

Extracurriculars: A Creative Writing Collection/commentary on the Education System and
Student Learning

Alana Gerber

ABSTRACT

My thesis features a collection of creative writing pieces highlighting the inadequacies of the education system in aiding students social-emotional health, physical safety and other basic needs. These pieces include stories of failed education, the impact of traumatic life events on school performance, neurodiversity in the classroom, the exclusivity of all male/white spaces and the harmful inadequacy of standardized testing. All works are based on real experiences collected for the purposes of this assignment.

KEYWORDS

Education, Childhood Education, Empathy, Professionalism, School, Alaska, Testing,

A Dream

Sitting at a tiny desk in a classroom in Mexico, I take a standardized test. We must be close to the border I think, for the school to have bussed us here so easily. Paralyzed with test anxiety, I cannot begin. Finally, and by then I am the last one in the room, I can begin the test. Painfully, I realize it is absurdly easy. If only Ariana was here, I think. Then I wouldn't be the last one. She was always the last one. Is it easy? Is it a trick? Either way, I hand it in. Stepping out of the building, I see the buses pull away in a neat line. I yell and run after them, humiliating myself fruitlessly. They will not turn around for me. There, hidden in an alcove I could only access by running, is another bus. They explain that only six-year-olds are allowed on this bus. Seconds later, they change their mind and usher me in. The bus is so packed, I immediately know I will have to sit next to someone I do not know. I see an empty seat next to a big woman who has her leg out. Walking down the cramped aisle, I see a four-year-old rambunctious boy I used to teach. He chatters away at me. I sit down next to the women. Later, I leave the library in the pouring rain on a bike not built for this. I hid my face. I am to remain disguised.

A Case Study

On a first date, in a basement bar, I listen. We compare his private boarding school to my public one. He tells me about the kids who were expelled and school trips to Cuba. I tell him about the teacher who would throw foam blocks painted like bricks at us. He tells me how he was sent away. His father remarried and his best friend died, and he has ADHD and his stepmother put her hand on his inner thigh and he was sent away to boarding school. If you could have seen the look on his face you would have understood. I do now. He tried to go to college three times. Now he is joining the army. For him, school hurt more than war.

I used to judge people for that. I don't anymore. When he got deployed, I laid on my floor for three days. I emailed my professor, and he did not respond.

Alaska

In the rural alaskan winter, it's common for people to go missing. They go out drinking, wander into the woods and never come home. People do this on purpose, but it also happens on accident. Sometimes there are helicopters, or state troopers who made the drive from town. Usually there are not.

What is it like, to raise children in this unforgiving cold? Who do they grow up to be? When they grow up at all. There was a four year old boy left home alone. He began the journey to the local bar on foot in search of his mother (he knew that's where she would be). In the dark, a truck backed over him.

These children are independent. They are immune to the cold. They have an Alaskan edge to them—something that's been frozen in. They are hardened, mini adults who are teeny little kids.

On a field trip, one of my second graders tried to step in front of a car. He told me he wanted to get hit. He keeled over on the side of the road in the fetal position as a wild dog charged us. I was ready to throw him over my shoulder and kick and kick. Sometimes, I think "this is no place for a baby."

I see first graders walking home alone at negative thirty below. A fifth grader banging his head against the locker, saying he doesn't want to be here anymore. He told me he wants to go to heaven.

The pledge of allegiance. The stench of camouflage in my classroom. Under my nose. The sound of their pretend machine gun fire directed at each other. Directed at me.

Children come to school in mens size ten shoes with their clothes inside out. They wear the same outfits for days in a row. They have no gloves, no coat. If the school did not provide breakfast, snack and lunch these children would not eat.

How am I supposed to teach math when his forehead is slamming the desk each time he falls asleep? When he can't stay awake for two blinks at a time? When a six-year-old comes to school with a black eye? When I can hear the wailing of a beating? I feed them. I give them lotion for their dry hands. I walk them home from school.

Violence

We were reading a rendition of *The Odyssey*. One chapter was particularly violent as a means to an end. I asked my class how they felt about the scene. They met me with whoops and hollers. There was one word shouted out with forceful glee: "America". By fifth grade, they already associate this country with violence. They know what America is. That's not the issue, they just love it.

Mental Health

I have this student who is smart and cheeky and passionate. He was diagnosed as emotionally disturbed. If he were in any other place in America he would have a one-on-one aid. In my class, he screams. He hits me and flips furniture. He bangs his head on the lockers and tells us how much he wants to die. He tells more jokes than anybody I've ever met in my life. In the mornings, he tells me how sneaky he's feeling that day. One day he came into class and said to me "you're really going to make me do math when I just said I wanted to commit suicide?"

He is polite, and he is thoughtful. Another teacher tells me that he's going to kill someone one day. I love him, and I give him as much grace as I can. I fear he is going to grow up to be a bad person. Sometimes I'm scared that he already is, and I love him too much to notice it.

Unprocessed Grief and lack of Mental Health Resources

One of my fifth graders asked to speak to me after class. She explained feelings of deep sadness. Her two year old brother had unexpectedly passed away a few months prior and she told me she felt like nobody cares anymore. She wasn't even allowed to leave the classroom so she didn't have to cry in front of the other students (who made fun of her). She said she did not understand these random waves of sadness she could not identify as the effects of lasting grief.

It heavily reminded me of my literary research on the autobiographical experiences of the lives of children in the United States's education system.

Every teacher has had moments where a child is not willing to learn. In Alaska, I worked with many children every day who were unable to. There comes a time when learning is no longer a priority, and is replaced by health and safety. When a student is suicidal. When a student is so unsafe at home they are unable to sleep, and they cannot stay awake at school for more than a few minutes at a time. When a student's social emotional needs are so drastically neglected they sit at their desks and cannot stop crying. What does it mean to be a teacher in a place where children's physiological and safety needs are not being met? It looks a lot more like being a parent. It looks like being a different type of caretaker. The most important and radical thing I learned in Alaska is that sometimes school should not come first.

In Alaska, these instances were exacerbated, by a drastic lack of resources, but the problems arising from an institution deprioritization of children's mental and physical health is

conventional and established almost everywhere. Children are learning that work matters most. No one is valuing them as whole beings until they reach a breaking point and sometimes not even then.

When students reach out for love they receive professionalism and ordinance. This work environment distinction that teachers have and use is not a distinction that children are able to make. All they feel is distance and ambivalence.