

DESCHOOL EDUCATION OR REINVENT THE SCHOOL?

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“I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.” (Mark Twain)

“My grandmother wanted me to have an education, so she kept me out of school.”

(Margaret Mead)

“The school is now identified with education as the church once was with religion.”

(Ivan Illich)

Introduction

The main thesis of this paper is that it is possible and advisable to promote and improve education by creating a society where learning – active, interactive, collaborative, problem-based, project-focused, meaningful learning – is stimulated and facilitated, but in which schools play no significant educational role.

A society in which this happened would be appropriately called a learning society: it would itself be the main learning environment.

This thesis has a main corollary: attempts to change, reform, transform, innovate, rethink, reinvent the school in order to improve the quality of education are a waste of time, effort and money. These resources (time, effort, money) should be reallocated to the task of effectively renewing education in the context of a learning society.

In the last decades there have been innumerable alerts that:

- the school has become a place where children’s natural curiosity is blocked and their initial passionate desire to learn is gradually killed;
- by forcing children to learn what they are not interested in learning, and to refrain from learning what they do want to learn, the school subjects them to a form of “mental rape” or, still worse, to an “amputation of their spirit”, for which there is no prosthetics;
- by treating all children as if they are alike, not unique, the school transforms them into a standardized group of adults whose mindset makes them unable to creatively and competently address, within a reasonable time frame, the most serious problems the world faces;
- the school has become a prison to which we sentence, every year, an incredible number of children with multiple and valuable talents to twelve-year terms, out of which they

emerge, when their term is completed, totally dumb, with their minds dulled and their creativity destroyed;

- the solution of our educational problems will not be found in allocating more money to school systems, paying teachers better, training teachers longer and more effectively, finding or inventing alternative curricula, methodologies and evaluation means, creating better libraries, media rooms and laboratories, injecting modern technologies into the classroom, extending the amount of time children stay in school (more years of schooling, more school days in the year, more hours in the school day, etc.), or any of the other myriad of “solutions” proposed every year);

- the school is dead: it has outrun its utility and no amount of “tweaks” or “fixes”, small or large, humanistic, technical, or technological will be able to bring it back to life.

And yet, public and private educational agents, at the local, regional, national and international level, dedicate, every year, considerable time, enormous efforts and fantastic amounts of money to the goal of improving education by changing / reforming / innovating / transforming / rethinking / reinventing schools.

To the attentive observer of the scene, it is no surprise that results have been dismal or even null.

This paper will propose a different route for the solution of the problem of quality education – a route, however, which clearly is not in any way new.

Roots of a Clear Alternative to Schooling

A. Closer Roots

In the very early seventies, when the main digital technologies we use today either did not exist or were not fully available, Ivan Illich (1926-2002), a Croatian-Austrian philosopher and Roman Catholic priest, working out of a monastery-like center in Cuernacava, Mexico, proposed something similar to what his good friend, Brazilian popular educator Paulo Freire (1921-1997), had demanded only a couple of years earlier: that we educate one another through interaction, dialogue, personal exchanges, collaboration, “mediated by the world” – i.e., in the places where we really live our lives, without resorting to schools, professional educators, encyclopedic curricula, sophisticated teaching methodologies, elaborate testing instruments, etc. ¹.

Illich’s *Deschooling Society* ², published in 1970, is a powerful summon to renew education in a learning society where the school plays no role.

Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, published in English also in 1970, contains powerful passages with the following message (here in a somehow free translation that joins passages found in more than one place in the book):

Nobody educates anybody, but nobody is capable of educating himself alone, either. We educate each other through a continuous dialogue, mediated by the world, in which we use resources that, in traditional education, are owned by the teacher alone. Education is a mutual, world-mediated process in which unfinished beings, conscious of their incompleteness, attempt to become more fully human. ³

B. Intermediary Roots

Any person or institution interested in education must have, if not a precise definition of what education is, at least a clear and definite understanding of the concept.

Education, in the recent past, basically meant transmission or delivery of information and knowledge. Education, in this context, was organized (in the form of schools involving teachers, curricula, methodology, evaluation) to implement this understanding.

This understanding of education may have made sense in *a context where information and knowledge were scarce and access to them was difficult*. That context no longer exists. Thus we must look for a different understanding of education. We could try to invent, out of nothing, a totally new concept. Or we could recapture insights that, in bits and pieces, have already been with us, sometimes for a long time, but never found real resonance. That is what will be done here in this paper.

Take, for instance, this quote from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* (originally published in 1762), that is, perhaps, the most important essay on education written in the 18th Century, more than 250 years ago, before industrial civilization became widespread and the modern public school appeared to emulate the industrial assembly line:

"All that we lack at birth and need when grown up is given us by education" ⁴.

This statement feels refreshing today because it emphasizes an important thing, often neglected in our times: *everything ("all") that we need to live our life and that is not innate to us ("that we lack at birth") must be acquired through education*.

Translated into more contemporary language, this means that education has to do, not with the transmission and delivery of encapsulated bits of information and knowledge, but with the very process of human development, that centrally includes capacity or competency building – that is, **learning** (not teaching). Rousseau proposed and defended a negative education, a *laissez-faire* education, an education in which the learner is the scriptwriter, the director, and the main, active protagonist.

Development is not the same thing as growth. Development is the product of learning. Someone can grow and not develop as human being. Mowgli, the boy in Rudyard Kipling's jungle stories, grew up, but did not develop as a human being. If we can speak of development in his case, it is more in terms of wolf development than human development.

Rousseau reminds the reader also that education is not limited to intellectual development. Education involves also other dimensions of human life: psychomotor, social (interpersonal), affective (emotional), aesthetic (sensible), ethical and perhaps even spiritual. This is what is meant today by the expression "human development". To add "full" or "integral" to this expression is almost pleonastic.

Rousseau does not say it in this passage, but even the things that are innate to us (whatever they may be) can be exercised, extended, improved, perfected through education – in all the dimensions specified.

This means that education will be considerably impoverished if it is conceived only (or primarily) as intellectual development, even if mastery of competencies and skills is added to absorption of information and knowledge.

Education is still more impoverished if it is reduced to preparation either for the job market in the digital economy or for effective citizenship in a democratic society, even though education as human development may include these two things. But it includes much more, such as, for instance, the development of characteristics that culminate in one's self-realization – what the Greeks called *eudaimonia*. Achieving *eudaimonia* implies defining, choosing and actualizing one's life project.

C. Older Roots

Discussing the concept of education among the ancient Greeks and Romans, James L. Jarrett states, in his magnificent *The Humanities and Humanistic Education*:

Indeed, neither Greek nor Roman was in the least likely to share the modern confusion that identifies education with schooling. We are shaped and formed by the totality of our environment: *it follows that we cannot afford to be careless about any aspect of that environment, architectural, legal, ceremonial, erotic, whatever.*⁵

If education has to do with human development in all of its dimensions, and if it takes place throughout the life of the individual, it cannot be accommodated within the confines of a single (and often one-dimensional) institution, namely, the school, without losing its essential richness, its ubiquitous nature, and its personalized focus.

Thus, when UNESCO tries (as it recently began to do), if not to obliterate the distinction between formal and non-formal education, at least to reduce its present

importance, it is taking us back to a view already espoused by the ancient Greeks and Romans.

But the point of view defended by the ancient Greeks and Romans went beyond giving equal attention to formal and non-formal educational initiatives. They did not favor the schooling of society. *They favored making society as a whole the environment in which we learn and thus educate ourselves.* According to this view, to be concerned with education is not equivalent to creating and maintaining a good school system (public or private, it makes no difference), much less to extending the time people remain in school (freely or under compulsion). Instead of proposing that the school should become a totalitarian institution in society, the ancient Greeks and Romans proposed that all the institutions and activities of society have an educational focus – that is, that society should become a truly educational (i.e., learning-centered) environment. That is the true meaning of *Paideia*.

The richness of this idea is mind-boggling. The ancient Greeks and Romans were not contemplating the educational role of only a few institutions of society, such as the family, the church, local community organizations, the communication means, industrial and commercial enterprises, cultural and leisure-focused organizations – not even of the school. They meant that *every institution and every activity of society*, from the way cities are planned and built, passing through how they organized and governed (including, necessarily, their laws) and through how they are maintained through free economic activities, and arriving at how time for play and leisure is promoted and organized, that all of this be learning-focused – that is, be educational.

Rather than proposing a totalitarian schooling of society, they proposed the total deschooling of society (à la Ivan Illich), because learning should become society's overall focus and concern. If the ancient Greeks and Romans had known the present digital information and communication technologies, they would probably have emphasized their point much more strongly and realistically.

D. Socratic Roots

Socrates was the first great educator of the human race (at least in the West) – and, arguably, its greatest. It is important to consider how he viewed and practiced education:

- He did not have a school: he worked in the main square of the city;
- He did not have a classroom: he worked in the open air;
- He did not work with groups: he worked with one person at a time;
- He did not have students: he had partners in dialogue and in learning;

- He did not have a curriculum: he discussed anything in which his dialogue partners were interested;
- He did not really answer the questions of his dialogue partners: he replied to a question always with another question, to stimulate them to find the answer themselves;
- He saw his task as similar to that of the midwife: to draw out successfully, through plain conversation, what is already inside the mind of his dialogue partner, because it is there, in the mind, that ideas are conceived;
- He did not use any learning resource except interaction and dialogue;
- He was suspicious of rhetorical oratory, speech making, lecturing, and teaching, because these methods go all in a single direction, are not two way, and so do not favor interaction and dialogue;
- For the same reason, he was suspicious of books, because they likewise do not favor interaction and dialogue. ⁶

Here we have, in a nutshell, the way Socrates viewed and practiced education, almost 2,500 years ago. What Socrates thought and did in the area of education is much closer to the "Ubiquitous Education Through the Learning Society" paradigm than anything anybody thought or did ever since. Whatever else this paradigm may contain, it is a clear defense of personalized education – and in Socrates' thought and practice we do find truly personalized learning.

E. Digital Information and Communication Technologies

Many educators, today, when they are not constrained to defend the present educational paradigm, find Socrates way of thinking congenial and admire his educational practice. That explains the partial and relative success of "constructivist" or "constructionist" proposals.

The only legitimate criticism that can be made of Socrates is that his way of viewing and practicing education is impractical in a large society that is committed to universal education, since it is based on one-to-one interaction and dialogue. In other words: it does not seem to be scalable. In a small city such as Athens, that was not committed to the education of its women and its slaves, it may have worked, but how to implement this kind of personalized education in a 21st-Century megalopolis?

What happened in the intervening 2,500 years since Socrates, especially in the 250 years since the Industrial Revolution, to make the education of today a standardized mass undertaking centered on the school was, on the one hand, a gradual but considerable increase

in the number of those society felt committed to educate and, on the other hand, lack of resources, human and technological, to continue to educate the way Socrates did.

Today, however, we have fantastic technologies that allow us to achieve “horizontal learning” much better than ever before. They allow us easy access to the Internet’s universal library and to one another – as well as to people with sophisticated knowledge and competencies, that are willing, on a one-to-one basis or in more general environments, to share what they know, and know how to do, in order to help us learn what we are interested in learning, what we want or need to learn.

It is now possible, through social media and networks, to bring the maieutic learning methodology proposed by Socrates to scale, offering everyone a personalized education that satisfies their interests, wants and needs.

Technology, especially by creating social media and making global social networks possible and viable, is also making personalized education possible and viable in large scale. Because global social networks are not only places where we gather information, share information, and entertain ourselves (although they are certainly that), but also places where we learn what we want and need to learn, as defined by our interests, they have become a macro Learning Environment. As a matter of fact, the virtual space has become the embryo of the "Ubiquitous Education Through the Learning Society" paradigm.

F. The Focus on (Redefined) Learning

The focus of traditional education was on teaching. The focus today is on learning – but learning has been redefined.

In the past we worried about teaching methodologies – didactics. It is now more than time that we move on to worry about learning methodologies, or mathetics, as, among others, Comenius, in the 17th Century, and Seymour Pappert, in the twentieth, proposed ⁷.

To learn, as Peter Senge ⁸, among others, has shown, is not to accumulate information, but to become capable of doing that which we could not do before. As simple as that. To learn is to build capacity and develop competencies. To learn is to gradually make fully sculpted human beings out of our original selves, to become that which we want, choose and decide to be.

But learning, to be effective, must take place in the context of one’s **life project**: it must help learners:

- discover their passions and talents;
- define and build a life project around them;

- develop the competencies, skills, values, attitudes and habits, as well as acquire the knowledge and information, that, together, will make it possible to effectively transform their life project into reality.

Education as Human Development

When we, humans, are born, we do not **know** much and do not **know how** to do almost anything. That is why we have to depend on others for quite some time. But fortunately we are born with three characteristics that are essential to human development:

- a. our genetic programming is minimal and open: within limits, we can become almost anything we want;
- b. our innate capacity for learning (in the sense seen above), which includes the capacity for language acquisition, is incredibly large, flexible, and quite effective;
- c. otherwise we have quite an unique set of individual features, built upon a basic common human substratum, to differentiate us from one another.

Given these features, mass education, education of the type “one size fits all”, should be banned. Personalized education is imperative. And, today, we all can achieve it, with the help of already available technologies.

But personalized education must necessarily be focused on what each individual wants and needs to learn. This means that personalized education must be focused on what each individual chooses and defines as his life project.

School-based mass education ignored the issue of one’s life project because it was intent on manufacturing standardized human (?) products undifferentiated from one another. That is why it came to defend and practice a “one size fits all” education.

Education as human development, however, aims at helping people (children as well as adults) find their “element”, as Sir Ken Robinson emphasized⁹.

Is this Utopian – or is this Something Doable Beginning Now?

Some people will read this paper and say “Nice and fine... but too bad it is unrealistic...” Others may even say “Beautiful, fantastic... but unfortunately it is totally utopian!” I assure you that what I propose is not unrealistic or utopian: it is fully doable, and it is doable now – if only we choose to do it¹⁰.

But it will not be done easily, or quickly.

It will not be easy. There will be resistance. Resistance from people who make money from schools, or who achieve power organizing or unionizing teachers, or who make money

and achieve power publishing and selling textbooks, videos, lab equipment and materials, sophisticated technologies, or who find their calling to be organizing conferences and giving lectures to educators... But it is doable, if we truly believe in it and chose to do it.

And it will not be quick. It took about 250 years for people to consider a society without schools something inconceivable¹¹. Several generations will come and go by before we can see the first fruits of these ideas, and still more for people to consider it unimaginable that we one day needed schools to educate... Home education could help... if it didn't see itself as home schooling! Unschooling is a good start – but it needs to be conjoined with positive efforts to make society a truly learning environment.

There is a secret – a rather simple secret. Learning takes place best when we are doing something else: playing, working, living our lives in the world, solving problems small or large: fixing a leak in our bathroom or finding a way to rid the world of poverty, disease, ignorance, injustice, violence, war... Jean-François Rischard, in his important book *High Noon: 20 Global Problems, 20 Years To Solve Them*¹², has a list of twenty major life-and-death problems which we don't know how to solve because we never learned how to approach them in our so-called educational institutions. He said we had 20 years to solve them. That was when he wrote it: in 2007. If he was write, we have only 10 years in which to learn how to develop the new mindset that will allow us to solve them. And the world is the stage where we must live and the place where we must learn – and the place where we will die when 2027 comes and we haven't learned it yet. Education is not preparation for life. Education is the process through which we learn to live as autonomous and competent human beings. And hopefully survive. And more hopefully still, flourish as human beings.

There are many people interested in technology here. Let me say just one more thing to them. The technology that is most relevant to learning is the technology that helps us do the things we want and need to do in life. It makes no sense to speak of learning or educational technologies, as such, that is, technologies that only help us learn.

So, the time is ripe to deschool and personalize education and make ours a true learning society. PAN-PBL's focus should continue to be concentrated on Problem-Based Learning, Project-Focused Learning and Other Active Learning Methodologies – but it should give preference to the use of these methodologies in learning environments that go beyond the school.

The school is dead – long live learning and education.

Conclusion

In this spirit, I leave you with a great quote from Erich Fromm, taken from his Introduction to *Celebration of Awareness*, the book by Ivan Illich already mentioned in the notes:

[Ivan Illich] has [through the years] remained true to himself in the very core of his approach and it is this core that we share. (. . .) This approach can be characterized by the motto: *de omnibus dubitandum*; everything must be doubted, particularly the ideological concepts which are virtually shared by everybody and have consequently assumed the role of indubitable common-sensical axioms. To 'doubt' in this sense does (. . .) imply (. . .) the readiness and capacity for critical questioning of all assumptions and institutions which have become idols under the name of common sense, logic and what is supposed to be 'natural'. (. . .) Radical doubt is an act of uncovering and discovering; it is the dawning of the awareness that the Emperor is naked, and that his splendid garments are nothing but the product of one's own phantasy. Radical doubt means to question; (. . .) radical doubt is a process; a process of liberation from idolatrous thinking; a widening of awareness, of imaginative, creative vision of our possibilities and options. (. . .) [Illich's approach] questions every idea and every institution from the standpoint whether it helps or hinders man's capacity for greater aliveness and joy. (. . .) The importance of [Illich's] thoughts lies in the fact that they have a liberating effect on the mind by showing entirely new possibilities; they make the reader more alive because they open the door that leads out of the prison of routinized, sterile, preconceived notions. By the creative shock they communicate (. . .) they help to stimulate energy and hope for a new beginning.¹³

Notes

- ¹ It is curious that neither of these men had their original cultural roots in mainline Western European countries or in the United States: Illich was Eastern European (Croatian) and Freire was Latin American (Brazilian).
- ² Ivan Illich (1970), *Deschooling Society*, New York: Harper & Row, *passim*. An earlier book by Illich is also worth consulting: (1969-1970), *Celebration of Awareness: A Call for Institutional Revolution*, New York: Doubleday (which contains an Introduction by Erich Fromm), chapters 7 ("The Futility of Schooling") and 8 ("School: The Sacred Cow"). It is from this book, p. 125 (chapter 8), that the third motto of this paper was taken.
- ³ Paulo Freire (1968), *Pedagogia do Oprimido*, Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra (original publication, in Portuguese); (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Herder & Herder (first edition in English, translated from Portuguese by Myra Bergman Ramos, with preface by Richard Shull); (2000), New York: Bloomsbury (Thirtieth Anniversary Edition of the First American Edition, with introduction by Donaldo Macedo); (2018, March), New York: Bloomsbury Academic (Fiftieth Anniversary Edition of the Original Brazilian Edition, with an updated introduction by Donaldo Macedo and interviews with several important educators and other personalities). The quotation incorporates a conflation of various passages freely translated from the Portuguese edition by me.

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- ⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762), *Émile ou de l'Éducation*, originally published in French, available in innumerable editions; available in English, also in various translations, the title using one or more of the following words: *The Emile: Treatise on Education*. The translation from the French here provided is that of William Boyd (1962), *The Emile* (Bi-centennial Edition), New York: Teachers College Press, Book I, *apud* Jarrett (1973), p. xiii.
- ⁵ James L. Jarrett (1973), *The Humanities and Humanistic Education*, Reading: Addison-Wesley, p. 11 (italics added).
- ⁶ The story and the pedagogical views of Socrates can be found scattered in several of Plato's *Dialogues* (available in innumerable translations and editions), but especially in *Theaetetus* (approximate date 369 BC) and *Phaedrus* (approximate date 370 BC). The first discusses his views on method, the maieutics (or midwifery), the second, his views on writing, of which he was quite critical (as compared to orality: talking or speaking or dialoguing or debating, which he preferred).
- ⁷ John Amos Comenius (1680), *Spicilegium Didacticum*, originally published in Latin, of very difficult access; for an accessible discussion of the concept, see Seymour Pappert (1993), *The Children's Machine: Rethinking School in the Age of the Computer*, New York: Basic Books, especially chapters 5-7.
- ⁸ Peter M. Senge (1990, rev. ed. 2006), *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization*, New York: Penguin / Random House, *passim*. See also Peter M. Senge *et alii* (1994), *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization*, New York: Doubleday, and Peter M. Senge *et alii* (2000), *Schools that Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Cares About Education* (2000), New York: Doubleday.
- ⁹ Sir Ken Robinson with Lou Aronica (2009), *The Element: How Finding your Passion Changes Everything*, New York: Penguin, and Sir Ken Robinson (2014), *Finding Your Element: How to Discover your Talents and Passions and Transform your Life*, New York: Penguin.
- ¹⁰ Peter Buckman (1973) asserted this in a sensible manner almost 45 years ago, in his Introduction to the book he edited, *Education Without Schools*, London: Souvenir Press. This book, out of print for many years, contains an important article by Ivan Illich and is very difficult to find.
- ¹¹ Ivan Illich's observations on Puerto Rican society, made in 1969, are truly remarkable: "Only if we understand the school system as the central myth-making ritual of industrial societies can we explain the deep need for it, the complex myth surrounding it, and the inextricable way in which schooling is tied to the self-image of contemporary man. (. . .) Puerto Rico has been schooled. I don't say educated, but, rather, schooled. **Puerto Ricans can no longer conceive of life without reference to the school.** The desire for education has given way to the compulsion of schooling. **Puerto Rico has adopted a new religion. Its doctrine is that education is a product of the school,** a product which can be defined by numbers. There are the numbers which indicate how many years a student has spent under the tutelage of teachers, and others which represent the proportion of his correct answers in an examination. Upon the receipt of a diploma the educational product acquires a market value. **School attendance in itself thus guarantees inclusion in the membership in the community of saints.** From governor to *jibaro* **Puerto Rico now accepts the ideology of its teachers as it once accepted the theology of its priests. The school is now identified with education as the church once was with religion.**" From "School: The Sacred Cow", chapter 8 in *Celebration of Awareness*, *op.cit.*, p.125 (emphases added). The last phrase is, of course, the third motto of this paper. The second part of the quotation comes from a graduation speech that Illich was invited to give at the University of Puerto Rico, in Río Piedras, in 1969.
- ¹² Jean-François Rischard, *High Noon: 20 Global Problems, 20 Years To Solve Them* (2007), New York: Basic Books. Rischard, an economist, was the first European Vice President of the World Bank from 1998 to 2005.
- ¹³ Erich Fromm (1970), "Introduction" to Ivan Illich's *Celebration of Awareness*, *op.cit.*, pp. 7-10.