

I have experienced a wide variety of educational methods, including Waldorf, Montessori, homeschooling, public school, private progressive school, and now private progressive boarding school. I have been inspired to create a school that is supportive and relevant to the needs of students today. I wanted to identify what I value most in a learning environment, and to develop a mission that reflects those core values. I distilled all of the important components of a healthy and supportive school environment into three fields: community, creativity, and individuality.

My painting contains all three of my core educational values. Community is shown in the positive communication and exchanges between the people in the painting. Creativity is shown with colors and actions. Individuality is portrayed by the various actions in the painting (dancing, reading, or conversing). The clothesline in between the balconies is a symbol of connection, compassion, empathy, and understanding. I drew inspiration from illustrations that inspired me as a child to explore and examine the world around me. I believe that not only should education be inspiring and encourage children to think creatively, it should also allow them to delve into the things that evoke wonder and imagination for them. This painting is a portrait of imagination, creativity, and community, all traits that schools should inspire and cultivate.

Painting is new to me and, therefore, it is intimidating. The medium itself speaks to one of my biggest goals in education: the fear of failure is faced head-on and used as a learning tool. Being encouraged to try new things and make mistakes is what allows children to explore their creative abilities. Education should be a tool of empowerment, a tool in which children can discover their natural love for learning and define their own success.

Lila

Before reading this paper, it may help you to understand my personal involvement and interest in this subject. Throughout my life, I have experienced a variety of educational structures and methods. Starting in a Montessori preschool and kindergarten I moved into a small public school, and then into a larger public school which I quickly transitioned out of and into the world of homeschooling and unschooling, followed by a year of Waldorf education and then two different progressive private schools. Having experienced an array of schooling methods, I was inspired to study the philosophy of teaching and pedagogy. For some reason I have always known that I want to have kids, and that I am interested in the possibility of becoming a teacher. It is my belief that every human being has a natural love for learning. I think these notions are due to the way my parents raised me with love, acceptance, support, and trust, and also because of how I have come to recognize my passionate love for learning. Many children, however, never want to go to school, hate the learning environment, and don't get the opportunity to enjoy the wonderful things that a learning environment can provide and facilitate. I have experienced this displeasure with my learning environment only once before, and the problem was never that I did not want to learn. The problem was always the fact that there were flaws in my learning environment that caused learning to become very difficult for me. This problem was partly rooted in social discomfort, and partly in the lack of respect and support that I received upon attempting to rectify the problems. The environment was distinctly lacking in compassion and a sense of community, and under this structure I could not feel safe or happy enough to learn. This feeling can be detrimental to a child's perception of what learning is and can be, and so I want all children to be able to enjoy a safe and happy environment which encourages them to be happy, to learn, and to grow into independent individuals. There are some things I have always responded very well to, one of which is being given trust and respect. When I feel trusted by my teachers I take personal responsibility and I work harder to do a good job in return. Being respected by my teachers gives me every reason to respect them, and also to respect my peers and the general environment; this is an example of why I am interested in educational philosophy and psychology. I have strong beliefs and values about education because I care about people; I care that children are in an environment in which they can learn, grow, and thrive. I believe that a part of human nature is the genuine desire to help, love, and share joy with others, and so I'm passionate about creating a learning environment in which the youth of this world can be encouraged to shine to their fullest. I believe that all children are born good people. Fostering a positive environment in which children can grow is like watering plants, making sure their soil is filled with nutrients, and putting them in a sunny place so they can grow to be their most beautiful, radiant, productive and successful selves. In this environment, one does not tell the plant how to grow. A daisy cannot be made to grow into a tomato, and an artist cannot be made to grow into a chemist, so the purpose of a school is not to *create* learning and growth but simply to provide what is necessary and best for learning and growth to happen. I do believe that some learning environments are unsuccessful gardens in which plants are more inclined to wilt and be malnourished. I am interested in finding successful ways to facilitate growth and learning just as a successful garden provides a beneficial environment for plants to grow and prosper.

When I was ten years old I was given a standardized test packet, a No. 2 pencil, and the vague reassurance that it would be over soon and that recess would follow. The fluorescent glare lent a white sheen to the front page with its robotic lettering. A teacher sat in front of the class with a big stack of papers and read the rules out loud like a mechanical drone, delivering the information with a bored look on her face. It felt like a plethora of rules that dragged on, and when she was finally done she told us all to lay our napkins on our desks so that she could bring

around wintergreen mints and pretzels during the test. Being given a snack was an exciting bit of incentive, but not enough to shake a subtle fear that wafted through my mind. *What if I'm not smart enough? What if I do badly? What if I get the answers all wrong? What if I'm stupid?* I couldn't help but look around me and wonder who was going to get the answers right, who was going to finish the test earlier than me and then put their pencil down smugly while I struggled to maintain my focus. I filled in the circles next to my chosen answers perfectly, just like the example had shown on the front - not a check mark, not partially filled, and not outside the line. I hoped that they would take into account how perfectly I filled in each little circle. After hours of finishing page after page that read "Go on" in the bottom right corner, the other kids had all finished and I wasn't done. The teacher from the special ed room came in and brought me to her room to finish my test. There were colorful little toys that you could squeeze and play with to help you focus. The only other kid in the room gave me a funny look and turned his head away. "Here," she said, "you can finish your work in here because you need extra time. You get forty extra minutes, so no rush." What a considerate gesture. I was happy to be given extra time, but I didn't like the special ed room. There had always been a special ed room in school, but it was for kids who couldn't speak correctly or needed extra help understanding their math, the "less competent" kids. I had never been sent here before. I never thought of myself as "special." I didn't like the segregation of the regular time kids and the extra time kids. What was wrong with me? Was I different?

Later on in life, I was lucky enough to realize that being different was exactly what was wrong with me. The thing is, we are all different; each and every one of us is one of a kind. Not even identical twins are the same person even though they are the result of a single egg splitting and allowing two embryos to grow. The genes shared between identical twins would make one think that they must be clones of each other, but not even twins can be the same. This means that human skills and talents vary in every way possible. Although test taking can be used as one form of assessment, the ways in which we use it are becoming outdated (if they were ever valid to begin with). Howard Gardner, a well known developmental psychologist, author, and the Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education at Harvard University, poses theories about the multiple embodiments of human intelligence. He suggests that there are many more forms of human intelligence than the few we have given attention to in the past. These different types of intelligence include linguistic, musical, logical/mathematical, spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, and emotional intelligence. His theory does not quantify or measure intelligence, it simply suggests that we have intellectual potentials which we may not be taking full advantage of, or putting to complete use. The forms of intelligence which are given most of the attention in testing (and in schools in general) are predominantly logical and linguistic, while the other types of intelligences which he has identified are neglected. (These include musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, and personal intelligence.) This understanding of human intelligences brings up an important point about the elements of educational structures that are lacking. Based on Gardner's theories, there are flaws in many existing educational structures because they do not address what is truly conducive to learning. It is imperative to the future of education that every child's varied skills and talents are valued and honored properly in the school environment (Gardner). Allowing children the freedom and positive structure to grow into their complete potential as creative, diverse, dynamic people is crucial. Without this, students not only undervalue and mistake their true potentials, but also cannot hope to lead the world in positive ways. There are many aspects of the learning environment that are overlooked in traditional education, but today's deeper understanding of childhood development and intelligence allow

exceptionally supportive progressive education to develop. Education that teaches students to be good at a specific uniform set of skills does not allow students to learn first hand, instead it constrains human capacity to do only that which it is told (Dewey). Allowing students to grow in an organic and supportive environment is important in implementing the growth and education of young people. As Ken Robinson puts it, “You cannot predict the outcome of human development, you can only create the condition under which they will begin to flourish.” In preparing future generations to take the world into their own hands, we must provide education which leads to curiosity, passion, knowledge, skill, and success.

To many people success means money. Money means comfort, not worrying about survival, and enjoying luxuries and fun things; fancy cars, a mansion, a big pool, and lots of parties. To others, success means happiness; some see success as freedom, or pursuing dreams, or raising a family. The pursuit of success is a natural, human drive, no matter what form it takes. We all desire success in one way or another and are driven towards achieving it (Markham). In many cases, people’s ideas of what success is simply take the form of whatever they think will make them happy, or whatever they have been told to believe will make them happy. If this means traveling the world, people may pursue a life of travel, if it means getting a job on Wall Street, then so be it. All people are simply doing what they can to achieve success in whichever way they believe they should. All people deserve to be happy, so in a learning environment it’s important to provide whatever tools and resources students need to enable them to achieve their own success. The purpose of an education is “to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way one achieves their own identity” (Baldwin). Allowing students the freedom to reach within and grow into their own identity is something that allows them personal success.

In my classroom I would provide students with a broad awareness of the world outside. This means possibilities for them, issues in the world, what is being done to solve issues, what can be done in the future, and so on. Awakenning a sense of compassion for the environment can be cultivated with outdoor learning, a strong community, and classes which focus on current issues and solutions. It’s important to nurture people’s natural ability have to care, empathize, and make positive change.

Education is a broad term and can refer to many different things, but it’s important to remember that learning is the goal in education. Teaching can occur, but if nobody is learning the goal is not being fulfilled. To teach is not only to offer knowledge and train skills, but to facilitate learning (Robinson). In facilitating learning, my goal is to allow students to find direction and interest within themselves so that they can become independent, competent, and happy young adults. For a strong learning environment children can benefit from many supportive and positive values fostered by their teachers and supported by the structure of the learning place. Some values include love, acceptance, kindness, joy, compassion, respect, creativity, curiosity, inspiration. These values can be nurtured by forming habits with rules and standards, exploration of interests, strong support from teachers, a broad and diverse curriculum, outside school opportunities, social interaction, freedom within a determined structure, positive discipline, and experience (Robinson). Allowing students to feel safe and happy in school is the first step in providing an environment in which they can explore, inquire, and define their own lives. My mission is to provide education as a tool with which children can embrace and discover their natural love for learning, find inspiration, and pursue whatever they may define as their

own success while benefiting the world. The values I regard as the most important in achieving this mission are creativity, community, and encouragement of individuality. All of these things should be actively cultivated and challenged within an environment that is encouraging, positive, supportive, loving, and accepting.

For children to grow, they must be encouraged to think limitlessly and creatively. In many ways, young children are the most uninhibited imaginative thinkers and are very creatively capable (Robinson). Creativity should be highly valued and developed in education. To nurture creativity in children's thinking, the classroom must be grounded in positivity and encouragement rather than fear and punishment. Methods that stigmatize mistake making, for example, discourage students and educate them out of their creativity (Robinson).

Suzanne Kingsbury, an author, editor, publishing consultant, and writing coach, finds immense creative success in the power of positivity. In her writing workshops and retreats, participants don't exchange any "deconstructive feedback," which is thought of by many people as "*constructive feedback*." Writers in her class are not allowed to deconstruct each other's work *or* their own work. Suzanne's extensive experience and research has lead her to knowing that the amygdala begins to work in reverse when self criticism takes place, and centers of the brain which allow creativity to happen begin to shut down. These survival methods are based on a fight or flight instinct. The centers of the brain shut down in order to have more energy to either fight or take flight. This applies to the creative process. In a hunter gatherer mentality it is crucial to ask, "What's wrong with this shelter we built?" or, "What's wrong here, are we in danger?" in order to survive. This poses the question; "What's wrong here?", rather than, "What is right here?" When people receive positive feedback rather than deconstructive feedback, the amygdala does not work in reverse, and the brain does not shut down creativity. Positive encouragement allows people to take risks in the learning process because they do not fear that their mistakes will be stigmatized. A process that is free of deconstructing student's work does not mean it doesn't improve student's skills, in fact, improvement is the focus. Suzanne constructively provides her students with a myriad of tools that help build more upon their pre-existing writing strengths. Suzanne says, "I *never* stigmatize in front of the group during my workshops, I just give tools. If a student comes to me and says 'I want to build a house,' I give them a hammer. Without this they may have never known they needed a hammer." Suzanne's method is a powerful way to build student's skills up rather than tearing them down, and has proven to improve student's writing skills an enormous amount. This method of giving positive feedback and offering constructive new tools can also apply to Science, Music, Art, Math, Humanities, or anything that is being taught (Kingsbury).

Practically every educational system in the world has the same hierarchy of subjects. Math and Language, then the Humanities and Sciences, and then the Arts. Within the arts, there is also a hierarchy in which visual art and music are prioritized and given more attention than drama and dance. This hierarchy in education is based on what was thought to make the most sense based on the career or future that a person was pursuing. The most useful subjects for work and a career are at the top. These values are based on the industrial world and meeting the needs of industrialism (Robinson). Skills and activities that kids and students may *enjoy* more were thought of as impossible things to succeed in, growing from the mentality that said "You won't ever get a job doing that" (Robinson). This mentality discourages students to think creatively and express themselves using every possible form of their intelligence. The use of the imagination and the production of original ideas is an important part of the way humans function, relate, communicate, and innovate; successful and revolutionary ideas must come from a place of

creativity. Being limited or encouraged to focus mainly on academics over arts structurally limits the possibilities for young, creative minds. For children to truly learn in schools, maintaining interest is also crucial. According to Katherine Michiels (Founder of the Katherine Michiels School), the primary goal in elementary level classrooms is for the children to cultivate and maintain a joy of learning. Individualization of the learning environment allows students to take responsibility for their own learning and reach their full potential in whichever way they feel most passionate. Valuing every realm of interest and expression to be equal is important in allowing students to find their own enjoyment in learning. Facilitating an inspired and creative environment does not, however, mean disregarding challenge or structure. In fact, challenging the creative mind can be much more difficult than fact learning or following instruction, although these also have a place in the learning process (Michiels). Creativity should be also be encouraged and nurtured because engaging in creativity helps people become very activated and open to learning (Rhombert). When students feel excited by making something or participating in an activity, their brains are being stimulated and they are able to enjoy their learning process. This embrace of the creative process and imagination can look like the difference between telling a student to follow the directions in a science lab to get an intended outcome, or telling the student the end goal and asking them to use their creative thinking and reasoning to reach their goal. Both of these methods have merit depending on the intention of which skills and abilities are being practiced, but allowing variety is important so that children are able to think in a variety of ways. Most people thrive and feel more successful and happy when their creativity is engaged in some form (Rhombert).

For me, creativity has always been a huge part of the learning process. I light up when teachers mention an artistic option; I love to make things with my hands, think up visual ways to display an idea, and work towards understanding ideas and concepts in a variety of ways. In my experience in Montessori, Waldorf, and also private progressive schools, I have always seen that kids are inspired by the opportunity to make something. In my Waldorf experience I found that by focusing on playing outdoors, creating art, dancing, building, and socializing, I felt engaged and stimulated all the time. I grew as a leader because I was the second to oldest, and my multi age class of ten kids taught me how to work closely with others.

Supporting creativity will undoubtedly take many forms in the classroom. One way for this to take form is the creation of art, projects, visual representations, songs, skits, videos, or sculptural models. Using the body and the mind together to create something allows engagement and critical thinking and pushes students to solve logistical problems and learn through experience. Allowing an artistic option is important so that students, who for example, think more artistically than logically, can make a physical representation or an artistic poster instead of taking a logical approach.

In the case that my classroom consisted of secondary school ages, I would support creativity by giving students a variety of choices whenever there was a project assigned. The options would include the creation of art or performance, a written piece, a scientific study or approach, or any other representation of their learning that they could come up with and suggest to me. For primary school ages I would offer projects and fun, engaging activities each day such as gardening, building, visual art, storytelling, playtime, puzzles, games, and outdoor time. Each of these activities engage students and contribute to developing different parts of the brain, but each of these activities also allow students the opportunity to explore their interests in an environment in which they are also learning community skills. Many progressive schools today emphasize community building.

Building a strong community can be an integral element of the school environment. The Katherine Michiels School in San Francisco considers building relationships to be a core value, saying, “We believe that building compassionate and trusting relationships is the foundation of a safe learning environment. Strong bonds between children, teachers, administrators and parents all contribute toward creating a space where each person is valued and respected as an equal member of the community” (Philosophy and Core Values). The school is for preschool and primary school ages, however cultivating a positive and supportive community is important in any learning environment. Eric Rhomberg, a science, math, and Spanish teacher in a middle and high school environment holds community in very high esteem, saying, “At Compass School, we state having a positive impact on the world as a part of our mission . I like the design of Compass, and how community oriented it is. It gives students a community experience, which leads to learning about consequences and conflicts, and how to work them out. I experience great joy when I feel like a part of a community. I like to feel actively engaged.” Eric points out that community is a value, a choice, and a belief, so he wants to help orient people in that way because he wants everyone to feel community minded. In his teaching experience he has noticed that working together in a community builds on itself exponentially. He recognizes the view that the world is a competitive place and that it’s more important to compete to get what you want, and that protection from harm is the pathway to happiness, stating, “When someone has that value I cannot argue that this is wrong. Orienting towards community mindedness is simply a value that I feel in my heart.” Paul Lacy, the author of “Growing Into Goodness” describes the value of community as “the matrix in which young people can develop the trust and self-confidence essential for the risk-taking required in education. In community everyone can learn to take responsibility, to follow or take the lead. In community we can learn to give and receive love.” (Lacy).

It’s difficult to imagine teaching without imposing any personalized values upon students, for everything taught in the classroom is taught for a reason or with an intended outcome. I am of the mindset that we are *born* capable and talented. Education should not be an institution that impresses specific skills and values upon students, it should be a place of organic growth (not without structure, simply allowing of choice and preference) and development where students go to become strong and independent people who are prepared for the challenges of the world today. The world is changing rapidly, especially because of the technological advancements that have been developed, and are currently developing, in the 21st century. To keep up with this technology it is crucial that we are teaching students something other than the date of the Louisiana Purchase. Although history is a very important educational tool, this should be a tool used to teach about how the humanity functions so that we can use it for the future. If children are the future, we should prepare them for the future. Students should be given a vast assortment of tools in a toolbelt, taught how they can use the tools if they choose, shown the incredible things they could create with them, and then encouraged and supported as they begin to build their own creations. It would be my hope that the environment would cultivate a community that would inspire students to make gardens and houses and new technological solutions rather than bombs or weapons that harm humanity.

Throughout my experience as a student in these different educational structures, I have seen success and passion emerge consistently from projects that support student’s values. Although students should not be commanded to think a certain way or learn things they have absolutely no inclination to learn, being completely neutral and unbiased is impossible to do as a teacher. Eric Rhomberg, Assistant Director of The Compass School in southern Vermont makes a valid point

about being objective. He points out that although sometimes it is advised that when teaching you must be objective and not impose your value upon students, he believes it's impossible not to impose. "I don't have that power, what you believe is a choice and something that fits for you. Neutral doesn't exist because everyone has values, so I can't help but express my values. As a teacher I never want to impose things on students, I want to be open minded and allow them to be different and individual, I think this is all good, but I have values and I am going to express those. People are drawn to authenticity in their peers and teachers, so I am teaching who I am, and being honest in my teaching. It's not intended to be persuasive and imposing, it's just real and honest." (Rhombert). Eric points out that there are certain values which he holds above others, but that he is not actually capable of making students believe one thing or another, they are capable of choosing what they believe. He supports students in their varied beliefs and interests, and by accepting each student as they are, he receives positive feedback and cooperation. This is something that is reflected in his classroom which is always full of engaged and curious students who feel free to be excited about their learning experience.

A learning environment should be a place where students are developed within, not a place where they are told to conform, to sit down and be quiet, or to have ideas imposed upon them day after day. It is a place that allows the positive growth of young people into the capable people they can be.

A school is a place children should love to go; it should be a place where students are inspired and happy and excited, where the natural hopefulness and creativity of youth is put to powerful use and set off into the world. Schools should be a tool with which children can embrace and learn about themselves, find inspiration, and pursue success. It is my hope that children of my generation and future generations can exploit our creative capacities and make more and more schools into sanctuaries that foster these same values. I am devoted to making my own life everything it can be, and to sharing my experience and improving the experiences of those around me. I have great love for the world and the people in it. I support education that allows children to grow into happy, healthy, successful adults.

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