

Claiming our democratic rights

By Carlo Ricci

Abstract:

Using autobiographical research this paper reminds us that schooling and education are not the same things and that mainstream schooling is an undemocratic institution that “dumbs us down.” The paper also makes the point that we need to slow down and rethink why it is that we are pressuring and hurrying our children to do things in school and in life earlier and earlier, and we need to understand the damage that this is doing to them. Ultimately, the paper insists that we need to reclaim our democratic rights as children, parents, teachers, principals and citizens.

Introduction:

First, I want to scream at the top of my lungs that **SCHOOLING AND EDUCATION ARE NOT THE SAME THINGS** and that schooling is undemocratic; in fact, I believe that schooling, as John Taylor Gatto (2005) wrote, “dumbs us down” (more about this later). I am an advocate of unschooling. In short, unschooling is where you trust, respect and understand that education is not an externally imposed recipe, but that it is something that comes from within and, most powerfully, it is something that we do all of the time (Holt, 1989). Unschooling children are allowed to unfold. The best definition of education that I have come across is by Holt. He writes that, “Living is learning. It is impossible to be alive and conscious (and some

would say unconscious) without constantly learning things” (Holt, 1989, p. 157). I understand that not all children can be unschooled, for various reasons, and so for those who are not unschooled I argue that they should be taught within a learner centered democratic environment. To clarify, I am using the terms learner-centered and democratic in a way that Jerry Mintz (2004) does. He defines learner-centered education as “an approach that is based on the interest of the student rather than curriculum driven, where someone else has the idea of what you ought to be learning,” and he defines democratic education as “education where students are actually empowered to make decisions about their own education and if they are in a school their own school.” There are many examples of these types of schools; for example, the Albany Free School, Sudbury Valley, and Summerhill just to name a few. Why am I so passionate and worked up over this? Simple, I believe that children are among the last acceptably oppressed groups and that we need to advocate for their rights. We need to free the children from the confines and prisons of modern schooling (Gatto, 2003).

I want to scream even louder for us to SLOW DOWN! We need to rethink why it is that we are pressuring and hurrying our children to do things in school and in life earlier and earlier, and we need to understand the damage that this is doing to them (Elkind 1988; Honore 2004; Honore 2008). We need to understand that all children are being damaged physically, emotionally, and spiritually by this-- even the ones that seem to be flourishing and doing well in school and in life. More profoundly, I believe that mainstream schooling damages all those that walk through its doors whether they are aware of it or not.

Along these lines, in the revised edition of *How Children Fail* Holt (1982) did an interesting thing: He left the original text as is and he added his current thoughts. This resulted in

a very engaging text to read. In one passage that reflected his current thinking, he wrote the following:

Since I wrote this, I have stopped believing that “schools,” however organized, are the proper, or only, or best places for this. As I wrote in *Instead of Education* and *Teach Your Own*, except in very rare circumstances the idea of special learning places where nothing but learning happens no longer seems to me to make any sense at all. The proper place and best place for children to learn whatever they need or want to know is the place where until very recently almost all children learned it—in the world itself, in the mainstream of adult life. (p. 296)

Connected to this Holt (1990) wrote in a letter addressed to Ivan Illich dated 24 May 1978,

In the last year or two I have found myself really *hating* schools with an intensity that seemed to me almost irrational, and that I could hardly explain even to people who agree with me a lot.

I feel grateful to have Holt’s words because they echo so much of what I feel. Reading Holt and interacting with others that share similar beliefs makes me feel that I am not alone and the external support and validation by others is empowering. For me, that schools hurt all who come through its doors is a given. They force us to be other than who we are and to learn what many are not interested in and this must affect us spiritually, physically and emotionally. The following by Gatto (2003) provides us with an example of how all students are damaged by schooling, dumbed down and the dangers of hurrying schooling:

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)

When I was a school teacher I was supposed to fail a student who read incessantly because he refused to read the assigned class novel. Even though he read more than any other student in the room, and even though the complexity of what he read was above what we were doing in class. In addition, I was supposed to prevent him from reading in class so that he could focus on what we were doing. Does anyone else find this wrongheaded and damaging?

Personal Nightmare:

At this point I would like to share with you an incident that has recently happened with my daughter's schooling in an attempt to continue to highlight the undemocratic realities of schooling. First, given all that I have said, I need to clarify why it is that she is in school. Although, I do not want her to be there, I believe that the decision of whether she is in school or not is not mine nor her mother's, but needs to rest with my daughter. The truth is that she was excited to start school. This is not surprising given that all of her neighbourhood friends go to school and that all of her television friends go to school and that so many people around her have made such a big deal about her approaching school age. Add to this that she has never been to school, other than a few hours a week for about a year at the City of Toronto Early Years Centre programs and Parks and Recreation independent play programs, she was excited.

She has now been in school for three days (September 2007) and I will share with you what happened within that time. On the second day she came home and we were seated at the

dinner table and she was just talking. She was not upset or anything, she was just sharing what has happened with her schooling so far. She mentioned that she was not allowed to sit beside her best friend. Incidentally, her friend being there is one of the biggest reasons, if not the biggest reason, for why she wants to go to school. As well, she mentioned that during snack time she is not allowed to talk to her friends, drink water from the drinking fountain. Furthermore, she mentioned that she did not really like the snack that was provided for her. You see, parents take turns providing snacks for all the children every day. This seemingly good idea is problematic because the children and their parents do not even get to decide what the children eat. The children have to eat whatever is provided whether it is healthy or not and whether they like it or not.

She was also given homework (in junior kindergarten!) that she did not do and we did not think much about it at the time. I was so frustrated that I came home and emailed a friend of mine and school board trustee to ask if he could clarify the homework policy for me. As for my daughter, I know she did not really understand that she had to do it, and we did not pay any attention to it. The next day, because she did not do her homework and schools are what they are, I thought that I would be a good parent and go to the school and share with the teacher Annabel's life history in an attempt to partner with the schools—an apparent big push from the Ontario Ministry of Education (they have made funds available for parent organizations and created parent groups and so on). Sadly, it's obvious that what is meant by parents partnering with schools or having more of a say in their children's schooling is that parents are expected to follow school orders and to make sure that their children are being compliant. Clearly, schools and The Ministry do not want a true meaningful partnership where they and parents work to make the best learning environment for children. And even more foreign would be to give

children a real and meaningful voice. Again, free schools and unschooling are living examples that show that this is possible.

What I thought would be a relatively easy and pleasant exchange turned into a nightmarish experience. I felt like a character in a Kafka novel. At first, I was alone with Annabel's teacher and I explained to her that Annabel is enjoying the experience and she loves to learn and that I hope that flame will not be extinguished by the schooling system in the way that it happens to so many. I explained to her our philosophy and approach to parenting and that we hoped that she would respect that. On many issues she seemed to agree (for example, the sitting with her friend, the talking, and the drinking fountain). She suggested that Annabel misunderstood some things and that she would clarify it the next day—maybe Annabel did? However, the teacher initially did mention to me that Annabel talked during snack time with her best friend and I simply reminded her that if we want children to be literate it is important that they talk—and what is wrong with talking during her snack time or most times anyway? We should be encouraging children to share their stories with each other. It builds creativity and communication skills and on and on. Not to mention that it is the ethical thing to do. Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff (2004) write,

What's the best way to master language? Years of research provide the answer: It's not with drills or computer programs, but with daily conversation that gives the child motivation and allows time to respond. When children interact with real people in a social context, they are motivated to express their needs, thoughts, and feelings. (p. 61)

This even makes intuitive sense, if you want a child to learn language, and I believe schools do, then allow them to talk and do not silence them, PLEASE!

Teacher oppression:

In a recent issue of *Professionally Speaking: The Magazine of the Ontario College of Teachers*, Browne (2007, September) writes an article about the results of the fifth annual survey of their members which highlights teacher dissatisfaction: When asked whether they are satisfied with the schooling system, “only 54 per cent say they are satisfied with it in 2007” (p. 55). As well, Browne writes,

This year, teachers indicate unexpectedly low levels of satisfaction. Only 78 per cent are happy with the job they are doing, while 70 per cent are satisfied with their school and 73 per cent are satisfied with the profession as a whole. (p. 55)

Now, just to clarify, I mentioned that children are oppressed in schools but so are adults; for example, teachers and principals. Teachers are oppressed because they are expected to, as one board document says, embrace and implement the curriculum. Teachers are not to question or to create in a professional way, but, really, they are expected to act as subordinates. Principals, on the other hand, are told that their job is to ensure that their teachers embrace and implement the curriculum. As well, principals are told and trained that they are agents of the board, which essentially means, that they need to do what the board says. One principal student of mine shared how during the day she had a parent come in and complain about the homework her child was getting and so she defended and supported the board’s homework policy, and that very night she went into her child’s school and she complained about that very same policy and how it was affecting her child. So given this fear and duty, I believe that my daughter’s teacher thought that

it was best to summon a, what I assume to be, more senior teacher (I will call her teacher 2) that she team teaches with.

The meeting:

The frightening thing is that teacher 2 seemed to embody and try to defend so much of what I believe is wrong with schooling today. I began my story all over again and I explained that Annabel is so responsible because she is use to having so much freedom which results in her being responsible. I left out some issues that I think we agreed upon with teacher 1 and I thought I would focus on the homework issue. I simply said that we are not going to make her do the homework, they could send it with her but if she does it she does it. The teacher told me it would take only ten minutes. She did not agree with my point that I do not care how long it takes, I care that Annabel has a choice and that we are not going to make her do what she chooses not to do. The truth is that she writes all of the time. She loves to write and she can write all of her numbers and letters and has been able to do so for a long time. And, another truth is that the homework that the school is sending home for her to do, to put it bluntly, is useless for her. They want her to print the letter "T" and "t" over and over again in a confined space. You may recall having to write within the lines of writing books when you were younger. Ultimately, Annabel loves to write and part of what she loves about it is the freedom and creativity she has in making her letters as she plays and manipulates the pen. Sometimes she just likes to doodle with the pen and she likes to make letters all over the page and of all different sizes and sometimes modify them in interesting ways. Why? Because she wants to!!!

She was also given a book to read. When I mentioned to teacher 2 that flashcards are not the best way to teach children how to read, she was shocked and said that they do not use flashcards. I explained that whether it's in a book form or card form makes little difference. The book had a word on one side and a picture on the other. They were flashcards made into a book. The book was about the same size as flashcards as well.

Another thing that frustrates me is that a person very close to Annabel with whom I have shared the story with, said to me that she did hear Annabel say that telephone starts with "T" and so school must be working. I reminded her that Annabel has been doing this for awhile and, in fact, I could name almost any word and she could tell me what it starts and ends with. I am afraid that her abilities will be attributed to what the schools are doing when, in fact, she can do things despite schools and she has been doing them on her own. I do not want to take the credit for Annabel's learning either, because the truth is that she has learned everything she has learned on her own and so the credit needs to go to her. I answer her questions when she asks them, but the questions come from her.

Briefly, when I mentioned that I was against grading and judging students, again teacher 2 looked horrified and said that she disagreed with what I was saying. I just want to say that we cannot know anyone's future potential. As well, how cruel is it to take a child who has been disadvantaged because of out of school factors (abuse and so on) and then have them come to school and label them as deficient and later put a number on that deficiency. This deficit mentally and this practice is simply wrong. Given the impact that these judgments have on children's perception of themselves and self images, we need to stop this shameful practice. And, as Alfie Kohn (1993) argues all students are punished by rewards like grading, even the seemingly successful ones.

Teacher 2 then asked if I understood our system of schooling and I shared with her that I did. I am a tenured associate professor in a faculty of education, graduate studies program, I have taught in elementary and secondary schools and, most importantly, I have a continuing interest in schooling that I research on my own. With regard to my own schooling, I want to make clear that I was a “poor” student in high school and, in fact, did not initially get into university because of my low grades. I say that I got my degrees from a university, but that I got my education on my own. Schooling was in the way of my learning. I could not read and focus on what I wanted to read and focus on because I had to read what I was asked to read and so on. Back to teacher 2, she suggested that I am familiar only with the alternative because that was what I was talking about and that I did not understand the research behind mainstream schooling. When I asked for names behind the research that she kept appealing to, she could not come up with any and when I asked her if she had explored alternatives she admitted she had not. I ask you, who is in a better position: someone who has read only one side or someone who has spent time researching and witnessing other orientations to education? We need to put a stop to mindless schooling, and we can, given the will. I urge you all not to take my word for it, but to investigate and implement democratic learner-centered alternatives on your own.

Ultimately, we agreed that they would send homework home, but my daughter would choose whether she wants to do it or not. They argued that they are the child`s teacher. I argued unsuccessfully that I am her parent and, most importantly, Annabel is her own person.

Finally, I just want to assure those that are interested in exploring democratic learner-centered alternatives but are afraid that by doing so their children`s future opportunities will be compromised. For example, many still buy into the myth that post-secondary institutions are an important step to happiness. For those that do, understand that there are many, many ways of

getting into post-secondary institutions or careers without a secondary school diploma. Many universities, for example, allow students in with a portfolio and so on. The one I want to focus on is Athabasca University. It is a fully accredited Canadian University and its admission policy reads,

Athabasca University's general admission policy has one formal undergraduate student entrance requirement: students must be 16 years of age or older. Students under 16 years of age may be admitted with special consideration by petitioning Coordinator, Registration Services. An underage student's admission application form must be accompanied by letters of support from the student's high-school principal or designate, and a parent or guardian. (Athabasca, 2007-08)

You can work from your home or wherever you choose or you can attend their campus. Why don't more of us know about this and the other alternatives available for our children?

Sadly, Annabel came home the next day with more mindless ``Ts`` and ``ts`` to write and this time she did them as soon as she walked in. I am left to wonder if and how the message was subtly conveyed to her that this is something that she must do. I also am left to wonder that this is the information she volunteered during our dinner conversation, and who knows what other damaging influences she was exposed to that I am not privy to.

Ultimately, we need to reclaim our democratic rights as children, parents, teachers, principals and citizens. We need to explore more democratic alternatives that prove to be working without grades, without homework and without coercion. We need to challenge the mindless myths that have become so ingrained in mainstream schooling. We need to face up to the reality that far too many children and those working within schools are so dissatisfied and

being damaged. It's beyond time to explore meaningful and substantive democratic learner-centered alternatives like unschooling and free schooling on a larger scale.

As I reflect on this article and prepare it to go to print (September 2008), I want to share two experiences I recently had with you. First, a few weeks ago my daughters and I were walking through a local mall and my girls noticed that people had thrown money in a fountain. This led to a discussion on making wishes and so they asked if they could. I gave them each a coin and told them that their wish could be kept secret. My oldest daughter Annabel, who is now preparing for senior kindergarten, said that she wanted to share her wish with me. I said that I would love to hear it. In short, she wished that school would start soon because she misses it. I have to say that she is well aware of its flaws and shares many of them with me. We have insightful conversations where I come out so much more enlightened and usually more resolved and frustrated by schooling.

The second thing that I want to share is that the board has implemented a new homework policy:

At its April 16 Board meeting, TDSB trustees endorsed a new Homework Policy for implementation in September 2008. "This builds on our existing policy and reinforces homework as an engaging and relevant learning activity," said System Superintendent of Program Karen Grose. (New Policy, 2008)

It goes on to read in part, "Homework should not be assigned to kindergarten-aged children. Rather, families are encouraged to engage in early learning activities such as playing, talking and reading together in English or in the family's first language". I like to think that my email to the trustee may have helped the cause along. Is this a victory and does this make schooling better?

Of course it does not. The change is so minuscule compared to the changes that are required to make schools democratic in the way that I suggested earlier that it renders this change virtually insignificant. For my part, I continue to hope that my daughter becomes so disillusioned with schooling that she decides to leave. In the meantime I continue to talk to her about and I continue to disagree with her decision to attend, but I do continue to consent to her right to lead her own life.

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Biography

Carlo Ricci currently teaches in the faculty of education's graduate program at Nipissing University and he founded and edits the online Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning (JUAL). He tries to incorporate the spirit of unschooling, democratic and learner centered principles in all of his classes. Everything of value that he has learned, he has learned outside of formal schooling. He has never taken a course in school connected to what he now teaches and writes about. He has taught in elementary and high school. He has also taught in undergraduate, teacher education programs and graduate programs. His personal schooling experience as a student and later as a teacher has inspired him to revolt against institutional schooling. He continues to heal from the wounds inflicted on him by formal schooling. He has two daughters ages 3 and 5 that he hopes will decide to unschool.