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Peter Gray Ph.D.
Freedom to Learn

Schools Are Good for Showing Off, Not for Learning

Here's one explanation of the education gap, and why it keeps increasing.

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Suppose you are a student in a high school or college course and a magic fairy offers you the following choice: (1) You will learn the material in the course well, but will get a low grade (a D). Or (2) you will *not* learn the material at all, but will get a high grade (an A). Which would you choose? Be honest.

Nearly all students (except for a few rebels), would unhesitatingly choose Alternative 2. Students are rational beings. They know that school is about grades, not learning. If they ever need to know the material they can always learn it on their own, in a far more efficient way than they can at school. On the other hand, they can never erase that awful D. It would be stupid to choose Alternative 1. By the time they have reached high school, all students know that.

Schools are for showing off, not for learning. When we enroll our children in school, we enroll them into a never ending series of contests—to see who is best, who can get the highest grades, the highest scores on standardized tests, win the most honors, make it into the most advanced placement classes, get into the best colleges. We see those grades and hoops jumped through as measures not only of our children, but also of ourselves as parents. We find ways, subtly or not so subtly, to brag about them to our friends and relatives.

All this has nothing to do with learning, and, really, we all know it. We rarely even bother to think about what our children are actually learning in school; we only care about the grades. We, the parents, maybe even more than our kids, think it would be stupid for our kids to choose Alternative 1 over Alternative 2. We would forbid them from making that choice, if we could.

If schools were for learning rather than showing off, we would design them entirely differently. They would be places where people could follow their own interests, learn what they wanted to learn, try out various career paths, prepare themselves for the futures that they wanted. Everyone would be doing different things, at different times, so there would be no basis for comparison. People would learn to read when they wanted to learn to read, and we would help them do it if they wanted help. The focus would be on cooperation, not on competition. That's what occurs at certain democratic schools, which are for learning, not for showing off, and such schools have proven remarkably effective.

One thing we know about learning is that it is inhibited by the kinds of pressures that we use at schools to motivate performance. Many psychological experiments have shown that contests and evaluations of all sorts lead those who already know well how to perform a task to do it even better than they otherwise would, but has the opposite effect on people who don't know it so well.

that they were evaluating performance. The result was that those who were already good, when not observed closely, performed even better when they knew they were being evaluated; but those who were just beginners, learning how to play, performed worse when evaluated. The same has been found for many kinds of tasks—intellectual as well as athletic or manual. Showing off is facilitated by evaluation and contests, but such pressures inhibit learning. And yet, in our constant attempt (supposedly) to increase learning at school, we keep raising the pressure, and then wonder why it doesn't work.

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Much has been written about the education gap between children from economically richer and poorer families in the United States. It's interesting to note that over the same period of time that pressures to perform well in school have been increasing, that gap has grown ever larger. In fact, one study ([described here in the New York Times](#)) showed that the gap in standardized test scores between the affluent and non-affluent grew by about 40 percent between the 1960s and today.

I'm sure that lots of factors figure into this education gap, but here's one I'd like you to consider. Let's suppose that children from economically better-off families learn, at home, much of what they are tested on in school. They perform well under the pressure of tests and the constant evaluation that occurs at school, because they already know a lot of it. They are used to this way of thinking. Let's suppose that children from economically worse off families don't learn so much, at home, of what they are tested on in school. They perform poorly on the tests, right from the beginning, because they don't already know it. The high pressure of constant testing and evaluation—coupled with the embarrassment and shame of failure—makes it very difficult for them to learn at school what the others had already learned at home.

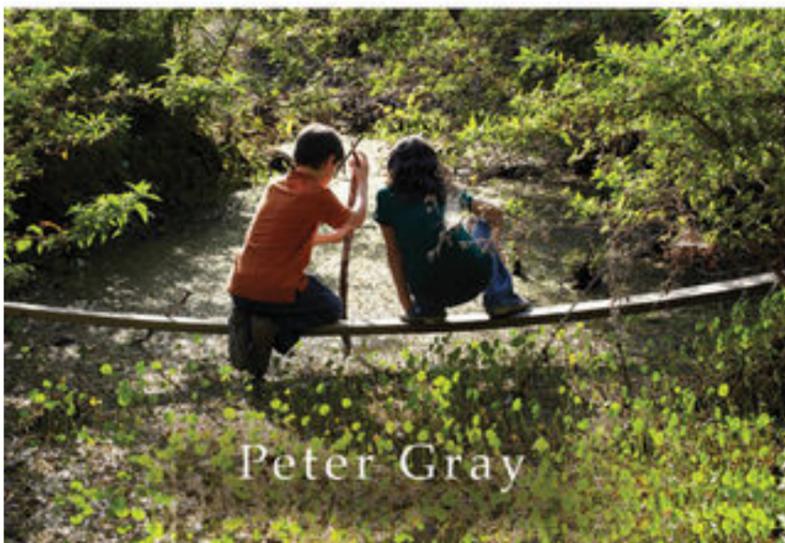
The failure may lead them to accept, fatalistically, a belief in their own stupidity, which may cause them to drop out of the whole process, mentally if not physically. In other words, I suggest, the high-pressure environment drives a wedge between those who already know and those who don't already know, causing the gap to increase from year to year in school. And, as the pressure to perform well increases, the wedge widens.

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*Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will
Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant,
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What do you think? Does this explanation of the increase in the education gap make sense, or not? This blog is a forum for discussion, and your stories, comments, and questions are valued and treated with respect by me and other readers. As always, I prefer if you post your comments and questions here rather than send them to me by private email. By putting them here, you share with other readers, not just with me. I read all comments and try to respond to all serious questions, if I feel I have something useful to say. Of course, if you have something to say that truly applies *only* to you and me, then send me an email.

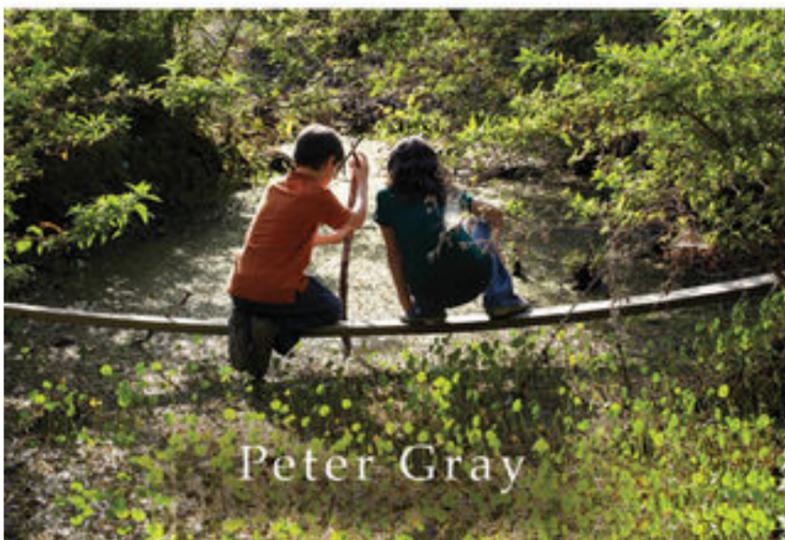
For more about children's natural ways of learning, and the conditions that best help them learn, see [Free to Learn](#).

Reference

[1] Michaels, J. W., Blommel, J. M., Brocato, R. M., Linkous, R. A., & Rowe, J. S. (1982). Social facilitation and inhibition in a natural setting. *Replications in Social Psychology*, 2, 21–24.

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About the Author



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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