

15,000 Hours of Playing School

I learned quickly how to play and succeed at the game of school. I was fortunate to be an early reader and to come from a supportive, white middle-class family to give me the initial advantage, and then I learned what I needed to do, how I needed to behave, to gain the teacher's affections and get the A.

As so often happens when we reach adulthood, and especially parenthood, we realize how much we don't know. I realized that I might have been successfully *schooled*, but I didn't feel well *educated*. When I reflect on the approximately 15,000 hours I spent in K-12 public school, I think of what a waste of time most of those hours were. What else could I have been doing, learning, in those hours? How much more genuine could those hours have been if I wasn't spending so much time playing the game, but actually learning, reading, doing?

As Ken Robinson candidly states in his book, *Creative Schools*: "The success of those who do well in the system comes at a high price for the many who do not. As the standards movement gathers pace, even more students are paying the price of failure. Too often, those who are succeeding are doing so in spite of the dominant culture of education, not because of it." [1]

For many children, the harm of compulsory schooling is obvious. Many are at a disadvantage right out of the gate and those disadvantages are amplified and embedded as their schooling continues. Others are bullied, labeled, tracked, or medicated. But beyond these obvious harms are the more subtle ones. Most schooled children, myself included, become conditioned to value and seek extrinsic rewards and superficial achievements. We lose creativity and individuality as we conform to arbitrary curriculum demands, teacher expectations, and institutional mores.

Parker Palmer writes in the Preface to Kirsten Olson's book, *Wounded By School*, about "the hidden and long-lasting wounds that result from the structural violence inherent in the ways we organize and evaluate learning, wounds that range from 'I found out that I have no gift of creativity,' or 'I learned that I'm no good at sports,' to 'They drained off my self-confidence,' 'I emerged feeling stupid,' or 'They put me in the losers' line and I've been there ever since.' Equally sad and profoundly ironic is the wound that may be the most widespread of all: the eagerness to learn that we all bring into the world as infants is often diminished and even destroyed by our schooling." [2]

So while it may seem that some of us made it through compulsory schooling unscathed—and even on top—I believe that few, if any of us, really do. We don't know how else we might have spent those 15,000 hours: to follow our curiosities, to reveal our

interests, to pursue our passions, to read, and read, and read some more. We don't know how well educated we could have become in our youth if we hadn't spent so much time memorizing, repeating, forgetting, and otherwise playing the game of school.

[1] Robinson, Kenneth. *Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution That's Transforming Education*. New York: Penguin Books, 2015, Introduction (xxi-xxii).

[2] Olson, Kirsten. *Wounded By School: Recapturing the Joy in Learning and Standing Up to Old School Culture*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2009, Preface.