MindShift

Can Any School Foster Pure Creativity?

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By Cevin Soling

How do we promote creativity in schools? This is one of the prevailing concerns of many progressive ethically wrong with suppressing creativity in children. The correlation between creativity and self-actualization seems implicit. Presumably, children's aspirations include a meaningful personal engagement with whatever it is they want to achieve.

Creativity can be broadly defined as the phenomenon of developing new processes, constructs, or ideas. But can creativity be measured? Just as with measuring intelligence, the challenge of measuring creativity is complicated by lots of different factors, including the current temperament on any given day of the child whose creativity is being measured. That's why it's important to understand how data is used in tests that are designed to quantify creativity as a single number. Measuring creativity typically involves evaluating the quantity and originality of responses to prompts that do not demand a specific answer. For instance, a child could be asked to come up with as many original or unusual functions as he can conceive for a toy airplane, or ways he would want to alter it to make it more fun.

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With regards to research involving creativity and children, two recent studies are of particular note. One study reveals that since 1990, Torrance test scores, which are designed to measure six components of creative thinking, have marginally declined each year. This test measures the quantity, originality, intensity, and degree of detail of novel ideas, as well as the individual's capacity to consider a range of possible solutions. And when output requires a title, the title's degree of novelty is evaluated.

While this research broadly examines a trend in American culture, another study investigated specific individuals over time and revealed that self-reported conceptions of creativity markedly decline after second grade. Whereas 95 percent of second-graders self-reported being creative, only 5 percent of high school seniors believe they are creative.

The most readily apparent inference to be drawn is the significant role that schools play in this reported decline. The hows and whys are evident. Creativity is based on thinking unconventionally, having time to daydream or simply reflect, understanding that there is no single right answer, and appreciating and valuing failure. All of these experiences run counter to what's measured, and thus valued, in the public school system. This conflict is precisely what reformers seek to resolve, although the strategies have been somewhat vague.

Because schools must work with large numbers of students, they're perpetually bound by the limitations of bureaucratic efficiency. Discipline, order, and obedience must be maintained, and while the degree of enforcement varies among schools, this level of order defines the institution. Curricula may have dramatically changed since the inception of compulsory schooling, but the autocratic design remains unchanged.

Because of the emphasis on maintaining order in a compulsory school environment, teachers are compelled to adopt policies that adhere to the rigid requirements of the institution. And in turn, students who embrace conformity and deference to authority are better-suited in these environments. For teachers to engage with an entire classroom of students, everyone must be acquiescent. The inevitable outcome, as studies consistently show, is a widespread aversion to traits associated with creativity in the public school environment.

Even more disturbing is that characteristics associated with creativity, such as being impulsive and taking risks, are closely aligned with what the American Psychiatric Association considers to be symptoms of ADHD. In the school environment, creativity can be considered pathological behavior as opposed to the compliant traits of being reliable, sincere, good-natured, responsible, tolerant, and peaceable -- the qualities associated with the lowest levels of creativity. Further discordance between school structure and creative displays is revealed by the finding that creative students tend to cheat more than their less creative classmates.

TURNING SCHOOL UPSIDE DOWN

Promoting creativity would require an entirely new conception of public schooling. Teachers would have to be transformed into mentors whose mission would be to support the individual interests of each child and introduce them to new ideas and possibilities, which the student may or may not opt to embrace. Traditional testing would have to be eliminated -- tests implicitly teach that failure is bad and that there is only one right answer. Creative learning would be more effectively promoted by having students actively engage in their creative pursuits as opposed to being confined to a classroom.

It's worth noting that learning environments with these features already exist. For example, democratic schools such as Sudbury Valley and Summerhill provide environments where students are responsible for deciding what and how they learn, who they associate with, and what activities they want to pursue. The staff acts as mentors to support students as opposed to directing their thoughts and behavior. Roughly thirty democratic schools exist in the U.S. and while this may not be appropriate for every child, studies have shown that this climate promotes creative traits.

Given these circumstances, the idea of teaching creativity in an environment that requires assessment, evaluation, and grading seems unlikely, if not impossible. Even where opportunities to show creativity might be devised, students may be inclined to self-censoring: A student who wants a good grade may not feel completely free to produce something that might be offensive.

So what's the result? Creativity scores decline, and school administrators wonder why their efforts towards boosting creativity have failed. What's more, the paradox of expecting students to exhibit creativity in an environment that suppresses such displays becomes a breeding ground for neurotic children.
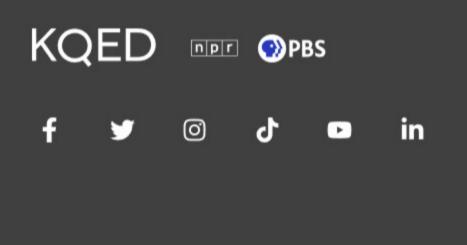
Barring a much-needed reinvention of the education system, there are steps that can be taken to promote creativity within the existing paradigm. Teachers can learn to recognize and respect that the child who cannot cope with the classroom environment might not be belligerent or have a mental disorder, but rather may simply have a creative disposition. Educators can also explain honestly to their students that the work they're doing in school may not foster creativity, but that they do believe in every students' innate capacity to be truly creative.

That kind of honesty will go a long way in enabling students to appreciate their innate creativity and provide them with greater fortitude and resources when engaging in creative pursuits outside of school.

Cevin Soling is the director of the documentary The War on Kids.

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