's fun and companionable” (Holt, 1981). He also says that when children see adults read books with lots of print, they realize that to find out what is in them, they will have to learn how to read (Holt, 1981). This reminds me of a discussion in Dr. Ricci's class about how children will learn to do something when the need arises. If children choose to learn something like reading, they will learn it because it is relevant to their lives (C. Ricci, personal communication, November 30, 2007). If we force them to read when they have no use for it or do not want to learn it, they will not remember what we teach, they will not meet those expectations we set for them and they will not enjoy reading.

I think that there are many problems with our literacy program. As an example, part of the EQAO questionnaire that students fill out in grade six asks if they enjoy reading. Most of our students responded that they do not like reading. Our solution to this problem involves applying for grants to get newer and more interesting books. We also try to make reading fun by setting up reading buddy programs, trips to the public library, book bag programs, and daily independent, guided and modeled and shared readings. In addition, we track children's progress in reading on a monthly basis and worry that they will not succeed in life if they can't read up to a certain leveled book by the end of their primary years. Children have no choice when it comes to reading. They must learn to like

it. The school system puts pressure on teachers to get students hooked on reading, but by the end of grade six most of them still don't enjoy it.

If we took away the pressure, then learning to read would become more pleasurable. Children would be more curious about books and learn the skill because the need would eventually arise. However, our school system would never allow this. We will therefore always have many students disinterested in reading despite our continued efforts to engage them.

On the topic of teaching mathematics to children, John Holt (1981) says that the best way to be introduced to numbers is in real life. He explains that “numbers are embedded in the context of reality” (Holt, 1981). Numbers are found everywhere. They are found in building, construction, business, photography, music and even cooking. However, schools take everything out of the context of reality (Holt, 1981). By doing so, “everything appears like some little thing floating around in space” (Holt, 1981). Instead, Holt (1981) suggests that we should learn to work with numbers in real life.

There is such a big focus on math in our schools that I thought John Holt's opinion of how we should learn it was interesting. We teach children how to take numbers, learn and use equations but we do not focus on the importance of it in the real world. Students don't understand why they are learning math. This makes learning math less interesting and more difficult to learn. Even though teachers are supposed to try to relate math to real life situations, it is still done in the classroom, at their desks using manipulatives like fake money and pretending to do things like buy items at a store.

All in all, John Holt presents many interesting points about our education system. His views on how teaching, evaluating, reading and math helped me redefine my role as

an educator. I realize I have little choice when it comes to how I teach. I am expected to teach math and reading in a certain way and follow the programs provided. I am also expected to evaluate my students. I can understand how I am interfering with the natural process of learning.

Reflection Three:

The Purpose of Education

John Taylor Gatto participated in Harper's Magazine forum "School on a Hill," that appeared in the September 2003 issue. I read his article entitled "Against School: How public education cripples our kids, and why" and it brought about some very interesting points concerning the primary purpose of schooling. Briefly, Gatto (2003) explains the purpose of public education is to make people into employees and consumers, and the root of this problem is embedded in the history of education (p.37).

Gatto begins by using examples of famous Americans that never graduated from secondary school to support his view that schooling is not necessary to be successful. He states:

Throughout history, most children did not go to school and still the unschooled rose to be admirals, like Farragut; inventors, like Edison; captains of industry like Carnegie and Rockefeller; writers, like Melville and Twain and Conrad; and even scholars, like Margaret Mead (Gatto, 2003, p.34).

Though they may have learned skills from others, we cannot credit formal education for their success. He then explains that our educational system was designed to produce citizens, who are passive, have average intelligence and a lack of leadership skills (Gatto, 2003, p.36). It was believed to be necessary in order to maintain a “manageable” population (Gatto, 2003, p.36).

When I considered these points, I thought about how we teach our children and if it supports this view. We do not teach children to think critically or to question, especially not authority. We do not teach them to be leaders because they just follow instructions at school and respond in the way that will get them the best marks. We also do not provide students with the opportunity to be creative and discover their talents. We make them learn strictly curriculum content, which is very limiting. I was shocked to think that could really be the purpose of education. I kept on reading.

Gatto (2003) then explains that with industrialization the economy moved towards mass production (p.37). However, mass production could only be successful if there was mass consumption. Schooling was a way of ensuring both. Its main goal was to educate people into being employees and consumers (Gatto, 2003, p.37). Gatto (2003) states “school encouraged [students] not to think at all and that left them sitting ducks for another great invention of the modern era – marketing”(p. 37). The idea was to group children by subject, age-grading and test scores and strip them of their responsibility and independence, so “they would grow older but never truly grow up” (Gatto, 2003, p.38).

Today, in our schools, teachers encourage this behavior. We group children, take away responsibility and independence and we spoon feed them knowledge. As a result, in today’s society, according to Gatto (2003), maturity is not part of our lives because

everything comes to us so easily (p.38). For example, we no longer have a need to learn to entertain ourselves (Gatto, 2003, p.38). Gatto (2003) states “We have become a nation of children, happy to surrender our judgments and our wills to political exhortations and commercial blandishments that would insult actual adults” (p.38). Over the years, adults have learned from years of schooling to abandon their ability to be creative, to think and to develop true talents. As teachers, are we doing the same to our students, without being aware of it?

However, according to Gatto (2003), if we understand the history and purpose of schooling, than we can teach our children differently (p.38). We can teach them useful skills. Gatto lists many of these skills in his article. For instance, he says that we could help children to develop “an inner life so that they’ll never be bored” since our students presently have a low tolerance for boredom (Gatto, 2003, p.38). We could also teach them to think critically and independently instead of simply obeying authority and learning the curriculum that has been decided for them (Gatto, 2003, p.38). Furthermore, we could let them have solitude so they learn to enjoy their own company (Gatto, 2003, p.38).

Gatto (2003) says that children who are schooled “are conditioned to dread being alone, and they seek constant companionship through the TV, the computer, the cell phone, and through shallow friendships” (p.38). I must agree that there is much evidence of this sort of behaviour found in students and adults, including myself. It is true that we tend to get bored easily, look to external sources for companionship and do not always think critically towards marketing. When you grow up this way, it seems perfectly normal. Now that I am aware of this view, I am more conscious of it in my classroom and

in my own life. While teaching, I can provide my students with opportunities, like the ones suggested in Gatto's article, but schooling is still very limiting. I feel that home schooling or free schooling would definitely offer children the opportunity to develop these skills. All in all, if education is not necessary to be successful, as shown through Gatto's examples, then its purpose is something other than this.

Conclusion:

The ideas of Ken Robinson, John Holt and John Taylor Gatto along with the many interesting discussions held in Dr. Ricci's course have impacted my personal philosophy of education. They have reshaped my interactions with my students and I am starting to redefine my role as a teacher. I am much more relaxed during the day. I find myself laughing and having fun with them and being more flexible in daily routines than ever before. The past couple months have been much more enjoyable for me and my students. I realize that I will never be able to let them choose their own activities, but I feel that I can still make adjustments and let them be creative in how they decide to do their work. It is frustrating to learn about views on education that are so influential and not be able to make any significant changes in my classroom. Nevertheless, I enjoy learning about these topics and I look forward to digging deeper into them.

Throughout the term, I also began to reflect on my own schooling and how it has shaped me. When I think about it, I did not learn much that really interested me in school. Also, I overlooked many of my interests because I had to focus most of my time on my studies. I started thinking about all the things I wanted to learn but pushed aside. I then decided to try a couple of them each term. This term, I decided to learn to play the piano.

It worked out well because the school where I teach offers lessons. My students think this is funny because they are much better players than I am. They enjoy teaching me notes and correct finger placement. I also started doing yoga. I really enjoyed this in high school but stopped because there was just never enough time to do everything. I enjoy it so much now that I know it will remain part of my weekly routine. It calms me and I feel more present when I am at work. I also started learning to sew. I have always wanted to do this and I am learning from my grandmother. I think these efforts are small steps in the direction of learning everything I have never made the time for before. It is a great feeling to be excited about learning. As a teacher, I think it is important to acknowledge that I can also in some ways help my students “*take an education rather than simply receive a schooling*” too (Gatto, 2003, p.34).

I am glad my Master of Education started with Dr. Ricci’s course. It has helped me redefine my role as a teacher and think about schooling from a whole other perspective that I was not familiar with. I am eager to learn more about these ideas of the education system and to see how they will continue to influence me at work, home and in other courses I take.

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Biography

Kathleen Anderson is a first year medical student who previously taught for two years at the elementary school level. She completed her undergraduate degree at Nipissing University with a focus on Education. Once she began her career teaching, she became interested in philosophy of alternative education, the history of the traditional school system and the impact educators have on student learning. Kathleen is a firm believer that all children have talents, and our current schooling methods can impede the natural development of their unique abilities.