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Education, Learning, and Knowledge: It's in the Student's Hands

On the inside of a public charter school in the Midwest, the students' colorful artwork is proudly displayed throughout the building. The artwork is a visual representation to show what they learned. You can see drawings of teachers, students' families, and a fruit basket from different points of view. The artwork is the final presentation of projects they have produced. When my class first visited the charter school and saw colorful pictures of presidents with poems under them, the principal explained that the kids were interested in learning about money. They discovered each bill had a different president's face and they learned about each president. This project led them to write "I Am From" poems from the point of view of a president. What is interesting about this approach to learning is the students told their teacher what interested them and the teacher helped guide them to answer their own questions. As a result, they learned United States history, used poetry and literature to write about a president, and had fun while doing it.

This is how this school's students learn. They participate by active learning, or "learning by doing," and by posing questions to create problems to find solutions. One method of active learning is "problem based learning" (PBL) which is part of an "unschooling" method. The question is, "is it possible to use unschooling and PBL in the classroom?" This paper will explain how unschooling principles and PBL can effectively be integrated into traditional school curriculum. These methods of teaching mean the present student-teacher roles will be completely changed. The unschooling philosophy and PBL allow students to have more control over what they learn because they choose what they want to learn. Now teachers are enablers of learning instead of being authority figures in charge of distributing knowledge to students. This change in learning practices alters the dynamics of the classroom as students make connections to the world around them. They become curious about their environment, pose questions, and use critical thinking and problem-solving skills to answer their questions. This

approach fosters continuous thinking and the realization that learning does not stop in the classroom.

To have students realize learning does not stop in the classroom, teachers need to help show them that it does not. One way to accomplish this is by embracing unschooling methods. “Unschooling” is a term coined in the 1970s by educator John Holt. It is centered on the child and what they want to learn, how they learn, and the parent’s role in this journey. Children direct themselves to learn information through their passions, interests, and curiosity and the parents facilitate when necessary. Holt’s book, *Teach Your Own: The John Holt Book of Homeschooling*, helps to explain why unschooling is a pertinent learning method for children. He recognizes children are “by nature and from birth very curious about the world around them, and very energetic, resourceful, and competent in exploring it, finding out about it, and mastering it” (xxv). These observations led him to create the unschooling principles that guide his philosophy of wanting schools to support exploration. He writes that unschooling is also known as “interest-driven, child-led, natural, organic, eclectic, or self-directed learning... [it] doesn’t use a fixed curriculum... [it] allows children as much freedom to learn in the world as their parents can comfortably bear... [the parent and child] live and learn together, pursuing questions and interests as they arise” (238-239).

For Holt, unschooling is a way for children to unleash their curiosity, which is typically restrained by the school structure and curriculum. By allowing themselves to direct their energy and time into something they care about, they use the natural way to learn. Their learning is not forced by the “common core” or curriculum. It is all due to their interests, passions, and curiosity. Also, because there are no set benchmarks or topics to follow, students learn by using an interdisciplinary approach to find information. The charter school students’ money project is a perfect example of natural learning in an interdisciplinary manner. The fourth graders were interested in money and they realized each dollar bill had a different person on it, which led them to ask who these people were. They researched and

learned about the different presidents, wrote poems from the presidents' points of view and used math to understand currency and exchange.

Throughout the unschooling process, the child will constantly be asking questions, critically thinking, connecting and processing new information. With the money scenario, school subjects and skills such as research, math, writing, and history are intertwined in an engaging manner. Each subject is connected together because all subjects are like a chocolate chip cookie: some parts are more apparent and stand out more than others, but they are cooked together and in the end you cannot really tell which part was responsible for its flavor.

The money project can be described as an active-learning method called "problem-based learning" (PBL). *Foundations of Problem Based Learning*, written by Claire Howell and Maggi Savin-Baden, introduces the PBL approach, which uses "scenarios to encourage students to engage themselves in the learning process" (4). PBL is not a set way to learn because it shows learning can be done in a variety of forms, specifically with "open-ended situations and problems" (7). It also promotes communication, interpersonal skills, and the "processes rather than the products of knowledge acquisition" (4). By emphasizing the "processes" over the "products," students will put in more time and care about *how* they got the answer, instead of just wanting to *know* the answer to get a question correct on a test. The ultimate goal is to develop the skills and motivation to be lifelong learners. PBL helps kids constantly think and learn to find interesting things in everyday life. They begin to connect everything together and realize everything is intertwined.

Another benefit of PBL is that the students are in charge of what they learn. They use their passions to guide them and teachers are merely facilitators. This approach not only demonstrates students' leadership and assertiveness, but also shows they are curious about the world and want to know how it works. The students dictate which direction they want their learning to go. Answering their questions will lead them through many different paths

and experiments, which translates into gaining knowledge. In a traditional school setting, PBL would be difficult to implement because of student-teacher roles. To integrate unschooling principles and PBL effectively into the classroom, a change needs to happen in how we view students and teachers.

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire realized that we need to change student-teacher roles. He wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to critique the teaching of information and knowledge. Chapter 2 addresses two concepts of education used by teachers and how they view students. He calls them the “banking” and “problem-posing” concepts of education. He critiques the banking concept, saying it turns teachers into “subjects” that “fill” students’ (“objects”) minds with information. The students are “receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” so they can withdraw information when necessary (58). This approach does not encourage critical thinking or creativity. It also promotes strict student-teacher roles because the teacher knows everything and must fill the students’ minds with information. The teacher is superior in knowledge and status and is obligated to deposit knowledge into the students’ minds. The only actions students perform are “receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” (58). With the teacher acting as the sole source of knowledge, clearly PBL would not work. PBL requires students and teachers to close the superior-inferior viewpoint and understand they can learn from each other. It also relies on students seizing their education and going forward with it; they cannot rely solely on the teachers to lead them.

In the problem-posing concept, dialogue is utilized to create “teacher-student” and “student-teacher” roles. The students and teachers think, investigate, grow and find answers, which promotes learning on both sides. With both parties learning from each other, there are no superior and inferior roles in the classroom. They learn together, which is an essential part of PBL. The charter school uses the problem-posing concept, such as with the money project, and we see how PBL can be implemented in the classroom. At the charter school, the students and teachers propel each other forward with a drive to understand the world. To achieve this

goal we need to begin to change how teachers and students are viewed. Can this change happen in the classroom? Can we trust children to take control of their learning?

Will a child really gain the skills and knowledge that schools are supposed to teach them if they are in charge of their education? What if that child is only passionate about one thing? Would that prevent that child from exploring new topics and engaging in new ideas? Pam Larricchia has three children and has been unschooling them for five years. She wrote an essay published in *The Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning* titled “Unschooling Passions.” Two of her children, Joseph and Alyssa, each have one interest. Joseph is passionately interested in video games and Alyssa is passionately interested in the *Harry Potter* series. Joseph’s interest in video games helped him to explore and develop strength in research skills, write coherently to persuade and inform, use logic, create and solve math equations, and appreciate stories and mythology (3-10). Alyssa’s focus on *Harry Potter* expanded to allow her to learn the craft of writing, understand credibility in research, gain an interest in Latin and see how it is embedded in words, and learn how to critically think and pose questions (26).

This is another example that demonstrates how one main topic can provide opportunities to learn about new interests because a child wants to know more. This method helps with the integration of PBL in traditional school curriculum because it shows that teachers can begin with one topic and the students will gain the skills that are deemed necessary for each grade level through self-directed learning. The abilities Joseph and Alyssa developed are included in the common core standards. This result, along with the charter school’s money example, is proof that natural learning can still work within a school’s educational requirements and benchmarks. Since Alyssa, Joseph, and the charter school students wanted to learn and their curiosities drove them to answer questions, they began to see how every topic is intertwined and leads to another. Their continuous thinking and questioning show that they can always learn something new. All it takes is inquiry.

One school subject that encourages investigation to find the answers is science. The scientific method requires students to make observations, ask questions, do background research, create a hypothesis, perform an experiment, get results, and critically analyze the conclusion. This entire process is PBL. There are no set ways to conduct experiments, which encompasses the PBL idea that there are “open-ended situations and problems” (Howell and Maggi Savin-Baden 7). The direction in which one chooses to take a science experiment is endless. We also see how the process is as important as the product. Students in small groups can change the independent variable in each experiment to see different outcomes. Anyone can read the answer of a science experiment in a textbook, but it is the act of actually doing the experiment that matters. By using a hands-on approach to learning, the students are actively engaging in their education. The students dictate where they want their learning to go because they decide what variable to change. The teachers are not in charge; they are only helping when necessary.

One ninth-grade biology class in Singapore embraced PBL. An article titled “Problem-Based Learning Tools” by Christine Chin and Li-Gek Chia shows how PBL can be integrated with problem-based science (PBS), which also wants to promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills to solve real-world problems. This class used the process of scientific inquiry to find answers, communicate their findings, and create connections. They began with posing “ill-structured problems” that helped to structure the learning agenda. Some of these topics, formed from their own observations and inquiries, included nutrition and hair growth, eating disorders, slimming centers, and the nutritional value of insects. The topics were broad, presented in a scenario fashion, and then turned into questions to answer. Next, students were split into groups of four or five, explored the problem, did background information, carried out the scientific process, put the information together, and presented the findings (45).

The most important part of this process is that the students dictated what they wanted to research, which was based on real-life experiences. This is a concrete example of how

classroom curriculum was implemented with PBL and was beneficial to students and teachers. The students directed their learning through inquiry and the teachers were helpful guides, yet they both learned throughout this experiment. This process was driven by the students' thirst for knowledge and motivation to find the answers. When students want to pursue knowledge instead of being told the answers to pass a test, school lessons are more engaging and interactive. In fact, there is some research that suggests that students are happier and have more positive attitudes towards school when they have complete responsibility in their education and learning.

A study was performed in 2006 to evaluate the attitudes of students in two Sudbury model schools (where students have complete responsibility in their education and learning). Jennifer Schwartz published the findings in the *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning* in an essay titled "Self-Directed Learning and Student Attitudes." The results found a "positive correlation between freedom and choice in the learning environment and positive student attitudes" (24). The two Sudbury model schools used in this study are the Sego Lily School in Murray, Utah and the Fairhaven School, located in Upper Marlboro, Maryland. Twenty-three students from the two schools answered numerical and open-ended questions. These questions included, "I like school," "school is fun for me," "we find interesting ways to spend our time at school," "I study things I enjoy at school," "the staff likes me," "what is your favorite thing about school?" and "what is your favorite thing to learn about? Do you get to spend time learning about that in school?" (37-38).

It was found that, in general, the students liked their schools and the staff members. The numerical questions were ranked on a 1-5 scale, where one was "strongly disagree," two was "disagree," three was "neutral," four was "agree," and five was "strongly agree." Overall, the opinions of the students were positive because no answer was below an average of 3.62. The majority of the questions averaged 4.1 or above (37-38). In the open-ended questions, the students also had a positive attitude about school. The students in the survey answered

the original question of “in self-directed learning environments [do] students have a positive experience of school?” (43). Their answers are evidence that students have a positive outlook on school and learning when they are in a self-directed learning environment. However, since unschooling/alternative schools are newer, there is not much research done yet on this subject. Even though there is minimal data in this area, it does show there is evidence to back up positive views of students in self-directed learning environments.

In order to better prepare children for life outside of school, we need to change our teaching principles and how we teach. One way of doing this is by embracing active learning, including problem-based learning. PBL uses scenarios to find answers to solutions. Students take control of their learning and it leads them onto many different paths and topics. The students gain knowledge through the process of learning, not just with the end result. PBL is an unschooling principle. Unschooling also emphasizes learning by doing and using your interests and passions to explore the world. In order to incorporate unschooling methods and PBL in the classroom, we have to change how we view students and teachers. Students and teachers can learn with each other using dialogue and posing questions. No one is superior in knowledge and status to the other.

Ultimately, active learning means we need to redefine education, knowledge and learning. What is the purpose of education? Is it teaching to get knowledge about certain subjects or is it the process of learning? Is knowledge the same as learning? No, it is not. Knowledge is gaining information and learning is obtaining the information in a “me”-centered approach. By asking ourselves the difference between knowledge and learning and the purpose of schools, we can begin to fix our problems with education. We have to let children have more control over what they want to learn because their passions, interests, and curiosities will guide them in gaining skills to be lifelong learners. We have to put more trust in the students because they are the future. Learning does not stop in the classroom and that is what we must show them.

Works Cited

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