



Schooling as a Defective Approach to Education¹

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For twenty years I have been engaged in curriculum development in many sorts of schools. The value of in-service education and broad-scale professional participation in educational improvement hardly needs to be justified. Obviously, anything that can be done to make poor schools good and good schools better is worth the time and effort.

But there are times when I feel that it's an uphill battle. When the psychological and moral condition of an inherently coercive system that tends to foster compulsive and competitive behavior in teachers and students alike; when teachers write profound and beautiful "truths" in graduate night courses and then spend the day harassing children; or who are frustrated in their attempts to teach in accordance with those "truths", I feel somewhat frustrated.

Educators have developed their own folklore about these conditions: "The teachers who will have the kids next year are expecting us to do so-and-so for them, so we have to get them ready;" and "The teachers who had them last year messed them up so badly it's all I can do to salvage a few of them."

School itself may be partly at fault. Not long ago, while engaged in a study of the problems that have caused many people in the United States, Great Britain, and around the world to become disillusioned with schools and schooling, I compiled a list of twenty characteristics of schooling that can hinder learning effectiveness. After living with the list for several months, it finally dawned on me: school improvement is continuously necessary because of inherent characteristics in the schooling approach to education. In other words, if you are going to use a schooling approach, certain problems come along in the bargain. Weaknesses and defects of the sort that we usually focus on during "school improvement" activities may indeed be normal states not aberrations! Seen in this light, schools are leaky ships that founder in the mud whenever the bilge pumps get fouled up. That goes a long way toward explaining what we often see!

Everett Reimer, in *School Is Dead* (Doubleday 1971) and Ivan Illich in *Deschooling Society* (Harper & Row 1970) go further than necessary, as I see it. They would sell out—or burn out—the whole defective system. I am grateful for some of the things schooling has done for me. (I'm also thankful for some of the effects of schooling that I've escaped and chagrined over some that I haven't.) Certain abstract, conceptual and highly sequential learnings schooling brings about very well *for some learners*. But to run everyone through experiences for which they can see no need and create a lifelong disdain for learning seems counterproductive.

¹ Ted Ward. Schooling as a Defective Approach to Education. Original as unpublished document, 1974. Adapted and published under the same title in the *Common Ground Journal*. Vol. 11 (1) Fall 2013: pp. 28-31. Used with permission. www.commongroundjournal.org

Sources of Weakness in the “Schooling” Approach to Education

1. All learners are assumed to be similar in terms of needs, interests and abilities.
2. Conforming behavior is preferred over divergent and nonconforming behavior.
3. Learners are increasingly made more competitive at the price of cooperation.
4. Learners are expected to be receptors of learning rather than communicators.
5. The learner’s part in decision-making is minimal and tends to be steadily reduced.
6. The responsibility for attitudes and feelings about content and about learning itself is attributed to the student.
7. The content to be learned is justified in terms of *future* needs of the learner.
8. Schooling’s major justification is preparation (mostly expressed in terms of eligibility for more schooling).
9. Evaluation is concerned almost exclusively with cognitive learning (knowledge of information and processes) and skills.
10. Learning experiences are designed or selected on the basis of values of the adult and established world.
11. Abstractions of experience (in the form of language and symbols) are substituted for realities.
12. Rewards are symbolic more than real. Even the satisfactions of seeing oneself develop are subordinated to imposed systems of rewards.
13. Punishment is assumed to increase learning.
14. Punishment is a virtually sovereign right of the teacher.
15. The teacher is ascribed authority, thus creating a hierarchy based on unearned status.
16. The social distance that separates teachers from learners is increased by according different sets of rights and expectations to each.
17. Learning experiences are designed (and limited) to fit time blocks.
18. Learning experiences are designed (and limited) to fit standard locations and space.
19. Testing is the criterion of success.
20. Success is the surpassing value.

These twenty characteristics of schools relate negatively to effective learning. Increasingly people are searching for alternatives. Some of the “alternative schools” are attempts to create alternatives to the schooling approach; so are some of the “extension education” movements. But even here, so often a borrowing of ways and means from the schooling approach limits what can be accomplished. Sometimes all that happens is a re-labeling of the same old bag of tricks.

We need to be liberated from seeing schooling at the very center of our concept of education. Figure 1 suggests how we recognize “education” as being the central part of the totality of life’s learning experiences and then assume schooling to be at the heart of the process.

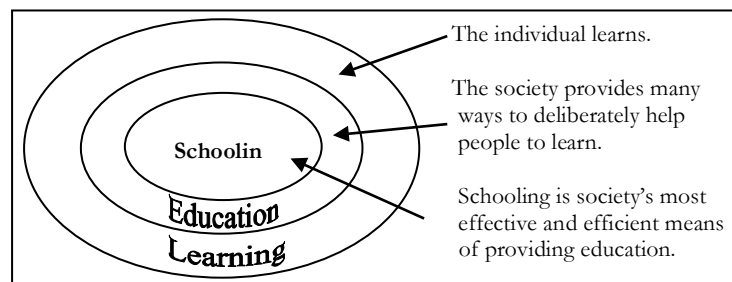


Figure 1: The “schooling” frame of mind.

A liberated viewpoint recognizes schooling (despite its defects) as *one* of many valid approaches to education (see Figure 2).

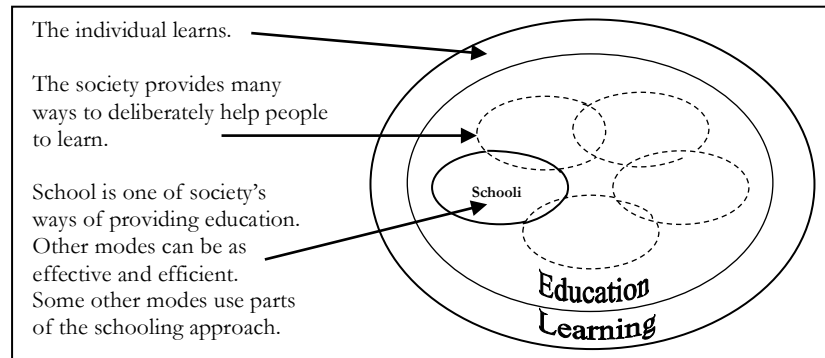


Figure 2: The "Liberated" Frame of Mind

In the years ahead you will hear much more about "nonformal education" and "alternative forms." Don't panic; these may be the voice of liberation. But don't jump on too many bandwagons, either. There ain't no such thing as a perfect way to educate.