

One Pathway to Education

Rogers, C., & Freiberg, H. J. (1994). Freedom to learn, (pp. 338-339). New York: Maxwell Macmillian International.

One Pathway to Education. A small boy enters school, his first day. He is eager to go because it is a step toward being grown up. He has watched as the big boys and girls go to school each morning and return again each afternoon. But he is also frightened. It is a strange new situation full of fearsome possibilities. He has heard stories about school -- about punishments, about exciting times, about report cards, about teachers, friendly and unfriendly. It is a scary uncertainty.

He is directed to his room. His teacher is businesslike. Here is his desk and chair, one in a straight row of desks and chairs. Here are his books and pencils. The teacher greets the group with a smile, but it seems forced. Then come the rules. He cannot leave his seat, even to go to the toilet, without first raising his hand and receiving permission. He is not to whisper or talk to his neighbors. He is to speak only when called upon. No one is to make unnecessary noise. He thinks of yesterday. He was continually on the move, making as much noise as he pleased, shouting to his friends. School is so very different.

Then classes begin -- the reading book, letters and words on the board. The teacher talks. One child is called upon and is praised for a correct response. He is called on. He makes a mistake "Wrong! Who can give Johnny the right answer?" Hands go up, and he is soon corrected. He feels stupid. He leans over to tell his neighbor how he happened to make the mistake. He is reprimanded for talking. The teacher comes and stands by his seat to make clear that she is watching him, that he must abide by the rules.

Recess is fun -- much shouting, running, some games -- but it's all too short. Then school begins again. His body squirms, his mind wanders, finally lunch. Not until the students are all lined up in a perfectly straight row are they permitted to walk silently to the lunchroom.

The child's educational career has commenced. He has already learned a great deal, though he could not put it into words. He has learned that:

- There is no place for his restless physical energy in the schoolroom.
- One conforms or takes the unpleasant consequences.
- Submission to rules is very important.
- Making a mistake is very bad.
- The punishment for a mistake is humiliation.
- Spontaneous interest does not belong in school.
- Teacher and disciplinarian are synonymous.
- School is, on the whole, an unpleasant experience.

At the end of the day, he asks his parents, "How long do I have to do I have to go?" Gradually, he will learn that he has been sentenced to a very long term.

As the days, months, years roll by, he learns other things:

- Most textbooks are boring.
- It is not safe to differ with a teacher.
- There are many ways to get by without studying or learning.
- It is okay to cheat as long as you don't get caught.
- Daydreams, doodling, and fantasy can make the day pass more quickly.
- To study hard and get good grades is behavior scorned by your peers.
- Most of the learning relevant to life takes place outside of school.
- Original ideas have no place in school.
- Exams and grades are the most important aspects of education.
- Some teachers are impersonal and boring in class.

Small wonder that the child looks forward to vacations as being the time when he really lives. Graduation becomes desirable as a release from boredom, constriction, and coercion.

This is one pathway, one type of school experience. I believe, based on observations and current research, that it is a pathway experienced by millions of children and young people [especially, by students from low-income families].

Guiding questions:

- **How similar and different is the described Johnny's experience in regard to your own past school experience, your friends' past school experience, your own current college experience, and your friends' current college experience?**
- **What is wrong with this experience in your view?**
- **Why do you think this experience occurs? How do school teaching and organization of the classroom contribute to the negative aspects of this experience?**
- **What do you think student's school experience should be? Please, describe it in detail.**
- **What changes do you propose for teaching and organizing the classroom to avoid Johnny's negative experience?**