



Public Schooling is a Pseudoscience

A lecture delivered May 1, 2020 at “The Disinformation Campaign Against Homeschooling” conference hosted by Ideological Diversity, a student organization at Harvard Kennedy School

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Scientific research is performed by the process of experimentation. An experiment is an intervention designed to test a hypothesis. Public schooling is an experiment. It is an intervention based on the following hypothesis: If a child is forced to go to school seven hours a day, five days a week, nine months a year for 13 years, then "something good" will happen.

It is important to note that "something good" has never been consistently defined. It could be learning literacy and other tools for self-actualization. It could be acquiring skills for the workplace. It could be absorbing democratic values and knowledge of the rights and obligations of being a citizen. In fact, we'll never know what schools are supposed to do because if a principal or superintendent ever had the courage to say what their school was supposed to do, parents would object because the scope would either be depressingly limited or impossibly broad and the school would be held accountable to generating some kind of outcome. By relegating the mission of school to peoples' imaginations, schools can avoid being exposed as frauds.

To test a hypothesis, you must establish that results, if there are any, could not have occurred by chance or from another cause. In the case of schooling, the purported benefits must be measured against a control group, but here's the catch, the design of the public school system has never been experimentally tested. For roughly 180 years, we have been taking children away from their families and forcing them to spend much of their lives in an institution that has never established it possesses any merit. The belief that we need schools is entirely faith-based. Plenty of scientific studies exist within the confines of schools, but they are only internally valid, and thus, they are not reliable because the results cannot be generalized.

When an eminent scientist or scholar objects to the teaching of creationism in school, they are saying, "Barbers should wear surgical masks when they partake in bloodletting." or "I read the horoscopes every day, and the advice for Sagittarius is consistently off. They stop publishing readings for Sagittarius." It is inherently absurd to criticize one isolated component of an intellectually dishonest practice. The design of public schools did not arise from any scientific

method. When someone insists that civics or ethics or basic finances or anything meaningful that is absent from the curriculum should be taught *in school*, just cut them off. They are implicitly promoting pseudoscience.

To most people, schools work because they feel like they do, or at least that they should, and because, over the course of being in school, they learned things. What they do not grasp is that while they *did* learn things, they also would have learned things without school. More importantly, they were robbed of their potential because schools retarded their intellectual, emotional, psychological, and social development.

How do we know this? Science.

Because of limited time, I cannot go into all of the ways scholastic instruction is set up that violates many things we know about the processes of learning effectively, but I will address one significant factor - public school, by design, is a captive environment. What constitutes being in captivity? It is a place where movement is limited, where the subject is removed from their attached environment – i.e., their home, where they have limited privacy, where they are tamed such that the flight impulse is diminished, and where they are afforded basic survival needs. This is true of every single public school, and I have to stress this because the reaction I always get is, yeah, schools are terrible, but not the ones my kids go. This is the kind of empirical denialism that people concerned with human rights are up against.

There is a wealth of data on what happens to people when they are placed in captivity, which includes impaired memory and concentration, anger, anxiety, depression, learned helplessness, and chronic stress. All of these symptoms are widely on display in schools, and the persistence of chronic stress, which has been corroborated by measurements of students' cortisol levels. In other words, one of the most significant problems with schools – the consequences of forcing kids to be in a place where they are held captive – isn't the teachers, administrators, or parents' fault – although all of these people are complicit by supporting the school system. No school reform effort has ever addressed this, and this is one of the reasons why reforms always fail. How do we know schools fail? Data, observation, and empirical evidence.

Let's look at each "something good" that schools are were, perhaps, designed to instill. We know schools perform poorly when it comes to academics. Schools neglect a plethora of subjects so they can focus primarily on English and Math. Despite this, according to the Department of Education, only 37% of twelfth-graders perform at or above the proficient level in literacy, and only 25% of twelfth-graders perform at or above the proficient level in math. What is more remarkable is that you can't even fully credit schools with attaining that dismal outcome

because many of those students learned those skills in their home environment. As for learning a trade? Public schools don't do that. You would need to go to a vocational school, become an apprentice, or develop those skills directly to acquire a talent.

The most Orwellian claim is that schools promote democratic ideals. No. Schools are openly hostile to democratic principles. Again, all schools. Every public school has an authoritarian, hierarchical power structure with students at the bottom, powerless to control the conditions to which they are subjected. In *every* school, meaningful dissent is suppressed.

The courts have affirmed that students can have certain speech censored, be subjected to warrantless searches, and incriminate themselves. They can be beaten by administrators in 19 states to point where they require hospitalization, and they have even been strip-searched by faculty without consequence. Even without these extreme scenarios, everyday existence for students involves demands for subjugation and acquiescence. They must adhere to dictates stating where they must be, who they may associate with, and what they are permitted to think. Because authoritarian power is advertised as being wielded for the good of the students, this approach is considered justified. Author C. S. Lewis noted, "Of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive."

No one who earnestly believes in human rights and who is intellectually honest would advocate sending a child to school without that child's consent. If conditions at schools, again all schools, were unchanged except that students were designated enemy combatants, teachers and administrators would be dragged to the Hague for war crimes in violation of the terms of the 3rd Geneva Convention – specifically, articles 17, 18, 22, 25, 26, 38, 51, 52, 53, and 99, which govern discipline, labor demands, personal effects, general health and well-being, diet, and exposure to humiliation.

Abuse in school is so rampant it is an indelible feature, not an anomaly. Everyone is familiar with the ubiquitous bullying and pervasive psychiatric abuse where children are drugged so they can cope with being in school, even though the drugs have debilitating long-term physical and mental side effects. But there are also other horrors that get little attention. The Associated Press uncovered roughly 17,000 official reports of sex assaults in school over a four-year period. It is reasonable to assume a large number of incidents were not reported. Solitary confinement is being phased out of prisons because it is widely considered to be inhumane, yet every year, on average, over 37,000 students are punished by being placed in solitary confinement in their schools, which often produces profound depression, social anxiety, panic attacks, and paranoia that never goes away.

In general, parents want their children to be good-hearted, intellectually curious, open-minded, creative, confident, articulate, expressive, self-reliant, and rational. Ask yourself these three questions:

- 1) Do you think sending kids to institutionalized schooling is the best way to achieve these goals?
- 2) Can you identify which feature of schooling is most conducive to achieving any one of these ends?
- 3) Are any of these traits a goal of public schooling?

Numerous studies show that public schools inhibit each one of these characteristics, and even if you try to promote these traits at home, the culture of schools are openly hostile to that of the family because kids must conform to the school environment or be subjected to unrelenting abuse from their peers.

I'd like to conclude with a poem that was written by a high school senior in Alton, Illinois.

He Was Square Inside and Brown

He drew... the things inside that needed saying.
Beautiful pictures he kept under his pillow.
When he started school he brought them...
To have along like a friend.
It was funny about school, he sat at a square brown desk
Like all the other square brown desks... and his room
Was a square brown room like all the other rooms, tight
And close and stiff.
He hated to hold the pencil and chalk, his arms stiff
His feet flat on the floor, stiff, the teacher watching
And watching. She told him to wear a tie like
All the other boys, he said he didn't like them.
She said it didn't matter what he liked.
After that the class drew.
He drew all yellow. It was the way he felt about Morning.
The Teacher came and smiled, "What's this?
Why don't you draw something like Ken's drawing?"
After that his mother bought him a tie, and he always
Drew airplanes and rocketships like everyone else.
He was square inside and brown and his hands were stiff.
The things inside that needed saying didn't need it
Anymore, they had stopped pushing... crushed, stiff
Like everything else.

Two weeks after writing this, he killed himself.

Suicide is another prominent feature of public schools that gets insufficient attention; otherwise, the very first question a parent would ask before enrolling their child is not about average test scores, but rather the school's suicide rate. The Centers for Disease Control reports that 1 in 6 high school students seriously consider suicide, and 1 in 12 makes an attempt on their life. Is this really an institution we want to force children to attend?

The poem, "He Was Square Inside And Brown" was retrieved from here:

Gatto, John. "He Was Square Inside And Brown." *Creativity, What Is It?*, 2003, 2bcreative.org/?page_id=1674.

The author, Cevin Soling, is an accomplished author, filmmaker, producer, and musician. Soling directed and produced the documentary The War on Kids, released in 2009. He holds multiple graduate degrees from Harvard University where he is currently studying.