



REIMAGINING
THE
CLASSROOM

CREATING NEW LEARNING SPACES
AND
CONNECTING WITH THE WORLD

THEODORE RICHARDS

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Reimagining the Classroom

**Creating New Learning Spaces and
Connecting with the World**

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This book is dedicated to the youth of the Chicago Wisdom Project.

“I cannot be a teacher without exposing who I am.”

—Paulo Freire

Introduction: Everything Is Education; Everywhere Is a Classroom

A child sits alone, staring at a screen.

This is the enduring image of the COVID pandemic: the sad and lonely child, learning “remotely.” It is the child who encapsulates this moment, the child who forces a reckoning with the world we've made, the future we've mortgaged, the cost of our hubris. It is perhaps then the only logical consequence of this system that our children should end up this way: alone, staring at a screen. This loneliness a manifestation of a deeper, cosmic loneliness, the spirit of rugged independence made flesh.

Its cost is apparent to any parent. Every gift of childhood—joy, exploration, play, wonder—sacrificed at the altar of the system. And so, it is also odd that our response to this crisis is a doubling down, a deeper investment in the very system that birthed it.

But there is a gift in this crisis, even if some refuse to see it. The pandemic has shown us so many things that we've been doing are perhaps worth rethinking. Why do we prepare our children for work that will surely no longer exist, for a world that will be so radically changed? It has brought our children's schools into our homes, and we have been able to see just how impoverished their educational lives often are.

Obviously, remote learning isn't ideal. But we also can see that our school systems—like many systems—were already problematic long before that pandemic hit. Our children's lives were dominated by a narrow breadth of easily tested skills and information. Our children were already spending

their days on screens, already in the midst of a mental health crisis.

This book is an invitation to look to our children as a way to find hope in a time of despair. It offers a vision of how we might reimagine teaching, learning, and parenting to create a space for our children to reimagine our world. For the greatest mistake we could make right now (and this is indeed the mistake we are making with so many remote learning models) is to try to replicate the old way of doing things.

Let's return to our child, the remote learner. One of my children (at the time she was a seventh grader; the other two younger children were homeschooled for kindergarten and first grade) has been in such a program, so I can attest that the issue is neither the competence nor the effort of her teachers. The problem is that we've forgotten the key to education, to parenting and childhood—to humanity. We've forgotten that all learning, all growth, all life is *relational*.

You won't find buzzwords or educational jargon in this book. Rather, you'll find a lot of questions: you'll be asked to reimagine your relationship to others, to the world as a whole. The crisis is making it apparent that some of the basic assumptions we've made about the world are worth rethinking. Foremost among them is our sense of independence and isolation—from each other, from the world as a whole. Our schools are rooted in the values of independence and isolation, and the consequence is that we are increasingly lonely. The crises we face, from the pandemic to climate change to the struggle for racial justice, all call upon us to think holistically and *interdependently*. You'll find here a framework for reimagining the basic narratives and metaphors upon which our schools—and, indeed, our civilization—are

based, and practices that are rooted not only in my work homeschooling my own children, but also on decades of experience as an educator through the organization I founded.

My hope is that professional educators will use this book to reconsider how they are doing things in schools and that homeschooling parents will use it to create vibrant learning spaces at home. But I also hope that any parent or role model can use it to rethink the relationships they are cultivating in their homes and elsewhere. For among the many assumptions that the reader will be asked to re-evaluate in this book are the very notions of “classroom,” “school,” and “education.”

A classroom or a school isn't merely a neutral space in which to perform the act of educating. The ways it is shaped, structured, and organized are rich with meaning, and most of that meaning is unarticulated, often unconscious. If the purpose of education is to create a better world, it is this unconscious symbolism of the school and classroom that provides us with a vision for the world our youth might create. In other words, the classroom is a microcosm, a metaphor for the world.

We will not only challenge this understanding of the classroom and the school, but also seek to think more expansively of what constitutes those spaces. The world can be a classroom; and everything can be understood as education. It is commonly said, for example, that when a society invests in prisons or the military and divests in schools, it is taking money from education in favor of those other institutions. And indeed, such decisions are a reflection of a society's values. But another way to frame such a decision is to say that whatever we invest in is, as a reflection of values, an investment in some form of education. To invest in a prison—and to incarcerate greater

numbers of people—is to choose that space as a classroom, a space in which many will learn their place in the world. To invest in the military is to choose the values and worldview of the soldier.

[Part I](#) offers the reader a framework to develop vibrant and holistic learning spaces and processes. In [Chapter 1](#), we will explore the problems with our current approach to teaching, parenting, and childhood. Specifically, the core metaphors and narratives upon which this system is based will be addressed and critiqued. [Chapter 2](#) offers an alternative set of core metaphors giving the reader a framework from which to cultivate new kinds of learning spaces. [Chapter 3](#) will describe a holistic process of inquiry and exploration, a pedagogy for reimagining our narratives.

[Part II](#) offers examples of specific practices drawn from my experience teaching my own children and creating programming through Wisdom Projects, Inc. Each chapter is a reimagined subject: [Chapter 4](#) takes an approach to science and math that emphasizes hands-on experiences in nature, awe, and wonder, all rooted in the universe story; [Chapter 5](#) focuses on the arts, including literature; [Chapter 6](#) describes practices in meditation, mindfulness, and rites of passage rooted in philosophical and cultural traditions from around the world; [Chapter 7](#) offers hands-on learning projects; and [Chapter 8](#) integrates social justice and social-emotional learning.

Finally, [Part III](#) briefly explores what happens when the concepts and practices of our reimagined classroom are applied to the world. In short, we must not forget why we are educating in the first place: not merely to make better students, but better citizens, better human beings, better communities. A better world.

We have lost our sense of place in the world. The stories we've been given have taught us that we are alone and,

ultimately, lonely. We live in a time of unprecedented crises, an age that requires unprecedented changes, not merely in our systems, but in the very values, ideas, and narratives that give us our sense of who we are and our place in the cosmos.

But most of us are too deeply embedded in our worldview to even be able to grasp the urgency and immensity of the changes required. We often simply cannot imagine what doesn't fit in our story. But there *is* hope. For there are people among us who aren't as invested in the worldview that has led us into so much trouble: our children. Our work, as parents and educators, is to create the spaces and facilitate the processes that can allow *them* to teach *us*. Our children, unlike us, will not hesitate to claim their new place in the world, if we can only offer them the space to do it—and the humility to listen.

Part I

Reimagining Education

Our learning process is rooted in the stories we tell and reimagine. Our learning spaces serve as metaphors for the world our children will create. In this section, we'll offer a critique of the metaphors of the current system and a method for educators to create their own vibrant learning spaces and activities. This includes both the way we conceive of a classroom and the processes therein.

We begin with a critique of the broader culture that our educational system has brought us, the underlying story that has alienated us from our fellow beings, human and non-human, and from the planet itself. This is an educational problem, for it is how we educate our children that gives them the story in the first place. And it is only by reimagining education that they might discover a new story. This story is given by the metaphors that guide the formation of a classroom. It is reimagined only when we transform those metaphors and enter into a learning process that engages the whole person, the whole community, the whole world.

Chapter 1

The Crisis of Education: Childhood in the Age of Loneliness

From the melting polar caps to violence in our cities to the rise of fascist governments, ours is an age in which we seem to be able to agree on almost nothing—except that we are in crisis. It would be easy to think of the rising anxiety I'm feeling as disconnected from the rising sea levels, or to think of the migrant crisis as unrelated to the violence in our inner cities. But at the core, all of our crises actually share some of the same roots, and part of the individual healing process involves exploring those roots collectively.

This book is about this global crisis, but it isn't about the melting polar caps, or CO₂ levels, or temperature. It isn't about increasing economic disparities, racism, or sexism. It's about a climate of loneliness that has taken over the planet—a planet of shrinking resources, imagination, hope. But how can we be hopeful when news of our demise comes on the television every night? How can we learn to share our resources when we are told that we can only find meaning by consuming more? Most significantly, how can we live as though the planet itself is a single, interconnected community when we have been told that our purpose is to find only individual success, only individual salvation?

I suggest that our spiritual malaise—the loneliness and loss of meaning—is connected to our ecological, political, and economic crises. It's all connected; and it's all about the deep story we tell about who we are and our place in the world. And this all comes down to how we educate our children.

Let me explain.

There's something in the air, as thick and unmistakable as the CO₂ particulates, even if it isn't as easily quantified. All around us, there is an anxiety about our future, about the future of our children. And like climate change, this anxiety is so massive, so all-encompassing and -consuming, that it feels impossible to escape, impossible to confront.

We also live in an age of anger, and in an age of fear. But of all the emotions that dominate our age, I believe that *loneliness* is the most pervasive. It is loneliness that tortures the internet troll or Wall Street executive who never seems to have enough; it is loneliness that leads us to addictions to shopping or food or anti-anxiety meds.

In some ways, this is my greatest fear and, perhaps, that which we all fear: being alone, really alone. I've often suggested that this is the ultimate salvation we are all seeking—true communion, connection—far more than any lonely, segregated paradise.

Why are we lonely? The reasons are complex and have to do with the habits and lifestyles of the modern world. We spend less time with family and community; we spend more time staring at screens. But our loneliness begins with a story, a story about who we are on the most fundamental level. This story tells us that our deepest identity is individual, and that we need to buy our way into a meaningful life.

It's unmistakable how lonely we all are. You can feel it in crowds, among the masses of people ignoring one another, staring at their own privatized virtual space in favor of the physical world. How is it that I can feel less lonely alone in my living room, listening to Coltrane, than I do on a crowded bus? This feeling reveals to us that loneliness isn't entirely about being alone, at least not the kind of

loneliness I am talking about. I am referring to more than the sadness at missing one's kin. This is a *cosmic* loneliness. This loneliness is the product of a narrative that tells us that our ultimate identity is individual, that we are not, in fact, in this together.

And we aren't just lacking in community with other people; we have lost our ecological place in the family of beings. We've lost our intimacy with the Earth—its rivers, its mountains, its seas—and the other species that make it up, that make us who we are. This requires us to experience the Earth in intimacy, not just stare at screens and drive from one sterile, climate-controlled space to another. It requires us to feel the texture of our world again, to fall in love again.

The climate crisis teaches us that we are an interconnected planet—decisions made on one continent impact another. Less widely considered is this crisis of the *inner* climate. This inner climate is, like the outer, interconnected. Our emotional lives are ecological webs, not isolated individuals. So, if the inner life is made toxic by a toxic story, we become unbalanced. I don't need to use extreme examples like mass shooters or oil spills here. Just spend some time on social media or watch the plastic bags floating down your street. There is something even more profound than the realization of our interconnectedness: *our emotions are a part of the ecosystem and a part of the Earth itself.*

And so, we must let go of the notion that loneliness—whether it's expressed on social media or by the person sitting in the cubical next to you, addicted to their meds—is merely an individual, psychological problem, a mental health issue. Loneliness, by its very nature, cannot be cured individually. It is a shared problem. It is a cultural problem. A problem of story.

OUR STORY

Think back to your earliest memories of childhood. What is one of the first stories you remember? If your childhood was like mine, you may recall curling up somewhere with a parent or another elder, listening to a story. Or perhaps you can recall attending a church or another place of worship and hearing the stories passed down through the generations. It was in these moments that you would have learned life's deepest and most important lessons. Through human touch, voice, and the magic of words, you began to put your world together. You began to discover your place in the world.

There is nothing more quintessentially human than sharing a story. Before there were books or churches, there were human communities that had to figure out how to survive in a dangerous and uncertain world. Humans weren't as fast as the antelope, as strong as the elephant, or as sharp-toothed as the lion. Their special gift and skill was the ability to care for each other and work together—to build community. And they did this through the magic of language and story.

In spite of those early childhood memories, many of us often wonder why it is that we don't simply act *rationally* to solve our problems. It's because any rational act is always performed in context—the unspoken, unseen story that lies behind our actions. If we have a story that tells us we are radically separate from the Earth, and from other people, and that our purpose is disembodied, individual salvation, it *is* rational to ignore the impact of climate change; it *is* rational for a society to have extreme—and growing—economic disparities; it *is* rational to think of our struggles as our own rather than part of the same collective struggle.