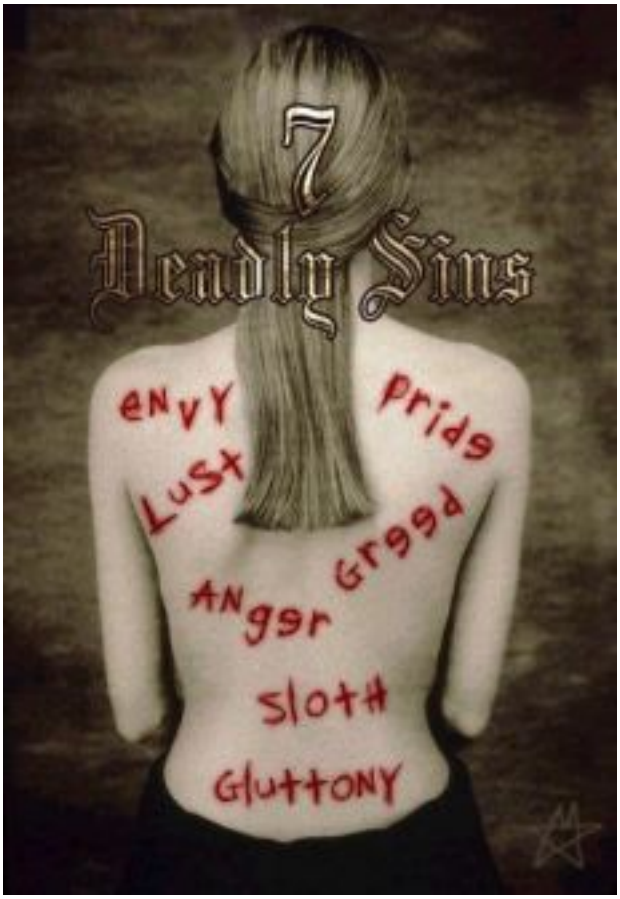
Psychology Today
https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn/200909/seven-sins-our-system-forced-education (April 10, 2015)

Seven Sins of Our System of Forced Education

Post published by Peter Gray on Sep 09, 2009 in Freedom to Learn



In my last post I took a step that, I must admit, made me feel uncomfortable. I said, several times: "School is prison." I felt uncomfortable saying that because school is so much a part of my life and the lives of almost everyone I know. I, like most people I know, went through the full 12 years of public schooling. My mother taught in a public school for several years. My beloved half-sister is a public schoolteacher. I have many dear friends and cousins who are public schoolteachers. How can I say that these good people--who love children and have poured themselves passionately into the task of trying to help children--are involved in a system of imprisoning children? The comments on my last post showed that my references to school as prison made some other people feel uncomfortable also.

Sometimes I find, no matter how uncomfortable it makes me and others feel, I have to speak the truth. We can use all the euphemisms we want, but the literal truth is that schools, as they generally exist in the United States and other modern countries, are prisons. Human beings within a certain age range (most commonly 6 to 16) are required by law to spend a good portion of their time there, and while there they are told what they must do, and the orders are generally enforced. They have no or very little voice in forming the rules they must follow. A prison--according to the common, general definition--is any place of involuntary confinement and restriction of liberty.

Now you might argue that schools as we know them are good, or necessary; but you can't argue that they are not prisons. To argue the latter would be to argue that we do not, in fact, have a system of compulsory education. Either that, or it would be a semantic argument in which you would claim that prison actually means something different from

its common, general definition. I think it is important, in any serious discussion, to use words honestly.

Sometimes people use the word prison in a metaphorical sense to refer to any situation in which they must follow rules or do things that are unpleasant. In that spirit, some adults might refer to their workplace as a prison, or even to their marriage as a prison. But that is not a literal use of the term, because those examples involve voluntary, not involuntary restraint. It is against the law in this and other democratic countries to force someone to work at a job where the person doesn't want to work, or to marry someone that he or she doesn't want to marry. It is not against the law, however, to force a child to go to school; in fact, it is against the law to not force a child to go to school if you are the parent and the child doesn't want to go. (Yes, I know, some parents have the wherewithal to find alternative schooling or provide home schooling that is acceptable to both the child and the state, but that is not the norm in today's society; and the laws in many states and countries work strongly against such alternatives.) So, while jobs and marriages might in some sad cases feel like prisons, schools generally are prisons.

Now here's another term that I think deserves to be said out loud: Forced education. Like the term prison, this term sounds harsh. But, again, if we have compulsory education, then we have forced education. The term compulsory, if it has any meaning at all, means that the person has no choice about it.

The question worth debating is this: Is forced education--and the consequential imprisonment of children--a good thing or a bad thing? Most people seem to believe that it is, all in all, a good thing; but I think that it is, all in all, a bad thing. I outline here some of the reasons why I think this, in a list of what I refer to as "seven sins" of our system of forced education:

1. Denial of liberty on the basis of age.

In my system of values, and in that long endorsed by democratic thinkers, it is wrong to deny anyone liberty without just cause. To incarcerate an adult we must prove, in a court of law, that the person has committed a crime or is a serious threat to herself or others. Yet we incarcerate children and teenagers in school just because of their age. This is the most blatant of the sins of forced education.

2. Fostering of shame, on the one hand, and hubris, on the other.

It is not easy to force people to do what they do not want to do. We no longer use the cane, as schoolmasters once did, but instead rely on a system of incessant testing, grading, and ranking of children compared with their peers. We thereby tap into and distort the human emotional systems of shame and pride to motivate children to do the work. Children are made to feel ashamed if they perform worse than their peers and pride if they perform better. Shame leads some to drop out, psychologically, from the educational endeavor and to become class clowns (not too bad), or bullies (bad), or drug abusers and dealers (very bad). Those made to feel excessive pride from the shallow accomplishments that earn them A's and honors may become arrogant, disdainful of the common lot who don't do so well on

tests; disdainful, therefore, of democratic values and processes (and this may be the worst effect of all).

3. Interference with the development of cooperation and nurturance.

We are an intensely social species, designed for cooperation. Children naturally want to help their friends, and even in school they find ways to do so. But our competition-based system of ranking and grading students works against the cooperative drive. Too much help given by one student to another is cheating. Helping others may even hurt the helper, by raising the grading curve and lowering the helper's position on it. Some of those students who most strongly buy into school understand this well; they become ruthless achievers. Moreover, as I have argued in previous posts (see especially Sept. 24, 2008), the forced age segregation that occurs in school itself promotes competition and bullying and inhibits the development of nurturance. Throughout human history, children and adolescents have learned to be caring and helpful through their interactions with younger children. The age-graded school system deprives them of such opportunities.

4. Interference with the development of personal responsibility and self-direction.

A theme of the entire series of essays in this blog is that children are biologically predisposed to take responsibility for their own education (for an introduction, see July 16, 2008, post). They play and explore in ways that allow them to learn about the social and physical world around them. They think about their own future and take steps to prepare themselves for it. By confining children to school and to other adult-directed settings, and by filling their time with assignments, we deprive them of the opportunities and time they need to assume such responsibility. Moreover, the implicit and sometimes explicit message of our forced schooling system is: "If you do what you are told to do in school, everything will work out well for you." Children who buy into that may stop taking responsibility for their own education. They may assume falsely that someone else has figured out what they need to know to become successful adults, so they don't have to think about it. If their life doesn't work out so well, they take the attitude of a victim: "My school (or parents or society) failed me, and that's why my life is all screwed up."

5. Linking of learning with fear, loathing, and drudgery.

For many students, school generates intense anxiety associated with learning. Students who are just learning to read and are a little slower than the rest feel anxious about reading in front of others. Tests generate anxiety in almost everyone who takes them seriously. Threats of failure and the shame associated with failure generate enormous anxiety in some. I have found in my college teaching of statistics that a high percentage of students, even at my rather elite university, suffer from math anxiety, apparently because of the humiliation they have experienced pertaining to math in school. A fundamental psychological principle is that anxiety inhibits learning. Learning occurs best in a playful state, and anxiety inhibits playfulness. The forced nature of schooling turns learning into work. Teachers even call it work: "You must do your work before you can play." So

learning, which children biologically crave, becomes toil--something to be avoided whenever possible.

6. Inhibition of critical thinking.

Presumably, one of the great general goals of education is the promotion of critical thinking. But despite all the lip service that educators devote to that goal, most students--including most "honors students"--learn to avoid thinking critically about their schoolwork. They learn that their job in school is to get high marks on tests and that critical thinking only wastes time and interferes. To get a good grade, you need to figure out what the teacher wants you to say and then say it. I've heard that sentiment expressed countless times by college students as well as by high-school students, in discussions held outside the classroom. I've devoted a lot of effort toward promoting critical thinking at the college level; I've developed a system of teaching designed to promote it, written articles about it, and given many talks about it at conferences on teaching. I'll devote a future post or two in this blog to the topic. But, truth be told, the grading system, which is the chief motivator in our system of education, is a powerful force against honest debate and critical thinking in the classroom. In a system in which we teachers do the grading, few students are going to criticize or even question the ideas we offer; and if we try to induce criticism by grading for it, we generate false criticism.

7. Reduction in diversity of skills, knowledge, and ways of thinking.

By forcing all schoolchildren through the same standard curriculum, we reduce their opportunities to follow alternative pathways. The school curriculum represents a tiny subset of the skills and knowledge that are important to our society. In this day and age, nobody can learn more than a sliver of all there is to know. Why force everyone to learn the same sliver? When children are free--as I have observed at the Sudbury Valley School and others have observed with unschoolers--they take new, diverse, and unpredicted paths. They develop passionate interests, work diligently to become experts in the realms that fascinate them, and then find ways of making a living by pursuing their interests. Students forced through the standard curriculum have much less time to pursue their own interests, and many learn well the lesson that their own interests don't really count; what counts is what's measured on the schools' tests. Some get over that, but too many do not. ----------

This list of "sins" is not novel. Many teachers I have spoken with are quite aware of all of these detrimental effects of forced education, and many work hard to try to counteract them. Some try to instill as much of a sense of freedom and play as the system permits; many do what they can to mute the shame of failure and reduce anxiety; most try to allow and promote cooperation and compassion among the students, despite the barriers against it; many do what they can to allow and promote critical thinking. But the system works against them. It may even be fair to say that teachers in our school system are no more free to teach as they wish than are students free to learn as they wish. (But teachers, unlike students, are free to quit; so they are not in prison.)

I must also add that human beings, especially young human beings, are remarkably adaptive and resourceful. Many students find ways to overcome the negative feelings that forced schooling engenders and to focus on the positive. They fight the sins. They find ways to cooperate, to play, to help one another overcome feelings of shame, to put undue pride in its place, to combat bullies, to think critically, and to spend some time on their true interests despite the forces working against them in school. But to do all this while also satisfying the demands of the forced education takes great effort, and many do not succeed. At minimum, the time students must spend on wasteful busywork and just following orders in school detracts greatly from the time they can use to educate themselves.

I have listed here "seven sins" of forced education, but I have resisted the temptation to call them the seven sins. There may be more than seven. I invite you to add more, in the comments section below.

Finally, I add that I do not believe that we should just do away with schools and replace them with nothing. Children educate themselves, but we adults have a responsibility to provide settings that allow them to do that in an optimal manner. That is the topic of my next post.