Are schools inherently coercive?

Submitted by David Deutsch on 3 July, 2005 - 10:01

From *Taking Children Seriously* **25**

David Deutsch (http://www.qubit.org/people/david/)

Are schools inherently coercive, or is that just a property of all (or nearly all?) existing schools, and come the revolution, could there be TCS schools?

In this article I want to consider whether there can be such a thing as a non-coercive school.

Well – what is a school? In our society one could very accurately define a school as "a place where children are herded together for the purpose of having unpleasant things done to them", but such a definition begs the question I am addressing. So how should we define "school", for present purposes? A place where children go every day to learn? Well, in that case, almost every child's home is a school, and TCS is dedicated to the proposition that non-coercive ones *can* exist. A block of flats is a place where *hundreds* of children learn every day, in their own homes and in each other's. A block of flats could be non-coercive too. But that's not what people mean by "school" when they ask whether schools can be non-coercive.

At the opposite extreme, I have no doubt that even existing schools are fairly non-coercive for *a few* of the children attending. This may be especially true in "vocational" schools such as sports academies or music academies, where some (small?) proportion of the children are there because they are passionate about the subject and can't get enough of it. They get pleasure and learning and personal growth from the experience of high-intensity interactions with expert practitioners in the relevant fields. Every morning they wake up and think "wow! today I can go to the X-School again, and interact with these great people! And when I get there I'm going to start work right away on that backhand volley (or Liszt study, or whatever) until it's absolutely perfect" (by their own standards), and at the end of the school day they are still pestering the teacher/coach with ideas they have had, and ask for advice and comments and criticisms until he says that he really has to go and have dinner now, but promises there'll be another opportunity tomorrow. Remove from such a school all the children who do not feel the way I have just described, and what you have left will be a non-coercive school – won't it? Well, yes, but that doesn't really answer the question that people have in mind when they ask whether schools can be non-coercive. For there are very few people under 16 (say), and virtually none under 12 (say), who have a "vocation", i.e. whose passions happen to be focused on a socially-recognized profession in such a way that what they now need is to follow the narrow track to professional expertise. Therefore the great majority of children could never benefit from any school of the type just described.

Is catering to children who have vocations the only way in which an educational institution could be non-coercive? Or is it possible to concentrate *generalized* learning resources and opportunities in one building, say, which would be open to children and run non-coercively and which most children would voluntarily turn to for several hours on most days during

most of their childhoods? This is, I think, what people mean by the question about non-coercive schools; for if we are only looking for places that educate some children, a little of the time, and cause little or no coercion, we need look no further than the local cinema or video arcade – or library, or museum, or hamburger restaurant – or indeed virtually *any* public place in our society *except* a school.

I fear that it is all too easy to invent a fantasy-answer to this question, by considering existing schools and then imagining (without having to solve the problem of *how*) that everything coercive about them is removed – exams, authority, boredom, fear, obedience training, rules, punishments, violence, curricula, compulsory lessons, compulsory attendance, etc. – and replaced by such wonderful things as "resources" (computers, gymnasiums, workshops) and knowledgeable, enthusiastic, and caring teachers who are only there as the children's expert assistants, and who are instantly fired if they utter a single harsh word. I don't think it would be efficient for me to labor through the countless problems involved in getting from A to B. Rather, to understand my critique of this fantasy, consider it from a more logical point of view: instead of imagining modifications of the existing institutions that are *least* like "non-coercive schools" (namely, existing schools), consider modifying those that are most like them, namely (say) cinemas.

Would it be feasible to modify a small town's cinema so that most of the town's children spend most of their time there – without being forced to, and without being coerced when they get there? Suppose that currently, in a typical week, 30% of the town's children spend 2 hours in the cinema. What would it take to raise that percentage from 30% to 90% (say), and the 2 hours to 30 hours (say), as required for the cinema to become the fabled non-coercive school.

What would it take to entice more children to visit the cinema every week? Well – in Hollywood there are smarter people than us considering that very problem every day. When Stephen Spielberg manages to create a blockbuster, it might indeed happen that 90% or more of the children in town watch it. But that's a rare event; our supposed average weekly figure of 30% already includes it, for there are some weeks when far fewer than 30% of children attend. We can take it that if the film industry knew how to make movies more attractive to children, then they would, so the current attendance represents the best that present-day human ingenuity and creativity can manage. The attractiveness of movies to children is already quite close to optimal, given the best available knowledge.

All right, then: would more children attend the cinema if it put on attractions other than movies? Of course. Consider the mall in which the cinema is situated. It is already doing its best to do that very thing. There's an ice rink, and bookshops, and burger bars, and so on. A small proportion of the town's children do spend much of their time there (though I don't think that it's the children whose parents are doing their best to give them a wonderful time at home!). All in all, the mall, too, is already close to optimum in its ability to attract children. And it attracts few of them, for little of the time.

The trouble is that children's interests are very diverse, and personal, and sporadic. Most of the children won't go to the mall's burger bar every day if there is an exciting pizza place in town. Most of them won't go to its wonderful ice rink *every day* if they prefer playing tennis or football. Most of them won't go to its interesting little bookshop *every day* if there's a bigger and better bookshop – or a specialist bookshop for an interest of theirs – in town. Most of them won't even go outside their own bedrooms if they are currently building a fascinating model there, or if they had a late night last night, or if there's an interesting program on TV. And so on. A mall is a wonderful, diverse, highly educational place, but it cannot outshine *the town as a whole* in any of these respects. If it could, it would!

So if we pursue the vision in a logical way, we come to the conclusion that the existing institution that comes closest to a non-coercive school is the entire town (or city, or society, or internet) that the children have access to, including their homes, and their friends' homes, and excluding only the existing schools.

to post comments

Comments

TCS = daydreams I've had since the 2nd grade

Submitted by Mick (not verified) on 10 July, 2005 - 15:48

This is my first visit to this site. I never knew that there were so many groups and organizations who had the same feelings and rationale that I did about school. Everything you talk about are things I dreamed about and never knew could exist, because no one seemed interested. I'll graduate from college in December, so I finally have the sanity to study this topic more in depth. Thank you for your work.

to post comments

great site

Submitted by SoulRiser (not verified) on 29 July, 2005 - 22:44

great site, i'll be linking to this in the Anti-School Directory @ **http://schoolsurvival.rise.za.net/directory/ (http://schoolsurvival.rise.za.net/directory/)**

to post comments

Yes, but . . .

*Submitted by **Relsqui (not verified) (http://www.chiliahedron.com)** on 28 August, 2005 - 04:31*

. . . you're wandering near the brink of the fallacy you just described. I don't think many people would disagree with you that life (if I may generalize a tad more) is the best teacher; but how do you *apply* that? Any serious attempt to reform schools--and if we're not serious, we may as well keep talking about that fantasy--has to pass through the government's digestive system. Therefore we need to start with something that will still be usable when it, err, comes out the other end. ;)

I don't want to only criticize, so I'll take an amateurish shot at elaborating. The obvious trait I glean from this article is *variety*: not only does there need to be something different for every child, there needs to be something different for every child every day. Well, many days. And I think it goes without saying that children need to have a say in what happens on which day, and that most of the time they won't agree with each other.

Interestingly enough, a school with exactly those traits is described in the book **Totto-chan: the Little Girl at the Window (http://japanbookplaza.com.au/shop/product_info.php/products_id/21877)** , by Kuroyonagi Tetsuko. (I wasn't aiming at that point, actually, but that book is a big influence on my idea of what a good school should be, so I thought it deserved a mention. What I'll say about goals in a couple paragraphs is also based on it.)

Okay. So far we have a variety of activities, from which each student can choose. If we tried to feed just that to politicians, it wouldn't take long for it to be spat back out again, so let's examine why in advance.

Official Objection #1: How do we make them learn things they don't want to learn?

You can't, but that's not news. The real question is, how do we entice them to study subjects which either aren't easy for them or in which they're not already interested? (To anyone who's thinking "Why should we?"--because of things beyond the scope of our hypothetical reform, including the fact that any adult who can't do basic math or

write decently in his native language is going to be looked down on in the real world. There are certain basic skills we have an obligation to teach.)

The simplest solution I can think for this is to set specific goals in each subject for each student. Ideally, these are based on the child's progress thus far, e.g. smaller goals in subjects the student is having trouble with and grand projects for things he's especially interested in. Realistically, these are going to be based on the standards of satisfactory progress that already exist, at least at first. That's okay, we can chip away at them later. ;)

Official Objection #2: But how do we know they're spending enough time on everything?

That's the same as the above, rephrased. If they meet their goals, they've spent enough time on the subject. If that only takes a week and a half, they need tougher goals.

Official Objection #4: How do we know they're not cheating?

I'll omit the obvious-but-not-useful answer about teaching kids that cheating is wrong or not to want to. If a student's goals are sufficiently personal, cheating wouldn't be possible, or at least more trouble than it's worth. (That's a point to use when making our case for nonstandardized assessment.) But more to the point, no one said they'd be going about their business unsupervised. There will still be teachers around, and cheating will be no more or less difficult than it is otherwise.

Official Objection #5: Won't students going in and out of classes all the time be disruptive?

Only when the classes are straight lecture or otherwise linear, which in this situation wouldn't be a useful way to teach OR learn. Luckily there are a lot of other ways to teach, like individual projects and group discussions and demonstrations, all of which are interruptable and/or repeatable.

Official Objection #6: Doesn't this make it easy for students to claim to be "in between" activities, when they're really just slacking off?

See #4. In other words, if we're doing our job, they won't want or need to; while we're still working out the kinks, there will be people around supervising. However, if the schedule of classes is going to be loose, the schedule for breaks and lunches is going to be loose too.

Official Objection #7: Won't this hinder the social aspect of formal schooling?

About as much as being released hinders the social aspect of being in prison! I'm including this question because my high school made a big deal out of trying to assign the same "core classes" to groups of students, with the idea that those students would see thirty very familiar faces every day instead of a hundred only vaguely familiar ones. Opening up all the classrooms to all the students nullifies that solution, yes, but it also nullifies the problem. Students with similar interests will see a lot of each other--so not only will they be familiar faces, they'll have something in common (instead of being randomly selected from a database).

This has already gone on longer than I meant for it to, but there's just one other thing I wanted to add. I approve of mandatory--if flexible--attendance, for the same reason I approve of mandatory study of a wide range of subjects. Going somewhere you don't necessarily feel like going and doing things that aren't easy are important skills. Not having them makes it a lot harder to deal with adult life. I do, however, believe it's possible to teach even those things without coersion, by creating situations where children learn them for themselves.

to post comments

democratic schools

Submitted by Christina M Cat (not verified) on 22 September, 2005 - 20:16

I was suprised that some of the alternative models of schools weren't mentioned, if only to get criticised in this, I know I've seen TCS criticism of say, Sudbury Valley model schools before. The primary coercive element I'm aware of with those is the cumpulsory attendence - which is reflective of governmental rules, not inherant to the school model itself...of the quoted listed of coercive elements, there are also rules and sometimes punishments...some of which exist to prevent/deal with very occasional violence. I doubt there is a lot more in the way of rules than there would be in a small town.

"coercive about them is removed – exams, authority, boredom, fear, obedience training, rules, punishments, violence, curricula, compulsory lessons, compulsory attendance"

Thankfully the current definition of school does NOT include someplace to go EVERY day...though the trend for lenghthening school years possible to year round *shudder* is growing, I haven't yet heard of much about extending it over weekends. A place that many children/students go frequently/regularly as a primary source of learning perhaps.

One of the things I like about a Sudbury Valley school model better than life focused around the home, is the instant social aspect - its not for everyone, but for some kids and some families creating a social life, or creating large group activities are not going to be easy or possible, and being able to participate in already created ones is very helpful - and something that exists to provide some level of organization for large groups of people likely to have some level of rules, but not necessarily going to end up being coercive (different 'schools' likely to have somewhat different rules from each other, and individuals have choice about whether/which to participate).

to post comments

I think it would be great for *me*

Submitted by stellarmama on 21 January, 2006 - 06:44

I would love an open-format school. I would love to have real-life (as opposed to online) conversations with real TCS parents and unschooled kids and possessors of *different* knowledge on a daily (or even weekly) basis. I even think my kids might like it :)

Sarah Anderson-Thimmes

to post comments

If it does not exist, I say why not create it?

Submitted by a reader Anna R... (not verified) on 22 February, 2006 - 08:08

Allow the sharing of a vision. Our purpose is to make available to all residents a social center where individuals may serve as inspiration in support of one another's lifelong learning course.

In the huge city of Houston Texas I can find only one alternative school and in is not the right fit for our family. That just amazes me. I need other real people to interact with face to face. Books are fine, discussion groups are nice, but real people of like mind are what I crave.

My older son age 8 is willing to tell me what he wants in a social center. I figure any children willing to attend will also say what they desire at the location. And if the location does not offer it I trust they can communicate their desires adequately to summon the staff and resources to get where they desire to go.

I figure with our funds pooled we will be able to make available to our children opportunities and supplies we may never be able to afford as an isolated family.

As an open community PR and welcoming committees are of main concern Open to all Regardless of age, regardless of schooling preferences Constitutional freedom of religion We will work hard at inviting a culturally diverse student/members body

A country club atmosphere for lifelong learning Age mixing Early education Child and young adult Community and senior volunteers Apprenticeships and other real life opportunities Resource database Parental involvement Community involvement Mentors Choices and freedom of choice Enriched environments Outdoor exploring/learning space imperative Open-ended courses of study Living as learning

After the fact portfolios for all students Portfolio assistance for homeschoolers

Parenting support Emotional support for students and families Diplomatic communication

Shortly a website will be up and running for this project. In addition it is to be submitted for approval as a foundation under the National Heritage Foundation **www.nhf.org (http://www.nhf.org)**

Joyfully Serving, Anna Rodriguez

to post comments

School Coercive?
Submitted by Willow on 11 April, 2007 - 20:17

As I understand it, school is authoritarian and has to be for the simple reason on staffing. In order for 30 children to be educated by one adult, or even if it were an idylic 10 children to one adult, the adult would surely have to stand there and tell the children what to do and order them about. I cannot concieve of a situation where a non-coercive school could work with more than twice the number of children as grown ups.

I also think that parents who would choose an alternative school probably have thought long and hard about parenting and educational philosophies and have some fairly clear ideas about what they do and don't want for their children, and this would not necessarily overlap with other people's views sufficiently.

Is there a site for your project yet? It looks good.

to post comments

Yes, schools are

Submitted by Argus (not verified) on 9 August, 2007 - 04:09

Yes, schools are coercive. THAT IS THE POINT. It's called discipline. I don't mean beating children, I mean "If you do the wrong thing you will get detention because it will help you learn what is right." Jesus, I thought I was a radical liberal until I read this tripe.

to post comments

Stateless

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 10 February, 2009 - 05:37

In a stateless society NO school would be coercive.

to post comments

Punishment doesn't teach you

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 8 March, 2011 - 13:03

Punishment doesn't teach you what is right. It doesn't teach you anything.

to post comments

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