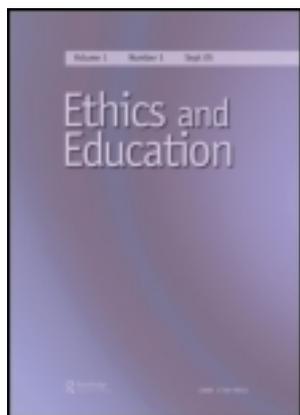


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The quest for compliance in schools: unforeseen consequences

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This study investigates the reaction of high school students in an alternative urban secondary school to highly controlling, authoritarian practices. Premised on the published theories, we imagined that students would object to the regime and consider it unduly repressive. Student reactions were elicited through questionnaires and interviews. To our considerable surprise, most respondents approved of the authoritarian regime and disapproved of granting students more self-expression. Most have come to believe that they do not deserve freedom from pervasive rules, for they will indeed abuse it. As one child said approvingly, ‘This is a disciplinary school’ – you give up freedom and accept rules. We discuss the implications of such a strong identification with the school’s norms and the consequent distrust of personal autonomy.

Keywords: high school teaching; discipline; authority; freedom; self-concept; self-esteem; identification

In some schools, inculcation in social mores and instructional material goes so smoothly that students are scarcely aware of the process. In others, factors intrinsic and extrinsic to the schools disrupt the process. Children may attend unwilling (or not at all). Teachers may find them uncooperative and therefore ratchet up the control systems to make instruction possible. Controls are partly in the structure of the day (mandatory classes, schedules, routines, rituals, and assignments), partly in rules of comportment (including when and how to talk, when and how to move, and how to dress; see Foucault 1977; McNeil 1986; Metz 1978), and partly in the discipline systems. The control mechanisms may be noxious, even to those in charge, but they are thought to be indispensable to maintaining a secure and safe environment, the precondition for teaching and learning. Teachers do not start out wanting to oppress children. They start out with an instructional lesson, but when students balk, when a few damage the opportunities of the many, ever-greater controls, often highly punitive, are instituted. Control over students is ratcheted up until there is no room for expressive spontaneity. Although teachers and administrators may not like the resulting repressive, often joyless, regime they feel forced to impose, they believe that freedom denied is freedom protected, for true freedom is the cultivation of a rational, deliberative autonomy, not impulsive self-determination. Coercion is the price to be paid for self-actualization.

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This, however, is an adult perspective. The adolescent, one assumes, often does not accept the rationale for coercion – hence, high school dropout rates. Released from daily controls, the dropout is likely to experience an enhanced freedom, to be pleased with the absence of an overpowering authoritarian adult, and not to note the restrictions on her freedom resulting from limited opportunities or limited skills. As noted by Berlin (1969–2002), it is the intentional limits on freedom rather than on the absence of a growth experience, which one experiences as restraints. Were the students more prescient, they might appreciate the benefits of coercion and not have abandoned school, but they are not prescient. School authorities keep telling students (and themselves believe) that the severe restraints on choice (unless it is the ‘right’ choice) are for their own good. How they respond to this rationale is the core of this study.

The authors imagined that students have no purchase on the for-your-own-good message. Their response, we supposed, was more likely to be resistance and alienation than understanding and assent. To avoid this eventuality, we further assumed that educators need to strike a balance between erecting controls and encouraging spontaneity and between Berlin’s positive and negative freedom (amplified below). In this study, after elaborating on the justification for such a balance, we describe how control is exerted in an alternative school for urban children,¹ the students’ reactions to the controls and, most worrisome, the failure embedded in its success, that is the unfortunate consequences of student identification with the pervasive and powerful authority. In the end, our expectations – that the students would object to the regime and consider it unduly repressive – were falsified. An explanation for these findings is taken up in our discussion.

Coercion and liberty

The drive to be free of restraints, to make one’s own decisions, to strike out independently in pursuit of one’s own goals, appears fundamental to the human condition. We see the drive in babies who would rather grab the spoon from their mother’s hand to feed themselves – often spilling and making a mess in the process – than submit to the perfect administration of parental feeding. And we see it happening as children resist instruction so as to figure out solutions for themselves.

Autonomy is not a final developmental outcome, to be released at the end of childhood, but is woven into the process of growing a sense of competence that, in turn, is required for self-esteem. As Deci and Ryan note, ‘being autonomous is both an input to and a manifestation of the development of an integrated self and true self-esteem’ (1995, 35). Exercising volition (agency), initiating successful encounters – in play, work, and relationships – is essential to developing first self-awareness and then, if all goes well, self-esteem (Damon and Hart 1988; Deci and Ryan 1995). It is thought that the chronic complaint of boredom among school children is, in part, a reaction to restrictions on children’s autonomous expressions. When ‘regulation of behavior is accomplished by the repressive control of feelings, then the path toward chronic boredom is established’ (Bernstein 1975, 536). Furthermore, and more importantly, if independent strivings are disregarded or negated, one’s self-worth becomes contingent on living as expected by others and dissolves when one fails in those efforts. Alone, measuring up to external standards does not yield self-esteem, though approval is a spur to it. That approval is most effective when directed, in part, to supporting a student’s burgeoning self-identity and not exclusively focused on who we want her to become. For adolescents in particular, self-

esteem involves expressing one's 'true feelings' as opposed to 'being phony,' 'not saying what you think,' 'putting on an act,' and 'changing yourself to be something that someone *else* wants you to be' (Harter 1998, 581). Deprivation of voice is 'associated with low self-esteem, hopelessness, and depressed affect' (Harter 1998, 582).

Yet, it is also true that paralleling the drive to be independent is the drive to be cared for (Noddings 2002, 2003). The same baby who wants to feed herself is soothed by being cradled, seeks protection and guidance, and wants her inquiries answered. She watches, imitates, questions, and learns from direct instruction. 'Teach-me' partners with 'me-do-it,' neither works in isolation. The thrust for personal agency seems written into our DNA, as is the desire to submit to the care and teaching of others. Children seek and need an orderly, protective, predictable, and restraining environment along with opportunities to shape their environment. This duality is well captured in the literature on child attachment. The well-attached 1-year-old uses his mother as a safe haven. Her presence provides security and protection, thereby allowing him to move away (Cassidy 1999). As Harter (1999) notes, the tradition of contrasting the Western ideal of autonomy and individualism with the Eastern one of relatedness and self-subordination to others is being replaced by a combined ideal that fosters both throughout life. An undeveloped authentic self, however, is a barrier to establishing mutuality.

The human nature arguments that recognize personal fulfillment as a function of dependence and independence strivings are paralleled by philosophical arguments acknowledging the imperatives of both negative and positive freedom (Berlin 1969–2002).

In the liberal political tradition, negative freedom, to live as one chooses subject only to not harming others, is a prized value. The liberty to express oneself, to be the author of one's own life, is core to human dignity; in a state of subjection, dignity is denied. In order to exercise personal agency in constructing a life, children at every age need exposure to, and exploration of, a variety of possibilities from which they can select. This is Berlin's negative freedom and what most people understand as liberty. We assumed it would have a particularly strong pull on the sentiments of American youth, given that liberty and the pursuit of happiness are viewed as inalienable national rights.

Yet true freedom, as opposed to anarchic impulsiveness, requires restraints on freedom, especially for the young, and justifies the intrusion of laws, schools, and carers. Authority and (negative) freedom, seemingly oppositional terms, are actually complementary. Authority by itself becomes tyranny and liberty becomes license. 'Each of these terms destroys itself at the very moment when it destroys the other term by its excess' (Simon 1940, 2). A child cannot know her true interests, cannot choose wisely if her impulses have not been shaped and constrained. The culture and family are the context in which agency and choice emerge (Archard 1993). This seeming paradox, that freedom depends on its prohibition, is translated by some as constituting the two basic claims of childhood – for welfare and agency rights (Archard 1993, 2003; Brighouse 2002; Kleinig 1976). Welfare rights (Feinberg 1980, calls them dependency rights) – inclusive of the right to receive (or the adult's obligation to provide) physical and psychological security, an education, stable relationships, and material security – cocoon the child's growth. Agency rights afford opportunities to develop capacities and consider options (Brighouse 2002; Kleinig 1976; Nussbaum 2000; Sen 1992). In the language of R. S. Peters, '[i]f the rule of law . . . is absent, it simply is not the case that children are actually able to do what they individually want' (Peters 1966, 117). At the same time, 'Autonomy implies the

ability and determination to regulate one's life by rules which one has accepted for oneself" (Peters 1966, 120).

The aspects of children's well-being that require protection and restraint are referred to by Berlin as positive freedom and are required for genuine self-mastery, the domination of a higher rational self over a lower instinctual self. Authentic self-interest and self-realization require deliberative rationality that is reduced when children fall prey to fears, ignorance, and easy temptations (as in quitting school; Taylor 1985). There are two critical elements to positive freedom: the first is a repressive but paternalistic control over the child. Repressive control allows children to develop perseverance, restraint, self-control, and discernment. Obedience to a benevolent authority is required for eventual emancipation of the true self. It is the price children pay for the good that comes to them from adults (Freeman 1983; Durkheim 2002).

The second element of positive freedom is an appeal to one's 'higher' self by providing values and adult-chosen opportunities that will direct the child to a purposeful, morally well-founded, and worthwhile life. The higher self is oriented to a set of ideals that may incorporate the values of a community or state, represent the teacher's or school's ideals of the good, or be constructed by the child through a pastiche of influences. Combining the two elements of positive freedom allows her to feel she is her own master able to function well in society. Yet, because there is obvious danger to this form of self-realization that requires restraint, positive freedom must be balanced by negative freedom – the opportunity to choose independently and go beyond the available models.

Schools, particularly those in regions of urban poverty, have, in both their instructional and behavioral demands, tilted heavily toward the repressive aspects of positive freedom rather than toward negative freedom. They ask (demand) that children suppress their liberty longings for the sake of growing a controlled, socialized, rational, disciplined, and orderly will.

The premise of our study is that developing responsible autonomy requires both positive and negative freedom. Those in power at Merit High (a fictitious name), the school that we studied, believe that holding and enforcing strict standards while simultaneously getting students to identify with those standards, give these high-risk youths their best chance to become constructive responsible adults. They are persuaded that negative freedom works against these possibilities. We wanted to understand the impact of such a discipline system, in which negative freedom is all but eliminated, on student perceptions of the school and themselves.

Merit High

Merit is an alternative high school with an enrollment of approximately 200 inner city students most of whom qualify for free lunches. They come to Merit because in previous schools they have failed, dropped out, truanted, been expelled, and/or involved with the juvenile justice system. The students are *under-credentialed*, that is they have failed a sufficient number of classes to be at least one grade level behind expectations. The school is starting its fourth year and is run by a private company.

The primary goal of Merit, as stated in the Handbook, is for students to give up their antisocial behavior, develop the skills to sustain change, and meet academic standards. The environment of Merit is designed to encourage students – and involve them in encouraging each other – toward meeting the school norms. The emphasis on group

collaboration and collective responsibility is reflected in the school's 'Six Steps to Success' (Handbook): (1) Help support your peers. (2) Accept all confrontations right or wrong and weak or strong. (A confrontation occurs between peers when one student, observing another who has deviated from the behavioral code, urges him to make a better choice. For example, a student spying a peer with a shirt out may say, 'Can you tuck in your shirt. Around here, we tuck in our shirts. C'mon just tuck in your shirt so we can go. I've got places to be.') (3) Be where you are supposed to be on time, plan ahead. (4) Do what you are supposed to do. (5) Take pride in Merit. (6) Work together to succeed.

The norms are strict. All students must wear the school uniform that includes a white collared polo shirt tucked in at all times, khaki pants without multiple pockets or split seams at the bottom, and a plain black or brown belt without any insignia. Shoes must have laces, no sandals or flip-flops, no heels higher than 1 inch, no open toes. No headgear or sunglasses are permitted. Students cannot bring food or drink, electronic devices, book bags or backpacks into the building. They cannot wear jewelry, carry more than \$10.00, carry pocket books, or chew gum. Students are subject to searches and confiscation of prohibited items that parents can reclaim. Morning intake starts at 7:30 am. The discipline and teaching staff wait by the door on a rotated schedule. The procedures are like those at an airport: students go through a metal detector. They must remove shoes and coats and then be frisked by a staff member of the same sex. When outside the classroom, they must walk in 'protocol' (in line, hands clasped tightly behind the back).

No choices are allowed in course selections. As for extracurricular activities, although students are allowed to fill out a request form indicating whether they would like to take shop, culinary, building trades or computers, in actuality unless someone in the administration really likes a particular student, the request is disregarded. Decisions are made on bureaucratic criteria – who can be fitted into what classes to get the elective credit needed for graduation – and on such personal criteria as whether or not the decision-makers believe a student can be trusted around tools or culinary knives. Art is offered but not music, and art is available only for those who need a humanities credit to graduate. You do not choose it; you are rostered into it. Even the content of sports is fully prescribed by the administration. Adults attempt to select games unfamiliar to the students so that everyone starts at the same level; they (rather than the students) also select teams to be evenly matched.

Student progress in socialization is reflected in the weekly status rankings conferred by the teachers and behavioral staff and discussed at the daily Guided Group Interaction session (discussions of problems students are having in adhering to norms, and reports on status changes). As described in the Handbook, there are six student ranks each with their own set of privileges. At the bottom of the hierarchy are *Concerns*, students who have been disruptive, excessively absent, or are new admits with documented behavior problems. Their task is to assimilate the code of conduct, accept confrontations, abide by the dress code, maintain eye contact with all school personnel, trim facial hair, clean fingernails, always walk in protocol, and address personnel by name, using 'yes' instead of 'yeah,' 'no' instead of 'naw,' or saying 'excuse me.' Next are the *Neutrals*, neither disruptive nor constructive, who not only understand and conform to the code but are also beginning to support it, as demonstrated by more vocal participation in confrontations and greater support for the norms. Then in line are the *Positives*, expected to be more vocal in confrontations that maintain the normative culture, show growth in academics, and demonstrate consistent behavior at off-campus as well as on-campus events. *Positives*

compose an essay on how they will use their status to help the school, and fill out a pledge log that lists all school norms. After writing the essay, they are eligible to be a *Pledge* and a member of the student government (described as a club). Its function is to support positive norms through peer pressure and mentoring. Members of student government can earn privileges. These include the opportunity to order meals off-campus, wear a different color shirt, and not have to walk in protocol. *Pledges* are expected to document positive confrontations in their logs. Once their logs and behavior are approved, they can become *Eagles* who not only provide an example and mentoring for new and lower status students but also communicate with staff about school issues. Finally are the *Executives*, officers of the student government, who provide leadership and are relied on by school personnel to maintain the school norms at the highest levels. They are the top functioning *Eagles*. For this study, *Pledges*, *Eagles*, and *Executives*, the schools' successes were combined making four ranked groups.

We note that although there is an emphasis on individual and group responsibility, student authority is relegated to enforcing school norms. A small amount of negative freedom, in the form of release from rules, is viewed as a privilege rather than a right and granted sparingly to students as a reward for obedience. Constraining rules are the default position, freedom the occasional luxury. Group solidarity is an instrument of the primary goal, rule enforcement. Even student government does not generate novel initiatives but serves the norms (rules). There is no opportunity for voluntary expression of agency in the school day. Negative freedom options to articulate one's own interests/purposes or realize these interests/purposes through choice in activities have no place in the school's aspirations, presumably because negative freedom, in the experience of the authorities, is likely to be abused.

Methods

The description and analysis that follow are best described as a case study. That is, together, students, teacher, and school formed a 'specific, unique, bounded system' (Stake 1994, 237; Creswell 2007; Stake 1995). As is usual in case studies, our inquiry was grounded in a theory that prompted a hypothesis – here, the expectation that high school students in a disciplinary school would resist the heavy normative commitment to positive freedom because of their desire for, and commitment to, negative freedom. We expected, in other words, that this would be yet another instance of students alienated from school because of their frustration over autocratic practices.

Although the school and its students are particular, the case explores a general hypothesis regarding the impact of school norms on student perceptions. We acknowledge that, especially in a case study, speculations on causality have to be highly provisional, yet we think it plausible that the dynamic at Merit High is likely to be found in other schools with the same normative structure and demographics. Thus, this is both a descriptive case and a test case (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1994; Marshall and Rossman 1999; Miles and Huberman 1994; Walton 1992). That our expectations were disconfirmed set up a rival dynamic regarding the responses of students to all-encompassing control systems. In our discussion, we attempt to analyze why this group of subjects reacted affirmatively to the norms in place. Although of course, given all the influences upon these students prior to (and during) their lives at Merit, there is no direct causal line from school policy to student interpretations, our questions and analyses attempted to elicit possible links. To probe these dynamics further we must, and have begun to, replicate this study

with other students from schools with similar organizational structures, as well as students in schools where more negative freedom is offered. We now expect that some students will support our original proposition and resist the norms, while others will share the reactions of the Merit students. The research burden will then be to probe under what sorts of circumstances each reaction prevails, thereby enriching our theoretical matrix.

The work was carried out by Emily Klim (EK), a second year member of Teach for America who was simultaneously pursuing a master's degree, and Joan Goodman (JG), instructor of a year-long graduate course on authority and freedom. The major assignment of the class was an extended study of authority and freedom in the school. EK taught American History and Social Science at Merit High. She was not an anonymous passive observer but, as teacher, a familiar, active co-constructor of the students' lives.

Merit's discipline was investigated through inspection of the school Handbook, a student questionnaire with open-ended questions, and eight extended interviews that further probed some of the questionnaire responses. Students answered a set of statements on a Likert scale – strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. In our analyses, we have turned this into a dichotomous scale. The students were then asked to explain their ratings. The survey questions were developed to identify student beliefs on the existence of positive and negative freedom in their school. For example, questions on positive freedom included 'The teachers and staff at my school encourage me to be myself.' 'The teachers and staff at my school want to change who I am.' 'The teachers and staff at my school know what's best for me.' 'The teachers and staff at my school want to control my behavior.' Questions regarding negative freedom included 'Compared to other schools you have been in, how much freedom do you have at Merit?' 'Is it a good or bad thing for students to have freedom in school?' 'What rules do you not like?' The comment sections further allowed the students to expand on their answers. The eight students interviewed (one male and one female representing equally the four status ratings) were selected because they gave interesting and varied answers on their surveys. Given that the interviews were amplifications of answers on the questionnaires, we merged them in presenting the results. The combined testimony provided data from which to generate broader theoretical speculations on the relationships of the control systems to emergent self-concepts.

One hundred and fifty surveys were handed out to the student body in several of the prescribed daily Guided Group Interaction sessions. All students of all grades were given the opportunity to fill them out. Completion was optional so as not to add to the coerciveness of the day. Results are based on the 56 surveys returned and largely completed. The data were messy. Often students left questions blank or wrote answers that were not intelligible. We therefore report the findings of the objective questions as percentages calculated on the basis of those responding to the particular question.

The racial and gender make-up of the resulting sample – 61% Black, 16% Hispanic, and 23% other – was representative of the school. At the time of our study, the students at Merit were classified as follows: Concerns, 16%; Neutrals, 42%; Positives, 22%; Pledges, Eagles, and Executives, 20%. Given the voluntary conditions of the survey, it is unsurprising that the respondents were somewhat skewed toward the better performing students. In the school at large 42% of the students were in the top two tiers, while in our sample it was 59%; in the school at large 58% fell in the lower two tiers, while in the sample it was 41%.

The student participants presumably volunteered because they knew and trusted the teacher and wanted the experience. This self-selectivity may have biased results in favor of

positive freedom judgments, as these students are perhaps more apt to have bought into the model of self-realization through obedience to school norms. The teacher, on the other hand, had a point of view, distilled from her own education and 2 years of teaching at Merit, which might have 'pulled for' the expression of discontent. Whatever the sacrifice in objectivity from these and other sources of bias, the students appeared to be giving honest self-revealing responses without concern for social desirability. That they may not be entirely representative of either the school or other similarly situated schools is less important than the implications of the sentiments expressed. We make the same disclaimer for our interpretations; they are not offered as 'findings,' but rather as speculations to be further pursued. The power of the analysis has to come from the likelihood that this disciplinary school and its population are similar to others (some others) and the persuasiveness of the speculations.

Results

To our considerable surprise, most students approved of the autocratic regime and disapproved of students having more of a school voice. Most have come to believe that they do not deserve freedom from pervasive rules, for they would indeed abuse it.

Positive freedom: a sign of caring

Students in the sample are largely supportive of the schools' quest. Seventy-five percent agreed with the statement, 'The teachers and staff at my school encourage me to be myself.' Being oneself largely means self-realization in accordance with school goals. As seen in comments to the question, 'The teachers and staff at my school want to change who I am,' all but two students gave answers along the lines of: 'It would be good because they want me to better myself.' One commented, 'If staff want to change me, it would be' a 'bad thing because that means I don't meet their expectations.' 'Bettering myself,' a constant refrain, meant meeting school goals and becoming prepared for the 'real world.' The aspiration, then, was to become the person advocated by the school, follow the rules because they promote a vaguely defined successful outcome. No one objected to the school's failure to help them find or follow their own interests. No one mentioned that being myself means pursuing my own talents, constructing a way to cope with challenges, both moral and practical, certainly nothing that would contribute to self-determination, to becoming agents of one's own destiny.

The view of school as a place that represents your own best interests was further supported by respondents (69%) who agreed with the statement, 'The teachers and staff at my school know what's best for me.' Some comments attributed an almost omniscient perspective to teachers: 'They know what I want to do after high school,' 'They know that I could work harder.' The most common response was that teachers are experienced, having once walked in our shoes and they know what is best. However, there was some resistance to this common statement. It appears that the phrase 'what's best for me' had a broad connotation, extending beyond school, whereas 'being myself' was limited to the in-school me. Thirteen of the 16 students who believed that school was encouraging them to be a better version of themselves (being myself) still balked at the idea that it knew what was truly best for them (what's best for me). Comments included 'They know what you need to learn and why, but only you yourself know what's good for you,' 'They only know

what you tell them,' 'They don't really know what I want in life so how can they tell me what's good for me,' 'They know what's best far as right now,' 'They don't know as well as my Mom and Dad even though they treat me like I'm their kids.'

Despite subjection to strict controls and rules, less than half (41%) agreed with the statement, 'The teachers and staff at my school want to control my behavior.' Those who agreed, however, were not critical of the school. They saw the controls as helping them to be more contained: 'I might get upset about some things so they help me not make the wrong decision,' 'So you don't make a fool of yourself,' 'Because I'm loud,' 'So I don't get out of line,' 'So that they can prevent violence,' 'So nobody gets out of control,' 'It's probably to keep the other students safe and also so I'm not a disruption,' The word, 'disruption,' sounds like teacher-speak and suggests student internalization of the adult's perspective. Beyond keeping a lid on the students, adult control is seen as a means of emancipating the truer self: 'So everyone can learn more,' 'Bad behavior can hinder your learning,' 'Because they would like me to act like an adult,' 'For the better,' 'To keep the school good and organized,' 'So that I can make this a better program,' Only three students objected to the controls. One, defiantly, claimed, 'I will not give in easy.' Another saw the controls as the teachers' wish 'to show more power, and to make mines [behavior] better.' The third commented, 'they control us but sometimes they going to lose control.' When asked if they had been treated unfairly 89% responded negatively. The few who said yes they had been treated unfairly mentioned inconsistent application of the rules, not the rules themselves. They were endorsed. A characteristic comment: 'I like the norms here. I'm comfortable with them. They're simple, easy to follow.'

This surrender to the norms suggests that Merit has been successful in convincing at least most of these students that the established policies of control are actually liberating; students so indoctrinated will be freed from their 'lower' passionate, impulsive selves. They reflect the belief, problematic for Berlin and others, that

[I]liberty, so far from being incompatible with authority, becomes virtually identical with it . . . liberty coincides with law: autonomy with authority. A law which forbids me to do what I could not, as a sane being, conceivably wish to do is not a restraint of my freedom. (2002, 194, 195)

Rules that prohibit my desires, then, benefit my well-being.

Negative freedom: a danger to schooling

If students adhered strictly to the Handbook there would be virtually no opportunities for negative freedom. But they do not. Although compliance with the uniform permits little self-expression, students add flowers in their hair or bright laces to their shoes. According to the rules, such adornments are not allowed – even the type of belts permitted is rule specified – but because these rules are not always strictly enforced, small choices are left to students. That seems to suffice.

When asked, *compared to other schools you have been in, how much freedom do you have at Merit*, 77% of those responding said they had less or no freedom at Merit. However, once again they approve of the controls associating school freedom with anarchy, lowered standards, and contrary to the purpose of education: '[We have] no freedom and it's good that way cause we're here to do our work,' 'Not much freedom because in my other school I would cut all day long and you can't do that here.' Lack of freedom was associated with caring and structure, freedom with not caring: 'Less freedom here. I can't just walk off

campus. I have to come to school here. Any other school could care less.’ Students wrote disparagingly about staff members from other schools who permitted them to roam through the halls or just walk out of the building. One student referred to his prior school as a ‘zoo.’

As to whether it is *a good or bad thing to have freedom at school*, the students had mixed reactions. On the one hand, they said, if you give freedom to students they will ‘take advantage’ of it, ‘get carried away,’ ‘act up,’ ‘mess up,’ ‘not do their work,’ ‘hallways would be crazy,’ ‘It’s a bad thing because if students got too much freedom they going to run wild and don’t care about life and mess up in class while someone else trying to learn,’ ‘It would be like Darfur.’ Unconstrained moments were opportunities for ‘bad choices’ or ‘wasting time.’ Even small amounts of freedom at school can be bad. According to one student, if he had more choice he would study World War II, but then he might not cover the basics. Adolescents, in general, ‘have too much freedom. That’s why things like flash mobs happen. You see the news. They shouldn’t be able to go downtown; they think they’re too grown,’ ‘Their parents gave them too much freedom.’ An Eagle summed it up: freedom comes with a ‘responsibility that some can’t handle.’ Negative freedom is misplaced in school; it is at odds with educational objectives and valued principally as a small break from the call for intense effort and repression. Again there was no mention of the absent opportunity to develop or explore an interest, to express one’s autonomy.

There is more support for freedom outside of school. It is a necessity for people to ‘be themselves,’ to be ‘comfortable,’ ‘because people don’t feel right being told what to do. They feel like they’re owned by somebody else, like they’re not even a person.’

Strict rules makes them [students] as a child, makes them want to do it [the forbidden]. It’s like they’re looking at a box and you tell them, ‘don’t open that box.’ They’re just going to want to open it more. It’s the same thing with sex, or cutting school.

Without any freedom a person would not have a life. If someone is ‘watching you and trying to control your every minute you cannot be yourself,’ Without freedom you will not ‘know who you are,’ ‘you’ll never even think about what you want to do so you won’t know.’ One student, an outlier, went so far as to assert you even need the chance to make bad choices if you are really to live or become a person at all, if you are to figure out what’s ‘not me’ and what is. She explained, ‘Life is life, you gotta live it. I wish I would of waited. I went through the drunk stage. I tried smoking. It’s not me.’ Another student, a 17-year-old male, replied similarly, suggesting everyone has freedom at a certain point and you learn from the consequences. When asked if he would give his children freedom: ‘I won’t give my kids lots of rules. I mean, I’m gonna tell them right from wrong. But after eighth grade, they can learn from life.’ Why from life? ‘In the end you hurting people if you don’t let them make their mistakes – they won’t know if they don’t go through it.’ This same student asserted that no matter what others dictated, you always had freedom in life. ‘You’ve got the freedom to make the choices that you make, but nobody said there weren’t gonna be no consequences.’

Schooling, however, is coercion for your own good. Its function is to teach students what they need to know as adults and cultivate obedience, not foster or respond to student capacities, interests, or individuality. ‘You’re not supposed to come to school for that [freedom]. I personally come to do my work and leave,’ You ‘do your work, get your diploma and go onto your next step,’ ‘In college there’s no time to joke around. You have no freedom. Other people [who don’t go to college] don’t do anything. They have freedom to do whatever they want but it’s not gonna get them anywhere,’ ‘Life [as exemplified by

school] is not doing what you want all the time, but just doing what you gotta. A lot of these kids don't understand that.' EK: 'Would you like to choose your classes?' 'No. Whatever I need to do, I like it laid out for me. I need structure.' Several students indicated it was the teacher's task to make decisions and curtail freedom, and the student's job to obey. 'As far as school, less freedom is better. You need to be organized. You need to know that somebody's over top of you making sure you do what you gotta do.' Going further, some saw the rules and routines, not as merely instrumental to gaining skills, but as good in their own right. Schools 'prepare you for waking up in the morning and being somewhere on time You have a lot of situations where you have to deal with things be places on time.'

When asked, *which rules do you not like*, a full 37% of those responding had no objections to any of the rules. Another 28% disliked having to follow the protocol walk with a couple commenting that 'it seems like jail.' A scattering (never more than three for each objection) complained about prohibitions on phones, gum, jewelry, bags, and the uniform. Although the school gives students no choice in their curriculum, and almost no extracurricular options, none of their criticisms alluded to these limitations. They also made no reference to either the status designations or the mandatory peer confrontations to enforce conformity.

For most of these students freedom is associated with an untamed spirit. Those possessing it are likely to do bad things and get into trouble. That has been their personal experience. The 'free' students in their communities are viewed as a source of danger. One student approvingly noted that children in suburban schools have more freedom, like bringing phones to school. But Merit students are different. 'It got people who went through more things. It's more dangerous. You gotta watch your back.' Suburban kids 'make better choices If you watch the news, all the crime happens here. In the suburbs, their news is that they save cats from trees,' EK: 'Are people basically dangerous?' 'Everybody's dangerous. We need rules to keep it safe.' This student, witness to serious violence, longed for the security that would come with what he called 'an enforcer,' or laws that really meant something to people. Freedom should be reserved for adults.

An adult is someone with a diploma. An adult, you can pay your own bills, you got your own house, that makes you an adult. Then you can do what you want and have freedom. Until then, you're still a child.

Students are not to be trusted. Give them freedom and they are likely to go 'crazy.'

Discussion

On reflection, we should not have been surprised by the harsh view students held of themselves (though we were). They have known lives where safety is enhanced through suspiciousness, by watching your back, and where expressions of freedom have gotten them and others into trouble. Safety and security lie in a rule based, highly controlled environment run by adults who know their best interests and have the power to enforce standards. The notion that school is a place for exploration, self-expression, generating ideals, and answering the question 'who am I?' is largely meaningless. They agree with the goals of Merit – that they should give up their antisocial ways. As one child said approvingly, 'This is a disciplinary school' – you give up freedom and accept rules.

It remains to be seen whether such student attitudes pervade other disciplinary and non-disciplinary but strict, restrictive schools. However, what emerges from Merit is the

troubling absence of a self-approving, self-reliant personal identity. If, as Deci and Ryan (1995) claim, self-esteem is dependent on the experience of autonomy, these students are likely to have an impoverished view of themselves.

For the past century, it has been commonplace for psychologists to theorize that one's self-understanding is partially a reflection of the appraisal of others. Approval generates self-approval and the reverse (early theorists include Cooley 1902; Mead 1934; Sullivan 1953). Children who live without the security provided by predictable and constant care, who cannot assume a benevolent environment, who have experienced trauma, particularly abuse and deprivation, who are on guard (hyper-vigilant) and distrustful of others, even of themselves, are prone to develop an internal 'model of the self as unworthy, ineffective and incompetent' (Harter 1999, 266) and particularly likely to accept the negative verdict of authorities. Weak and powerless, they find comfort in subordination to, and agreement with, the powerful. The 'narrative about [their] own life is not derived from personal experience but from someone else's story' (Frankel 2002, 114). They believe in the judgments of powerful adults – in this case that they cannot be trusted with freedom, are unable to control themselves, should submit to external controls, and deserve the discipline they receive. The more enveloping the negative portrayal of them, the more convincing it becomes, and the firmer their belief in it (Bandura 2002; for a psychoanalytic description of this dynamic, see Ferenczi 1933–1994; Freud 1946; Kestenberg 1992; Sarnoff 1960).

Of course, these students have not necessarily been traumatized and teachers are not deliberate aggressors nor arbitrarily authoritarian. Their judgments that students, prone to violence and potentially dangerous, cannot handle negative freedom may well be accurate. There may be some realism to the belief that they are untrustworthy. Yet, when students hear and accept the message that they have lived self-defeating lives and must change who they are or end up in prison, when there is no counter-narrative to offset this portrayal, when 'you must change' means basically 'be obedient,' then they are deprived of internal images and aspirations to flesh out a positive identity. Without a positive, even coherent sense of self, the development of agency is compromised. If they have heroes, it is the law enforcers.

Derogation of the self – I am nothing, I cannot be trusted, I must follow the directives of others – might be interpreted as a variant on Berlin's positive freedom: finding the higher self and fulfillment by accepting controls over the lower impulsive self. But for these students, schooling is not a source of repressing one's base impulses and thereby liberating the higher self in order to rationally pursue an ideology or worthy purpose; it is a place 'to get your work done and leave . . . Just do your work, get your diploma and go onto your next step' – college, trade school, or an unspecified job. Schools 'prepare you for waking up in the morning and being somewhere on time and follow.' Hopefully you become financially independent but hardly your own master, the instrument of my own, not of other men's acts of will . . . conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them in reference to my own ideas and purposes (Berlin 1969–2002, 178).

Students at schools like Merit have lived with aggression as victims and perpetrators. The school, understandably emphasizing the history of student participation in antisocial behavior, views them primarily as perpetrators who need to be dominated and subdued. Were they perceived more as victims, there would be a stronger focus in the language and attitudes of the school on how students can transcend the fearful aspects of their surrounding culture. That would involve helping them formulate ends, other than not misbehaving, and find the courage and confidence to move forward. Rules can indeed be

protective, as the students testify, but rules alone do not offer worthwhile goals or the means to pursue them. That end requires negative freedom. Only frequent exercise of the will can secure a stable responsible will.

Conclusion

Positive freedom recognizes two essential facts of the human condition: for human beings to be their own masters and to strive toward ends of their own choosing, they must be able to exert control over themselves and they must have been inculcated in (exposed to) ends worth pursuing. At disciplinary schools such as Merit the emphasis is on controls with little consideration of life's purposes and ends. What's worth pursuing is submitting to the authorities so that one is fit to submit to other authorities after graduation. Beyond authority is more authority. In the absence of 'higher' aspirations, it is the authority they incorporate. And what that authority preaches is that only current submission will reverse the unfortunate consequences of their earlier failure to submit. To Berlin the ideal of positive freedom is self-mastery in the service of self-actualization (the true self). But a strong will bent on self-actualization must be directed toward goals. From whence do the goals arise?

We initiated this study convinced that schools should strive for a mix of control and liberty. However, at least for children whose lives have been blighted by failure and criticism, the controls cannot be directed solely at repressing the 'lower' (impulsive) self.

The second component of positive freedom, which initially was not foreground for us, is formulating the objectives for the 'true self.' At schools like Merit there is rather little that self-control serves except anemic and vague aspirations such as preparing to meet job schedules, or becoming an adult. It is self-control for the sake of self-control – getting to work on time – never mind the job, learning you do not always get what you want – without refining the wants. As Putnam (1990), borrowing from William James, elaborates, however valuable it is to live by schedules, order, and routines, without ideals (projects and aims) one's life is without shape and coherence. That is attained by goals married to 'courage and endurance,' 'pluck and will' (James 1912). Merit has not presented its students with vivid potential aspirations, nor provided them with sufficient experiences, choice, or variety to sort through alternatives other than fitting in. At Merit students are even assigned (rostered) into their *elective* courses. Fitting in with schedules and rules is their highest aspiration. The exclusive attention to rules and controls may result less in self-direction than in self-derogation. Unless self-control is paired with larger purposes than impulse inhibition, there will be no emergence of a well-directed, focused will, for students believe they are best off if the will is subjugated.

Yet, first things first: 'I mean, this is a disciplinary school.' That Merit has won the acquiescence, even the loyalty of these students is a remarkable accomplishment. Without control over *bad* behavior, success as they see it – a job, an income, an adult life – will be impossible. And of course Merit is not alone in emphasizing an orientation to external rewards as the measure of a satisfying and successful life. It may merely represent a more extreme version of today's widespread ethos. Nonetheless, it would seem that at its proclaimed best Merit High is graduating stunted young adults who are far from becoming masters of their lives, choosing their own ends rather than serving as the instrument of others.

Note

1. Alternative or disciplinary schools are for students who have had problems conforming to the rules and requirements of their local neighborhood schools.

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