

Abstract

In this paper I want to share how my now six-year-old daughter learned how to write her name, recognize numbers, read some words and draw. By doing so I hope to offer an alternative to a schooling-centered curriculum that would have us believe that the only way to learn these things is to have an expert train young people to do these things.

Methodologically, this paper is a narrative. I also consider this paper to be a political piece of writing. For me writing politically in this paper means, in part, engaging the reader in a dialogue about, on the one hand, trusting and respecting young people's right to learn what they want, when they want, how they want and, on the other hand, imposing an externally directed curriculum on them. I am arguing in favour of the former.

How my now six-year-old daughter learned how to write her name, recognize numbers, read some words and draw: A narrative

Dr. Carlo Ricci

In this paper I want to share how my now six-year-old daughter learned how to write her name, recognize numbers, read some words and draw. By doing so I hope to offer an alternative to a schooling-centered curriculum that would have us believe that the only way to learn these things is to have an expert train young people to do these things. In addition, a schooling-centered curriculum would have us believe that there are right ways of teaching these skills and that there are certified experts who are trained to do so. On the contrary, I wish to suggest that what we should be doing instead is trusting ourselves and our children by allowing them to learn these things in their own way and at their own pace, if and when they choose to do so.

Methodologically, this paper is a narrative. Gannon (2009) writes, “Much narrative research claims empirical authority. Researchers make truth claims about their data, and analyses are grounded in the sense that narratives are real telling by real people about their own real lived experiences” (p. 74). I also consider this paper to be a political piece of writing. In a chapter titled, *Writing Politically*, Saltmarsh (2009) writes,

It is such a politics of truth that mobilizes central debates affecting all professional practice fields, often played out publicly in what are commonly referred to as the “science wars”, “history wars”, “reading wars” and “culture wars” that have emerged as ongoing sites of contestation. Whose views of science, whose versions of history, whose conceptualizations of literacy, and how we might collectively engage in the interpretation and meaning-making from

which images and texts—these issues are central to the “truth games” (Foucault, 2002) at play in these ongoing struggles over epistemological and discursive legitimacy. (p. 141)

For me writing politically in this paper means, in part, engaging the reader in a dialogue about, on the one hand, trusting and respecting young people’s right to learn what they want, when they want, how they want and, on the other hand, imposing an externally directed curriculum on them. I am arguing in favour of the former.

I must admit that there are cases where learning how to write ones name, recognize numbers, read some words and draw tasks are difficult for some. These are rare exceptions. Mostly, those who experience difficulty do so either because they are not interested or they are being hurried to do something before they are ready.

So, how did my daughter learn how to write her name? Honestly, I really do not know and I do not think anyone really can know. Nevertheless, the best I can gather is that she learned how to write her name by understanding that there is a connection between writing and names. When she first tried to express this connection on paper she would just scribble something and she would come to me and tell me that what she had done was write her name. We said nothing to discourage her from believing that this is what she had done. After all, scribbling is just as valuable in learning how to write, as babbling is in learning how to speak. She then used similar scribbles to write notes and sign cards for people’s birthdays. In other words, she did this while engaging in genuine real life activities. Eventually, she must have realized that scribbles were not enough and that she needed to use letters. So, she practiced her letters and asked the very occasional question about the letters she wrote. The important part in all of this is that she was doing

this because she wanted to and not because an external authority told her that she had to. Soon she started to master writing her letters as she wrote them on the page. Eventually, she asked about the letters that make up her name and she started writing those on a page. Initially, some letters were missing, some were mis-formed and almost none were in the correct order or in the correct place on the page. Still, we said nothing to her. At some point she realized that the letters need to be in a certain order. She eventually did this and started writing her name. What I find most valuable in this account is that she did all of this on her own, without outside interference. She learned to ask the right question at the right time and we knew enough not to say anything more than simply answering the question that she asked.

My daughter learned about numbers in a similar way. At first she would practice and recite numbers in no particular order. Then she eventually realized that order matters and she learned to recite them in the correct order. Now, how did she learn to recognize numbers? She learned to recognize numbers by engaging in everyday tasks. For instance, she enjoys watching television and realized that to do this she had to use the remote control. The remote control has numbers so she learned about numbers. She also wanted to call her grandparents, aunts, cousins and friends and consequently learned numbers by using the telephone.

Print is in more places than where I have mentioned so far and so she, I know, used all of the resources around her to make sense of the print that she would see. For example, I recall times when she was seated in our car and we were either stopped at a red light or driving along and she would point out to me the numbers and letters that she would see on signs. The reason I bring this up is simply to make the point that to read

and write letters and numbers and drawing is a natural part of living in our world. We live in a print culture and we are surrounded by print. Children absorb the rules of speech and the rules of eating, in the same way they absorb the rules of letters and numbers and drawing.

Having said all of this, if I wanted to, I believe that I would have been able to hurry my daughter to learn how to, for example, read sooner than she did if she were left on her own to discover. I use the word “may” deliberately, because if she chooses to resist or is not interested, I may not be able to. At the age of four, I would not have called my daughter a reader, but I know that she did know how to read some words. For example, I know she knew how to read all of our (her family members) names. She knew how to read the days of the week and she also knew how to read *start* and *end* and many other words that I did not even know that she knew. She knew how to read our names because she sees them in print, on birthday cards, and on mail that we received. When she chose to write, she often wanted to write our names and the like.

In part, she learned how to read the days of the week because our oven has the days of the week digitally displayed and she was interested in knowing when events that we mention to her would happen. So, for example, when we told her that we were going to a certain friend’s house on Saturday and it was Wednesday she processed the information. She would go to the oven on occasion to see what day it was. She did the same for the time. So, if we told her that we were going swimming at four she would go to the oven to see what time it was. She could also use an analog clock. She could do this because she received a watch for her third birthday. When she got it I thought that it would be awhile before she would be able to use it correctly. She asked to put it on her

wrist one day. I helped her to put it on. I would do that, I thought, just to amuse her and because it would be cute to see her wearing a watch. What actually happened, in fact, was that she asked me how to tell time. I mentioned to her that if the little hand is on the nine then it is nine and if it is on or close to the ten then it is either ten or close to ten. To my surprise, after that brief explanation she has been able to tell time fairly accurately. I think it is important to point out that I was surprised because I did not think she would be capable of doing what she did—this leads me to think, how often do we prevent young people from doing things not because they are incapable, but because we incorrectly think that they are not? Luckily, when she asks to try things I do not prevent her from doing so because I understand that I do not know her limits.

I knew that she knew how to read *start* and *end* because on our way to a friend's house that we had never been to before, she asked me about a map that I had. I handed it to her and I answered some of her questions about how the map works. I said to her that where it says *start* is where our house is and where it says *end* is where my friend's house is. She pointed to *start* and said "so we live here and our friend lives here where it says *end*". Again, I was impressed and surprised, even though you think I would now know better, and simply said that that was correct.

I will return to my earlier point about being able to hurry her through reading.. I thought about whether I should try. The harder I thought about it, the less of a convincing reason I could come up with why I should try and teach her how to read. I thought that I may be missing something, so I asked two groups of educators and administrators and (many other people since then) to see if they had a reason that I had overlooked about why I should hurry her to read. The reason why I asked the teachers and administrators is

that I teach at a faculty of education, graduate studies and I was teaching my course and they were there. By the way, I teach using unschooling in my classrooms (yes, it is almost possible). In the end, no one could come up with a convincing reason for why my four-year-old should be hurried to read. We mostly agreed that there is no reason for most four-year-olds to read other than because schools demand and expect them to. Besides, I almost feel that once children learn how to read, it will diminish the imaginative and creative ways that they currently read books. For example, when my daughter did not know how to read words, she would simply take a book and mostly make up her own words and story. Once she learned to read, the words directed her imagination and creativity.

My daughter learned how to draw in a similar fashion. For instance, her first attempts at representing people were scribbles and I would only know that it was a person because she would tell me that it was. Her abilities to represent human figures are now very sophisticated. She now includes plenty of detail including hair on those with hair and no hair for those without. Again, she did this without us directing her drawing. It just seemed that the more she drew the more she learned how to draw. This should not be surprising.

If, as I have suggested, learning to read, for example, is natural in our world, then why do so many people complain that schoolers cannot read?

Gatto (2009) writes,

To learn to read and to like it takes about thirty contact hours under the right circumstances, sometimes a few more, sometimes a few less. It's a fairly easy skill for anyone to pick up if good reasons to do so are provided. Exhortation isn't

sufficient, however, nor intimidation, humiliation, or the confusion of a classroom full of strangers. The only way you can stop a child from learning to read and liking it—in the densely verbal culture which surrounds us all with printed language anywhere we turn—is to teach it the way we teach it [in mainstream schooling]. (p. 152)

As well, I believe it is because, as I also have suggested, children need to want to do it and be ready to do it. If they are not, then they will resist. In the following Holt (1964/1982) reinforces what I suggest and adds some powerful additional reasons:

The stubborn and dogged “I don’t get it” with which they meet the instructions and explanations of their teachers—may it not be a statement of resistance as well as one of panic and flight?

I think it is almost certainly so. Whether children do this consciously and deliberately depends on the age and character of the child. Under pressure that they want to resist but don’t dare to resist openly, some children may quite deliberately *go stupid*; I have seen it and felt it. Most of them, however, are probably not this aware of what they are doing. They deny their intelligence to their jailers, the teachers, not so much to frustrate them but because they have other more important uses for it. Freedom to live and to think about life for its own sake is important and even essential to a child. He will give only so much time and thought to what others want him to do; the rest he demands and takes for his own interests, plans, worries, dreams. The result is that he is not all there during most of his hours in school. Whether he is afraid to be there, or just does

not want to be there, the result is the same. Fear, boredom, resistance—they all go to make what we call stupid children. (pp. 262-3)

Now, another important thing in all of this is that we never forced her to draw, write or read and so on. She just did it when she felt like it. Interestingly, my daughter attended a play program one morning a week with several of her neighborhood friends. What I noticed was that when she would be asked to paint or draw while in the program, it would be merely a slab of paint on the page. It probably would take her seconds to do. I never asked her about this but I suspect that the reason why her paintings when she was in the program looked so unsophisticated was that she was doing it not because she wanted to paint but because she was made to paint. I suspect that she would rather be playing with her friends than painting, so she complied because she had to, but resisted by doing as little as was required.. I believe she did this so that she could get it over with and move on to do what she really wanted to do which was go off and play with her friends.

I need to add a footnote to what I have written so far. I take my role as one who respects and supports children seriously and to that end when my now six-year-old that I write about in this paper was four, she decided that she wanted to go to school. I believe that she wanted to go because her friends were going. Although I disagreed with her decision, I consented because, after all, it is her life and I truly trust and respect her ability to direct her own life. She is a reader now and it is impossible to distinguish between what we were doing with her at home and what the school was doing with her there, so we will never know whether her schooling helped, hurt, hindered or was neutral toward her progress. Nevertheless, what I can say with confidence is that she was writing

her name, recognized numbers, reading some words and could draw well before she attended school. In addition, mine is just one story and there are many other narratives that people have shared about how children became proficient readers without schooling. My younger daughter who is now 4 is making similar progress and has decided, so far, that she does not want to attend school. She is well on her way to being literate, numerate and artistic. As well, I want to add that although I use ages to set context in some cases I want to remind the reader about what I said earlier with regards to whether a child needs to learn to read at an early age: I truly believe that people will be better off if they are not hurried and allowed to learn to read at whatever age they learn. In other words, contrary to what “experts” want us to believe there is no standard age for which a person needs to learn to read.

To add to the above point, Priesnitz (2000/2004) writes:

The reality is that given a stimulating, trusting environment, and some assistance when requested, children will usually learn to read. One place where these factors come together is England’s Summerhill School. Zoe Readhead...tells a story about one of the schools instructors. This woman was once a student at the school and did not learn to read until, she was a teenager—simply because she did not see the need. Readhead says the woman is grateful that her desire not to learn to read was respected, and that she is now an avid and skilled reader. (p. 79)

Similarly, Gatto (2003) writes,

In thirty years of operation, Sudbury Valley has never had a single kid who didn’t learn to read...So Sudbury doesn’t even teach reading yet all its kids learn to read

and even like reading. What could be going on there that we don't understand? (p. 58)

And Holt (1989) writes,

In any case, whether you are a “gifted” five-year-old or a terrified, illiterate twelve-year-old, trying to read something new is a dangerous adventure. You may make mistakes, or fail, and so feel disappointment or shame, or anger, or disgust. Just in order to get started on this adventure, most people need as much comfort, reassurance, and security as they can find. The typical classroom, with other children ready to point out, correct, and even laugh at every mistake, and the teacher all too often (wittingly or unwittingly) helping and urging them to do this, is the worst possible place for a child to begin. (p. 3)

And Gatto (2003) writes:

David learns to read at age four; Rachel, at age nine: In normal development, when both are 13, you can't tell which one learned first—the five-year spread means nothing at all. But in school I label Rachel “learning disabled” and slow David down a bit, too. For a paycheck, I adjust David to depend on me to tell him when to go and stop. He won't outgrow that dependency. I identify Rachel as discount merchandise, “special education” fodder. She'll be locked in her place forever. (p. xxvi)

In conclusion, admittedly I sometimes have lapses. Sometimes what I consider being helpful and trying to assist she considers interfering. The result of my interference is that she becomes disinterested in what she is doing. My interference takes the fun out of the activity and interrupts her learning. For instance, she is in the zone happily using

her imagination and creativity to experiment and my interference removes her from that valuable experience. I continue to work at trusting and respecting her to direct her own learning. In addition, if I do not interfere she is learning all kinds of ancillary lessons. For example, she is learning that she can learn on her own and that she does not have to rely on an external figure to teach her things. I believe that this self confidence and understanding is just as important, if not more important to her learning. I believe that learning to read and write letters and numbers and drawing is natural and something that children will enjoy doing as long as they are not forced to do it. So, I will continue to nurture and love my children and will not interfere with their learning, but just trust that they will learn.

Finally, Krashen and McQuillan (2007, October) write,

Free voluntary reading means reading because you want to: no book reports, no comprehension questions, and the freedom to put the book down when it is not right for you. It is the kind of reading nearly all literate adults do all the time. (p. 68)

They go on to write that,

Correlation studies confirm that students who do more free reading read better, write better, have better grammatical competence, and have larger vocabularies (Krashen, 1997, 2004; McQuillan, 1998)...Much research and many individual cases support the view that late intervention based on free reading can work for struggling readers, that there is no “critical period” for learning to read, and that improvement in literacy can occur at any age. (p. 68)

References

- Gannon, S. (2009). Writing narrative. In J. Higgs & D. Horsfall & S. Grace (Eds.), *Writing qualitative research on practice* (pp. 73-82). Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Gatto, J.T. (2009). *Weapons of mass instruction: A schoolteachers' journey through the dark world of compulsory schooling*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.
- Gatto, J.T. (2003). *The underground history of American education: An intimate investigation into the prison of modern schooling* (Rev. ed.). Oxford, New York: Oxford Village Press.
- Holt, J. (1982). *How children fail*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press. (Original work published 1964)
- Holt, J. (1989). *Learning all the time: How small children begin to read, write, count, and investigate the world, without being taught*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.
- Krashen, S., & McQuillan, J. (2007, October). The case for late intervention: Appealing books and no timetable are all some students need to break through reading. *Educational Leadership*, 65(2), 68-73.
- Priesnitz, W. (2000, 2004). *Challenging assumptions in education*. Toronto, On: The Alternate Press.
- Saltmarsh, S. (2009). *Writing politically: Reflections on the writing of politics and the*

politics of writing. In J. Higgs & D. Horsfall & S. Grace (Eds.), *Writing qualitative research on practice* (pp. 139-152). Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.