

Schools, De-Schooling and Education for a Future

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by Rosemary Haughton

All over the 'developed' world, children left their homes this morning and went to school. All over the undeveloped world, parents were wishing their children could do so.

All over the developed world, millions of children are accepting school as an unavoidable bore, or actively hating it. Some weep, some play truant, some produce psychosomatic symptoms to avoid going to school. Most just put up with it and long for the holidays. A lucky few enjoy school, at least until the age when the shadow of public examinations falls over their lives. Yet all over the undeveloped world, angry or wistful teenagers see schooling as the means to a good life—a means withheld from most of them.

The greater part of the world's children long for what those who have it dislike. And even those who loathe it grow up to assume it has an absolute value, and should be imposed on every human child. No wonder the whole notion of schooling as a method of education is coming under fire. But too often the question of schooling or not schooling is treated in isolation from its social and economic setting. What follows is an attempt to consider a few of the problems involved, and possible solutions, for there have been changes recently, in the way people think about the schooling situation. For one thing, an uncomfortable realization is spreading that the schooling systems of the prosperous nations are not working too well. Violence in schools is frequently in the news, and organized as well as spontaneous protest by school children is not uncommon. Part of the reason for this unrest lies in the rocketing costs of normal educational equipment and of teachers (salaries and training) plus the demand for still more elaborate educational gadgetry for a technological future. This has created a huge gap between what educationists think schooling should be like and what it is actually like for most children. The overcrowded schools, the overworked teachers, the bored, resentful children, are there because governments have refused to acknowledge that their resources were not equal to their published principles on education. Political ladies and gentlemen opening new school buildings seldom acknowledge that each super spectacular new school means a number of old schools left unrepaired. And if this is true in the (at present) affluent West, it is unlikely that the undeveloped nations, falling behind further and further in the economic race, will be able to achieve what is assumed to be the necessary education for civilized man: full-time, compulsory schooling from childhood through to the mid-'teens, with higher education for all who want it.

All this, which is not new, is beginning at last to force parents, teachers, and even governments to question the educational axiom that universal compulsory full-time education is the norm. Reactions to this questioning swing between the rash of 'de-schooling' literature and angry refusal to admit that anything is wrong which cannot be put right by pumping more money into the existing systems. And underdeveloped nations mostly cling to the belief, ingrained by generations of enviously watching Western 'progress', that Western-type schooling is essential to the achievement of industrialization and prosperity, Western style.

But these are only strictly educational symptoms. Behind all this anxiety, envy and disillusion about schooling lie other causes for anxiety which appear to have little to do with education—the mounting threat of pollution and the exhaustion of mineral resources and fossil fuels. It is becoming more and more accepted that life on earth must change radically if it is to survive. Most obviously (and by whatever method these changes are brought about) rampant technology, guided only by the desire for profit, has to give way to a guided technology aimed at conservation, with optimum use and re-use of available resources, and geared to labour-intensive and service industries. The encouragement of 'conspicuous consumption' in order to keep the economy expanding has to give way to restricted consumption, discouragement of luxury buying, and a heavy cut-back in the production of goods manufactured from irreplaceable raw materials, especially metals and petroleum. Such a shift from a waste economy to a thrift economy means, however you look at it, a lowering of the standard of living of the rich nations, and colossal changes in patterns of employment, land-use, housing—and education.

Broadly, the change in education must mean that many of the values taken for granted in Western education will come to seem meaningless if not definitely anti-social. The spirit of competition will be out of place. Competition in our kind of society means aiming at the highest achievement in exam results, eventually leading to a better type of job—i.e. one that makes possible more consumption and waste and more spectacular pollution (electrical gadgets, new cars, extra bathrooms, etc., and rapid changeover of all of them). Competition, even of a purely academic or artistic kind, means an emphasis on individual excellence *at the expense of the less successful*, yet the future depends on co-operation, and a high value on manual and service types of work. The cherished concept of pursuit of 'pure' knowledge, facts at all costs, also becomes a luxury, since its possibility as an ideal depended on an underpinning of accepted moral and social convention which went on operating no matter what the academics and scientists thought they had discovered. There was a 'gentleman's agreement' that knowledge would not be misused. The last war shattered that dream. In the same way 'value-free'

teaching, so beloved of liberal educationists and so built into teacher training, becomes merely an evasion of responsibility when a moral and social revolution of an unprecedented kind demands that young people make moral and economic decisions affecting their whole lives and those of all mankind—which is not possible on the basis of an education that has carefully eschewed moral commitment and regarded ethically ‘biased’ teachers with deep suspicion.

Yet—and this is the crunch—how can a non-competitive, ‘value guided’, morally committed education take place in a school, unless all the teachers agree? And if they do, who made them do so? Are their jobs to be dependent on their doctrinal purity? Is the opportunity (even the *need*) for imposition of a ‘correct’ doctrine of education for new conditions too high a price to pay for the necessary realism in coping with man’s future? What happens to a system that is so sure of its rightness that it imposes total conformity as a price of acceptability we do not need to be told. Yet if human problems are to be tackled—and fast—by children now requiring education, some such ‘rationalization’ of educational ethics seems inevitable, at least if education is considered as equivalent to schooling. In Italy before the war the face of Il Duce stared up at school children from their books, side by side with the face of Jesus. Those who thus suggested the absolute and morally impeccable nature of Mussolini’s role in the welfare of the nation knew what they were about. And woe to the child who failed to salute the Leader. When there is a demand to change society *fast* (never mind whether the changes are really needed as in Cuba, China, Russia or demanded by a ruling clique in order to retain power) the indoctrination of children in large numbers is the quickest way to do it, and the teachers are picked for the job.

It seems we have a pleasant choice: either the ethical conditioning of children by the State in schools, or economic and social collapse when the ‘free-play of market forces’ has done its worst with immature minds and driven the economy of prosperity into recession and collapse, inevitably followed by riots, repression, dictatorship, revolution, counter-revolution, and more dictatorship.

‘Conditioning’ is, of course, a loaded word. It can be used to describe any educational process of which one disapproves. Education involves influencing people, and only a culture to which serious social and moral dislocation seems inconceivable can play with the notion of not influencing children at all. (In other words, such a culture assumes that basic and unspoken influences of a beneficent nature will always prevail.) But there is a difference between educational influences. There are those which, in due time, can justify themselves by reference to their success in promoting good relationships, and economic and social attitudes which serve the whole community without violating the conscience of any individual. And there are those influences which require to be reinforced by constant argument,

repetition of slogans, and periodic scares and scapegoats, well into adult life, because they will not stand examination if the individual is allowed enough psychological space in which to stand back and look at them.

There is no need to elaborate this difference here. The nature of conscience, the 'real' needs of man, the proper roles of secular and religious authority, and whether there is such a thing as a moral absolute—all these come into the argument, but to follow them out here would not really help. There is a common-sense, recognizable distinction, which is important and basic, between, on the one hand, indoctrination laid on in a moral vacuum, for reasons decided on by a political power having little regard for the proper shape of human life, and, on the other, the steady training and shaping of attitudes intended to assist mature decision later, and form habits necessary for social and personal stability in the particular cultural circumstances. The point of emphasizing the difference here is that a schooling system of education as we know it is, by its nature, virtually bound to use the 'indoctrination' kind of influence, if it sets out to influence children ethically at all—and it *must* do so, in the coming years, for the sake of their survival. Various kind of necessary social principles need to be inculcated, certain virtues implanted and emphasized, and their opposites shown to be antisocial and detestable. These may be desirable and necessary measures and we can leave out of account here the use of 'indoctrination' methods for evil ends. We are considering *necessary* and *right* ends.

But the inculcation of any ideas in the setting of a 'total environment' (such as a school tries to be) are damaging to the individual conscience, simply by virtue of their wholesale, impersonal and indiscriminating nature, however right the doctrines and necessary the principles taught. The application of moral and social norms to a variety of children, each of whom reacts according to his emotional condition, family relationship, and so on—but must conform his reaction to an expected norm—means an inevitable distortion of the individual conscience. This is the kind of thing which Catholic schools have been accused of doing, not without justification, and usually with the best of intentions. I repeat, we must not be distracted here by arguments about whether the content of any such teaching is in fact necessary and useful and proper to human life. We are assuming—perhaps unrealistically, but necessarily for the sake of this discussion—that it is. *Even* when it is, it is morally and spiritually damaging to a child to be the object of non-stop, impersonal, calculated pressures which he has no means of resisting or judging. The dilemma, then, appears to be that either children are properly trained to cope with their future, in a way that is spiritually damaging, or they are damaged by an ethically 'laissez-faire' type of education which leaves them unprepared for the world they have to live in.

One aspect of the school 'scene' in the West does seem to show—

indirectly—that this apparent dilemma is not a real one, but has been artificially created by our assumption that total schooling—for all, all day, and all ages up to adult-hood—is the norm of education. For it is obvious, once one begins to think about it, that all the schemes, methods, and subjects introduced into schools in the name of educational reform and progress have been *remedial*. They have been attempts to make school life more human, more varied, more ‘real’, more practical, more able to develop the ‘whole’ personality. They have been measures designed to cure schooling of what might be called diseases of educational malnutrition. We need to ask what is the (concealed) norm by which this deficiency is measured.

When education began to be available to children of poorer families, what they got at first were simply basic skills of literacy. Later, to bring them nearer to the educational standards of the upper classes, they got more ‘subjects’, all taught in the reasonably efficient but uncompromisingly theoretical and ‘fact-absorbing’ style in which upper-class school boys, and tutored boys and girls, had usually learned them. The increase in hours of schooling, and length of school life, simply meant more and more of this. But only a few eccentric educationists noticed that this was not really an education at all for working-class children (except for the brilliant few who will educate themselves no matter what happens by absorbing knowledge from all directions and every experience). For a while, in the early decades of this century, all classes were getting roughly the same type of academic sustenance at school, but the upper-class children still—until the thirties, probably—got a large part of their education at home. There was time for it. There were governesses, and holiday tutors, but above all there were (out of school) hours of free time to wander, to discover the world and other people, to read, pretend, question, experiment. There were hobbies to pursue, and people to pursue them. There were trades to watch and admire, streets to explore, plans to devise and carry out, and books to read.

It could be overdone, and young adults without obligation or necessary occupation were bored into destructive sillinesses; but there was both a tradition and an opportunity for learning which was not school learning, so the (almost universally hated) lessons didn’t matter too much. For the working-class and lower middle-class child education increasingly meant schooling, full-stop. With parents too busy to listen and help, no books, early work with long hours, and small encouragement, out-of-school learning was stunted. There was often a good ‘gang-life’, and country children were luckier, but the free time left from helping at home was restricted in its educational stimulus because of the lack of a background of educational opportunities. Impoverishment of language, the drabness of the growing cities, distrust of an imposed ‘snob’ culture, and disappearance of the more interesting home and country crafts and

trades added up to very little in the way of educational vitamins to supplement the academic stodge served up at school.

This was the situation up to the beginning of the last war, roughly, but though it still applies in many places the effort to do something about this educational deficiency gathered power in the forties and fifties, and gradually ceased to be a preoccupation of a minority of educational 'cranks'.

When it came, what did 'progressive' education add to the three 'Rs' and the watered-down 'gentlemen's education' which was the usual diet? It added, for instance, more physical training, including games and country dancing, and this shaded over into dramatic work, self-expression through movement, and so on. It added encouragement to use words more creatively in speech and writing. It added 'projects', linking several 'subjects' and various methods in exploring a single theme, and in making and presenting material connected with it. It fostered 'collections' and school museums. It arranged outings—to the beach, the museum, a factory, a pottery, a foreign country, a castle or battle-field. It developed school 'departments' devoted to what had once been 'extras'—art, music, 'crafts'. It elaborated practical courses like house-craft and woodwork, making them more challenging and 'grown-up'. It boosted initiative, imagination, and co-operation in groups. It played down marks, regimentation, and rote-learning.

One could go on. But the point of giving examples of such 'remedial' educational effort is to suggest the nature of this overall tendency in schools: all of it, in all its varieties and degrees, was an effort to make life in schools more like *life as it should be out of school*. It was not trying to give children in school what they would normally have out of school, but what, ideally, they *should* have out of school. It did not admit this, or usually even realize it, but the fact shows that all these educational 'reforms' are palpably *out of place in a school*.

This can be seen by the elaborate efforts that have to be made to keep the various projects 'relevant' to the child. This is done by discussing in class, by bringing 'samples' to school, by pointing out the links with the 'real' world, by increasing the staff-pupil ratio when possible, so that children can work in small groups, by creating 'family-type' groups for some work, and even by building replica 'homes' in the house-craft department. But the fact remains that all the things which children find most stimulating and enjoyable at school are things which are not easily accommodated in a setting of large numbers of children of equal ages, managed by a few adults. The absorption of facts, and various kinds of mental training and disciplines, are most easily done in the fairly impersonal, disciplined atmosphere of a school. The other 'subjects' and crafts, games and arts are uncomfortable in such an atmosphere, and wherever they take up a large part of the school day the whole school system gradually changes to accommodate them.

A great deal of what goes on in schools is uncomfortable there because it naturally belongs in quite different environments. Some of it belongs in the home, some to the workshop, some to the freedom of the countryside, some to university-type seminar groups, some to 'field-work' of various kinds, some to times and places of celebration and entertainment.

Only, home life and workshops, and so on, do not usually take forms which can accommodate the educational needs of children. And a return to the past is not possible or desirable either, if only because there are far too many children now for the haphazard educational influences of village, small town, trade, or home to accommodate them. And even if the technology of the future is radically re-directed it will still be needed, and technical education for it will have to be provided in a methodical way for which nothing in the past offers a model.

It is no answer to shoo the children out of school, unless the world outside it can offer them the education they need. As some teachers and educationists have pointed out (and they are not all disguised fascists), the children of the poor and of industrial cities would be the ones to suffer if a real 'de-schooling' policy were pursued, because they have little in the way of educational resources to fall back on. Professional and better-off families, with a tradition of respect for education and a determination to push their children ahead, would provide some kind of education, somehow, no matter what the cost. And the 'alternative education' offered would have to be as heavily organized as the present system if it were to be more than an expedient for the lucky few—in other words, it would become just another kind of schooling. It would involve the imposing, in a very short time, of an untried system on millions of children.

It might work, or it might not, but it seems to me that discussions of de-schooling and of alternative education start from the wrong end. They assume, along with the supporters of schooling, two things: that the family as the basic social unit is unable to provide sufficient educational material, which is perfectly true, and that this is the only kind of social unit we need consider in this context, and will continue unchanged for the foreseeable future. This is not necessarily true at all.

There is only one realistic alternative to schooling as an attempt at total education, and that is a social unit which can provide its proper and natural proportion of a child's education. It doesn't matter whether it is called a commune, or the village-size community of the 'Blue-print for Survival'. Whatever you call it, a grouping of small families into a living organism is the way out of the schooling impasse, the setting for a proper preparation for a difficult future, and also a background against which more limited schooling could be really effective.

Mono-culture has been the bane of farms and forests, and its ill

effects are only now being realized, let alone cured. But human mono-culture, in the segregation of groups of people according to employment, is just as destructive of human life. All that the best educationists have been labouring to achieve in the unsuitable setting of schools really belongs in the 'village' or 'community' setting. In such a setting people have many different trades, those who work in factories are not confined to the company of other people who work in the same factory, and many people (men and women) have their local occupation as well as the necessary hours of work in industry.

Schools are needed for efficient, trained, instruction in basic skills, and certain specialized subjects. Schools are the best and most acceptable way of teaching some things that everyone has to learn, whether they like it or not. But such disciplined learning is acceptable and even stimulating to a child for whom it is *not* virtually the whole of childhood, except for brief intervals of freedom. Schools have a job to do, and they could do it a great deal better if all the naturally non-school things they now try to do—to make life bearable for the children and to 'prepare them for life'—were available to the children, on a planned and carefully supervised basis, in the setting of home. But 'home', for this, has to mean both the child's immediate family ('extended' or not) and a local and well-known grouping of other adults and other families.

At the moment, parents are encouraged to 'take an interest' in their child's education, attend parent-teacher meetings, and 'stimulate the child's interest'. It is hard to get enthusiastic about all this because parents know that, in fact, they have no power and little influence in their child's education. But if the goodwill that goes into such efforts were pushed a little further, if each parent, each adult, were responsible for some aspect of the education of a small group of children, the reaction would be different. Real responsibility is challenging and interesting. Paper responsibility without real power is merely depressing.

But it needs to be organized. The medieval apprenticeship system, for instance, meant a commitment to learning one trade, and a group of apprentices lived 'as family' for many years. There is no reason why the principle should not operate for shorter periods, in learning trades, practising arts, acquiring household and nursing skills, and so on. To go into detail would be out of place here, but the possibilities are enormous, once the basic idea is accepted that a very large proportion of education should and could be given out of school, but only if the social unit in which it is obtained is small enough (so everyone knows everyone), varied enough (so personal talents can have scope, but all can also learn the necessary skills) and—perhaps most important of all—stable enough.

This may be an unattainable state of affairs, but unless something of the kind evolves, we are destined to go on trying to make schooling

do what it is not 'naturally' designed to do, and it will sometimes succeed and more often fail, and more and more millions will be poured into it, against mounting outcries from taxpayers, without making much impression. (And possibly the standards of basic skills will continue to go down, because the things schools can do well are being sacrificed in order to keep the children human by emphasizing types of education that don't belong in a school at all.)

We have time to re-organize our society in such a way as to make a human education possible, with schools doing their useful and limited job. If we do make some such change, we shall have a chance to give children the kind of deliberate, intensive, and morally committed preparation for the future which our world requires, and this can be done in *schools*, but—and this is the important point—what is taught by 'indoctrination' methods in schools will be assimilated, tested, 'humanized' and judged in the wider educational world which will be the child's more important life. In the setting of a proper local community, of its real relationships (of family, trade, local 'civic' responsibility) the principles taught, and the virtues inculcated, will have to make sense as a way of life, or they will fail to impress. When they are seen to work in daily life, among known adults who are 'us' and not 'them', they do not oppress the conscience, but shape it, individually and personally. The 're-shaping' of the economy, of our standards and values as a society, our personal goals and hopes, is becoming urgent. We can do it by dictatorship (we may come to that) but we need not, if we can make—in time—a way of life that has its human values built into it because it is on a *scale* that human beings can cope with.

It is not only the vast size of many schools that offends against the human scale of life. It is the oppressive *mono-cultures*, the social and aesthetic frustration, and the sense of unstable helplessness before vast forces that make it hard to create a human type of education. Even when it is done, against large odds, it fails finally; the better it is done in schools, the more cynical the adolescents become, for the 'outside' world offers no 'continuation course'. For the sake of the world's future and our children's spiritual and social welfare we need to break out of the human mass-production racket, and create a way of life that can, naturally and of its own resources, provide the greater part of a child's education, at whatever level. And let the schools—and the universities—do the job they can do.