



UNSCHOOLING AND INCREASED CHILD CREATIVITY

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Unschooling and Increased Child Creativity

Creativity is the ability to create and formulate new ideas. An individual's childhood is the best time to nurture creativity. However, the traditional school system drains student imagination. Schools do not nurture many students' probing questions and ideas that engender creativity. Instead, schools label students who pose them as problematic and challenging. Creativity is an essential aspect of society because it allows people to have unique ideation, which has been essential for societal advancement. For example, in the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson posited that human endeavor is "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness," a radical new concept for his era. Albert Einstein famously said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge."

Without human originality, our everyday lives would be devoid of the comforts we take for granted. It took the imagination of Thomas Edison, for example, to conceive electricity before such a phenomenon could be realized. Without creativity, our world would not have music, skyscrapers, elevators, and many other astonishing creations we take for granted.

Creativity is the carrier of advancement, and unschooling, rather than the suffocating rote learning of traditional schools, is more the vehicle to ignite this creative spark in children.

The Harm of Traditional Public Schools

While traditional public schools were created 184 years ago, it was only from 1920-1970 that standardized schooling became compulsory for an expanding middle class (Paterson, 2021). The schools were geared towards American middle-class students who were assumed to aspire to employment in business. Therefore, education was delivered factory-style towards preparations for wage-earning jobs. The "factory model" school system emphasized “memorization, the punctilious performance of rote tasks, mastery of technical language” (Ellard, 2021, “The Real Story,” p. 1).

In 2023 many aspects of our society have changed; however, our school system has not. Many private and charter schools claim that they encourage questions and creativity among students. However, teachers cannot support and develop each child's curiosity due to the sizeable student-to-teacher ratio. For example, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), whose students are predominately Hispanic, Black, Asian, or of other Non-Anglo (PHBAO) status, has a 35.5:1 student-to-teacher ratio in its 9th and 10th-grade classrooms (LAUSD, 2023, p. 10). Many LAUSD teachers complain of classes exceeding 35 students. Large class sizes are a persistently contentious issue between them and the district (Baron, 2000). Studies have proven that students thrive in smaller classes (an average of 15). Data showed these students scored higher on tests and were more likely to get into college (Staff, 2019). Large classroom sizes are also arduous for teachers because of the extreme demand and attention children need. Other barriers that prevent teachers from developing creativity in large classrooms include the lack of education for teachers on how to nurture creativity, a large amount of curriculum needed to

cover, and the need to prepare students for standardized exams that do not test creativity (Sawyer, 2015). The large student-teacher ratio leaves creativity behind.

Instead of sparking creative minds, public schools have produced profoundly damaged ones. The number of teenagers with mental health issues continues to rise, primarily due to the stress and anxiety caused by schooling (CDC, 2021). Children from four to 18 are expected to wake up at 7 AM, five days a week, often not returning home until 4 PM. Children who participate in extracurricular activities often return home around 6 PM. Moreover, to succeed in school and get into a decent college, students study at least two hours daily, leaving children and young adults free to rest only after 8 PM, some 11 hours after starting the day. The number of hours many children spend on school-related activities equates to regular job hours. In addition, as children get older, they face even more tests, projects, and expectations. This can take its toll. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that seven out of ten high school students do not get the recommended nine hours of sleep a night (*Coronavirus Disease 2019*, n.d.). Teenagers average just over seven hours of sleep a night. Traditional schooling is wearing down children, physically and mentally, with deleterious effects.

Depression In Students

Concomitant with exhaustion, public school students are experiencing a decline in mental health. According to the CDC (2021), more than 42% of students felt persistent sadness and hopelessness. School settings significantly impact students' mental health, especially after the coronavirus pandemic. More than 37% of high schoolers experienced depression symptoms during COVID-19, and 44% continued to have mental health issues the following year (CDC, 2021). More than one out of 5 (22%) students seriously considered suicide! Moreover, 10% of students attempted suicide. Teenagers who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community, females, and

students of color had even higher numbers. For example, in 2021, 45% of LGBTQ+ students seriously planned to take their own lives (CDC, 2021). As of 2023, in the United States, post-COVID, 59.8% of youth who struggle with severe depression did not receive any mental health treatment (Youth Data, 2023, n.d.).

Identifying Unschooling

Unschooling is an educational philosophy that seeks to nurture a child's interest and desire to learn. The term unschooling was coined in 1977 by John Holt, a teacher, to describe the process of children being educated naturally in the natural world. Later, an educational writer and speaker, Sandra Dodd, dove deeper into the concept and created the radical unschooling philosophy. Radical unschooling families believe in "child-led" education and life choices (*What Is Unschooling?* n.d.). Unlike traditional schooling, unschooling does not follow any curriculum. Instead, it relies entirely on each child's curiosity, opening up a world full of learning opportunities that public school teachers cannot give each student. Since unschooled children are directing their learning, it allows them to learn subjects that pique their interests. Unschooling eliminates unwanted and unnecessary classes and lets children decide what they want to learn.

Unschooling Advocates

There are many other benefits to unschooling. In a 2013 survey of 232 unschooling families, the benefits of unschooling included improved learning, better attitudes toward learning, improved psychological and social well-being for the children, and increased closeness, harmony, and freedom for the whole family (Gray & Riley, 2013, p. 1). Jay Williams, a former middle school teacher who chose to unschool his kids, said, "The #1 benefit for unschooling that I've seen is the relationship between parents and child" (Brosbe, 2022). Children who become teenagers tend to grow apart from their parents. Unschooling advocates claim that the amount of

time spent together between parent and child creates a closer relationship, building a more connected family.

Unschooling is also a less stressful way of learning and managing a student's social life. A frequent concern about pulling a child from a traditional school is that it would limit social interaction. However, over half of unschooling families said that their children showed emotional and social advantages that they felt unschooling gave them. Their children were less stressed, happier, and had improved self-esteem (Gray & Riley, 2013).

While the actual term unschooling was created in the 1970s, the phenomenon has been around for decades. For example, Charles Dickens (1812-1870), considered an eminent Victorian writer for writing classic novels such as *A Christmas Carol*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Great Expectations*, was unschooled. During his time, unschooling was not a word yet. However, Dickens self-educated himself in the form of unschooling. His mother taught him basic skills, like reading, but most of his early education was self-taught. Many other creative people went through a form of unschooling, including Thomas Edison, Bertrand Russell, Billie Eilish, and her collaborator-brother, Finneas. In fact, in the last three centuries, creators - inventors, philosophers, and authors - were mainly "unschooled" and educated themselves on topics they were interested in (Duignan, n.d.).

Standardized education is far from the only option for a successful life. Steve Jobs eschewed college to work at Atari Corporation as a video game designer before becoming the founder of Apple and a celebrated technological innovator. Moreover, the road to success in the creative arts is littered with high school dropouts such as Johnny Depp, Tom Cruise, Walt Disney, and Quentin Tarantino, for example. Education for creativity is often too structured for a

person to nurture their creativity. These unschooled individuals educated themselves on their interests.

Measuring Creativity

Creativity in this paper is defined as the ability to conceptualize original ideas, as measured by The Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT), which determines a person's creativity levels. The TTCT was created by Ellis Paul Torrance in 1966 to measure a person's fluency, flexibility, and originality. TTCT has demonstrated precise accuracy and reliability worldwide through application and verification in more than 2,000 research studies in 35 languages (Alabbasi et al., 2022). In the 1930s and 1940s, Torrance encountered students labeled "difficult." Torrance believed these students were sent to boarding schools because of their unusual ideas. Torrance became inspired by the book *Square Pegs in Square Holes* (Broadley, 1943); the title refers to when someone does not fit into a place or situation, much like how creative people do not fit into traditional schooling. Torrance suggests:

All students have creative abilities that can be enhanced; it is more critical to recognize and harness the abilities of those students who may have behavioral and learning issues because of their different way of thinking or those from underrepresented populations whose abilities may not be identified on traditional I.Q. and achievement tests (Alabbasi, 2022, "The Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking: A historical review," para. 3).

Children learn differently, whether as visual or auditory learners. Their way of studying may differ depending on how a student learns best. Hence, recognizing and enhancing each child's natural creative abilities is crucial to nurture imagination.

Nurturing Children's Creativity

As children's creativity can empower society, adults should take a proactive role in encouraging it. Traditional schooling provides education in four core subjects: English, math, science, and history. These classes barely spark curiosity in children as they are text-based, and the instruction is passive; the student sits and listens. Students are anxious about these subjects; however, good grades are crucial to college admission. Obsession with grades obscures learning. Instead, students memorize data and terms that will not be needed after the test. The purpose of learning is to take in information, and the pressure of getting acceptable grades diminishes this effort (Knesek, 2022).

Adult Contribution

Adults can be critically essential mentors in nurturing a child's natural creativity. The constant pressure young students receive makes learning very difficult. However, learning itself while building creativity does not need to be difficult, and adults can very much be a contributing factor. In a *New York Times* best-seller, *The Importance of Being Little: What Young Children Really Need From Grown-ups*, Erika Christakis, a child educator, emphasizes the difference an adult can make in encouraging a child's creativity but warns that it does take effort to undo years of damage tradition schooling does to children. "We can't expect every child who's spent daily life sitting upright in a classroom chair or slouched over a screen to wake up and spontaneously exclaim, 'Give me an empty cardboard box so I can turn it into an elephant sanctuary!'" (Straus, 2019) These bursts of imagination only happen if changes are made in childhood students are getting the attention needed for creative growth (Strauss, 2019).

Children's Inherent Creativity

All children are born with curiosity and creativity, and the traditional schooling system slowly disintegrates. In a demonstration of this, a preschool class recently outperformed the

University of California undergraduates in an assessment to evaluate their ability to solve challenges with an unfamiliar machine. Kyung Hee Kim, an educational scholar and creativity researcher, discovered that K-12 students' performance on the TTCT has declined more than a full standard deviation in one generation (Strauss, 2019). It is estimated that 85% of children today are less creative than their 1980s "twin," and younger children experienced a greater decline (Kyung, 2019). The decrease was specifically in children's emotional and verbal expression, imagination, humor, idiosyncrasy, and ability to associate unrelated concepts (Strauss, 2019). Kim refers to a "creativity crisis" in American culture and suspects that students' childhoods are lacking "free play" and "unstructured time," followed by pilings of standardized tests and very slim academic goals (Stauss, 2019).

Adults concerned about child development often only focus on the academic part of their child's growth. Adults need to start valuing children's playtime so that "the new generation can grow into more creative adults who will solve problems we can't yet imagine" (Strauss, 2019). Creativity allows people to have a different perspective toward problem-solving and are more open to change. A society that has disconnected from creativity will become diminished in many areas. Society would not be able to maintain open minds or overcome prejudices. Moreover, a society lacking creativity loses its all-important innovation (Carson, 2023).

Conclusion

The flexibility of unschooling opens up the freedom for young children's creativity to be nurtured. Creativity is often lost in a society that thinks highly of academic achievement. The traditional schooling system does not cultivate the creativity children are naturally born with; instead, it pushes it aside by prioritizing grades and core subjects. Unschooling should be the

future of youth education, which enables outside-of-the-box thinking and supports all ideas, no matter how obscure they may sound.

Exhausting children by sending them to a public school every weekday is not beneficial for an adolescent; extensive schooling will only overly structure a child's life. After traditional education, most adults continue to live a very structured lifestyle due to their mundane jobs, which mimics the effects of traditional schooling. Unschooling is the alternative to nurturing a child's innate creativity. Restricting someone's childhood through redundant schooling will only lead to a steeper decline in children's creativity and a void of creativity and innovation.

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