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Spotsy High a Prison

by Thomas L. Johnson

How can we speak of democracy or freedom when from the very beginning of life we mold the child to undergo tyranny, to obey a dictator? ... How can we expect them, when school-life is finished, to accept and use the rights of freedom? — Maria Montessori, Education for a New World

Two Spotsylvania High School students have been very brave to write letters to *The Free Lance-Star* about their academic institution. Michael Gugino [June 2] asserts that “my high school has been transformed into a penitentiary,” and David Lochart [June 13] observes that to just “walk in the [school] hallway without the correct documents, and you will be harshly reprimanded.”

What these two students probably don’t realize is that schools have operated like prisons for as long as they have existed. And this condition is not just found in America, but throughout the world.

Almost three decades ago, Craig Haney and Philip Zimbardo wrote an article published in *Psychology Today* [June 1975] that was titled “It’s Tough to Tell a High School from a Prison.” Among many other things, they spoke about “guards posing as teachers, and students learning how to be docile prisoners.”

In her book, *Injustice for All*, Anne Strick comments that

Zimbardo calls our schools “prisons of the mind,” where we early learn to surrender intellectual autonomy and play out the prisoner-guard relationship. The schools’ “good” child does not question his teachers, salaams to administrators, and jockeys hard on a grading curve where one person’s gain is another’s loss.

And in John Holt’s candid and revealing book *The Underachieving School*, he points out that

What is most shocking and horrifying about public education today is that in almost all schools children are treated, most of the time, like convicts in jail. They cannot move without written permission, and the buildings are full of monitors — that is, spies and police, most of them students themselves — to

make sure that they have this permission. During a large part of the day, they cannot even speak without permission.

Herbert Kohl, another keen observer of the academic scene, in his book *The Open Classroom*, summarizes his take on the educational system by saying that for most American children there is essentially one public school system in the United States, and it is authoritarian and oppressive.

The basic reason why schools operate like prisons is due to the fact that they are all authoritarian institutions, established by people who hold an authoritarian philosophy of life. And in these institutions, those in authority, the administrators and teachers, must be strictly obeyed by those under their rule, the students. But one could more accurately describe these individuals as the victims.

The tragic situation concerning the education of children and youths, is that they start out in the educational system at such an early age that they are unable to judge what is happening to them. And after 12 or more years of exposure to this dictatorial situation, they are so thoroughly indoctrinated in the functioning of this irrational academic system that suppresses their rights and freedom, that they are convinced of its validity.

But now that more and more students, like Mr. Gugino and Mr. Lochart, are discovering the similarity between a school and a prison, hopefully they will withdraw their support of the entire authoritarian academic system and declare their intellectual independence. In my book, *The REAL Academic Community*, which is subtitled *And the Rational Alternative*, I include a formal statement called "The Declaration of Educational Independence." It begins with these words:

We, the students of the world, having been subject to the tyranny of a dictatorial system of education since the dawn of antiquity, have reached a point in time when we will no longer submit our minds to the arbitrary whims of mental masters. Recognizing the individuality of every human being, and the right of each individual to determine the development of his or her own mind, we hereby declare our independence in the pursuit of knowledge. In defense of our position we state the following truths....

Perhaps one day this call for intellectual freedom, which could result in healthy mental development for children during the highly sensitive early years of life, will be adopted by more and more youths who wish to work for a far better future for themselves, their children, and for the entire human race.

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