

2016 International Essay Contest for Young People

【Children's Category – 1st Prize】

Taming the Jungle (Original)

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For seven hours a day, five days a week, I live in a jungle. Not the kind with towering trees and tangled vines, of course— my jungle is made of red-bricked walls and ivory tiles. Instead of monkeys and pythons and parrots, the ecosystem bursts with aspiring doctors, budding lawyers, soon-to-be engineers. These animals hoot and screech and caw to each other, comparing Calculus test scores and English essay grades. As in any jungle, there's a pecking order. Students do not hesitate to cheat, plagiarize, and tear each other apart in the bloodlust to reach the top of the food chain. When I gaze around this vast untamed wilderness, my heart aches for my classmates who toil to the breaking point at ungodly hours of the night, who are forced to quit guitar and painting in pursuit of tutoring and Honors Chemistry, who are taught to believe that their intelligence and talent is determined by a collection of percentages, percentiles, and government-mandated tests. When I look around my school, I can't help but wonder, how can we change this?



Albert Einstein's famous quote comes to mind: "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." If Einstein's words hold true, then our current education system is wasting a considerable amount of resources trying to stick flounders into forests. Like items on a production line, students are molded until their grades and test scores and extracurricular activities fit a cookie-cutter standard. Class rank, standardized tests, and other narrow measures of achievement all perpetrate the idea that there is only one type of intelligence, only one way to observe and reason. Students with skills and passions that cannot be measured by filling in bubbles are uprooted from their natural aptitudes. As a result of this assembly-line education system, the world loses the unique, unconventional young minds that are essential to solving the complex

challenges we face as a global community.

Thus, rather than forcing fish to climb trees, we should recognize how critters of varying shapes and sizes and abilities all play a vital part in maintaining the balance of the jungle. In the classroom, this means fostering collaboration instead of pitting kids against one another. Much like wild creatures who all depend on each other to survive in an interconnected web of life, students rely on their classmates so they can learn and grow from each other. Schools should remove class rank, which encourages children to think of their peers as nothing but competitors and enemies. Instead of basing learning on textbooks, lectures, and rote memorization, educators should assign projects that require a diversity of talents to be conglomerated. Multimedia, interactive demonstrations, and hands-on experiments can be incorporated into memorable, creative lessons. With all the readily accessible technology today, there is no longer a reason to limit students to PowerPoints and worksheets. We can give kids the opportunity to build models, design inventions, and communicate with experts in the field— all with a few swipes of a finger. Likewise, assessments should be comprehensive, involving problem-solving and real-world applications, instead of merely requiring a choice between A, B, C, or D. This holistic education cultivates passion, critical thinking, and out-of-the-box reasoning, and it gives all types of learners the opportunity to contribute their one-of-a-kind talents.

Our world is changing, and the old standard for education can no longer keep up. The twenty-first century is the age of inventors, engineers, and entrepreneurs, all of whom can only be successful when they communicate instead of clash, collaborate instead of compete. Only a generation that is diverse, curious, and creative could be capable of tackling the many problems we face internationally. A brighter future starts within the classroom, with dedicated educators and originative students. It is indeed, as they say, a jungle out there, but our schools have the power to raise the next movers and shakers to tame it.