

DESCHOOLING TO FOSTER ENVIRONMENTAL CITIZENRY

By

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Abstract

Environmentally-concerned parents and educators today are asking, “How do we co-create learning environments that will foster environmental citizenry?” This reflects David Orr’s claim: “More of the same kind of education that enabled us to industrialize the earth can only make things worse.” Using autoethnography to explore my decision to deschool my children, I’m placed in the position of a reflexive practitioner, as I serve as both the primary researcher and subject of that research. Upon arriving at the decision to forgo the compulsory education system I discovered the interconnectedness between deschooling, autoethnography, and 21st century theories of environmental education. I examine the rationales of environmental educators such as Orr, Weston and Jickling who call for new systems of environmental education. I expose underlying assumptions and beliefs that shape my decisions to deschool my daughters and create context for broader community discussion about how to educate for an environmentally engaged citizenry.

Key words: Autoethnography, David Orr, Anthony Weston, Bob Jickling, compulsory education, environmental citizen, 21st century education, deschooling, homeschooling.

Dedication

I dedicate these thoughts and ideas to:

Jaden Isabella Richer

You have been my inspiration for this thesis since day one.
Your “Big Self” has shown me that you are your own master of
Living, Learning, and Loving in every moment

*("Mommy, relax! I'm just a kid and kids love candy. I'm not going to be a kid forever!") ~ Jaden
4 years old*

And to

Pierre-Maxime Richer

For every day that you challenge yourself and your students to think and question,
and for facilitating the growth of our planet’s future ecological citizens. Thanks for allowing
your students to color outside of the lines.

And to

Hazelle Senja Richer,

For giving me the chance to put into practice
everything I learned from your big sister

(Mommy, stop! I DO it!")

*~ Hazelle 1 1/2 years old & safely maneuvering herself down three flights of stairs and clearly
expressing her need for independence and safe risk taking*

And to

Elin for your patience, for believing that I had an important story to share and for supporting me
in my endeavor to express my stories in my own way. Mom, for the endless hours of caring for
my girls so that I could study and write. Dad, Uncle Jeff, and Grandma. I really couldn’t have
started this program without your support. Tracy and Roy for your intellectual stimulation. And
to my amazing and wonderful girl friends who put up with two years of me saying “I have to
work on my thesis” and more importantly, for being second mommies to my girls so I really
could work on this project. And last but not least, to our beautiful planet Earth. For the vast
amount of trees you gave so I could print out article after article, draft upon draft, and the energy
you gave to run the computers that I gazed at endlessly, and for all the other finite resources that
I used to be able to finish this paper. I wonder if anyone has ever bothered to do a life-cycle
assessment of a Thesis...

Declaration

You will notice that this paper does not follow the rules according to that prescribed in the Royal Roads University (RRU) Thesis Handbook, which I did follow exclusively in the writing of the thesis proposal. I use several different fonts, I apply color to some text and not others, I do not reference according to the set of laws or policy designated by those who created the thesis handbook.

I do appreciate the need for order and consistency (sometimes), however it would not make sense for me to abide by these rules considering that the topic and theme of this thesis is about deviating from social norms in favor of acting upon what I believe is best for myself, best for my daughter and best for the planet. I have already shown through hundreds of past examples that I can give others credit for their thoughts, that I can set my margins to someone else's standards, and that I know the difference between Times New Roman and Arial fonts.

I also know all too well that once my days with Royal Roads are over, RRU standards will no longer apply and I will need to conform to some other organization's well intended guidelines, which in my career experience have never been as stringent as a university.

I am certain that the layout of my thesis will disturb some readers greatly. However, I also hope for these same readers that perusing this paper can be an exercise in letting go, in asking yourself "What is Really Important to Me?", and in asking questions about the nature in which we ask others to follow rules, who created those rules, and are those rules still applicable today. After all, that is what this thesis is about: asking important questions that really matter.

An engineer may say that Function before Form is important and an architect may say the reverse. I say that both are equally important and that it is fun to play and experiment as well. I like colors; life is not just black and white. I don't privilege academic knowledge over good old-fashioned experiential knowledge or the reverse so why would I privilege Centuryschoolbook size 11 over Palatino-Roman size 12.

Instead of taking a white glove through this paper and judging it based on one set of ideas of what is right, read it as you would a novel, a newspaper, a bible.

Base your opinions of this paper on what your emotions, your intellect, your intuition, and your life stories are telling you for that is how I wrote this paper.

As you read the following pages, I want you, the reader, to fully experience my thesis with all of your senses, all of your emotions, similar to how I want my daughters to experience life and learning.

I encourage you to lose all aspirations and desires to be objective and declare your subjectivity as openly and proudly as I have done. I invite you to interpret my stories through your own. Then, in my ideal world, we could sit together and discuss what you see and hear and feel in the words you have read, and what I see and hear and feel in the text I have written.

Together, through conversation, through negotiation, we will come up with a shared understanding amongst the infinite different ways that this thesis could be perceived. I believe that only then can we begin to create the world that we really want to live in.

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field.
I'll meet you there.

Rumi

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Section 1: Preamble

After two years of research and writing and closing upon yet another extension deadline, I finally found the courage to express that I did not want to, would not, and could not submit a traditional thesis. It is not that I did not know how — I've written many APA style academic papers in my 14-year professional career as a student. It's that I could no longer ignore the contradiction between what I was advocating and the rigid, pre-determined academic publication format inherent to a traditional thesis.

For me, writing for a magazine about a subject matter that I feel is important is refreshing, exciting, scary and, well, just new. It also feels meaningful and purposeful — everything that learning should be about. I was pleased when Rick Kool, the Program Head of the Master of Arts in Environmental Education and Communications, agreed that I could use that format to write about a non-traditional approach to learning. The articles that you are about to read reflect the culmination of my research findings and my knowledge of the subject matter. They describe the transformations that I went through as a mother and as an environmental educator. They are written as evocative, “from the heart” essays that portray my researched and challenging and strong point of view. I wrote the articles in a manner that *Mothering Magazine* and *Yoga Journal* might like to publish.

I want to acknowledge that I am biased, subjective, opinionated, and highly influenced by my experiences in life, by strangers, my family and friends, professors, colleagues. I have great difficulty in drawing the distinction between my own ideas and the ideas of others that I have come across in peer reviewed journals, popular magazines, media, and conversations with ‘experts’ in the field of deschooling and ecoliteracy. Unable to reference every experience that I have had with my child, every conversation that I have had with someone who's provided

insight, or every book, magazine, journal article, or website that has slowly opened me to see the world differently, I write with a voice that is my own, yet mirrors the countless pieces of data that I've absorbed over my lifetime and that helps shape who I am today.

From Academic Writing to Personal Essay

Here is a glimpse into the transformation that took place in my writing and thinking as I transitioned from writing an academic thesis to expressing myself through personal essays in popular magazines.

My original thesis title was:

1. *How am I going to school my daughter?; which turned into*
2. *An Autoethnography of Deciding to Unschool Jaden; and twisted into*
3. *Unschooling for Ecoliteracy; then morphed quickly into*
4. *Deconstructing Environmental Education: Deschooling Myself; which leaves me...*

HERE...

...two years after the first deadline to complete the program and with a vastly different purpose and motivation for completing this project. In doing the research about deschooling and ecoliteracy I unintentionally and inevitably deschooled myself (partially). I'm no longer physically capable of completing a traditional thesis written in academic prose, blocked with perfect margins, neatly bound with APA formatting, ready to be read and critiqued and graded for the purpose of completing a degree, or for the purpose of receiving a letter grade or a piece of paper stating that I had fulfilled all the requirements of the program.

Navigating Through Systems: Seeking Support

I find myself still working to complete this project, and for no other purpose than to complete what I started and to get this huge ‘monkey’ off my back so that I can physically, mentally and whole-heartedly engage in a deschooling life with my little monkey, otherwise known as Jaden. So as not to appear a hypocrite, I should also note that I officially registered as a homeschooled/deschooled* individual this week with the Self-Design Program at Wondertree¹. This last point brings me to cross-roads where self-reflection and insecurity about my own ability as a deschooling parent is brought forth and should rightfully be explored. I was once asked why I would officially register Jaden in a system that I was lambasting. My response to this is that even though the studies show that homeschooling and deschooling numbers are on the rise, those numbers are relative when you put yourself in my shoes, relatively alone within a community of ten thousand people who are all sending their children to school. Let me stress that deciding to go against the norm, even when you feel very strongly about the issue at hand, is always a new undertaking, a new challenge, and a potentially scary and lonesome endeavor. Over time, perhaps by the time my second daughter will be of school age, this endeavor will feel less scary and feel more normal to me.

By registering Jaden in the Self Design Program this year, I’m simply choosing to navigate life comfortably within one system while challenging another. The Self Design program allows me, as a mother, to connect with resources that will support me while I continue to nurture my children’s natural learning ability. As well, the program allows me, again as a mother, to connect with other like-hearted and minded families that are also deschooling. This will hopefully evolve and connections with a wider global community will emerge in which I get

¹ Further information about Wondertree and the Self Design program can be found here: Retrieved July 1st from <http://www.wondertree.org/index.html>

to learn from other new families and those that have been deschooling for years. I imagine that the stories that these families have to share are invaluable and right now I'm just happy to understand their language and to know that I can access them through Wondertree. I suppose it would be more appropriate for me to say that I registered Jaden in the Self Design program more for myself than for her, as I trust her ability to learn in all situations and I know she'll be fine with or without Wondertree. This passage simply describes two possible scenarios; 1) I don't yet trust myself as a deschooling parent or 2) I'm a mother seeking to meet fellow travelers on this life long journey in which I'm happy to hop on and off the tour bus as I choose. All aboard!

***Please note:** semantics are not my forte and labeling the learning experiences that my children and I are co-creating seems constraining and impossible given that I'll only know what to call what we are doing when we are old and able to look back on it. However, once you've read through this paper and if you are inspired to do so, I invite you to invent a new word or pull from a long forgotten piece of verbiage to describe the life that my daughter and I are living.

Navigating Through Systems: Seeking Closure

Through this thesis writing experience, I also found myself critiquing the master's thesis process, again going against the status quo. Some might argue that it was through my decision to do a master's program that I did the kind of intensive thinking that led me to challenge the thesis process. Others might also ask why I choose to participate in a school system that contains elements of what I don't want for my own children's learning experience. The two key points that jump out of these two self-criticisms are 'decision' and 'choice'. I made the *decision* to do a master's program, and I *choose* to continue participating. And though I changed my thesis topics throughout the program more times than my daughters yell 'mommy' in one day, I still had the choice to research and study what I wanted to learn. Unfortunately, compulsory school is just that-'compulsory'- with little room for the child to negotiate topics or subjects to be learned and limited choice in deciding where that learning takes place. A question I ask myself now is, had I

known about deschooling as a child or prior to entering university, would I have made the decision to attend university? Instead of answering that question, I instead imagine various life scenarios as a result of answering yes, or no. This helps guide me in making decisions about further education; does it always have to take place in a university, a workshop or training course, or with a teacher, instructor, or professor? I'm certain that I will continue to learn and I'm confident that I will seek further opportunities to educate myself, however I'll now recognize that the ways I go about doing so do not always have to occur in formal or traditional settings. I'll also have a better understanding of how questioning a system can lead to positive change.

From Dispassionate Observer to Passionate Participant

The passage below titled: Anger: Grieving Stage #2 was the first piece that I wrote freely and without inhibition shortly after discovering that the compulsory education was an oppressive and socially constructed system. It was only a few short years ago that I was willing to place my children into a compulsory school, and would have done so without questioning. Upon learning about the ill effects that the compulsory education system has had on our societies for the past 100 years², I went through each of the five stages of grief (denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) as explained by Kubler-Ross (1973, 2005)³, as grieving people may do when they lose someone or something of personal value. I had valued schools, for reasons I had never questioned. For this project, I simply reflect my experience in the anger stage.⁴

² Gatto, J. (2000). *The Underground History of American Education*. New York: Oxford Village Press. Gatto, J.T. (1991). *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers. Illich, I. (1971). *Deschooling society*. New York: Harper and Row.

³ Kubler-Ross, E. (1977). *On Death and Dying*. New York: Scribner. Kubler-Ross, E. (2005). *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*. New York: Simon & Schuster Ltd.

⁴ I do not mean to make light of the grieving stages or of people who have lost a loved one. However, I did undergo significant emotions of loss, anger at myself for not knowing better, anger at society, denial, and so forth in learning about the ill effects of schools, in deciding to deschool my children, in relating this decision to family, friends,

Anger~ Grieving Stage #2.

There will come a day when we look back on the concept of a compulsory education (CE) and we'll lower our heads in shame. It won't be enough to defend that we are products of the system and therefore unable to stop the vicious cycle.⁵ Playing the victim will not suffice as an excuse.

We will ask ourselves how we allowed our families and our communities to be raped of our children and our children to be stripped of their senses, their innate ability to think, to feel, to wonder, to seek, to question and to discover for themselves. We will be so utterly embarrassed that we once defended such an education system ~ “Our children need schools to learn. Kids need to be socialized?” ~ and that we forcibly placed our children within this oppressive system without questioning it.

We will laugh at the irony of a CLASS-room and curriculum based education that socially engineered our children to be the environmental problems that we were educating our children to be able to solve. We'll wish we had known that the word ‘Curriculum’ stems from the latin word ‘Race Course’ as our children wonder why they missed their childhood. We will not laugh when we think about how we stripped our youth of their individual rights though we stated we were educating them democratically for a democratic society.

Right now, some are wondering, “Who is the individual who will be to compulsory education what Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King was to the civil rights movement?” It is not enough to try and reform the system. The entire system needs to be done away with in its entirety. The choices we make today about the learning environment we want for our children will determine the state of the natural environment in the generations to come.

The time has come to create a new paradigm for education and to understand that learning is an age old natural process that does not require manipulation or coercion.

My words above may seem absurd and ungrateful today, when education is so popularly viewed to be a privilege, an opportunity, a right, a gift. Yet, should we not ask who the giver is and whose price is being paid for this gift. But tomorrow is another day, another

strangers, in trying to understand where I fit into the bigger picture, feeling overwhelmed at the immensity of this global problem, in learning about my new role in society, and in restructuring my family/work life to engage in a life of deschooling.

⁵ “Marx stated that, institutions in an exploitative society ensure elite domination or the reproduction of class and gender relations. Education is used to transmit the predominant ideology—which is often connected to an economic base—and therefore has a socializing function.” Volume 2 / 1997: Alternatives to National Standards for Environmental Education: Process-Based Quality Assessment Arjen E. J. Wals & Tore van der Leij, Wageningen Agricultural University, *The Netherlands Journal of Environmental Education*.

opportunity to look at education through a different lens, to challenge conventional wisdom, and to be grateful that you did. My intention for this thesis is to look the gift horse in the mouth and for you to do the same.

I ask you now to recall a time that existed when it was acceptable to make slaves of human beings, when women could not vote, when homosexuality was punishable by the death penalty, when Galileo was put on trial for claiming that the earth was round, and when children were once valued as assets instead of liabilities. The truths of today may be the lies of tomorrow. For the purpose of this paper, I chose to see the notion of Government-run Education as a little white lie gone array. This little lie is a significant cause of the environmental problems that we see today.

I would never have written as strongly as I did above in an academic paper. Though I've always had thoughts like this and I've always wanted to speak like this, I wouldn't have been able to for fear that my words would come across as too opinionated or not justified, but mostly for fear of not writing what the professor wanted to hear and receiving a failing grade as a result. I must confess, I wrote this knowing full well that this might jar you as a reader. Education is so ingrained in us that we don't know how to question it or even think that it needs to be questioned.

However, the concept of compulsory education is a socially constructed concept that in the history of human kind has only been around for a few short years. Challenging a societal norm such as education feels like a lonesome quest. Fortunately, more and more, I do encounter environmentally-concerned parents and educators today that are grappling with the issues around education and how to educate the young to face the challenges of our rapidly eroding planet. This question looms large in my decisions to deschool⁶ my children. Similar to how this thesis has come to fruition, I view the act of deschooling as non-formal and transformative learning,

⁶ I use the terms deschooling, deschooling, and homeschooling interchangeably throughout this paper though I'm sure there are many advocates of each concept of learning that would disagree and perhaps be offended by me doing so. However, I refuse to label the non-schooling process I'm embarking on with Jaden as it is really just an act of learning through living and through being alive.

and as a potentially key way to foster ecologically aware citizens. My motivation behind this thesis, which was to take the form of an autoethnography, was to highlight the similarities between deschooling and ecoliteracy for the purpose of creating learning communities that fosters environmentally engaged citizens. By taking the autoethnographic form, I gave myself permission to express feelings that I otherwise felt I couldn't express in an academic piece of writing.

From Academic Abstract to Community Engagement

Here is my original abstract from the academic thesis I was so passionate to write two years ago. I am still interested in the ideas presented in the abstract; however I am more engaged in the process of finding out those answers through direct experience with my children, not through formal writing.

How do we educate the young to face the challenges of our rapidly eroding planet? Like many environmentally-concerned parents and educators today, this question looms large in my decisions about how to create a learning environment that will foster environmental citizenry for my own children. It reflects David Orr's claim that: "More of the same kind of education that enabled us to industrialize the earth can only make things worse"⁷. This thesis uses an autoethnography approach to explore the question of: "How can I educate my daughter for environmental citizenry? It places me in the position of a reflexive practitioner, as I serve as both the primary researcher and the primary subject of that research. In this thesis I explore the definition and attributes of ecological literacy so that I may provide a similar learning environment for Jaden. I examine the rationales of environmental educators such as Orr, Capra, Weston and Jickling who are calling for new systems of environmental education. I envision the environmental challenges my children and other children growing up in the early part of the 21st century will face. Using these three sources of data, I expose the underlying assumptions and beliefs that shape my decisions to "deschool" my daughters and in so doing, create groundwork for broader community discussion about how best to educate for an environmentally engaged citizenry.

⁷ Orr, D. (1992). *Environmental Literacy: Education as if the earth mattered*. 12th Annual E. F. Schumacher Lectures. Oct 1992, Great Barrington, MA.

Key words: Autoethnography, David Orr, Fritjof Capra, Anthony Weston, Bob
Jickling, compulsory education, environmental citizen, unschooling,
deschooling, homeschooling.

The last sentence in the abstract states that I want to “create groundwork for broader community discussion about how best to educate for an environmentally engaged citizenry”. Reflecting over the past two years, I spent a great deal of time getting down on myself for not completing my thesis, for being a procrastinator, claiming that I didn’t have the intellectual ability to write a worthy master’s thesis and so on.

However, having emerged from the final stage of grieving - ‘acceptance’ - about the ailments of the compulsory education system and after having learned the intricacies of what it means to embody a deschooling philosophy, I view the past two years of this thesis writing endeavor through a different lens. In doing my research and then discussing my ideas with other parents concerned about their children’s education, by having endless discussions with strangers about the topic of my thesis, which led to being called upon by the local school district to discuss how our community could in fact educate for an environmentally engaged citizenry, I inadvertently created the groundwork for broader community discussions about the controversial topic that I had intended to write about. The act of learning about deschooling through *doing*, through *being* part of a community, and through *living* has been a valuable outcome from having written the original abstract above.

From Writing About Autoethnography as a Research Method to Expressing My Own Authentic Voice

Throughout my thesis work, I have grappled with the following questions:

- 1. Can a thesis be written in any other way than the formal way that I know?*
- 2. What gets classified as legitimate ways of knowing and inquiring?*
- 3. What research and data (ways of knowing) should be valued or privileged?*

These questions led me, initially, to autoethnography as a research method. This method exposed and made me confront the discrepancy between writing an autoethnography in an academic format and expressing my own authentic voice. In the end, I grew confident enough to pursue the latter. I decided to write personal essays in popular publications rather than trying to make an autoethnography conform to the rigid guidelines of an academic thesis.

The following section contains the research methods section for autoethnography that was accepted in my original proposal two years ago. As you are reading, please note the contradiction between the aims of autoethnography and the academic voice in which it is presented, and why I believe the decision to write personal essays for popular publications was a truer reflection of both the aims of that research methodology and my commitment to deschooling.

Section 2: Autoethnography: What is it?

Autoethnography is “a turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self experiences occur”.⁸ Autoethnography grew within a postmodern philosophy which values “that many ways of knowing and inquiring are legitimate and that no one way should be privileged”.⁹ Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner, influential authors and professors of autoethnography, declare that this methodology “privilege[s] stories over analysis, allowing and encouraging alternative readings and multiple interpretations”.¹⁰ I imagine that readers of this paper will interpret sections of my autoethnography differently depending on the current role the readers are playing in their own lives. An educator in a traditional school setting versus a parent who has been deschooling his or her child for many years may be attracted to certain elements of the thesis that the other is not.

Walford mentions that autoethnography “is about the need to be introspective about feelings and motives, to be self-questioning, and prepared to confront contradictions and ‘less than flattering’ things about the self.”¹¹ I encourage the reader to accompany me on this autoethnographic journey of introspection on the topics of education, our children, and the planet. Glesne states that within the postmodern perspective of qualitative research, there is

⁸ Denzin, N. (1999). Interpretive Ethnography for the Next Century. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 28(5), 510-519; 253.

⁹ Wall, S. (2006). An autoethnography on learning about autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(2), Article 9; 2. Retrieved November 3, 2007 from http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5_2/pdf/wall.pdf.

¹⁰ Ellis, C. & Bochner, A. (2000). *Autoethnography, personal, narrative, reflexivity*. In N.K.Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed., p. 733-768; 745) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

¹¹ Walford, G. (2004). Finding the limits: Autoethnography and being an Oxford University proctor. *Qualitative Research*, 4(3), 403-417; 411.

the need to “seriously take on the lenses of other ways of looking at the world...¹² “and to create new forms of representing what is learned, forms that reveal emotions and feeling”.¹³

Autoethnographies are also political in nature as they engage their readers in important political issues and often ask us to consider things, or do things differently.¹⁴ Education is grappled in politics. Public funds pay for public education, private education is accessible to an elite few, governments debate over what, where, when, and how children should be educated and the costs involved in doing so, and corporate entities compete with each other to influence and win the support of actual institutions. Public education was also founded on the need to create an industrial working class society, housing prices rise and fall according to academic success of individual schools, and curriculum is developed as a reflection of what industries value. By simply posing the question of whether or not my daughters should go to school, I have entered into a political discourse.

Autoethnography is a qualitative form of “narrative or story telling that is usually written in the first-person and features dialogue, emotion, spirituality, and self-consciousness as relational and institutional stories affected by historical, social, and cultural structure”.¹⁵ According to Ellis, social scientists now use the term autoethnography to refer to “stories that feature the self or that include the researcher as a character”.¹⁶ This autoethnography is a subjective, reflexive and analytical personal account of my decision to deschool my children. Autoethnography is based on the assumption that people share similar experiences with the author and like the author, that others have also been faced with difficult decisions. I have

¹² Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. Boston, MA: Pearson. p. 18.

¹³ Ibid. p. 19.

¹⁴ Holt, Nicholas L. (2003). Representation, legitimation, and autoethnography: An autoethnographic writing story. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2(1). Article 2. Retrieved November 15, 2007 from http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/2_1final/html/holt.html

¹⁵ Ellis, C. (2004) *The Ethnographic I*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira. p. 38.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 38.

met many parents who believe that the conventional education system fails to meet the needs of their children and society. Like me, they are searching for effective ways to respond. In her paper *Writing on the Bias*, Linda Brodkey proposes that autoethnography invests itself in "the potential for social change rather than any psychological benefits".¹⁷ This thesis is an agent for social change in that it explores ideas of how education can be a catalyst for environmental change.

History of Autoethnography

The term 'autoethnography' has been in use for over thirty years by anthropologists, sociologists and literary critics.¹⁸ David Hayano claims to have heard the word autoethnography used for the first time in 1966 by Sir Raymond Firth at a seminar at the London School of Economics.¹⁹ Anthropologist Karl Heider used the term autoethnography in 1975 in his report of fieldwork on the Dani tribe of Indonesia, where he asked the Dani people to make an account of what their people do.²⁰ He claims that he would have never been able to gather the quality of responses to his question using other methods,²¹ However, both Hayano and Heider use the term to refer to studies by anthropologists in which the researcher is a full insider of the group being studied. Hayano, for instance, is a professional poker player and he conducted an autoethnographical study of professional poker players.²² The term autoethnography is now used by social scientists in reference to stories that feature oneself or in which the researcher and the subject are one and the same person.²³ In my situation, I am the researcher studying myself in the process of deciding how and where to

¹⁷ Brodkey, L. 1994. Writing on the bias. *College English*. 56(5), 527-547;528.

¹⁸ Ellis, C. (2004) *The Ethnographic I*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.

¹⁹ Hayano, D. (1979), Auto-ethnography: Paradigms, problems, and prospects. *Human Organization*, 38, 99-104.

²⁰ Heider, K. (1975). What Do People Do? Dani Auto-Ethnography. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 31, 3-17.

²¹ Heider, K. (1975). What Do People Do? Dani Auto-Ethnography. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 31, 3-17.

²² Hayano, D. (1979), Auto-ethnography: Paradigms, problems, and prospects. *Human Organization*, 38, 99-104.

²³ Ellis, C. (2004) *The Ethnographic I*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.

educate my daughters. Autoethnography recognizes that the personal and the cultural are unavoidably linked and thus encourages non-conventional methods of inquiry and expression to emerge.²⁴

Collecting Data

Data collection consists of multiple experiential and observational activities and then may take the form of a letter, a short story, a case study or poem - the data and the intended recipient drive the choice of format. In my case, I started off wanting to express my findings in play, which went back to being written conventionally, and which finally resulted in being written as articles for magazines. Ellis states that “autoethnography does not proceed linearly”,²⁵ and that the process is complex and does not follow any specified formula. Ellis declares that writing an autoethnography is similar to being sent “into the woods without a compass”.²⁶ The autoethnographic writing process is not and cannot be prescriptive because the content and the form in which the autoethnographies take are one and the same, they tend to evolve simultaneously, and they are an emergent component unique to each writer. The advantage of wandering through the writing process without a predetermined direction is that the writer may discover information or knowledge about him or herself that could not have been predicted. I could never have imagined the changes that would take place, the experiences I would have in my career, the contacts I would make with complete strangers, or the friends I would make and perhaps even become distant from as a result of this learning journey.

²⁴ Wall, S. (2006). An autoethnography on learning about autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(2), Article 9. Retrieved November 3, 2007 from http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5_2/pdf/wall.pdf

²⁵ Ellis, C. (2004) *The Ethnographic I*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira. p. 119.

²⁶ Ellis, C. (2004) *The Ethnographic I*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira. p. 120.

Methods within Autoethnography

The bulk of my autoethnography stems from reflections of informal discussions with friends, family, strangers and members of alternative education support groups.

Conversations that I have had with others who have grappled with similar issues will add insight and flavor to my thesis. The following passage by Ellis highlights how the process of writing autoethnographies requires active participation by many people, not just the author.²⁷

Participants are encouraged to engage in personal relationships with authors/researchers, to think of themselves as co-researchers, to share authority, and to author their own lives in their own voices. Readers, too, take a more active role as they are invited into the author's world, aroused to a feeling level about the events being described, and stimulated to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives.²⁸

Deep personal inquiry as to what I believe the nature of education to be and what I believe we should be educating our children for will be supplemented by my understanding of current and relevant literature on the topic. In addition, I intend to highlight the gaps that exist in the environmental literature according to my personal reflection on how I've come to know about deschooling and arriving at the thought that deschooling and environmental education philosophy and practice is linked.

Personal Narrative

Personal narrative can be seen as either the product of autoethnography or as the actual proposed method unto itself²⁹. Richardson explains that writing, in itself, is a method of inquiry in which areas of the self and the topic are discovered and analyzed as the writer moves from a mode of "telling" to one of "knowing".³⁰ She suggests that one writes as a way

²⁷ Ellis, C. (2004) *The Ethnographic I*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.

²⁸ Ellis, C. (2004) *The Ethnographic I*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira. p. 26.

²⁹ Connelly, F. & Clandinin, D.(1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, 19(5), 2-14.

³⁰ Richardson, L. (1994). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.) *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 516-529). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

to find out something, a story, about the social world that was not known before it was written. Clandinin and Connelly explain that “[o]ne theory in educational research holds that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world”.³¹ As writing is both a product and process, it does not occur linearly. Jago states that, “personal narratives do not present themselves in conversation as identifiable, coherent wholes.”³² Rather, they exist as conversational fragments gathered together by the researcher and sculpted into an historical account”.³³

Influences on Autoethnography

Autoethnography is noted as “a genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness”³⁴ and requires authors to call upon their own lived experiences, connecting the personal to the cultural, and placing the self and others within a social context.³⁵ The process of collecting data may prove to be challenging as Ellis articulates below,

Back and forth autoethnographers gaze: First they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition³⁶.

³¹ Connelly, F. & Clandinin, D. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, 19(5), 2-14. p. 2.

³² Jago, B. (1998). Ambivalence and agency: Women's narratives of father absence, *Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 398-426.

³³ Jago, B. (1998). Ambivalence and agency: Women's narratives of father absence, *Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 398-426. p. 103.

³⁴ Ellis, C. & Bochner, A. (2000). Autoethnography, personal, narrative, reflexivity. In N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed., p. 733-768) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. p. 739.

³⁵ Reed-Danahay, D (1997). *Auto/Ethnography*. New York, NY: Berg.

³⁶ Ellis, C. (2004) *The Ethnographic I*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira. p. 37-38.

I will not attempt to overcome these challenges or ‘unblurr’ the distinctions. Instead I will attempt to recognize and use the challenge to show more clearly the ties that bind my cultural and personal experiences within education and how that relates to my decision to deschool.

Autoethnography and Validity

‘Research’ is defined as a careful and diligent search.³⁷ I endeavored to carefully and diligently search introspectively to uncover experiences and influences that effected my decision to deschool my girls. Ellis paraphrases Mykhalovskiy who states that autoethnography is becoming recognized in its own right as personal narrative and that “to write about the self is to write about social experience”.³⁸

A question that arises which I will address in more detail in this thesis is the question of what constitutes validity within the realm of autoethnography and this subjective, qualitative, postmodern method of inquiry. Walford states, “there are many forms of useful writing but, in my view, for that writing to be designated the report of ‘research’ it has to pass certain tests of validity and relevance”.³⁹

Many authors argue that authenticity is an indicator for validity within qualitative inquiry.⁴⁰ In addition, Cohen et al., state “‘understanding’ is a more suitable term than

³⁷ Harper, D. (2001a). Online etymology dictionary: Research. Retrieved January 1st, 2008, from <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=research>

³⁸ Ellis, C. (2004) *The Ethnographic I*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira. p. 40.

³⁹ Walford, G. (2004). Finding the limits: Autoethnography and being an Oxford University proctor. *Qualitative Research*, 4(3), 403-417. p. 413.

⁴⁰ Ellis, C. (2004) *The Ethnographic I*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.; Holt, Nicholas L. (2003). Representation, legitimation, and autoethnography: An autoethnographic writing story. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2(1). Article 2. Retrieved November 15, 2007 from http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/2_1final/html/holt.html; Richardson, L. (2000). New writing practices in qualitative research. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 17, 5-20.

‘validity’ in qualitative research”.⁴¹ Cohen et al. deem that, “in qualitative data collection, the intensive personal involvement and in-depth responses of individuals secure a sufficient level of validity and reliability”.⁴²

According to Ellis, “validity means that our work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible”.⁴³ She states that validity can be judged by whether the writing provides ways in which the reader, the participants or the researcher can improve upon their lives or understand their social situation better in addition to “the way those in power shape them”.⁴⁴ In writing my thesis, I hope to better understand the motives behind the powers that be within the traditional and alternative education arena, in addition to my own motives for wanting to deschool.

Sparkes states that the criteria used to judge autoethnography and personal narrative should not be the same as the criteria used to judge traditional sociological research.⁴⁵ The question then arises: What criteria need to be established to judge or evaluate autoethnography? Richardson provides the following five criteria that can be used when reviewing autoethnography, also termed personal narratives, which include analysis of both evaluative and constructive validity techniques:

1. Substantive contribution: Does the piece contribute to our understanding of social life?
2. Aesthetic merit: Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfyingly complex, and not boring?
3. Reflexivity: How did the author come to write this text? How has the author’s

⁴¹ Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2000), *Research Methods in Education*. 5th Ed. Routledge Falmer, London. p. 106.

⁴² Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2000), *Research Methods in Education*. 5th Ed. Routledge Falmer, London. p. 107.

⁴³ Ellis, C. (2004) *The Ethnographic I*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira. p. 124.

⁴⁴ Ellis, C. (2004) *The Ethnographic I*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira. p. 124.

⁴⁵ Sparkes, A. (2000). Autoethnography and narratives of self. Reflections on criteria in action. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 17, 21-41.

subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text?

4. Impactfulness: Does this affect me emotionally and/or intellectually? Does it generate new questions or move me to action?
5. Expresses a reality: Does this text embody a fleshed out sense of lived experience? Autoethnographic manuscripts might include dramatic recall, unusual phrasing, and strong metaphors to invite the reader to 'relive' events with the author.⁴⁶

I include a sixth and seventh criterion to judge the validity of autoethnography papers which comes from Lincoln and Guba, 1986 cited by Cohen et al.⁴⁷

6. Fairness: Does it augment and improve the participants' experience of the world, and does it improve the empowerment of the participants?
7. How does the author judge his or her own work?

I use the above list of criteria as a framework for judging the validity of my work with the seventh criterion being the most important to me.

In an attempt to understand how validity is addressed within qualitative research, I came across the concept of 'catalytic validity', which accurately describes what I am attempting to achieve through the process of conducting this autoethnography. Catalytic validity "suggests an agenda" and "strives to ensure that research leads to action".⁴⁸ Though I decided to deschool my children more than 3 years ago, that decision was mostly based on intuition and non-academic research. My decision and this thesis, which are based on research of relevant academic literature, helped to validate my 'agenda' or decision to deschool Jaden. More importantly, my research has led me past the deciding process to the 'action' of actually deschooling them.

⁴⁶ Richardson, L. (2000). New writing practices in qualitative research. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 17, 5-20. p. 15-16.

⁴⁷ Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2000), *Research Methods in Education*. 5th Ed. Routledge Falmer, London.

⁴⁸ Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2000), *Research Methods in Education*. 5th Ed. Routledge Falmer, London. p. 106.

Cohen et al cites Schofield, 1992 stating that catalytic validity in research “might focus on what might be (the leading edge of innovations and future trends) and what could be (the ideal, possible futures)”.⁴⁹ As I envision the environmental challenges my children and other children growing up in the early part of the 21st century will face, this autoethnography attempts to contribute to and continue an ongoing broader community discussion about how best to educate for an environmentally engaged citizenry.

Autoethnography and Subjectivity

Glesne argues that subjectivity has previously been left out of research as a way to “control against through a variety of methods to establish validity”.⁵⁰ However, if the researcher recognizes his or her subjective stance in the study, subjectivity “can be monitored for more trustworthy research... and can contribute to research”.⁵¹ Throughout the thesis writing process, I tried to stay attuned to my subjective lenses as I searched for a clearer understanding of how I came to my decision to deschool. In order to do this, Glesne states that I must remain attuned to my emotions in order “identify when [my] subjectivity is being engaged”.⁵² She also goes on to say that by understanding and monitoring your subjectivity, You learn more about your own values, attitudes, beliefs, interests, and needs. You learn that your subjectivity is the basis for the story that you are able to tell. It is the strength on which you build. It makes you who you are as a person and as a researcher, equipping you with the perspectives and insights that shape all that you do as a researcher, from the selection of the topic clear through to the emphasis you make in your writing⁵³.

Clearly, my attachment to this topic led me to literature and to individuals that supported my sentiments. In addition, in deciding to write articles for certain magazines, I

⁴⁹ Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2000), *Research Methods in Education*. 5th Ed. Routledge Falmer, London. p. 111.

⁵⁰ Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. Boston, MA: Pearson. p.119.

⁵¹ Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. Boston, MA: Pearson. p.119.

⁵² Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. Boston, MA: Pearson. p.120.

⁵³ Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. Boston, MA: Pearson. p.123.

admit that I chose magazines that may agree with or support my position rather than disagree with my opinions. As a result of better understanding autoethnography, I am able to set a goal to endeavor to explore and continuously reflect upon my own subjectivity in my deschooling experiences with my daughters and in future discussions with other schooling families.

Critiques of Autoethnography

Autoethnography has been met with a degree of academic suspicion because it contravenes certain qualitative research traditions.⁵⁴ This thesis investigates the critiques of autoethnography with an aim of addressing its criticisms and forwarding its use as a legitimate research technique and tool in its own right.

Autoethnography, though a relatively new term to academia, is actually an old technique for doing and communicating research and knowledge. Autoethnography is rooted in the ancient art of storytelling, which has been used throughout history and cultures to educate, share, and transfer information. Wolcott suggests, “That qualitative researchers need to be storytellers, and storytelling should be one of their distinguishing attributes”.⁵⁵

Coffey criticizes autoethnography as being self-indulgent and narcissistic.⁵⁶ Ellis counters that researchers who believe that they are removed from what they study are actually self-absorbed because they obviously do not believe that life impacts them the same way that life impacts their subjects.⁵⁷ Autoethnography is a postmodern concept and as such, Glesne argues that “universal truths” do exist to be discovered because researchers are part of

⁵⁴ Holt, Nicholas L. (2003). Representation, legitimation, and autoethnography: An autoethnographic writing story. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2(1). Article 2. Retrieved November 15, 2007 from http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/2_1/pdf/holt.pdf.

⁵⁵ Wolcott, H. F. (1994). *Transforming qualitative data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. p.17.

⁵⁶ Coffey, P. (1999). *The ethnographic self*. London: Sage.

⁵⁷ Ellis, C. (2004) *The Ethnographic I*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.

the societies of which they investigate in which only partial ‘local’ and ‘historical’ insights can be obtained.⁵⁸ Bakhtin explains "I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself to another, through another, and with the help of another".⁵⁹

Wall highlights another critique of autoethnography: its lack of systematicity and methodological rigor.⁶⁰ I believe the eight criteria for judging the validity of an autoethnography that I employ in this thesis serve to address this criticism.

Another critique of autoethnography is its lack of generalizability. Those in favor of autoethnography, including myself, agree that the lack of generalizability is in fact strength within this method of inquiry.⁶¹ As every individual has different experiences, there is a great deal that can be learned about individual situations and problems that are addressed in personal narratives. And while not being able to generalize autoethnographies, this method of inquiry does allow for transferability, as readers are able to relate to the author with regards to the problem or issue being discussed. Curtin and Fossey define transferability as the ability for readers to assess the detail provided within a qualitative research article and to “be able to determine if the findings can be applied to other contexts”.⁶² At times, we have all felt alone or isolated when dealing with certain life situations. I hope that my autoethnography will help the reader, who may be going through a similar struggle, to feel a self-acceptance, or at the very least to not feel so alone.

⁵⁸ Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. Boston, MA: Pearson.

⁵⁹ Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics* (C. Emerson, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p. 287.

⁶⁰ Wall, S. (2006). An autoethnography on learning about autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(2), Article 9. Retrieved November 3, 2007 from http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5_2/pdf/wall.pdf.

⁶¹ Ellis, C. (2004) *The Ethnographic I*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.

⁶² Curtin M, Fossey E. (2007). Appraising the trustworthiness of qualitative studies: guidelines for occupational therapists. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, 54(1), 88-94. p. 92.

Holt declares that “researchers would be well advised to be persistent in their autoethnographic intentions... and be prepared to face rejection and critiques of their chosen genre.”⁶³ I am prepared to face rejection and to counteract critiques of this method, similar to how I will undoubtedly be criticized by others for my decision to go against mainstream society by deschooling. Holt goes on to say that “resilience and conviction are required to pursue this methodology”⁶⁴ which I have required as I’ve entered a life of deschooling.

Ethic of Care and Concern

Ellis points out the importance of writing from “an ethic of care and concern”,⁶⁵ which I have done. I have focused on my own lived experiences. I endeavored to describe my reflections of reality as truthfully as possible without diluting any aspects of my thoughts, feelings, and emotions. With regards to issues of confidentiality and the ethical responsibility to protect others and myself, I concealed names of people and/or places.

Being at home with a radical stance

As I have tried to leave my academic voice behind and started to view myself as my own authority, I battled with the need to continuously seek well referenced literature instead of learning to listen to the story, the data and the evidence that is within me. There are important similarities between autoethnography and deschooling. Both are about the coming together, the blending of sciences and the arts when doing research and when learning. Quantitative or qualitative data can easily be presented in a pie chart or in a poem. A child artist is always

⁶³ Holt, Nicholas L. (2003). Representation, legitimation, and autoethnography: An autoethnographic writing story. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2(1). Article 2. Retrieved November 15, 2007 from http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/2_1/pdf/holt.pdf. p. 19.

⁶⁴ Holt, Nicholas L. (2003). Representation, legitimation, and autoethnography: An autoethnographic writing story. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2(1). Article 2. Retrieved November 15, 2007 from http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/2_1/pdf/holt.pdf. p. 19.

⁶⁵ Ellis, C. (2004) *The Ethnographic I*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.p. 46.

analyzing the world around him; when finger knitting he's doing math, when baking she's engaged in chemistry. Autoethnography and deschooling are also about integrated learning and seeing the connections between all things in life – there is little separation between learning and doing. Both foster self-knowledge, and the understanding that self-knowledge cannot be taught: it can only be facilitated or discovered, no matter how painful or joyful it is to do so. Both autoethnographer and deschooler attempt to share this knowledge, gained through life experience, with others; to help someone else possibly learn or gain a new understanding. And both autoethnography and deschooling are considered by many to be unconventional or radical ways to participate in life.

As I leave my academic voice behind in favor of this newly discovered voice, I feel a sense of freedom and a new sense of self. I'm not certain I would have arrived here had I not chosen to learn about and use autoethnography over a more traditional research method. The irony of choosing to use a non-conventional research method to explore and write about non-conventional subject matter is still a marvel. However what I find more intriguing is that everything that autoethnography claims to do, it did to me.

I chose the magazines listed below over Environmental Education or Homeschooling/Deschooling magazines because my interactions with people over the past two years showed me that educators want more education, environmental educators press for more environmental education, and deschoolers advocate for more deschooling, with each group being quick to defend the system in which they work, live or play. However, I wanted to write to an audience who had not yet realized that education is merely a socially constructed system, a game even; one that can and should be questioned. A game in which we can make up our own rules

and one in which we are legally entitled to choose whether or not we want to play. I suppose I'm choosing to write to the person that I was at the onset of this thesis writing journey.

The articles can be read in any order.

The first article, *Yoga as a Model for Deschooling*, shows how I've come to understand my role as a deschooling mother through reflecting on the foundation of which my yoga practice and my yoga teaching philosophy is built. This same foundation could be used to enable environmental educators (facilitators) to rethink environmental education theories and practices. This article will be submitted to *Yoga Journal*.

The second article, *Deschooling for the Environment: One Mother's Journey*, aims to deconstruct environmental education as it is being designed for school curriculums today. This article also draws parallels between what it takes to foster ecoliteracy and what it takes to achieve deschooling. This article will be submitted to *Mothering Magazine*.

It is important to note that edited versions of these articles will be submitted to the above mentioned magazines to be sure that submission guidelines are respected.

Article 1

*Deschooling: A Yoga Practice*⁶⁶

Learning is Breathing is Life

The living room is dark and silent. So quiet that I am able to hear her gentle breath. Inhale ~ exhale ~ inhale ~ exhale. Her little body, half the length of mine, snuggles close to me, twitches and becomes heavy. Sleep finally takes hold of her. Gazing at my daughter, both of us peaceful and content to be wrapped up in each other ~ Innnnhaaaalle ~ exssssssshaaaale. I'm reminded of an article that I read earlier this evening that states - "learning is like breathing". In doing research which supported my decision to deschool my children, I came across the article and remembered it being so eloquent in describing how learning and education are two very different concepts, but that life and learning are simply one and the same. A passage from the article by Aaron Falbel reads as follows:

*Learning is like breathing. It is a natural, human activity: it is part of being alive. A person who is active, curious, who explores the world using all his or her senses, who meets life with energy and enthusiasm—as all babies do—is learning. Our ability to learn, like our ability to breathe, does not need to be improved or tampered with. It is utter nonsense, not to mention deeply insulting, to say that people need to be taught how to learn or how to think. We are born knowing how to do these things. All that is needed is an interesting, accessible, intelligible world and a chance to play a meaningful part in it*⁶⁷

Hearing the sleepy breath of my 3 year old also reminds me that in yoga philosophy, breath is equivalent to life. If breath is life and learning is like breathing, then learning is life, and deschooling advocates like John Holt were correct in declaring that learning takes place outside of the four walls of a classroom, in the community, and as a result of being alive ~ of living.

⁶⁶ Please note: This article will be submitted to Yoga Journal

⁶⁷ Falbel, A. (1996). Learning? Yes, of course. Education? No thanks. In M. Hern (Ed.), *Deschooling our lives*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.

In Non-Violent Communication, you are invited to sigh, to say HmMMM when you require time to think before speaking or moving forward. HmMMM. From here my thoughts flow to my own yoga practice and to me being a teacher of yoga. I can't help but draw similarities between yoga and deschooling. And to use yoga as a metaphor for deschooling, I see more clearly the path I will take as a new parent journeying into that free-learning realm.

Natural Learners

Babies and children are natural learners. They quickly acquire self-fulfilling social skills knowing which actions will bring mom running, breast or bottle ready in hand. Babies learn language patterns that result in the amazing talent of speech. They figure out rules to games, how to manipulate objects, walk, run, and so much more. In most cases, all the parent needs to do is encourage the child. Babies are also natural yogis from birth – postures like airplane, cobra, lion, down dog, and child's pose are a natural part of a child's movements. Yoga helps to bring our rigid adult bodies to resemble the flexible child-like bodies we grew away from. Perhaps yoga is about softening our rigid world views so we may come to know how others view their communities. Yoga brings us closer to our natural physical state, more in touch with our intuition, helps to balance us emotionally, keeps us in the present moment mentally and connects us on a spiritual realm. However, what truly aligns yoga and deschooling is that both attempt to keep us connected with the radical potential that exists within all of us. If we seem to have wandered from that potential within, yoga and deschooling can help us rediscover it in its entirety. In their article *Challenging the popular wisdom: What can families do?*, Geraldine and Gus Lyn-Piluso point out that every child has a radical potential within that makes him or her

capable of changing the world.⁶⁸ They go on to say that this radical potential is present until it gets ‘trained’ out by institutions of power, namely compulsory schools. Hmmmm. Imagine how the world would look if every individual lived to fulfill their maximum potential.

Teachers and Authority? New definitions emerge

I can’t help but question the words ‘practice’ and ‘teacher’. Vinoba Bhave, a great influence on the Small School movement in Europe, shines the light on an interesting fact... in 14 nationally recognized languages in India, there is no root word that translates to the English word “Teach”⁶⁹. People can learn, people can help others learn, but they cannot teach. To be an effective yoga teacher, it is important to continually ‘study’ under another teacher or mentor to maintain your own personal practice to expand your teaching abilities, but more importantly to also continue learning. This ultimately makes you a better teacher. My partner, a recently graduated school teacher knows all too well that once the teaching certificate is acquired, teachers are for the most part left on their own to teach their students. There is little opportunity for new teachers to mentor with older and more experienced teachers. Hmmmm ~ Mentoring. Deschooling further supports and encourages learners to apprentice alongside mentors in the community, and to also offer themselves as mentors to younger children. This cross-generational learning model provides a breadth of learning opportunities to a deschooled child who gets to hear stories of generations ago and also share stories with those that are younger.

When we eliminate the assumption that you must be taught in order to learn, we remove the sense of hierarchy and authority in the learning world. Though I am a ‘teacher’ of a yoga class, there is always someone in the class that has more experience than I do. I also often find

⁶⁸ Lyn-Piluso, G. & G. (1996). Challenging the popular wisdom: What can families do? In M. Hern (Ed.), *Deschooling our lives*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers. p. 57.

⁶⁹ Bhave, V. (1996). The intimate and the ultimate. In M. Hern (Ed.), *Deschooling our lives*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.

myself learning more from the students than I feel I give them. In yoga, the student and the mentor are never really masters of anything – whether it’s a yoga posture, a yoga style or a yoga philosophy. A teacher is always working to understand the needs of the students to be able to offer them more of what they need, which is different for everyone. Therefore, the yoga instructor is never able to hold a power of authority or claim that he or she knows best. As well, the student may one day feel that he or she has mastered a posture only to discover 45 minutes later that they can no longer hold the same posture. In deschooling, the child is always learning and is encouraged to look within for the answers instead of always seeking out authority figures. As a parent, I’m guilty of thinking that I always know best because I am the Mother. I’m equally guilty of believing that my child has mastered a task such as tying her shoes or feeding herself, only to discover a day later that the child no longer remembers how to do (or simply doesn’t want to do) the task. Overall, yoga and deschooling are about discovering your own truths with the help of a mentor, parent or teacher who sees themselves as a co-learner instead of a figure of authority.

Practice or Doing?

As students, we are always told to practice. “*Practice your handwriting, practice your timetables, and practice your vocabulary.*” In writing about the deschooling of music, Mark Douglas points out the benefits to children if adults could simply let go of the idea of *practicing* and simply acknowledge the child *doing* the desired action⁷⁰. Most of us can recall childhood memories of our parents nagging us to practice something. In my case, this constant nagging and guilt over not wanting to practice for hours on end took the joy out of playing the piano, which I had only ever wanted to do for pleasure anyway. Unfortunately, practicing became such a pain

⁷⁰ Douglas, M. (1996). Thinking about play, practice, and the deschooling of music. In M. Hern (Ed.), *Deschooling our lives*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.

that I stopped playing for years. *I only took up playing the piano again as an adult, once I discovered that not all piano teachers expect students to take an exam, practice theory, or attend recitals; another three tasks that drove me away from my love of playing.* In the case of yoga, it may be called a practice, but like deschooling the reality is that we are ‘doing’ yoga, we are learning. And in doing, we learn more about ourselves and our relationship to everything around us. Hmmmmm.

Setting an Intention of an Ethic of Care and Concern

So now that I have argued that yoga students do yoga and deschoolers learn by doing, I have to ask myself what I do as a yoga teacher. Do I actually teach yoga? Hardly. What I do is gently and safely support my students in discovering their limits in that particular class. I help students to build a foundation for themselves, explaining the postures, and then facilitate my student’s ‘practice’ with frequent reminders and prompts. In a yoga class of forty students, no two students are at the same level therefore there is no pre-described standard for which I teach to or goals that I want my students to attain. Though I may have a predetermined flow that I’d like to follow, I hardly ever stick to it once I enter the class. It is common to hear me ask the class, “So, how are you feeling today? Any injuries, areas of concern, parts of the body, mind or soul that require special attention?” Together the students and I co-create the flow of the class. This is similar to how my day begins with my children, with us all bundled up in bed, chatting about how the day might unfold. I may want to go for a bike ride only to learn that my oldest doesn’t feel like peddling about the town. Instead she may prefer to go to the swimming pool, while I may have little desire to be indoors and swimming. So we ask each other questions, holding each other’s needs gently, and then we find a balance, which is not always equal, but is equally agreed upon. Setting this intention of an ethic of care and concern for what the learner

needs and desires is what makes being a yoga teacher and a deschooling parent so fulfilling. Encouraging the learner to set intentions or goals is equally important. And more importantly, recognizing and appreciating that these intentions or goals are self-determined is a common theme as a deschooler and a yoga instructor. At the beginning of a class, I may ask my students to set an intention for themselves – perhaps of focus, breath, love, self-compassion, no judgment – and I may ask the students throughout the class to revisit those intentions yet remind them to not judge themselves for deviating away from their original goals or for creating a new set of intentions to strive towards. Similar to deschooling, goals and learning plans are determined by the student and can change at any time. In yoga, the body acts differently throughout the day; in the morning it could be stiff and in the evening very flexible. The mind behaves the same way. For a deschooled child, reading for weeks on end is not uncommon only to find that the same child substitutes books for music instruments or playtime in a favorite tree for equal lengths of time. I image the child to be stretching and flexing the mind or body as often as desired or needed. An intention of an ethic of care and concern for the learner's needs over the teacher's needs allows the yoga student and the deschooled child to focus on exploring, working towards, and hopefully embracing their utmost potential.

Unification

A common assumption in yoga and in deschooling is that the act of learning is about the unleashing of the infinite *potential that lies within* each of us. And to tap into this potential, it is essential that there is connection. Yoga is about unification, the coming together of the body, the mind and the soul and is equally about discovering those connections yourself as the experience of achieving that unity is unique to each learner. The idea of unifying is similar in deschooling in that learners are continuously drawing the connections between what is being learned and the

real world – there is no distinction between the two. This is very different from traditional curriculums in that subjects are taught independent of what is happening in the immediate world. A teacher may chose to educate a student about the wars in Iraq but fails to talk to the child about the environmental battles occurring in their own back-yard. Connections in deschooling also relates to the relationships that the learner is forming. These bonds can occur between the learner and the self, between the more-than-human world and the learner, and between the learner and other individuals. It is through these connections, in both yoga and deschooling, that the invaluable tool self-knowledge is acquired.

Self-Assessment & Self-Knowledge

I often begin my classes by reminding people that yoga is not about competition. Judgment remains outside of the yoga studio, while observation and self-assessment are always welcomed to participate. In yoga, similar to deschooling, no grades or passes or fails are given. The students themselves determine when the time is right to transition into more challenging postures or subject matter of which there are no limits but what the mind, body, and will desires. From this, self-knowledge bursts forth allowing room for growth, further exploration, or perhaps even a change in direction or pace of learning.

From this self-knowledge, the learner can begin to understand his or her place on the mat, in the room, out in the community and greater world. Deschooling and yoga are both about knowing your strengths, your weakness, and then deciding where you want to play and participate. It is also about knowing what you want to build upon, whether it is your strengths or your weaknesses or your abilities or your challenges. Report cards, standardized tests, foundation skills assessments and exams are not relevant or necessary in yoga or deschooling, and I would argue that these reporting and testing instruments are not necessary in compulsory schools as

well. Both recognize the arbitrary nature of these tools and favor instead one's own self-evaluation according to their own sensibilities. Deschoolees and yogis also understand that they have the ability and the responsibility to ask for feedback, advice, and evaluation if desired from chosen mentors. Hmmmmmm. Responsibility.

Showing Up: Taking Responsibility & Time

Both in yoga and deschooling, the learner chooses to show up whenever they show up, whether in a studio, or to engage in a learning plan. Showing up can take form mentally, emotionally, and physically and the purpose or motivation for doing so comes in many flavors. However, what is important about showing up is that it is the student's responsibility to do so. As well, it is the responsibility of the learner to choose the nature and conditions of the learning experiences that they desire. It is the responsibility of the yoga student that desires a therapeutic practice to choose to show up for a restorative or Yin yoga class while the student that wants a detoxifying practice to show up for a Bikram or hot yoga class. Similar to the deschooling student, if they have a desire to learn a particular subject matter, they take responsibility and use their resourcefulness to further their learning, whether they ask for help in doing so or facilitate it themselves. As learners, both take full ownership and responsibility for the results they create.

Time is also of the essence to both the yogi and the deschooled learner, with time being what you make of it. Yoga students can choose a variety of classes at a variety of different studios to meet their yoga and time needs. On the mat, yogis are encouraged to go into or come out of postures when they see fit; there are no time restrictions for holding postures. Assessing the body for pain or comfort is more important. If the class feels too long or too difficult, students are invited to lie down for the entire class or engage in postures of their choice. As well, most yoga studios recognize that learners prefer to learn at various times throughout the day and

therefore offer classes to accommodate this need. Yoga can be done morning, noon and night and is not limited to the hours between 9:00 AM and 3:00 PM as most schools are. For deschoolers, learning takes place everywhere and all the time and as a mother who is deschooling her children, I try to stay attuned to their ability to manage their time accordingly and to provide them with plenty of unstructured time to explore their learning interests, their communities, and themselves and to form meaningful relationships and connections with the people they interact with and the world in which they live.

Fellow Yogis, Fellow Learners

One of the most interesting parallelisms between yoga and deschooling is that segregation by age does not occur intentionally, as it happens within compulsory schools. Yes, there may be Yoga for Seniors, Kids Yoga, Stiff Mans Yoga, and Mom and Baby Yoga to name only a few different classes, but even within these classes, all ages are welcome. These classes are based on interests and commonalities. Like deschooling, there are no age restrictions and anyone can participate. However it is up to the yoga student or the deschooled child to determine if his or her needs will be met by participating in the class and whether his or her participation will negatively impact fellow yogis or learners. And this is what deters seniors from participating in a Mom and Baby class or Moms with crying babies from joining a Stiff Man yoga class. Otherwise, all classes contain a plethora of ages where it is natural to see an eighty year-old learning on the mat next to a fifteen year-old, or in a deschooled environment, a ten year-old learning how to build a dog house with the neighbors grandfather down the street. Deschoolers don't understand why schools isolate children in classes according to their ages or isolate children from the communities in which they live, similar to how seniors are isolated in senior citizen homes. When we institutionalize the young and old, we isolate and remove the

knowledge of the past and the potential for the future from our communities, only valuing the present adult world to shape our lives. When all age groups are encouraged to learn together and learn from each other, both leadership and mentorship skills flourish, ecological, spiritual, and social histories and hopes are shared and empathy and respect for each other emerges.

Hmmmm. I liked to use this world-view to imagine and co-create a sustainable world in which to live.

Appreciating & Honoring Differences

Learning styles amongst individuals and styles of yoga vary tremendously. Each style should be honored for its uniqueness as there is so much to be gained from openly embracing and understanding the differences that exist. Researchers say that all children are unique and that each child learns differently. Howard Gardner developed the theory of multiple intelligences in 1983 which proposes that intelligence as it was defined missed out on a wide variety of human abilities.⁷¹ Gardner proposes that there are eleven intelligences and that by understanding that children learn in different ways, schools can begin to reconstruct themselves accordingly. Just like the various multiple intelligences and the various style of yoga, one style is not better than another style.

As someone who attempts to teach yoga, I'm aware of the multitude of learning styles of my students. Some learn by watching me demo a posture, others through listening, and others through having me gently touch them: the senses enable the yoga to flow. If I were to choose one method over another to teach a class, the result would be that two thirds of my class would be standing around looking to others for direction, unable to follow the sequence of postures I was guiding the class into. The same applies to deschooling. As a parent of two young girls, I'm all

⁷¹ Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.

too aware of the various learning styles that each child possesses at any given time and only when I can recognize which learning abilities are resonating, can I engage in supporting my children in their learning.

Individual Freedom Fosters Collective Community

Yoga and deschooling are hugely about freedom – freedom of the body, the mind and the breath; freedom from attachments to the material world, from the Ego, from pressures from society. Deschooling is also about freedom from the social constraints that stop kids from being able to learn where, how and what they want to learn. When the child is free from fear of making mistakes or failing and free to make decisions and when adults can learn to trust that children are fully capable of directing their own learning and participating in their communities as valuable members of society, only then can children become the leaders that will advance in the world with the confidence to initiate change in socially and environmentally just ways. Of course, initiating and actually being able to make change is fundamentally a cooperative social project. Yoga studios and allowing learning to take place outside of the school walls provides learners with opportunities to participate in social projects that they may not have been aware of and contributed to.

Yoga is about being conscious, awakening to what lies within, to what is important within each of us. Deschooling mimics that – it's about nurturing a keen consciousness and appreciation for social and individual freedom. Both yoga and deschooling are about finding truths about ourselves and our relation to the world we live in. Both are about keeping the innate skill of inquiry alive within each and every one of us. Hmmmmmm.

As my mind flows through the many linkages between deschooling and yoga mentioned above, I recognize the challenge in eliminating the word 'teach' from my vocabulary. However

to overcome this challenge, I will first reflect on my intention behind the action of teaching – which for me is to hold a space where the exchange of information, knowledge or wisdom may occur between all the individuals in the learning environment. When I consider deschooling and yoga in this form (and especially parenting), I envision a new way of being in this world where power struggles subside and relationships thrive; healthy, balanced and continuously growing.

My thoughts of deschooling and yoga come to a rest and I feel my daughter's body stir slightly and she softens even more; a subtle but unmistakable smile slides across her lips. She's dreaming about whatever 3 year olds dream of and the thought of the dreams that fill her sleeping mind brings a smile to my lips. My body softens too. I feel more relaxed now than I have been since I first made the decision to deschool my children. Being able to self-reflect on the way I've always taught, I mean the way I've been helping others learn and do yoga and using these realizations as the foundation for the learning adventure that my children and I will engage in allows me to breathe easier. I feel confident in my decision to embark on this journey, in creating this new life together. Every so often through this deschooling voyage, I'll just need to remind myself that learning is like breathing, it's part of being alive, and that if I can hear or see my children breathing, I'll know that they are learning, and that they will be fine. My breath begins to slow, my eyelids close, I fall asleep too. Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale.

Article 2

*Deschooling for the Environment: One Mother's Journey*⁷²

About Me

Some may call me a progressive minded educationalist. Others see me as, a radical; I've even been labeled a hippie. I'm unsure of where you'd place me on the spectrum of trendsetter or follower. If I were to go back to school, I'd study to be a *Grundsatzfragen-er*⁷³ [German for a person who asks fundamental questions that really matter], or I'd switch careers and become a child again, one that constantly asks, Why? If I were to meet you for the first time, I may introduce myself as Nicolette, a mother of two, an environmental educator, a yoga instructor, a wife, daughter, sister, or friend or all of the above. But what I'd prefer is to say nothing at all. Rather, I'd take your hand and invite you to sit with me for a while. After a moment's time, you would then learn for yourself that we are probably more similar than you would have expected at first glance. I too am an individual who is deeply concerned about the state of our planet, the state of our political and health systems, and (after all I am the mother of a school-aged child), the state of our compulsory education system. I am a human being trying to meet my needs as a mother who is concerned for the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being of not only my children, but all children and the planet.

⁷² This article aims to highlight the parallelism between ecoliteracy and deschooling which inevitably deconstructs environmental education as it is being designed for school curriculums today. This article will be submitted to Canadian Family and/or Mothering Magazine.

⁷³ Brown, J., Isaacs, D., & Vogt, E. (2003). *The art of powerful questions: Catalyzing insight, innovation and action*. Waltham, MA: Pegasus Communications.

About My School-aged Daughter, Jaden

I don't need to be an expert to know that my daughter is naturally curious and has been a natural learner from the moment I first laid eyes on her⁷⁴. From the day Jaden was born, it was evident that she was taking in the world around her through her big inquisitive eyes that would try and focus on whoever was ogling her, or on any objects within her immediate view. You could see her turning her head towards sounds, straining to find out who or what was making the noise behind her. When she could finally grasp objects, it was all too clear that she was trying to understand her world through taste and touch, grabbing everything in sight and placing everything in her mouth, simply to understand her world a little more. By the time she reached one year of age, Jaden's natural learning ability was obvious in the way she had learned to walk, was starting to talk, and playing more complex self-initiated games. The examples were endless and awe-inspiring; as I'm sure every mother would agree if they reflect on their own children's early childhood developments.

Jaden is now five years old, and I'm still amazed at her natural ability to take in, process, and store information all of the time, only to surprise me with her newly found discoveries in one form or another. Nothing seems to slip past her. And what I find even more phenomenal is her relentless desire to learn which seems so strong that I sometimes feel exhausted trying to imagine how her little being is able to take it all in. As I was laying beside Jaden the other night as she was falling asleep, I could hear her whispering to herself, *two plus two is ...short pause...four, pause, six plus four plus two is ...longer pause...eleven, no twelve*. Then I felt her breath deepen

⁷⁴ Cameron, B. & Meyer, B. (2006). *SelfDesign: Nurturing genius through natural learning*. Boulder, CO: Sentient Publications. Caine, G. & Caine, R. (2007). *Natural Learning: The Basis for Raising and Sustaining High Standards of Real World Performance*. Position Paper: Natural Learning Research Institute. Holt, J. (1989). *Learning all the time: How small children begin to read, write, count, and investigate the world, without being taught*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.

and her body twitch, an indication that she was fast asleep. I knew that counting to twelve was pretty easy for Jaden and probably for most five year olds, but adding three different random digits and coming up with the right answer? Up to this point, I guessed that she was capable of adding two plus two, but I wasn't fully aware of where her math skills lay as we don't sit around doing 'math'. How does a five year olds' mind work? I wanted to get inside of it and witness the magic of how she learns. Not able to do that, I lay there trying to guess at what point in our day or week or month she had had the opportunity to learn how to add multiple numbers? How did she come up with a system for her herself to add these numbers together – half asleep? Could she or would she get the right answer again if I 'tested' her in the morning? However she discovered the answer is still a mystery and keeps me wondering *how, exactly, do children learn?*

John Holt, in his book *How Children Learn*, describes the natural learning style of young children:

The child is curious. He wants to make sense out of things, find out how things work, gain competence and control over himself and his environment, and do what he can see other people doing. He is open, perceptive, and experimental. He does not merely observe the world around him. He does not shut himself off from the strange, complicated world around him, but tastes it, touches it, hefts it, bends it, breaks it. To find out how reality works, he works on it. He is bold. He is not afraid of making mistakes. And he is patient. He can tolerate an extraordinary amount of uncertainty, confusion, ignorance, and suspense.⁷⁵

Though I may appear to regard my child as unique and special, Jaden is not unlike all children who are inquisitive, always inquiring about one thing or another, trying to know and understand and make sense of the infinite possibilities that make up the world around them. Essentially, kids are born to be what I'm trying to reclaim within myself, someone skilled in being able to ask fundamental questions that really matter. Jade is a natural *Grundsatzfragen-er*. She was born whole, alive, curious, trusting, and fully capable of guiding her own learning.

⁷⁵ Holt, J. (1995). *How children learn* (rev. ed.). New York: Perseus. p. 287.

Deschooling: How Did I Arrive Here?

Nearly three years of asking questions, making discoveries and a chance encounter with highly articulate and motivated 6 year old deschooled boy led me to my decision to deschool my own children. As a mother who wants what's best for her child, I naturally want to retain what is natural about my children, their curiosity, their sense of wonder and awe about the world around them, and their ability to ask questions uninhibitedly – *Mom, why does that man only have one leg? Mom, if you die, will you still love me? Uncle Shane doesn't have a mustache; can he still be my Uncle?*

As Jaden was approaching the age where she would normally enter the traditional educational arena, I was constantly inundated with a terrible feeling that if I sent her off to a traditional school, that her natural potential and desire to learn would be squashed like a bug by the system. From what I could recall from my own educational experience in the public school system, compulsory schools were not and are still not designed to foster free thinking, questioning, creative, autonomous, mindful, emotionally intelligent and independent individuals who equally understand and value their dependency on life sustaining natural environments – could this have been too much to ask of one system alone?

Elementary school musings – Year 1984

One particular day in elementary school, I was told by my teacher that we were going to write a book report. To decide upon the subject we were going to do some 'research' in the library – "What fun!!!" I remembered thinking to myself. I happened to come across a book on existentialism that was written for children – the word itself was too much fun to pass up. In presenting the book to my teacher, excited to have found a topic for my book report, I remember mispronouncing the title (this 8 year old wasn't concerned about that) as I showed her my discovery. Unfortunately, almost three decades later, I can still recall the look on my teacher's face and the tone in her voice and the language of her large towering body as she said, "Nicky, you are too young for this book – now why don't you look at this book on monarch butterflies", or was it mushrooms? Does it really matter? After all, it was just one book report.

Curriculum developers, teachers, parents, and government who feel that children *need* to be educated may disregard the incident mentioned above as being insignificant – I did after all get to learn about mushrooms, or was it butterflies? Some people may claim that the teacher was only looking out for my best interests; perhaps the teacher didn't want me to set unachievable goals. The parent or teacher, who questions the nature of schools and the purpose of education, may hold the point of view that the teacher, whether it was her intention or not, squashed the inquiring mind of one child and that in doing the teacher abused his or her power of authority. They might also say that the teacher wasn't respecting my needs and choices and or perhaps didn't trust that I had the ability to self-direct my own learning. I only remember feeling deflated. I also remember the argument with my father - it was a Sunday evening. This I remember because he gave me the first of many lectures about always waiting until the last minute to do my homework. I believe that if I had been motivated by the content, I would have written that report the day it was assigned. To this day motivation and meaningfulness are two very important factors that I require to be able to follow through with any project – I'm confident that you as the reader can relate to this.

Some might say that despite my experiences in the school system that I am challenging, I have somehow managed to retain my natural ability to ask important questions such as those inquiries whose answers led me to want to partake in deschooling. Yes, I do question that which I'm not comfortable with. And perhaps my experiences in a compulsory institution didn't completely remove this essential ability; however I know all too well the emotional damage created by my experiences in school. [I also acknowledge here that there were probably other influences as well, such as family, friends, and strangers as I wasn't raised solely within the school system – though one half of my waking day was spent inside of a classroom or school

ground for 13 of the first 18 years of my life]. Believing that the emotional damage can be undone, it's important to note that schools waste a lot of time doing the damage that we must later undo if we are to lead a fulfilling life. I struggle everyday with questioning inconsistencies that I witness around me and in standing up to authority. These experiences bring about intense emotional dilemmas that fatigue or completely paralyze me from being able to act. Some might say that this is my nature, but if I was anything like my daughters who have the ability to question everything around them without reservation and emotional attachment, I would say that I am a product of an oppressive system that creates a lot of emotional injury to our innate qualities.

I know that I'm not alone in questioning the type of education that I want for my child. All too often, I find myself engaged in an in-depth conversation with others who are dealing with the issue of where to send their children to school, as they too feel that compulsory schooling is not serving the needs of their children.

Playground pause ~ Year 2008...

A parent just recently approached me in the park...

"I heard you are homeschooling your kids?"

Is this a question or an accusation? I wonder. Uhm, we've actually decided to deschool them. I reply. I feel myself begin to sweat.

"What's does that mean?" Inquires the inquisitive parent.

Well, I'm not too sure exactly as we are taking it day by day. We aren't planning on using any curriculum. We are really just planning to follow our daughters leads, pay close attention to where their interests lay on any particular day, support them when and where we can. When we started questioning where we'd said them to school, we decided that school wasn't right for them, you know? It's obvious that she doesn't know – it's really a lot to take in. I've been researching this topic for nearly three years and I'm not sure I fully understand what I'm about to embark on, I just know it's the right thing to do. I realize that I'm holding my breath.

She appears to be frustrated. “Our son just started kindergarten; it’s only been three weeks. We thought he was quite smart, even brilliant. So creative, you know, he’s been making up his own plays, elaborate plays, since he was two – his imagination is limitless. Then we were called in for a meeting with his teacher and they said that he’s not adjusting socially, not like the other kids. When it’s time to sit and practice writing his name, he goes and hides under the teacher’s desk and doesn’t come out for the rest of the morning. The teacher doesn’t know what to do with him. She recommended that we get him tested. We have an appointment booked for next week. It just doesn’t feel right. You know, I didn’t even think to question the idea of sending him to school; I didn’t know you could even do that.” She is clearly frustrated.

The pause in the park evolves into a caring and sharing dialogue between two mothers who are deeply concerned about their children.

Other parents go further and say that compulsory schools may also be failing our communities and the planet. Through these interactions with strangers at bus stops, coworkers in coffee shops, and at home with family members and friends, I have come to realize that I no longer need to feel so radical in questioning the type of education that I want for my children. I have come to realize that I am part of a fast growing group of people that is making the connection between how and where children are educated and the future state of our planet.

Prior to deciding to deschool Jaden, I first inquired into which educational opportunities would be best for my kids. Like most parents, I immediately investigated schools in and around our neighborhood; public schools, private schools and alternative schools such as Waldorf, Montessori, and Windsor House. Being someone who needs to read through the entire menu at a restaurant before making a decision, I couldn’t help but feel that the menu of school options that I was putting together was incomplete.

Was there something else out there that I had not yet discovered? Though a few of the schooling options looked appealing, I clearly wasn’t satisfied with the choices on my menu to make a decision. This was the turning point where I resurrected my deeply hidden childlike qualities of asking question after question after question. What was it about the public education

system that I didn't like or that stopped me from simply registering my daughter at the closest school from our house? What is a school? What is education? What are we educating our children for? Deschooling seemed to provide the answers to my questions.

Deschooling Defined by Others

Deschooling is unique to every family, child or parent. There is not one definition of deschooling that everyone would agree upon. It's more about how you go about it, rather than what is it. Having said that, the following individuals offer definitions that hold value for me:

Author and educator John Holt describes deschooling as learning that does not use a fixed curriculum, is not directed by a teacher, and occurs within the milieu of family and community.⁷⁶

Geraldine and Gus Lyn-Piluso, Goddard College and Seneca College professors, state that deschooling begins with the radical assessment of compulsory schooling. "We might even define deschooling as the development of a sensibility – nurturing a keen consciousness and appreciation of social and individual freedom..."⁷⁷ These professors go on to say that:

*Deschoolers do not simply move the school to the home – it rejects the school and its authoritarian nature completely – it aims at the full development of human beings who "own" themselves, who are critically conscious, free individuals committed to social transformation...*⁷⁸

Interestingly enough, while I was working on this paper, I started working with a life coach and after the first two sessions, she outright told me that I needed to start 'owning my shit', that I needed to stop everything that I was doing, reflect on where I had 'lost' myself, and begin to reclaim who I was. When I asked her if she knew anything about deschooling, she said she hadn't heard the term before. I'm sure if I had taken the time to describe deschooling to her,

⁷⁶ Holt, J. (1981). *Teach Your Own: A Hopeful Path for Education*. New York: Delta/Seymour Lawrence.

⁷⁷ Lyn-Piluso, G. & G. (1996). Challenging the popular wisdom: What can families do? In M. Hern (Ed.), *Deschooling our lives*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers. p. 57.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

she would have related to it; after all, she seemed to be speaking the same language as deschoolers.

Geraldine and Gus Lyn-Piluso go on to say that “children don’t know what not to question and therefore question everything”⁷⁹, a quality that is needed if they are to expose and find creative solutions to the unsustainable actions of governments, people, and industry. Children have a radical potential to design themselves as who they want to be and to be makers of their own communities as they wish to see them, if only adults would allow them to “self-manage, self-direct, and self-evaluate their own lives”⁸⁰ three very important aspects of deschooling.

I particularly enjoy the following definition by philosopher and free-lance writer, Aaron Falbel. He defines deschooling as a process that allows children to become more informed, intelligent, curious, competent, skillful, and aware through their interactions with the world around them – it’s about living.⁸¹ Falbel also believed that John Holt and Ivan Illich, two major contributors to the deschooling movement, saw abandoning schools as the first step in making social change and that even if people opted out of school, they could still embrace learning and education.

My Definition of Deschooling...

I’ve come to understand deschooling as the rejection of the authoritative nature of schools. It’s about building relationships between people, between adults and children, and between children and their natural environment. I see deschooling being about learning that takes place anywhere and everywhere, not solely within the four walls of a classroom or the immediate

⁷⁹ Lyn-Piluso, G. & G. (1996). Challenging the popular wisdom: What can families do? In M. Hern (Ed.), *Deschooling our lives*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers. p. 54.

⁸⁰ Hern, M. (1996). *Deschooling our lives*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers. p. 4.

⁸¹ Falbel, A. (1996). Learning? Yes, of course. Education? No thanks. In M. Hern (Ed.), *Deschooling our lives*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.

school grounds, but out in the learner's community, engaged in real, purposeful, meaningful tasks with real people working and playing in real life situations. Though I offer what I've come to terms with as a satisfactory definition of deschooling for my daughters, what I'm more intrigued with is how one goes about deschooling. I invite the reader into the deschooling space that I intend to hold for my daughters:

I intend for my daughters' learning life to be entirely unstructured – or only as structured and self-scheduled as they decide to make it. There will be no classroom-style, curriculum-based learning taking place around our kitchen table. Their lives will be their own curriculum, their own textbooks from which to learn from. The girls will not be familiar with the act of taking a 15-minute recess. I have no desire to be a teacher or someone that dictates what my daughters should learn, nor does my husband who is a teacher by profession. We intend to both be learners alongside our children. The word curriculum will be replaced with 'learning map', similar to a road map that lists all the possible destinations but does not dictate where one 'should' go or what time one 'should' end up there. We'll value directions when we or the girls ask for them.

Our learning journey will look nothing like school. Instead, we aspire to create a sense of freedom where questions will continue to come forth as naturally as they do now. The girls will be self-educated as a result of being alive, active members of the community in which they live. I know from my own learning experience that people learn when they are enthusiastic and passionate and when education is non-coercive. If the girls are motivated and eager to read for weeks on end about only one subject, only to never pick up a book on that subject again, there will be no judgment, only observation. I hope I never say, "Ok, put away your Art, it's time for your half hour Science lesson" as I remember hearing often throughout my early-school years, when in fact I would have drawn, painted, and played for hours. I hope that all the traditional

school subjects blend together, where there is no distinction between chemistry and home-economics or biology and music. Baking a birthday cake for a friend will bring forth an understanding of how chemicals mix together to form a new substance and a wade through a pond to learn about red-tailed frogs will be a lesson in harmony, rhythm, and the music created in nature. Space, time, and idleness, from which inspiration and creativity stems, will be overflowing. There will be no value placed on one pursuit over another. Living is learning will be our mantra.

...as a mother...

I want my daughters to grow up to be responsible beings capable of directing their own lives and fully capable of being engaged and active members in the communities in which they live. In order to do this, we have to give them practice in making meaningful contributions within their communities. John Taylor Gatto writes, “School takes our children away from any possibility of an active role in community life...and by doing so ensures our children cannot grow up fully human.”⁸² My daughters’ sense of what it means to be part of a community is still forming, similar to their conceptions of time, place and self. Schools have a predetermined curriculum designed for the thousands of children that enter the system. Without being able to know the interests and desires of each child, schools do not allow children the space, time or place to discover for themselves what is important or what is meaningful. When children are passive recipients of information that is disconnected from the communities in which they live and when they are not able to develop a self-knowledge of what motivates them, it is easy to see how and why students grow into passive adults that are disengaged from their communities,

⁸² Gatto, J. T. (1991). *Dumbing us down: The hidden curriculum of compulsory schooling*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers. p. 14.

having little motivation to change the ‘wrongdoings’ that occur around them. I intend to honor my children by letting them discover for themselves what is important in life.

I want to keep the spirit of critical inquiry alive within my daughters so that they may dispute corporate and political authority, so that they may challenge the systems that are not working for them without fear and with empowerment. I want my daughters to know that knowledge is not fixed, that truths are discovered, not taught. I want my daughters to learn for their own pleasure and not for anyone else’s pleasure. There is no doubt that my daughters will find themselves in situations where they are judged, tested, quizzed or graded. For example, Jaden and her sister may decide to pursue babysitting, first aid, or lifeguard certification, or progress to another level in sports activities, dance, music or perhaps one day attend university or land a dream career. However, what is important in all of these situations is that we communicate the importance and value of holding self-observation and constructive self-criticism in constant reflection and understanding of the ideas and opinions of others. At most, all I can hope for is that my daughters continue to live their life in wonder; continuously exploring, playing, doing, being.

...as an environmental educator...

As an environmental educator, I live in wonder, exploring philosophies and practices that will foster environmental citizenry. How does a person become an individual who is in tune with the workings of the world, who knows how her actions affect the natural systems around her, who recognizes that she is both an independent and dependent being within this system, the type of mindful and conscious being that will enhance and not be a hindrance to the more-than-human environment?

As an environmental educator, I am also asking questions like; how do we prepare the young to face the challenges of our rapidly eroding planet? Like many environmentally concerned parents and educators today, this question looms large in my decisions about the type of learning environment I want for my children. It reflects environmental educator David Orr's claim that: "More of the same kind of education that enabled us to industrialize the earth can only make things worse."⁸³ We cannot continue along this path of educating children to be knowledgeable or skilled in certain disconnected subject matters, including environmental studies.

In reading the literature that critiques conventional education with respect to building environmental citizens, Joy Palmer writes about how schools have failed to address the importance of educating society to develop in sustainable ways.⁸⁴ In discovering that the traditional, authoritative, predetermined education system is not designed to foster the type of citizens that will endeavor to protect and restore the planet for future generations, I am unable as a mother and as an environmental educator to place my daughters within a traditional school system that I believe is one of the causes of the environmental crisis that we are experiencing.

As a result of this view of compulsory education, I am unable to see how environmental education as it is designed to be plugged in as a subject to be studied within schools will be effective in creating the environmental citizens it aims to produce. Instead I feel that the best possible opportunity that will allow my children to unfold as stewards of the planet is to provide them with a life-long deschooling experience in which they are directors of their own learning. According to Chet Bowers, Professor of Education at Portland State University, we need to sever

⁸³ Orr, D. (1992). *Environmental literacy: Education as if the earth mattered*. 12th Annual E. F. Schumacher Lectures. Oct 1992, Great Barrington: Massachusetts.

⁸⁴ Palmer, J. (1998). *Environmental education in the 21st century: Theory, practice, progress and promise*. London: Routledge.

the transfer of knowledge of what contributes to environmental degradation to a new way of education that focuses on emotional intelligence, character development, and understanding of how humans are connected and interdependent in our local environmental and cultural commons.⁸⁵ If we were to apply the Pareto principle, otherwise known as the “80/20” rule developed by Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto⁸⁶, is it not 20% of the people who are educated that have contributed to 80% of the environmental and social problems that we are faced with today?

As autonomous beings with direct contact with their immediate indoor and outdoor environment, my children will be able to making meaning of the world around them, drawing their own conclusions about the environmental state of their communities. This will allow them to decipher the actions needed to create alternative pathways for leading healthy and fulfilling lives. In addition, the connections that they will make between themselves and the more-than-human world will be self-induced, self-discovered, and meaningful. This will ideally provide our children with the motivation to want to recreate a sustainable world that they want to be a part of. Given the right education, Bowers believes that individuals have the potential to become autonomous thinkers, the type of people the world needs to reverse the ecological crises that we face.

Critiques of Environmental Education.

I’m not the first to question the potentially ineffective role that environmental education has within a traditional school system. Anthony Weston is one of very few writers that I discovered that radically critiques environmental education similar to how Ivan Illich and John

⁸⁵ Bowers, C. (2007). Short essays for deep discussions. Message posted to <http://cabowers.net/pdf/EssayForDeepDiscussion.pdf>

⁸⁶ Pareto, V. (1935). *The Mind and Society [Trattato Di Sociologia Generale]*. Harcourt: Brace.

Holt critiqued compulsory education. Weston feels that the goal of ‘ecological literacy’ is severely problematic and controversial and that “of course we need to change the schools, but what we really need to change is our lifeworld – change it so that the rest of nature, the ‘more-than-human,’ is more with us, in all its endless fascination and power.”⁸⁷

Does an environmental education curriculum, as implemented as a subject to be taught in several schools these days, help to expand our children’s sense of connectedness, meaning, and thus awareness of self as part of a larger community? Yes, perhaps, but after reading about how environmental educators such as Weston have responded to this question, I’ve come to believe that there are obstacles to this method that may eventually become significant barriers if educators continue to keep students removed from the environment and community in which they are learning about. If we are continuing to teach students within the four walls of a classroom or attempt to teach with predetermined experiential learning programs outside of the school in which the important connections that are needed to be made are prescribed by a top-down approach rather than allowed to emerge from the children themselves, we’ll continue to produce passive individuals who are recipients of information rather than creators of new sustaining strategies.

I value the intended outcomes and the goals of environmental education, however if they are not also the goals or “projects that emerge naturally out of the children’s or student’s own lives”⁸⁸, then we can’t guarantee that the children will be motivated to learn anything from the problems that they are being asked to solve⁸⁹. Robert Michael Pyle, author of *The Thunder Tree*:

⁸⁷ Weston, A. (1996). Deschooling environmental education. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 1, 35-44. p. 43.

⁸⁸ Weston, A. (1996). Deschooling environmental education. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 1, 35-44. p. 37.

⁸⁹ Weston, A. (1995). *Instead of environmental education*. Paper presented at the Colloquium on Environment, Ethics, and Education, Whitehorse, Yukon. p. 6.

Lessons from an Urban Wildland, believes that people won't be inclined to care or protect their natural environments if they did not have the opportunity in early childhood to form intimate relationships through direct experience with the land around them; and this in itself poses a major barrier within environmental conservation.⁹⁰ And in *Ecological Identity: Becoming a Reflective Environmentalist*, Mitchell Thomashow agrees that people are motivated to protect the Earth not because of technical analyses regarding environmental degradation but because they feel a profound connection to the land around them.⁹¹ I have trouble seeing how this profound connection will emerge on a much needed critical scale when children are made to sit behind desks, books and computers for the majority of their waking day. As part of a recent contract, I facilitated a workshop on behalf of a well-known global organization. The audience was made up of youth in which students from several schools in one community were invited to attend. The purpose of the workshop was to have students generate ideas for future experiential environmental education programs for the organization. I was astounded and saddened to discover that the majority of the students that participated in the workshop had never *ever* walked on a nature trail or in the woods – they told me that they were afraid to do so. How can we expect our young to grow into environmentally conscious adults who will endeavor to “save” the natural world if they are afraid of simply being in it?

I recently participated in a planning group to create an environmental education plan for students and a sustainability action plan for their schools. Many of the action items generated were focused on behavior change – “The kids need to be taught how to recycle”, “taught how to compost”, “taught how to print on double sided paper”. While these ideas, if followed through, may bring about some quality of change, these ideas are not what Thomashow was referring to

⁹⁰ Pyle, R. M. (1993). *The thunder tree: Lessons from an Urban Wildland*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

⁹¹ Thomashow, M. (1995). *Ecological identity: Becoming a reflective environmentalist*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

and greatly lack the ability for children to form any sort of connection to the land around them. Really, these ideas are just another subject matter, a disconnected topic meant to push ideas on the students instead of nurturing the children's abilities to come up with their own ideas and possible solutions. After reading through the small body of research that exists on deschooling and the critiques of environmental education, I would summarize the readings like this; the system of school itself is antithetical to learning⁹² and that what our children need is less school⁹³. With less school, there could also be less coercive education and environmental education and potentially more learning in the natural world and within communities. Without teachers and schools and with more support from the community, learning could be more self-determined, self-scheduled and could allow for more 'practice' [or doing] in the environment.⁹⁴ And the more unstructured and unadulterated time in nature⁹⁵ in which individuals can connect with and return to their true, pre-formed, whole and perfect selves⁹⁶, the more possibility we have of nurturing individuals who will fight to stop the degradation and will endeavor to protect that in which they love and are connected to. Could this be a laudable goal of environmental education in the 21st century? I answer, YES!, enthusiastically and most definitely.

-end-

⁹² Holt, J. (1995). *How children fail*. New York, NY: Perseus.

⁹³ Illich, I. (1971). *Deschooling society*. New York: Harper and Row.

⁹⁴ Weston, A. (1996). Deschooling environmental education. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 1, 35-44. p. 37.

⁹⁵ Sobel, D. (1995). Ecophobia. *Earth Ethics*, 6(2), 1-6.

⁹⁶ Thomashow, M. (1995). *Ecological identity: Becoming a reflective environmentalist*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Closing Thoughts

Discovery...Deschooling and Ecoliteracy are Linked

The idea that humans could be controlled to think and act in particular ways became the paradigm for the compulsory education system that I am a product of. In choosing to reject that paradigm and opt for another way of learning for my child, I'm also opting for another way for children of the 21st century to learn about the environment and all infinite knowledge that is contained within. I opt for what I've described throughout this paper as deschooling.

In his article *Deschooling Environmental Education*, Weston proposes a different concept of environmental education called "enabling environmental practice" and offers a broader focus for reconstructive action in which he claims that schools can still play a huge part. I have to laugh to myself at the fact that even though Weston chose to use the term Deschooling in the title, he fails to note that the suggestions that he proposes are effectively what millions of deschooling parents and children around the world are currently doing, and probably doing without knowing that they may in fact be 'enabling environmental practice' amongst their children. Everything Weston proposes is essentially what millions of deschooling/deschooling families are intuitively doing without the guidance of experts, or direction from government officials. Therefore I've come to the conclusion that deschoolers are fulfilling the goals desired by environmental educators, whether they know it or not, and are possibly enabling their children to become environmentally engaged citizens.

The arguments for deschooling, against environmental education and for enabling environmental practice, are similar in that all three educational approaches agree that⁹⁷:

⁹⁷ To arrive at the conclusions that follow, I researched literature on Deschooling, 21st Century Education, Humane Education, Environmental Education, Unschooling, Homeschooling, and Environmental/Eco-Literacy, and then

- We need to do away with the authoritative nature of schools and with the confining and limiting physical structure of schools themselves.
- We need to start helping to rebuild and reshape relationships between people, relationships with the self, and relationships between people and their environment.
- It is crucial that students be able to think critically and autonomously.
- Self-knowledge must emerge from time and space in nature in which learners have the ability to self-reflect and that self-knowledge is a subject matter that cannot be taught.
- It is important to consider that if students don't value something, if they are not emotionally attached to it, they also may not effectively learn about it.
- Students have the ability to and want to contribute to their community when the scope is local and meaningful.⁹⁸
- Subjects, whether they are math, literature, arts, sciences or environmental education are not disconnected pieces of information that children must passively absorb and regurgitate, soon to be forgotten. The subjects are life subjects made up of interconnected nuggets of information that leads to knowledge about the world that children are naturally a part of and therefore should be engaged in throughout their communities and in nature.
- Fostering empathy between the child and his or her community and the natural world cannot be the main objective of a program or course, but can emerge naturally if children are allowed to be directors of their own lives and able to form deep and meaningful connections with the world around them.
- There is great importance in silence and learning how to watch and listen. Children have a great need for time and accessible natural areas whether that means sitting around on a suburban sidewalk watching an ant crawl over a blade of grass growing through the concrete or out in an open field on acres of rural farmland.
- “The development of an ecologically literate citizenry, for example, maybe linked to regular, unstructured experiences in wild places (both urban and rural), much as the development of reading skills depends upon contact with books and adults who read them.”⁹⁹ Deschooling also emphasizes a child’s need for unstructured and unadulterated communion with nature.
- The educator should immerse him/herself in the world of the learners and the realities by which they are challenged, inspired, or motivated.
- Trust that learner has control in determining to a great extent the content and direction of the learning process him/herself, while the educator is much more concerned with the quality of the learning process.

proceeded to keep an excel file of the all the ‘data’ (key points) that emerged from the different bodies of literature. From there I coded the data and came up with the key themes listed here.

⁹⁸ Sobel, D. (1995). Ecophobia. *Earth Ethics*, 6(2), 1-6.

⁹⁹ Smith, G. (1997). Coming home: What childhood memories reveal about the experience of place. *Clearing 96*: 7-10.

- The need for teachers are eliminated as powers of authority in favor of co-learners, mentors, or facilitators in which everyone is equally privileged in making decisions within the community. This also allows for children to be experts when it comes to knowing their own communities and the wider world.
- There is a need to reject formal standards of judging, evaluating, testing or grading for outcomes of learning. It is more important that the standards in which children adhere to are self-determined opposed to being prescribed from the top-down.
- Children are naturally curious, questioning, wondrous beings capable of directing their own inquiries and learnings.

Deschooling is a revolutionary opportunity to foster children who will grow into citizens that will endeavor to protect and restore the planet for future generations. According to the Home School Legal Defense Association, the number of homeschoolers in Canada has more than doubled over the last decade to approximately 80,000 families, as thousands of parents are choosing to not send their children to school for dozens of different reasons.¹⁰⁰ Enabling environmental citizenry is just one more reason to do so. My goal then is not to offer up deschooling as a solution to the educational problems of our communities, but to show that deschoolers (those that are actively offering their children the freedom to design their own learning paths) are potentially creating ecologically and socially literate adults who are connected to the world around them. As Rachel Carson said long ago in her famous book *The Sense of Wonder*, “It is more important to pave the way for the child to want to know than to put him on a diet of facts he is not ready to assimilate.”¹⁰¹

I hope that these ideas and reflections will provide support and thoughts to ponder for other individuals who are asking similar questions about the types of learning environments they want for their children. It is my desire that this article will ignite a fire within teachers, curriculum developers, parents and communities to take seriously the issue of how can we provide an

¹⁰⁰ Source: <http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/imr-ri3.nsf/eng/gr-92908.html> Retrieved September 14, 2009

¹⁰¹ Carson, R. (1956). *The sense of wonder*. New York: Harper & Row. P. 45.

education for our children that will foster an environmentally engaged citizenry – one that generations after them will talk about the way that my generation talks awe-inspiringly about Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and other great leaders of a time before us. As parents and educators today, we need not doubt that our children will grow to become effective leaders if we simply trust that our children possess that leadership potential within them. When we trust fully, only then can we relinquish the control we have over institutional education systems and watch our children learn, question, and make meaningful connections as they were naturally born to do.

Reflections of an Academic Using Autoethnography

"Find out the reason that commands you to write; see whether it has spread its roots into the very depth of your heart; confess to yourself you would have to die if you were forbidden to write." ~ Rainer Maria Rilke¹⁰²

People will compare and contrast autoethnography with all types of research methods, particularly ethnography and biography. Given that I've come to believe that autoethnography is a research method that is better understood through direct experience as a researcher and as a reader, I choose to take a subjective approach and only highlight autoethnography's salient points as they relate to my own personal experience. I choose this approach over taking an objective and tedious stance of listing the similarities or many differences that exist between this methodology and others.

My experience with autoethnography as it applies to this research project is exactly as Rilke's quote above suggests. My daughters were the reason that commanded me to write about deschooling and this topic coupled with the thesis requirement to connect it to environmental education was the reason that I started to ask questions pertaining to the type of education that fosters environmental citizenry. My reasons for undertaking this research project were relevant

¹⁰² Sourced from <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/show/1243>. Retrieved on October 10, 2009.

and personal, two factors that makes autoethnography what it is. When I first set out to write this thesis, I thought I was learning and writing about three fundamentally different topics: 1) Autoethnography (a research method and methodology), 2) Deschooling, and 3) Environmental Education. In researching and learning more about these three topics, I came to realize how interconnected these topics are. The ideas and the reasons for writing about deschooling, autoethnography and environmental citizenry eventually spread their roots into the deepest parts of my heart, my mind, and my individual cells to the point where I find it challenging to think or talk about one topic without mentioning all three.

When we, the MAEEC students, first embarked on this thesis journey, we were told that our thesis title didn't need to be confirmed until the end of the journey as the title would change many times over the course of the research and writing. As I've come to understand it, the reasons why the title changes right up until the very last draft before submission, is because the writers themselves change as a result of the information and knowledge they acquire. That was the case for me. With every morsel of information that I acquired on the subject matter, I was forever changing and morphing into a different person. I began to think differently about everything and I started to question all things around me like I had never done before. I even started acting differently. I was essentially seeing the world through a new set of eyes.

You might ask how this writing experience is different from any other paper I've researched and written in the past and my answer is that it is fundamentally different on all levels. Prior to writing an autoethnography that required that I look to myself as the subject and to my own life experiences as the data for this paper, I was simply a recipient and a regurgitator of information – my ideas were never my own, but simply a well structured assembly of other writer's thoughts that left me relatively unchanged despite the new information that I had

acquired. I believe that the reason for this is that I have seldom written a paper for any other purpose but to fulfill the requirements of a course.

In writing this paper, which was extremely meaningful to my life, which served a significant personal purpose, and that helped me to answer an important question about the type of education that was best for my daughters, I not only acquired information, but knowledge as well. Connecting to this knowledge required that I look deep within to understand why I was even questioning the idea of school and education. And this knowledge acquired through writing an autoethnography is what contributed to my transformation in my thinking, my actions, and how I see the world around me. I feel shy in saying that I can't help feeling that this knowledge will eventually be recognized as wisdom, perhaps in my life time, perhaps later.

I feel like an alien on a foreign planet when I suggest that we need to do away with the 19th century system of schooling, including the current theories and practices of environmental education that continue to keep children behind a desk instead of allowing them to be active members of their community. I recognize that I'm physically living in one paradigm while my thinking now exists in a future paradigm; the shift has yet to happen. This transformation in thinking and seeing has definitely left me feeling ungrounded, insane at times, and has left me with more questions than answers, especially when I think about the next steps that I will take in life as they relate to my career, my family, and my community.

I had never come across literature that had such a profound effect on my life as the writings on the history of education, particularly industrial education. However, given that there are several examples throughout the world of educators and learning environments that have already made the shift away from the shackles of 19th century industrial education, I can easily say that the four-walled classroom and school experience that I was a part of and that I almost

unquestioningly sent my children to, is actually an old paradigm that unfortunately still dominates the 21st century. My newfound knowledge is actually part of a shift that is underway that has not yet reached the tipping point. I relate to Rilke's quote above; this autoethnographic experience has forced me to confess that I would have to die if I were forbidden to write or talk about the desperate need to do away with schools, classroom-based, government-certified teachers and curriculum including environmental education curriculum. In whichever direction my life unfolds and despite how alone or 'crazy' I feel I see myself advocating for an entirely new system of education and a different theory of environmental education that will foster an environmental citizenry.

Unfortunately, my financial constraints attached to the time constraints defined by the university only allowed me to understand and formulate my thinking and writing up to these points:

1. The current model of education and theories and practices of environmental education are not serving our children and our planet, in other words, they are not producing an environmental citizenry that the planet requires.
2. Deschooling is a potential model for the types of learning environments that will foster an environmentally engaged citizenry, similar to how autoethnography is about the potential for social change.
3. Autoethnography is a method of inquiry that aligns well with 'deschooling for environmental citizenry' and may be a starting point to help people better come to know and understand the world around them in a meaningful and purposeful way.

I see deschooling and autoethnography as a leverage point for people to step out of the industrial and post-industrial rat race long enough to acquaint or reacquaint themselves with their

individual selves. Taking this time would allow for people to connect with what is really important in their lives and to see the interconnectedness and interdependence of their individual lives in the greater living and non-living world. Deschooling an individual or a community and/or taking the time to write an autoethnography both require that individuals begin to recognize the unique talents and skills that each person possesses and to feel the motivation and purpose which drives them to act. They also begin to see themselves as researchers, information seekers and knowledge makers in which they hold personal experience and reflection as valuable data alongside information put forth by powers of authority. As well, information presented by others is continually scrutinized and questioned. If the same concepts that apply to deschooling and autoethnography could be applied to how we think about designing environmental education programs, perhaps we could begin to see environmental education as more than a behavior change tool and more as a way of thinking and being in the world.

Unfortunately, given the time constraints of the university, I am unable to presently go beyond describing what I see is wrong with the current system of education and environmental education to provide the reader with a proposal for what education in the 21st century could look like, other than saying that deschooling is a potential model for fostering an engaged citizenry. Most fortunately, I recently came across a website entitled, *21st Century Education*¹⁰³ which provides an article titled *Possibilities for 21st Century Education*. This webpage/article reflects the type of education that I would have ideally laid out in this thesis had time and money not been a barrier. Ironically, the authors describes 19th and 20th century education as being time-based while 21st century education will need to be outcome-based in which the outcomes are determined by the student and not by a predesigned curriculum. For me personally, this autoethnography is very much outcome based as I've securely come to know the type of learning

¹⁰³ http://www.21stcenturyschools.com/What_is_21st_Century_Education.htm. Retrieved Friday, October 10, 2009

environment that I want for my daughters. However, the thesis was driven by a time-based standard of learning where I had to pay extra for the time I needed to bring this paper to a meaningful state for myself and hopefully for the university.

The article is also a fantastic summary of everything that I have come to learn about deschooling, autoethnography and education that fosters environmental citizenry, though these three terms are not mentioned once throughout the article. My favorite line from the article reads as follows: “Schools” will go “from ‘buildings’ to nerve centers, with walls that are porous and transparent, connecting teachers, students and the community to the wealth of knowledge that exists in the world.”¹⁰⁴ The authors goes on to provide new definitions for ‘student’, ‘teacher’, ‘learner’ and other terms associated with 19th century education.

I am looking at deschooling for environmental citizenry – the kind of citizens that the planet requires. Schools, teachers and curriculum that continue to align with the 19th century paradigm of education are not producing these kinds of citizens. This thesis shows the levels of understanding and the information I needed to sort through and make sense of within the timelines available to me. This process allowed me to arrive at this point today, where I clearly recognize that deschoolers and environmental educators want similar things for our children in the 21st century, yet some (or many) environmental educators try and achieve their goals using 19th century hierarchal, structured, authoritative, time-based school settings that continue to keep the children separated from the community and natural world that they are supposed to be connected to and motivated to ‘save’. Of course, I also recognize that further research needs to happen to determine if deschooling does in fact foster environmental citizenry – which is another thesis all on its own.

¹⁰⁴ http://www.21stcenturyschools.com/What_is_21st_Century_Education.htm. Retrieved Friday, October 10, 2009

A recent experience in which I participated in a carbon-neutral planning session for a school district showed me that we seriously need to reconsider what environmental education programs look like in the 21st century and more importantly, *WHO* designs environmental education programs in this century. Suggestions generated by group made up of teachers, administrators, superintendents, and parents ranged from redesigning recycling boxes to look more modern and “funky” so that kids will want to recycle more of their single-use items to resetting the printers in the schools so that students and staff will have no choice but to print double-sided. From the way the participants were looking at me, I felt like my big toe was growing out of my forehead when I suggested something as novel as doing away with a predetermined environmental education curriculum in favor of inviting the students to determine which environmental or social issues they wanted to tackle and then invite them to figure out their own solutions. Who knows, perhaps a student somewhere out there might say that adults need to do away with recycling in favor of reusing or reducing. Perhaps another student would suggest that we do away with adults who impose environmental solutions on children without providing them with a choice in designing the solutions.

Not all hope was lost at that meeting. One gentleman – truly a man who was gentle and kind in his thinking about children and their learning experiences – suggested that we allow students to become the ultimate decision makers in how schools and school grounds were run. His ideas included inviting kids to be the energy auditors, provide them with opportunities to be involved in the purchasing decisions made at schools, ask the students to design the school grounds, choose the cleaning products, create the request for proposals and hire needed contractors, establish the community projects, and more. If this man had not been in attendance, I would have felt like the odd duck in the group.

Continuing to feed children with information and solutions to adult-created environmental problems while depriving students of opportunities to seek greater meaning and connection from their experiences in communities and in nature will only serve to perpetuate the environmental and social problems we seek answers to. Albert Einstein – a genius ahead of his time who didn't do particularly well in school – is purported to have said, 'The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.' Perhaps this was because he wasn't a passive recipient of information but an active maker and contributor of knowledge.

Deeper Reflections

When I first looked into autoethnography, I remember reading that the writing had the ability to invoke social change. I can not predict the effect this paper will have on anyone beyond me and I certainly couldn't have predicted the change that writing this paper has had on me. I'm not the same person coming out of this thesis experience, as I was when I entered. Much of this also has to do with the thesis subject matter itself - deschooling and autoethnography - which has left me questioning everything around me in ways that I have never done before. For example, throughout the writing of this paper I questioned the value of holding an MA as it relates to the time I've taken away from my family, the time that I've spent behind a computer, the value that my research contribution makes to an already information overloaded society, and to my health as I spent many nights researching and writing when I could and should have been sleeping, preparing healthy meals instead of grabbing 'fast-food' meals, and engaging with my daughters the following morning in a more attentive and present way instead of in my sleep deprived manner that my children are now so used to.

I know that I made the decision to do this program and that all the choices that I've made to date have been mine alone. However, the one choice that I feel was not mine to make was how and when the final thesis draft would come together - and it came together exactly how the autoethnography literature stated it would;

- Haphazardly,
- Without structure,
- Independent of time constraints,
- At a point when I was physically and mentally able to do so,
- As a reflection on my own experiences through the research and writing process, and
- With a newfound sense of what constitutes valid knowledge.

I could not have completed this thesis before now, as my thinking was not complete until this final moment. This particular thesis process could not be rushed and the subject matter and methodology could not be squeezed into the time-lines set by the university. I assure the reader that I tried several times to complete this thesis within the allocated time frame, but try as I might, I couldn't force myself to write about something that I didn't fully understand.

Emotionally and mentally, the experience of writing this autoethnography resulted in me being left with more questions than answers, and the questions are not easily answered. I'm also left questioning the nature of universities and the role they play in furthering environmental, social, and economic degradation. The following quote portrays the concerns I have about educating our children when we have not yet asked, 'What, in fact, are we educating our children for?'

Dear Teacher,

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness: Gas chambers built by learned engineers. Infants killed by trained nurses. Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates.

*So, I am suspicious of education. My request is: Help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns. Reading, writing, and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human.*¹⁰⁵

The future cannot be accurately predicted, especially during these times of environmental uncertainty, In being left with more questions without answers, I feel even more like an outsider in which I no longer know my place in society. I question my role as an environmental coordinator for the municipality in which I work, my role as a mother, my decision to have more children, and the path I will follow in my immediate future. Though I've come to answer the important question that I set out to answer - *What is the best learning environment for my children?* - I'm left feeling more mentally and emotionally unstable than intellectually 'sane' - perhaps because I feel like there are less people that I can relate to or that can relate to me. I also feel more disconnected than connected from everything around me. At times I desire to return to my pre-RRU self in which I looked forward to sending my girls to school instead of deschooling them and where I believed that education and more specifically environmental education was the answer to so many of the problems that we face. However, the reality is that I am a different person who sees the world differently and there is no turning back.

The most challenging factor that I faced in writing this paper (beyond critiquing schools in which I was writing this thesis to fulfill the requirements of a school program) was in critiquing environmental education within an environmental education program. It was challenging to overcome my own academic insecurities that arose from thinking about myself as a master's student trying to form a critical argument about environmental education that would eventually be submitted for review by the very same professors who advocate for environmental

¹⁰⁵ Ginott, H. G. (1993). *Teacher and child : a book for parents and teachers*. Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan Canada.

education. In seeing the reviewers as holders of doctorate degrees with long lists of published writings, I allowed myself to put these individuals on academic and intellectual pedestals. I allowed myself to forget that they too are individuals like me are deeply concerned about the state of the planet and are also open to critique at the same time as they are attempting to critique the field in which they work. I signed up for the program feeling that environmental education would contribute to solving the environmental crisis that we face and by being an environmental educator, I could play a role in that grand challenge. Concluding with theories that we need to do away with schools and top-down structured environmental programs in favor of child-determined community-engaged learning means that I need to start thinking big about what it means to call myself an environmental educator. It means I need to engage in further exploration to expand mine and others concepts of what environmental education can look like in the 21st century. It means that I need to rethink my role as an individual in my community, career wise and in other ways.

Advice to Future Autoethnographers

It is only now that I can do a 360 degree reflection on my experience writing an autoethnography and feel that I can offer up some advice to future autoethnographers. My first piece of advice is for you to conduct your own research to learn about autoethnography, as the information that I chose to include in this paper is only a glimpse into what autoethnography actually is. I also recommend that you read several autoethnographies that have been written by others, particularly those writings that you as a reader find meaningful, moving, and provocative, as that is actually how I came to understand this interesting methodology.

Secondly, my advice is that you read this paper as a traditional academic thesis that strived to be an autoethnography and on the most part failed. I admit that I was caught between

two worlds; wanting to please the people who would be reviewing this thesis and wanting to venture into a creative and deeply introspective world of writing like autoethnographers before me have successfully done. As I reread this thesis, I don't hear my own authentic voice as much as I hear myself attempting to translate a foreign language into one that I think others will understand. As well, my original intention was to write my thesis as a play, which I shied away from for fear that it was too radical a concept and because I felt I didn't have the capability of writing a play. Other universities have accepted autoethnographies in all shapes and forms such as poems, plays, art, sculptures, and so on and I realize that allowed fear to stop me from engaging in and learning something new. However, this realization also makes it clear to me that I actually do understand autoethnography after all. This almost-an-autoethnography was my first attempt and I imagine that when or if I write another autoethnography, I will have more success in allowing my true self to come through on all levels, despite any rejection or failure I feel I may face.

Thirdly, be prepared to face critique and possibly rejection from others. This is a relatively new genre for most universities and in choosing to write an autoethnography you are also choosing to pave a new path that deviates away from the norm. Breaking new ground is never easy to do so be prepared for the journey by really understanding the case for and against autoethnography. And always remember that autoethnography is really just the ancient art of storytelling where life experience, thoughts and ideas, creativity and deep reflection is all that is needed to tell an engaging story that will move the listener.

Fourthly, I'd recommend that you request that your editor or supervisor or a member of your review committee be someone who is more than familiar with autoethnography or has written an autoethnography that moved you to want to make some sort of change in your life.

Having someone on board who already knows this foreign language will help make the translation that much smoother and sweeter for all involved. This will also help you to create a autoethnographic work of art.

Lastly, I must warn you that you may experience some sort of profound change within your thinking as you come to know yourself better and perhaps in a whole new light. Self-knowledge cannot be taught – it is something that is discovered and autoethnography greatly assists in making these discoveries which may or may not always be pleasant.

I leave you with this last quote. This thesis is really about that defining moment when the new ‘presence’, the future entered inside of me. It’s about my transition and recognition that I, like many others, float between educational paradigms. Rilke’s quote below summarizes everything that makes autoethnography and deschooling the interesting academic and educational challenges that they are while beautifully expressing the changes that occurred within me and that I can only hope may occur within you as well.

*It seems to me that almost all our sadnesses are moments of tension, which we feel as **paralysis** because we no longer hear our astonished emotions living. Because we are alone with the **unfamiliar presence** that has entered us; because everything we trust and are used to is for a moment **taken away** from us; because we stand in the midst of a **transition** where we cannot remain standing. That is why the sadness passes: the new presence inside us, the presence that has been added, has entered our heart, has gone into its innermost chamber and is no longer even there, - is already in our bloodstream. And we don't know what it was. We could easily be made to believe that nothing happened, and yet **we have changed**, as a house that a guest has entered changes. We can't say who has come, perhaps we will never know, but many signs indicate that **the future enters us** in this way in order to be **transformed in us**, long before it happens. And that is why it is so important to be **solitary** and **attentive** when one is sad: because the seemingly uneventful and motionless moment when our future steps into us is so much closer to life than that other loud and accidental point of time when it happens to us as if from outside. The quieter we are, the more patient and open we are in our sadnesses, the more deeply and serenely the **new presence can enter us**, and the more we can make it our own, the more it **becomes our fate**.*

~ Rainer Maria Rilke¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Rilke, R. M. (1954). *Letters to a young poet*. New York: Norton. p. 14.