

## Psychopathology of everyday schooling

<http://www.johntaylorgatto.com/chapters/15d.htm>

### What Really Goes On

School wreaks havoc on human foundations in at least eight substantive ways so deeply buried few notice them, and fewer still can imagine any other way for children to grow up:

1) The first lesson schools teach is *forgetfulness*; forcing children to forget how they taught themselves important things like walking and talking. This is done so pleasantly and painlessly that the one area of schooling most of us would agree has few problems is elementary school—even though it is there that the massive damage to language-making occurs. Jerry Farber captured the truth over thirty years ago in his lapidary metaphor "Student as Nigger" and developed it in the beautiful essay of the same name. If we forced children to learn to walk with the same methods we use to force them to read, a few would learn to walk well in spite of us, most would walk indifferently, without pleasure, and a portion of the remainder would not become ambulatory at all. The push to extend "day care" further and further into currently unschooled time importantly assists the formal twelve-year sequence, ensuring utmost tractability among first graders.

2) The second lesson schools teach is *bewilderment and confusion*. Virtually nothing selected by schools as basic is basic, all curriculum is subordinate to standards imposed by behavioral psychology, and to a lesser extent Freudian precepts compounded into a hash with "third force" psychology (centering on the writings of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow). None of these systems accurately describes human reality, but their lodgement in university/business seven-step mythologies makes them dangerously invulnerable to common-sense criticism.

None of the allegedly scientific school sequences is empirically defensible. All lack evidence of being much more than superstition cleverly hybridized with a body of borrowed fact. Pestalozzi's basic "simple to complex" formulation, for instance, is a prescription for disaster in the classroom since no two minds have the same "simple" starting point, and in the more advanced schedules, children are frequently more knowledgeable than their overseers—witness the wretched record of public school computer instruction when compared to self-discovery programs undertaken informally. Similarly, endless sequences of so-called "subjects" delivered by men and women who, however well-meaning, have only superficial knowledge of the things whereof they speak, is the introduction most kids get to the liar's world of institutional life. Ignorant mentors cannot manage larger meanings, only facts. In this way schools teach the disconnection of everything.

3) The third lesson schools teach is that *children are assigned* by experts to a social class and must stay in the class to which they have been assigned. This is an Egyptian outlook, but its Oriental message only begins to suggest the bad fit it produces in America. The natural genius of the United States as explored and set down in covenants over the first two-thirds of our history has now been radically degraded and overthrown. The class system is reawakened through schooling. So rigid have American classifications become that our society has taken on the aspect of caste, which teaches unwarranted self-esteem and its converse—envy, self-hatred, and surrender. In class systems, the state assigns your place in a class, and if you know what's good for you, you come to know it, too.

4) The fourth lesson schools teach is *indifference*. By bells and other concentration-destroying technology, schools teach that nothing is worth finishing because some arbitrary power intervenes both periodically and aperiodically. If nothing is worth finishing, nothing is worth starting. Don't you see how one follows the other? Love of learning can't survive this steady drill. Students are taught to work for

## How School Ruins Children

little favors and ceremonial grades which correlate poorly with their actual ability. By addicting children to outside approval and nonsense rewards, schools make them indifferent to the real power and potential that inheres in self-discovery reveals. Schools alienate the winners as well as the losers.

5) The fifth lesson schools teach is *emotional dependency*. By stars, checks, smiles, frowns, prizes, honors, and disgraces, schools condition children to lifelong emotional dependency. It's like training a dog. The reward/punishment cycle, known to animal trainers from antiquity, is the heart of a human psychology distilled in late nineteenth-century Leipzig and incorporated thoroughly into the scientific management revolution of the early twentieth century in America. Half a century later, by 1968, it had infected every school system in the United States, so all-pervasive at century's end that few people can imagine a different way to go about management. And indeed, there isn't a better one if the goal of managed lives in a managed economy and a managed social order is what you're after.

Each day, schools reinforce how absolute and arbitrary power really is by granting and denying access to fundamental needs for toilets, water, privacy, and movement. In this way, basic human rights which usually require only individual volition, are transformed into privileges not to be taken for granted.

6) The sixth lesson schools teach is *intellectual dependency*. Good people wait for a teacher to tell them what to do. Good people do it the way the teacher wants it done. Good teachers in their turn wait for the curriculum supervisor or textbook to tell *them* what to do. Principals are evaluated according to an ability to make these groups conform to expectations; superintendents upon their ability to make principals conform; state education departments on their ability to efficiently direct and control the thinking of superintendents according to instructions which originate with foundations, universities, and politicians sensitive to the quietly expressed wishes of powerful corporations, and other interests.

For all its clumsy execution, school is a textbook illustration of how the bureaucratic chain of command is supposed to work. Once the thing is running, virtually nobody can alter its direction who doesn't understand the complex code for making it work, a code that never stops trying to complicate itself further in order to make human control impossible. The sixth lesson of schooling teaches that experts make all important choices, but it is useless to remonstrate with the expert nearest you because he is as helpless as you are to change the system.

7) The seventh lesson schools teach is *provisional self-esteem*. Self-respect in children must be made contingent on the certification of experts through rituals of number magic. It must not be self-generated as it was for Benjamin Franklin, the Wright brothers, Thomas Edison, or Henry Ford. The role of grades, report cards, standardized tests, prizes, scholarships, and other awards in effecting this process is too obvious to belabor, but it's the daily encounter with hundreds of verbal and nonverbal cues sent by teachers that shapes the quality of self-doubt most effectively.

8) The last lesson school teaches I'll call the *glass house effect*: It teaches how hopeless it is to resist because you are always watched. There is no place to hide. Nor should you want to. Your avoidance behavior is actually a signal you *should* be watched even more closely than the others. Privacy is a thought crime. School sees to it that there is no private time, no private space, no minute uncommanded, no desk free from search, no bruise not inspected by medical policing or the counseling arm of thought patrols.

The most sensitive children I had each year knew on some level what was really going on. But we choked the treacherous breath out of them until they acknowledged they depended on us for their futures. Hard-core cases were remanded to adjustment agencies where they converted themselves into manageable cynics.