

Down with school

Do kids really need to go to school to learn? For most people it is blindingly obvious that school is the only place where real learning takes place, and for them it goes without saying that real learning only takes place where there is teaching. Kids need teachers, and they need them for six or eight hours a day, five days a week for at least eleven years or they will sink in a sea of ignorance.

For the social theorist **Ivan Illich** the axiom that learning is the result of teaching is fallacious. Most learning happens without the person being taught by someone consciously teaching them. We learn to speak, to think, to criticise, to be sociable, to be political and we learn to work without the interference of teachers. Good reading skills, which are vital if kids are to learn effectively from one of the great sources of learning: books, are developed more often than not by young people who read widely for pleasure.

People who learn a second language well are much more likely to do so because of interests outside the classroom - interests in movies, music, magazines, foreign friends, games or computers which give these people the motivation that keeps them learning even while they are playing, without a teacher breathing down their neck.

The events in our education that turn out to be decisive for our professional lives are also unlikely to have little to do with the timetabled lessons we had at school. A chance encounter sparks an interest and we then regularly devote some of our free time to learning about a subject or developing a skill like climbing, diving, drawing, photography, computer programming or writing - interests that open up future career prospects.

An academic education with lots of theory and analysis and abstraction and learning almost everything from books or from listening to the teacher favours only the minority of students who want to go to university and carry on studying those academic subjects. As for the majority, its needs and interests and talents are not catered for by an educational system so biased towards theory and the traditional academic subjects.

Although school doesn't do justice to the majority of students, if it is seen from the standpoint of society it is clear that it teaches everyone a valuable lesson. Without a word being uttered, school teaches kids that life must be programmed. You must start work at a certain time, learn to stand in line, observe certain rules and codes of dress and accept a disciplinary system. School is, above all else, a means of socialising children so that they will acquire the habits and attitudes required by contemporary public life - it provides the invaluable function of getting kids used to a certain kind of social order.

Not only is teaching not necessary for learning, it can also be an obstruction to it. When they come to the end of an intensive course in literature, how many students quietly say to themselves, "I never want to open a book like that again"? The compulsory nature of the activities, the exaggerated attention to detail, the insignificance of a personal response, the environment of the classroom and, not least, the pressure of exams can all kill a subject that might otherwise have become an enduring passion.

Undoubtedly schools are a fact of life in our modern and highly organised societies. It might seem like a nice idea for education to be much more informal and for it to be tailored to the interests and talents of individuals, and for it to take place in very small groups, but on a national scale this just isn't feasible. That leaves some of us wondering how our educational system could be reformed so that the experience of school is much more positive for all students.

<https://www.fullspate.digitalcounterrevolution.co.uk/archive/downwithschool.html>