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**Peter Gray Ph.D.**  
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# Our Social Obligation: Educational Opportunity, not Coercion

How we could promote universal education without coercion

Posted Sep 16, 2009

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*Children educate themselves.* Children are biologically built for self-[education](#). Their instincts to explore; to observe; to eavesdrop on the conversations of their elders; to ask countless questions; and to play with the artifacts, ideas, and skills of the culture all serve the purpose of education. Regular readers of this blog know that this has been my main thesis in all of these posts.

*Schools, as we generally know them, interfere with children's abilities to educate themselves.* When we confine children and adolescents to schools, where they are assigned to rooms by age and can't choose their associates, where they can't pursue their own interests but instead must conform to the dictates of the teacher and the time course of the bell, we interfere with their abilities to educate themselves. Children's natural means of education require freedom. Regular readers know that this is my secondary thesis.

In my last two posts I outlined a case against compulsory (forced) schooling. Now, in this post, I will say a bit about what students *like* about school, to the degree that they like it at all, and will sketch out my thoughts about how we, as a society, could satisfy their desires and provide them the opportunities to educate themselves well without coercion.

## What Students LIKE About School

The attitude of most students in our standard public and private schools toward their school is not entirely negative. I have not done a formal survey, but my informal observations suggest the following as some of the things that students often or sometimes say that they like about school:

- *Opportunity to make and meet friends.* Over the past few decades, as adults have assumed greater control over children's lives (e.g. see [this post](#)), it has become increasingly difficult for children to meet other children and make friends. School is one of the few places where many children congregate, and in free time--before school, at lunch, and during recess (in those schools where recess still exists), they have the opportunity to talk and play together. The assignments of children to classes and schools by age prevent them from making friends across a broad age range, but at least they can meet and befriend other children of their same age at school.

without them and to solve problems on their own. In hunter-gatherer cultures, where children are free all day to do what they want, children beyond the age of four years old spend much if not most of their time with other children, out of sight of adults. This is how they learn independence and self-governance. Children in our schools do not have that kind of independence, because they are governed by teachers, but at least they are away from their parents and are learning to cope with a different set of conditions than those that their parents would provide.

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- *Opportunity to escape from poverty or from other confining conditions.* One commenter on my recent post noted, aptly, that for some children school is "an escape hatch." My local newspaper recently carried an article about a young girl in an impoverished area of Boston, whose father had abandoned her and whose mother had died of HIV, who had lost many of her young friends to murder or other causes associated with poverty, but who herself is "making it" through the school system. She is a star high school student, because of her own enormous initiative, and she is bound for college. Stories like this remind us that we need escape hatches for those born in poverty. We need escape hatches that work better than our current schools. Our schools notoriously fail to meet the needs of the majority who come from poverty. Only a few make it through the hatch; and home schooling is not an option for them.

- *Exposure to new ideas and new ways of thinking, and instruction in valued skills.* Students commonly talk about being bored in school, or anxious about tests, or angry that they have to spend so much time on meaningless homework and have little time for the rest of life. But sometimes, on the positive side, they also talk about some idea that they heard about in school, which got them excited, or about their enjoyment of some new skill they acquired in school, or about the joy of reading a book that they learned about at school. Some teachers are much better than others at breaking through the tedium and the concern for grades and finding ways to excite students, and students treasure those teachers. Unfortunately, students almost never get to choose their teachers, so the opportunity for such enrichment is a matter of luck. And even with the best teachers, only a fraction of class time is experienced by most students as intellectually exciting, partly because of the demands on all teachers to cover the standard curriculum and give the standard tests.

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**How We Could, If We Wished, Provide Opportunities for All Children to Educate Themselves Well, Without Coercion**

them. But in order for children to learn, we need to provide the opportunities. We need to provide those opportunities not just to wealthy and middle class families, but also to the poor.

Briefly, what I envision, in my dream for the future, is that instead of schools as we know them today we would have a system of community centers, open to everyone, where children--and adults too, if they wish--can come to play, explore, and learn. Where possible, there would be fields and woods where children can get away from adults and explore on their own. The tools of learning would be available, including computers. The town library would be part of each center. Local people, with various skills, would devote some time there offering classes to those who wish to take them--in music, art, athletics, math, foreign languages, cooking, business management, checkbook balancing, and anything else that people deem to be fun, interesting, or important. There would be no requirements, no grades, no ranking of people compared with other people. Local theater and music groups would put on productions at the center, and people of all ages could form new groups, of whatever sorts met their interests.

For a cost much less than that currently spent on our system of coercive education, we could develop beautiful centers, with exciting opportunities for self-education. Children would flock to such centers, because that is where their friends are and that is where there are so many exciting things to play with and explore. Within the center all that we most value in our culture would be represented, and children and adults too could sample as they please. The details of each center's construction and offerings would be determined locally and democratically, within each community. Purchases of equipment would be in response to demand, not the result of someone's *a priori* expectations. Staff would be hired for limited terms, through a democratic procedure, to assure a staff that serves the participants' needs. There would be no tenure.

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With such centers, we could trust children's instincts for self-education to take control. They would learn what they need to know to do well as adults in our culture, and they would develop deep interests, which would lead to careers that would be play for them, not toil.

I have been brief here, in this final section, partly because my digression at the beginning has caused the post to grow longer than is recommended by the good people at Psychology Today. But for now, this hint may be enough. For now I'm glad just to get the idea out there, sketchy as it is, for you to play with, add to, or object to. Sometime down the road, after I've heard your thoughts and given the idea more thought myself, I'll discuss it in greater detail. I can think of many possible objections to this idea, but all of them that I can think of are problems that can be solved, not roadblocks. [Before ending, I should note that I owe this general idea primarily to my son, Scott Gray, who has given far more serious thought to it, to date, than I have. But I take responsibility for my specific interpretation of it, with which he might not agree.]

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**Peter Gray, Ph.D.**, is a research professor at Boston College and author of the newly published book *Free to Learn* (Basic Books) and *Psychology*.

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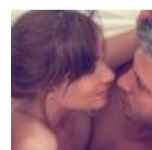
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