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Re-Thinking Schools

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Many children and teenagers find themselves constantly bumping up against “old” ways of living and learning. These children are often frustrated by rote learning and simple, mundane tasks. Many of them appear unable to cooperate in anything without first engaging in some form of debate. Some of these children exist in various states of seemingly perpetual agitation or withdrawal and may exhibit emotional outbursts or periods of profound non-communication. They may be extremely sensitive to noise, activity or emotional environments; or they may have difficulty expressing themselves or developing common social relationships. Many also experience night terrors, visions, anxiety or other symptoms of uneasiness.

All too often, these challenging phenomena are perceived as displays of incapacity, insolence or subterfuge rather than genuine calls for help. At school, these children’s names are often heard in faculty meetings and staff rooms as teachers give voice to mounting frustration. In an effort to justify continuance of the old paradigm, we find all sorts of labels for those who do not blend in: hypersensitive, learning disabled, ADHD, autistic, special, challenged, gifted, precocious, and troubled, to name a few. We diagnose and discipline, postulate and medicate, instill shame, place blame and stubbornly refuse to consider the possibility that it is not these children who are failing our systems, but our systems that are failing these children.

Being multi-faceted, multi-dimensional thinkers, today’s children simply do not relate to the simplistic linear, sequential approach implemented in most teaching and disciplinary situations. When thus confronted they “zone out” intellectually, engaging in fascinating inner landscapes in lieu of mundane external ones. In these situations, children retain some general information, but miss out on critical details necessary for complete mastery. Having

heightened intellectual capacity, combined with emotional or environmental sensitivity, and intuitive gifts, these children are particularly vulnerable to frustration, boredom and over-stimulation within the classroom setting. It is no wonder they find homework challenging at the end of the day, when what they really need is some serious “down time!” Fortunately, there are teachers who will advocate for these children, recognizing the child who is passionate, hardworking, co-operative, even downright demure.

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We as a community must ask ourselves not, “Why is this child causing us problems?” but rather, “What is needed to help this child succeed?” The answers are surprisingly simple.

Inspiration. Purpose. Creativity. Positivity.

When these children find inspiration in subject matter, meaningful content in assignments, creativity in delivery and positive responses to their efforts, their entire experience changes. Combine this with teachers who model what they expect and are willing to think (and act) outside the box—and our children are suddenly walking in a whole new world. In this world, children work at tasks that inspire them and are deeply connected to a sense of purpose in all that they do. Understanding why they are required to perform a task can be even more important to them than understanding how they can perform it. Often, just establishing this one

simple connection results in work being completed to an exceptional standard.

Whether or not they qualify under Ministry guidelines, all children deserve to be educated based on their own Individualized Learning Plan. In areas of strength, many of our children have the ability to “download” large packages of information into their brains, much like computers do. These children need to learn at their own pace—accelerating and extending themselves in some areas while navigating slowly and carefully in others. They need to be constantly reminded that what they can do is far more important than what they can’t. In areas of excellence, children should have the opportunity to challenge courses to demonstrate sufficient mastery, moving freely into levels of study that are compatible with actual rather than theoretical standing.

Because kids can be unconventional, creative thinkers, they often respond best to unconventional, creative methods. “Fun” is a key word here. So are “dynamic,” “flexible,” “unique” and “courageous.” And “safe sanctuary.” These kids need to feel safe. In all the excitement and passion they have for life and learning, what these kids need most is to learn to be at peace within themselves. They need skills and tools to help them access calm, quiet minds and heartspace amid the chaos of daily life. Providing our children with opportunities to gather in safe, nurturing environments where they can explore inner wisdom, personal authenticity and relationships with nature is one way we can support them in this journey. Above all, we must learn to grant our children and ourselves “The serenity to accept the things we can not change; the courage to change the things we can; and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Peter Tongue and Teron Wolf believe that in the spirit of inspiration, purpose, creativity and positivity, we can achieve a future educational system wherein all children are given opportunities to succeed in a loving, expansive way. They are gathering resources, funds and information to help create a school that will nurture the mind, body, heart and spirit of its entire community. They would love to hear from parents and educators who share this vision. Please contact Peter Tongue at descendingdove@gmail.com and Teron Wolf at equanimitycentre@yahoo.ca.



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