

KEEN for Learning

*Why Some Kids Don't Succeed in the Classroom—and
What We Can Do About It*

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CHAPTER 1

Classroom Learning and Life

“Education is not a preparation for life; education is life itself.”

—John Dewey

What’s Up with the Classroom?

When you think about it, school is a funny place. We suspend the normal activities of life and place children in an artificial learning environment (a classroom) to learn what they’ll need to be successful in society later on. Schools contain classrooms in which heterogeneous groups of children are placed together and taught “subjects.” The school identifies certain things as important to learn (parallelograms) and others as not very important (making a variety of funny faces), proceeding to tell students how successful they are based on whether they can demonstrate that they have learned the important things.

As artificial as it is, the classroom model is prevalent in North American society. Look at almost any learning

situation today for any age group: Whether it's in elementary or secondary school, college or university, corporate training, language instruction, driver's training, or hobby classes, it is predominately the preferred way for groups to learn. One of the reasons that it's so ubiquitous in our millennium, despite the new learning opportunities available to individuals through the media and the Internet, is that most adults experienced classrooms as the place for learning as children. It is so familiar that each of us feels that, in a sense, we understand the classroom because we have all experienced it.

It also has extremely powerful effects: Students who are successful in their first 10 years in the classroom environment tend to accumulate many years of schooling after and are, on the whole, statistically wealthier, happier, and more successful in setting and achieving life goals than those who don't—they even live longer! The same is true for countries. Those who have the most well-developed school systems—almost all based on classrooms—are at the top of the list for per capita income, life expectancy, and quality of life indicators. This has been a discernable trend for the last century. Governments have recognized this by increasing spending on education in the last few decades and by paying extremely close attention to dropout rates, with the stated aim of having every student well educated and, most famously in the United States, “no child left behind.”

What many don't realize is that the belief that every child should learn in the classroom is a truly radical idea. For most

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of education in the last 100 years, children have been left behind, flunked out, or allowed not to have success and that was acceptable. School was a place to rank and sort students by ability and effort. The common approach was “You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink.” Teachers were charged with presenting material in a structured and logical way and assessing students’ ability to learn that material. After World War II, the overall graduation rate was between 65% and 70%. From 1950 to 1970, it ranged from 73% to 80% and is presently anywhere between 75% and 85% depending on how it is tabulated. So what happened to those students who did not graduate? They went into the workforce or into specialized vocational training. Many who did so had very successful outcomes, earning a good living and becoming valuable members of their communities and contributing to society.

Those who leave school in North America no longer have the opportunities afforded to previous generations. Today’s children must not only stay in school but must also prepare themselves for a lifetime of learning that will take place in postsecondary education, in the workplace, and beyond. And that means they will spend a lot of time in classrooms.

The Fear of Classroom Learning and Its Consequences

So what changes have been made to make sure that this new cohort of students—those who might have left school in previous generations—has success in the classroom? As vital as it is that schools educate every child, we have found it

challenging to educate students who struggle in the classroom and because of this we have millions who leave our school system like Chad, believing they are stupid when it comes to classroom learning. The consequences of this are tragic.

For those still in school, their level of engagement is reduced dramatically and their effort at learning decreases progressively with each year they stay in school. I spent a number of years at an inner-city high school and it was obvious which students arrived already finished with learning; they had little self-confidence on academic tasks, were not resilient when they encountered difficulties, and were fearful about taking risks in the classroom, preferring to put as little effort as possible into activities. They often masked their fear of learning with bravado, sarcasm, classroom disruption, or absence from class. But when one got to know them, the fear and loathing that Chad had revealed to me became readily apparent. They *wanted* to learn, but felt it was beyond them. And for the fragile ego that accompanies one in the high school years, this was too much to bear. So they flunked out and left.

For those who leave school with the belief that they cannot learn in that environment, it can negatively colour the way they approach formal learning for the rest of their lives. Because school is such a seminal and powerful experience, failure in that context will cause them to consciously avoid future situations in which they have to be in a classroom or demonstrate their ability to learn in a structured learning situation. They may end up avoiding training courses or other

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such opportunities necessary to help them achieve their goals. If they do find themselves in these settings, they disengage emotionally to avoid the pain of failure, refraining from asking questions, participating in discussions, seeking extra help, or anything else exposing their “stupidity” to others. It is tragic to think how much this attitude contributes to the constriction of opportunity for individuals, not to mention the loss society suffers when its members do not reach the highest levels of potential that learning provides.

To be sure, there are a few who become “self-teachers” and pursue their own interests and develop a love of learning. Some of the most fascinating and erudite people I know maintained a passion for education despite what they experienced in school; their natural stubbornness and contrarian natures gave them an understanding like that of Mark Twain who quipped, “I never let schooling interfere with my education.” A surprising number of entrepreneurs are of this ilk.

The distrust that many of them share about their school experience is well represented by this entrepreneur:

Growing up almost every teacher I had discouraged me from being myself. They said I needed to talk less, do as I am told...just couldn't handle teachers. Teachers definitely could not handle me. I believed in myself too much. I would rarely care about what the teachers told me about success. This does not mean I blatantly disrespected teachers. I would do my work and move on...The biggest lesson that school does not teach student is how the world “actually” works.”