

March 20th, 2019 Meeting Follow-up
Sandy Hill Community Centre
Produced by Richard Fransham

List of Attendees

Maya	Babrowska	Uniting for Children and Youth
Ian	Bingeman	Youth Ottawa
Raj	Doobay	Northern educator
Richard	Fransham	Ottawa Public Education Remake Initiative
June	Girvan	Every Child Is Sacred
Doug	Hunter	Families for Addition Recovery, Destination Imagination
Abby	Karos	Compass Centre for Self-Directed Learning
Lauren	Latour	Ecology Ottawa - Youth Climate Ambassadors Program
Warren	McBride	Alternate schools expert and university professor
Nadia	Nassri	Zad Education and Development
Emeka	Ndukwe	OCDSB Advisory Committee on Equity
David	Newing	United Citizens Initiative and author of "Global Citizenship in the 21st Century – A Leap of Faith to a Better World"
Jan-Erik	Nyhuus	World Youth Matters
Richard	Sharpe	613/810 Black Hub

Youth Agency

Youth agency emerged as the central topic of the meeting, thus the title. Virtually everyone expressed the desire to help cultivate it. The following is not a report on the meeting. It is follow-up intended to help turn talk into action, and it does not necessarily represent the views of the group.

See below for content related to Ecology Ottawa and Youth Ottawa.

Youth Agency – that we should even be discussing it.

Kids are born learners, born doers. Mention was made in the meeting of how it has been schooled out of them by age thirteen. [A NASA report](#) tells us schools kill creativity. University and college registrars are saying they find unschooled students and those who attended democratic schools are more ready for post secondary studies than are the products of traditional schools. It's all summed up with the quote, "I was such a great learner and then I went to school." According to Daniel Greenberg, a founder of the [Sudbury Valley School](#), the greatest gift the school gives to its students is to let them be. Peter Gray did [an early study](#) of the benefits and disadvantages of Sudbury Valley.

With youth agency, we need to be looking at how not to school agency out of youth, as well as how to help the young victims of schooling reclaim their agency. Much experience among people at the meeting can be tapped to develop a vision and course of action for schools to avoid suppressing the naturally agency of children.

Democracy and “Children Learn What They Live”

[Children Learn What They Live](#) is the title of a poem by Dorothy Nolte, and many children live with autocracy both at home and at school. To partially use a Pierre Trudeau line, the state has no business in the homes of the people. It is limited, except in extreme cases of child abuse, to building awareness of how to be a democratic parent, how to respect a child’s right to self-determination. It doesn’t lead to l’enfant roi because the fully democratic parent knows what it is to be equal with a child. They live equality and the child learns from the parent how to be nicely assertive when someone, often a child, is attempting to violate another person’s rights.

The state can and does, however, dictate the kinds of schools we have, and for a society that fancies itself democratic, it keeps on letting the state operate highly undemocratic schools. People know that our traditional school model originates from Prussia and that it was tailored for an industrial society. It has been described as lock-step learning, assembly line learning, and obedience school, Uniformity and conformity are its hallmarks. Diversity is a big word these days. [Zahra Liberté Aldünia](#) says, “Diversity is the artwork of the universe.” It’s a word generally associated with multiculturalism, but we need to extent our thoughts about it to individuality, to the uniqueness of each child, and it requires letting them unfold their own blueprints.

We need to get the message out that while it is good to meet the needs of every child, we really aren’t talking about caring and compassion for young people. We are talking about creating a sustainable, fun world for all of us. It involves realizing that every time personal freedom is removed without just cause, we diminish the lives of us all.

A Mechanism for Change

I find that people are trapped in small thinking when they are asked to consider the [CHIP Pilot Program](#). It is far more than an alternative for a class of students. It is a mechanism for bringing about change. It takes into account how paradigm shifts occur and the very painful human aspects it involves. We know from Thomas Kuhn, who coined the term “paradigm shift,” that paradigms compete and dominate ones work to keep contenders out of site. We need to apply what history has to teach us in order to avoid the destructiveness that occurs when paradigms that have outlived their usefulness are permitted to keep dominating. This means that we need to create the conditions for a promising contender to conduct its [normal science](#) on equal terms with the dominant paradigm. This is what a CHIP styled learning program offers to do. It opens the door for proponents of the promising democratic

learning model to do the normal science that will determine if the model can live up to its promise.

The Restoration of Youth Agency

We have a dominant paradigm about which John Gatto, author of [Dumbing Us Down](#), has said:

"It is the great triumph of compulsory government monopoly mass-schooling that among even the best of my fellow teachers, and among even the best of my students' parents, only a small number can imagine a different way to do things."

This suggests something other than public education as we know it, but public education, properly executed, is a pillar of a democratic way of life; it is a tool for building strong, caring communities. A shift from the autocratic education model to the democratic one is not a total upset. Public education is preserved. Students attend their local schools, better named community learning centres, and apart from getting rid of age segregation and formally scheduled school days divided into fixed chunks of time to study segregated subjects, everything else can remain much the same . . . except that students can take their religious holidays without getting behind; they can take any prescribed ministry curriculum instead of what the majority wants, and they become unleashed to take advantage of endless possibilities to learn from the big world instead of being confined to the walls of a school and its meagre resources. Then too, the potential for community-based projects becomes immense.

It is true that there has been movement in public education towards the democratic model, but it has been without vision. It has been done reluctantly to silence noisy parents who have a vision of something better, and it is generally constrained to the point that it is hardly an alternative at all. A grounded theory approach to change is needed. It is an incremental approach where research and pilot programs work in tandem. Research informs the pilots, the pilots inform research and together they arrive at well-defined, workable new models.

Prerequisite to a school board implementing the mechanism for change, is public awareness building, and this awareness building needs to continue along with implementations to insure they do not get sabotaged by those who cannot, or will not, see.

An Awareness Building Event

I mentioned in the meeting that I would be hosting a screening of "[Self Taught](#)" in the fall. The purpose is awareness building. Jan-Erik who was at our meeting has a vision of a major conference for Ottawa a couple of years from now and the more I talk with him about it, the more I am coming to see it as doable. It has me thinking that some modest event in the fall that includes the screening of "Self Taught" and that involves youth and perhaps keynote youth speakers who have lived and are

living self-taught lives would make for a good warm-up to the conference Jan-Erik envisions, a conference that could ultimately put youth on the minds of all of Ottawa, and this could result in school boards acting far more like the entrepreneurial leaders they claim to be trying to produce with their exit outcomes, and in secure funding for groups like Youth Ottawa to realize its dream and Ecology Ottawa to build its programs to help youth secure their future.

Ecology Ottawa and Connecting

The lack of connection between environmental groups has been identified as a reason why so little progress has been made addressing climate change. The same is being said about the lack of progress in improving the lives of children and youth, i.e. the groups advocating for them are too disconnected. This is starting to change. Eight local environmental groups have come together to create the Youth Climate Ambassadors program. It is being launched at the Shaw Centre on the evening of March 27th.

Our own coalition is another sign that change is happening with many groups coming together to restore the agency of young people. With Ecology Ottawa actively cultivating youth agency, it follows that we would want to partner with it. If some of us can attend the launch of the [Youth Climate Ambassadors program](#) on March 27th, it could spark a vision of how we might contribute to the success of the program to further our mutual goals.

Youth Ottawa

Youth Ottawa has tremendous potential to develop youth agency. To lose it would be a huge setback. It would take years to rebuild the platform it has created. In follow-up to the meeting and related exchanges, Ian Bingeman, the executive director of Youth Ottawa, has provided the following:

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David's (Newing) story was great, in that he was able to secure \$20 million and then get things going, but it really requires the knowledge of who and how to approach to get to that level.

We currently have \$0 in provincial funding and \$0 in federal funding, and our fundraising efforts barely raised \$4,000 last year. I am not exaggerating when I say that without better funding, I do not think we will be able to continue to function next year. I've been able to hold together our core team for over two years now, but the stress of the work we have been doing is compounded by the lack of resources to properly celebrate and tell the stories (and pay my staff something close to the value of their work). We need funding to a) consolidate what we have gained through our efforts over the last few years and b) put in place better management mechanisms so that we can continue operating if, for example, I happen to get hit by a bus.

With respect to my dream for Youth Ottawa, it is three fold (apologies for the writing here - I am opting for speed over clarity in getting this over to you):

1. An ability to coordinate and provide youth-led, experiential, curriculum-embedded and community-connected programming to schools, to get more youth engaged (regardless of what that specific program is)
2. The ability to provide backbone functions (communications, data management, reporting, alignment of activities, convening stakeholders) to Ottawa for youth empowerment activities
3. The ability to employ youth as they develop their "for youth by youth" community-connected projects, either through social enterprises which employ youth (like Hot Shoe Productions) or through the development of their own social innovation/entrepreneurial projects (like Cuts for Kids). They would also be employed to run our school-based programming. Single best way to overcome the "opportunity gaps" that exist in education, employment, and citizenship is to provide employment rather than volunteer positions for youth from marginalized communities.

Please see the [Youth Ottawa program book](#).

Raj Doobay who arrived with Richard Sharpe offered this advice

Raj's advice reinforces the idea that democracy is a grassroots activity and the more we can do to encourage the average citizen to participate in it, the more we accomplish our goals. These are Raj's words:

"Every street, every community is connected. This is the grassroots where you can start from. You will reach people who believe in community, sharing, the environment... these are parents, teachers, environmentalists. If you get your message out via this network, you will get a lot of foot traffic."

Last note

Larry Rosenstock, a founder of High Tech High, has said that the formally scheduled school day is the single greatest impediment to educational innovation.

Ken Robinson attacks the formally scheduled school day saying, "If you were running a business with a thousand employees, and every forty minutes everybody had to stop what they were doing, go to a different room entirely, and do something else for forty minutes that they weren't so interested in, and then rinse and repeat six times a day, you'd be out of business in a week."

The article, [The Absurd Structure of High School](#), further makes the case for eliminating formal scheduling, but nowhere do we see public education methodically investigating how to run a system without it. We are being set up for a difficult transition to self-directed learning that could mean the demise of a public education for anyone but the least vulnerable, and it would become a ghettoized system not fit for the development of any child. To top it off, it would create a society designed for the most privileged.

Conclusion

I finish with two quotes meant to leave the impression that control and management drive our school system, and that equity, inclusion and youth empowerment will remain illusive until we get a system based on commitment and self-direction.

"If you want to control, you design organizations for accountability.
If you want to accomplish, you design for commitment."

- Tapscott and Caston, *Paradigm Shift*

"Perhaps it's time to toss the very word 'management' onto the linguistic ash heap alongside 'icebox' and horseless carriage.' This era doesn't call for better management. It calls for a renaissance of self-direction."

- Daniel Pink, *Drive*

Accountability still exists. We need to hold our school board accountable for moving us to a new age for public education.