

3 Ideas to Prevent Schools from Killing Creativity, Curiosity, and Critical Thinking

Our current school system kills creativity, what can we do?

Published on May 11, 2011 by Todd B. Kashdan, Ph.D. in Curious?

As a kid, I grew up in an area on Long Island where the bodega across the street was off-limits, too dangerous for travel. My 6-year old rebellious mind didn't crave midnight motorcycle rides while swigging a bottle of jagermeister. Standing across the street with my twin brother, I could smell freshly baked rainbow square cookies and all I wanted to do was sit in an alleyway and munch on them until dusk. Not much has changed....that would still be a good day.

Try to find a principal or teacher that does not truly value creativity, curiosity, and critical thinking. At [George Mason University](#), where I teach, the motto is "where innovation is tradition!" But I don't care about inspirational posters, banners, and trite slogans, I'm interested in what happens behind closed doors. If we want kids to experience a sense of wonder and discover new information on their own (curiosity), if we want them to generate novel, adaptive ideas (creativity), and if we want them to derive their own perspectives and conclusions after a discussion (critical thinking), then the current educational system is a failure. Here are three related thoughts to change this trend. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, just a sparkplug.

1. Acknowledge Campbell's Law. If everyone knows what is being used to measure progress, expect corruption. Whatever is being used to make decisions about money, resources, teacher performance, and student performance is subject to distortion. Right now, the action is test scores. Instead of trying to figure out how to make time for play, music, and the arts, people in our school systems are hyperfocused on boosting test scores. Principals feel the pressure, this gets passed on to teachers, and in turn, you have students that see school for what it is- a factory where they are working to get high scores so that everyone can avoid the wrath of failure. Expect short-cuts and cheating every step of the way. How can the proper information for these tests be distilled the quickest? How can this information be retained the longest? How can we remove distractions? High stakes test is a recipe for obedience, conformity, perfectionism, and unnecessary health damaging strain.

2. Support the need for autonomy. If you want to steal a child's love of a topic, make it mandatory for them to follow precise guidelines of what they have to know and what is irrelevant. Don't answer tangential questions which will steal time away from the omnipresent syllabus (no time for intrigue!). If you are the principal, make sure that teachers and students know that you are always observing them. Deprive children of choices and alternative perspectives, and you might lull them into compliance. And if there are any behavioral problems, don't assume they are bored or having a hard time focusing for long periods of time during the day. Assume it is their personality and has nothing to do with the classroom environment. Punish them. Punish anyone and everyone who has extra energy, different perspectives, or challenges what is being said and taught.

3. Recognize how much effort is required to focus attention for long periods of time, persevere at challenging tasks, and stifle the desire to socialize with all of the people sitting around you. Children and adults alike do not have the brain power to sit and learn information for 8 hours per day (much less when the starting point is around 8am). Rather than viewing self-control as a mindset, a personality trait, a virtue, or a skill, consider it to be a renewable resource. Using self-control to direct our attention, delay gratification, resist impulses, or control our emotions, exhausts resources in the body. We have a limited amount of resources that can be

depleted. No matter how physically fit we are, exerting ourselves inevitably leads to some degree of exhaustion. Acts of self-control deplete mental strength in the same way that exercise temporarily depletes physical strength. But there is one important lesson from science: people can replenish their mental strength and with training, people can increase their self-control capacity (such that it will take longer to reach the point of exhaustion).

Try to find a principal or teacher that does not want the children around them to show greater self-control and willpower. What's the best way to replenish the mental power of children in school? To begin, politicians and school administrators can take a closer look at the first places that are cut from the curriculum: recess time, music, the arts, and sports. Kids need respites or relaxing activities. Kids feel more focused and energetic after these respites. In addition, nothing restores energy and focus more than passionate activities. There is a paradox such that when we do something that is mentally and physically challenging that we are passionate about, we should feel tired but in reality, we feel energized. Rock climbers scaling a difficult mountain route. Writers cranking out a fluid 6-hour writing session. Rapt attention during an emotionally intense concert, movie, or sporting event. Children need passionate activities. Not only are they enjoyable and interesting on their own, they serve to increase children's ability to concentrate, think intelligently, and derive creative responses in the classroom.

These are not opinions, the ideas above are based on science. If you want children to do well in school, give them dedicated time to play, sing, dance, build something out of wood, or whatever their fancy. There is a myth that time spent in these activities is time better spent cramming in more information for all important high stakes tests. Unfortunately, the brain doesn't work that way. We each have a finite amount of willpower and when this willpower is exhausted, carrots and sticks are not going to change this fact. Our brains need time for restoration and replenishment. Discover what kids are passionate about and set them free to pursue it. Let me repeat that, set them free. Do not overly structure their recess. Do not overly structure their play time. This is a time for them to recharge their batteries. In return, you will get a greater frequency of creative, curious, critically thinking youngsters. You will get attentive, engaged students.

Thankfully, there will always be curious and creative characters in our world. But instead of relying on serendipity, let's intentionally cultivate these characters. Unless we want the future to be in the hands of mindless drones who can follow directions and regurgitate information, it's time for a change...

Dr. Todd B. Kashdan is a clinical psychologist and professor of psychology at George Mason University. He is the author of *Curious? Discover the Missing Ingredient to a Fulfilling Life* and more recently, *Designing Positive Psychology*. If you are interested in any speaking engagements or workshops related to this topic or others, go to the Laboratory for the Study of Social Anxiety, Character Strengths, and Related Phenomena