

Challenging Societal Defaults

I just finished reading *Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World*, by Wharton Business School professor, Adam Grant. It's very Malcolm Gladwell-esque in its style and format, descriptively weaving story and fact to make a compelling case for unconventional thinking and doing.

One of my top takeaways from the book is that a common characteristic of originals is their tendency to "question defaults." Grant writes:

"Justifying the default system serves a soothing function. It's an emotional painkiller: If the world is supposed to be this way, we don't need to be dissatisfied with it. But acquiescence also robs us of the moral outrage to stand against injustice and the creative will to consider alternative ways that the world could work. The hallmark of originality is rejecting the default and exploring whether a better option exists." [1]

The societal default that most concerns me is mass schooling. In a relatively short timeframe, mass schooling has become so ingrained in our cultural psyche that it influences everything from fiction writing to child-rearing, fashion to fads. It has become such a default, such a societal given, that it's almost impossible to imagine education without schooling.

The problem with mass schooling is that it is not serving children well. It kills creativity, punishes individuality, and pathologizes difference. As mass schooling expands and becomes more restrictive, there is mounting evidence that it is causing serious psychological harm to many children. In addition to these troubling outcomes, mass schooling simply isn't working. Children aren't learning. As I wrote previously for Intellectual Takeout:

"Despite data showing that the U.S. spends more on education than most developed countries, current education outcomes are disappointing. On international comparison tests, such as the well-regarded Programme for International Student Assessment, U.S. students are lagging far behind their peers in other nations, with U.S.

15-year-olds ranking 38th out of 71 countries in math, and 24th in science. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress—known more widely as the Nation’s Report Card—student reading and math skills declined.”

For minority students, mass schooling may be particularly damaging. NPR reported on U.S. Department of Education data from 2013-2014 showing that 6,743 children who were enrolled in public *preschool* received one or more out-of-school suspensions—with black children far more likely to be suspended than white children. These suspensions can swiftly funnel children into the criminal justice system and fuel the school-to-prison pipeline. Additionally, according to data compiled by PBS: “Only 14% of African American eighth graders score at or above the proficient level. These results reveal that millions of young people cannot understand or evaluate text, provide relevant details, or support inferences about the written documents they read.”

If you read this blog, you are likely questioning the mass schooling default and are curious about alternatives. You are an original. Originals don’t pretend to have all the answers or alternatives. But they ask the questions and seek the possibilities. Grant writes:

“Ultimately, the people who choose to champion originality are the ones who propel us forward.... They feel the same fear, the same doubt, as the rest of us. What sets them apart is that they take action anyway. They know in their hearts that failing would yield less regret than failing to try.” [2]

The stakes are high. We all care most deeply about educating children to be literate, competent, inventive, compassionate, and thoughtful. It’s time we question if mass schooling really has the ability to facilitate these outcomes, or whether alternatives to school might do the job better. It’s time to challenge defaults.

[1] Grant, Adam. *Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World*. New York: Viking, 2016, p. 7.

[2] *ibid*, p. 28.