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The Free and Happy Student

B. F. Skinner

In a widely read article written more than 30 years ago, the famous behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner predicted disastrous consequences if schools adopted teaching methods based on the child-centered educational philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

His critique was remarkably prescient.

The theories that troubled Skinner have influenced a generation of educators, and today they permeate educational institutions from kindergarten through graduate school. Just as Skinner predicted, children free to follow their educational whims failed to gain a solid base of knowledge and skills. Neither has Rousseau's kinder, gentler child-centered teaching strategy lived up to its promise of producing happier and more responsible students.

Skinner's observations about what is now called "learner-centered" schooling are as valid today as they were 30 years ago. Early in the 20th century, progressive educators sought to eliminate the hickory stick and other forms of punishment as motivators in the classroom. But in the Sixties, a full-blown resurgence of Rousseau's 200-year-old education views effectively dumped the baby out with the bathwater.

Rousseau advocated unfettered personal freedom for students to explore academic subjects or not, depending upon their personal inclinations. The "hippies" of the Sixties were the epitome of that freedom and, no doubt, one of the factors that inspired Skinner's treatise.

To make his argument, Skinner dissected the myth of the "free school" and the "free and happy student" described in Rousseau's classic Emile. Written in 1762, Emile expounded Rousseau's theory that education is not about imparting knowledge (facts) but instead requires drawing out the interests of each individual child. His fictional Emile is the perfect student. He needs no discipline, studies because he is naturally curious, and learns things because they interest him. As Skinner observes, an Emile may occasionally surface in real-life classrooms, but he clearly isn't the norm.

Educators, nevertheless, latched on to Rousseau's theories as part of a movement to eliminate rigid discipline from schools. In the process, they also removed knowledge and skills from the curriculum and abdicated their traditional roles as directors of learning. Instead, they became "facilitators" and idealized the student-led classroom.

Core knowledge? Not necessary, according to the disciples of Rousseau. Knowledge is always in flux and therefore irrelevant in their lives, so why bother to acquire it? Feelings and emotional reactions mattered more than reason and intellect. Regimentation went out the window for the "free and happy" student. Seats lined

up in restrictive rows were the first to go. Stifling examinations and grades followed. Disorganization and inefficiency replaced order and focused effort. "Progressive" educators sought to bring the "real world" into the classroom or turn students over to the "real world" to be educated.

But were students really freed? As adult influences were removed, students simply became more subject to less benign social and economic influences -- peers and retail marketers, for example. In effect, the task of teaching mature and responsible conduct was left almost entirely to the family.

Skinner's portrait of the modern Emile is the product of those influences. Modern and "free" Emile isn't happier with school or life. He lacks a work ethic and has limited curiosity. He can't think clearly because he has had little chance to learn to think logically or scientifically. Rousseau's mode of education was supposed to help children become better human beings, but modern Emile engages in vandalism and personal attacks on teachers. The creativity that the "free school" was supposed to unleash never materialized because students had little with which to be creative and produced only primitive and elemental art, music, and literature.

Contrasted to the utopian fantasies of Rousseau and his followers, Skinner's case for adult-directed schooling seems especially valid and compelling:

> Formal education enables individuals to learn far more in one lifetime than would be possible from experience alone.
>
> Education is preparation for the future and best directed by adults who have an admittedly imperfect but useful knowledge of that future.
>
> Real-world experiences teach about the present but not necessarily about the future.
>
> Encouraging children to be guided only by their own educational choices limits them to learning mostly about the present.

In Skinner's view, the teacher's job is to give the student immediate reasons for engaging in behavior (i.e., study) that will prove beneficial in the future. To carry out this task, teachers cannot cede control of the classroom to their students. Rather they must exert sufficient influence to overcome competing attractions but with minimal use of threat and punishment.

Followers of Rousseau and "progressive" educators sought to end punitive practices. In the process, they substantially weakened teachers' ability to foster study and learning. Skinner argues that knowledgeable use of positive reinforcement will permit teachers to achieve the traditional goals of schooling but without the side effects of aversive control.

The Education Consumers Consultants Network is an alliance of experienced and credentialed educators dedicated to serving the needs of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers for independent and consumer-friendly consulting. For more information, contact J. E. Stone, Ed.D., at (423) 282-6832, or write: professor@education-consumers.com