

Chapter One

Wasting Time

Let's consider a frightening possibility: far too much of the time our children spend in school is wasted. It's not that nothing happens there or that kids spend their time just fooling around or that teachers don't try their best to present lessons they think are in our children's best interests. It's just that unless our children—of all ages—are truly engaged in their learning, most of what they experience during school hours passes over them like the shadow of a cloud, or through them like an undigested seed. They may be present in the classroom, but they are not really *there*. Their pencils may be chugging away on the worksheets or the writing prompts or math problems laid out for them, but their intelligence is running on two cylinders at best. They pay some attention to what their teacher happens to be telling them, but their imagination has moved elsewhere. Megan Flatley, a graduate student of mine, wrote in a recent short paper for class, "As a student, I remember being bored in 80 percent of my classes in high school. When something happened out of the ordinary, we all took pleasure in it. Whether this was a student acting up, a fire drill—any kind of distraction, really—it was more fun than what the teacher might be saying or the lessons I was supposed to be learning. Just the feeling of SOMETHING HAPPENING was exciting."

And, worst of all, by the time our kids have reached fourth or fifth grade, they think that what they are experiencing in school is *normal*.

Why *shouldn't* our kids be eager to head off to school each day, anticipating their next investigation, project, or performance? It

can be agonizing for parents to see their imaginative, articulate, eagerly seeking young learner become, over the years, someone bored, passive, complaining, or compliant—focused on not making mistakes rather than on taking on new challenges.¹ Most kids in school listen and do what they're told, most of the time. They pick up stray facts and acquire some skills they wouldn't necessarily learn elsewhere. They learn about following rules in the lunchroom and about leaving one-inch margins on their papers. They even learn the Pythagorean theorem and how to write a five-paragraph essay with three supporting arguments and a conclusion.

But unless they view such activities as important, as having meaning to them in their lives *right now*, they aren't truly *learning*, in the sense of developing their minds and hearts as young people eager to embrace the world. Although it is true that many of us who have been successful in schools-as-they-are have fond memories of inspired teachers about whom the relevance of what they taught us only became apparent in retrospect (often years later), the odds are that too many of our fellow students never achieved such delayed enlightenment. I'm not insisting that everything we teach must be instantly relevant, only that we take very seriously our students' need to find purpose in what we ask of them. I am still shocked to hear so many young people express just how meaningless they find academic life in school and that they spend their time mostly just going through the motions. Andres, a young man who attends high school in San Francisco, put it this way: "In seventh grade my grades started slipping. I noticed I had a lot more freedom, and I stopped doing my work. But they kept on passing me, even though I wasn't doing anything. It's not like it was about my learning, it was about moving us through to high school. I hated that."²

What Is Authentic Learning?

Throughout these first pages, I have been using the word *authentic* to describe learning that is the alternative to playing the Game of School, and you have a right to know what I mean. Here are several examples, taken from a variety of sources:

- A history teacher leads a ninth-grade class on a field trip to an abandoned cemetery in the woods not far from their school. First, she and the kids spend some time cleaning up the site, removing dead limbs fallen from overhanging trees, righting headstones that have toppled over, cleaning the headstones with soap and water and brushes. Each student picks the name of someone from a headstone, and the class goes into the village to find what official records exist for that person. The students do their research, write it up, and present it as a booklet in a meeting with members of the town's historical society, who are enthusiastic about their work and talk with them about it. Their booklet becomes part of the town record.
- A fifth-grade teacher, mindful of how abstract such notions as “inequality” and “resources” and “poverty” can appear to kids, comes to class with exactly enough chocolate chip cookies for each of his students. He places students into groups, representing the relative populations of North America, South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa, with a large name tag for each group member listing their continent. He then distributes the cookies in a way that represents the “wealth” available to each group. The three students representing North America end up with six cookies each; the eight students representing Africa have one cookie between them. The students are asked to explore their feelings on the competing values of wanting to share the “good things” fairly, versus wanting to have all the cookies for themselves. They also get to speculate on how, if they ran the world, they might resolve this. Each student writes a response to the question, “How can we make the world a better place?”
- Children in a second-grade class take a trip to a nearby retirement home. They meet some of the residents and talk in small groups with them. When they return to school, they paint pictures that they think will be appreciated by their new older friends. When they return with their pictures, the residents have a tea party for them, and the student artwork is given to the residents to hang in their rooms.

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- A seventh-grade math teacher, concerned about widely differing attitudes toward math among his incoming students, asks them to mark, anonymously on a 3-by-5 card, the number that best reflects how they feel: 1 = I love math; 2 = Math is pretty good; 3 = Math is so-so; 4 = I do it but don't like it; 5 = I hate math. A student is asked to tote up the scores while the teacher speculates as to how many kids might be in each category. The results are announced (everyone learns how good a predictor their teacher is). The class is then divided into five small groups, each with poster paper. One group has to reflect the results as fractions; the second, as percentages; the third, as decimals; the fourth, on a bar graph; the fifth, on a pie chart. Their *feelings* about math are given expression via math symbols. The teacher then talks about how their attitudes might change by Thanksgiving time, and the groups have to represent this, too, on poster paper. (The five groups switch methods of representing the new data.) Afterwards (or on following days), the students write, again anonymously, what they think it would take for each of them to be able to move up a number: what they need from their teacher, how their parents can help, what they themselves can do. The suspense generated by their attempt to achieve these new goals fuels the conversation of the classroom.
- An eleventh-grade civics teacher invites students to learn about the Bill of Rights by exploring what rights they *wish* were guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, from a twenty-first-century viewpoint. Each group can come up with two new "rights" that our Founding Fathers either didn't care enough about or couldn't possibly have predicted a need for. In exchange, the kids have to come to consensus about which two of the existing ten amendments they would be willing to let go of. A legal expert (lawyer, judge, legislator, or constitutional scholar) is invited into class to hear and comment on their proposals.

- I recently came across yet another example, offered by a high school student: “For our final exam in English and world history we had a mock trial with a real judge and a court typist. They separated us into defense and prosecution, with four lawyers on each side, and they set up a mock scene from *Animal Farm* in which the character Boxer supposedly dies. The defense was defending the guy who supposedly killed him. We had to dress up and go down to City Center for three or four hours. It was pretty fun. We learned more about the book, but we also learned how to follow court procedures, write direct testimony, and do cross-examination.”³³

If we look for them, we find dozens of similar examples in all subjects and at every grade level. What they share is that students recognize that knowledge and meaning have not been predetermined by teacher or textbook, but instead will emerge from their *own* efforts, guided and structured by their teacher. Students act as “junior partners” as they encounter academic content in a more or less realistic setting or through questions that seem cogent and not easily answerable. Nobody knows in advance what will emerge. Their role as students is to *speculate* about the unknown, to *seek* and to *synthesize* knowledge, and then to *share* it. Important people (their parents, local citizens, other students) care about what they will discover or create. Such engagement forms *genuine learning partnerships*.

Despite our children’s strong innate capacity and zest for such authentic learning, the failure of our educational system to recognize and stimulate these great natural gifts causes educators to focus, instead, on presenting knowledge, or “delivering instruction,” to students. As a result, children’s desire to acquire information and skills takes a nosedive as they rise up through the grades. On a daily basis, kids are more likely to be influenced by how other kids behave toward them in the lunchroom or the playground, or by whether their teacher smiled at them or scolded them, than by the lesson plans their teacher followed and the knowledge he or she has “covered.” The human interactions are what stand out, and it is these

that are more likely to induce students to change or modify their behavior—to avoid that one or to get closer to this one or to try not to upset their teacher. Precious little of what they have supposedly learned has had as much of an impact.

The Attack on Our Learning Spirit

For nearly all of us, advantaged and disadvantaged, as we emerge from those preschool years of unabashedly enthusiastic learning and begin our careers as students, our inner drive to learn—what I would call our *learning spirit*—suffers a series of blows. Our freedom of physical movement is severely restricted, our curiosity is confined, our opportunity to talk to other kids about what we are learning is curtailed. We do not see these as attacks on our learning spirit; they are just the normal stuff that happens in school. In the classroom, we do not choose either to embrace or to reject “learning.” We experience a pressure to do well, to be good, to be smart in school. Little by little, grade by grade, we find ourselves relating to school more and more in a way that sharply contrasts with the energy, purposefulness, and joy that young children bring to the challenge of learning how to talk, run, play games, ask questions, and investigate the world around them. Learning becomes a chore rather than an adventure.

In school we are more likely to learn *not* to talk, *not* to run, *not* to play, and *not* to ask questions. We are cautioned to “keep our hands to ourselves” and *not* to investigate anything that hasn’t been placed before us on our desks. Our curiosity may be seen as impudence, our creativity misjudged as failure to follow directions. In *The Passionate Learner*, I documented just such a transfer of focus among a group of urban kids:

I asked a group of third-grade students to tell me what were the most important things they were learning in school. They said, “not to run in the halls,” “no pushing or fighting,” “don’t throw stuff on the floor.” I agreed with them that these were, indeed, important things,

and I wrote them on the board under the heading, “Good *Behavior*.” But next to that I wrote “Good *Learning*” and asked them what important things they felt they needed to *learn*. After a few moments, two children raised their hands. One said, “to listen to the teacher.” The other said, “to be good.”

Already, as third graders, learning had become a world of “good children” and “bad children.” Good children listen to their teacher. The bad children don’t. Thus far in their lives, these urban third graders still consider it *good* to “be good.” For many of their older brothers and sisters, it has already become *cool* to “be bad.”⁴

Not all children respond the same way, of course. There are plenty of kids in urban, suburban, and rural schools who will perk up and tell us that they are learning to read books, to write stories, to master long division, to care for classroom pets. School is clearly about more than just following the teacher’s direction, as important as that is. But we should worry if our young people are beginning to confuse, or to blend in their minds, the idea of *obeying the teacher* with *learning*. For that tendency, if left unchecked by teachers and parents, will soon transform many children into youngsters whose resistance to obeying the teacher (which may be a normal aspect of their emerging adolescence) signals a parallel resistance to learning. Before we know it, the “resisters” become synonymous with “bad kids,” even in their own minds. We don’t find many kids who report, “I love what I’m learning in school—it’s just that I don’t like doing the stuff my teachers try to make me do.”

There is a simple test we can perform to find out whether or not our children are truly learning. We can ask them, not the usual question, “How was school today, Honey?” or “What did she teach you in your math class?” but rather, “Did you learn anything in school today that you really want to know more about?” If the answer is often yes, your child has been primed to continue learning on her own. If it’s usually no, you have cause for worry—even if your child brings home a good report card.

Megan Flatley recalls:

I was a pretty good student, growing up, who didn't have to try very hard to get good grades. Looking back, I realize that I could have used my education for so much more than I did. Instead of really being involved in what was going on around me, I did the minimum necessary to get by. And, sadly enough, this "minimum" was more than enough . . . ! The subject matter was boring and irrelevant to me. My classes were something to get through, and I cannot recall ONCE going home and thinking, "I would like to look into that, to learn more about that."

I don't remember being asked such a question by my parents, or asking it of my kids as they moved through public school. It didn't occur to my parents or me to think that a child's time is as precious as that of a busy adult and that much of the time my kids and I were in school and doing homework was poorly spent. Looking back, I'd say that although most of the public schools my kids and I attended were deemed "pretty good" by local standards, at least 60 to 70 percent of the time spent in schools was wasted.

I have observed schools where, on average, the waste of time for students seemed closer to 90 to 95 percent. The teachers (or student teachers) knew *something* was wrong, but they rarely framed their concerns as a critique of their school culture or as a reflection on the enormity of time wasted. They were more likely to focus on deficiencies of aptitude or attitude on the part of significant numbers of students, or on the lack of interesting texts and materials, or on the inappropriateness of the curriculum they were being asked to deliver, or on the obstruction of a few troublemakers. Rarely, if ever, did they say to their classes, "This just isn't working. I can see that most of you aren't learning much—are you? Please tell me if I'm exaggerating the problem. But as I see it, whatever we're trying to accomplish, we're obviously not doing it very well. We need to rethink what we're doing. If *you* aren't learning much; if you're not engaged, not desirous of learning more about this topic, then obviously we're on the wrong track, and we should be doing something quite, quite different."

Such a statement is by no means a confession of ineptitude on the teacher's part, much less an expression of failure (though some might view it thus). It is an invitation for teacher and students to replace their false selves, their pseudo-educational roles, with new pathways to engagement in learning. Here is an instance where a student saw a teacher do just that: "I was sitting in history really bored, and I was wondering how could history help me? And he could tell that we were getting bored, so he asked us the same question! He didn't tell us the answer—the question was good enough. It kind of made me think."⁵

Going with the Flow

It's time to lift the veils from our eyes and contemplate the waste of time that has become endemic throughout our educational system. Those veils are everywhere; a search of available research on the topic offers little in the way of an examination of how children waste time by not being actively, intellectually, and emotionally engaged in their studies. In April 1994, a blue ribbon commission investigating our nation's education system in the aftermath of *A Nation at Risk* came up with a report titled *Prisoners of Time*, in which they documented what they saw as an obsolete structure of organization. Their report began,

Learning in America is a prisoner of time. For the past 150 years, American public schools have held time constant and let learning vary. The rule, only rarely voiced, is simple: learn what you can in the time we make available. It should surprise no one that some bright, hard-working students do reasonably well. Everyone else—from the typical student to the dropout—runs into trouble.

Time is learning's warden. Our time-bound mentality has fooled us all into believing that schools can educate all of the people all of the time in a school year of 180 six-hour days. The consequence of our self-deception has been to ask the impossible of our students. We expect them to learn as much as their counterparts abroad in only half the time.⁶

What is noteworthy in the commission's findings is that their focus is solely on how time is used and misused in schools (for example, "the fixed clock and calendar," the charge that "Academic time has been stolen to make room for a host of nonacademic activities," plus a plea for more planning time for educators, more interdisciplinary team teaching, individualized instruction, and more time for students to devote to ratcheting themselves up for the purpose of "mastering world-class standards" and meeting the global competition). The commission properly castigates our reliance on credits or "Carnegie units" as a basis for graduation, and demands that we "reinvent schools around learning, not time." However, they do not address the waste associated with *the failure to engage students in authentic learning*. They propose, sadly, only more of the same—more academic instruction aided by more technology—rather than a rethinking of how teachers and students might work to foster higher levels of learning.

Teachers, and the administrative staff who stand behind them, are powerful figures to young children.⁷ When powerful people in our lives direct us to do something, some task, some function (be it lining up to go to lunch, opening our books to page 15, getting rid of our chewing gum, or solving the math problems on the handout), we usually have little choice but to obey. It would probably not be wise to say, "Mr. Knox, I'm not especially hungry, today, so I'd rather keep reading *Harry Potter* for a while and then come down to lunch a bit later." When asked to open our social studies textbook, a pre-teen is not likely to say, "I'm sorry, Miss Rodriguez, but to me it represents a biased view of history. Is it all right if I go to the library to look for another book on that topic that might be more interesting?" If told to spit out our chewing gum, it would probably not go over very well to respond, "But, Mr. Wilson, I never, *ever*, stick my gum under the desk. I chew it quietly because it helps me relax. It's also sugarless, so it won't hurt my teeth." If directed to start on the math handout, few students respond, "These problems are too easy [or too hard] for me, Ms. Chen. Do you think I could sit with my friend Kyle and work on some math that's at our level?"

Such responses might, in fact, be perfectly reasonable ones to use at home and, depending on our parents' style of child rearing, we might expect to receive positive or negative responses from them.⁸ But in school, we soon learn, it's important for everyone to be doing things pretty much in the same way. There just isn't time for individual negotiation on assignments or other directives. We are schooled to "go along to get along." When we see one of our classmates openly defy a teacher, we learn how dangerous that can be. We don't want to get yelled at, kept inside for recess, sent to the time-out corner or principal's office, or threatened with a call home. So we line up for lunch, open our textbooks to page 15, throw the gum in the waste bin, begin tackling the math problems whether or not they are appropriately challenging. We soon fail to distinguish (if ever we did) between commands that have to do with rules of behavior and those that pertain to learning. You'd better "listen to the teacher" if you want to "be good."

The response of most of us is to play along. We may feel rebellious or bored, but, like *Oliver Twist*, we quickly learn not to ask for special favors. If our teacher is someone whom we admire and respect, we are more willing to acquiesce to his or her direction, especially if this teacher is sensitive to our own particular needs and makes a reasonable effort to tailor the assigned work to a level that challenges us without overwhelming us. Similarly, if we resent our teacher, we may continue to acquiesce, but we are likely to harden ourselves against that person and the learning she or he asks us to pursue.

In either case, we develop the habit of disengaging what we do in school and for homework from both the inner logic and the self-motivation that has heretofore driven us as learners to figure things out and learn new skills. We remove ourselves as the driver of our learning carriage, we succumb to the bit and bridle, we accept the blinders, and we learn to pull along with the other horses. We do our work to get it done. If something new and interesting emerges from an assignment, it is a pleasant surprise; but we learn not to expect such surprises as a concomitant of schoolwork.

Productive and Unproductive Contexts for Learning

Seymour Sarason reminds us of the distinction between “productive and unproductive contexts of learning.” It is a central concept of his lifelong critique both of conventional schooling and of misguided school reform efforts. He explains, “by *productive* I mean that the learning process is one which engenders and reinforces [the child’s] wanting to learn more.”⁹ Unproductive learning is almost everything else that goes on in school.

This is not a call to ban all instructional activities that students don’t immediately and enthusiastically embrace. We don’t want to turn our educators into slick salespeople who cater to the whims and fancies of their students (who are already too much influenced by the fads pushed by the media). We adults don’t have to pander to our children’s notions of what would be “easy” to do or “fun” to learn about. Children respond to good teaching even—especially—when it challenges them to think deeply, to aim high.

But unless we take very seriously the notion of productive and unproductive contexts of learning, we will find that the desired connection between a teacher’s notion of what’s worth teaching and a child’s sense of what’s worth learning more about will take place only rarely, or haphazardly, or with only a few “super teachers” or only a minority of youngsters who come to school ready and eager to soak up what we offer them.

Most of us who consider ourselves successful in life eventually regain at least some of our zest for learning, either in college or grad school; in preparation for a career that has captured our imagination; in the challenge of making a go of it in the business world; as artists and artisans or hobbyists of one kind or another; as advocates for political and environmental causes; as readers and writers. We humans love to learn, and we are never quite as invigorated as when we have carved out of our busy schedules some time to devote to our learning passions.

But this reemergence of a zest for learning cannot fully compensate for the loss that takes place during the years of our school-

ing. If we are fortunate enough to be raised in a home where love of learning is celebrated and modeled before our eyes, we may come to school well fortified to deal with lessons we find boring or meaningless, assignments we find confusing or tedious, or teachers who seem uninterested in how our own creativity exhibits itself. Our parents may comfort us with the idea that this, too, shall pass; they might assist us with our homework and help find creative solutions to tasks that seem absurd or pointless.

Defining What Children Do in School as “Work”

For most children in most schools on most days, such support cannot overcome the feeling that they are there simply to do what they are told. And then the Game, the act of feigning interest and putting forth only as much energy or thought as is necessary to meet the expectations set for us by those in command, envelopes our approach to school. We begin to see school, in a word, as our “work.” After all, that’s what everybody else calls it.

In his op-ed piece “Students Don’t ‘Work’—They Learn,” writer and critic Alfie Kohn invites teachers to resolve, *From now on, we will stop referring to what students do in school as “work.”*

Importing the nomenclature of the workplace is something most of us do without thinking—which is in itself a good reason to reflect on the practice. Every time we talk about “homework” or “seat work” or “work habits,” every time we describe the improvement in, or assessment of, a student’s “work” in class, every time we urge children to “get to work” or even refer to “classroom *management*,” we are using a metaphor with profound implications for the nature of schooling. In effect, we are equating what children do to figure things out with what adults do in offices and factories to earn money.¹⁰

I don’t want to downplay the importance of work in our lives. I seek rather to elevate—to celebrate—the importance of *learning*, of

productive learning, the kind of learning that makes the learner want to do more of it on her own.

Nobody's Fault: Crimeless Victims of a System That Hurts Learning

I see no despicable plot, no conspiracy by educators to deny children their right to learn. The problem is not that those who work within schools and colleges regularly force us to abandon our own learning goals and submit to their indoctrination. It's just that too many of us—students and teachers alike—agree to substitute lesser, symbolic goals for greater and truer ones. When we allow ourselves (or get convinced) to gear ourselves up so as to complete school tasks that have little meaning for us *aside from the value of getting them done and over with*, we lose touch with our own learning spirit. We become alienated from the natural learning desires and inquisitiveness within us. We tend to become compliant rather than creative, docile instead of courageous, inwardly passive instead of assertively engaged, cynical at a time in life when we should be idealistic. We become *game players* by reflex, and *learners* only on occasion.

Not everyone. And certainly not all the time.

There are inspiring teachers in our schools and colleges who want nothing more than for us to blossom as self-motivated and creative learners. For them, we are happy to perform the tasks they set for us (even if we might not have chosen those tasks ourselves). “Sometimes I can't wait to get up and go to school,” reports Montoya, a high school student in Oakland. “Because at some points school is very interesting—like when we have exhibition night, where everybody shows their projects off.”¹¹ We thrive on the praise that comes with compliance and hard work. Getting the assignment done well and on time can lead not only to a good grade but also to a genuine sense of achievement. Montoya reports, “I wouldn't even think I could do something and my teacher would push me farther and I would succeed and do really well. In those first two months we

did tons of work, and at the end we had a big project to do. I couldn't believe all the work I did."¹²

And, to be fair, there is something about the nature of school that can offer a degree of structure, authority, and comfort to certain learners of all ages. For the youngest, it's a chance to gain recognition and praise from an adult not their parent who affords them a chance to perform well, within known boundaries, on tasks that challenge them to show just how "grown-up" and conscientious they are. For some teenagers faced with the confusions of growing up, school can be that place where they take a break from their hormones, their family struggles, and their peer group pressures and apply themselves to concrete, specific tasks within guidelines set forth by an adult figure to whom they do not need to prove how independent or cool they are. And for some adults who return to school for a course or a degree, a syllabus provides them with structure, boundaries, and intellectual challenge, along with a comforting sense of hierarchy, of someone deservedly "in charge"—qualities that may be missing in other parts of life.¹³ But I worry that when too many students get in the habit of focusing, reflexively, on the "work" their teachers are asking them to do, their independence as learners begins to atrophy.

My argument with the Game of School is not an argument against *school*, much less against the teaching profession. Teachers, schools, and school systems are themselves often the victims of this self-same game, played out according to the rules set down by those who have power over us. My hope is to bring this phenomenon to the attention of educators and learners at all levels; it is most destructive where least acknowledged. Those caught in the Game soon lose awareness of it; it begins to seem like the only way of doing business.

Although we all play to one degree or another, the Game affects each of us quite differently. And though it can result in a significant or even a tragic loss of our own power as learners, it is a loss that is recoverable at every stage of life. It is never too late to learn, never

too late to recover one's own learning power and initiative from the habits and practices that subdue and subvert that power. Learning on our own (or with chosen colleagues) or developing our own goals for the learning we do in school becomes an empowering act of discovering the truth; and it is the truth that makes us free.

Let's examine a view of the Game from a former student of mine, Elcira Delgado. Although quite contemptuous of the circumstances that have nurtured her role as a player in the Game of School, she's evidently not quite ready to give up playing.

~ Interlude ~

Elcira Delgado's Show

“Welcome to The Game of School! I’m your host, Johnny Doe, and today our guest is college student Elcira Delgado. Elcira hails from the middle-class, suburban town of West Hartford, CT, a town known for its excellent school system. She enjoys long walks on the beach, listening to music, and no, school does not fit into her extracurricular activities. She’s been a participant in our game now for about eight years. She’s won every game so far and never gets sick of playing! How does she do it?” . . .

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to welcome you to *my* Game of School. It all began back in good old elementary school. Ah, the joys of being a fifth grader, you get to rule the school, you’ll be in middle school soon and you don’t have to use that stupid jar of paste. What? No paste? Wait, wait, wait. Why no paste? Oh yeah, now I remember. It’s all becoming clear to me, or unclear to me. Fifth grade was the beginning of the downfall of my motivation to learn. Slowly but surely all those fun hands-on projects began to disappear (hence no more paste), and lectures became commonplace. But that’s OK, because we still had a couple of science projects here and there, we got to move to another classroom to do history, and we still had recess. Besides, our report cards did not show us A’s or F’s, but simply showcased our work with an “excellent,” “satisfactory,” or “unsatisfactory.” I had always been an “excellent” student and never needed a reminder from my parents to do my homework.

Yeah, I was *that* kid. You know the kind, the kid that always did their homework, 100 on every spelling bee, the student teachers show off to the administration. I did well because I enjoyed learning. But

elementary school couldn't last forever, so I graduated from Braeburn Elementary school to begin my glory days as a middle schooler on the road to success.

Sixth grade? Ah yes, I remember it well: The institution of Home-room; different teachers for different subjects; our first school dance; that kid with the cute hair (I must keep my focus on school); my first C—and in *English*, of all subjects.

You'd think after speaking English for a good 11 years I'd be getting A's. But back to that C. Ouch! Yeah, that one hurt. Yeah, those C's, you can't even change them into any other letter with your own red pen. Maybe you could make it a curvy B, but that's a stretch. Now I'm not saying that the C was the *beginning* of my game. Simply that it hurt. Up to now, I was "Little Miss Excellent" in school, and this C was a huge blow to my perfect record. Not only was it difficult for me to cope with my "satisfactory" grade, but my almost nonexistent social life was hurting too. Not being able to go outside and play kickball with the rest of the neighborhood sucks, especially when instead you are stuck inside, *grounded*.

My parents were not so pleased with this grade and began monitoring my schoolwork. I tried to tell them it wasn't my fault, but the fault of my evil, "She-never-even-smiles-at-me" English teacher. This did not fly so well. There was only one way out of this, to do all my work to the best of my ability. This lasted till about halfway through the year, when I had my parents convinced that I was once again a great student. School was still kind of interesting to me, but as my interests began to shift from learning to sleeping, shopping, and boys, my attention was no longer focused on the different cultures of the world, but instead on whom I was going to sit with at lunch that day. The fact that my classes had begun to drag on and on, with a teacher standing at the front of the class droning on for forty-five minutes, was no help either.

Seventh grade was the year of the lying, cheating, and stealing. You are not new to the school anymore, but you're no closer to the end than you were last year. This was the year that we began to learn algebra, the

history of the world, and to read books longer than 150 pages. This is when I began to play the Game of School full tilt. I couldn't help it. Drilling of math problems, pages upon pages of wars, grammar, I couldn't take it. Do you think I really read every chapter of my textbooks to answer questions? Of course I didn't. Besides, the Cliff's Notes were not as time-consuming and had all the answers right there. Do you think I paid attention in class? Well that was 50/50, but still, I should have been attentive 100 percent of the time. Like that would ever happen . . .

Oh wait, it did, once! During my history class. I can't remember exactly what I was studying, but I wrote a wonderful paper on the topic. My parents even helped me proofread my masterpiece. I brought the disk to school and printed it out in the computer lab. The next week went along wonderfully, till, as luck would have it, I sanded a few layers of skin off during Tech Ed. As I walked to the nurse's office with a bleeding thumb and blackened skin, I was stopped by my history teacher (who didn't seem to notice my festering wound). He asked to speak with me after school, something about plagiarism and copying someone else's paper.

Are you kidding me?! Someone had handed in the same paper as I had?! Who'd done it? Oh, of course, the Goody Two Shoes of our class. *He* didn't have *time* to write a paper of his own, so he found mine in the computer lab and handed it in as his! Lucky for me, he confessed, but of course, since he was such a Kiss Ass he never got in trouble for it (but you know if it had been anyone else in our class, it would have been cause for instant out-of-school suspension). Forget working hard. If people are going to try to steal my work and take my A, there is no point in creating such masterpieces. So, I continued on my path of doing almost nothing, but fortunately for me succeeding with straight A's.

Eighth grade, not so important. Just a whole lotta doing nothing and passing classes. I slept a lot in class, too. Either that, or I pretended to look really interested. My parents didn't bother me about a thing. As long as the A came at the end of the semester, I could do what I wanted. This same mentality lasted into my high school years. Classes were b-o-r-i-n-g. Lectures became commonplace and essay tests were taking

over. Luckily, by now I had perfected my “do-hardly-anything/still-get-an-A” skills. I was a Master. My friends never did understand how I did so well in school without lifting a finger to do my work. That empty A filled my soul with pride. I wasn’t learning much, but colleges don’t ask what we have truly learned. They simply read some b—s— essay we write and check out our grades . . .

And here I am today, a proud student in college, where I continue to play my Game of School. Why can’t I study? Why do I settle for the mediocre grades? What is wrong with me?

Ah, the answer is simple, my friend. I have no motivation. “What?!” you say. “No motivation?” Isn’t pleasing my parents and becoming a successful career woman enough? Apparently not. Some might say that I am still immature and have not learned the true value of higher education, and to them I would say, “You’re partially right.” But what is the point of doing my best, when I can get my degree, go out into the work field, perfect the necessary skills and become a master at what I do, without being a 4.0 student? Can’t answer that one? Nah, me neither. Maybe that’s why I never lose at my game . . .

OK, now I’m just dragging this out, like the rest of my educational experiences. Let’s review what we’ve learned:

1. Elcira doesn’t like doing schoolwork.
2. Elcira does the minimum necessary to succeed.
3. Elcira is still playing the Game of School as a sophomore in college.

Chilling facts, aren’t they? I shudder myself when I read this list. As a future educator I should love school and learning, but that enthusiasm was lost somewhere in the halls of Sedgwick Middle School. All I know is that I’ve learned from my past education the type of teacher I DON’T want to be. And besides, it’s difficult to be boring in an elementary classroom. I just hope that all those teachers teaching the secondary grades out there can realize how important it is to keep their students moti-

vated, even in a boring subject like algebra, or you might end up with a classroom full of little Elciras.

Will I ever get back my motivation to learn? I don't know how likely that is to happen. You'd think that someone who does so little school-work would be hanging off the back of a garbage truck right now. But no, up to this moment in my life, the game has worked to my advantage, and I'm happy where I'm at. So, as I continue to pursue my education, the game will continue to be played. There's only one thing that could stop me dead in my tracks, which would be to receive a grade lower than a C. Until then? "Play on, Playa—the Game of School is goin' strong. Holla!"

