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Unschooling, Reschooling, and Alternative Schooling— Options for Everyone



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Reschool Yourself

Lessons from a Grown-Up Who Went Back to Kindergarten

BY MELIA DICKER

I had to admit it. I was jealous of my own students. Decorating cakes, designing websites, or painting in watercolor — you name it, these kids were learning to do it, and they were only in middle school. They were enrolled in Spark, the youth program I'd started with my friend Chris Balme to give kids the type of hands-on education that we weren't able to have. Our idea worked. My students were excited about what they were doing, and they were learning things that I still didn't know at age 27.

How to Reschool Yourself

1 If you have regrets about school, understand how you lost your way so that you can get back on track now.

Dredge up old baggage about your education, in order to let it go.

Ask yourself: How did my school experiences shape me into the person I am today? If they were to happen again now, how would I feel better equipped to handle them?

2 Appreciate the positive ways in which school influenced you.

Even if school limited you in some ways, it probably also opened up opportunities. Be grateful for them.

Ask yourself: Which teachers were role models for me? Which projects or activities introduced me to things I still remember today? How did my schooling help lead me to my current life?

3 Realize that it's never too late to change — and do it.

Now that you've made peace with your past, move forward into your future, no matter what your age.

Ask yourself: What beliefs and habits, if I were to change them, would make me happier? What things do I still want to learn and do, and how can I learn them?

I felt happy for my students, and pleased that I'd had a hand in developing their passion for learning. However, a part of me still felt unfulfilled. It was the part of me that wondered, "What about me? What about the rest of us grown-ups?" It seemed unfortunate to have just one shot at our education, and if we didn't emerge from it happy — well, better luck for other kids.

If I could go back and do school over again, I thought, I'd change a lot about my experience. I'd be able to explore freely, without the pressure of grades. I'd have a lot of independent study time, so I could follow my curiosity and develop my talents. Without the pressure to achieve and rewards for doing so, I would be less likely to develop the habits — workaholicism, people-pleasing, and perfectionism — that were making me unhappy in my adult life.

I decided that I wouldn't be able to make real change in myself, or in the education system, if I didn't make peace with my past first. I wanted a do-over. I wanted to go back and do my education again, knowing what I know now.

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Slowly, an idea came to me. Why *not* do school over again? All my schools were within a two-hour radius of each other, and I still knew teachers at all of them. Surely they would know that I intended not to criticize my schooling, but rather to understand it. The ideas kept coming, and the project began to take shape. I decided to return to each of my classrooms and do school over again, grade by grade, from kindergarten through college, and write about the experience.

I named the project Reschool Yourself, to communicate that it was not just about me, but rather about all of us



Melia in kindergarten. Photo by Adair Catalan (kindergarten student)

adults. I chose the word as a twist on “deschooling,” to mean not just healing any wounds developed in school, but also “reschooling” by shaping your own future from now on: that is, learning and doing what you choose to. I hoped that the project would not only help myself and others make peace with their past, but also to create an inspiring vision for what education could look like in the future.

My plans went smoothly, and I spent the next three months, from August to December, at my old schools, doing whatever the students did in the classroom and on the playground. I spent roughly a week in each grade and blogged about it on my website (www.reschoolyourself.com). I described being the most popular girl in elementary school for the first time, and remembering childhood moments of punishment and reward. In middle school, I wrote about running the mile in P.E., and going to an after-school dance. In high school, I took algebra tests and did chemistry labs. Finally, in college, I stayed three days in one of my old dorms and attended courses taught by my old professors. I also did a “memory walk” around campus for hours, visiting every place that had significance for me.

Over the holidays, I was able to reflect on what I had experienced. As expected, I had observed things in the classroom that were hard to watch: young students not being

permitted to drink water when they asked for it, and older ones sacrificing their health and happiness for achievement the way I had done. On the other hand, I had also seen things that gave me hope for education: school communities where each member had an important niche, and the type of hands-on projects that inspired true excitement and learning.

I changed more in those three months of reschooling than I had over the previous few years. By spending time with young children, I remembered how to laugh, play, and imagine throughout the day. I realized how much more confident I am as an adult than I was as a student. I grew to appreciate the teachers and school experiences that had shaped me in a positive way, and I understood how even the painful moments brought me to where I am in life today. By the end of the fall, I felt that my reschooling had neutralized the emotional charge that school once had for me. That is, when I set foot on the campus of my old schools today, memories still come back to me — only they’re not loaded with the upsetting feelings that they once carried.

One of my most important conclusions was that the education system will not change unless the adults making the rules can see school from a child’s perspective. Otherwise, they will tend to recreate their own school experience for the children they parent or teach — even those parts of school



Math with the 4th graders. Photo by Dave Kohnhorst

that they resented, like homework or grades — because they assume school has to be that way. Those of us attempting to transform the system will continue to meet resistance unless policy makers, principals, and parents remember what school was once like for them, as well as experience what it's like today.

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Reschooling is particularly important for those of us who have ended up working in education because we felt unsatisfied with our own schooling. I realized that my motivation once came from a place of anger and regret, and that I often criticized what was wrong with the current system instead of envisioning what education *could* look like. Putting old resentments to rest and forgiving the people involved in my

education, including myself, equipped me to approach educational change in a new way: from a place of excitement and possibility.

The most important lesson that you can draw from the project is that you can reschool yourself, too. You don't have to quit your job and go back to all your old schools like I did. Instead, sort through your old writings and photo albums, triggering old memories so you can intentionally stop clinging to them. Visit your old schools for even an afternoon, if you can. Recall the positive aspects of your schooling, and realize how even the painful experiences made you who you are today. Recognize that even if you didn't get to learn piano or scuba diving when you were a kid, it's not too late now. Take a class. Watch a documentary. Put down this article now and spend five minutes researching how you can learn something new.

Above all, remember that whether your age is 27 or 97, it's never too late to reschool yourself.

To read about what it was like to go back to kindergarten as a grown-up or to donate to the project, visit www.reschoolyourself.com.

Melia Dicker is a writer and educator who has worked with students of all ages in the U.S. and abroad. She co-founded Spark, a nonprofit youth organization in the San Francisco Bay Area, and is active in the democratic education community. When she's not dressed in costume or thinking about food, she blogs about education and personal development at www.reschoolyourself.com. ●