

# Get Out of the Cave! Public Education and Shaping Reality: Plato's Allegory of the Cave!



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“...compare our nature in respect of education and its lack to such an experience as this” (Socrates, *Republic*, 514a-520a) (Translation by Thomas Sheehan, <https://web.stanford.edu/class/ihum40/cave.pdf>).

When considering the prospect of public education in modernity, *Allegory of the Cave* or *Plato's Cave* becomes a worthwhile analogy to explore the current educational environment. The questions that need to be asked are not relevant to data or test scores, but rather *what* and *how* are we teaching the next generation of learners?



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In Greek philosopher Plato's famous essay *Republic* (514a-520a), Plato depicts a dialogue known as the *Plato's Cave*. The dialogue is between Glaucon (Plato's brother) and Socrates (Plato's mentor). In the

allegory, Plato has Socrates describe a story about a group of people, shackled by their legs and neck, to the wall of a cave. The inhabitants of the cave have been there since childhood. The only view they have is of the blank wall in front of them, unable to turn their heads. There is a half wall behind them, behind which burns a fire. Since the cave dwellers are unable to turn their heads, they can not see the fire. Behind the half wall, and in front of the fire, a group of people hold up statues and carvings, thereby casting shadows on the wall in front of the cave dwellers. These shadows are the only beings the cave dwellers ever see. The dim reflection of light cast on the blank wall is the only light they see. "...those who were chained would consider nothing but the artifacts" (Socrates, *Republic*). The cave dwellers reality is the shadows on the wall (see Plato's work on *Forms* (he development of ideas in a movement toward what Plato calls "goodness"))).



"book lot on black wooden shelf" by Giammarco Boscaro on Unsplash

Reality is taught in the environments in which we inhabit and created by the observer. Reality is created in families, in cultures, and in institutions, such as the school system. As much as we would like to believe that there is an objective reality, science has shown this "fact" to be otherwise. According to a 2005 essay written by RC Henry, a professor of physics and astronomy at Johns Hopkins University:

*A fundamental conclusion of the new physics also acknowledges that the observer creates the reality. As observers, we are personally involved with*

*the creation of our own reality. Physicists are being forced to admit that the universe is a “mental” construction.*

The objects, items, and intentions placed in front of children are what shape their reality. This begs the question, what reality are we creating for the next generation of learners? If you refer to *Hobgoblin of Public Education and Conformity*, the article highlights the public education system's use of standardized tests as a measure of mastery and achievement, despite the fact that standardized tests have **never been shown to improve student achievement or teacher performance** (see also, *The Emperor is Naked! Hegemony in Education*). Reality, in fact, is a product of *intention, attention, and thought*.





"think outside the box" by Nikita Kachanovsky on Unsplash

First, let's look at the definition of the word *mind*. Dr. Dan Siegel, clinical psychiatrist at the UCLA School of Medicine, asserts the following in a *Psychotherapy Networker* article, "relationships are the sharing between people of energy and information flow. The brain and its whole body are the embodied mechanism of that flow, and the mind is the self-organizing process that regulates that flow. What you do with your mind can even change the structure of your brain" (<https://www.psychotherapynetworker.org/blog/details/189/video->

whats-the-difference-between-brain-and-mind-dan). A child's mind (and the human mind) needs to be nurtured, soothed, stimulated, and challenged. What then, is being cast on the walls in the public school system to stimulate the child's mind?

1. Are students being asked to understand and process knowledge or regurgitate information?
2. Are students being "tested" to give the "right" answer or "assessed" to elucidate thoughtful understanding?

When a mind is directed to stare at a blank wall cast with shadows day after day, the end-result will be a community of conformists believing in one version of reality that is self-created and linear.

In the Allegory of the Cave, Plato has Socrates postulate what would happen if a cave dweller is forcibly dragged up the rocky, steep slope that leads to the exit of the cave, thereby freeing the dweller from the dimly lit prison and emerging in to the sunlight? The prisoner would have to be dragged, with a great deal of pain, Socrates adds, because he would have no concept of a world outside the cave, nor would he be able to navigate his way out. Socrates posits that it would take a good deal of time for the dweller's eyes to adjust to the actual sun light, to acclimate to the beings, environment, and light. If we accept the definition of education as "the act of being in life," then which version of reality should be taught to children from a young age? The version that casts shadows on the wall, manufacturing a reality constructed by others based on standards that reflect more about teaching than learning? Or, is it possible to create an education system that is process-oriented, focusing on "how" to think rather than "what" to think? Can we move public education out of the cave and in to the sunlight?



"brown cave" by Ivana Cajina on Unsplash

“Neurons that fire together, wire together,” (Dr. Dan Siegel, *The Whole Brained Child*). The intentions set before children are what they will absorb and the material that will be used to shape their growing minds. In early and primary education, what do children need to become growing thriving beings in the world? Part of the answer rests in building young brains and minds to integrate learning throughout the whole brain, rather than stimulating the lower reptilian brain through reward systems and teaching only to the linear, logical left brain. Dr. Dan Siegel’s groundbreaking movement focused on Mindsight and

Interpersonal Neurobiology can provide some answers to the systemic problems faced in the public education system. When “flow” of concepts and ideas (Plato's Forms) can be introduced and used in the lower grades, “mind-full” children will be the result. Connection, neural integration, and a thoughtful learner will evolve in the system, once the light has been brought to the shadows.



"silhouette photography of person" by Greg Rakozy on Unsplash

Parents and educators are important voices in the system. Change happens when insight is gained, when parents and educators no longer feed the system that IS and begin to transform the individual child or student in to a thoughtful learner through *connection* and *intention*. Please respond to the questions asked in this article, I look forward to making connections.





