

What do we learn in school that couldn't be learned elsewhere?

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Why do we send our kids to school? We've been told that it is in elementary school that the bases of learning to read, write, and do math are acquired, although anyone who spends any time with children can clearly see that children want to learn what we do. They want to learn to read if they see us reading, to write if they see us writing, and to count if they see us counting.

What do they want our kids to learn? As observed by Jan D. Matthews in *Towards the Destruction of Schooling*, the modern school is a social institution that was created in the context of the development of industrial capitalist society. Today, we can easily see that the objective behind the current reforms is to make school mesh with the values of advanced capitalism: management by projects, competencies, higher education, flexibility, etc.

It aims to prepare a work force that is easily manipulated and can adapt to the needs of the economy. The education system does not aspire to form free and autonomous individuals. Society is the antithesis of a community that is autonomous and self-sufficient.

So, how do children learn? Every day, they watch the activities of the adults around them and watch how relationships between people function. Children raised in a capitalist society learn to accept its social norms, even if they are in contact with a different discourse.

Children learn in different ways, each one having their own learning style. They learn by listening to us, observing us, imitating and experimenting. Children learn every day, all the time. Even if you don't realize it, your children are studying you at this very moment. They may be more verbal, or more visual, or both equally, self-learning or needing help, and they learn the subjects that are interesting to them, and at their own rhythm.

So then, why do we bring our children to school? School is often seen as an establishment that acquires students so that the teachers can give them their lessons collectively. But if they don't go to school, they'll be ignorant and maladapted, we hear from the mouths of some.

According to several parents practicing home schooling or "unschooling," the educational material of one week of primary or secondary school can be reduced to about 8 to 10 hours a week. The rest of the time, we are taught to be submissive and to fear the authority of the teacher, of the director, of the social worker, of youth protection services, of the police detention centers and of juvenile court.

At school, discipline is at the center of the educational project

Hierarchical society is primarily based on the domestication of human beings. According to radical environmentalist Derrick Jensen, obligatory schooling lasts longer and longer because "it takes that long to sufficiently break the will of the child. It's not easy to disconnect children from their desires, to disconnect them from their own experiences of the world in order to prepare them for miserable and painful work conditions that they will be forced to endure."

The dominant approach to schooling had always been pedagogical formalism, that is, an approach that emphasizes strict discipline and learning by memorization, even if the latest reforms quietly try to take a distance from this.

According to a Foucault-inspired analysis, mandatory schooling under the control of the state represents a network of surveillance and coercion methods in order to standardize the particular ways of learning and acting.

By accepting their social role as agents of the state, teachers employ these practices highlight the notion that the adults own the child, that they have legitimate control over children. Children are made to understand that an authority which is imposed on them must be respected.

Teachers know very well that in the school yard, children will reproduce and give legitimacy to the power relationships experienced in class for their own interests. The children are thus a population to control, to surveil, to evaluate, and discipline; school allows for this. Discipline is not just unique to school; it is also found in the factory, the office, the prison, and the psych ward.

School as a social institution

School is a social institution that intervenes directly in the process of the socialization of children. Socialization is defined as a process during which an individual learns and interiorizes the norms and the values of the society to which they belong in order to adopt specific social behaviors. This process is necessary for the reproduction of the social order.

A hierarchical society needs school to teach children to be submissive and to renounce their desires, so that children adopt behaviors that support the established order. School socialization is primary and principal socialization, since it begins at a young age and becomes the main influence on the child, supplanting the family.

Institutionalized socialization is above all a result of the constraints imposed by its agents. Interactions between an individual and their social environment are possible, but they remain under the surveillance and control of the state and corporations since interactions that are not surveilled risk producing a radical social transformation of society.

School is like a pill that helps people adapt to the madness of modern society. We live our life. We don't do homework because this experience is fulfilling in itself, we don't do it on our own terms or in our own ways, we do it because it is what we are told we must do.

School imposes a tempo that regiment our life (8 am to 4 pm), necessary for the modeling of future docile workers. Parents, busy working, don't have a choice about whether to send their kids to school or not, and comfort themselves by believing that their children are receiving an appropriate education.

Instead of living at the rhythm of their community, learning through daily activities and contributing to the well-being of the group, the child is regimented by the state as they are being shaped by it.

To respond to the needs of production, parents force their kids to get up early in order to send them to school while school puts itself in charge of establishing a discipline for the exploited.

It punishes children because they are not sitting properly, because they talk to their classmates, because they don't listen, because they sleep on their desks, because they simply don't want to do an activity at a specific moment. Since elementary school, we are bored and we are given orders.

School, like religion, TV, and video games, finishes by destroying the child. It kills the creativity to freely express their desires and frustrations to instead transform them into a zombie—an adult, constantly in the process of managing their future, their professional career, their retirement plan, and their funeral—and denying the present moment.

School forces children to develop an understanding of the world that corresponds to the hierarchical organization of society and the uniformity of knowledge. We are taught that there is only one correct way to read and write, only one version of history, only one correct way to express oneself in public.

School insures that the future adult will be functional in our society, that they will be capable of responding in the appropriate manner to their boss, appreciate mass culture, believe in the words of technocrats concerned with their security and the promises of scientists to resolve environmental problems. At the end of high school comes the stress of planning a future career, lectures on how to have a professional orientation, and dead-end meetings with the guidance counselor. Without even realizing it, you are convinced to go into such and such field, depending on the needs of the market.

The analysis by Daniel Quinn is very enlightening in his *Schooling: The Hidden Agenda*. He notes that “at the heart of our cultural matrix, all the media tell us that schooling exists to prepare children for success and for the accomplishment of their life in our civilization (and they fail even at that).”

Reform after reform, school always fails. Quinn then reverses the question: “Suppose that school isn’t failing? Suppose that it’s doing exactly what it’s supposed to do?” What are the things that it does extremely well?

First off, it does an excellent job at keeping youth outside the job market and thus stops the country from being flooded by millions of unemployed youth because of a lack of employment. Instead of becoming part of the labor force at twelve years old, they become active consumers, spending thousands of dollars on merchandise with money earned by their parents.

During the industrialization of western societies, agriculture required fewer and fewer hands, and youth found themselves in the streets and alleyways of the new industrial cities; in order to keep them off the streets, what better than to force them to attend school?

According to Quinn, the solution was to add new elements to the curriculum to make school longer. The children were never asked if that is what they wanted or needed to know, or if they’d never need to know it. It didn’t really matter if once learned, everything is immediately forgotten—the purpose was to keep them busy.

After the economic crash in 1929, it became necessary to keep youth out of the labor market for as long as possible. At the end of the Second World War, we started to hear that education should include a time in community college, if necessary, and then in university. They need to always be given more poems to analyze, more pages of history and literature to read, and more equations to solve. At the same time, youth continued to leave school without knowing much more than what was learned in elementary school a century ago and were still not employable.

School isn’t failing, it is succeeding but in a way that we would prefer not to see. Producing graduates without competencies, without survival values, and with no other option but to work or die of hunger. These aren’t accidents of the system, these are the nature of the system.

So, why do we continue to go to school?

For the same reason that we don’t revolt. The power to reward and to punish, to make individuals used to desired ways of thinking and acting, is part of the goal of integrating the individual into a hierarchical social order. High school is yet another way to make this integrating function more efficient and more total in its effects. The purpose of university is to make it so that the individual better adapts to a new set of social conditions created by advanced capitalism.

What I found in university wasn’t individuals who were more intelligent than the rest of the population, but rather multiple pretentious and docile youth, coming from privileged families, having attended private schools or elite programs, speaking the same language as those who govern us.

University is the place where youth learn to respect the rules of the game imposed by the state. In the student assemblies, we see young careerists and future bureaucrats who are interested in building their CV and thus being in a better social position when they apply for a job in politics, the unions, or the NGOs. At the intellectual level, the students are nothing other than superficial beings who will spend most of their time debating a commodified reality; they learn concepts as though these were concrete things. We can count thousands of incompetent graduates each year.

Coming from privileged environments and private schools, almost all these students take themselves for science-priests, art stars, neurotic psychologists, journalist-cops, and politician-dogs. 30 classes, 45 hours a class, and there, you get out with a piece of paper and a recognition from a professional order in exchange for a fee.

Then, you shuffle in a lab always repeating the same gestures or in a center of some kind for pacifying youth who have had enough of their dysfunctional family and of the laws that block their access to the things valued by our society. If that’s not satisfying, there’s always the possibility to bow down before your master in a superior position, to then become the one who watches students from the front of the room. University is a factory where practical incompetents and specialists in compartmentalized knowledge are produced.

The industrial system has found in the education model a rational way to domesticate the exploited, thus allowing for easier recuperation of resistance by redirecting it into institutional channels, like union negotiation or political reformism. The rebels who have interiorized the values transmitted by school try to retouch the repressive

machine, rather than destroy it, and a domesticated child is one who only expresses themselves in the moment that the teacher (the state) allows them.

Authentic rebellion starts in the streets and then builds alternatives both to corporatized universities and to the dominant society.

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A version of this appeared in “En suspense”, a pamphlet written during the 2012 student strike in Quebec. It was translated for the Fifth Estate in Montreal.

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