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3

IF SCHOOLS DIDN'T EXIST

Enough has been said about society and youth at this point to allow me to say something about schools. Once again, a few detours are in order. The aim of this chapter is to reveal something about the functions and tasks of schools within the type of society that we have just seen reflected in the reactions of its youngest members. We must not, however, be overzealous in our endeavor to find a solution. A single good question is worth more than a hundred shoddy answers. The underlying question is presented here in the form of a thought experiment.

What would happen to society in its current form if schools didn't exist? If we didn't have a system of teachers, principals, and school administrators, and if most of these weren't situated in large buildings where they met students year-round, year after year, what then—if anything—would be different? And how would society fare?

Not well. At least, it would not fare as it is doing now. But this would perhaps be the case for slightly different reasons than we might normally assume.

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IF SCHOOLS DIDN'T EXIST: ACT I

Schools do close, admittedly. There are breaks, and in Sweden, teachers even go on strike. And we know—parents know, in any case—that the most elementary need satisfied by the school is to provide children with *a place to be*.[1] Cities are not built for children, cars are not built for children, machines do not need them, and adults do not need them. Extended vacations become a burden, and strikes result in catastrophes, simply because our society is not structured to accommodate having children around all the time.

The problem has been turned upside down in the course of one hundred years. In 1871, a commission was established to produce a new education act for Norwegian cities. The commission was unequivocal about the length of the school day: *it should be limited so as not to hinder children from working*. A lengthy quote is in order here, taken from Hans-Jørgen Dokka's (1967, 288–289) seminal work *Fra allmueskole til folkeskole* (From peasant schools to public schools):[2]

> The majority of the commission found it crucial to place substantial import on considerations for the poorest segment of the working population in determining the length of the school day. The commission began by gathering data that would enable a determination of the appropriate amount of compulsory school attendance for working-class children. This was of utmost importance to the commission, for whom the children's school attendance was perceived as an increasingly heavy burden for workers in urban areas—heavier than it had been previously, given the nature of the urban development. The working class that emerged, especially in the larger cities, lived under conditions making them, more or less, dependent on the revenue from their children's labor. Therefore, they should not be forced to comply with compulsory schooling

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for any longer than is absolutely necessary. The commission stressed the importance of keeping in mind the fact that children from poor families were sent out to work at a younger age than previously, due to the growing demand for child labor produced by the industrial economy.

The commission's comprehensive findings showed that 26.1 percent of students attending public schools in fifty-six cities—that is, those who had provided the data—worked outside the home in 1871. The percentage-based distribution showed that 15.9 percent maintained "regular employment," while 10.2 percent occasionally carried out "temporary work." The age groups included by the commission were distributed in the following way: 18.3 percent of children were twelve years of age or older, 5.7 percent between ten and years years of age, and 2.1 percent of children were under the age of ten. For seventeen of the cities—among those some of the largest included in the study—more detailed findings specified that 65 percent of children twelve years of age and older were working. This percentage dropped to 34.2 percent for children between ten and twelve years. For the girls, the corresponding figures were 32.7 percent and 15.4 percent, respectively, for the two age groups. There was no information on their incomes, so the commission omitted this data from the study. But the total annual income nonetheless amounted to approximately fifty thousand Norwegian rigsdaler.[3] As would be expected, the oldest students had earned the most, taking home an average of eleven and one-third rigsdaler, compared to seven rigsdaler for the second-oldest group.

The commission did not entertain a single doubt about the importance of the conditions revealed by the data with respect to decisions pertaining to the organization of the schools. Indeed, the commission found it all the more necessary to take child labor into account as it expected—and even hoped—that child labor outside the home would increase beyond the employment rates of 1871. Their data appeared to suggest a clearly inverse proportional relation between child labor and poverty relief.

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But the committee's conclusion had little staying power. Educationists protested, and the matter was made the subject of a new study. It was determined that the commission had been exaggerating, and at the very least, the children should not be working that much. As it turned out, the demand for child labor was on the wane. Child mortality rates went down, and the automation of labor continued its unrelenting forward march.

Frank Musgrove (1965) has gathered a large body of data confirming similar conditions in England. A key problem in the earliest phases of industrialization was that children ousted their parents from the workforce. As Musgrove notes, what shocked the bourgeoisie was not the fact that it was children who worked in the mines or factories. Rather, the consternation stemmed from the discovery that they performed better than their parents, who being accustomed to the countryside, had greater difficulties adjusting. Accordingly, the children took home larger salaries, achieving greater freedom and power in the process. In Musgrove's depiction of the past—which is not exactly flattering—laws against child labor were instated in order to protect older people from undue competition. But with the introduction of these laws, coupled with the decline in mortality rates and new technologies, the need for child labor was diminished. In Musgrove's cool words, "Compulsory schools became a necessity in the 1870s, not because children were working, but because to an increasing extent they were not working" (Musgrove 1965, 76).

This does not quite capture the situation in Scandinavia. Our societies were too unified, and our cities were too small. But his words provide a perspective. They do not quite fit with Scandinavia's past, but they can remind us of something

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in our present—for example, when it was decided that compulsory school attendance should be extended from seven to nine years (act of June 13, 1969, no. 24, effective from July 1, 1971).

Before legislators began addressing the extension of compulsory schooling, four thousand protests arrived through the mail, chiefly from educationists who had experience from the earliest trials on increased school hours. But the Standing Committee on Education and Church Affairs was unwilling to wait. When jobs and social structures are constantly subject to change, the committee argued, this imposes considerable demands on the individual as well as increases the need for a solid general education. This was a recurring theme in the subsequent debate:

> An additional factor in this context that is also of essential significance is the shortage of alternatives for a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old who wishes to leave school. Experience would suggest that this age group has difficulties finding a satisfying job in competition with those who are a little older and, in addition, have completed more years of schooling.
>
> Finally, the committee wants to emphasize that the problems represented by the students suffering the most from "school fatigue" will often be transferred to other parts of society or working life in the event that these students are exempted from compulsory school attendance (Recommendation to the Odelsting XLV, 1968–1969, 5).

It was self-evident for the committee that schools should assume responsibility for these young people. This assumption was also self-evident for the majority of those who would later discuss the question in Parliament. Einar Hovdhaugen provides an example (Odelstinget debate, April 21, 1969, 273):[4]

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> When one is confronted with these problems (people who are "tired of school" and have disciplinary problems), it is natural that the question arises as to whether the last years of lower secondary school should be voluntary. It would be the simplest and least demanding solution for our schools. It would probably have been easier to approve this solution about twenty to twenty-five years ago than it is today due to the structure of our society. Today the opportunities through which a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old can enter the workforce and receive training are limited. In most cases, these opportunities are nonexistent. Economic development has left the fourteen- or fifteen-year-old children of today with little motivation for working regular hours. Today, an increasing number of people reside in cities and densely populated areas. What is more, with the family waning in its power and influence, there is cause to fear that students who leave school when they are fourteen or fifteen years old will in many cases face unemployment and join juvenile gangs, and on the whole mature in such a way as to create greater problems for society than the problem the school faces in terms of the issue of nine years of compulsory school attendance. Therefore, nine years of compulsory schooling is favorable under the assumption that our schools will be better equipped to accommodate today's challenges than they are at present. Should we abandon the scheme of compulsory education for nine years, I fear that (schools would) … fail to meet their social and pedagogical responsibilities.

There wasn't any real debate about increasing the general school attendance from seven to nine compulsory years. Within the Norwegian Parliament, Bjarne Undheim was the strongest skeptic, but he found it unrealistic to propose any initiatives against compulsory schooling.[5] Teddy Dyring, another member of Parliament, drafted a proposal that compulsory schooling should last only until eighth grade.[6] His point of view was rather unusual (Lagtinget debate, 1969, 59): "For those who are 'tired of school,' those who are not

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motivated to continue their education, the school is no school, but rather a form of housing."

The proposal received four votes and was virtually ignored in the debate. The matter was already as good as resolved. But there was a minor deliberation about whether some individuals, in extraordinary cases, should be allowed to leave school after eight years.

The majority of the members of the Standing Committee on Education and Church Affairs favored the wording proposed by the department: "A student may, in special cases, be discharged earlier, but not before he has received eight years of schooling." The current law takes a similar approach. But a small minority considered a proposal that was originally suggested by the Norwegian Teachers' Union: "The school board may under special circumstances decide to transfer a student from ordinary class instruction into an alternative learning facility." Many fought enthusiastically for this clause. The minority group's captain, Torger Hovi, stated that (Odelstinget debate, April 21, 1969, 264)[7]

> I find it difficult to make sense of the conclusion drawn by the majority on this matter. When a student is discharged, the school has lost its grip on the student—along with its responsibility. And yet the student remains society's responsibility. On the other hand, our society does not have any other institutions with better resources than the school to deal with such matters. Therefore, the minority does not want to grant anyone the right to discharge a student before completion of nine years of schooling. …
>
> [W]hen a student is discharged, the school has lost its grip on him.

This is actually something we all know, and yet it often remains unarticulated. This, in turn, is never a good

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pedagogical starting point: "Come on, go to school, we have no better solution." In such cases, it is probably better to think of society as the great benefactor, sacrificing everything to ensure that the little ones are offered some small part of our cultural heritage.

This is probably also true. But it is not the whole and absolute truth. There are also other reasons why we have schools. If we are to understand the school, we must attempt to shed light on these other reasons. And if these reasons are found acceptable, we must try to organize the school accordingly. If they are deemed unacceptable, we must try to prevent the needs behind such reasons from arising in the first place—or address them in another manner.

From this perspective it thus *also* becomes important to view the school as a storage facility—a particularly expedient means of removing children and youths from general circulation in society. We have no idea what to do with children, young people, and others rendered deviant by the requirements of working life. We have one or maybe two ideas: retire them or place them in an institution. What is meant by "institution" is first and foremost "school"—that is, the ordinary schools designed for children and young people from the age of seven to fifteen. In terms of numbers, we are able to keep no small number of "useless" individuals out of circulation through schools. We have created a technically sophisticated, industrialized, and mass-producing society in which young people are just as useless as most other forms of unskilled labor. The issue of teenagers and their counterculture is intimately bound up with their uselessness, depending on what society defines as important. In this case, the school is a particularly expedient medium for containment.

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Through schools, the encounter between the society of the useless and that of the adults is postponed. If schools didn't exist, we would have to devise another strategy, and more important, find another purpose for young people.

IF SCHOOLS DIDN'T EXIST: ACT II

Another important aspect of our societies would also lose its potency if schools were to close. It is an aspect seldom mentioned around the dinner tables of the wealthy, but frequently addressed over dinner among ordinary folks. It is an obvious fact for most parents—and will soon be for most children—that certain types of schooling are highly decisive for one's future. Table 3.1 provides a succinct impression of the high—and increasingly higher—level of awareness of this reality on the part of both parents and children. For the uninitiated: in some school subjects, it is possible for the students themselves to decide the level of difficulty at which they want to work. Tier one is the easiest, and tier three is the hardest, so nobody needs to feel bad about not measuring up.

But ultimately, many people are nonetheless disappointed; they bite off more than they can chew. Because they know, as their parents know, and as most people know, that a certificate for having passed lower secondary school in the lowest tier isn't even worth the price of the paper it is printed on. During the second half of the school year, schools are granted the authority to force students into the tier where they "belong." My guess is that schools are reluctant to exercise this authority. They too know what the rest of us know. Here, something else is at work that extends beyond the

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Table 3.1 Three-Tier Distribution in Percent of Eighth-Grade Students by School Subject, between 1964–1965 and 1968–1969

Tier distribution in subjects												
Norwegian				Math			English			German		
Year	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	Not German
1964–1965	1.5	31.6	54.8	15.2	29.6	51.8	13.3	27.9	51.6	13.4	51.8	34.8
1965–1966	9.7	30.5	56.9	14.4	29.2	53.0	14.0	27.0	53.9	15.1	54.1	30.8
1966–1967	9.7	30.7	56.1	14.3	29.3	51.7	13.1	27.2	54.2	16.0	53.4	29.0
1967–1968	9.0	29.2	59.1	13.5	29.5	54.1	13.3	26.8	56.0	15.5	54.1	29.1
1968–1969	8.0	27.3	61.3	12.2	27.3	57.6	12.2	25.5	59.4	14.9	57.0	27.7

Source: National Curriculum Committee, Recommendation I, Oslo, 1970, 45, 49.

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platitudes of the public school's declared objectives. Here, it is a matter of granting admission passes to the class structure of society. Here, it is neither a question of learning or living. It is a question of being able to demonstrate some form of justification when moving forward in the race. The table illustrates clearly that most students have learned something in the course of their time in school. The third-tier enrollment rates are increasing steadily.

This shift has been observed and noted by many—for example, by Tore Lindbekk (1971, 19–20):[8]

> On the whole, the attitude of the surrounding society has been that an increase in schooling will increase the actual competence of students in school—i.e., the students' utility value. The amount of this increase in utility value remains an open question. In the meantime, school attendance records and the schools' grading system have been implemented as important conflict-reducing criteria for the selection process involved in the allocation of attractive positions within society. Few recruiting institutions attach much importance to these criteria as actual indicators of real utility. There is assumed to be a positive correlation between level of education, grades, and relevant occupational proficiency. But no industries or organizations have ever gone to the trouble of investigating the problem in further depth. What they care about is that these criteria are fair. And discounting these criteria would just generate complaints and extra work.
>
> In this regard, it is probably through its classification of individuals as bearers of rights that the school system today makes its most needed and evident contribution to other institutions.

An unstoppable growth factor is built into this logic, the impact of which is illustrated in figure 3.1. Where the most important privileges in society are underpinned by the educational structure, the fight for these special advantages

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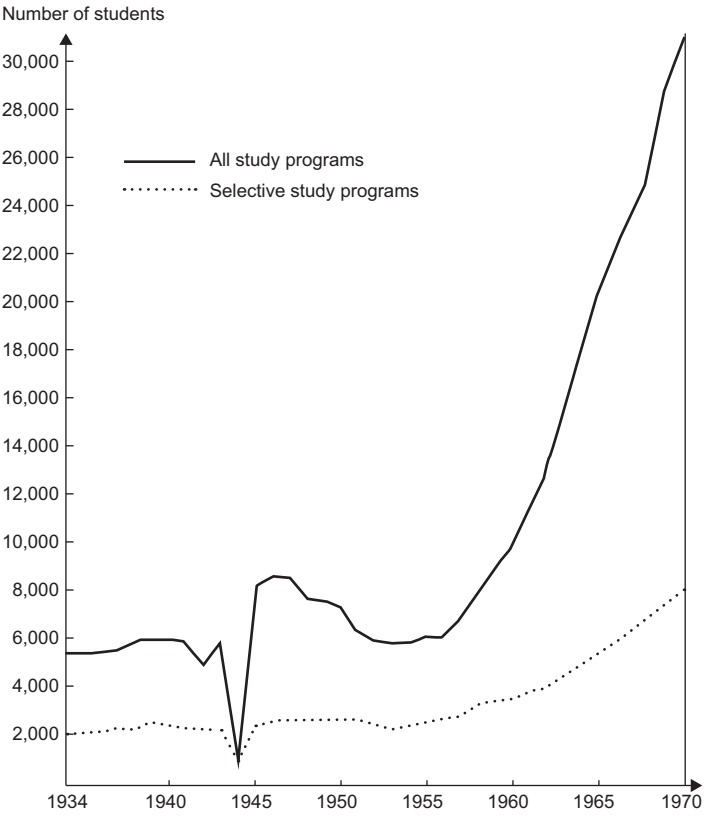

Figure 3.1 Total number of students attending Norwegian institutions of higher learning between 1934 and 1970. *Source:* Norwegian Research Council for Science and the Humanities (NAVF).

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will unfold at increasingly higher levels. There was a time when primary and lower secondary school attendance functioned reasonably well as an access point to advantages for the minority. With nine years of compulsory schooling, this access point has literally been brought down to earth. Everyone begins here, so the first stage of development must be those stages that come *in addition*. But lo and behold, that creates inequality! Almost like a law of nature, we will soon hear the calls for twelve years of compulsory schooling, so once again everyone will be placed on an equal footing. Yet again a stratification layer is removed: everyone begins on equal terms starting in the thirteenth year, and the fight for the scarce goods continues. And it will probably proceed in this way until some day the bubble bursts—and there will be no workers on hand to do the small number of jobs that are left to be done.

If schools didn't exist, society would still need a way to funnel its citizens into the various jobs found in society. And if schools didn't exist, it seems likely that society would *initially* fall back on that which, still today, determines the level of educational achievement needed by the student in order to make do: the social position of the family.

Study after study comes to exactly the same conclusion: there is a crucial correlation between the family's social position (measured as the parents' professional standing) and the child's completed level of schooling. The level of schooling, in turn, becomes a crucial factor in terms of the social position of the child. This circle is so tightly knit—and with so few exceptions—that it would be tempting to suggest that we would be better off without it altogether. At least, then, it would be impossible to ignore the actual connection between

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heredity and status. It would no longer be hidden behind a purportedly transparent system.

In his dystopian novel from 1966, Michael Young warns against intelligence as a mechanism for class distinction, or as stated in the original title, *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870–2033: An Essay on Education and Equality*.[9] This is like warning against flooding in the Sahara! By shouting so loudly about the dangers of a society that is controlled by intelligent subjects extracted from the school system, Young does nothing more than divert attention away from the reality. If anything, the educational system just confirms the social differences that already exist. It provides people of high status with *special* opportunities for taking exams. Their status within the class structure of society thus becomes the most robust form of status—awarded by birth and achieved by schooling. The myth of Young—corroborated by the celebrated examples of *extraordinary individuals* who have managed to break through the limitations of their heritage and educate themselves into the upper echelons of society—only contributes to obscuring the fact that *most people* stay where they are born. Should advancement occur, it occurs for the class in its entirety. And in the meantime, the class above has also advanced.

Table 3.2 offers a glimpse of the typical research findings in this field. These figures are from England, but similar findings can be procured from closer or more distant locations.[10] The table shows the failure rates at an English upper secondary school. The worst-performing students have already been eliminated. Nonetheless, the majority are still doing poorly, compared to the children from upper-class homes. Here only 10 percent of the upper third have failed versus 54 percent in the "unskilled worker" category—assessed at the time of

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Table 3.2 Failure Rates at an English High School, in Relation to the Father's Employment Status and Student's Results on Admission

	Result on admission		
Father's occupational category	**Upper third**	**Middle third**	**Lower third**
Business and trade	10	25	34
Office administration	19	32	42
High-skilled work	38	58	62
Low-skilled work	54	62	76

Source: Boalt and Husén 1964, 79.

admission. Among the lower third, 34 percent from the highest social class versus a total of 76 percent of the children of unskilled workers have failed. What the numbers represent here is presumably the effects of numerous minor centrifuges of the type illustrated through the examples of Adrian and Clint in chapter 1.

This pattern continues from the lowest to the highest levels of school. We *know* it is like this. Reaching the top of the educational ladder—legitimately achieving the admission passes that some students were born to obtain—is an achievement predominantly reserved for children from wealthy backgrounds. And should they fail to achieve and receive their admission passes through the ordinary channels at home, they can easily obtain them through a detour to some foreign university.[11] If the schools ceased to exist, a veil would be torn away.[12] We would experience firsthand the significance of birthright. And we would be obliged to discuss in a serious manner who, if anyone, should receive most of society's spoils—in rank or wealth—and on what grounds.

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IF SCHOOLS DIDN'T EXIST: ACT III

For some, one implication is as clear as the blue sky: the transfer of skills would be lost if schools didn't exist. A modern-day, increasingly complicated society calls for increasingly more schooling of its young members. The cultural heritage is growing, and that necessarily requires the allocation of more time for the transfer of knowledge. Our intellectual development and the foundation of our material welfare rest on this legacy.

If countries with different levels of education are compared, there is an almost-perfect correlation between a country's gross domestic product and average levels of education. Developing nations invest in education for a good reason. Without school, no development. The school is the bedrock on which everything rests. This much was clear in the example of the French village presented in the first chapter of this book.

Nevertheless, it may still be entirely wrong.

For a while the French village school became the bedrock on which everything rested. Something similar was probably also the case in Norway. What Thabault shows in depth and detail to be true for the small French village, Dokka demonstrates to be true for the entire Norwegian school system. There was *a genuine need* for schools. They were the underlying condition for continued material growth. They disseminated letters, numbers, and techniques. They made new political forms possible and became caretakers of the cultural heritage.

For a period of time, they did all this so thoroughly that the school became a given for most of us. But our time is

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different from Thabault's. Our time is not what Dokka describes. Our time must become ours.

Correlations are not causes. The apparent connection between levels of education and economic growth can also reflect the various functions I have mentioned above—storage and social stratification—which increase in accordance with the gross domestic product.[13]

As the size of our cultural heritage increases, so too do our archives. Here we arrive at a key point. The French village school was—as were our original public schools—established in a phase *between* the subsistence economy and the arrival of a fast-paced, technocratic society. As Musgrove (1965, 26) writes, "If a generation in a primitive society forgets to do its homework, its culture will be lost." In *our* time, on the other hand, we are free to look up whatever information we need; it exists somewhere, accessible to anyone who takes the trouble to learn the most basic techniques of looking things up or digging things out. But in those interim years, only schools provided this possibility. As the culture burgeoned and expanded, the bubble of knowledge eventually burst—and soon enough, water pumps, mealtimes, and apprenticeships were no longer sufficient to transfer the ever-increasing volumes of knowledge. Schools solved all these problems—for the time being at least.

The volume of knowledge has subsequently grown at a rate almost impossible to fathom. Figure 3.2 provides an overview of the access to technical and scientific literature in the University Library[14] and twelve other faculty and scientific libraries in Denmark. The vertical scale is logarithmic, meaning that the relative distance between values on the scale decreases as the scale ascends, so the increase is far

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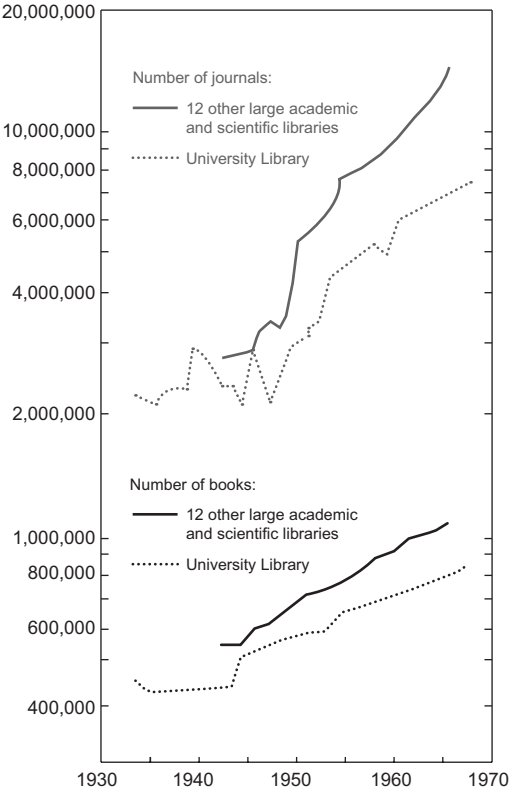

Figure 3.2 Growth in technical and scientific literature at the University Library and twelve other academic and scientific libraries in Denmark, 1933–1969. Logarithmic scale. *Source:* Ruby 1970.

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more dramatic than it might at first appear to the untrained eye. The number of books has doubled within the University Library over the course of thirty years and within the other libraries over the course of twenty. The number of journals has doubled over the course of fourteen and nine years, respectively, while the number of articles within the journals has increased by over 50 percent in the last decade.[15] Even if the school increased the volume of its curriculum every year, it would inevitably fail: the snippet of knowledge covered in schools will become smaller and smaller in relation to the total volume of all there is to know. We will never again be able to dream about a *knowledgeable* citizenry. Our ultimate goal must instead be to provide that citizenry with the tools and curiosity to look.

And still we cling to a form of schooling based on the model of the village school. But the village was a closed society. This also meant that its inhabitants *knew their* society: they had an overview; they lived within a microcosm. When this bubble burst and society was flooded with new information, the need for new forms of communication arose. Only then did a school arrive. Yet *our* society is open to the point of despair. We have knowledge about everything—in books, in archives, and on tape. What *we* need is overview, an entirety, to seal up the bubble anew. We need a system that re-creates the village situation before the school arrived.[16]

Our situation is thus new in several ways. We are living in a phase in which the knowledge of each discipline is increasing at such a remarkable rate that the schools manage to grapple with only a fraction of all that knowledge every year. This is especially true within the fields of mathematics,

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chemistry, physics, and biology, but it also holds true for the humanities and social sciences. We cannot possibly retain everything there is to know about these subjects. The best we can do is learn the general principles and techniques for finding knowledge. At the same time, though, as our knowledge—viewed in comparison to the current ongoing expansion of information and knowledge—is increasingly less, we are becoming *more and more ignorant of our own society*. We are becoming more ignorant in both absolute and relative terms. Few are able to maintain an overview of the continuous stream of social science publications because it is so dense, so swift, and so difficult. Both here and in other disciplines, it has become impossible to communicate anything more than an ever-diminishing fraction of this information and knowledge to schoolchildren. In addition, it is unlikely that the increase in the number of books and articles will manage to keep up with the increase in complexity and lack of transparency in our society. Everyone says that social science research continues to provide us with greater knowledge about our societies. This appears to be true in the sense that the sheer volume of books and articles is ever increasing. But it seems questionable if we consider the formal increase of knowledge in terms of this growing complexity and insuperability. Nobody has measured or quantified this, but as a means of highlighting my main point, I want to claim that ignorance about social life actually increases faster than the amount of knowledge contained in books. In spite of the incredible development of social science research—seen within all industrialized societies—I would thus argue that the residents of the French village actually knew a lot more about their society than almost anybody knows about

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ours. Even if social science were the only subject in school, it would be to no avail.

We are living in a different era. We must rethink and explore the potential for other ways by which schools could contribute to reestablishing a sense of unity and transparency in society. We must discover alternative ways of learning how to live in society.

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If Schools Didn't Exist

A Study in the Sociology of Schools

By: Nils Christie

Edited by: Lucas Cone, Joachim Wiewiura

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