
Attention and Boredom in the 19th-Century American School:

The “Drudgery” of Learning and Teaching and the Common School Reform Movement

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Introduction

Children’s attentiveness is a persistent instructional issue and plays an important role in the academic success or failure of students. In current day US pedagogical discourse attentiveness is often conceptualized in terms of ‘engagement,’ ‘time-on-task’ or ‘attention span,’ all of which map onto characteristics of the ‘good student’ and (unsurprisingly) then positively correlate to academic achievement. However, similar to the other chapters in this volume, one of the underlying premises of this chapter is that alongside this technicist approach and the understandings of human attention that we get from developmental psychology and the recent advances associated with brain-based research, we need historical scholarship on the various ways that human attentiveness and its opposites have figured as the targets of philosophical, scientific and pedagogical scrutiny across time.

In previous work I have examined how the child’s attentiveness was conceptualized by 18th-century pedagogical theorists (Locke; Rousseau; Edgeworth). Across this earlier period we see the production of properly concentrated and concentrating subjects increasingly becoming one of the important goals of education (Sobe 2010, pp. 1f.). In the 18th century children’s attentiveness was commonly thought of as a virtue or as an innate ‘capacity,’ that could, of course, be fortified. However, this capacity was seen to be differentially distributed among, for example, the poor, girls and women, and so-called ‘primitive’ people. In short, the historical examination of what we might call ‘attention regimes’ sheds light on the ways that schooling relates to (and contributes to) forming political life as well as forms of social inclusion and exclusion.

Children’s attentive capabilities were one of the important elements in the pedagogical thought in the US Common School reform movement of the 1830s, 40s and 50s. As at other historical moments, concern about human beings’ attentive and concentrating powers pivoted on concerns about human freedom and relations of

dependence/independence and the chief concern taken up in this chapter is with how people in this particular time and place were led to reflect on their own engagement in their work/world. In the early-19th-century America we see the elaboration of *both* a pedagogic discourse *and* a school reform discourse that positioned attention in relation to social administration, i. e. the concurrent governance of both the individual and society. A first argument of this chapter is that children's attentiveness appeared to American educators as much more than an object of teaching technique or pedagogical craft. Rather than merely being a technical step to further knowledge acquisition in a particular school subject, the management of the child's attentiveness was an integral part of the moral and political educational project of "governing the young" (Finkelstein 1989). However, second, I am also arguing in this chapter that 'boredom', the affective opposite of attentiveness-as-engagement, was similarly an important part of the moral and political educational project that was the American Common School reform movement. And, third, I am also arguing that perhaps most significant is that we find these concerns about the proper management of boredom and attentiveness to apply similarly to activity of learning (on the part of students) and to the activity of teaching (on the part of educators).

The chapter begins with a brief discussion of two historical texts, one having to do with the proper practice of teaching and the second an autobiographical account of what an American classroom could be like at the start of the 19th century. Together they offer an initial illustration of the first two arguments presented above. The second section of the chapter discusses the relation between attention and boredom and outlines a theoretical framework for conceptualizing attention and boredom in relation to the history of emotions. The third section of the chapter is based on research on American pedagogical periodicals from the 1820s–1840s and examines how the work of teaching and the labor of teaching was positioned in relation to concerns about attention and boredom—which, I argue, manifest at this particular moment in relation to the problem of drudgery. Then, the fourth section uses this same archival material as well as pedagogic advice manuals written for teachers to examine the way in which student learning was similarly positioned in relation to concerns about drudgery.

Enacting Desire: The Early-19th-Century American Schoolroom as "Little Empire of Mind"

In his 1839 book, *The Teacher: Or Moral Influences Employed in the Instruction and Government of the Young* Jacob Abbott tells a story related to him by an acquaintance

that he claims perfectly illustrates “the way by which a knowledge of human nature is to be turned to account in managing human minds.” He describes that British House of Commons where,

“it is well known that the gallery is appropriated to spectators, and that it sometimes becomes necessary to order them to retire, when a vote is to be taken, or private business to be transacted. When the officer in attendance was ordered to clear the gallery, it was sometimes found to be a very troublesome and slow operation; for those who first went out remained as close to the doors as possible, so as to secure the opportunity to come in again first” (Abbott 1839, p. 15).

What resulted was a log-jam that meant that getting the remaining spectators removed from the gallery could take upwards of fifteen minutes. However,

“[t]he whole difficulty was removed by a very simple plan. One door only was opened when the crowd was to retire, and they were then admitted through the other. The consequence was, that as soon as the order was given to clear the galleries everyone fled as fast as possible through the open door around to the one which was closed, so as to be ready to enter first, when that, in its turn, should be opened” (ibid.).

In Abbot’s view, this furnished a perfect illustration of how “human nature” could be used to good ends. The unknown author of this plan, which was claimed to have trimmed the clearing of the spectator gallery from fifteen minutes to just several, serves as a model for the teacher who “studies the nature and tendency of the minds which he has to control; adapts his plans and his measures to the laws of human nature.” Similar to the way that the officers in the House of Commons no longer had to use force to remove bodies from the room but instead had engineered a system in which individuals avidly, unhesitatingly and more efficiently employed their own labors to this same effect, Abbott’s teacher could accomplish his purposes “not by mere labor and force, but by ingenuity and enterprise” (ibid., pp. 16f.).

In Abbott’s story and in his description of correct teaching we see an enactment of the new statecraft that Michel Foucault (1977) has described as emerging in the early years of the nineteenth century. Across Europe and in the United States governance less and less took the physical body as its target and instead acted upon the will, inclinations and inner ‘nature’ of human beings. Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* described carceral practices shifting focus from the body onto the soul and a similar innovation in governmental strategy played out in pedagogy. It would be a mistake, however, to reduce the educational significance of this to a move to shun corporal punishment in favor of mental and moral suasion. At stake is a profound rewriting of the arts of government where the focus is not on human beings just in and of themselves but on human beings in their relations or their linkages with

resources, territory, habits, modes of thinking—even human beings in their relations to things like accidents and epidemics. Government, in the early/mid nineteenth century, is to be distinguished from sovereignty. It involves people, aka subjects, deeply enmeshed in the activity of governing. This is why Foucault insists that in this (disciplinary) era power must be analyzed as something that circulates with individuals “always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power” (Foucault 1980, p. 98). The student in Abbott’s classroom, like the spectator in the gallery at the British House of Commons, is not meant to feel, perceive, or in point of fact, be subject to an external force. But rather, is to be an active participant in the “empire of the mind”—a metaphor for the schoolroom that Abbott offers—that the good teacher stewards and sets into motion.

It is against this background that we can properly make sense of the ‘Whig’ tendencies which are often (and accurately) attached to Common School reformers like Horace Mann. Historian David Hogan refers to “New England Pedagogy” of the 1820s–1840s as “a concerted attempt to invent and deploy a disciplinary pedagogy [...] that simultaneously reflected [a] faith in the ability of education to promote the development of the powers of the self and [a] concern that education cultivate the capacity for self-government” (1999, p. 12). This was a group of reformers troubled by Jacksonian populism who saw the provision of public schooling as a means to guarantee social stability and economic progress. Consistent across texts from the period is the view it was of utmost importance that the attentiveness of the child be generated from within the individual.

Part and parcel of this new statecraft is the idea the individuals might come to internalize and desire this kind of governance as is nicely illustrated in an autobiographical text from 1833—one that also gives us a textured account of the opposite of attentiveness-as-engagement. Warren Burton, then aged 33, penned a reminiscence of his early schooling, *The District School as It Was. By One Who Went to it*, that has furnished historians of American education with a wealth of information on the conditions of schools at the start of the 19th century and on teachers and teaching.¹ For example, Burton provides rich detail of the social and cultural politics that went into selecting teachers in a small New England town—both regarding the women who were employed to teach during the summer sessions and the men who were hired for the school’s winter session. He reported:

“The severest duty I was ever called to perform was sitting on that little front seat, at my first winter school. My lesson in the Abs [the alphabet] conveyed no ideas, excited little interest, and, of course, occupied but very little of my time. There was nothing before me on which to lean my head, or lay my arms, but my own knees.

1 See Finkelstein (1974, pp. 293-300).

How my limbs ached for the freedom and activity of play! It sometimes seemed as if a drubbing from the master, or a kick across the school-house, would have been a pleasant relief” (Burton 1833, p. 33).

This excerpt underscores the contrast that Burton felt between his summer school teachers, especially Mary Smith, the teacher he first had when he began attending school as a three and a half year-old, and the more austere and disciplinarian men who taught in the winter sessions. As seen above, Burton describes the labors of learning the alphabet during his first winter school session as exciting “little interest” and recollects longing for something to break the tedium and bring “relief” (Burton 1833). Burton was describing attending school in the period roughly from 1804 to 1811 and his text makes several mentions of the great changes to teaching that have been introduced in “the last few years” (i.e. late 1820s and early 1830s). Specifically as regards mathematics Burton notes:

“Honor and gratitude be to Pestalozzi; thanks be to our countrymen, Colburn, Emerson, and others for making what was the hardest and driest of studies, one of the easiest and most interesting. They have at length tackled the intellectual team aright; have put the carriage before the carrier; pshaw! [...] Formerly, memory [...] was loaded with rules, rules, words, words, to top-heaviness and sent lumbering along; while the understanding, which should have been the living and spirited mover of the vehicle, was kept ill-fed and lean, and put loosely behind, to push after it as it could” (ibid., p. 118).

For Burton, these newer approaches contrasted sharply with his own experience of slowly learning mathematics where “each rule [...] was to be committed to memory, word for word, which to me was the most tedious and difficult job of the whole.” (ibid., p. 117) As presented in these two texts, the proper management of human beings—and human beings managing themselves—pivoted on an affective politics of desire, attraction and suasion rather than compulsion. The human being itself as the ‘vehicle’ was to internalize its own intellectual spirit and propel itself—as opposed to being pushed—forward.

Conceptualizing Attention and Boredom on an Emotional Plane

Burton’s description of tedium that ached for interruption sounds might accurately be described as “boredom”. Yet, neither Burton himself nor any of his contemporaries would have readily identified him as “bored” or as experiencing

“boredom”—in either 1803/4 when the incident took place or 1833 when he wrote up his reminiscences—thus, we are led to question whether in fact boredom is the right descriptor to use in this instance. And in fact, as a historical phenomenon we can posit that human beings “being bored” changes quite significantly with time, place and culture. Literary scholar Patricia Spacks (1995) argues that there are unique and consequential cultural contours to our contemporary Western ideas about boredom. She maintains that boredom is not discussed in Western literature before the second half of the 18th century. In this argument, the very possibility of boredom is tightly linked to modernity, particularly a growing emphasis on the individual and the rise of the idea of leisure (Pezze and Salzani 2009). However, other scholars have proposed that there are family resemblances between modern ‘boredom’ and ways that human beings have emotionally responded to their lives and circumstances across several millennia of history (Toohey 2012). Nonetheless, there is no dispute that the word ‘boredom’ first appears in English in 1750 and that earlier concepts such as ‘acedia’ (spiritual laziness) and ‘ennui’ (existential angst) map onto slightly different affective constellations than what is captured in the idea of ‘being bored’. A review of the major teaching manuals published in English in the period 1800–1850 reveals not a single mention of the phrase “boredom”, nor the adjective “boring”, nor the notion of “being bored.”² Yet, in the school-days recollection quoted above, we clearly see a student experiencing something that a 21st-century observer might well describe as boredom.

To think through this we can turn to the historiography of the emotions which has emerged in recent years as a vibrant historical sub-field and is one that has begun to capture the attention of historians of education (Sobe 2012, pp. 689–695). One of the premises of this project is that alongside studying how school curricula have changed over time and how schools have historically served different ‘kinds’ of children, it is important to examine what has actually transpired in educational spaces³ as well as to reconstruct—to the best of our abilities—how schools have been experienced by individuals over time. As Joanna Bourke puts it in her recent cultural history of fear, “looked at historically, subjective feelings are invisible”; what remains for us to examine are the texts and material artifacts that have been left (2007, p. 6). For some time now, historians have engaged with the important historical role that human emotions have played in social change (and social stasis). Norbert Elias’ 1939 *The Civilizing Process* has been quite influential

2 Pedagogic manuals consulted include James G. Carter’s 1824 *Essays on Popular Education*, Samuel Hall’s 1830 *Lectures on School Keeping*, Jacob Abbott’s 1839 *The Teacher*, Henry Dunn’s 1839 *Teaching Manual*, Alonzo Potter and George Emerson’s 1843 *The School and the Schoolmaster*, and Baynard Hall’s 1848 *Teaching: A Science*.

3 See Braster et al. (2011).

in history of education scholarship for its carefully documented examination of the social processes and cultural patterns that produce emotional restraint as a key dimension of modernity. For much of the twentieth century, as Barbara Rosenwein pointed out in her pivotal 2002 historiographic essay “Worrying about Emotions in History,” a “hydraulic” conceptualization of emotions as pressures that “build up” and must be accommodated had dominated the ways that historians discussed emotions. This approach (present in Elias, Freud, G. S. Hall and pervasive in the field of psychohistory) began to be challenged in the last two decades of the twentieth century as scholars emphasized the socially constructed nature of emotions. Studies such as Megan Boler’s 1999 *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* have devoted considerable attention to the emotional projects that educational institutions had been involved with for decades. Nonetheless, even as historians grapple with the socially constructed nature of the affective domain of human experience, the theme of emotional regulation has remained a mainstay. Emotional regimes have come to be viewed less as exclusively negative and repressive, but as productive in Foucauldian terms—meaning that the social construction of and regulation of the emotional domain is seen as forming people, forming social norms, and forming social relations.

It is a commonplace to map the opposite of attentiveness as distraction. This is the problematic elaborated by art historian Jonathan Crary in his brilliant 1999 book *Suspensions of perception: attention, spectacle, and modern culture*. However, it is a mistake to think of human attentiveness as only a matter of cognition. Human attentiveness has an important affective dimension where one of the opposites of engagement is boredom. Yet, what the affective state of boredom means/inheres in varies historically. And I would propose that young Warren Burton’s aching for activity and relief during unexciting and uninspiring instruction in the alphabet is most usefully viewed as joined to an early-nineteenth century American concern with the ‘drudgery’ of work and its relation to schooling. In the period 1800–1850 the concept of ‘drudgery’ appears to be the most common descriptor applied to the painful monotony, suffering and disengagement experienced in schools. Integral to this, I propose, were cultural concerns about the dignity and changing value of work as well as the rise of wage labor, all of which represented changes to how human bodies experienced time. To be a ‘drudge’ was to be a slave and to inhabit a recognizable condition of unfreedom. Questions and anxieties around freedom and the value of work pervade early-nineteenth century discussions of schooling on two important axes: first, with regard to the work of schoolchildren, and second, with regard to the work of the teacher. Since the founding of the Republic and particularly with the Common School movement of the 1830s and 1840s, advocates for education promised that investment in schooling would bring deferred reward,

both for individuals and for society in general. One of the historical interpretations offered in this chapter is that across the first half of the nineteenth century we can see the formation of cultural conventions aiming to convince people that the labors involved in schooling were worth it.⁴

The Drudgery of Work in School

Writing in 1828, leading American educator and director of the Hartford Female Seminary Catharine E. Beecher opined that many of the problems of American education could be traced to a failure to properly respect teaching as a profession. Similar to the calls for the professional training of teachers that James G. Carter had offered in his 1824 scandalizing articles on the state of education in Massachusetts and like Horace Mann and other Common School reformers' later emphasis on raising the prestige of teaching, Beecher noted that "the formation of the minds of children has not been made a profession securing wealth, influence or honor to those who enter it" (1828, p. 4). Beecher complained that teaching "has been looked upon as [an alternative to] poverty, or as a drudgery suited only to inferior minds and far beneath the aims of the intellectual aspirant for fame and influence, or of the active competitor for wealth and distinction" (*ibid.*, pp. 4-5). My research suggests that Beecher's use of the word "drudgery" would, in the early nineteenth century, be understood as a reference to servitude and monotonous, wearisome work that was seen as improper for certain kinds or classes of people.

In her study of the different ways that work has been valued and indeed even permitted to different races across American history, social historian Jacqueline Jones repeatedly draws attention to the perverse and racist ways in which the labor of Black Americans has been treated. Though the vast majority of New England Common School reformers were strong abolitionists, opposition to slavery did not necessarily translate into full-fledged commitments to racial justice.⁵ Likewise, despite sympathetic views on the injustice and degradations suffered by enslaved African-Americans, the pitiful state of their labor inspired meditations on how freedom could be enjoyed by others.⁶

4 For related arguments, see Block (2012); Kett (2013).

5 On reformers' commitments to racial justice and equality taking a backseat to their commitments to advancing the common school movement see Moss (2009).

6 According to Toni Morrison (1993) this point could be writ large to apply across American culture where the condition of African unfreedom has helped to elaborate and sustain freedom.

The interweaving of education and distinctions between desirable and undesirable forms of work is clearly evidenced in an excerpt from Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing's September 1838 lecture on *Self-Culture* that was reprinted in the *Connecticut Common School Journal* in 1840:

"Spread education, and, as the history of this country shows, there will be no bounds to useful inventions [...] You may think that a man without mind will do all the better what you call the drudgery of life. Go then to the Southern plantation. There the slave is brought up to be a mere drudge. He is robbed of the rights of a man, his whole spiritual nature is starved, that he may work, and do nothing but work; and in that slovenly agriculture, in that worn out soil, in the rude state of the mechanic arts, you may find a comment on your doctrine that by degrading men you make them more productive laborers" (Channing 1840, p. 130).

Channing goes on to argue that education makes people into more productive laborers. He dismisses the viewpoint that "any considerable education lifts men above their work, makes them look with disgust on their trades as mean and low, makes drudgery intolerable," (Channing 1839, p. 28) with an argument for the enlightened laborer:

"An enlightened farmer, who understands agricultural chemistry, the laws of vegetation, the structure of plants, the properties of manures, the influences of climate, who looks intelligently on his work, and brings his knowledge to bear on exigencies, is a much more cheerful, as well as more dignified laborer than the peasant whose mind is akin to the clod on which he treads, and whose whole life is the same, dull, unthinking, unimproving toil" (ibid.).

The formula Channing specifies here for dignifying (agricultural) labor by enmeshing it within a professional training closely linked to intellectual growth and a disposition to learning, tightly parallels the Common School reformers prescription for improving the profession and work of teaching.

Horace Mann proposed that a key educational challenge was to "lift the vocation [of teaching] out of the regions of a menial service and a drudgery, and to place it upon the high and steadfast ground of duty and of an honorable and sacred calling" (Mann 1839a). According to Mann this was one of the chartering purposes of the Boston-based *Common School Journal* that he edited. Mann offered these words in June 1839 as lead-in to a re-printed lecture on the motives of the teacher that had been recently given by the Congregational minister Hubbard Winslow. In Mann's short introduction (which was reprinted several months later in the *Connecticut Common School Journal*) (Mann 1839b) he noted that between three and four thousand female educators were about to begin summer sessions and

remarked that absent a higher motive to their work it would simply be “wearisome and disheartening.” In fact, “if they look upon the routine of the schoolroom as so much wheel-work which they are to drudge through for a stipulated price, then the literal tending of wheels must be far less irksome and vexatious,” Mann wrote (making, with the reference to “wheel-work” a comparison to female labor in New England textile mills) (Winslow 1839, p. 161). The problem of motivation echoes across Mann’s annual reports and, as we see here, was deeply linked to an effort to carve out teacher work as a form of labor that would be set apart from the wage labor that was increasingly shaping the American economy of the 1820s, 30s and 40s. In his study of work ideals in industrializing America of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Daniel Rogers notes that a “maze of paradoxes” surrounds the industrial economy emerging in the New England mill towns at the same time as the educational transformations under discussion here. Rogers characterizes factories as creatures that both represented and undercut ideas about the value and ethical superiority of hard work (Rogers 1974). Even though the American industrial economy was just beginning to emerge at mid-century, Mann’s comment about “wheel-work” clearly demonstrate a concern with properly locating the work of teaching within the complex and fragile sets of distinctions between less-worthy/rewarding and more worthy/rewarding labor, as well as the ways that unfree slave labor, demeaning labor was distinguished from proper industriousness and proper productivity.⁷

In his own text on the proper motives for teaching, Hubbard Winslow posed the problem of relying on “pecuniary compensation” in similar terms:

“Although this motive may properly hold a place in his bosom yet it should not be the only, nor even the principal one. If it is, he will go at his employment as a task. It will be to him an intolerable drudgery. He will dread the hour of teaching; he will long to have it close; he will be continually saying ‘what a weariness is it’” (1839, p. 166).

To raise teaching out of drudgery Winslow suggested that the teacher needed an “enthusiastic *fondness for teaching*, connected with an *affectionate interest in children*” (emphasis in original). Alongside this, the teacher “must love knowledge, and love to impart it” (ibid.). Historian David Hogan has argued that New England pedagogical reform beginning with the uptake of Pestalozzian ideas in the 1820s was linked to what can be referred to as an “affective individualism” that drew together the engagement of children’s interests, affectionate relationships between teachers and students, and the internalization of authority (1999). Hogan relies on Michel

7 The gendered division of labor is also important to mention here and warrants additional research attention.

Foucault's notion of disciplinary power to interpret the relationship between this new pedagogy and economic change, pinning it on middle-class anxiety about the market revolution transforming early-nineteenth century America. Yet, the significance of new educational strictures to disciplinary regimes notwithstanding, Winslow's and Mann's optimistic proposals for banishing drudgery from schools also relate to the management of boredom and what was modeled for how human beings were to most properly relate to the necessity (and even transcendental promises) of labor. As we see in the next section, the strategies proposed for making sure that teachers not go at their employment as a menial task dovetailed perfectly with the strategies proposed for ensuring that pupils not go at their learning as a menial task.

The Drudgery of Schoolwork

“there is a sense of drudgery approaching to that of slavery, in the unrelenting necessity of labor, where there is none of the interest of imparting knowledge or receiving it, or of reciprocating knowledge that has been imparted and received”
excerpt from Foster's 1821 “Evils of Popular Ignorance” reprinted in the *Connecticut Common School Journal* (Foster 1841, p. 104).

John Foster's 1821 explication of the danger and consequences of ignorance were reprinted in an 1841 issue of Henry Barnard's *Connecticut Common School Journal* following a commonplace pattern of recirculating texts that related to the Common School reformer's causes. The reprinted passage offers a description of the “ignorant family” that centers on the affective damage done when learning is not held in high esteem. Parent-child and child-parent affection suffers, according to Foster. Rudeness and insubordination take over—all for “want of resources for engaging and occupying, for amusing, and instructing the younger minds” (ibid., p. 103). In Foster's argument it is not simply that proper social relations and individual moral fiber unravel when education is absent. Rather, this unraveling occurs when the child's interest is not awakened and engaged. From this perspective, then, children's boredom in school is not just undesirable; it is dangerous.

Calls to render children's school learning less of a drudgery recur across multiple common school-era texts. For example, Mann and others called for American schools to be properly equipped with books and libraries, mounting the argument that unless children find something to address their “innate and insatiable thirst” they will consider reading a drudgery and will avoid books when they complete

school.⁸ Learning to love books is one of the pieces of the educational algorithm that would have people internalizing their own intellectual spirit and propelling themselves forward.⁹

We see the call to avoid drudgery expressed in manuals written for teachers such as Samuel Read Hall's popular 1829 *Lectures on Schoolkeeping*. In a chapter on "Means of Exciting the Attention of Scholars" Hall devotes considerable space to strategies that are to be avoided. Chief among these was the practice of "emulation". By this Hall was referring to a schoolroom marked by competition among students, with that competition understood as undergirded by "the desire to excel for the sake of gratification of being superior to others" (1830, p. 106). Competition that played out in this manner did little to cultivate "habits of self-government," the key behavioral desideratum of Hall's book.

"Instead of having a good effect, emulation has an injurious one, on the acquisition of knowledge, and on the improvement of the mind. In order to have a scholar understand and remember what he learns, it is necessary for him to love learning for its own sake" (*ibid.*, p. 111).

For Hall and others the notion of intrinsic merit ("for its own sake") was tied to an affective stimulus to action, i.e. a form of love and pleasure-generating desire. Quoting John Parkhurst's 1825 *Elements of Moral Philosophy* (from which he also drew his definition of emulation), Hall proposed that a key task of the teacher was "to present the importance of knowledge and mental improvement as qualifications for respectability, usefulness and happiness in future life." The attention of the child was thus to be secured in advance of studies proceeding: the schoolchild was to want to learn. And the child was to want to learn in the same measure as he or she was to want to be respectable, useful and happy in society.

Hall proposed that "a love of learning for its own sake is a powerful stimulus" (*ibid.*, p. 114). The teacher was to bring the child to "just views on the value of knowledge" and was to "point out plainly the consequences which much result to [the child] and others, from indifference and inattention to the opportunity he has of gaining knowledge" (*ibid.*, pp. 115f.). As we saw above, the teacher's task here is one of gentle persuasion, not external compulsion. The object was to produce a properly-desiring individual under the confident logic that such an individual would thus strive towards behaviors that would ensure the proper governance of society.

8 "The School Library" *Common School Journal* 1/12 (June 15, 1839), p. 178.

9 On school libraries and the love of books see also, "Common School Libraries" *Connecticut Common School Journal* 2/1 (Aug 1839), pp. 11-12.

As noted earlier, in the early nineteenth century school summer sessions were typically taught by women with men's employment seen as required for agricultural work. Older children (of both sexes) were more likely to attend winter sessions as they too were required for agricultural work in many communities. This meant that female teachers often worked with a set of younger children and Hall devoted a chapter of his teaching manual specifically to female instructors, advising them that with their youngest charges.

"The first object at which you should aim, is *to please them*—to make the school as pleasant as possible. In order to do this, you must consider what they are, and how their attention can be excited; how they are pleased, and in what manner they may, most easily be governed" (ibid., p. 116).

Warren Burton's autobiographical testimony discussed above would seem to suggest that there were in fact instances in which female summer session teachers did in fact inhabit personas of the type Hall describes here as most desirable.¹⁰ In recommending that at mid-day teachers provide a full hour of what would later be called "recess" Hall directly speaks to the ways that good teachers need to avoid learning environments in which boredom could occur.

"To confine a volatile child for six hours a day to one place, without employment and with no change of scenery—with nothing but a dull round of exercises in which it takes little or no delight, is not only unreasonable and cruel, but is a sure way to make the school and unpleasant place, and to make dolts of the scholars themselves" (ibid.).

In sum, we can note a remarkable overlap between the desire of Common School-era education reformers to banish drudgery from the schoolroom for both teachers and for children. Of course, this is not to claim that in any significant number either teachers or 'scholars' (the term 'student' not having been yet widely used) were liberated from drudgery and from experiencing boredom while at work in school. Yet, we do see the domain of affect as a pivotal surface of intervention—intervention on the self and on others.

10 Like all documents, however, autobiographical sources need to be read in relation to the specificity of their genres, in this case, as texts produced joined to a particular practice of narrating a life—with that narration inevitably shaped by subsequent events and experiences. Since Burton makes an affirmative reference to Hall's 1829 book it is fair to assume that Burton's positive gloss on certain of his summer teachers has been somehow filtered through the best-practices recommended by Hall. Nonetheless, the connection that Burton's text makes to a (reported) set of actual school-room interactions provides us with an important link between the normative, advice literature and what occurred in early-nineteenth schools.

Conclusion

Drudgery loomed large as a problem for both students and teachers. Writings from the period are regularly calibrated on establishing teaching as a worthwhile occupation. At the same time there was also a twinned concern with making learning a worthwhile occupation. Whereas much history of education scholarship treats the history of teaching and the history of student's schoolroom experiences as separate topics of inquiry, one conclusion to draw from the above analysis is that there are likely to be many settings where the same cultural concerns similarly traverse these two domains.

Patricia Spacks suggests that what is perhaps most significant about present-day preoccupation with the problem of boredom is that a single concept can be so freely extended across phenomena and experiences that exhibit considerable variety and variation. Think for example of the contemporary teenager's drawn-out "borRR-RING" as a gesture that can dismiss a day at school, a suggested activity, a person, even an object such as a book, music or a piece of art. As a way of interpreting the world and human experience 'being bored' implies irritation and unease; "it reflects a state of affairs in which the individual is assigned ever more importance and ever less power," Spacks suggests (1995, p. 13).

This chapter has sought to examine the ways that with the emergence of mass public education in the US in the early 19th century schools emerged as sites of boredom and attention. Undergirding the project is the idea that this is the historical period when the school becomes a prominent socialization mechanism in the US and that boredom and attention in schools has great consequence for how individuals come to understand in global terms what it means for a human being to feel, perceive, engage and participate. As we have seen above, the drudgery of school work—both for children and for their adult teachers—was identified as a pressing social, cultural and economic problem. Joined to the project of making schooling worthwhile (again for both teachers and for pupils) was a new form of social governance based on an affective politics of desire, attraction and suasion rather than compulsion or what Foucault refers to as a regime of sovereign power. The re-placing of responsibility for social order into individuals themselves had profound implications for what was supposed to, and did, occur in schools. It is worth quoting Spacks at length on the ways that the rise of individualism (long associated with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) played out in the nineteenth century:

"As individual life is accorded more importance, focus on daily happenings intensifies. Keeping an eye on spall particularities has positive consequences but, inviting constant evaluation, also calls attention to the lack of emotional satisfaction in much

ordinary experience. The inner life comes to be seen as consequential, therefore its inadequacies invite attention” (ibid., p. 23).

Spacks proposes that the concept of boredom emerges as an “all-purpose register of inadequacy” (ibid.). As noted above, “being bored” “boredom” and “boring” seem not appear in education-related texts in the period 1800-1850. Yet, I would propose that we might see the ways that weariness, fatigue, restlessness, drudgery, freedom and nonfreedom were woven together as laying a foundation for the emergence of boredom in schools. Education reformers in the Common School era attempted to develop forms and patterns of schooling that would, on the one hand, enhance human capabilities and facilitate the overcoming of inadequacies. Yet, in the distinguishing among human kinds and in demarcating different kinds of toil we might also witness the foundation stones of the systems of inclusion and exclusion and merit/demerit that American education is riven with today.

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