

Schoolhouse, Rocked

Written by Peter Gray, Ph.D.

Sunday, 01 September 2013 00:00 - Last Updated Wednesday, 18 March 2015 10:30

The author of *Free to Learn* discusses his hopes for the book, and for children's education in our society.

With regard to our educational system, I feel a bit like the child in Hans Christian Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes," who cried out, "But he isn't wearing anything at all!" I imagine that some of you readers feel the same way.

All the world seems to believe that our coercive system of schooling is essential to children's becoming educated. They believe it not because their own two eyes and common sense tell them it's true, but because everyone says it's true and therefore it must be. Many people don't even think much about it; they just accept it as true. They may hate school themselves, but nevertheless assume school is necessary, like bad-tasting medicine. Never mind that bad-tasting medicine takes a second to swallow while forced schooling takes 11 to 13 years.



TOUCHING THE FUTURE

SCHOOLHOUSE, ROCKED

The author of *Free to Learn* discusses his hopes for the book, and for children's education in our society

By Peter Gray, Ph.D.
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LISA DEKARDO

With regard to our educational system, I feel a bit like the child in Hans Christian Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes," who cried out, "But he isn't wearing anything at all!" I imagine that some of you readers feel the same way.

All the world seems to believe that our coercive system of schooling is essential to children's becoming educated. They believe it not because their own two eyes and common sense tell them it's true, but because everyone says it's true and therefore it must be. Many people don't even think much about it; they just accept it as true. They may hate school themselves, but nevertheless assume school is necessary, like bad-tasting medicine. Never mind that bad-tasting medicine takes a second to swallow while forced schooling takes 11 to 13 years.

Nearly all political leaders espouse some form of schooling as the route to a better future. Philanthropists are working feverishly at making sure that school at ever-younger ages and making them spend more hours per day, more years, and years of their lifetime there. The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child — with an acknowledgment of many provisions that every child has the right to a compulsory education. (It's right there in Item 9 of the declaration.) What a wonderful affirmation of the concept of a human "right" you have the right, which you can't refuse, to be compelled to spend years in a setting where you must do just what you are told to do. (Or rather double-spaced in quotes, but few people recognize it as such. We are so stuck on the idea that children must be forced to learn that we can't even imagine that a child might be better off learning without being forced. In its defense, I note that the U.N. declaration also speaks of the child's right to play.)

But like the great majority who praised the Emperor's fine new clothes, those who profess their belief in the value of forced schooling are, I think, in that belief. They "believe" it because everyone else does — to believe it, because it would seem stupid not to believe it, because there is some profit to be made for believing it, or because to stand against the crowd would be unworkable. But, at the same time, they find it hard to completely drop their own two eyes and common sense, and they find it hard to rationalize their beliefs about freedom and dignity with the belief that children should be denied these as they are in school. When I talk with advocates of coercive schooling in a way that allows them to see under their defenses, I often find that just below the surface lies a ball of doubt. That gives me hope.

Since the publication of my new book, *Free to Learn*, many people have asked me why I wrote it and what I hope it will accomplish. I have questions about writing have about my new book. I debated for a long time with myself about whether or not I should even mention it here, but I do so in order the message to spread that I am questioning these questions. Of course, I can be the first to cry out that the Emperor is naked in the case of schooling. Indeed, many have been saying this longer than I, including such pioneering thinkers as A. S. Neill, John Holt, John Taylor Gatto, Ivan Illich, and David Greenberg. We need all such voices, and we need them to be heard. So, here goes...

At a local level, I hope that *Free to Learn* will give to these parents who can see that forced schooling is harming their children and disrupting their family life the courage to act on what they see. I hope, too, that families who are already taking a non-standard route



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Nearly all political leaders espouse more forced schooling as the route to a better future. Philanthropists are working feverishly at making kids start school at everyounger ages and making them spend more hours per day, days per year, and years of their lifetime there. The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child— with no acknowledgement of irony—proclaims that every child has the right to a compulsory education. (It's right there in Item 7 of the declaration.) What a tortuous distortion of the concept of a human "right"; you have the right, which you can't refuse, to be compelled to spend years in a setting where you must do just what you are told to do. Orwellian doublespeak in spades, but few people recognize it as such. We are so stuck on the idea that children must be forced to learn that we can't even imagine that a child might be better off learning without being forced. (In its defense, I note that the U.N. declaration also speaks of the child's right to play.)

But like the great majority who praised the Emperor's fine new clothes, those who proclaim their belief in the value of forced schooling are uneasy, I think, in that belief. They "believe" it because everyone else claims to believe it, because it would seem stupid not to believe it, because there is some profit to be made for believing it, or because to stand against the crowd would be uncomfortable. But, at the same time, they find it hard to completely deny their own two eyes and common sense, and they find it hard to rationalize their beliefs about freedom and dignity with the belief that children should be denied these as they are in school. When I talk with advocates of coercive schooling in a way that allows them to set aside their defenses, I often find that just below the surface lies a bed of doubt. That gives me hope.

Since the publication of my new book, *Free to Learn*, many people have asked me why I wrote it and what I hope it will accomplish. I have qualms about writing here about my own book. I debated for a long time with myself about whether or not I should even mention it here, but I do so want the message to spread that I am overcoming those qualms. Of course, I am far from the first to cry out that the Emperor is naked on the issue of schooling. Indeed, many have been saying this longer than I, including such pioneering thinkers as A.S. Neill, John Holt, John Taylor Gatto, Sandra Dodd and Daniel Greenberg. We need all such voices, and we need them to be heard. So, here goes...

At a local level, I hope that *Free to Learn* will give to those parents who can see that forced schooling is harming their children and disrupting their family life the courage to act on what they see. I hope, too, that families who are already taking a non-standard route in education will

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find the book useful as a tool to help convince their skeptical friends and relatives that what they are doing is not crazy. But my broadest hope is that the book will reach people who haven't previously given much thought to this whole question. I hope that the book will lead many people to think deeply about childhood, education and schooling (and about the difference between education and schooling), and that this will help promote societal change in the ways we treat children.

The book's central thesis is that children come into the world exquisitely designed, and strongly motivated, to educate themselves. They don't need to be forced to learn; in fact, coercion undermines their natural desire to learn. What they do need is opportunity. My argument to society at large is that we need to stop thinking about educating children and start thinking about how to provide the conditions that maximize each child's ability to educate himself or herself. That is what children are biologically designed to do, but to do it well they need conditions that are very, very different from the coercive, deprived conditions of our standard schools.

The book is not founded on abstract theory, philosophical speculation or romantic idealism. It is founded on large bodies of empirical evidence. Some of the evidence comes from anthropologists' observations of how children in pre-agricultural societies educated themselves. Some of it comes from research in our culture showing that children who are allowed to educate themselves and are provided the resources to do so learn very well what they need to know to become happy, productive, moral, adult citizens. Some of it comes from the laboratories of research psychologists, who have studied children's strong and effective drives to explore and understand the physical and social world around them. Some of it comes from research showing how the playful frame of mind is best for acquiring new ideas and skills and thinking creatively, and how play is the natural vehicle through which children practice the skills and values of their culture and learn how to get along with others, solve their own problems, regulate their emotions and impulses, and generally take control of their own lives.

The book also documents the history of our coercive system of schooling. It shows how that system arose quite explicitly for purposes of indoctrination and obedience training, not for education, as most of us think of it today. And further, the book documents the psychological damage that we are currently inflicting on children by depriving them of the freedom and play they need for healthy development.

The book brings all of these sources of evidence together to make the case that we can and should change our way of treating children, to a way that trusts them and takes their real needs and abilities into account. It also describes the environmental conditions that enable children to

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educate themselves well. These conditions include unlimited freedom to play and explore, access to the tools of the culture, access to adult experts, free age mixing among children and adolescents, and immersion in a stable, moral, caring local community. All of these can be provided at far less expense than what we spend on our prisonlike schools, if we put our minds to it.

I have seen many wonderful improvements in human rights in my years so far on earth. We have made great strides in recognizing the competence and rights of people regardless of race, gender and sexual orientation. I hope now to see, in my remaining years, real progress in recognizing the competence and rights of children, for only when children grow up free can we hope for a society in which adults know fully how to handle freedom and the responsibilities that come with it. That's why I wrote the book and why I will continue, as long as I am able, to promote these ideas.

What Leads Families to “Unschool” Their Children?

A survey of unschooling families, conducted in fall 2011 by Peter Gray, Ph.D.

Responses emphasizing rigidity of rules and authoritarian nature of the classroom:

“The school principal threatened to have [my son] prosecuted for bringing a ‘weapon’ to school. The ‘weapon’ was a can of silly string.”

“I saw kids punished for being inquisitive and talkative, which is something I thought most young kids were, naturally.”

“We were increasingly frustrated by the way things were taught to the kids. One example: Kids who understood things quickly in math still had to go through the tedious process of ‘showing their work,’ even if they could figure it out in their heads. Our daughter was bored and frustrated with this kind of busy work. She was getting punished (loss of recess) for not doing her

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homework, yet got very good grades on her report card and a perfect score on her first MCAS exam.”

“When my 5-year-old was going to be held back in kindergarten for not knowing his letters, I knew this was wrong and that all kids learn at a different pace.”

“We were tired of our children being labeled and tired of them coming home exhausted and, quite frankly, full of nastiness. They weren’t the nice people we remembered them to be. Once we brought them all home, they became ‘people’ again.”

“Our oldest child, on her first day of school, was told that she must ask for permission to urinate and permission to eat. She told us that she was unwilling to do that, and we decided, with the school, to withdraw her after a few days of her leaving the school grounds and coming home.”

Responses emphasizing boredom, wasted time, or loss of interest in learning in school:

“After I put them in public school for a time, it became extremely clear to me that being forced to follow someone else’s idea of a curriculum was counterproductive, to the point of making them ‘hate’ learning (we found this intolerable).”

“We hated the blue-ribbon public school our oldest attended. He had one hour of homework (reading comprehension and math worksheets) every night, for a 6-year-old! The work was too easy for him, and he hated it and dragged his feet every night, and we resented the intrusion into our family life and relaxing time.”

“I worked in the classrooms a lot and saw a lot of wasted time, during which my kids were stuck sitting still and doing absolutely nothing.”

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“By 5th grade, when we took [our son] out, school was destroying his natural curiosity and love of learning. Too many hours in school and then working on homework. He said to me, ‘Mom, when is my time?’ It was breaking my heart.”

“We...found that increasing levels of homework and projects left us slaves to the school’s schedule even after school hours and on weekends. Additionally, we found that our oldest child was losing his love of learning, and our second child did not have enough time for her passion and gift—the performing arts.”

Responses emphasizing the child’s unhappiness, anxiety, or being bullied at school:

“School was awful for the whole family. Homework. Hours. Social issues. Lack of physical exercise. Lack of family time. Discipline problems.... I was literally dragging my kids to school, they hated it so much.”

“My eldest son was late to read (late according to the school), and that frustration led me to explore other options, but I didn’t pursue any at that time. Later when the same child was in third grade, the workload— and his frustration level with it, while still achieving “advanced” grades—seemed incongruous. He was working longer hours at school than his father spent at work. For what purpose?”

“My older daughter was having test anxiety (it was the first year that No Child Left Behind was implemented), wasn’t eating at lunchtime, was overcome by the noise and smells, and was distracted in the classroom. My younger daughter was bored and beginning to refuse to participate in classroom activities. My older daughter had been unhappy her entire school career—I kept thinking she’d outgrow it, but she didn’t. Things finally got to the breaking point and I pulled them out without having a plan, but knowing I could definitely do better than the school. I was done sending them someplace that made them so sad and created so much tension in our family.”

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“Our older daughter absolutely hated going to school and all of us were miserable. Due to misconceptions and lack of exposure to homeschooling (forget unschooling, even homeschooling is not common in India), we did not realize that it was a viable option, till desperation led us to consider it.”

“The faculty repeatedly ignored situations where other kids attacked my son physically and verbally, and after two years of taking it, he pushed one of his bullies back and was suddenly in trouble. (The bully was not in trouble, even though him being a bully toward my son was witnessed by several teachers.) The school repeatedly set my son up to fail and ignored my requests and demands for change. Then they called a meeting to discuss what to do about my son, instead of what they could do for him.... I told them that there would be no such meeting.”

“My eldest child lost her love of learning early on at school. Eventually she stopped even doing math and went from top of the class to the bottom. This was due to a math teacher who used to mock her and make her feel small.”

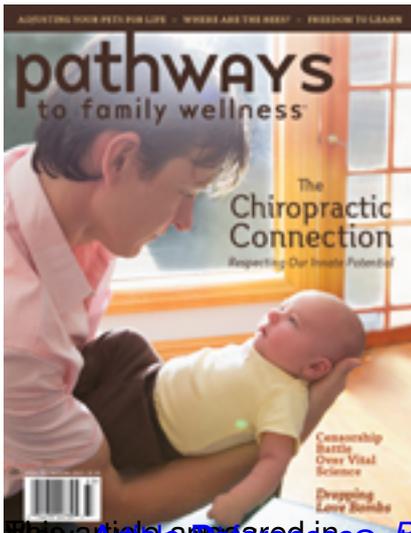
“In the beginning of Grade 2, my daughter told me one evening of how one of her friends had been verbally threatened (the term used was ‘You’re dead meat’) by another classmate, pushed up against a wall, and told that the classmate’s older cousins were going to get her. I was appalled that this was happening to 8-year-olds and that, upon talking to my daughter’s teacher about this incident, this type of interaction was not considered alarming by the teaching staff. I never want my children to accept and numb themselves to think that treating other humans horrendously, unlovingly and unkindly is normal! I wanted my children to know that a loving, more nurturing world exists—thus we began homeschooling!”

“When we first started homeschooling, my oldest, at age 11, had been so emotionally damaged from his school experiences that we were shocked to see how quickly his personality rebounded within a month or two.”

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