

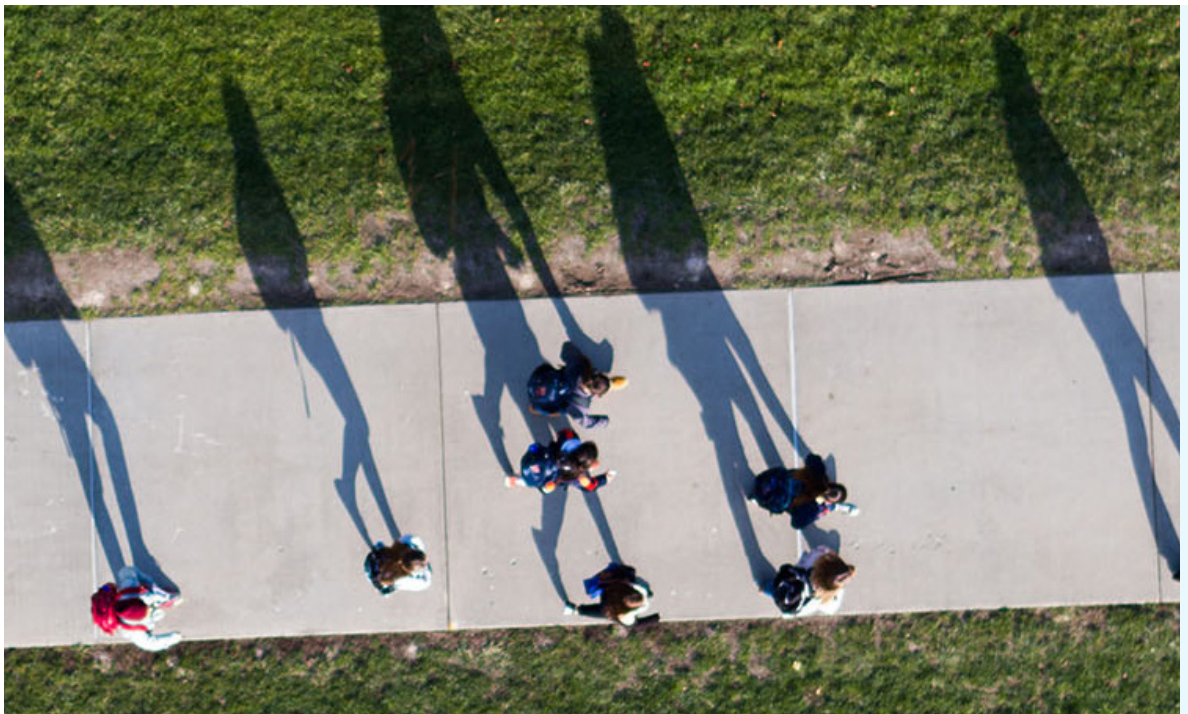
MOVING OFF THE EDUCATION CONVEYOR BELT

MORGAN CONOVER

If the purpose of school is to educate young people to become productive members of society through realizing their full potential, then the public school system is failing dramatically. The mechanization of education has led to an unforgiving system in which creativity is stifled or suppressed altogether, and a one-track path to white-collar work dominates. Education's goal seems to have devolved into facilitating the creation of a homogenized population, which has impacted everything from the job market to mental health.

The public education system of today did not develop organically; it arose from the needs of industrialization during the nineteenth century. There are two main implications of this: that the most useful subjects for work are at the top, and that universities designed the system in their image—thus, nearly every high school in the U.S. is essentially offering, as Ken Robinson puts it, “a protracted process of university entrance.” Ironically, this

system does not produce the diverse workforce necessary for a balanced and productive society for which it was designed and upon which it relies; instead, it creates an imbalanced demographic, as most students are advised (and feel compelled) to go to college. Because most people seem to regard college as “an extension of compulsory schooling” (Crawford 143), many students begin college directionless and graduate only slightly less directionless. In his book *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite*, William Deresiewicz observes that the system of higher education “manufactures students who are smart and talented and driven, yes, but also anxious, timid, and lost, with little intellectual curiosity and a stunted sense of purpose: trapped in a bubble of privilege, heading meekly in the same direction, great at what they’re doing but with no idea why they’re doing it” (3). The college students of today have learned how to be a student—do your homework, get the



Photography by Chase Gutman.

answers, ace the test—rather than think independently and realize something larger is at stake in their education (13). As a result, these “ultra-high-achieving elite college students of today” focus almost exclusively on expanding their resumes—not with things they particularly enjoy doing and are passionate about but rather activities that best situate them for an award, an elite graduate program, or a high-paying job (7). This drive to accrue credentials rather than learn and experience delays or suppresses realizations of truer and more satisfying individual callings.

Not only does compelling students to attend college create a conveyor belt of higher education in which all students seem to converge on the same homogenized self—the upper-middle-class professional—but funneling students into college also creates perversities in the labor market (Crawford 143). According to UNESCO, in the next thirty years more people than ever before will be graduating from

educational institutions worldwide due to both increases in population and the revolutionary impact of technology on the working world. Such a vastly educated world offers profound benefits, but the difficult, distressing reality is that suddenly degrees aren't worth anything. Dr. Randall Collins from the University of Pennsylvania Sociology Department argues that “increasing the number of credentialed people competing for a finite number of jobs tends to ratchet up the educational requirements for those jobs without increasing anyone's income” (Weyrich). This rampant credentialism creates a lopsided demographic in which college graduates with exorbitant student loans find the job market so glutted that they are unable to find work that pays well enough to let them discharge their debts (Weyrich).

The origins of these problems stem directly from the public education system's increasing mechanization and “conveyor belt” structure. In “Signs of the Times” (1829), Thomas

Carlyle argues that the mechanization of our world has fundamentally changed our manner of existence: “Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand.” Education is a prime example of how this mechanization works. Nearly all levels of the current public education system are heavily dependent on standardized tests: Students are pressured to get good scores because this apparently determines their intellectual worth, teachers are graded on their ability to teach based on how well their students do on these tests, and schools’ funding is tied to test scores. Standardized tests are predicated on the notion that knowledge and intelligence can be boiled down to scientifically quantifiable data. The tests are scored by a machine, and the fact that these cookie-cutter tests are based on the assumption that knowledge is quantifiable changes people’s perception of what knowledge and intelligence are. The pervasive definition of intelligence as solely associated with academia is misguided. Intelligence is diverse: People learn visually, audibly, kinesthetically; they think in movement, think in abstraction, think in concrete experience. Intelligence is dynamic, distinct, and “wonderfully interactive” (Robinson). Robinson says, “Creativity—which I define as the process of having original ideas that have value—more often than not comes about through the interaction of different disciplinary ways of seeing things.” Indeed, creativity does not apply only to the traditional arts, as most people presume; it is essential for nearly every discipline.

Whereas instruction, “that mysterious communing of Wisdom with Ignorance,” was once an undefinable and uncertain process, requiring attention to individual aptitudes and a continual variation of means and methods, it is

now a “secure, universal, straightforward business, to be conducted in the gross, by proper mechanism” (Carlyle). For instance, writing an essay for the SAT for which there is no defined audience and no context whatsoever is only testing a student’s ability to work within a form, typically the standard five paragraph essay—so restricting in its contrived simplicity. It teaches students that writing is an exercise completely removed from the communication of something one truly cares about and believes in. Good writing is rhetorically situated.

If perceptions of intelligence were expanded, this would prompt a revolution in how schools teach children, and by extension, working environments might improve and people might be happier. In an 1882 lecture on work, John Ruskin notes: “[I]t is among children only, and as children only, that you will find medicine for your healing and true wisdom for your teaching.” Children, he says, are constantly asking questions, and they recognize that they do not know everything. They are “full of love to every creature” and happy always whether at play or duty (Ruskin). Children also have an incredible capacity for innovation, and they are not afraid to fail. But the current education system, as Robinson notes, squanders these talents. In schools today, there is a right and a wrong way to do things. As a result, very little learning takes place, because the emphasis is not on learning, but on being correct. The letter grade awarded at the end of the term is seen as more important than the knowledge acquired during it. Children are effectively being educated out of their creative capacities. By adulthood and even by the teenage years, most people are afraid of being wrong, a fear that represses creativity. It is imperative to encourage creativity-promoting

traits in children rather than crush them; as Ruskin argues, “it is the character of children we want,” because “that’s the great worker’s character also” (Ruskin).

The conveyor belt structure of the public school system also has significant consequences for children’s mental health. Kids develop complexes and insecurities because they are forced to attempt things they aren’t ready for or suited to do and then are blamed when they are unable to do them. The pressure to perform well induces stress and anxiety. Moreover, little attention is paid to the fact that no two people have the same disposition. Crawford observes that “it is a rare person who is naturally inclined to sit still for sixteen years in school, and then indefinitely at work.” Naturally, this extends to the workplace. Schools are “preoccupied with demographic variables” and “sorting into cognitive classes” that “collapse the human qualities into a narrow set of categories, the better to be represented on a checklist or a set of test scores.” This serves institutional purposes for quantifying “success,” but the stark reality is that students come to view their worth “in light of the available metrics, and forget that institutional purposes are not our own” (Crawford 72). Similarly, Carlyle asserts that the faith in mechanism, in the all-importance of physical things, “is in every age the common refuge of Weakness and blind Discontent; of all who believe, as many will ever do, that man’s true good lies without him, not within” (Carlyle). So when kids are shuffled into a system that prizes a select few dispositions (those best suited for the life of the mind), many highly talented, brilliant, and creative students become discouraged because their talent is not valued or is actually stigmatized (Robinson). The human

mind is the most complex structure in the universe; to compartmentalize it and make its development so strictly regimented crushes creativity and inhibits growth or can even lead to stagnation.

Everyone has a vested interest in education because it shapes the minds of children, the future of the human race. Education has a huge role in the formative years of youth because it has a vast impact on identity formation. But the emphasis on expediency and utility has left the public school system bereft of creativity and the ability to cultivate wonder and purpose in students. It seems that contemporary public education has become so mechanized and regimented that the true goal—to teach students how to learn and think critically—has become obfuscated. The current education system is perhaps best summed up by a quote from Albert Einstein: “Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.”

Works Cited

- Carlyle, Thomas. “Signs of the Times.” *Edinburgh Review*, 1829.
- Crawford, Matthew. *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*. New York: Penguin, 2009.
- Deresiewicz, William. *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite*. New York: Free Press, 2014.
- Robinson, Ken. “Do Schools Kill Creativity?” TED. February 2006. Lecture.
- Ruskin, John. “Lecture I: Work.” *The Crown of the Wild Olive*. George Allen: Sunnyside, Orpington, Kent. 1882.
- Weyrich, Noah. “Failing Grades.” *The Pennsylvania Gazette*. 2006.