School Is Not For Everyone

After reading Kohn's article and stance on education and grades I find myself thinking about my education up to this point in a different way. I have always been a big believer in school is not for everyone, this was evident when all I wanted to do in elementary school was hug and do projects, not learn my multiplication facts. Though as I grew up I realized that time was moving and my teachers weren't waiting for me to catch up, let alone process the information, they were just making tallies in the gradebook. I had many P’s, for proficient, but only in the social categories, all the rest were I’s, for incompetant (I think it was really “incomplete” but you get the point). From the moment I brought home that 4th grade report card I was WELL aware that my success is solely based upon knowledge of what we were learning by standardized testing, homework, and rubrics. I was eleven, overflowing with anxiety, now wondering when I should begin the biggest project of the year, the science fair. I was eleven, reading a rubric with extensive explanations on how to receive the expected grade. Kohn’s article states “Grades diminish students’ interest in whatever they’re learning”, yeah no shit. For the science fair there were columns with numbers 1-5 and rows with an explanation of each criteria they are looking for and as the rows cascaded they would give a detailed description of what that looks like. all the 5’s would describe exactly what they expected, the data, the set up, THE FONT and the 1 would say “data in wrong place, wrong font, not long enough” basically the opposite of 5. Not only did we have a rubric, but we had our names on sticks that were drawn to tell us what experiment we were supposed to complete for the fair... “Lindsay, Egg density!”...Are you kidding me? Egg fucking density? Yippee. After painstakingly doing the experiment I WASN'T interested in, making the trifold cardboard set up that ALL the other students had because it was “on the rubric”, finally the science fair day came and went. I will also tell you that I don't remember how to test the density of an egg, but if I built a damn robot (or at least attempted) I would remember that. AND don't you think building a robot would also stretch my thinking or my intelligence more than putting an egg in a glass with water and oil? “Grades tend to reduce the quality of students’ thinking ,'' yeah, no shit.

My experience since then has mirrored the 4th grade science fair, except, well worse. My academic years were filled with more rubrics, more memorization, and no comprehension. Kohn points to the idea of a more hands on approach, no grades, no rubrics, just the information and free will. I haven't had a class that isn't based on being proficient or graded since preschool. Since I was 5 I have been taught that my success is based on doing the bare minimum for the highest grade and that school wasn't meant to be a place of individuality but instead cookie cutter formation. I crave Kohn’s idea that we are able to assess knowledge or learning without grades or examinations. I want to engage in my learning while leaving out the high point assignments, but instead a more freedom filled project based learning is what I hope to achieve.

I have always had to work harder than classmates in order to get the same result on an exam or even a homework; My mom always said it was my ADHD, my anxiety, and my dyslexia that caused me to be behind before I even began, but I believed it was the way I was being taught. Parallel to Kohn’s thoughts on grades, they have certainly been the bane of my existence. Instead of “giving up like many of my classmates I MADE school for me, or well at least tried to. I worked through the night to retain information just long enough to make it to end of the exam. I rewrote notes from powerpoint presentations three times over with a rainbow of colors praying I would retain even half of the information. What kind of learning is that? Unfortunately the learning of the United States.

I think that grades represent something different for each person. For me it was my boundless hours spent studying SOMETIMES paying off. For my best friend it was to prove he could be a 1st generation college graduate. For my brother it represented that he will only put effort into what he enjoyed, phys ed. For my mom it was for her father who always wanted her to get into U of M. For my father it was so he could get a degree and take over the family business (that soon after failed). I do wonder how much better it would be, if only there was more knowledge of the benefit of not grading or assessing so regularly. Already, I have written above and beyond the “guidelines” of this “assignment” and pushed aside my other ones because I feel a huge sense of freedom in being able to write a reflection of Kohn’s stance. I appreciate and look forward to being able to do what I can for my learning but not for my grade. Thank you, Bradford.