Carla Shalaby uses a portraiture approach to illustrate the everyday experiences of four young children recognized as “problem students.” Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom from Young Children at School details the ways that these children, ages six and seven, fail to conform and comply with the everyday demands and requirements of school, engaging in “trouble-making” behavior within the classroom. As a result, they are regularly excluded from the classroom community, and are recipients of frequent negative attention from both teachers and peers.

Shalaby encourages readers to question the way such children are identified in schools. The locus of the problem is often thought to reside within individual children, requiring correction through various forms of intervention (such as discipline or medication). Shalaby argues that the problem emanates from school as an institution. Like other educational researchers (such as Deschenes, Cuban & Tyack, 2001), she suggests a mismatch between the structure of schools and the so-called problem students who fail to conform. Thus, rather than working to “fix” such children, solutions should instead focus on making changes at the institutional level.

In this essay, I employ self-determination theory as a framework to illustrate why some systems and structures in our public schools may be damaging to young students. Self-determination theory is a theory of human motivation pertaining to people’s innate psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002). The theory begins with the assumption that all individuals have constructive propensities to develop an elaborated sense of self. In other words, humans are curious, growth-oriented organisms that seek challenges and opportunities in their environment to learn and internalize the knowledge and values that surround them. Furthermore, social environments can either support or undermine such processes. According to self-determination theory, autonomy, competence, and relatedness are critical for one’s psychological health. Social contexts that enable satisfaction of such needs tend to yield engagement, mastery, and well-being. In contrast, contexts preventing need fulfillment often lead to negative consequences, such as the weakening of individuals’ motivation, growth, and well-being. Thus, by examining the extent to which needs are satisfied, self-determination theory can be used to examine factors in social environments that facilitate
motivation and well-being, compared to those which hinder such processes. Using this framework, the “troublemakers” portrayed in the book can be understood to be acting out in school because their basic psychological needs are left unmet. Although situated in different schools and with different teachers, each student seems to be suffering. Thus, misbehavior may be a signal that school environments are harmful.

To understand their situations, one must first consider the wider scope of the current standards-based reform movement driving our educational system. The movement emphasizes standardization, evaluation, and accountability. Standards-based reform also tends to promote conformity, control, and narrow measures of achievement. Shalaby intentionally chose exceptional schools and highly regarded teachers who employ contemporary methods of instruction, yet many restrictive features are evident in their classrooms. For example, the teachers utilize rich curricula paired with multisensory and multimodal approaches, but do so in concert with high expectations for behavior, and strict demands for conformity and obedience. From the young ages of six and seven years, the children are expected to sit still for long periods of time as they engage in rich and demanding classroom activities. The classrooms’ focus is on academic rigor and the curriculum, seemingly at the expense of developmental foundations for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

In terms of students’ psychological need for autonomy, the classrooms employ rigid rules, norms, and behaviors. Students are told when to sit, stand, speak, and use the bathroom. As is clear from reading about Zora’s experience, students are often expected to conform, or blend in, rather than to stand out and express their own individuality. Success is viewed as imitation rather than imagination. Zora, however, conveys proud individuality, and is often punished for it in the classroom as her teacher works to make her invisible. Zora rebels against straightforward and constrained tasks, and instead infuses them with her vivid imagination and creativity. Most often she finds herself in trouble for doing things that signal her desire to stand out and be noticed, rather than conform.

Furthermore, schools employ strict requirements of obedience. Students are expected to obey school rules and regulations, and those who do best in school tend to be those who obey without question. However, such rigidity thwarts students’ psychological need for autonomy. For example, Lucas finds himself pegged as a problem student because he struggles to learn and to accept school’s culture. Specifically, Lucas seems to have difficulty internalizing and adapting to school culture because he experiences his own needs and interests as urgent, and he finds it challenging to follow the directives of the teacher. Lucas’ misbehavior may be an attempt to signal that the school’s culture is harmful because it obstructs his own (as well as others’) need for autonomy, as it is expected that students trade their own desires for the requirements of the teachers.

Similarly, Sean has difficulty in learning and accepting school culture because he has been brought up to question rules and authority at home, rather than to blindly obey them. Sean’s mother offers him authority and freedom at home; he has some power in decision-making, and he often negotiates with his mother. Furthermore, his mother believes that encouraging such constant questioning will help her son in life, though she admits that the practice of questioning is unlikely to help him in school. Sean is capable
of obeying, but he values questioning, and he insists upon justification for the demands being placed upon him. He wants some control, choice, and freedom. In other words, Sean’s need for autonomy is impeded in school.

The children depicted in the book also seem to be left with their psychological need for relatedness unfulfilled. Each child is described as having poor social skills. Furthermore, their classrooms offer little opportunity for students to engage with peers to build such skills. Because of school’s rigid structure and increased focus on academic rigor, little time is devoted to play and unstructured interaction with peers. Thus, students are provided few opportunities to learn skills of social relationship. In Marcus’s example, we see that he strongly values interpersonal relationships; he wants to know people and to be known, and he seeks relationships at every opportunity. However, given school’s focus on academic rigor, he is provided with few opportunities to be social. He, like the other three children, seems to experience a paradoxical cycle: with the desire to meet his own psychological need for relatedness, he acts out in the classroom to receive attention from peers. Such behavior often results in negative attention from the teacher, as well as his exclusion from the classroom. Repeated reprimand and exclusion make it difficult for him to form friendships with peers. The more he feels left out, the more he engages in attention-seeking behavior, which results in further reprimand. The negative attention from teachers signals to peers that he is a “problem,” making it less likely that other children will engage with him. Thus, the final outcome is that Marcus’s need for relatedness is left unmet in the classroom, as he has little opportunity to form positive relationships with peers, or to build his identity as a valued member of the classroom community. Marcus’s classroom experience conflicts with research suggesting that schools should focus on authentic and meaningful human relationships, as well as promote care and empathy between and among students and teachers (Baker, 2006; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Juvonen, 2006; O’Connor, Dearing & Collins, 2010; Martin & Dowson, 2009).

Finally, the four “troublemakers” find themselves regularly excluded from the classroom. They are routinely marginalized through punishment and isolation. The students miss out on important instructional time, and as a consequence, they suffer academically. A further outcome is that their psychological need for competence is left unfulfilled, hindering their well-being, as well as their motivation to conform and comply with classroom demands.

Such approaches common to the standards-based reform movement diverge from educational research showing that students with autonomy-supportive teachers, compared to those with more controlling teachers, exhibit greater motivation and perceived competence (Deci, Nezlek, & Sheinman, 1981), higher academic performance (Boggiano, Fink, Shields, Seelbach, & Barrett, 1993), and increased conceptual understanding (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987). Research also indicates that increasing teachers’ autonomy support results in increased student motivation and engagement in the classroom (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004). Autonomy-supportive teachers enable such positive educational and developmental outcomes in their students by meeting students’ needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness during instruction (Reeve, 2002).
Importantly, Shalaby demonstrates that context matters in terms of the children’s trouble-making behavior. In other words, the children are shown to be capable of obeying and focusing when they are outside of school. Using self-determination theory as a framework, we can conclude that the children’s needs are likely satisfied in other social contexts. Therefore, instead of pegging such students as “problem children” in need of correction and/or exclusion from the classroom, Shalaby points out for us that we can view them as leaders, showing us where school culture employs subtle forms of marginalization. Rather than working to “fix” such students, or rendering them invisible, we may better aid them by changing certain aspects of the social context of school as we now know it.

The young students portrayed in the book teach us that they want to be heard; they want to play; to stand out; to be known, loved, and valued as human beings. Shalaby urges teachers to support such students by teaching love and freedom. This involves loving all students, even those who misbehave. When it comes to students who “make trouble,” instead of working to make such misbehavior invisible (i.e., through exclusion and reprimand), teachers can ask themselves whether the children may be signaling some “poison” in the environment from which they are suffering (p. xxi). The goal then becomes to heal the students by removing the toxin, rather than punishing and/or harming them. Thus, instead of acting to exclude and erase troublemakers, all students are to be valued and welcomed in the classroom community. Perhaps a good place to begin is by undertaking an effort to satisfy all students’ most basic psychological needs within the school context.

Educational research yields insight as to what an interpretive framework of self-determination theory might look like (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Reeve & Halusic, 2009). For example, strategies for meeting students’ need for relatedness include offering all students rich opportunities to build authentic and meaningful human relationships with others. Educators’ focus is on developing caring and reciprocal relationships with students. Approaches for meeting students’ need for autonomy include providing students with choice and celebrating their individuality, rather than requiring conformity. Further, the salience of evaluative pressure and control is minimized, while students’ perceptions of having a voice and a choice in academic activities are maximized. Students are given opportunities to be authentically heard, known, and valued. Instead of requiring students to conform and obey without question, students might be taught to think critically about, and question such rules, as well as when and how to challenge authority appropriately. Finally, to meet students’ need for competence, no child is excluded from the classroom, especially during important instructional time. All learning activities are optimally challenging; specifically, those that enable students to test and develop their academic abilities, and can be truly comprehended and mastered. Relevant learning tools are also provided, along with appropriate feedback that emphasizes efficacy rather than evaluation.

In summary, the current standards-based reform movement driving our educational system has led to a school culture that tends to promote ideals such as obedience, conformity, control, and narrow measures of achievement. As illustrated by the experiences of the four children in *Troublemakers*, such an environment may be
harmful to our students as it obstructs their basic psychological need for self-determination. As we move forward, it is important to think about change at the institutional level. To successfully teach love and freedom, it is necessary to develop systems and structures of school that support students’ self-determination.

References


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