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### The Next Generation

Many high school students, staying up late at night working on their project, may find themselves thinking, “why am I doing this?”. School has been an important institution for ages, but with the recent advancements in technology, most of the world’s knowledge is just a few taps away. There has been great debate surrounding what the purpose of modern schooling should be. Some argue that schools are not necessary in the modern world, and that they are making everyone standardized. However, in today’s era of diversity and inequality, school plays an ever more important role in constructing a stable and fair future. Specifically, the purpose of school in the twenty-first century is to create a generation of students that can understand each other and be successful regardless of what culture or household from which they came.

While those against school may claim that it is not necessary in order to achieve greatness, education allows the underprivileged to get out of their situation and become successful. According to John Taylor Gatto, a recognized teacher who resigned, prosperous Americans such as Thomas Edison, Andrew Carnegie, and Mark Twain did not have to go to high school to be successful (Gatto). Although these people were indeed able to achieve great things without school, they were the exception, as the majority of the uneducated were not able to find success during this time period. In the 19th and 20th centuries, it was incredibly difficult for the poor to escape poverty and for farmers to achieve their dreams of a better life. It was an even greater challenge for women, people of color, and other marginalized groups to escape the

shackles of discrimination and live freely. Maya Angelou faced this kind of struggle, as in her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she described how her middle school graduation was ruined during times of school segregation. During the ceremony, an out-of-place speaker talked about how the nearby white school was being improved and had better equipment and education than theirs. He only praised her school, the predominantly black school, for its athletics. This made Angelou feel as if the only figures she could ever look up to were African-American athletes, whereas scientists and inventors were out of her league. As a result, the speaker reduced the students of her school to “maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen”, and made her believe that “anything higher than [she] aspired to was farcical and presumptuous” (Angelou). It is clear that the segregation of education gave greater opportunity to the privileged and made the rest, including Angelou, feel restricted in who they could become. The disparity in success and freedom only increased. Closing this gap is the purpose of school today. Devoid of segregation, schools today are filled with students of different race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Everyone starts at the same point and has an equal opportunity to dream as big as they want to. This is consistent with the principles of Horace Mann, known as the father of American public education, who wrote that schools are made for the “general prevalence of virtue intelligence, rather than the production of few splendid examples of genius and knowledge” (Mann). Therefore, although some “few splendid examples” may not need school to thrive, schools today create a diverse new generation where anyone can lead society, not just a handful of privileged individuals. However, as the world is becoming more and more divided politically, economically, and racially, it is important that people of all backgrounds are able to accept each other.

Those opposing modern schools assert that its purpose is to indoctrinate students to conform to its standards, but in actuality this type of conformity is necessary as it creates an environment for students to understand each other and break any prejudices inherited in their household. Gatto argues that the standardization stemming from school is harmful to students since it aims “to breed and train a standardized citizenry, to put down dissent and originality” (Gatto). He seems to be primarily concerned with school conformity eliminating personal opinions, but what he does not realize is that it is impossible for schools to do this. In today’s day and age, students arrive at school all holding different beliefs and worldviews. No matter what schools do, they can never completely eradicate household influences. On the other hand, some level of conformity is vital for the students to be able to interact with one another. If schools did not have some sort of standardized education, then everyone would view the world and each other differently. By forcing students to conform to some degree, schools make them similar enough for them to understand one another but still preserve their uniqueness and identity. Specifically, schools standardize the lesson of accepting each other’s differences. They create this type of conformity through a standardized curriculum that teaches values of acceptance and open-mindedness, as most schools today cover racial, cultural, and global topics. Many students inherit dangerous prejudices and stereotypes from their parents or household, so having these important discussions in schools could open their minds. Aside from curriculum, schools also encourage students to discard homegrown prejudices by providing an environment where students can get to know other people from different backgrounds. Theodore Sizer, a school reformer and former teacher, reflected on this type of environment during his visit to a real classroom. The classroom was filled with primarily black and brown students, and Sizer noted that in their first moments together, he had already “guessed from their appearances alone who

they were”. However, as the class began to discuss deeper and more personal topics, he realized that the stereotypes he formed disappeared and his “impressions changed several times” (Sizer). Even though Sizer was an adult example, students have a similar experience. Looking at other students, they immediately paint a mental portrait of who they are based on appearances and stereotypes just like Sizer did. Nevertheless, after getting to know the person they realize that they are a lot more complex and multi-dimensional than their first impression. This type of student-to-student interaction dissolves inherited stereotypes and stops prejudice from being passed on further. Therefore, by creating an atmosphere where such interactions can occur and with the help of thoughtful educational material, schools root out prejudice, allowing students to better understand each other. In today’s polarized world of division, making everyone conform to acceptance is a fundamental task that school does a great job of doing.

Ultimately, the role of schooling today is to foster a generation of students where everyone accepts each other and can find success. In doing so, schools are shaping a future where uncontrollable differences between humans are not such dividing factors anymore.

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