

INTRODUCTION

Children Should be Free Citizens

I have a riddle to pose, but first I'd like to play a kind of verbal charade with you. I'll give a description of an institution, and you'll try to guess what it is. You get only one guess, but I'll try to make it fairly easy. Ready? O.K, here it goes:

It's usually housed in big brick buildings; the more modern ones are concrete. The basic population (I'll call them "clients") are confined inside, unless one of them gets a special pass. The clients are under the complete control of a group of people I'll call "overseers," who issue commands to the clients.

The basic rule of the institution is that the clients must obey the commands of the overseers or be subject to punishment (for example, additional confinement).

The clients have virtually no rights, constitutional or otherwise. The atmosphere is generally oppressive, and there is a basic tension between overseers and clients. Often, there is intensive psychological pressure imposed upon the clients. Many break under it, trying to escape, either by running away

of by resorting to drugs, alcohol or violence.

Freedom is unknown with in the walls of the institution; personal initiative is, to put it mildly, discouraged. The overseers do not tolerate defiance or independence, but are otherwise rarely concerned with the relationships among clients. Obedience is all-important.

It is a broadly-stated hope that the clients will receive enough training during their confinement to prepare them for life outside the institution when they are finally let free. I say “hope” because, more often than not, this does not happen, and one of the major complaints one hears is that the newly-released ex-clients are generally not well-trained to do anything useful, and are often illiterate.

The clients, for their part – not surprisingly – almost all hate the institution, and dream of getting out. Periodically they will favor a friendly overseer, but the nature of the beast is to feel a deep antagonism to those who rule them with arbitrary power.

After a few years of exposure to the anger, hostility, and frustration of everyday life in an essentially repressive environment, most overseers either leave, try to move on to administrative post, or develop a protective shell of hardness and cynicism to cover the pain of their disappointment.

Have you guessed now what the institution is that I've described? You're right! It's called “*a school*”!

You're also right if you said “*a prison*”!

And that brings me to the riddle I promised you in the opening sentence. Riddle: “Why is a school a prison?”

To answer that one properly, you have to answer a bunch of riddles, all of which are equally puzzling.

Why are children forced to go to school?

Why are children forced to stay in school?

Why are children forced to learn in school?

Why don't school children have the same rights as adults?

Why aren't teachers free to choose what they teach?

Or, to put it in the most basic terms possible, why does the United States of America, the greatest democratic republic in history, the most powerful nation on earth, the model of freedom and fair play for all of mankind – why does this great nation subject its youth to a despotism which makes old King George III look liberal?

Don't rush to dismiss these questions. The answers are far from obvious. There was a time not too long ago when we treated blacks as slaves, laborers as paid servants, women as indentured household help. There was a time when the “self-evident” truth that “all men are created equal” referred exclusively to adult white propertied males.

It has taken much blood, and many valiant struggles, to get the word “men” to mean “adult human beings of all sexes and races.” Maybe, just maybe, it's time to extend the meaning to young people as well.