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CREATING A FUTURE THROUGH THE POWER OF IMAGINATION

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ABSTRACT

   Imagination processes and creative tools have been used by individuals throughout time

to innovate around issues and perceive the world from unique perspectives. However, the arts

and other forms of curriculum that support creative processes are neglected and misunderstood

within traditional education. Traditional educators dismiss the value of imagination and tend to

assume that creativity is a frivolous pursuit. My question is why, why is creativity and artistic

expression in schools belittled and unappreciated? Is it because creativity is too difficult to teach,

or expensive to manage? Or is it because creativity produces outspoken deviators from the norm?

And what will happen if creativity is continuously dismissed in education? Many scholars and

alternative educators such as (Robison, Gladwell, Banaji, and Emilia), argue for the importance

of implementing more creativity, and imagination geared curriculum within education. The goal

of this project is to combine creative writing with guiding research as a way of analyzing how,

imagination/creativity contribute to personal development, from two intersecting angles with

pathos and ethos. I am using this project to unravel the ways in which imagination influences and

supports individuals to enable them to innovate around complex issues, and keep mental states

grounded in a growth-mindset. Through this piece I hope to demonstrate the urgent change that

society needs, to transform traditional schools from ones that focus on charts, and

standardization, to schools that instead focus on imagination and the betterment of their

individual students. My mission for this project is to determine the extent of imagination's

impact, through its many means of influence, on individuals and society.

Keywords: Imagination, creativity, traditional, alternative, education, standardization.

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INTRODUCTION

In this research guided memoir, I couple my unique educational experiences with outside research to evaluate the benefits and difficulties of being dyslexic and transitioning back and forth between standard school systems and several homeschooling systems. I will be using my first-hand personal experiences with alternative teaching techniques, and I will synthesize my experiences with the voices of many experts on alternative education. I will also demonstrate in comparison, how current traditional schools/programs and approaches can be dangerous and damaging to students in the short and long term, and present how I hope to change these shortcomings. I will analyze why certain educating techniques worked or failed for me, from a student and peer assistant perspective. The goal of this research guided memoir is to present a unique perspective on alternative education and demonstrate the importance of implementing alternative educational techniques into the traditional schools' curriculum. In conclusion, this project will hopefully demonstrate that creativity and a student geared holistic approach to education, can improve student engagement and wellbeing as well as provide community enrichment.

I am also writing this memoir now because I realized, in lieu of recent events, change is necessary in our society and therefore our education systems. I also want to use this project as my base going forward for further research into alternative enrichment school programs. This project is important to me, because I strongly believe that if we do not allow the approaches to education to evolve, the students and our society will continue to suffer as a result. In this project I also put forward that the way to change is through imagination, and if creativity is used in schools instead of standardization our students and citizens will have the opportunity to lead more balanced, happy, and open lives.

Chapter 1: The Power of Make-Believe

This chapter will focus on evaluating the importance and power of make-belief, as well as analyzing the effects of standardization that traditional schools instill into children during their early childhood learning experiences.

The preschool and kindergarten institutions in America originally sprang from Friedrich Froebel's Germany institution in 1837 and has since mutated from its original intent (Muelle 87). These institutions have continued to shape and enforce most of the budding minds of American children since the mid to late 19th century. Christina More Muelle, discusses the history and transitional phase of the kindergarten institution from Germany to America, and examines how it mutated from Frobel's creation to American modern education. Muelle explains that Frobel's original intent for Kindergarten was for it to be a socializing tool through play, by stating, "In his school, Froebel (1974) emphasized play, which started with simple activities and later progressed to more complex games. He felt that children should learn through play" (Muelle 87). These prep schools for children between the ages of 4-6 were to prepare young children socially before entering grade school, which in turn was meant to prepare them for higher education and for life.

Most Americans have experienced some form of education like kindergarten or preschool, even though it is not mandated in several states. However, because this concept was so widely embraced, kindergarten became the first level of standardization that students were introduced to. In the process of making and enforcing a standardized curriculum many students, unable to fit within the desired mold, either learned how to fake conformity or were rejected and outcasted in punishment for being unique. Being dyslexic, I found it impossible to fit into that standard mold required of me by my kindergarten teacher. The way I needed to be taught was beyond her processes of teaching within the standard curriculum that she was provided. So, instead of question

her way of teaching, she assumed either I was being stubborn, stupid or she was not drilling me hard enough, and only needed to push the same techniques at me until I eventually cracked and gave into being "normal". We will call my kindergarten teacher, Ms. Ann, and my image of her when I was 5 was rather like that of a crabby Witch, with a bleach stripped bob and sun worn wrinkles. She was my childhood bully, guarding the dungeon of my private catholic kindergarten, and I had no idea how I was going to fight back.

I remember my mother being frustrated, as I would come home crying almost every day, and be sick to my stomach when thinking about returning, because I kept getting punished for something, I did not even know I had. I was blamed for not being 'able-minded' and for presenting a challenge to the system she had dedicated herself to, a system that valued reading, writing and arithmetic over any other skill. Ms. Ann prided herself for being adored by other educational colleges and having extensive knowledge of the most effective ways to teach and mold young students, so of course, she just assumed I was a dud, unable to achieve the standard, a fluke. She hated that I would not learn, like it was my choice, she tended to treat me like a "degenerate", and therefore ostracized me from the rest of the "promising students", as if afraid that my stubborn stupidity would rub off on them. Ms. Ann had a star pupil, who I desperately wanted to befriend, but, due to her misguided fear of my accursed inability to conform, she would actively keep us separated, creating a hierarchy on the playground. Christina More Muelle explains that in the early to mid-20th century the kindergarten institution in America transitioned from one of necessary childcare for the working mothers of the industrial revolution to one of qualitative standardized competition. Muelle writes, "Measurement brought promise of efficiency for kindergarten. Since there were no immediate effects on the kindergarten, studies began to focus on teachers' efforts. Even though the first assessments were used for measuring the children's individual growth, the

teachers began to have a greater concern for standardization and efficiency (Weber, 1969)" (Muelle 89). As Weber and Muelle explain, kindergarten transformed into a form of competition for teachers to compare their ability to standardizes students efficiently. The student's individual growth and needs became secondary to the teacher's ability to effectively enforce a standard onto a large group of children. This pressure that is pushed onto teachers is dangerous, because it forces them to view students as unruly variables that need to be put into a mold for them to keep their jobs and or promote in the system that values standardization over individualism.

My dyslexia infuriated Ms. Ann, because it defied the "infallible standardized curriculum" that she held onto as the ultimate solution to preparing children for the harsh reality of grade school. Now, I did my best to fake the ability to read, write, and processes rapid fire memory questions to improve my standing with her, but there is only so much you can fake. Dyslexia is a learning disability that is neurobiological in origin (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998). In the article, "Dyslexia and the Brain: What does Current research tell us?" they discuss the neurobiology behind what causes dyslexia, they write, "Booth and Burman (2001) found that people with dyslexia have less gray matter in the left parietotemporal area […] than non-dyslexic individuals. Having less gray matter in this region of the brain could lead to problems processing the sound structure of language (phonological awareness)" (Hudson, High, Otaiba). They also pointed out that dyslexics generally have less white matter in the same area, meaning it is much harder for certain regions of the brain to communicate with one another. Malcom Gladwell also explains that a dyslexic brain struggles with using quick processing when it comes to words and sounds and "rapid automized naming" (Gladwell 100-101). Because the dyslexic brain has less gray and white matter in the left parietotemporal area, the ability to quickly recognize patterns in relation to sounds and words is increasingly more difficult, and for many, nearly impossible.

One of the strongest memories that I have of Ms. Ann, is when she was drilling me on rapid fire arithmetic questions that my dyslexic brain was unable to quickly process. At this point all my other classmates had finished and were permitted to leave the room and go eat the watermelon that my teacher had provided to them for snack time. Now my child brain has since morphed this memory with an emotional tint, but from my 5-year-old perspective, the room that I had been left alone in felt like a dark interrogation room, and Police Captain Ms. Ann kept drilling me on a question I could not process the answer for. It began to feel like a trick question, and that no matter what I said I would be wrong. Probably after the fifth time of answering the question wrong, Ms. Ann decided to change tactics; she dragged me from the dark "interrogation" room and into the main room where everyone else was happily eating watermelon. She began drastically gesturing at the number line that was stretched across our main room walls, yelling, and pointing at the big numbers, like that would help me get it faster. She was exasperated with my 'behavior' and threatened to take away my chance to eat the watermelon with everyone else. I could feel all the other student's eyes on me, my face was hot with embarrassment, for being the only one who could not get it. I felt stupid and alone, as words had failed me in their written and verbal form as a way to communicate or fight back. So, my last resort was to cry. Ms. Ann let up at that point, realizing her tactics where not going to get through to me that day. Because she was unable to deviate from and stretch her curriculum around my unique needs and was unwilling to consider the individual student first and the curriculum second, she failed to reach me every day I was there. This could have led me down a path of crippling anxiety towards school, or to refuse school as something I could do completely, due to the feeling of isolation and label of 'uncurable-stupidity' that Ms. Ann labeled me with. But because I was removed from traditional school in time, I eventually overcame these possibly damaging effects. These byproducts of standardization can and have left many

students who stayed in the traditional school system, with deep scars and distain toward school. Ms. Ann was unable to teach me how to read or write for the 2-3 years she had me, but she did teach me how to think of creative ways to fake my answers.

Standardized early education, presents many complications for teachers and for students, especially for those students who defy the parameters of the standard curriculum. Throughout history many famously known geniuses have struggled with and defied the parameters of standard education. Thomas Edison was one of these students, he was thrown out of school at 12 and called 'too stupid to learn anything' by his teacher. Pablo Picasso also struggled in school and was labeled with Dyslexia, Leonardo Da Vinci was said to have ADD, and Albert Einstein was described as 'mentally slow, unsociable, and adrift forever in foolish dreams' by his teachers (Schwartz). This struggle in some ways helped them grow, as they were presented with a mountain that they had to creatively figure a way around to keep up, where other students were able to simply conform to the path presented to them. This concept of the power of struggle is also addressed by Malcom Gladwell. He explains that because traditional schools value the ability to read and write, so fervently, that children with Dyslexia become outsiders, breakers of the mold in relation to standardization. Gladwell explains, writing, "Dyslexia – in the best cases – forces you to develop skills that might otherwise have lain dormant. It also forces you to do things that you might otherwise never have considered…" (Gladwell 124). However, this quote is looking at the best-case scenario for a dyslexic, I managed to use it to my advantage, but I had help. Many students are unable to learn from the ostracization, and instead become isolated and fall into juvenile delinquency, as my kindergarten teacher expected of me. For students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities, it takes a larger level of creativity and outside support to overcome the isolation and insecurities that standardization causes for them. The reason standard education does

not work, is because it assumes that everyone has the capacity to be standard and therefore can learn the same way.

The traditional education's goal is to create a manufactured result of each of its graduates from high school. As Sir Ken Robinson, a well renowned expert in alternative education, elaborated that standard education was developed during the time of the industrial revolution to mass produce workers who could fulfill simple and repetitive tasks (Robinson xxi). From kindergarten to high school, students are tasked to answer questions and not ask them, as they are programmed to absorb masses of information and then regurgitate the same information when asked. This process discourages make-believe and other creative play activities, which helps develop a completely different side of the brain that promotes innovation, flexibility, imagination, empathy, and a growth mindset. Make-believe represents the individual's active participation in creative processes of extrospection and introspection, and communal problem solving. If creativity and make-believe are discouraged in education, social empathy and internal emotional awareness will decay. Also, innovative practice amongst the common populace will decrease and people will become less resistant to manipulation. Florence Beetlestone examines how imagination and creative play help support social empathy and suggests that imagination supports emotional well-being in children as it works as "an outlet for the subconscious mind" (Beetlestone 77). Beetlestone also writes, "Imagination is a tool which children need to learn to use in a socially constructive manner so that they are less inclined to spoil each other's games, tell tales or hurt each other" (Beetlestone 77). I believe, as Beetlestone does, that children use their imagination and actively practice through make-believe games, empathy techniques and social habits. For example, my younger sister and I used to fight a lot, which I have noticed amongst siblings as being common, making getting along uncommon. Because I am dyslexic, I struggled to communicate with words,

as the English language had continued to befuddle and betray me. Also, my ability to read people's expressions or subtle social cues were difficult for me to decode. So, during social interactions, I generally felt lost. Even with my younger sister we struggled to communicate or understand each other at first. However, when we played with dolls/Barbies, and practiced social scenarios like fights, crushes, secrets, comedic timing, and arguments, I began to make connections to social causes and effects, making my own patterns, my key code to decode social cues. Without creative play, my sister and I would not have formed the close bond and level of understanding that we did.

Imagination also helps support and grow innovators along with empathetic well-balanced individuals. Tony Wagner explains that the future requires innovators, and that innovation requires imagination and creative play to blossom. Wagner explains that through imagination children can imagine alternative futures and by doing so, craft possible pathways to these futures through the manipulation of fictional thought (Wagner 26). And although creative play is generally deemed frivolous, worlds of possibility lay within the reach of these creative means. When playing out a survival or social scenario with dolls, or a battle scenario in role playing games such as D&D, innovators are inspired to practice problem solving and world building through play. However, I did not fully grasp how impactful these processes were when I was little, but because make-believe and imaginative play where always a staple for my learning, I was granted the gifts that came with harnessing imagination.

My mother decided to homeschool me for a while, after seeing how I struggled to meld within the standard school system and with Ms. Ann. I studied under the typical school recruitments while homeschooled, but I was also allowed to play and learn from my environment. My mother made sure to listen to me as an individual and respected my natural curiosity. This natural flow of the learning and teaching processes is exhibited in schools who use the Montessori

method or the Reggio Emilia Approach, which believes in each child's natural curiosity to learn. Sir Ken Robinson also acknowledged the importance of natural curiosity. He explains, that from birth, humans are naturally curious and creative learners (Robinson 39-40). This natural curiosity and passion to learn new things is encouraged when any or all questions are met with positivity, no matter how seemingly simple, strange, or complicated, a teacher should try their best to answer it or encourage the student to work with others to form their own conclusions. An example from my grade school years, is when my mother would take me on walks around the neighborhood, and when I was curious about why or how birds could fly, or why leaves where green, she and I would get into the biology and physics of it all and debate the many scientific and imaginative possibilities we could think of. This would encourage me to ask more questions, and to think critically about the world around me. Students/kids who get shutdown by sayings like, "Because I say so!" when they ask questions, without any other explanation, tend to stop asking questions, which can lead to future citizens who do not ask or think about critical/unorthodox questions.

Sir Ken Robinson wrote that most educators and schools maintained their traditions, simply because it is just how it has "always" been done previously. However, these habits of tradition create pockets of neglect and leave holes within the system. These pockets of neglect and stagnation, left behind by outdated tradition, drag the next generation into debt with the past. Jeff Vandermeer expresses in *Wonderbook: The Illustrated Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction*, that creativity and imagination helps those who use it to perceive outside the restrictive norms and boundaries of their current reality and envision something unseen (Vandermeer 9). This can be used as a powerful tool for transformation, as well as a protective tool, to help some absorb their undesirable surroundings, and make manageable through imagination and play, the harder aspects of life. A great friend and mentor of my family, Dr. George Eisen examined these concepts of

imagination and creative play in relation to the Holocaust, in his book, *Children and Play in the Holocaust*. Dr. George Eisen wrote, "Children's play is governed by unique sets of rules that are not always tamed by adult rationalization. It can retain, even in the most adverse moments, a modicum of "innocence." Yet portraying it only as "levity," "frivolity," or "frolic" is a grave misrepresentation of its true nature" (Eisen 7). Imagination, and creative play branch away from the norms provided by previous generations, which allow for spaces of growth, and for foundations in adaptability and resistance against the atrocities of those in power. Imagination opens the space for questions, and questions help weed out the traditions that might need to be revised. For example, the archaic tradition of lenient gun laws, which have been hurting students nationwide should and have been put into question by students. Because disturbed individuals are so easily given access to firearms, many schools have suffered loses and many more schools live in fear of being next. Just because something is a tradition, or has been around for a while, does not make it infallible, and imagination gives that space for history and common ideologies to be placed in question.

By evaluating these processes now, as an adult, I realize that because my questions were valued and treated as important, my natural passion for knowledge was nurtured and my independence and individuality empowered. This natural curiosity is also heavily linked to make-believe because make-believe operates sections of the brain that handle the innovative and creative processes. Make-believe promotes a sense of individual empowerment, as it allows each child to process their environment and gain a safe space for them to experiment with ideas and social situations. Someone who participates in make-believe processes, also practices social awareness and empathy, acceptance of difference, self-empowerment, and innovative creation and goal planning. When discussing the nature of creativity, Roy Prentice explains what creativity and

imagination can be used for, and in what ways. He writes, "A capacity to take risks, to tolerate ambiguity and break boundaries, along with an openness to experience and a freshness of perception are also widely regarded as fundamental features of creativity" (Prentice 150). Make-believe helped me with empathy, social understanding, and perception, and helped me communicate my experiences and vision of the world with others, similarly to what I am doing now. It opened my mind to how others might be feeling because I had to imagine a world beyond my self-centric perspective and project my consciousness to reach and learn from those around me to play well with others. I was able stretch my mind and imagine how other players might be feeling because of creative play. For an example, when I would play make-believe games with my younger sister, we learned through play how to read each other's experiences. Our moods, feelings, curiosities/fears about the world were tested in the reality of our imagination. Children learn how to communicate and express their identities and emotions through make-believe play. Therefore, stifling the time children are allowed to create and express themselves through play, could hinder their empathic abilities and emotional/social control. Through make-believe, the norm is also allowed to be placed in question, rules, laws, and reality itself is open to interpretation and to questions without the critiques of adult traditionalists.

This kind of mental processing is important for students who are faced with seemingly impossible situations, and realities that need reform. Practicing make-believe can take many forms, it can be going on leprechaun or fairy hunts, creating stories, and writing them down, playing with dolls or (action figures) and giving them adventures to go on, like going to the moon, or meeting a mermaid. Not all imaginary games will launch a multimillion-dollar idea, but someone had to dare daydream about a trip to the moon or being able to submerge below the sea. Make-believe inspires the impossible to seem probable and allows for things that were once said to be 'set-in-

stone' to become more fluid and receptive to change and adaptation. Like applied science, where experiments are tested and re-examined for new data in a controlled environment, creative play through make-believe acts as a testing ground for the reforming of a students' reality, where new concepts and ideas can be tested and re-examined in a safe environment that allows for change and mistakes. The use of make-believe also promotes a more flexible and fluid image of reality. I believe that students who are more attuned to the unlimited potential of make-believe, are also better equipped to adapt and evolve and even improve the flow/results of their individual and communal realities.

The mindset that is grown through make-believe processes, promotes a solid foundation for the natural curious mind of early childhood. However, labels such as daydreamer, head in the clouds, and other forms of discouragement to such make-believe processes are commonly dispensed in traditional kindergartens, grade-schools, and so forth. Granted, I do believe the basic 3R's (reading, writing and arithmetic) that Florence Beetlestone expressed in their book, as being the most valued systems in traditional schools (Beetlestone 24), should be mastered, as tools, but they should not be given priority. Early childhood education should promote the betterment of each individual child, and not force its children to forgo their individuality to conform to a standard that was formed in the early 19th century. This concept of make-belief, and the open attitude that it promotes, should not only be applied to traditional school curriculum, but it should also guide the way teachers teach, as each teacher should learn to grow and adapt with their students.

Chapter 2: Conformity vs. Creativity

In this chapter I discuss how conformity is used in traditional schools. I will discuss the positive effects as well as the negative effects of conformity and standardization for students. I will also compare my experiences of dealing with this standardization, through STAR tests, and compare it to my non-standard homeschooling experiences in elementary school.

After graduating from kindergarten, my mother decided to homeschool me for a year to help me with my dyslexia. After my experiences with Ms. Ann, I had grown to hate school. She had convinced me that I was inherently bad at school, a naturally born delinquent. I remember trying to learn the alphabet and drilling my handwriting, it felt like I was trying to stretch my brain in a way that it naturally did not want to go. I would try and try, but nothing would click. I remember my mother had bought me these foam square mats that had the alphabet on them, that fit together like a puzzle, and we would use it to practice the alphabet. However, instead of learning the letters I would memorize the placement of each letter and the sound that went with it, but when the letters got scrambled, I would be back to square one. Nothing would click in my brain, because as I would learn later, that the region of my brain that decoded words and sounds did not have the same structure of that of a student without a learning disability.

I would work with my mother almost every day on drilling my writing and reading, during my first year of elementary school. It honestly felt like I was trying to tear my brain in half, and like I was trying to understand a complex language while hanging upside down and under water. Sometimes the stress of it all would be too much, and I would hate the fact that I could not get it, and I would cry, but soon after I would make a small break through. Looking back now, I can only compare how I felt about learning to read and write English, to trying to comprehend and decode

an ancient dead language, it was mind boggling. I struggled to connect verbal sounds to written visuals, and when I would try to read words on a page, they would sometimes appear as if they were wobbling and rippling on the page, like water. The English language was a frustrating mystery to me, and yet everyone else around me was able to just understand it so effortlessly. I later asked my sister and other peers what it was like for them to learn English; I wondered if it was as hard for them as well, but they would usually reply with something like "I don't really remember a time when I could not read", it came naturally to them, and I was pretty blown away by that.

Originally, the plan was to homeschool me for about a year, so I would be a bit more prepared to go back to school. However, after the first year, my mother realized what a relief it was for my 7-year-old self to be free to learn and play outside the curriculum or the teacher's boundaries that labeled me as a stubborn delinquent. After a while I began to love learning again, I believe learning is a natural passion that each child has, but this natural curiosity as Sir Ken Robinson explains, is usually lost in the K-12 ages, and only sometimes regained in college (Robinson 39). Sir Ken Robinson also wrote on conformity and standardization, he wrote, "If you run an education system on standardization and conformity that suppresses individuality, imagination, and creativity, don't be surprised if that's what it does" (Robinson xx). I believe, like so many others, that the natural curiosity of students should be nurtured and not smothered by conformity and standardization. One of the teaching styles, that allows each child's natural curiosity and passion for learning to blossom and be valued is promoted in the Reggio Emilia Approach school systems taught in Italy and in many Montessori schools throughout America. Valarie Mercilliott Hewett examines the Reggio Emilia Approach to early childhood education and explains some of their ideals involving the education process. Valarie Hewett explains that the

Reggio Emilia Approach regards its students with respect and allows them to follow their own inquiries based on their natural curiosities. Lynn Staley also describes the implementation of the Reggio Emilia philosophy in a university preschool. Staley writes, "They [children] are natural researchers as they question what they see, hypothesize solutions, predict outcomes, experiment, and reflect on their discoveries" (Staley 20). The Reggio Emilia Approach nurtures and guides this natural curiosity in its students and allows them to harness their creative abilities to solve problems and reflect on outcomes. Many believe that this form of education, is too open, or "fun" based and that it is careless and wasteful, because it does not "prepare kids for the harsh conforming reality", and they believe "school should be strict and traditional". However, the issue with this perception of school, is that it assumes that the world we all currently live in will not change or should not change. Suggesting those in charge of the educational funding are most likely interested in keeping the social and business hierarchies that are currently running the show, as they probably push things in their favor.

Now, my father was one of those traditionalists, from the ages of 7-16 he was worried that my sister and I would not 'cut it' in the 'real world' and that because we did not attend a traditional high-end private school, we would struggle in college. His perception on the way we learned, was a shared one with many other traditionalists, he feared for our academic future, because we learned and were taught differently. I believe he was worried that we "goofed off" too much and did not take our education seriously. My sister and I would play make-believe games with dolls or really anything we could get our hands on, and if there was nothing, we would make imaginary characters out of our own hands (like shadow puppets) and dive completely into a fantasy world, fully immersed into the reality of our own making, with just our makeshift characters from our own hands. This creative play was beneficial for my sister and I for social, empathetic, and emotional

reasons. To a traditionalist, these creative practices might appear like 'goofing-off' but to us it was a free space where we could experiment with our thoughts and feelings toward things and create new realities. At the time, I considered it just a fun game with endless possibilities, where my sister and I would take turns inventing scenarios for the characters to navigate through. We called these scenario's 'set-ups' and we would pitch our set-up ideas to each and sometimes collaborate a bit more on the idea before we started. After the set-up was decided, we would play it out, to see how each character might respond to the set-up scenario. Many times, the story went off-the-rails, but nonetheless, it gave us a chance to collaborate on a creative project as a team and improvise as the situation unfolded. Without this free space, and creative play, these critical lessons and tests would have not been intertwined with my formation as an individual.

Dr. Shakuntala Banaji, as well as those who use the Reggio Emilia approach, and countless others who believe in the power of creativity and imagination also highlight the importance of creative space. Open space and time to allow students to explore their imaginative realities without judgment, is a key element to teaching students to be innovators and creators. Dr. Banaji explains how creativity works as a form of resistance, and how it strengthens the resilience of each individual student against conformity and authoritative control. Jon Good and Punya Mishra from the Deep-Play Research group who interviewed Dr. Banaji, discuss how Dr. Banaji's work expresses the dangers of the reduction of creativity in schools, and they correlate it to citizens being more compliant to authoritative control. They write, "A curriculum that routinely discourages creativity decreases the likelihood of developing "challenging, divergent citizens who do not accept authoritarianism without question" (2016)" (Good and Mishra 311). Dr. Banaji also explains several ways to promote this creativity in schools, Jon good and Punya Mishra also explain some of Dr. Banaji's plans to encourage more creative based approach in schools. They

explain that Dr. Banaji suggests that students should be given space to "mess around" freely, and that each teacher and students "languages, cultures, and experiences" (311), should be honored to promote independence and self-esteem. Ultimately, space needs to be provided in schools, so students can take their time to choose to learn, grow and work together on their own independent terms, or they will assume inferiority when it comes to decision making. I believe people tend to approach creativity two dimensionally, attempting to force such a complex subject into a simplified box, like human beings, creativity is a complex system, that thrives on controlled chaos and diversity.

Now, it is nearly impossible for human beings to approach such an abstract idea like creativity, without at least attempting to define and label it, of which I am guilty of as well. I like to picture imagination as theory, as the unlimited pool of potential ideas and possibilities, and creativity or innovation as the actions or inventions that put the theories of imagination into action. John Tyndall, a Victorian scientific mind, even believed in the power of imagination, as theory work, he wrote, "Bounded and conditioned by cooperant Reason, imagination becomes the mightiest instrument of the physical discoverer. Newton's passage from a falling apple to a falling moon was, at the outset, a leap of the imagination" (Otis 69). Because the world we live in is always rapidly changing, growing, and shifting, this conformist approach to traditional education is dangerous. Not only does this restrict the creative capacities of each student's natural potential, but it also causes students physical and mental health to be jeopardized.

Dr. Jesse Martin a Ph.D. psychologist explains how the long-term exposure to the conformity of traditional schools, poorly effects students mental and physical health. He elaborates on why many believe in the traditional school system, and why many believe conformity is a good thing, but ultimately explains that the cons outweigh the pros when it comes to the ill effects of

long term forced exposure to conformity in traditional school. Dr. Jesse Martin who specializes in Psychology and education expresses his concern on the long-term effects of conformity by writing, "I informally surveyed some clinical psychologists to gauge their opinions on the subject. Without mentioning the context, I asked them what the long-term impact of prolonged, enforced conformity would be on an individual's mental health. I consistently heard phrases like damage to self-esteem, losing one's sense of identity, and being unable to find oneself. In the longer term, prolonged enforced conformity would eventually lead to clinical anxiety issues along with chronic depression" (Martin). Now, conformity can be a useful skill to have and to understand, as it helps with keeping things orderly and easily understood, however, this attitude of organized mass-produced education instills a fixed mindset into children.

A fixed-mindset vs. a growth-mindset (a theory by Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D.) is a concept that I learned about later, as an SI Leader at Chaffey College. A fixed-mindset can be a difficult and dangerous perception to have, a fixed-mindset fears and rejects change, it gives up easily when faced with any obstacle, sees effort as pointless, ignores any criticism or feedback, and feels threatened by the success of others (Dweck). Now this mindset, is brought on by the need to be perceived by others as smart but does not actually desire the knowledge behind the façade of their mask of intelligence. A person with a fixed mindset suffers from "static intelligence" (Dweck), with zero desire to grow or pursue new knowledge. I have witnessed this kind of attitude toward learning in many traditional school students and alumni, and I believe this mindset is a symptom of the prolonged exposure to forced conformity that traditional schools demand from their students. Now how is this conformity instilled into students through traditional school?

I only attended a traditional school for a short amount of time, but I was still influenced by some of the conformist expectations, as I still had to take and study for the STAR (Standardized

Testing and Reporting) tests. These tests were required in the state of California to test and report how we measured up to the "standard" in terms of math, reading/writing, history, and science. These standardized tests were mandated every year for students from grades 2nd-11th. They mostly consisted of true or false or multiple-choice questions, promoting the ability of memorization as the top priority for succeeding at taking STAR tests. I remember spending large portions of the months leading up to taking the tests drilling and memorizing certain answers. And one year, during one of my earlier STAR tests, I remember being told by the teacher or "warden", as it seemed to me, of the test, that if I were ever unsure or struggled with a question I should just guess, because I would most likely get it right. I was in 2nd or 3rd grade at this point, so I took seriously what most adults told me.

Now because I was being homeschooled, the STAR tests we took tended to be stationed at random hotels, in rooms that most of the time had beige or white walls, no windows, fluorescent lights that gave me horrible headaches that made me sleepy. We also all had to sit on torture machines in the shape of uncomfortable plastic and metal chairs and desks that all faced the "wardens" giant desk, that was rowed with a multitude of half sharpened number 2 pencils and stacks of tests. These rooms were generally very cold, and painfully quiet, it was almost so quiet that I feared to think too loud, every sniffle or shift echoed throughout the beige paneled room, which caused some restless students to turn and stare at each nose maker. These tests have caused anxiety and stress in children as early as 2nd grade. My sister, who continues to struggle with test anxiety, was one of them. I originally did rather poorly in taking the STAR test because I decided to listen to the "wardens" suggestions, and I guessed most of my answers, not knowing there would be consequences. Because I did so poorly, I was sent a specialist, who assumed I was not so bright and thus treated me as such. I was forced to attend these "special" sessions almost every week, to

check my progress to make sure I kept up to standard. Soon, my specialist realized I knew the material, and that I had just taken a bad test, so they backed off a bit and just told me to do better in the next test or I would have to take the "special" classes all over again.

Desperately not wanting to have to take the "special" classes again, I put much more effort into memorizing the answers for the next STAR test. After that I scored above standard and excelled in my future tests, granted, I tended to purge all the memorized information soon after each test, as the human brain can only absorb so much unnecessary and inapplicable information, because it must make room for more relative information. However, this monotonous and forced display of conformity was not the only way I learned during my early childhood. I read my required History, Science, Math, and English, which took me longer to process than most, but my extracurricular activities expanded beyond these requirements and often involved action and imagination. My mother has a BS in biology, so she loved explaining the world of science to me, for example, we would go on walks around my neighborhood or a park, and every-time I asked a question or seemed curious about something, she would take it as an opportunity to teach me something new. I would ask why the sky was blue, and she would explain to me the process of how the atmosphere worked, about how the sun and the earth's ozone worked, and when I would ask about why trees had green leaves, we might collect some leaves and she would have me inspect them, their veins and their ridges and explain to me how plants were living organisms. And when she did not know the answer, she would simply say, "I'm not sure" and we would research it together. I learned to question my environment, and the reality presented around me through this process. I also learned that no one has the answer to everything, but there are always opportunities to explore and puzzle together our own individual findings. This eventually taught me to do my

own research into subjects and not take things as facts simply because an adult tells me it is the undisputed truth.

During my early educational years, I was also introduced to multiple cultures and customs. We would celebrate the typical "American" holidays, legends and religions, but we also tried learning about and celebrating other countries/cultures holidays, legends and religions as well, like Ramadan, Chinese New Year, The day of the Dead, Buddha, the Monkey King or Sun Wukong , Vishnu and Krishna, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, many Maori gods like Tumatauenga and Punga, and Norse and Greek Gods like Oden and Zeus. We would attempt to either celebrate these holidays, or we would read children's books like *The Legend of the Monkey King*, *Pugna the goddess of ugly, Everybody Bakes Bread, and Children of the Dragon selected tales from Vietnam*, and listen to learning Chinese for kids and Celtic Folklore on cassette-tapes when driving. This inspired an appreciation and love for the diversity of cultures and unique customs outside my own at a young age, and as I grew up, I would actively explore more into other cultures, with movies and food and read about other religions and cultural traditions, and I still to this day love experiencing and celebrating outside my given culture. By associating fun childhood experiences with cultural diversity, my mother instilled in me a love for diversity, keeping me open-minded about the world around me. When imagination, and play are pooled together, the possibilities for what can be taught and learned become a wider spectrum of ideas.

The use of creative writing/reading, and creative play made this material absorbable to my child mind and inspired a growth-mindset in me toward cultural diversity. Free or open time inspires creative play and independence, and a more open education allowed me to explore myself and others of all ages, races, and cultures. The Reggio Emilia Approach to early childhood education, views its students as protagonists in the learning process, providing them with space

and responsibilities, allowing each student to feel like a valued and active participant in their community, giving them a sense of empathy and responsibility to the people and world around them (Hewett 96). Why do we treat our students like subjects to be taught at instead of as new learners to be guided as unique individuals? Who might even have somethings to teach us in return? When students are not given a chance to attempt challenging different things, they will learn to fear the unknown. The nature of creativity is also explained by Roy Prentice from the Curriculum Journal, he explains that the nature of creativity has "A capacity to take risks, to tolerate ambiguity and break boundaries, along with an openness to experience and a freshness of perception are also widely regarded as fundamental features of creativity" (Prentice 150). Prentice also later lists some conditions on how creativity can prosper within the education system. Prentice writes, "From an early age children need to be presented with rich opportunities to engage with the world in different ways, to enable imaginative connections to be made between past and present experience. They also need to be taught how to reflect upon them from unfamiliar perspectives" (Prentice 154). Roy Prentice, Sir Ken Robinson, Dr. Shakuntala Banaji, Tony Wagner, the Reggio Emilia approach, and many others also highly encourage allowing for free space when teaching, especially during the years of early childhood education, as this instills self-motivation, a sense of responsibility and purpose/passion for learning, and a growth-mindset.

Because I grew up with the competing influences of progressive and traditionalist approaches to teaching in my early educational experiences from teachers and my parents, this allowed me to compare how each approach affected me. My dad as a traditionalist did not see how play and other creative outlets would help me in my future endeavors as a college student and as an adult. He worried that I was falling behind anytime I did not have my nose to the grindstone in some "academically worthy" book. However, with the education system we have today, he was

right to be concerned, because in a system that forces standardization, deviation from the norm causes strife for the student. But my mother after witnessing how the traditional school system affected me, began to pioneer a more progressive/holistic approach to teach me, while keeping a balance with my traditional homework to keep me on track for the future. Sir Ken Robinson believed in the natural progressive growth of traditionalist schools, as he believed education should be approached from a perspective of change, a willingness to adapt and grow, he states, "Opportunities for change exist within every school, even where the emphasis on high-stakes testing has become extreme. Schools often do things simply because they've always done them" (Robinson 57). I also believe this transition will be slow, but necessary for the educational systems redesign. I believe that education should be approached as a living, shifting and evolving organism, because it deals with children who are unpredictable and tend to exceed the boundaries of the known.

Consequently, having a curricular system that is set in stone, and therefore unwavering and repeatedly forced upon each individual child no matter their differences, is a system destined to fail. The traditional education system values results' that on a chart look standard and conform to a status quo. The traditional education system does not value the individual students' potential or progress, it is not centered around the student but instead forces the student to morph to its set of expectations or fail and become ostracized in the public eye. This informs students that their individuality, differences, purpose, and passions are obsolete, because they hinder their ability to conform to the standards expected from them. Without this drive, students tend to be indifferent towards the future, they lack direction and emotional stability as they tend to feel unfulfilled without a strong desire to contribute in some way to their reality. This is one of the most dangerous side effects to the long-term exposure of forced conformity that is used in traditional schools.

Standardization breeds ignorance when it comes to authority over each student's individuality. The 'standard' presents itself as superior to the diversity of students' personalities and ways of learning and living in schools. The standardization process is less time consuming and requires little to no creative effort from the teacher or student, but this paints the disturbing picture that schools and education are deemed as nonessential, as something that can be mass produced like a fast-food chain/company. If traditional schools are treated in the same way mass produced fast-food chain restaurants are, the students graduating from high school will be subjected to the similar result of sub-par fast food, that are frozen and then reheated in the microwave, then served in a flimsy paper wrapping. Now some teachers like some cooks at fast food chains, may have the audacity to mix up the system and try a new spice or food preparation process, but in the end, will eventually be subjected to an ultimatum to keep to the predesigned standard, or lose their job for deviating from the system. Schools value their charts and their test scores but neglect the personal development of their students. Many students can succeed and excel through this system, but many times they succeed despite the school, not because of the school.

Now this struggle can be beneficial for some, as it pushes them to get around the obstacles and fight through conformity, but for students already struggling with personal battles of their own, whether it be a learning disadvantage, a physical disadvantage, or social/economic disadvantage, the schools' obstacles can cause some students to drown, overloading them with immense stress. The long-term exposure to conformity that these traditionalist schools persist on, are dangerous to society's development as they enforce a fixed-mindset, lack of drive or purpose, induce stress and anxiety in citizens, promote a singularity over diversity, reduce each student's perspective on reality and discourage creativity and imaginative play. These side-effects of

standardization/conformity, leave students with an unstable emotional control system, zero coping

methods, and discourages individuality and uniqueness.

Chapter 3: The Homeschooling Insider

In this chapter I discuss my experience of being homeschooled, and my experience at the homeschooling co-op, TLC. I also discuss the importance of community building in education, and individual enrichment for students, through alternative school approaches.

Traditional schools instill this conformist mindset in their students through physical and academic training. The rigid classroom environment, lack of independent power when it comes to each students' educational choices, and the preset expectations demanded out of everyone to conform to a standard outcome all contribute to this conformist mindset. After a year of one-on-one homeschooling and getting to learn the Gorman Learning Center system (the homeschooling system I joined) and Peggy our PLT (a Personal Learning Teacher, that works as an outside supervisor from the Gorman Learning center that monitors and collects homework and provides books and test materials), I decided to ask my mom for more. I needed a consistent social outlet, so my mom decided to try out this new homeschooling learning center in Pasadena owned by The Gorman Learning Center. We attended once a week, every Tuesday, where I participated in several classes, from theater classes, group literature classes and science labs. There was the option to take 1-6 periods including lunch, all classes were considered optional, and there were many classes to choose from each period, providing the students with variety. These options allowed me to gain a sense of control over my education and my life.

The teachers most of the time had at least a bachelors in their subject and they usually loved what they taught. However, the Gorman Learning Center soon backed out of the co-op, leaving many homeschooling kids out of a social outlet, so several parents, including my mother, decided to form a new homeschooling co-op program, and rename it WISH. After they formed a board,

that consisted of several mothers of the current students, and reformed the program, the program became more parent oriented, a few outside professionals were also invited to teach limited programs and be paid, but most of the time the program was run by the student's parents. This setting was heavily dependent on a sense of community and a common goal, to help support the students. I participated in this program from the ages of 8-10. However, because it was such a long drive, we decided to relocate and form another homeschooling co-op closer to home, this was once again founded by my mother and 2 other board members and was named TLC (The Learning Collective).

This program was a large part of my middle-school through high-school experience. During my time at TLC, I learned about diversity, community, leadership, and teamwork as well as how to value my individuality and creativity. Because of my position as the school director's daughter, I took on many responsibilities around the school, like welcoming new families and helping new kids settle in, helping set up and clean up every Monday morning, and I would assist in classes when needed. At the age of 13 I was also allowed to co-teach a class with another parent. I loved theater at the time, so, I designed and taught a theater class to my peers for a semester. I had previous experience in theater from my time at the Gorman Learning center/WISH, and I had done some research by reading books on improv and theater exercises, also before I could offer my theater class to the other students, I had to present a fully formed schedule or syllabus to the board. This responsibility allowed me to one, share my passion with my classmates, and two, helped me find confidence in my leadership skills. Several other students 13 and up also took the opportunity to co-teach about subjects they were passionate about, from horses and Pokémon to creative writing and acting.

This concept is like clubs or peer lead classes at universities, like UCRs 1 unit student lead classes. It encourages the pursuit of passions, allows for creative team collaboration, and promotes leadership opportunities. I personally was nervous to present to and lead my peers, but with time and practice I learned how to manage a classroom, teach, and how to improvise my plans when an exercise or concept did not work as designed. TLC was designed as a very open and progressive school that valued individuality and allowed for a more freeing educational experience. This progressive and less restrictive approach to teaching, however, can be a little difficult for some teachers and programs to manage, because it represents the definition of "herding cats". With this school, the idea was to make an environment where each student's individuality was respected, and their voices were loudly heard, so the classes tended to be a bit rambunctious. Each class required two teachers, a main instructor, and an aid. However, if a class size were over 15 students the teacher might even request another aid, to assist, even though most traditional schools hold large amounts of students per teacher, the way we taught, it would be impossible to manage all those students and keep the quality and principles of the school without assistance. We worked more like a community than anything. At our peak we would average 60+ families, a semester, however, because it was a K-12 school, many of those families enrolled more than one child, which meant on average 80+ students and parents. We had plays, dances, science fairs, and talent shows, and the parents and students worked together to form a community for progressive homeschooling families.

I believe creating enrichment programs like this, to run alongside schools is an important first step to revising the traditionalist school system. As Sir Ken Robinson, I do believe there should be a balance to the way schools are run, there should be forms of structure that are still flexible enough to allow students to explore, play and create without being trapped in a rigid set

of rules and curriculum. I would like to list what I believed worked in this homeschooling co-op and what I think could be improved upon with the advice of many great educators and writers like, Sir Ken Robinson, Tony Wagner, Malcom Gladwell, Milbrey McLaughlin and Shakuntala Banaji. First, I believe that the lack of division amongst the age groups at TLC was important. In most traditional schools' children K-12 are generally restricted to their grade, which cuts them off from the perspectives of all the age-groups as they figure their worlds out. I enjoyed being able to learn from how kids in kindergarten saw the world and seeing how quickly their perspectives changed when they started middle-school, and how teens or parents interacted with each other throughout the day.

This natural chain of growth in perspective allowed me to appreciate each stage of life and acknowledge that everyone must go through a similar process of self-discovering and development. Most of the time kids would clique together in their respective age groups, however, it was always fun to see the older teens playing tag with elementary school kids or helping preschool kids who had gotten lost or had fallen. This, I believe, promoted a sense of community and understanding amongst the students. Many times, I would also watch as middle-school student imitated the older high-school student, admiring and learning from them. The invisible barriers that would normally separate middle-school kids from high-school kids in traditional schools, appeared less at TLC, allowing the middle-school kids to learn from the high-school kids and vis versa. This stigmatized hierarchy of age groups is nonexistent outside of the K-12 graded school system. So, I find it odd that it is enforced in schools, because it cuts off students from the natural chain of growth, denying them the chance to learn from the diversity of ideas each new age group has to offer; therefore, denying them the chance to see how similar everyone is in the growing processes and that this is not the first time someone has had to struggle with learning something

new. I can imagine it would have been terrifying if everyone around me was struggling at the same stage of life and there were no opportunities to see how things might turn out.

Dr. Milbrey McLaughlin, a Stanford professor who studied community-based organizations (CBO's) and used a decade of research explains the importance of community when it comes to youth development and engagement. Dr. McLaughlin wrote, "Community organizations can make a powerful positive difference in youth's lives" (McLaughlin 16). After school hours, these students who have endured repetitious mass conformity in their classes, are left to a non-engaging void, lacking in community or support from adults. As McLaughlin explains, in her article, many of the student's experienced boredom and they felt invisible like drifters on the outskirts of their communities, instead of being a part of one (McLaughlin 4). During my time at TLC, although the program only met once a week, we also created extracurricular gatherings and events, that promoted community building and instilled in me, a sense of accomplishment and purpose. One of those activities was to help certain volunteer families with putting in water saving landscapes, for their front or backyards. The teen program I was a part of was planning a camping trip, and to pay for the trip we offered to landscape and remodel a few of the volunteer families' yards. With their help, our team managed to remodel three different yards, turning them into more eco-friendly, less water consuming yards and compiled enough money for our trip. After, I felt accomplished, like I learned something valuable and contributed to my community. We held many events like this to raise money for a cause we believed, that gave us students a chance to learn something new, lead a group, and fix problems as a team for a community we believed in.

Normally the concept of homeschooling is linked to the stigmas of loners, who simply do the same curriculum but at home without any outside influence, and normally that might be true.

Nonetheless, I was lucky to participate in these homeschooling co-ops and experience things that I normally would not. But there is always room for improvement because the school was a non-profit co-op, not many families where able to attend, at times we had to refuse enrollment because we did not have enough teachers or room, which meant that the social and cultural diversity of the school was limited. I believe a school should hold enough students to encourage a wide range of diverse experiences and cultures, however, it should manage the number of students, so that the teachers are not overwhelmed, so students do not get left behind. For a teacher to be able to truly engage and influence each student, the class sizes must be restricted to at most 15-20 students with aid, and 5-15 with no aid.

Tony Wagner, Shakuntala Banaji, The Reggio Emilia Approach and Sir Ken Robinson all explain the importance of engaging with the student, as it is extremely crucial to encourage their natural curiosity in learning about the world around them, because then they feel a sense of responsibility and control over their reality and feel they need to contribute to and or improve it. Tony Wagner explains this by saying, "Regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds or degree of school success, what all young innovators have in common is the importance of play, passion, and purpose in their lives" (Wagner 139). Wagner explains that to inspire future crucial innovators, students must be allowed space, time, and encouragement in the pursuit of passion. Also, they should be allowed to pursue or discover such a passion in school, and they should be given a chance to independently work it out through creative play. This concept is also implemented in the Reggio Emilia Approach to education. The Reggio Emilia Approach implemented techniques to encourage independence in their students, by letting them act as the protagonist in their educational journeys. Like Tony Wagner, this approach demonstrates the importance of encouraging the students to independently discover their passion and educational direction. Valerie Hewett writes

on these points relating to the Reggio Emilia Approach to educational independence, Hewett writes, "As a protagonist, the child is understood as having an innate desire to discover, learn, and make sense of the world. Thus, within the Reggio Emilia Approach, the child is viewed not as a target of instruction, but rather as having the active role of an apprentice (Katz, 1993), working alongside others in the discovery and construction of solutions to meaningful questions and problems…" (Hewett 96). In this approach the child is given a chance to take control over their lives and ideas. Sir Ken Robinson also mentions how crucial it is to acknowledge each child's diversity and encourage their natural curiosity to learn, he writes, "Regardless, the task we face is not to increase yield in schools at the expense of engagement; it is to invigorate the living culture of schools themselves" (Robinson 45). The priority of schools should be to bring a better environment to their students, to encourage their passions and engage them in their learning process and make it something enjoyable for the student. I believe a separate enrichment program, is what could provide students with such a space that was open to creative development and imaginative play.

Now, most of the classes held at TLC, were extracurricular geared classes, like theater, art, creative writing, dance, sewing, cooking, and even some classes that did L.A.R.P.ING and stunt work. But even with the few classes that could be considered core classes, like debate/public speaking classes, math, Spanish, and intro to biology type courses, the curriculum and structure of the class had to be approached in a unique way. To keep the students interested and excited about learning in the class, the teachers had to invent new ways of approaching their subjects that would engage the student's curiosities. If a class was not popular with the students, it tended to fade out and was replaced with a more engaging class. However, since we were a small co-op, the variety of classes was limited, but if this concept were to be expanded upon, the variety of classes could

promote an extremely engaging and stimulating educational experience for K-12 students. Students that are subjected to a "black-or-white" fallacy, meaning that they are given a limited number of choices when it comes to their education, as if there are no other alternative options, struggle to find passion and drive within their assigned field as they are forced to pick a field, they hate the least, not one they love. The world is filled with many shades of opportunities, this manipulation of a false choice leaves many students feeling defeated in their limited options.

I have seen this defeated attitude toward education frequently in junior college students, and I noticed it many times in students who transferred from public schools to TLC. When students transferred from public school to TLC, I noticed their attitude toward school would slowly shift from one of silent dread to one of rambunctious energy and enthusiasm, it was like watching one of those videos of a pound dog transitioning from silent and meek to playful and energetic once they felt safe in their now environment that allowed them to feel free and be themselves. These once reluctant students began asking a multitude of questions and started wanting to stay after class, even though it had ended. This, I believe, is a sign of an exciting and engaging class, many times the class time would run over because everyone was so engrossed in the current project whether it be a creative writing discussion, building a hover craft, attempting stop-motion-animation, or debating the importance of music. To a traditionalist, these projects may sound silly or pointless, but encouraging creativity, improvisational and argumentative skills, and innovative aptitude are extremely crucial to the development of each new generation, if they are to succeed in adapting to and improving the future.

Tony Wagner, Sir Ken Robinson and Shakuntala Banaji all address the importance of implementing these life skills in education, as these skills will help form a better student, citizen, and innovator for the future. Tony Wagner explains how these innovators will affect the world,

and why it is so important to encourage this type of ability in students as it is crucial to human development. Wagner writes "Increasingly in the twenty-first century, what you know is far less important than what you can do with what you know. The interest in and ability to create new knowledge to solve new problems is the single most important skill that all students must master today" (Wagner 142). Wagner points out, that without creativity, we lose our innovators, our problem solvers, and like him, I believe that those abilities are crucial to our society's development and improvement. Ken Robinson explains how educational traditions must evolve to support our new future, he writes, "The old systems of education were not designed with this world in mind. Improving them by raising conventional standards will not meet the challenges we now face" (Robinson xxi). To prepare the next generation, I believe as Ken Robinson did, that education must evolve and become something new. Dr. Shakuntala Banaji also believes, creativity is crucial to society, explaining that without it, society stagnates. Dr. Banaji also believes creativity works as a form of resistance and encourages diversity and supports learning. Dr. Banaji explains this in response to an interview question from the article "Creativity is Resistance", she states, "Creativity is categorically not a solution to unhappiness, social inequality, war and mental illness. But the conditions which allow for creativity would also be conditions which could potentially reduce unhappiness, social inequality, war, and mental illness – or at the very least, lower anxiety, stress, unhelpful competitiveness, fear and distrust ([Banaji] 2016)" (Good and Mishra 310). Although creativity is not the ultimate solve-all solution to all the world's problems, I believe like Dr. Banaji, that creativity creates space for new realities to be formed and opportunities for old dysfunctional policies to be questioned. In a traditional school that values calculable statistics on 'success' or 'failure' creativity is unappreciated and even feared. However, in an open enrichment program that values the student first, creativity is key.

During my time at TLC, in middle-school, I was also engaged in a hunt for a tutor who would help me overcome my dyslexia. We had to try many before finding Barbara Morford, who helped me turn my world upside down. Her approach to tutoring me was unlike any other tutor I had previously. She had set her office right next to her house and created a relaxed and positive atmosphere. She got to know me, to see how I learned, she guided me but did not control every aspect of the process, letting me explore and come to my own conclusions. I am a visual learner, I do well with images, so she would use visuals and show me patterns to help me grasp how the English language worked. My tutor, Barbra Morford, would use these "Set" brand cards, that had several different images, patterns, colors, and shapes. With these Set brand cards, I practiced my quick response and matching abilities that I needed for sight reading. I did not grasp the purpose beyond the fun when I was a kid, but looking back, I realized that these games helped me retrain my brain to comprehend patterns quickly. My tutor also used many other games and imagery techniques to help me connect sounds and visuals in relation to pattern recognition. The dyslexic brain requires an extra step to understanding how sounds and written words are connected. This is because as Roxanne F. Hudson, Leslie High, and Stephanie Al Otaiba explain in their article, certain aspects of the left side of the brain, that work with pattern and language comprehension are less developed in the dyslexic brain (Hudson, High, Otaiba). For this, Barbara Morford gave me many exercises with both visual, sound, and physical components to help me develop a completely different bridge in my brain so I could process language more efficiently.

She explained to me the patterns of the English language, how double "o's" worked and why it differed from the "ou" sound, there were so many complex rules and random conditions to the language that sometimes my brain would be so overwhelmed like a computer that had begun to overheat from the excess amounts of data being downloaded. When it got to be too much, she

would have me get a snack and or a drink from her cabinet and take a break, letting my mind relax and soak in what we had just gone over, instead of pushing me further to be more "efficient". I remember the silent letters and the difference between a lowercase "b" and a "d" being utterly confusing. But because she gave me the creative space and allowed me the independent control over my scholastic practices, I slowly began to get what she had to teach me.

It took repetition and a patient creative approach to get through to me. I learned the rhymes and patterns, and at first, I was just memorizing them, but after a year or so of work, things began to click, and I began to recognize the patterns all around me. It was like seeing clearly for the first time. I had not realized how blind I had been until that moment. I was around 11 when I started reading every little thing, I could spot around me. I would sound out the street signs and the store signs when we would drive past, and the labels on boxes in grocery stores, it was like opening a door to a whole new realm of possibilities. It amazes me to this day how I can simply look at a word, or paragraph and understand it, when in comparison, I had to manually puzzle out every word like advanced calculus during my early elementary school days. I began writing at this point too, finally able to express my creativity in a way that could be shared with others. I started hand-writing a fantasy novel, which helped me develop my weak motor skills and practice my spelling, my hand would cramp and sounding out each word was agonizing, but because it was fun for me to invent a magical world of my own I kept at it; I started this book at the age of 11, and I kept at it until the age of 13, and at this point I had hand-written 60 pages. Looking back at the book, I can see my handwriting, spelling and grammar improve throughout the story. If I had not had the freedom to pursue my creative passions in this way, I believe my handwriting, spelling and grammar would not be at the level they are today. I persevered through the obstacles that dyslexia presented because I enjoyed and appreciated what writing could do for me. Writing also allowed

me to form thoughts in cohesive ways so that others could understand my perspective, it opened new worlds for me, and I had the freedom and encouragement to explore them.

Alternative curriculum that showcases and utilizes creativity, comes in many forms. At TLC we had classes for improv, stunt work, creative writing, drawing, D&D, Hula, feltwork, cooking, jazz dancing, and many more. These classes provided me with many unique perspectives and experiences, and when I got into writing and drawing, I learned about the importance of passion and dedication, and how satisfying it was to improve on skill. For example, being able to look at my art, or my writing ability as it has progressed with me, has helped me understand that improvement requires time spent, and time spent requires a level of passion to keep the drive moving forward. It is my strong belief that learning requires a level of fun and imagination, to properly work. Even though English was painful and difficult for me to learn, when I was having fun, and realized the fun I could have once I had learned to read and write, that is what drove me back again and again to the subject that hurt my brain to work with. When the subject is exciting for the student, the student engages more with the class, and retains more after the class. Fun, however, does not mean easy, fun in many cases means increasing the challenge. To make a subject more engaging for a student, helping translate the material of the subject to the students' needs in a real-life application scenario, I believe would give the students a chance to see each subject's potential. I also noticed that students tend to be more engaged when they are given a chance to actively participate in solving or working through problems presented in the subject.

TLC gave me a chance to learn my passions, learn about myself, and feel confident in my abilities to understand new things and engage with new people. Through this experience I got the chance to lead and teach my peers, work to improve my community, and embrace my creative

side. However, I still had to transition back into the "real world" and so, at the age of 16, I started

attending Chaffey College concurrently with my high school program.

Chapter 4: Back in The System

In this chapter I discuss my experience with transitioning from a non-traditional form of education to a traditional Community College. I discuss how long-term exposure to conformity has resulted in disengaged and dispassionate students in higher education. I also examine my experience as an SI Leader at Chaffey College, comparing how the SI's program approached alternative ways of educating, with the individual student considered first.

At the age of 16 I decided I wanted to try and get back in the traditional school system, and transition to community college. I had spent several years with my tutor Barbra Morford and found my center as an individual and a teammate at TLC, so I believed I was ready to give the "real world" a shot. The first class I took at Chaffey Community College was a math course during the summer. I had to adjust quickly to the pace and overall purpose of the course, stepping out from a world that followed each student's individual pace and perspective to a large classroom of strangers that followed and mimicked the professor's perspective on the subject. After the class I would generally approach the professor in hopes of getting more specifics on the lesson presented earlier, accustomed to the closer relations of student to teacher ratio from my homeschooling co-op. This professor, however, was accustomed to the rushed lifestyle of an adjunct teacher. No office, no answers, and no time because the next job was waiting. Teachers and Professors are not provided enough money or space to properly engage with their students in public institutions, especially in community colleges. Because of this, during my time at Chaffey College, I got a wide variety of both passionate and exhausted professors, some doing what they could to survive and some stressing because the job they loved wore them thin.

In the following Fall semester, I entered my first English course, both excited and terrified I might fall behind like before. However, I was lucky enough to have Jacquelyn Ford as

my professor for my first English college class. The first paper I wrote for that class, was in green colored, non-traditional font, that had calendar letters on the heading for the page numbers and a fancy large title in bold. Thank goodness it was just a rough draft and was not graded. I had never learned the typical MLA format during my homeschooling years, and when I would write essays for my homeschooling courses, the more creative and unique, the better. So, green was my favorite color, and I wanted my essay to stand out amongst the sea of other essays. I quickly learned that was a mistake, but Professor Ford was kind enough to give me directions on how to properly format an MLA style essay. Professor Ford appreciated my passion and creativity, but still pushed me to learn new things, and understand the standardized formatting. In this instance, I realized the importance of having a standard format, so each paper could be judged on equal terms, solely based on the writing. However, Professor Ford still encouraged my unique creativity to be transferred into my writing, to keep the spirit of the green wild font and put it into words instead.

I had several great and influential teachers during my community college journey, as well as some discouraging obstacles, but nonetheless, I worked my way through it and rediscovered my love for English and for teaching. The two most memorable people/instances are my English Professor, Professor Daniel Keener, and my experience as an SI leader. Professor Keener reminded me what a teacher and mentor in the education system could and should be, someone who opens doors to new insights, and gives their students a chance to get to know the world's ins, and outs and all the beautiful and horrible things that people from the past and present have to offer. He let our individuality and creativity shine, and he talked to the students like equals. He would work together with the students to achieve a goal or idea, instead of having his students work for him to meet his perspective on a subject, he would help the students form their own

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positions and perspectives and helped them format those ideas succinctly. Professor Keener was also a strong supporter of the SI program at Chaffey. Through the SI program, where students with good grades in a particular subject, could help peer assist other students to understand materials in alternative ways, my passion for teaching grew further. I was hired to assist in English courses, the subject I once struggled with to even understand initially. My confidence in assisting with English courses was at first, low. I felt like I should not be qualified to teach others about a subject I struggled with myself. However, I realized through SI, that the struggles I went through were what made my contributions valuable.

Because I struggled with understanding English, and because I managed to find creative ways around the hurdles of learning how to read and write, I was more qualified to present the students, my peers, with alternative solutions. Malcom Gladwell, a strong believer in the process of struggling and overcoming obstacles once said, "A lot of what is most beautiful about the world arises from struggle" (Gladwell). I realized this after working as an SI leader, that to struggle sometimes means to learn, however, there is a difference between being challenged and being used. During the SI training process, some of the techniques and philosophies we learned have stuck with me ever since. For example, we would discuss student self-care, when considering Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, or alternative learning techniques that would promote a growth-mindset over a fixed-mindset, in relation to Carol Dweck's research into the power of mindset and learning. What I particularly liked about these exercises and practices, was recognizing the person, the individual needs, and perspectives of each student, and teaching with that in mind, instead of prioritizing that last. We also learned about the many types of learning, that of kinetic, auditory, visual, or written learners, again promoting the point that each student learns and processes material differently and therefore rejecting the parameters of

standardization. In response to this training, the SI leaders like myself, would formulate and work together to create lesson plans, on how best to implement this research into workable material.

To keep the students engaged many of the SI leaders would turn the material into games, creating a fun and growth-mind set promoting environment. Our training also pushed us to create activities that would encourage teamwork and collaboration to solve problems, amongst the students. I would plan what we would work on each session, some days we focused on self-care, some days we worked on broader concepts like 'critical reading tips', while some days we worked on singular elements, like thesis formatting or sentence variation or introduction paragraphs, etc. I would generally ask the group what they felt like doing for the next session, or I would look at their syllabus, since each SI leader was assigned to attend the class(es) they are assisting in and work with that specific professors' students. I would then prepare what I believed would benefit them the most that week based on their schedule. I enjoyed my work, because it allowed me to be creative in my teaching process, it gave me space to work with the students, and help them overcome obstacles that they had been struggling with, by approaching it from a student-oriented angle. I worked with one student, who explained to me, that they had been struggling with English for their entire life; he was struggling to understand essay structure, and how to form an introduction paragraph. I decided to work with him and draw some images and explain it in metaphors, as he explained to me that he was a creative person, a person who loved music. After working through a few of the barricades he had put up in relation to English, I managed to make a few breakthroughs with him.

I overcame my dyslexia because I was given the chance to find the fun in English, and the fun in learning something that was challenging. My tutor also helped me tailor my learning

process to something that made sense to me, something I could grasp through my perspective. In an article called "Interest Matters: The Importance of Promoting Interest in Education" where the importance of engaging students in the learning process is discussed, they argue that educational policies tend to focus on pushing the students to meet predesigned academic standards and neglect the engagement aspect of education. In the article they also promote engaging students to enjoy and form personal interests in their subjects (Harackiewicz, Judith M et al.). I believe, because of the mass production approach to traditional education, individuality and personal development has been forgotten during the teaching process. Many of the students I worked with would regard me with confusion and shock when I would directly ask them what they thought of a particular problem or idea, and many would respond with something like, "I don't know". Now some just wanted me to hand them the answers so they could do well enough, pass and move on, while some of them, I think, generally did not know because they had never been asked what or how they felt about any subject. Because teachers are given limited time, way too many students, and are forced to implement a standardization focused curriculum, personal interest is left on the wayside. This sends the message to the students, that their individuality is not valued in an academic setting. This approach leads to disengaged and detached students who only seek an education for monetary gain, and not personal development or community progression. Tony Wagner explains that promoting individual passion in students can be challenging but is necessary to form forward thinking innovators (Wagner 146). I believe, as Wagner does, that forward thinking innovators who are not afraid to make their voice known are what this world needs to continue.

To promote this passion and help students, teachers must encourage everyone to find what interests them, and then care for and help push each student to pursue those interests. I

believe people learn best when they can relate new ideas to old knowledge hooks, and by making connections with complex ideas to personal knowledge. However, for this, teachers must address that each student has different hooks, as well as different personal knowledge that they relate and connect with. For me, I enjoy stories, and I enjoy drawing, so my tutor helped connect learning English to something I was already interested in and translated it to learning and understanding English. Therefore, I also attempted to implement a similar technique with my students. For an example, with the student before who enjoyed music and art, I tried to use that language and that perspective and work it into teaching him how a thesis or an essay worked as a whole. In the article by Harackiewicz, Judith M et al. this process is described as "Triggering Students' Situational Interest: Context Personalization". They also provide a similar example to what I discussed before, on how this has worked to engage students in subjects that they originally found difficult, by writing, "Another way to trigger students' interest in a new subject is to leverage their existing individual interests by presenting instruction in the context of those interests. For example, to teach math to a musician, talk about the mathematical principles inherent in music. Building content around existing interests is an intuitive approach for educators" (Harackiewicz, Judith M et al.). I believe, simply recognizing a student's individual interests and perspectives helps them understand new material, by linking it to the old material the teacher only has half a bridge to build to reach their students comprehension on the subject.

If given a chance to be a part of the learning process and shown how each subject can improve their lives inside and outside the academic world, I believe students will regain a drive for their educational outcome. I have seen the aftereffects of standardization and traditional schooling, in the student's attending universities, noting how several students fear raising their hands and asking questions, and how they merely accept their outcomes and not develop

interests in any field. The reason for this, in many cases, is financial difficulty, as education is, for most, a way to ensure bigger paychecks, so the faster they finish the better. However, for some, I believe this lack of interest and direction is due to the system denying them any say or opinion in the direction of their education. Sir Ken Robinson also promoted individuality-based education verses standard-based education. He explained this by writing, "The revolution I'm advocating is based on different principles from those of the standards movement. It is based on a belief in the value of the individual, the right to self-determination, our potential to evolve and live a fulfilled life, and the importance of civic responsibility and respect for others" (Robinson xxii). I believe, like Sir Ken Robinson did, that it is time to evolve, it is time to recognize that the students we now teach are all unique individuals, and that should be celebrated and explored and not shaped and cut to fit a standard mold that was generically determined by a government. Yes, I do believe it will be messy, and difficult at times, and it might seem impossible to work within a system that recognizes set plans over individuality, but I also do believe it is what humanity needs to breathe fresh air into this world. Tony Wagner and Sir Ken Robinson explore the economic and social decline of many budding communities because of standardization and mass education, and I believe like they do, that if something is not changed then we will lose our future innovators, and problem solvers, we will lose those unique voices and ideas. Whenever a fellow classmate or a student I was working with told me, "I don't know" or "I don't care" when it came to their futures or opinions, it frustrated me. I hope to change that for the future students I teach and give them a chance to pursue their individual passion without feeling like they might be outcasted or left behind for deviating from the standard curriculum.

The student's passions and enthusiasms regarding academic interests seemed non-existent. Their concept of the future seemed vague, and unsure, and I believe that might have to

do with the lack of agency and autonomy that their traditional education enforced. In a more recent class, that I took here at UCR, I learned about Disability Studies. In this Disability Studies class, I learned about how unique it is to be what is categorized as "normal". The idea of standard, the idea of traditional education and of normal is a flimsy concept designed by a capitalist system that values 'able-bodies' and 'able-minds' to produce and continue providing a profit. Thomas Hehir writes about this in their article "Eliminating Ableism in Education". Thomas Hehir writes, "In short, in the eyes of many educators and society, it is preferable for disabled students to do things in the same manner as nondisabled kids" (Hehir 3). Thomas Hehir continues to explain the displacement that many students with disabilities such as deafness, blindness, or learning disabilities such as dyslexia feel in an ableist traditional school system. Because the system focuses on and demands a standard to be followed, students are either forced to comply to the standard or be rejected by it. Either outcome of this integration or rejection process leaves the students afraid to deviate from that presented standard, fearing rejection and isolation from the system. However, as I have presented before, this idea of abled-bodiedness or a standard, is unrealistic. As Thomas Hehir explains and from what I retained from my Disability Studies class, disability or difference is common. So, many students who managed to stay under the radar and fold themselves into the cookie cutter shapes sometimes even feel isolated, afraid they might be discovered and be rejected by the system as well.

Why must we live in a system that values mimicry and obedience over originality and difference? If the school engrains into their students that difference is punished and obedience is rewarded, that school will produce students who lack desires and dreams of their own. These innovators who could have breached the limits of what is currently understood and known, and pushed for a new approach in all fields, are now afraid to even step outside the 'norm' and be

labeled as different. These labels of disabled, different, 'special', all suggest that individuality and uniqueness are foreign, but everyone struggles with something, sometimes it might appear more minor in retrospect to the student, but nonetheless, because of this, it is impossible to teach everyone the same way. I believe the only way to fully address each student's perspective is to prioritize their voice, and their passions when teaching. When a student feels like an active participant in their education, they are more willing to fight for the future they imagine.

As a student with a learning disability, a label that determined me to be a failure within the system, I found strength in an alternate system, that was built around what I needed and found interesting. Because I was allowed to learn my way, a way that made me feel confident and excited about what I could accomplish, I jumped back into public school and managed to find my footing, because I had that foundation that built me up as a person before I dove into a world that tried to snuff my uniqueness out. This standardization that is engrained into students in traditional schools, in many cases, I believe stifles their chance to imagine realities outside what is provided for them, and it prioritizes repeatability over unpredictability. I also believe that if this system is not changed, it will continue to harm our society, our communities, our individual experiences, and our world. I have only really seen the beginning and end results of these kinds of schools, but even those are enough to terrify me, and to make me realize that imagination is a powerful tool, weapon, and way of understanding, that schools seem to either fear or misunderstand. Nonetheless, I hope to continue to push the barriers of the education system so that imagination and personal growth become crucial to the learning experience and does not become dismissed by a society that is simply afraid of change.

Chapter 5: Reimagining Education and Reflection

In this chapter I go over the process of writing this piece, to point out how even this project, which was a mix of creative and academic writing helped me understand more about myself, and the world around me. I also discuss how I want to use what I have learned through this process and how I plan to apply it in my future endeavors.

Initially, I was nervous to start this project, to critically look back at my past and then write out what I remembered, so that the memories could be used as examples in my research pursuits. However, through this process, I believe using personal anecdotes has grounded my theories in a relatable reality. I coupled my personal anecdotes with professional, academic writing to give my stories some more scholarly merit, because I wanted to demonstrate that alternative education is not just based in theory or 'fantasy' but is currently possible and thriving. Granted I do not believe my education process was infallible or by any means 'perfect', but it worked for me, and I managed to succeed in the traditional academic sphere even without a traditional education background. Nonetheless, after writing this, I realized that I want to improve on what was taught to me, I want to expand the possibilities of alternative education, and create my own enrichment program for K-12. I was lucky because I had great supplemental teachers and tutors to guide me through dyslexia and the growing-up process. But many students who deviate from the standard norms are not as lucky, and still struggle with feeling isolated and frustrated as the system that they are required to attend rejects their individuality and unique learning needs. This world labels difference as abnormal, and those who cannot conform to the standard as delinquent and stubborn. But I want to create a space that nurtures difference and empathy and encourages creativity over repeatability.

When writing this piece, I realized the potential of what an enrichment program could do for students, especially those that cannot fit into the standard form of traditional schools. I wanted to draw from my experience at TLC, as that is the closest enrichment and alternative educational program that I have personally attended. I believe that a program like TLC has much to improve on, but it gives me hope that such a program can succeed and can work in tandem with traditional teachings. I believe it will be impossible for alternative education to fully transform the educational system quickly, but I do believe after working through this process of self-reflection, that an enrichment program is possible and necessary for our future to survive and thrive as a society. When I was asked what I wanted to contribute to the world, and how I wanted to improve it, I looked at what I could do. I thought, I could be a doctor to heal people, I could be a soldier or fireman to protect people, I could be an engineer or scientist to help protect and heal the world from destructive events/people, but I realized that to improve all these fields I could create a new approach to education that would empower future experts and give them the confidence in their creativity to imagine new ways around the problems of the future. I want to make spaces in this world where creativity and imaginative play are allowed to exist and be set free to unfurl to their potential. I want to fight against the stigmas of creativity, because I believe it is a core building block to the way the future should be approached.

I hope to use this project as a launching platform to begin formatting a new an improved enrichment program that will be held multiple days a week and take creative education to a new level. I also plan to continue my research into alternative schools, like Montessori schools and the Reggio Emilia's Approach, and other alternative schools around the globe. I want to personally experience and interview the patrons and administrators of these schools to assess how these programs have benefited their communities and maybe see what has not functioned as

well with this transition in their communities. I then hope to write about these schools in my pursuit for a master's and Ph.D. in education. My plan is to take what I have learned on alternative schools and bring that to my community to form my own program that will create an environment that will provide the students with a creative space and make them comfortable to explore the boundaries of their realities and critically analyze modern rules and idealisms that merely stand due to tradition. Traditional schools are damaging to the future and to the individual students, as standardization instills susceptible stagnation in students and induces isolation and stress in the students as they are forced to conform to standard that rejects deviation and difference. With this in mind, and my personal history with alternative and traditional education, this project helped me realize that yes, this change is needed, but it appears that the best first step is to make a platform for creative education to grow on and allow the enrichment program to stand in tandem with traditional school and not fully replace it yet, so the transition is more natural. I would love to see the open, holistic, and creative approach to education eventually merge with traditional education, however, I believe that might take longer than my lifetime to achieve, but I hope to contribute the first steps to this process. I hope to start the process of creating a system of education that believes in the core values of diversity and holds the flexibility of imagination in the utmost regards, all while respecting the individual voices of its students.

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