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Evolving the future of education: Problems in enabling broad social reforms

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Abstract: The apparent success of the Sudbury Valley School, coupled with its lack of impact on the larger culture, is used here to illustrate general constraints on managed change at the large-population level. Government regulations preventing innovation, the difficulty of bucking social norms, and the inadequacy of current indices of success operate against beneficial educational change in the larger culture.

In their target article, Wilson et al. describe human behavioral and cultural changes as evolutionary processes, contend that such changes must be consciously managed to improve human welfare, and describe some already proven means of promoting beneficial change at the level of individuals, small groups, and even large populations. In their discussion of change at the small-group level, they mention my work documenting the effectiveness of the Sudbury Valley School. Here I expand that example to illustrate why successful innovation at the small-group level does not necessarily lead to reform at the larger population level.

First, I must note that Sudbury Valley School is almost the antithesis of what most people think of as school. It is a setting where children and adolescents mix freely with one another, where they are free to play and explore in their own chosen ways all day, where students and staff members together create all school rules democratically, where there is no curriculum except the informal ones that students may create for themselves, and where students are not tested or in other ways evaluated for academic achievements. Yet, follow-up studies show that the graduates have been highly successful in higher education and careers, even though many came to the school due to failure or rejection in local public schools (Gray & Chanoff 1986; Greenberg & Sadofsky 1992; Greenberg et al. 2005). My analyses suggest that the school works well because it provides the conditions that optimize children's instinctive drives and abilities to educate themselves through observing, exploring, questioning, practicing valued skills in play, and sharing thoughts in conversation (Gray 2011b; 2013).

I do not expect to convince readers of these conclusions on the basis of this brief summary, but I ask readers to suppose that these conclusions are true and then to ponder the problem of why the success of Sudbury Valley has had so little impact on the larger culture. Sudbury Valley (founded in 1968) has existed for nearly half a century. It has hundreds of graduates. Its success and that of its graduates have been documented in articles and books. The school operates on a per-student budget less than half that of the local public schools. Yet, the school's example has had essentially no effect on schooling in the larger culture, which continues to move in a direction ever further from that of Sudbury Valley – a direction that deprives children ever more of opportunities to play, explore, and pursue their own interests and that produces ever more unhappiness, anxiety, and depression (Gray 2011a; 2013). Roughly three dozen schools explicitly modeled after Sudbury Valley now exist worldwide (listed at the Sudbury Valley website), but despite their apparent success, enrollments are small. Sudbury Valley still has only about 150 students, and all of the other schools are smaller.

Here, as I see it, are three constraints to the spread of educational innovation to the larger population level. I think these operate against other potentially beneficial social changes, as well.

Government regulations that prevent innovation. There are no publicly funded Sudbury schools, because nowhere do such schools satisfy government criteria for what a school must be to receive funding. Evolution requires variation. To the degree that variation is prevented by law, evolution cannot occur. A common criticism of Sudbury schools is that they are all private schools, which charge tuition, so there is no direct evidence that such schools would work for the general population in public schools. But laws prevent any test of that criticism. The problem of lack of variation is even greater in most European countries, where government regulations apply to tuition-supported schools just as they apply to tax-supported schools. For example, in the Netherlands, parents who have sent their children to a Sudbury school have been tried and convicted for violation of the truancy law (Hoekstra 2013).

The conservative nature of social norms. Wilson et al. use *symbotype* to refer to “a network of symbolic relations that regulates behavior” (sect. 2.4, para. 2). Symbotypes include culturally ingrained beliefs. Everyone in our culture hears regularly about the value of schooling, and concepts of childhood and conventional schooling are almost indelibly entwined in people’s minds. The first thing we ask, on meeting a child, is about their grade in school or their favorite school subject. People find it hard to swim against the cultural tide. A recent survey of parents who had chosen a non-normative educational path for their children revealed that the single biggest challenge in pursuing that path was facing the continuous questioning and criticism from others; the second biggest challenge was combating their own, culturally ingrained, automatic associations about what education is supposed to be (Gray & Riley 2013).

The problem of defining success. Many people in the educational establishment would describe present policies of closing “failing” schools and firing “unsuccessful” teachers as a managed evolutionary process. Successful schools and teachers survive, unsuccessful ones are weeded out. But success here is assessed almost solely through scores on standardized tests, so schooling becomes, increasingly, a matter of drill to prepare for tests. Over the same period that this focus on testing has increased, creativity of schoolchildren has declined (Kim 2011) and stress-induced disorders among children have increased (Gray 2011a; 2013). It is difficult to assess school success through follow-up studies of graduates that consider such factors as happiness, social responsibility, and real-world achievement, but that would be a more telling criterion. International comparisons suggest that the more a school system focuses on improving test scores, the worse are the results in terms of creating the innovative self-starters needed in today’s economy (Zhao 2012).

These are among the major constraints that have prevented beneficial change in our educational system, but not the only ones. If the word limit permitted it, I would also comment on the problem of vested interests operating against change and the “you can’t get there from here” problem that makes gradual evolution from the current system to something akin to Sudbury Valley essentially impossible.