

Voices: The need for alternative schooling

By Carlo Ricci, Katharine Gauthier, Jeff Baxter, Linda Neault

Carlo Ricci

For the longest time schools made me believe that there was something wrong with me. I was not a “strong” student, a position that I was once ashamed of, and of which I am now proud. The way I saw it then was that there was something wrong with me. Now I know that I am not the problem-- schools are. As a university instructor I still continue to feel the scorn and oppression of schoolers and schooling. There are things that I know in my heart are wrong but yet I am forced to conform to them. Having said that, I try-- I really try and for the most part succeed-- to offer my students an experience consistent with the tenets of unschooling (Ricci, 2007). I feel relatively confident that I am doing a good job with compulsory attendance, grading, and the externally imposed curriculum; however, there is one area that remains a challenge: assignments. In my heart I wish that I did not have to impose them on students, but I believe, quite frankly, that the university is not ready and would not support this—even though much of what we learn is not followed by a formal need to be artificially evaluated on what we have learned. So, instead what I do is that I give students freedom to do and use any medium they wish to use, and to share whatever it is they choose to share. Robinson & Aronica (2009) write:

Our aptitudes are highly personal. They may be for general types of activity, like math, music, sport, poetry, or political theory. They can also be highly specific—not music in

general, but jazz or rap. Not wind instruments in general, but the flute. Not science, but biochemistry. Not track and field, but the long jump. (p. 22)

They go on to suggest that we need to ask “How are you intelligent?,” rather than how intelligent are you (p. 42). Along the same lines, they write: “Because it’s about making things, creative work always involves using media of some sort to develop ideas. The medium can be anything at all (p. 72).” Because, for a long time now, I have understood that our aptitudes are highly personal; and that the medium we use to share what is within our bodies, minds and spirits can be anything; and that we need to ask how are you intelligent?, I have allowed students the freedom to discover their ideas using any medium they wish-- This way of thinking resonates so deeply with me.

By all accounts, this has worked really well and I have had people use, for instance, knitting, drawing, poetry, carpentry, cooking and writing to share, unfold and grow in their own way. Many may think that given the option students would do anything, as long as they do not have to write. The truth is that most people still choose to write. One explanation could be they continue to do what they are used to, which is writing; however, another plausible explanation is that there are people who enjoy writing--I know I do, especially when I am given the freedom to write about any topic in the format of my choice.

Having said that, what follows is writing that some students choose to produce for a holistic education class that was offered at the graduate level. The pieces are reflective and were written after 2 three hour classes where we discussed learner centered democratic approaches to schooling, unschooling, alternative schooling, holistic education and many other topics that were

initiated by those who were present. Given the limitations of space, we have included three, but all of the written submissions could have easily been a part of this final paper.

Together these narratives offer powerful testimonies to struggles and conflicts experienced by teachers. Again, the reflections are written by teachers who are enrolled in a graduate program. Together they move us forward in valuable ways and they help us to make the case and understand the need for unschooling and alternative learning. The program is a full-time graduate program and, inherently so, the contributors to this piece are newly credentialed teachers and are not currently employed within the school system. I will defer saying more about them and allow you to read on your own what they choose to share.

Katharine Gauthier

Childhood is an important part of life. It is about slowing down, discovering the world at your own pace. Childhood is a time of curiosity. Learning happens through real play and imagination as children make meaning from their experiences. It is a time of exploration and development as children begin to grow as individuals in the world around them.

As adults, we tend to forget the meaning of childhood. Our definition of childhood consists of developmentally appropriate activities, structured time and censored play. Jean Jacques Rousseau (1911/1963) wrote, “Childhood has its own ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling; nothing is more foolish than to try and substitute our ways” (p. 54). Today’s children do not have the time to be children. Scheduled play dates and structured play time dictate what they should do, how they should think and how they should feel. Through surveillance, structure and rigidity, adults have begun the process of domesticating childhood.

Childhood has a different way of “.... seeing, thinking, and feeling” (Rousseau, 1911/1963, p. 54). As adults, we cannot even begin to understand a child’s innate way of life. Yet we continually tell ourselves that we know what is best for our children. Ignoring the informal learning and self discovery that takes place in children’s everyday lives, we enroll them in school and extracurricular activities so that they can begin to grow as individuals. However, this does little more than impose our thinking and way of life on our children. Some children as young as three years old are forced to enter a school system completely controlled by adults. They are no longer allowed to slow down, but instead must follow rules, regulations, schedules and structures dictated by others. Learning is no longer guided by self discovery, but instead controlled within the parameters of the curriculum. Appropriate play and imagination occur only in the allotted structured time.

Education should delve more deeply into the nature of childhood if it is to become meaningful for children. Think of all of the things we have learned through informal play, self discovery and active imagination: creativity, problem-solving, ingenuity, compromise, independence and teamwork, among other things. Most importantly, we learned about ourselves as individuals, about who we are- our likes and dislikes, our strengths and weaknesses. Education should facilitate the opportunity for this to occur naturally rather than being the architect of these experiences. Instead of forcing children to learn meaningless subject matter dictated by adults, schooling should allow children to slow down and explore the world at their own pace. Honoré (2004) writes,

Whenever people talk of the need for children to slow down, play is always high on the agenda. Many studies show that unstructured time for play helps younger children

develop their social and language skills, their creative powers and their ability to learn.... Unstructured play is digging for worms in the garden, messing about with toys in the bedroom, building castles with Lego, horsing around with other kids in the playground or just gazing out the window. It is about exploring the world, and your own reaction to it, at your own speed. (p. 265-266)

Schooling should encourage children to use their innate skills such as play and imagination so that they can make meaningful connections with their experiences and interactions.

Through rigidity and control, adults continually try to domesticate childhood. However, in telling children what to think and how to feel, we only limit their individuality and ability to think critically for themselves. We cannot allow children to lose their voices in childhood. After all, it is in childhood that our search begins to find who we are and who we will become.

Jeff Baxter

My interest in environmental education led me to choose *Chapter Ten: Earth Connections from the book The Holistic Curriculum* (2001/2008) to present to the class. Upon reading this thought-provoking chapter I found some quotes to use for my critical reflection. In discussing Moffett's contributions, Miller (2001/2008) states that

Career education, where people choose careers based on economic factors. Career education is thus reduced to some kind of economic model, and, as a result, many people feel alienated from their work and cannot wait until their retirement...Thomas Merton once called this process 'the mass production of people literally unfit for anything except to take part in an elaborate and completely artificial charade'. (p. 163)

I believe that the majority of school systems play a huge role in the formation of students who have a 'school-equals-career' mentality. From my point of view, I believe that schools are a means to an end for the needs of a country's labour force. I speculate that this is the case in provinces throughout Canada as well as most countries worldwide. Influence of this cannot be blamed solely on the government, but pressures from society at large. Directly, parents of the children want them to be competitive in the job market and believe that structured learning of hard skills is the path to success. Pressure to master skills earlier and earlier is becoming the norm. And the earlier the student masters selected subject skills, the "smarter" and more successful society often thinks they are. In terms of younger age groups, I feel that the amount of time that children are really allowed to be children is becoming lessened. It seems that rather than truly learning they are being primed for the workforce. Those in their teenage years are pushed towards post-secondary choices that render the highest wages, benefits packages, and job security. While much of this attitude is based on good intentions relating to financial success, I believe it can be damaging in the long run, both to the individual and society as a whole. Certainly, job markets may be flooded with students who "made the grade," but society picks up the pieces of the unhappy and unsatisfied.

For instance, from my personal experience I remember choosing my university degree based on what was seen as a better choice of a degree leading to a career. A Bachelor of Science in Kinesiology seemed more valued than a Bachelor of Outdoors Adventure Leadership, which I was passionate about. Certainly, there was more opportunity for better paying jobs in the science field, and so, I chose payment over passion. My Bachelor of Science degree was an un-inspired challenge that left me awarded a transcript of mediocre grades and a list of human science facts

that failed to inspire. To make the most of the degree, I worked through a seven-year career as an ergonomist.

Not that I don't appreciate having the opportunities - I did, but I know I would have probably been a happier, healthier, and more productive member of society if I had followed my passion. My mental state was reduced to that of feeling a zombie-like sensation overwhelming me. Each day I would wake-up to go to work, clock seven-point-five hours and then go home and prepare for the next heart-wrenching seven-point-five hours to start. I lived for weekends, but they were not enough. I planned surf trips to warm water locations, but it didn't suffice. I felt like a drain on the government system and a failure to myself. And all this with one of the highest paying, most job secure ergonomist positions in the country. My peers deemed me a great success. I had solidified myself in the ergonomics community through volunteer projects and my research and publications. However, even with all of this, I was not satisfied and felt like my successes were irrelevant.

It took years to convince myself that success should be based on my terms; that this belief was okay. As long as my trek through life did not place hardship on anyone else and I achieved a financial level of independence, I decided I could do anything I wanted. I am now on that journey, to be an educator; perhaps not in a formal setting, but an educator none-the-less. I feel as though I will be a much more productive person in my new lifestyle and I feel that my positive attitude and demeanour will echo in those around me, benefiting society.

I believe that I had to learn this about myself over time. It is so important that we get to know ourselves and trust our passions. Society's definition of logic is not always the best to follow--other's judgment of your success can be misleading. I believe that schools and formal

educational institutions do students of all ages a disservice when they encourage career education.

Linda Neault

For the purpose of this reflection, I have chosen the following quote by the Dalai Lama:

Compassion is based on a clear acceptance or recognition that others, like oneself, want happiness and have the right to overcome suffering. On that basis one develops some kind of concern about the welfare of others, irrespective of one's attitude to oneself. That is compassion. (Miller, 2001/2008, p.21)

Compassion for others is a wonderful goal for all to strive for and practice. In the context of mainstream schooling, instead of employees hiding behind their curriculum and theories, I believe they should actually connect with the souls of others holistically. They should see their students as whole human beings and go beyond just the cognitive. To connect with the mind, body and spirit would allow growth in a more compassionate way.

Mainstream schooling has become too mechanical and competitive. Too often, we teach the necessary curriculum and we encourage students to become individuals to obey the rules of schooling. In too many cases, they are only "good" students if they abide by the rules of the classroom. Too often, we do not allow them to connect with other students in a compassionate manner. Instead, we become divisive and teach them to conquer one another by labelling many students and creating environments which promote isolation. We further push many of those students that are labelled as "high-risk" into isolation. There is little compassion shown to many of these students. Instead, too often when I was a social worker I witnessed students being directed to the principal's office and dismissed from school. It is sad that so many are subjected

to this treatment, all because of, I believe, a lack of compassion from the teacher, administrators and other students.

It seems that too often those who work in mainstream schooling are so focused on the Ministry of Education guidelines and delivering the curriculum that they cannot see the whole human being sitting in front of them. They see a student that has to abide by the rules and learn the curriculum. I have not seen many mainstream school employees go beyond the curriculum and actually connect to the soul of the student.

I want to share an experience that I encountered during my teaching practicum in my Bachelor of Education program. I was teaching in a grade 1 class and was quite excited to be surrounded by these young children. I loved their energy and ability to be so open and spontaneous about their learning environment. I saw one child sitting in a chair with his head down on his desktop. I went over to his desk and proceeded to begin a conversation with him. The teacher abruptly stopped my conversation with this child and informed that he suffered from ADHD and that no one was allowed to interact with him-- not even the other students in this class! I was appalled and asked why no one was allowed to speak to him. She explained that this was her way of managing such a bad child in her classroom. I was also instructed by this teacher that no one was permitted to hug a child or touch a child. Immediately I knew that I was going to have a negative experience in this classroom. In fact, it made me second guess the teaching profession altogether. I thought that if all teachers were like this, lacking compassion and respect for their students, I could not become involved in this profession.

We all have the right to happiness and to learn ways to overcome our own suffering. Suffering is part of being human. In mainstream schools, we need to teach our teachers to look

beyond the small world of curriculum and to look at the student that is sitting in front of us in a holistic manner. Mainstream schooling needs to be revamped and compassion and empathy needs to be incorporated into all aspects of the system. School employees need to be encouraged to take a risk and to ask all of those in the building how they are feeling about their own real world, to look at their world and have compassion for what these people face every day outside of the classroom.

This is such a rarity that I remember when I was in grade seven I was going through a very rough time in my world outside of the classroom. I remember a teacher actually asking me if I was alright. I remember feeling shocked that a teacher would ask such a question. Of course I denied that anything was wrong in my real world. I thought that I was not permitted to discuss my own personal issues in an educational setting. I was taught that school was for learning educational curriculum and that you left your problems at home. How unfortunate! Not only did I have this idea about schooling, I also brought this perspective into the working world.

Conclusion

In summary, some share the opinion that compassion should be placed at the forefront when dealing with people whether they are younger or older. Those dealing with young people should promote the concept of compassion and experience benefits of connecting on new levels. Eventually, kindness, empathy, reaching out to assist others would replace the notion of competition and individualism present in our society today. In terms of schooling, success is not about grades, it is about compassion and engaging in a holistic manner. Of course, all the while we must be careful not to merely impose this but to create learner centered democratic environments where this way of thinking and acting permeates naturally.

Together, these teacher narratives provide insight into the need for discussing alternative schooling that leads to action-- Awareness is the first step to action. While most of the authors of these narratives have no formal experience in alternative education, they all express how valuable such alternatives would be to both teachers and students. It is their hope that more people will become aware and access the benefits of alternative education, and that other education systems will take note, awakening them to the need for holistic learner centered democratic alternatives. We would like to end with an inspirational and hopeful quote from Paul Goodman that reminds us that we can all make a difference. Even if it's changing how we interact and engage with the young people that we meet in our own lives and context we can make a difference by acting in holistic learner centered democratic ways. By transforming ourselves and how we act we necessarily transform the world because we are a part of the world. Paul Goodman writes the following:

Suppose you had the revolution you are talking or dreaming about. Suppose your side had won, and you had the kind of society you wanted. How would you live, you personally, in that society? Start living that way now! Whatever you would do then, do it now. When you run up against obstacles, people, or things that won't let you live that way, then begin to think about how to get over or around or under that obstacle, or how to push it out of the way, and your politics will be concrete and practical. (quoted in Holt 1994)

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Biographies

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Jeff Baxter is completing a Master of Education in Curriculum Leadership at Nipissing University. His research is focused on the long term impacts of international teaching practicums on pre-service teachers, specifically a group that taught in Cameroon.

Linda Neault is currently a full-time Master of Education student at Nipissing University. Her main interest is the role of education and its implications for high risk students. Employed in the social work field for the past 25 years she has worked with students with addictions in schools and has a passion for exploring programs that will benefit high risk students.