

## RETHINKING SCHOOLS: EDUCATION AS HAPPINESS

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**Abstract:** The underlying assumption of any educational reform is that we can and should control measurable achievement. The entire scenario builds on a platform of causal determinism, since every effect has a cause, the causes can be tweaked to produce unique desired effects. But the targeted goals have hardly been achieved, with rote memorization and 'textbook culture' plaguing the system. Another striking feature of discussions around educational reform is the absence of conversation around the child's free will and what might make a child happy. Consequently 'school' is being repeatedly labelled as an environment hindering a child's autonomy and creativity. The meaning and need of education goes beyond and should not be restricted to measurable learning outcomes and policies based on cause-effect rationales. The child's happiness is a continuous component and the paramount metric of his or her education. A compatibilist attempt has been made to preserve a child's free will within the confines of our deterministic laws. An alternative system of democratic schooling is then proposed, where the school alters itself to the child's needs, rather than the other way round.

**Keywords:** Civil liberty, compatibilism, democratic schooling, free will.

**Introduction:** The emergence of child centred learning as a prominent thought in the latter half of the twentieth century also brought forth the avenues of active learning and child autonomy. These ideas of autonomy can be traced back to the voices raised in favour of free will by philosophers and educationists alike. A minimal definition of free will suggests that the agent has capacity to choose his or her course of action, but that does not encompass the myriad conflicting views philosophers have had in this domain. According to David Hume, the question of the nature of free will is 'the most contentious question of metaphysics.' Still, for an educationist, the best reason for caring about free will is that it is closely related to two other important philosophical issues: freedom of action and moral responsibility. This analysis considers free will as intuitively composed of three elements: Freedom (being able to do otherwise), Agency (being the originator of one's actions) and Intelligibility (being able to understand the reasons for one's actions) (Goertzel, 2010).

Much of our current and past education reform works on the underlying assumption that we *can and should* control others, in particular their measurable achievement. There are specific targets in our policy plans, there is subject-wise curriculum, appropriate student-teacher ratio, even the number of teaching hours is prescribed. This normative framework builds on the platform of causal determinism that given the states of affairs obtained at a time in the past, when

conjoined with the established laws of nature, a unique outcome pathway is entailed. If I try to move the time scale forward, and considering the established laws of nature being constant, the present state of affairs will determine a unique future pathway. In other words, since every effect has a cause, the causes can be tweaked in the present to produce unique desired effects in the future.

In more realistic terms though, I agree that whether or not our existence is governed either by free will or by determinism is an ever-raging debate. I shall look for a pathway that is best for the education of a child. I shall not be looking at this issue from an *incompatibilist's* view point. Assuming that an education system built upon such core determinist values annihilates a child's free will would not be a progressive stance. I shall rather consider the *compatibilist's* view and see whether the child's free will can exist even in our determinist system.

**Education as happiness:** For this analysis, I consider two hypothetical characters: Freeda and Determa. I shall assume Freeda as a child exercising free will at all occasions; the existing deterministic structures exert no influence on any of her volitions. She studies in the Freedom School, where no regulations exist to limit her free will. Skills, information, and knowledge are shared without hierarchy or the institutional environment of formal schooling. Determa meanwhile, is a student at the Determined School, which represents the current

state of our school system. She follows core determinist values in each of her volitions. In other words, each of her actions is under the assumption that a unique course is determined through a conjunction of the past and the current laws.

Since we start looking for a pathway for education, what do we even mean by this 'education of a child'? Since Freeda is in full control of her thoughts, it would be natural for to ask why she needs education, if at all. This thought might drive her back to think if her education is aiming for something. The idea of an aim as a 'foreseen end' (NCF, 2005) automatically assumes a cause and effect relationship. This deterministic approach, where the aims of her education are defined by someone else, doesn't sit well with purely free-willed Freeda. Does this mean she rejects education outright? She could, but that alternative leads our analysis to a dead end. Let's think of an education model that would be an attractive choice for a child. Education for a free willed child could be seen as an ongoing state, not as a target oriented process. It would be insufficient to leave this ongoing state undefined. What could be the motivation for Freeda to stick to her choice of continuous education? It could be the curiosity of knowing new things, time spent with friends, appreciation from teachers, healthy competition and so on. A central theme runs through this barrage of choices – happiness. Freeda sticks to her choice of being educated as long as she is happy with that choice.

Education for Determa is an abstraction of what is defined by the educating authorities. She might still be happy. But the reason for that happiness might not have emerged from her choice. It could be an effect of the regulation enforced upon her. Happiness will depend on the outcome of the cause-effect relationship for Determa. We shall have to analyze the data on Determined School available from the policy outcomes to construct our knowledge regarding Determa's happiness.

The Determined School has adhered to the national education policy. The norms imposed on school itself encompass the infrastructure, minimum working days, admission procedures, fees, student-teacher ratios and staff salary. The teachers also have to stick to time tables and prescribed syllabus that even includes number of hours to be spent per topic. There are several implicit expectations as well such as checking notebooks and maintaining detailed

student records. These regulations trickle down to the students as well as they have to tackle with subjects they might not like as well. The standardized assessment system and the notion of rewards and detention based on the same can be added to this list. All these regulations are aimed at the consequence of raising a learned individual. Even if we consider this target enforcing approach for a moment, numerous national level studies brings out some appalling data showing falling learning levels. Rote learning and 'textbook culture' (Kumar, 1988) plague the system. The students, teachers, school administrators and parents, who are all indispensable stakeholders in the process of education, have no say in deciding these regulations. Since happiness comes packed with education of a free willed child, the probability of Determa being as happy as Freeda seems bleak seems bleak in this restrictive system.

Thus happiness for Freeda is a necessary premise that comes packed with education in the Freedom School. And that is what our Determined School should look to achieve for each of its students. I reemphasize that happiness is not a target one yearns to achieve; it should rather be an ongoing state.

#### **Searching for a framework: A case for democratic education**

In the process of looking towards the preservation of the child's free will in our determinist system, a requisite framework can be built that supports this need. It would be helpful to set down some basic tenets that are desirable in this framework:

- The framework should be based on a normative order. This stems from the fact that the tenets of a deterministic system rest on foundations of fine-tuning our present to determine a unique future. Such fine-tuning, and that too at scale, is done best through a normative framework.
- The framework should be normative only to safeguard the child's free will. Out of the triad of elements comprising free will, the element of agency (being the originator of one's own actions) and the element of intelligibility (understanding reasons for one's actions) have to be abandoned since the compatibilist view point does not think of free will as a metaphysical entity (Salles, 2001). Only the freedom (ability to do otherwise) element shall be considered. Hence, free will shall be synonymous with freedom in our compatibilist system.

- The framework must uphold the child's happiness as a continuous state.
- The framework should be implementable at scale for it to have a mass impact. This is quite unlike many models of alternative schooling, which stay confined to their niches and caters to a tiny fraction of the population.
- The determinist principles primarily manifest themselves in schools, which form the fundamental building blocks of our education system. The framework required should be implementable at the school level.

Looking for a school-level normative framework satisfying the criteria mentioned above, it is nothing but obvious to look for a solution in the normative framework that has already been provided by the Indian Constitution. This framework by definition is democratic, wherein the authority rests with the masses. Policies and actions are based on decisions and not arbitrary or autocratic acts of will. Consequently, the people under the aegis of this democratic system can exercise their right to vote, decide and act freely according to their conscience, and without being subject to duress. An effective justification of a similar rights based framework of liberty is found in Hinchliffe's conception, though he talks more in terms of a republic than a democracy. But the basic tenets of individual freedom being preserved through a normative framework are similar to our framework's requirements. He thus proposes the concept of civil or republican liberty which is constituted through a normative order. Hinchliffe also quickly points out that the need of authority for liberty is paradoxical; but it rests on human recognition and not force, since the point of view of all those who are part of the normative order is considered. This is quite unlike natural liberty which shuns authority and takes the point of view of a 'fictitious person outside of it'. He also ideates a common public space where differences among multiple public discourses are recognized (not eliminated) and settled through rational argumentation (Wilson, 2010, pp. 657-659).

Comparing with the requirements of our framework, a democratic system is based on a rights based approach, wherein all decisions are arrived at by rational discourse and on the grounds of the objective and convincing character of the arguments advanced to support them. Hence it satisfies our first criterion

of being normative. Secondly, all members are presumed to be free agents, until good reason can be given for constraints to be applied and freedom to be taken away. The requirement of welfare of its members automatically includes responsibility for the happiness of a child. Implementation at scale is one of the strengths of a democratic system, which has been empirically verified in nations with population and expanse as vast as India. Another justification for implementing a democratic system for education comes from the central concept of 'knowledge' in education. The pursuit of knowledge as a justified true belief in various forms, its generation, growth, dissemination, criticism, communications regarding new knowledge, all involve ethical democratic imperatives. We can even argue for the inherence of certain democratic principles in speech and instructional discourse. The presumption of liberty, equality and toleration is implicit in every occasion of language being used for the dissemination of knowledge.

The prime justification for preferring a democratic school model over any other normative style of educational administration is that these schools can follow the Popperian path of critical rationalism (Popper, 2005) in accepting and embracing every attempt at refutation. A premium is placed upon exposing even the most cherished beliefs, definitions, policies and plans to public scrutiny, review and possible refutation. The activity of democratic debate as a means of self-assessment is one of the most effective tool that can be wielded within a normative framework to uphold an individual free will.

Consequently, an attempt needs to be made to rebuild the Determined School with a prime focus on the student's free will within a normative democratic structure.

**Rethinking the Determined School:** The Freedom School, an open structure with no hierarchy or institutional framework, is intended to safeguard an individual's free will as well as encourage self-reliance, critical consciousness, and personal development. Since the democratic model of schooling satisfies the criteria required for our framework, we can use this to rethink our model of the Determined School to preserve the qualities upheld by the Freedom School. This newly constituted model is considered henceforth as the Democratic School.

The democratic structure implies that the charter of norms for the school needs to be born out of rationalist deliberation. Paramount importance should be given to the fact that since our primary objective has been protecting the child's free will, norms should be constituted only for situations when this free will is threatened (such as during conflict scenarios), and that is the only time when rationalist deliberation needs to be held. Also, since the members in a democracy are considered equal under all circumstances, the students, the teachers and the school administration shall have an equal weight attached to their opinions. We must re-emphasize that this public space for discussion 'is not that there is a normative order to which emergent publics must conform- it is rather that this normative order is itself created precisely through rational argumentation at the level of practical discourse' (Hinchliffe, 2014).

Hence, in this newly constituted Democratic School, any decisions that do not involve social conflict can be made by Determa based on her free will. In other words, she should be free to decide for herself whether or not she wants to attend any lessons. She can choose to not attend a single class for months if she doesn't want to. A.S. Neill has shown that such an approach does not drive the child away from learning, they rather start seeing not being able to attend classes as a severe punishment (Neill, 1960). Data from the Summerhill School in Suffolk, England shows that in 2014, the attendance rate at this school was 96%. Moreover, the attendance rate has increased by 0.7 percentage points since 2013. The attendance rate is in the top 20% of all schools (Office for Standards in Education: See appendix).

The school is also not required to follow a timetable. The students do not have any structured assessments either. Teaching in itself is not considered very important. This approach is drawn from Rousseau's conception of a teacher, whose only role is to provide adequate contexts from learning through experiences (Rousseau, 1904). Under such a system, there is no competition or jealousy, even the staff room is a happy place. This in turn results in everybody sustaining a 'happy' environment for the students.

Despite the freedom being provided towards choice of a curriculum for the child, Determa still learns. The only difference being, she learns what she wants to, and not what is thrust upon her by force. Free children like her develop a liking for learning, some for Mathematics, and others for Geography and

History (Neill, 1960). Free children cull from the offered subjects only those which interest them and find joy in them.

John Dewey, another proponent of democratic education, had proposed during the industrial age that children should not all be given the same pre-determined curriculum. He argues that children should be active participants in the creation of their education. Moreover, since our society outside school is also based on democratic outlines, education for democracy is deemed useful. Children must experience democracy to learn democracy (Dewey, 1916).

The focus is on learning through gaining experiences and activities, as practised by Rousseau. Books are never the benchmark for learning and assessments. Bookish learning kills a lot of creativity and most of the school work in conventional schools is a waste of kids' energy, time and patience. The belief is that basic knowledge of arithmetic and literature is automatically gained if a child develops intrinsic motivation to learn (Neill, 1964). OFSTED data in 2014 shows that 68% Summerhill students attained grades A\* to C in a cumulative analysis report of all subjects taught in a school (See appendix). These statistics are in the top 20% results recorded by the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), an academically rigorous and internationally recognised qualification for all schools in England.

*Moral responsibility:* A necessary baggage that comes with free will is moral responsibility. The child should be made aware of the same. But this moral responsibility should never be considered as a price paid for possession of free will. Similarly, if an agent does not have free will, then that agent is not morally responsible for her actions. For example, if Determa is coerced into doing a morally bad act, such as stealing a note book, we shouldn't hold her morally responsible for this action since it is not an action that she did of her own free will.

*Conflict resolution:* The school is a social structure. It is bound to have conflicts arising every now and then. Deriving from the normative conception of civil liberty, the authority to resolve these conflicts should be held by a single body whose legitimacy is recognized by all stakeholders (Hinchliffe, 2014). Every decision could be arrived at using a parliamentary form of debate. An attempt should be made to recognize differences and arrive at mutually agreeable solutions. Each member of the teaching

staff and each child, regardless of his age, should have one vote, and everybody's vote should carry the same weight.

We are imposing several limits on individual freedom of action here, in favour of stability. But as mentioned earlier, this regulatory platform should work as a judicial system aiming to resolve conflicts when needed, rather than working as a deterministic legislative system every time. It can also become an excellent platform for practicing public speaking, especially for those who could neither read nor write.

*After school:* Determa's parents might fear, what their child will do if she does not learn anything conventional at school. However, the school's criterion of success is the ability to work joyfully and to live positively. Under that definition, the pupils graduating from the Democratic School would look to maintain their state of happiness and follow the voice their free will. Such tendencies should push a majority of them towards doing creative and original work in their fields. Rousseau also reaffirms that an experiential learning approach, where the child's

natural abilities are adequately developed, is sufficient for him to return to society and play his part.

**Conclusion:** The meaning and need of education goes beyond policies based on cause-effect rationales and measurable learning outcomes. The child's happiness is directly linked to his or her ability to exercise choice and free will, and should be the paramount metric of effective education. This study does not ask for devolution of the existing systems; it would do more harm than good. An attempt is made to preserve the child's free will within a normative determinist system, by proposing an alternative system of democratic schooling, which is duly backed even by measurable empirical data. Schools act as building blocks of education that act from the ground up. We must look to leverage these structures by building them on the foundations of free will and happiness from a child's perspective. The state also needs to recognize the importance of treasuring the free will of an individual, and devolve more authority to democratic educational institutions.

#### Appendix:

1. Attendance data from Summerhill School compared to British national data  
(Source: OFSTED Website, 2014):



2. General Certificate of Secondary Education Performance data (2012-14) from Summerhill school, i.e. percentage of students attaining grades A\* to C, compared to British national data (Source: OFSTED Website, 2014):



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