1. The education I received in elementary school heavily valued individual excellence and competition over equality and collective progress. Although pragmatist in the methods of education it employed, such as project-based assignments and group work, the underlying values of the school were conservative and were apparent in the way the school prized free competition of students, visibly rewarding the successful winners of the competition whilst neglecting students whose performances were comparatively underwhelming.   
   In elementary school, the most emphasized field of competition was not academics but rather obedience and general disposition. Since academically there was not much disparity in students’ abilities, students were appraised based on their demeanor. An example representative of this attitude was the score system that existed in every homeroom class. In the system, each student was given a base score of zero at the start of every month. From there, students were able to increase their score by completing certain actions listed out by the school that were deemed “exemplary.” However, for every instance of misbehavior or noncompliance, teachers would subtract points from a student’s score. At the end of every month, students with a score exceeding a certain threshold were rewarded with the freedom to choose one toy from a selection of toys provided by the school. Simultaneously, students with a negative score were punished with a phone call to their parents and occasionally a visit to the principal’s office. The toys were put on display throughout the school year to incentivize children to behave and comply with their teachers’ demands.   
   This score weighed heavily on the impressionable young minds of the students, and I was no exception. Every time the teacher called me out in front of my peers and subtracted points from my score, I felt humiliated, ashamed, and alienated. Furthermore, our scores were tied to the strong biblical dogma propagated by the school and were seen as indicators of the moral character of each student (students with a perpetually negative score, like me, were frequently referred to as sinners). The close association of the score with the content of one’s character (the biblical notion of virtues) turned the score into a status symbol among the predominantly Christian student body; students with high scores would continually flaunt it while students with low scores were side eyed and looked down upon. Since I was among the students who were constantly looked down upon, this scoring caused me to harbor strong feelings of aversion and mistrust towards the school, leading to increasingly reckless behavior out of spite.   
   This all changed in middle school, however, when the most emphasized sphere of competition shifted from behavior to academics. The score system was superseded by a series of awards given to students who performed exceptionally in academic fields. Teachers frequently delegated teaching tasks to students with awards, appointing them TA status in classes. At the end of every semester, the school convened to commend the students who showed most academic success in that semester, and their handprints were put on the “Wall of Fame,” a wall with cheesy origins dedicated to celebrating the academic success of students.   
   Awards were not the only system that rewarded excellence and spurred competition. The school implemented a grading system that derived assessed students based on their performance relative to the national standard. Students were stratified within each class and given different goals and assignments. High performance students were given challenging tasks and an increased amount of homework, and with completion were given the grade of “Exceeds Standards,” whereas average students received a grade of “Meets Standards” at highest. In theory, all students were given an equal chance at “Exceeds Standards” by completing the arduous work load, but in practice the teachers strongly recommended against the majority of the students to make the attempt and only encouraged the exceptional few in each class to strive for that grade.  
   I was among the few, and after entering middle school the amount of commendation I received for my work increased substantially compared to elementary school. This caused a visible shift in my demeanor. Whereas in elementary school I tended to misbehave and question authority, in middle school I became observably more submissive and took classes more seriously. I was incorporated into the school hierarchy and given a high rank that benefitted me. As soon as this happened, I began to comply and support the system that in prior years had been an ostracizing force that acted against me.
2. I have a friend that I went to school with from kindergarten to middle school. His name was Andrea and he was a black male, not terrible in socioeconomic standing but lower than the class average, and performed poorly in academics. As I mentioned before, my school had a freedom/excellence-based curriculum in which they would promote and reward excellence and success relative to others, the score system being an integral part. Andrea and I were best friends and behaved identically, both unfavorable in the eyes of the school. However, I had a white dad and was raised to speak formal, “white” English whereas Andrea’s entire family was black and spoke in distinctively African American vernacular, what my white teachers would call “slang.” This difference was essential in the difference in the way we were treated by our teachers. I was able to negotiate with teachers in order to somewhat mitigate the consequences of my actions, and teachers were more inclined to listen to me than Andrea. When Andrea spoke, the first thing teachers would do was correct his English, and they would rarely listen to the content of what he had to communicate. This led to teachers forming a critical opinion about Andrea early on, and their prejudice strongly influenced the way they would regulate our behavior. When Andrea and I did something wrong together, the brunt of the blame would usually fall on Andrea. Such prejudice and mischaracterization led him to indifference towards school and academic activities. He was also dyslexic and required special attention in school, attention that was not provided by hostile teachers. By the time we reached middle school, Andrea had completely drifted away from academics while I had become more and more invested in it. Instead, Andrea devoted his attention to basketball, a field in which he found considerable success and was appropriately awarded for his hard work. He went on to play basketball in high school and earned entered university on a sports scholarship.   
   If Andrea’s educational environment had been more progressive and taken an equality-based approach, he likely would not be playing basketball today. It is undeniable that his drift towards basketball was motivated in large part by the rejection he faced in school and academia. If teachers were more patient with him and attended sufficiently to his needs, he may have found academics to be easier and more enjoyable. Excellence-based educational approaches place students on tracks early on and disproportionately hurt late bloomers who start off without as much knowledge as their peers. In an equality-based approach, Andrea may have been a late bloomer and could have expanded his options for post high school education drastically.  
   On the contrary, in a freedom/excellence-based curriculum, it can be predicted that not much would have changed. He would have fallen behind the rest of the class early on and struggled with inferiority complex within school, which would motivate him to find success in other spheres. It is unapparent whether that would have been basketball, but he would have found some other activity to channel his energy into.

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