

Anti-Authoritarian Personalities & Standard Schools

Are “Behavior Problems” More Accurately Rebellion Against Authority?

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Mark Twain, one of America’s most beloved anti-authoritarians, gave young people sound advice: “Never let your schooling get in the way of your education.” Do most schools teach us:

- * To be self-directed—or directed by others?
- * That relationships should be respectful—or manipulated by rewards and punishments?
- * That you can exit from boring and abusive surroundings—or that you must endure them?
- * That you can choose your path of learning—or that you must submit to any and all authorities?
- * To seek the authoritative—or comply with the authoritarian?

The nature of most classrooms, regardless of the subject matter, socializes students to be passive and directed by others, to follow orders, to take seriously the rewards and punishments of authorities, to pretend to care about things they don’t care about, and to realize they are impotent to affect their situation. Standard schools demand compliance with hierarchy, including compliance with authorities whom one does not necessarily respect.

Anti-authoritarian teachers know this. John Taylor Gatto, accepting the New York City Teacher of the Year Award on January 31, 1990, was blunt:

The truth is that schools don’t really teach anything except how to obey orders. This is a great mystery to me because thousands of humane, caring people work in schools as teachers and aides and administrators, but the abstract logic of the institution overwhelms their individual contributions.

Authoritarians equate success with gaining the rewards of authorities. Former teacher and school critic Alfie Kohn, in *Punished by Rewards*, describes entire childhoods turned into one continuous attempt to prepare for Harvard—“Preparation H.”

Kohn tells of speaking to a group of these high-achieving authoritarian students. When he was finished, a 16-year-old boy said, “You’re telling us not to just get in a race for the traditional rewards. What else is there?” Kohn reflected that here was a teenager who was highly successful by conventional standards, but, “there was a large hole where his soul should have been.”

By contrast, anti-authoritarian students are often disruptive, both passively and actively. And these days, teachers increasingly refer them to mental health professionals who routinely give these kids diagnoses such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and opposition defiant disorder (ODD).

Today, a young Albert Einstein would likely receive an ADHD and an ODD diagnosis. Albert didn’t pay attention to his teachers and failed his college entrance examinations twice. However, Einstein biographer Ronald Clark (*Einstein: The Life and Times*) asserts that Albert’s problems did not stem from attention deficits but rather from his hatred of authoritarian, Prussian discipline in his schools.

Einstein said, “The teachers in the elementary school appeared to me like sergeants and in the Gymnasium the teachers were like lieutenants.” After he did enter college, one professor told Einstein, “You have one fault; one can’t

tell you anything.” The truth is that the anti-authoritarian Einstein didn’t reject all authorities, only the ones that didn’t know what they were talking about.

There is nothing essentially disordered with ADHD labeled kids. As I document in *Commonsense Rebellion*, kids labeled with ADHD do pay attention when an activity is novel, interests them, or is chosen by them, or when they are getting paid for it; and biochemical explanations of ADHD don’t scientifically hold up. These kids, for the most part, simply resist boring tasks that do not interest them or when the only reward is a good grade from a teacher. Many of them are essentially anti-authoritarians.

What does explain these kids’ classroom behavior? While authoritarians recoil at the idea of comparing school to prison, anti-authoritarian kids don’t. For these kids, school feels like jail, and they behave similarly to others who experience subjugation. John Holt’s *How Children Fail* (1964) details this.

Holt reminds us that in German concentration camps many of the prisoners, attempting “to save both their lives and something of their dignity, and to resist, despite their impotence, the demands of their jailers...[adopted] an air of amiable dull-wittedness, of smiling foolishness, of cooperative and willing incompetence...Told to do something, they listened attentively, nodded their heads eagerly, and asked questions that showed they had not understood a word of what had been said.” This same strategy was also used by enslaved Africans on plantations.

Subjugated people, including anti-authoritarian kids in a classroom, attempt to appease their rulers while still satisfying some part of their own desire for dignity. They do this, Holt said, “by putting on a mask, by acting much more stupid and incompetent than they really are, by denying their rulers the full use of their intelligence and ability, by declaring their minds and spirits free of their enslaved bodies.”

By “going stupid” in the classroom, children frustrate authorities through withdrawing the most intelligent and creative parts of their minds from the scene, achieving some sense of potency—a problematic one, however, as some of these kids begin to believe they actually are stupid or do have ADHD. “Going stupid” is one reason for ADHD and other so-called “mental illnesses.”

While anti-authoritarian kids who more passively resist authorities are often diagnosed with ADHD, young anti-authoritarians who are more open and direct about their resistance to illegitimate authorities are routinely diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). The symptoms of ODD include “often actively defies or refuses to comply with adult requests or rules” and “often argues with adults.” Only authoritarians don’t find it laughable that these “symptoms” constitute a disorder. ODD kids are essentially young anti-authoritarians.

I once consulted with a teacher about an extremely bright eight-year-old boy who routinely defied his teachers and was labeled with ODD. I suggested that perhaps the boy didn’t have a disease, but was just bored. His teacher, a pleasant woman, agreed with me. However, she added, “They told us at the state conference that our job is to get them ready for the work world...that the children have to get used to not being stimulated all the time or they will lose their jobs in the real world.” The teacher told me this quite innocently, in no way attempting to make some dark political point.

Can standard schools be reformed? According to school critic Jonathan Kozol, teachers wishing to see schools less rigid and less oppressive, “are not willing to confront that the one, exclusive and historic function of the system is counter to these goals.”

Kozol reminds us that maintaining a hierarchy and the indoctrination of workers to institutionalized life—first to the factory and later to bureaucracy—has always been the clear-cut function of the public schools.

In 1844, Horace Mann, the first secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, addressed himself to business interests:

“Could there, in your opinion, be any police so vigilant and effective, for the protection of all rights of person, property and character, as such as a sound and comprehensive education and training as our system of common schools could be made to impart?...Would not the payment of sufficient tax to make such training universal, be the cheapest means of self-protection and insurance?”

I am in my fifties, and I still have nightmares about school. When I go into a school to vote, to see a play, or for some other innocuous reason, I still get anxious, my stomach gets upset, and I just want to run from the building. I used to joke that school gave me post-traumatic stress disorder. But maybe it’s no joke.

A great pain reduction in my young life came when the New York City teachers went out on strike my first year of junior high school. But then the strike ended, and the authorities decided to extend class periods to make up for “lost learning,” and the ordinary torture of a school day became an extraordinarily torturous one.

Ivan Illich, in his classic *Deschooling Society* (1970), offers an anti-authoritarian alternative to standard authoritarian schooling. Instead of schools there would be:

- * Skill Exchanges: Persons list their skills and the conditions under which they are willing to serve as models for others who want to learn these skills.

- * Peer Matching: A communication network which permits persons to describe the learning activity in which they wish to engage in hope of finding a partner for inquiry.

- * Professional Educators: Those with a reputation as master educators would provide experienced leadership when learners came to rough terrain. They would not make curriculum, discipline students, purchase textbooks, plan lessons or keep records. They would be advice givers, and book and apprenticeship recommenders. They would inspire intellectual discipline and curiosity.

- * Reference Services: Not just libraries, but farms, laboratories, and more. “Deschooling the artifacts of education” requires making the artifacts available.

From my experience, while most anti-authoritarian kids disliked their schooling and couldn’t wait to exit from it, they would be enthusiastic learners in Illich’s deschooled educational model.

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