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It's Time to Push for Schools to be Places of True Excitement for Our Kids

By Michele Gregoire Gill
UCF Forum columnist
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In this era of classrooms saturated with testing, we are missing the overall end of education: What do we want our students to be like as a result of their school experiences?



I can still see myself in my eighth grade English class. We are being asked to research a possible career. I pick lawyer because that seems like what is expected of me. But I have no interest in the law. I slump at my desk as the teacher drones on about the

assignment, while I secretly compose poems about wanting to be invisible, wishing I could wear a brown paper bag over my head so no one will look at me.

I go to a great school. There's no market for private schools in my rich Westchester, New York, suburb because the local schools are fantastic. The high school has a planetarium. The middle school has an Olympic-sized pool. Still, my classes are all mostly the same.

The teacher stands at the front and teaches, through lecture, activities, sometimes even games. But the classroom is tightly controlled, and students have no voice in what they are learning or how they learn it.

My social studies teacher is very good — I learn a lot of history in his class. He teaches me how to conduct research by identifying subtopics on index cards, then writing all the key facts I can find about each topic on cards related to that topic. At the end of the project, I have a fat stack of cards I can barely hold, and a solid foundation for a good paper on Andrew Jackson.

I begin to question the complacency I have had about my life.

The high school is even better. My ninth grade social studies teacher is unlike any other teacher I've ever had. I come alive in his class, begin to question the world and my place in it. He has us choose protest songs about the Vietnam War and analyze the lyrics. We watch *Walkabout*, an Australian film about the survival of two stranded children in the outback, and analyze the symbolism hidden throughout this disturbing film. I begin to question the complacency I have had about my life.

For our research projects, he lets us select our own among an abundant list of topics. I choose to analyze the tenets of Confucianism and how this philosophy shaped ancient cultures. In English class, we get to choose how to represent our understanding of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I write a *Ballad of Mayella Ewell* from the perspective of Boo Radley. I do a good job; I care about this project. It sticks with me, even 35 years later.

So, if my middle school gave me a strong foundation in academics, my high school set me free to become deeply curious about the world.

When we move to Florida, the quality of my schooling declines, though I have a handful of really good teachers here, too. My 10th grade English teacher allows us to pick a major project that incorporates various techniques she's taught us (sonnets, research, analysis), and I write *Sonnet of Myself* that is appropriately inward-focusing and poignant for a 15-year-old on the cusp of self-discovery. My 11th grade English teacher, though, apologizes for assigning us a superficial three-page paper, as even this is too much to expect of us.

I'm now a mom of two boys, and through them I've witnessed good teaching and poor teaching, great schools and awful ones. The same undercurrent exists, though — this idea that we have to control children and make them learn according to our agenda. It's even worse than when I was a kid, in this era of high-accountability and testing-saturated classrooms. There are so many reforms proposed to increase student

achievement or engagement — inquiry learning, collaborative groups, differentiated learning, technology-based instruction.

And yet, to me, as someone who has spent much of her lifetime exploring questions related to schooling, I think they all miss the mark. We become so focused with single-pronged solutions that we miss the bigger picture — the overall end of education: What do we want our students to be like as a result of their school experiences?

I ended up becoming so fed up with the difficulty of improving schools via teaching teachers that I created a school where the culture would be different, focused on what really matters in education rather than on Band-Aid reforms.

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And what does matter? It comes down to deep respect of each child and providing them with opportunities and guidance to nurture their unique gifts and talents in service to the problems that exist in the world. Sure, skills must be taught, too, but always in the context of authentic projects and endeavors related to big, important ideas. And school activities must engage students; learning independent of engagement does not stick, does not last. High expectations are critical, but they must be unique to the individual; not a rigid standard all must achieve, but a particular student's best efforts.

I think we overcontrol and undervalue our students in the United States and that is to the detriment of each child and to our greater society as a whole, as all the underdeveloped talent lies dormant, unused — unless you happen to be the privileged child able to attend an exceptional school or someone who has parents able to engage them in meaningful extracurricular learning opportunities.

But this is what schools are for, and they are for ALL students, not just the privileged few, and we are wasting their potential. It's not enough to create one good school. What is needed is a paradigm shift in how we think about education. Two of my colleagues and I want to be part of that conversation, so we created the [Center for Creating and Sustaining Innovative Schools](#), which is part of the UCF College of Community Innovation and Education.

It is time to create schools that are places of true excitement and passion for our kids — not just for them, but for the greater good of the world.

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