

# 5

## A DIFFERENT SCHOOL

---

---

If people really believed that the world was controlled by forces external to themselves, they probably wouldn't write books—perhaps with the exception of those who felt pressured by those forces to write them. I, for one, do not feel pressured. On the contrary, I believe and hope that the perspectives I have presented above will have a disruptive impact on society's predominant solutions. I have faith, without doubt due to my sociological common sense, in the transformative power of thoughts. At least, that is, if these thoughts are expressed at more or less the right time. But perhaps sociology may also prove valuable in helping us understand how thoughts acquire influence. We have moved far beyond the village school, but continue to struggle with its fundamental structure. The result is a school based on stratification, a school that is suitable for upholding both a class structure and its own function as a storage space. But our society is evolving, however. Alternative solutions become more and more evident—with time they are visible to everyone, and perhaps a bit too visible for some. On reaching middle age we tend to exaggerate the beauty of

childhood, the charm of youth, though perhaps this response is not as given as we might believe it to be. It is possible that we needed a storage space or the commonly defended stratification service provided by schools. Yet for all these supposedly necessary school services—although I would have preferred other approaches—they have failed to hinder the perhaps most central thing: we have become satiated. Social inequality remains. A society divided by social classes is flourishing with increasing fervor. The internal inequalities have presumably increased. At many workplaces, life has become even more exhausting. Nevertheless, crucial changes must have taken place in that more immediate material needs no longer threaten Norway as they did in the past. These changes should remind us that there *is* a difference between relative and absolute suffering. A hundred years ago, one-fourth of the population died before reaching adulthood. An additional fourth never married, while those who did could only afford this luxury after they turned thirty. Compared to our past, we are free. With greater certainty of sufficient material resources than any society ever before, we are able to sit back, look at our lives, and reflect on our own handiwork.

But more than this—and this is where the sociological common sense comes in again—the liberation from the most elementary material suffering has given rise to other needs (whether they are articulated or just experienced) that will most likely affect the situation for schools as well. You don't scream for more food when your mouth is full. Our technologies have been immensely successful. We can now produce *things*. Other aspects, however, are still in need of attention. I have tried to put into words what these *other aspects* are, but have given up; they are not easily captured by words.

Perhaps it will suffice to state that these aspects involve ways of living together, ways of living *beyond* the satisfaction of material needs, ways of living that affect both those who live together and those who live alone. The current young generation—satiated through and through in terms of its material needs—are the most apparent apostles and in most apparent need of a different school. The question is whether there should be a school at all.

Schools are mirrors of society. It is thus society that must be changed first, some claim. I would warmly welcome such changes. But if we believe in the power of thought—and thus believe that schools are more than mirrors—it seems only reasonable to attempt to promote change on several fronts at the same time. This chapter takes a step in this direction. I will begin with the minor reforms and then gradually proceed to the more substantial issues. First, though, something must be said about the cul-de-sacs in the landscape.

## CUL-DE-SACS

*“If only we had better teachers.”*

I cannot imagine a more futile starting point for educational reform. We *have* excellent teachers—as good as the ordinary run of Norwegians, although their capabilities are, presumably, even a bit better. A disproportionate number come from middle-class backgrounds, and are from villages and above all western Norway.<sup>1</sup> On the whole, this may lead to entire generations of teachers who will be slightly out of sync with the values of the children and young people who are born in

cities. It would not hurt to include more working-class teachers, more teachers who thought with their hands and not their heads, and more teachers who come from some of the more underdeveloped regions of Norway. Yet this is of little importance. And it seems unlikely that this is what people have in mind when they call for better teachers. What they are calling for is rather, “We need those who are equipped to deal with children and young people.” But then we find ourselves immediately in the vicinity of the important questions, Which children, and to what ends? I wonder if many of the teachers who are suffering today—or let others suffer under their control—would have functioned *better* if only the objectives and frameworks had been of a different nature. My optimistic guess is that *most* teachers are equipped to deal with children and young people—at least if they are allowed to do what both parties find important. But it does not make any real difference if I am wrong. Children are so numerous and different, and their transition to adult life so problematic, that any notion of an elitist selection of teachers is out of the question. We must adapt conditions to accommodate an average capacity and then factor deviations (both below and above) into the equation.

*“But they should have better working conditions so that the most qualified candidates would apply.”*

More money—surely this wouldn’t hurt. Whether those who want to make a lot of money are also those who are best qualified to deal with children remains an open question, though. The same holds true for another common demand with an eye to improving conditions: fewer children in each

classroom. It seems likely—although not certain—that lower student-teacher ratios would be more comfortable. But this would also give the authority figure in the room more power and time to impart the curriculum to the students. And what if the curriculum is irrelevant or perhaps even harmful? What if the teacher's increased freedom and resources led to even stricter performance requirements?

*“But the architecture of schools should be changed.”*

I certainly wouldn't mind. And it *is* good that something is happening.<sup>2</sup> The open schools that are attracting so much attention these days represent an exciting step forward, making possible both large and small spaces that can be adapted to class sizes as well as adjusted to a variety of subjects, working methods, and group compositions. These changes represent a great and by all means timely development in light of the thoughtless monuments that have been constructed up to now. But they represent only a small fragment of the larger mosaic of important things that must be changed. It would be a perilous path to follow if in applying so much thought and faith to opening up the interior of buildings, we neglected to take into account that the external walls remained intact. What's more, this open architecture can provide teachers with even better opportunities to impart the knowledge stipulated by the traditional requirements of the school as well as ensure that both they and their colleagues are diligent in their compliance with the same. “Open schools” may be open for both good and evil.

We must dig deeper.

## A FREE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

First and foremost, let us take the preamble seriously! Let us take the *entire* preamble seriously, not solely the part about knowledge. In chapter 4, I already pointed out some of its most apparent limitations. Let me now, in the spirit of a proposal, elaborate on the consequences of these.

If our mission is to create a thriving school community of collaborating individuals, the first requirement must be to do away with the system's structure of a giant stepladder with a control center dictating activities from above. There is only one way to do this. Ripping off the bandage will hurt. But only in the beginning.

We must do the exact opposite of what everyone is demanding. *We must cut down on administration.* We must first of all cut down on the control center's external management of schools. We must work from the top down, and strip away a number of the Ministry of Education and Church Affairs' mandates for the schools. We must become free *from*—and hereby free *to*. Next in line would be the abolishment of established positions such as municipal education commissioners. And we must get rid of—or if that isn't possible, then at least downgrade—all remaining parts of the school administration so that their power and authority equals that of the teachers. Alternatively, we could work toward elevating the power and authority (and status) of the teachers in order to place them on equal footing with the present administration. It is, in a sense, insignificant which strategy is chosen. The main point is to establish a situation—a system—where all important decisions are made within or in close proximity to each individual school. If the school community is to be

a thriving and significant entity, its most vital and essential decisions cannot be made by those seated on the top floor.

This, of course, would be madness. At least, that is, in the minds of the already-weary office managers, division heads, municipal education commissioners, chief municipal education officers, and school inspectors who spend their days drowning in paperwork—letters to be answered, projects to be coordinated, and decisions to be made. It would be chaos—half measures, solutions at cross-purposes, and half-baked, scandalous solutions. *I* know it too. The solution I propose does not come without a cost. It would not result in *similar* schools offering the same quality education throughout the country—at least not similar in terms of the notion of the uniform *quality* currently envisioned by district commissioners. On the other hand, the impact of the variation would not only be negative. It would be a matter of variation, or for better or worse, a “natural experiment” of sorts, and thereby most likely a speedier rate of renewal for the school system.

Our current centralized, top-down governed system ensures justice in the sense that everyone is guaranteed similarity. But this also means restraint when faced with trying new solutions, and a sluggish pace in their implementation. In the current framework, introducing or removing a novel solution is a case of all or nothing at all; new solutions must always involve the system as a whole. And if the solution turns out to be a mistake, it will be removed in its entirety. This structure, which seems so obvious, would enable the central authorities to ensure that the nation’s schools are constantly up to date and in a position to benefit from the best educational advancements. Yet this is not how

centralized decision making works. It follows its own laws. It requires accountability and simplified decision-making procedures. The more power the system has, the less reason its administrators have to take any initiative. The flow of inquiries forces them to make decisions *concerning what other people ask about*. They acquire the role of a court of law. There are strong forces at work that are impeding these agencies from experimentation or even being close to the centers of activity.<sup>3</sup>

And even if I am wrong—even if an external administration played an instrumental role in realizing the lofty visions for our schools—I would nevertheless insist on the necessity of *cutting down at the top*. Most social schemes come at a cost. Even if a centralized decision-making body were advantageous for the educational system as a whole, any benefits would be outweighed by the inherent disadvantages it entails for the individual schools. If students, together with the teachers, together with the parents, are to realize the ambition of a thriving school community, we must first abandon the belief that centralization is beneficial.

*“But won’t this just lead to more power for principals and head teachers?”*

Certainly. That is why *they must also be cut*. We must once again consciously try to counteract the built-in tendencies of social organisms to establish pyramid structures in which all power—along with honors and payment—is situated at the top. By design, we must counteract the creation of more head teacher posts and try to do away with existing ones. Higher salaries must be negotiated and awarded on the basis of criteria other than specialization. The same goes for



the role of principal. Managing other teachers is not a job worthy of any self-respecting educator, and even less so the misguided practice of assigning such a task to our best educators. Besides, such a position is downright harmful if the preamble is to be taken seriously. Abolishing the administrative authority as such would compel other solutions to emerge. Some schools would, perhaps, fall back on appointing a principal. Others would prefer collective decision making. Others would choose anarchy. A wealth of experience demonstrates that most people manage to find a way to function if they need to, if they are left to their own devices. In such instances, the search in its own right for this way of functioning would become one of the main purposes of the school—that is, learning to function as a community through life experience.

I do not see a need to cut down on the number of form teachers, since they seldom exercise any power, but something must be done about the subject-specific teachers. Today, the imaginary silos of each teacher's subject continue to determine why our curriculum becomes a curriculum. If we are to create a school community with room for something other than isolated subjects, we cannot staff the community with people who are first and foremost there for their *subject*. School communities must primarily be made up of specialized generalists who are able to navigate diversity. Edvard Befring has suggested calling these individuals general education professionals, and these participants must be prioritized, for a while at least, since the importance of their role seems to have been completely forgotten. Later we can begin to ponder the significance of subjects such as math and history.

In line with this, I see no need to cut down on the teachers' resource centers, councils, and minor committees, insofar, that is, as they serve only as coordinating agencies that give *advice*—and nothing more. They will doubtless be heard should they come up with something wise.

*“But does that mean that school communities should govern themselves?”*

Yes. And in keeping with this, yet another agency must be shut down: the board of education. The school boards were created for the previous generation, not ours. They were created for small schools in small communities where everyone knew one another. In such cases, everyone knew who the best-qualified professionals were, where and how these individuals could be influenced to become even better qualified, and thereby create an even better school.

Why not try to re-create this situation? Once again, some people are already working toward this goal. The solution must replicate the one proposed for the centralized administration: we must curtail the influence of the current boards of education. We must absolve them of their duties and authority, and return these to the schools. This almost came to pass in the last century. But the change was not implemented, in part due to a widespread anxiety that the church would hereby gain too much influence over local committees. This anxiety should be less relevant today, and the arguments for reassigning tasks and power to the schools have become considerably stronger. A single board for all the schools in a single district can only generate alienation, internal specialization, and an inevitable release of power into the hands of the central administration.

Why not rob from the board of education and channel the funds to the dozens of school councils proposed by the Regulatory Committee and Standing Committee on Cooperative Affairs, taking care to redistribute more than mere ornamentation? We must redistribute the *important* decisions. If a district has a budgeted amount to spend on its schools, it should be possible to distribute this amount among the schools according to some kind of principle. It would then be up to each particular school to decide how the money should be spent. It is not difficult to imagine the uproar that would ensue in response to such a redistribution model: it would be madness. How would it be managed? And who would decide? Some schools would fall into neglect. It would be unjust and, above all, irresponsible.

There are two types of answers for the question of who ought to have decision-making authority. One type of answer is to produce regulations that will determine this. This answer is similar to the idea of an administrator who will be the school's final authority. The other type of answer is more in keeping with the ideas of this book: the individual school—along with the people who voluntarily run the school, or that is, the parents—should decide who will have decision-making authority. And the deliberations about this—about whom, what, and how—would be among the most significant struggles in the life of the school, during the first year and all the years to come.

At the risk of jumping the gun on some of the suggestions offered on the following pages, let me try to be as specific as possible. Schools should have the power to make decisions about their own budgets. They should decide for themselves whether they wish to renovate buildings, build a laboratory

in the woodworking shop, create a skating rink, or perhaps sacrifice earthly conveniences and take all seventh graders on a field trip to Svalbard. All this would probably be expensive. But what if they chose *not* to fill the vacant position after old Bob retired? Why on earth shouldn't this decision belong to the school itself?

And then there is the question of employment. Today, teachers apply for positions throughout the entire district before being assigned to particular schools by the board of education. Some principals, the best ones, probably have more direct contact with the school board and its administration than others. They are probably able to attract the teachers they find to be best suited for the policy of what is, quite literally, "their" school. These principals are presumably quite satisfied with the way things are. It seems that change, in most systems, occurs slowly, simply because a select group of individuals benefits from the current system. But somebody loses out. It would be better if schools were allowed to procure the staff they needed through direct contact and hiring. This could produce dynamic communities competing to create and offer the best possible working environments. In some instances, this liberty should not be absolute. Perhaps the district's central administration should have some say in the decision making, such as the decision to reassign particularly qualified teachers to exceptionally difficult positions. Given the class-specific nature of housing patterns, some districts would be less attractive than others. It might be the case that such leveling mechanisms would be in order—although I doubt this would really be necessary as long as the rest of the items on my wish list are granted.

## AN OPEN CURRICULUM

It is not enough to tear down the control centers. The directives must also be removed. From a historical perspective, the national curriculum is a young phenomenon, and we should take care to ensure it does not grow old.

This does not imply the end of lesson plans altogether. *Many* people, with different backgrounds and qualifications, should participate in the creation of lesson plans, and the existing proposals can serve as a kind of initial blueprint, but to be read as inspiring catalysts rather than directives for action. The deliberations involved when choosing among these temptations must constitute the core contents of each individual school community. This point, of course, would imply the end of nationally standardized exams. Any praise of self-rule and decentralization will be empty words as long as the central governing authorities continue to impose the same standards on all the schools. Exams do not simply test students: they also test teachers and, in a sense, the overall quality of the school in relation to the centrally determined learning objectives. The national exam is what ensures that the reins of power over schooling stay firmly in the hands of the central authorities.

As this book goes to press, the Ministry of Education and Church Affairs in Norway has outlined its proposal for Curriculum Guidelines for Compulsory Education (1971), which builds on the recommendations of the National Curriculum Committee. To some extent, it is an attempt to lessen the pressure of each specific subject. In lower secondary school, one hour a week is allocated to class and student council activities. Furthermore, math has been made an elective in

the ninth grade—although math competence remains one of the criteria for admission to upper secondary school. Nor is there any clarity with regard to examinations. “An assessment of a student’s proficiency in different subjects should never be a one-sided determination of the student’s skills and achievements” (Curriculum Guidelines for Compulsory Education, 1971, 59). On the other hand, what follows is a virtually verbatim rendering of the National Curriculum Committee’s Recommendation II regarding how “it is indispensable to disclose information about a student’s assessed attainment in their transition from compulsory schooling to working life or further education.” And

it will generally be necessary to develop specific sets of questions, assignments, exercises or the like when the purpose of an assessment is to try to determine students’ actual levels of proficiency in different subjects. These questions are also important for a number of other assessments. Advice is therefore found in the lesson plans on how to produce such resources, which are to be made available as publicly accessible documents, and may be used when deemed expedient for the assessment in question. This applies to both the assessment of skills and achievements as well as abilities and talents. (59)

It doesn’t help much to state that the Curriculum Guidelines “must not be understood as binding minimum requirements for all students” (24) if at the same time a system of control is established whereby those who have fulfilled the most requirements also perform best. The wording of the Curriculum Guidelines is generally much more cautious than that of the national curriculum. Moreover, the Curriculum Guidelines contain a wealth of perspectives regarding the importance of learning how to *find* knowledge rather than simply *knowing* it. Something—or someone—is carefully

moving us away from a comprehensive, subject-based school system. This is stated with even greater clarity in the press release that followed the publication of the new Curriculum Guidelines for Compulsory Education.<sup>4</sup>

Would not abandoning a system that ensures common academic standards with centralized exams ruin the possibility of controlling student admissions to both upper secondary and tertiary educations?

Exactly—and this is one of the greatest benefits of the suggested reform. A vagueness would be introduced, and perhaps even uncertainty concerning those supposedly best fit for pursuing higher education and certain professions. To read the history of the public school is to read a saga of slavery. Over and over again—and through disparate means—the slave and their companions struggle to rise to the level of a gentleman, the one who administers knowledge and culture, and knows how everything must be. And if mandatory attendance at the peasants' school—or *people's* school, as it was deftly named to skirt the connotations of slavery—was extended in its duration, the best students could perhaps even be allowed to continue their studies at an upper secondary school. If the days were longer, if the year was longer, if the number of years was increased—it would be a school to the gentleman's satisfaction. Meanwhile, if tougher requirements were imposed, the national curriculum expanded, nationwide exams introduced, and of course, a couple of additional ploys executed along the way, signals of reassurance would be sent to the gentlemen that even though this is a school for everyone, differences will still be upheld. Thus came the lesson plans or the series of schemes designed to prevent those deemed most unfit

from attending the people's school (or in any case, to expel them as quickly as possible in the event they had somehow landed there by mistake). This would please the gentlemen and they might even venture to send their own children to the school.

And so the school continues its acts of slave-like submission, blissfully unaware that the battle has already been won. The victory stems not from the school's own achievements but instead from the fact that the outer circumstances no longer require slave-like submission. Several factors in the mix conspire to ensure this: in some schools, no more than half the student body continues on to upper secondary school. If more were to do so, the upper secondary schools would lose a lot of their power, and increasingly adapt themselves so as to take what they could get. No one really believes that upper secondary schools in Oslo would stop admitting students even if the lower secondary schools stopped teaching German or other foreign languages in addition to English. Upper secondary schools would not stop admitting students even if the lower secondary schools stopped teaching English, botany, mathematics, and chemistry. The upper secondary schools must take what they can get because they depend on their students. They will have to adapt. All that is required is to set the wheels in motion.

Other schools, however, have no troubles filling up their rosters. In such cases, it is easy to see why primary schools end up submitting to the whims of the higher levels. This submission is, nevertheless, unnecessary. As will become still clearer for everyone, most of what is stated in this book about primary and lower secondary schools also applies to upper



secondary schools. This will soon become clear to everyone, and the upper secondary schools will begin to unravel from the inside out. Once the Parliament realizes that external circumstances have eliminated the need for submission, it will try to open up the system from above. The universities are well aware of these changing circumstances and are in the process of creating exactly these openings.

There are, of course, many pawns in the game. Secondary schools have slaved to satisfy *their* master. That is, the alma mater, the overseer of the real and distant truths—and the cradle of teachers for our secondary schools. And yet it is exactly from this level that we now can deal the critical blow to the secondary school's power over primary and lower secondary schools. Increasingly, secondary school diplomas will no longer serve as the only certificate qualifying students for admission to higher education. There is a visible trend in a number of industrialized countries that resembles that of the distant socialist countries: admission to universities can and should be recruited directly from the people. A discussion of why this practice is flourishing at this moment, how justified it is, or whether it is good or bad in the long run is beyond the scope of this book. We must be satisfied by simply stating that such a trend *does* exist, and then ask what it means for the position of upper secondary schools. The more this trend catches on, the more these schools will lose their monopoly. They will thereby also be relieved of a burden. They too will be freed from their master. They will be free to cooperate with their equals in the primary and lower secondary schools—free to fully receive what these schools have to offer.

## SCHOOLS AND THE DIVISION INTO CLASSES

But alas, we must not forget the lessons learned in chapter 3! One of the main points was that schools provide a service in the name of class distinctions. If the system was opened up in such a way as to grant everyone free access everywhere, then it would not be possible to carry out this service. Make up your mind, man! Are we supposed to follow the advice of chapter 3 or chapter 5?

Both. Chapter 3 described the place of schools within the class structure as well as the service that the school has provided up to now and chiefly still supplies. But ours is not a completely static society. Several circumstances have begun impeding the ability of schools to provide class certification. First, there are so many who attend school for so many years that the pyramid is becoming heavy at the top. We have reached a certain saturation point. We cannot assign power and honor to so many. When being posh is normalized, it ceases to be desirable. The saturation point will be reached if a large percentage of the population pursues an education until they are twenty-five to thirty years old. Increasing numbers decrease the value of each degree, so the declining status of students is not only a matter of radicalism. And having spent so many years in school, in the end it almost seems comical—and a silly waste of time—if someone tries to ascend through education to a rank above others.

Doubt acquires fertile growing conditions when more and more people are snooping around inside the temples of higher education. This is partly because doubt is research's foremost assistant, and partly because what is going on in the universities probably wasn't all that exciting in the first

place. Inside, capable people may be found—capable in their own fields. But there are other fields and activities. Perhaps even more is required of the person who grows tomatoes or builds a house? Or perhaps such activities produce an even greater return on the investment? The “normalization” of the highest levels of education breeds what we could call “neopopulism”—an important brake on the tendency toward the professionalization of society (cf. Torgersen 1971). In addition, the security of material abundance—allowing for social experiments—is eroding the foundation of the class structure. The same can be said for the trends in youth culture that are making new ways of life seem more respectable. A lack of clarity rises like a phoenix out of these ruptures, weakening the intimate connection between high levels of education and high social status.

In line with this, academic salaries are decreasing. This is by all means beneficial for the education system. We will never be completely rid of the problems described in this book, however, as long as salaries are based on education levels. Schools will attract opportunists looking for monetary gain rather than for teaching. There is no need to take a stand on whether trying to get rich is a legitimate goal. But it is certainly harmful to the education system when this goal is pursued through the institutions whose main function is to confer a status that in turn legitimizes a higher salary. In such cases, it becomes impossible to alleviate the pressure on the education system. In such cases, we end up constructing a shortage of space at all levels of education and thereby centrifuges within the public school.

It is becoming increasingly unreasonable to claim that the poor academic deserves material circumstances that are

slightly better than those of most people, allegedly so as to provide the conditions necessary to enable them to carry out their lofty and difficult errand. When most people do well with less, it should be evident that the academic can function with less as well. It is utter nonsense that secondary school teachers should earn more than other teachers—surpassed in absurdity only by the model that allows teachers employed at the tertiary level (university professors most of all) to earn more than teachers in secondary schools. A decent school system cannot be established before a comprehensive educational maintenance allowance is instated, followed by a fixed salary for the entire education sector, possibly with additional compensation for parents with children, certain age groups, or certain remote districts. In addition, it seems about time to finally put into motion mechanisms that can control admission to the few professions over which society has some influence—mechanisms beyond that of the formal education system. There is a long waiting list for students wishing to study medicine and odontology. We should therefore reduce the salary of these overly popular fields of study in order to shorten the waiting list. The most zealous will presumably stay. It is hard to take seriously those who see an unsolvable problem in the fact that many candidates seek admission to studies offering the most enticing financial rewards.<sup>5</sup>

A new situation will arise when moderately paid teachers in schools and universities are freed from the task of certifying people for a higher pay grade (at least in terms of the government's regulated salary levels). At the higher and highest levels of education—in the sense of institutions dealing with the most complicated or comprehensive fields of

knowledge—teachers will meet students who are above all there to learn. At the primary and lower secondary school levels, teachers will be able to take care of not only the need to learn but also the need for a place to be.

The pressure described in first part of this section will foster a development of this nature. It will not happen overnight—especially not in the case of upper secondary schools, as they are staffed with highly specialized individuals holding traditionally high statuses and no immediately apparent alternatives. The fight for admission to the best upper secondary schools will continue in other parts of Norway, even if universities open up little by little for students without upper secondary school diplomas (a fully open university will probably never come to pass without struggles of considerable magnitude). The fight will also continue even if everyone is granted the right to attend upper secondary school—hereby forcing these schools to change simply because they are no longer recruiting the students they want the most. Especially in districts with traditionally low levels of education, the educational pyramid will take more time to become heavy at the top—the upper secondary school diploma will endure as a confirmation of the status an individual has been born to achieve. If the primary and lower secondary schools refuse to distinguish “the best” from the rest in leaving certificates, upper secondary schools could perform this assessment at the beginning of the first term through admission tests. It would be illusory to believe that the stratifying function of the education system will disappear—the prospects of this coming to pass are relegated to the very, very distant future. But this, of course, is a political question. Can we tolerate such a system? Let us, in any case, try to minimize its impact.

One could try to hinder direct transitions between educational levels. How about a few years of work first? This would perhaps create new problems—and these will be addressed below. And if secondary schools remained cramped, why not come up with different admission criteria? A raffle would certainly work better—and do less harm to the losers of the established system—than both compulsory lesson plans and tests. And it would also—to the extent that children from upper- and middle-class families lost out—lead to a rapid expansion of the capacity of upper secondary schools. Naturally, such schemes would generate new problems. These will remain unsolved for now. We must move on to another important matter. It will annoy those in power—but perhaps entice those who are not.

### **A MIRROR FOR SCHOOLS**

There are many reasons why schools have turned out the way they have. These reasons make implementing change appear hopeless. What I have proposed will probably be rejected as utopian and irrelevant by many. Let me try to shake up the latter assumption a little by holding up a mirror borrowed from the toolbox of research in criminology. It is an unusual vantage point for looking at the school as a system (but normal when looking at students). We are accustomed to comparing the most ordinary educational institutions to each other—primary schools, secondary schools, and universities. But humor me by permitting me to make an analogy comparing the lower secondary schools to prisons.

Let us first try to perceive these institutions through the eyes of the most estranged students: the dropouts, those with

hairy chins or puffed-out chests, those with great vigor and on average higher activity levels than they will ever experience again, and those with an intense need to behave like fully grown adults. I would dare say that such students' experience of their own situation quite often resembles that of a prisoner's. They find themselves within an authoritarian system from which they cannot escape. They are compelled by law to stay. If they skip school, they can be fetched by those in power and be transferred to another institution. Parents can be punished if their children do not show up. In this system, students are on the lowest rung of the ladder, while everyone else, absolutely everyone else, has the right to give them orders they must obey. Those in power coordinate their actions and information. What is known by one is usually made available to and known by everyone in the system. This information will also be communicated to others in power—parents or administrative authorities, who then provide additional information in return. Since these young people have no expectations of staying in school, much of the planned schoolwork will seem meaningless. Consequently, their schoolwork frequently obtains the *quality of slave labor*—like moving stones from one end of the yard to the other and then back again. Modern prison facilities have at least tried to legitimize these structures by offering actual work, some even including paid positions. Schoolwork remains unpaid. Nonetheless, the work of students is meticulously checked by school authorities, and the results of these checks are made public and available to everyone, including the other students. It is hard work. Unlike slave labor, both the relative and more general sense of a student's failure in school is degrading, also in the eyes of their fellow prisoners.

Poised within this external framework, the internal life of the school obtains several characteristics in common with the life we know from prison research. Some students join forces to form a common front against the teachers, widening the distance between them: norms *against* cooperation are created. These norms are directed in part at the teachers and in part toward fellow students who display weakness—in other words, a willingness to cooperate with the oppressors. There are quite obvious reasons behind these acts of dissent. They symbolize what side the student is on in the everlasting battle against persons in positions of authority. They generate excitement, break up the monotony of daily life, and contribute, at least to some degree, to creating a feeling of ownership—a feeling of still being free.

Interesting similarities appear between lower secondary schools and correctional facilities in a number of areas: to a large extent, neither of these institutions have any real possibility of sanctioning their clientele. At first glance, this may seem like a paradox: the prison, surrounded by walls, filled with authorities trained to do the job, equipped with keys and handcuffs, and granted permission by society, with the force of the police and military up their sleeves—how can the prison staff be without any possibility for sanctions? As for the schools, did I not just say that *everyone* has power over students, and that those in this position of coordinated power have at their disposal the most draconian control mechanisms to ensure that each student completes the assigned schoolwork? Yes, but nevertheless—or perhaps for precisely this reason, the prisoner has already hit bottom and quite simply cannot descend any further. They have already been deprived of everything a human being can be deprived



of. If decency prevents us from using a whip or other forms of torture, starvation or complete isolation for more than limited periods of time, then there is nothing more to take from them. Then we are truly powerless. And the prisoner is free. We are also powerless in relation to the *student* who has had enough, doesn't want to continue studying, and has messed up for one reason or another. I would expect most prison wardens to nod in recognition when hearing about the apparent "disciplinary problems" of many schools. The teacher is not so lucky. Their job was not presented as a job of internment. They were not trained to carry out their office. And they are even more restricted in their possibilities for exercising the requisite power. They are not allowed to employ any form of physical punishment. And they are charged with the responsibility of guarding a clientele who are free to complain to people outside the system every single day.

Yet at the same time, the teacher shares an important hurdle with the prison warden since *they cannot punish by means of exclusion*. The student, on the other hand, has plenty of ways to punish the teacher by staying away from school. If students skip school, this *may* lead to someone questioning the teacher's competence. If enough students stay away, this also raises doubts about the unquestioned justification of schooling. Truants do not only create problems for themselves. They shed a harsh light on the schools' function as a system of coercion and thereby fundamentally subvert the key mechanism of power employed by almost all other social systems: "If you don't want to follow the rules, get out of here."

In such situations, schools and teachers often resort to using many of the control mechanisms also used by prisons

and prison wardens. They refrain from speaking about rights as much as possible when granting the wishes of a student. Rather, these wishes are portrayed as privileges or extraordinary benefits, which can be applied punitively, through withdrawal. Rights are taken for granted; privileges are instruments of control. The traditional prisons had cultivated this practice to perfection. Prisoners were divided into different classes—yes exactly, classes—and then each inmate would be granted an increasing number of privileges as they ascended through the ranks. Breaking the rules led to a downgrade in rank and withdrawal of privileges. This system was abandoned as the development of society made the preposterousness of claiming that not all prisoners deserved to begin in the best class patently evident. There were no longer any privileges. There were rights.

Prisons are, of course, not entirely without options. A difficult and/or dangerous prisoner can be transferred to a more secure prison, closed unit, or solitary confinement. Schools have similar options. They can send students to observation classes for difficult students, or reform school or other schools designed for troublemakers. Compared to the prisons, schools appear to offer more options for internal variation and less external control. Some of these schemes may even be seen as a good thing for some students. At the same time, however, reservations about the use of institutional transfers as an exercise of power will presumably be greater in schools than in prisons. This is due to the facts that the objective of detention in the school is covert and the ideological belief that all students should be able to function in an ordinary classroom environment is highly pervasive. It would feel like a failure for both the teacher and school to

resort to removal. Once again—as in prison—it is probably easier to diagnose the renegade child and thereby displace responsibility onto the shoulders of other professions. Here as well as in more general attempts to curb smaller frictions within an individual prison or school, apparent parallels between the roles of prison doctors and school psychologists are found.

We are all subject to coercion, of course. The body coerces us, the twenty-four-hour day coerces us, the rhythms of the seasons impose their own demands, and time causes things to grow, mature, and decay. Most of us submit to these forces, or perhaps even feel a certain joy in succumbing or playing along with—and not against—the laws of nature. Socially constructed coercion—*when it is experienced as that*—is an entirely different story. I was recently leafing through the pages of some textbooks intended for ninth graders—one on health studies, another an English book, and the third a chemistry book. I can say without any reservations: exciting books, thoughtfully and elegantly composed, and a temptation for anyone—*anyone, that is, who chooses to become absorbed with them*. But as soon as they become mandatory reading, they are transformed from temptations into burdens—not for everyone, but a heavy one for some, and thereby highly contagious for many. There are also structures to be found within the inner life of schools that destroy what otherwise could have been a source of edifying joy—such as the joy of consistently studying the same subject for several weeks' time. Instead, by splitting up every school day into different subjects, students are systematically trained to work in a distracted manner, tossed from Roman emperors to music class to mathematics, then led through a brief stint of

physical education before arriving at German. Anyone wishing to demonstrate the manufactured coercion of this system could hardly find a more telling example. This structure also serves as an effective formula for the creation of an indifferent human being (cf. Carling 1966b; Hem 1971). Schools are, to a certain extent, organized as subject-based institutions by employing different teachers, each of whom have specialized in a particular subject. On the one hand, such specialization impedes many aspirations for a positive school experience. On the other hand, the school day is organized in a way that is contrary to the elementary principles of concentration. As such, the subjects themselves will not be taught properly. This is, again, the result of the inner logic of the school system, but at the same time a result that contributes to highlighting the similarities between schoolwork and forced labor. Who can seriously recommend the merits of a system that obliges the student to let go of one thought after forty or forty-five minutes only to plunge into something completely different, followed by a third topic, and then a fourth. ... Educational tricks are of little import when the very framework, the timetable, is counterproductive.

Even in my most vindictive moments, I would not claim that the analogy between lower secondary schools and prisons is completely fitting. But some things do fit, for some students and teachers, in some situations. And regardless of whether the analogy is fitting to a greater or lesser degree, I find it important to call attention to these possibilities for systematic resemblances. In so doing, I have simultaneously described the antithesis to the preamble cited at the beginning of this book: this is no place to be if by “place” one refers to a worthy place for human beings. If an institution

is built primarily for the purpose of storage, and defines students as its lowest and formally speaking most powerless participants, a prison is the obvious analogy. As such, I see no reason why educators should not familiarize themselves with the sociology of prisons rather than obscuring the similarities outlined above.

But that is not what we want. We do not want to convert schools into prisons. When I exaggerate the analogy to such an extreme, it is above all to reveal its dangerous proximity and inspire as many people as possible to work for the development of a school community with entirely different qualities than those of correctional facilities.

### **A MIRROR FOR PARENTS**

Naturally, it is not only the teachers and students who bear the brunt of this. The parents are also affected. When young people are made superfluous in our society, we simultaneously create a situation in which the possibility for control is greatly diminished for all age groups. Participation in the workforce implies the right to certain types of rewards, such as money, amenities, or respect. Exclusion from working life implies a general removal of these rewards. Parents and others are thereby also deprived of those power mechanisms that lie within *reducing rewards in response to significantly poor performance or other undesirable behavior*. Nothing can be taken back where nothing is given. Young people *as a group* are punished by this general exclusion from ordinary working life to the extent that there is nothing left to punish them for. It is not possible to punish the most disenfranchised even more through further exclusion.

But those who aspire to control the behavior of young people face other difficulties as well. In communities with scant resources, deviants will quickly experience the consequences of dissent: exclusion from the community, and possibly hunger, dire necessity, or even ruin. In today's society, these basic sanctions are no longer an option—in part because our values dictate that it is wrong to starve maladjusted youths, but above all, it simply cannot be done. There are so many basic resources readily available that most—if allowed freedom of movement—would find a way to survive if they were willing to endure a low standard of living. And that is exactly what many of them are not only willing to do but also view as an ideal.

I find it remarkable that in spite of everything, society is functioning as well as it is, and people form connections with one another through emotion alone. The misconduct of adolescents is often the cause of public dismay—and that is probably because many of those in power actually do comprehend, or at least sense, how fragile the balance actually is. If the well-meaning society is unable to placate grievances, few punitive measures remain at its disposal as an alternative. The only remaining recourse is that of direct physical coercion: a beating or institution. Here, the situation of parents resembles that of prison guards. To inflict physical punishment runs counter to important values. Oddly enough, the physical punishment of adolescents is experienced as even more improper than infliction of the same on young children. And it is considered an admission of failure to seek help from other authorities. In an elegant analysis, Gresham Sykes (1958) shows how prison guards, with all the power

in the world behind them, rarely exercise this power even when they have to—such as chastising the prisoner, showing them, or worst of all, calling for help—because to do so implies they are unskilled in their vocation. Instead, they try to achieve cooperation through the use of all manner of compromises and thereby are to a large degree controlled by their prisoners. Parents are in a somewhat similar situation, chiefly because children and especially young people possess a key resource within the situation to which we have brought both ourselves and them: they can refuse to participate. The student can escape—they can withdraw or seek out the company of peers. Society's formerly integrated punishments for withdrawing from the workforce have ceased to be effective; the students are already excluded. And they do not starve to death. Viewed from this perspective, the symbolic presence of the Palace Park in Oslo or the city of Copenhagen are probably more important for youths who do *not* hang out in the Palace Park and do not travel to Copenhagen than for those who actually do. *The possibility* of leaving is power. It is a onetime weapon, functioning like the threat of divorce in a marriage. Like a nuclear weapon, it is so powerful that it is more effective when it is not used. But the mere possibility has an effect. In the back of their minds, both parties know that the young person can commit acts that would bring the authorities to the very brink of desperation. The more horrifying the descriptions of the deserted backyards occupied by rebellious youths in Copenhagen for the purpose of carrying out different projects, the greater the potential threat afforded to ordinary adolescents. Those who leave give power to those who stay.

## A PLACE TO BE

We will now leave behind the prisons and the possibility of a large-scale adolescent withdrawal from society behind us, and take another look at the Standing Committee on Education and Church Affairs' (Recommendation to the Odelsting XLV, 1968–1969, 9) important words about the act it created concerning primary and lower secondary education:

We must therefore, to a much greater extent, begin to view our schools as social communities. Schools can and must do more than prepare and qualify students for the life ahead of them. Schools *are in their own right* an essential part of life. Education has become—and will be even more so—an increasingly integral part of what it means to be a human being. Schools must therefore have an *intrinsic value*. Children and young people should be able to find joy in their existence while attending school. It will hence become a key responsibility for schools to promote well-being and happiness.

If it is the case that we have set up society in such a way that there is no use for people in that society until they reach a certain age—and have chosen instead to gather them in institutions we have called schools—we should then direct our efforts toward converting these institutions into a type of miniature society where life can be lived to the fullest and in the most ordinary form as a matter of course. We do happen to know quite a bit about what such a life would entail insofar as we agree that it should have as few qualities as possible in common with prisons. The antithesis to the prison is an open society, where all parties participate because they feel like it, find something valuable to take home with them, and/or the time spent together in and of itself yields significant benefits. In our context, this means that the public



school must first and foremost be a place to be, before it is a place to learn.

When sociologists speak of “society,” they are often referring to social systems that are self-sufficient, self-governing, and to a large extent independent of others. Norway is a society, but the Norwegian State Railways is not. Yet Norway may be less of a society in some periods and more so in others. Isolated villages may be distinct societies, but with the arrival of better roads this characteristic tends to disappear.

Questions concerning the organization of social life are probably of less importance in a school for adults aspiring to become airline pilots. Here the purpose of going to school is apparent: to acquire knowledge. It is evident for all involved parties that a great deal of this knowledge is necessary, so it is reassuring when the acquired level of knowledge is tested before students leave the school. Their education has an immediate relevance to their future occupation.

The opposite is the case for many students in lower secondary school. And the qualities of the social system as a community become correspondingly important. This pertains to individuals who have been deprived of meaningful tasks in their daily lives due to technological advancements and do not necessarily obtain qualifications for any type of employment through the course of their schooling. In such schools, the life of the society *is* the actual content. The challenge facing the school must therefore be to offer the option of participation—and hereby opportunities to find meaning—within a social system in which ordinary life is represented to the greatest possible extent. That is, precisely, a society. A society has at least *five* characteristics, which should also characterize such a school-society.

1. They should, like all societies, have a certain degree of *autonomy*. This is what is achieved by cutting down on external administration, a compulsory curriculum, and most of the tests. I have said enough about this above.
2. Another characteristic is *self-sufficiency*. In relation to schools, this could be achieved by granting schools full control over their own buildings and equipment, including their immediate surroundings. In the current society, we struggle to provide children with meaningful tasks—tasks that they can master—and where the importance of such mastery is self-evident. In the current situation, we do our utmost *within* the school *to deny* children and young people the possibility of undertaking such meaningful tasks. To begin with the most elementary ones, Why in the world is the cleaning of the school premises not left to the users of the school? Why is the repainting of classrooms not a task for the school? Outside there are lawns, maybe even parks. Perhaps there is a schoolyard in need of gravel or asphalt, light bulbs to be changed, wastepaper to be disposed of, mail to be distributed, and bulletin boards to be decorated. Why not leave all this to the actual members of the school-society?

I know the answers:

- A. We do not have time to take care of such matters due to the scheduled curriculum and tests.
- B. It will be both expensive and inefficient. I speak from experience. Some time ago, I wrote a short article containing some of my thoughts that led Per Aavatsmark to propose the following during the budgetary negotiations in Oslo in 1968: “In collaboration with the education authorities,

the administration is urged to shed light on the question of whether schools should be in charge of their gardens, preferably in a school gardening class." The chief technical officer established a committee that responded, "The tasks vary greatly and change with the seasons. A large number of the tasks clearly call for skilled workers. ... [U]p to now this work has been led and for the most part carried out by skilled and experienced gardeners. To the greatest extent possible, they use gardening machinery." The commission deemed it inadvisable, and the chief technical officer added, "It may be even more expensive to implement the proposed solution. Teachers must receive pay for their work in supervising the students. Moreover, procuring machinery and tools for all schools would generate high costs." And the municipal financial officer agreed with the chief education officer on advising against such madness.

C. Moreover, it is not certain that the job would be done properly. The schools would not be as clean, neat, and shiny as they are today.

These responses are suitable for our purposes in that they illustrate key differences in the visions of what a school is or should be. If the school is considered an important place to be, it essentially goes without saying that the school itself should be responsible for the upkeep of the school building and determining the appropriate standards for that upkeep. This task, in and of itself, of arriving at decisions about how people want their school to be, is a matter of great importance for any school-society. How much energy should be devoted to cleaning, and how much money should be spent on paint? Who should decide, and how will agreements be

reached? More than anything, these decisions will breed precisely the kind of tasks most educators claim to be looking for, whereby people who are good at organizing, can organize; people who are good at cleaning, can clean; those who are happy painters, can paint; and those who are strong in body can carry things while those who are not can make a marvelous contribution by baking bread for those doing the carrying. Of all the unimaginative initiatives in the history of curriculum-bound schooling, the most extreme example must be the decision to have ready-made food brought in to provide a nourishing breakfast, or even worse, where both produce and skilled housewives are brought in, thereby depriving the school kitchen of its completely natural service within the school-society: to prepare wholesome food when food is needed (and preferably a bit more often).<sup>6</sup> I can just envision the administrators sharpening their pencils as they prepare to write a memo specifying the particular foods that must be prepared. So let me quickly add, the type, substance, schedule, and expenses should, of course, also be determined by the school-society. If people want to serve beefsteak, so be it. Maybe the cost of that beefsteak will mean that they won't be able to afford their next school trip—but that is also their business.

This is a fundamental point for creating a thriving school-society. But passing half measures will yield the most lamentable results. Many a school administrator would claim that they really *have tried* to offer their students meaningful service tasks in relation to the school. They have encouraged the students to wash, paint, and garden. And the students can't be bothered. Just as they can't be bothered to pick up trash, or keep the school's common areas nice and tidy.

This raises the question of whether the school is society's school, the teachers' school, or really the *school-society's* school. Who determines whether its buildings need to be cleaned or painted, and how to spend any available savings? Those in power would like to experiment with changes that *first* impose duties on their subjects, and *thereafter*—if all goes well over a long period of time—gradually and tentatively introduce rights. Should the entire scheme prove untenable, the second part of the experiment will be dropped. But duties and rights must come hand in hand if the school is to work as envisioned.

No society can exist solely on the basis of the mutually provided services of its members. External resources must also flow into the school-society. In our context, this primarily implies that the school must actively find tasks to carry out both inside *and* outside the school. It probably won't have to look very far. Is it not grotesque that nursing homes and schools, located across the street from each other, toil desperately away in isolation in their mutual and separate endeavors to solve opposite problems? Nursing homes are in need of nursing staff, and schools are in need of meaningful tasks for their students. Why shouldn't class 8A be assigned full responsibility for a large part of the manual work required in the nursing home throughout the year? Why shouldn't class 8B be responsible for doing the daily grocery shopping for the district's elderly residents who are living alone or stopping by on a regular basis to make sure everything is all right? Why do we count on engineers to invent emergency alarm systems for the elderly who live alone when there is an abundance of young people in our society whom we have absolutely no idea what to do with, beyond

keeping them in a school to learn something deemed important by the established educational conventions? Such service tasks require organization and coordination; they can be expanded, spill over into other activities, and even become a source of income for the school. Other schools will find other opportunities. They will most likely always operate on the margins—a bit on the outskirts—of ordinary working life in society. But this is where newcomers have always begun.

If only somebody would see the wisdom of these ideas. But then they would also have to have the strength to resist the temptation to impose a system. Memos and standardized schemes designed for universal use, or worse yet, an office or staff employed to perform this task—this would be enough to squelch anything of significance within the school-society. There is a widespread misconception—existing in sweet harmony with the special interests of many people—that social systems yield the best results when they are supplied with abundant material resources. Once again, however, the application of common sense reveals that the opposite will tend to be the case—as is exemplified in schools and universities. I have said enough about school administration, and I will only add that my points are valid for universities as well: an understaffed administration will make it self-evident that students and teachers must deal with the most pressing issues together. In this way the fight over resources is avoided.

This is especially important in the school-society. Here, a shortage of staff implies that everyone must be put to use—even the least capable of students must not simply be tolerated but instead be encouraged to pitch in. In such cases, everybody wins. The smaller schools must send everyone

out onto the field when their team is playing—otherwise their efforts will come to naught. The larger schools have the luxury of using their best players and excluding the others. Whether small schools are better than large at imparting knowledge to their students remains unclear. Yet they are most certainly better at creating the conditions to ensure a life of participation.<sup>7</sup> It is, in this light, clearly not helpful to supply the school-society with all kinds of external resources and provide it with all manner of support so only those who are truly qualified have an opportunity to put their talents to use. Insofar as we conceive of the school as a society, it must to a large degree manage itself in order for its members to manage themselves. The administrator's task—if they have not already been phased out—must be to look away, bite their tongue, keep their mouth shut, let the school manage on its own, and if worse comes to worse, offer to help put out the severest of fires. Or put differently, the administrator should act in relation to the particular school as reasonable parents do with their children—walk beside them, ready to provide support, and only intervene when absolutely necessary.

3. *Socialization*. Every society must eventually accept new recruits and ensure that they fit in—that they are welcomed as fellow members of society. Once more, it is helpful to think of the school as a type of miniature society. And once more, this is a worthy task for those who have personally lived in that society for weeks, months, or years. A central task of this school-society should be that older students function as teachers for newcomers. Educationists have a technical term for this—“peer mentoring”—and it fell into disrepute, perhaps rightly, in the middle of

the last century. At the time, it was a makeshift solution designed to compensate for the shortage of teachers, and drill students in the most elementary levels of reading, writing, and calculus. But today, we face a luxury problem. Our predominant challenge is how to help people learn to live with one another.

4. Some students will mess around, though. They will refuse to play by the rules of the school-society. An infinite number of hours will be spent on determining what these rules are as well as what constitutes their violation, why such breaches happen, and their potential consequences. This theme can be summarized as *deviance and social control*, the core challenges of which constitute utter nightmares for principals and head teachers. In many aspects, the roles of the police officer and head teacher are quite similar, with the important difference being that the police officer enjoys a nobler reputation for snatching up worthier villains. If we hope to create a thriving school-society, these duties must be taken out of the hands of the authorities and placed in the hands of the school-society. I do not imagine that there are many authorities who take pleasure in these tasks, but nonetheless there are real difficulties and risks associated with handing them over to the actual members of the school-societies. Abuses of power may occur. In addition, every educator will know that students can behave even more harshly toward their peers—often to the point of barbaric cruelty—than the most apathetic of teachers. First, however, a school-society is certainly not an authoritarian framework, and second, it is not my intention to abolish the teachers but rather to employ them differently. More on this later.<sup>8</sup>



5. It would be a paltry society if we were to stop here. Much like our current situation, it would be a society where rituals are few and dull, where high culture is extremely high, reserved only for connoisseurs, where legends and myths are written in books, and hash smokers have a monopoly on transcendent experiences. Something has been lost that must be secured by the school-society. The same holds true for *art and religion*, which will be addressed in a bit.<sup>9</sup>

*“And who should decide?”*

The overall bent of my proposals is probably clear about now. The school-society should decide on who should decide. Several problems arise from this answer. The most apparent problem probably pertains to the boundaries of the society: Who has the right to influence and decide? As I see it, the more schools are forced to uphold their functions of storage and stratification, the more we should push back, and the more reasonable it becomes to leave it up to the students and teachers to make as many of the decisions as possible on their own. Parents, in this sense, become adversaries of the school-society, looking for a place to store their children as well as certify them for the highest-possible social position. They become a pressure group advocating for more subjects, more tests, more lesson planning, and less life. It is easy to understand why teachers often try to protect themselves—and their students—from parents who zealously try to make schools increase whatever they already have too much of in the first place. In this situation, it makes sense to ensure that parents have little say about the particularities of each school. But the more schools become places for authentic

engagement with important elements of the surrounding world, the more this surrounding world will be invited to engage. This means first and foremost the parents, but also locally elected school boards. When there is a substantial influx of these outside resources, there is every reason to expect that the older children, whom this is about, will be able to understand this. The interests of the children and parents will hereby converge. Parents will, in effect, *be* represented in the school-society. And then the question concerning decision making will become to a large extent immaterial.

*“And the teachers?”*

The teachers will become—now as before—the most important partners in the school-society. But they will be partners—not commanders. They will become adult coworkers, occupied with the task of integrating the most valuable elements from the surrounding society into the life of the school-society. They will be given opportunities to impart models for adult life through a much wider range of activities than were previously made available. They will assert their positions as teachers through their actions within the school-society, as sources of inspiration, or supervisors or sages—depending on whatever qualities they may possess. A few teachers without these qualities would serve as the school-society’s deviants, highlighting the value of the school-society’s norms precisely through their noncompliance. They would be assigned simpler chores on the margins of the system, and some would have to face the sanctions determined by the school-society, either in the form of treatment or punishment.

The children would not terrorize one another. If there is one certainty about most children, it is their wish to grow out of such habits. Adults unburdened by family ties to children attending the school will always have extraordinary opportunities for influencing them. In the case of those of today's youths who aspire to become adults in a manner that differs from our foolish approach, perhaps they are right to question and should have the power to vote down the teacher. But I do not think this will lead to problems in the way of low standards, chaos, or extravagance. They would on average probably be young people who are even stricter, more serious, more determined, and more demanding of themselves and others than is perhaps beneficial for society. The youth demonstrations that now and then arise (even in Norway) indicate something important about young people, but are not representative of the vast majority.

## **A PLACE TO LEARN**

In becoming a place to be, the school-society also becomes a place to learn. Here, I defend a sort of working-school principle. If we wish for our students to become competent and independent people, who are able to maintain a home and function in society, they must learn this through life and participation, not by going through the motions. It is here that the Norwegian Parliament's imperative to "endeavor to facilitate constructive modes of cooperation" should be taken into serious consideration. If students are to learn about and become familiar with the life of society, they should live a life in society. There can be no other way.

But proper participation requires a large number of things: developing the rules for the school-society requires reading and writing skills. The rules must be read and written, and perhaps even typed up. Campaign speeches for school elections must be written; arguments must be worked out in detail and based on information. Budgets must be created, and salaries must be calculated along with questions of, How much should we charge for the cinnamon buns? Most people will find doing such calculations enjoyable if they are keeping track of things that they really need. There is no need to detail the specific configurations of this work. There is an abundance of life and activities to work on both inside and outside our schools.

For all my talk about schools as places to be, we must not forget another easily overlooked and perhaps even more important fact: humans are not sustained solely by community. Once again, there is cause to consider schools in relation to the laws of historical change. For example, the schools in Norway were historically tied to the word of God. Bishops and pastors controlled the teacher, and did so with an iron fist. A large part of the battle for better schools in Norway has been a battle against the dominant position of Christianity studies. The growth in school administrations and compulsory lesson plans can be explained in a similar fashion. If the local community were granted too much decision-making latitude, too much time would be spent singing hymns in school. There are still too many hymns being sung, but perhaps this is now done in a more perfunctory way. The law dictates that schools provide students with a Christian upbringing, but this is—because of the way Norwegian society has developed—mostly carried out by non-Christian

people. The result is probably even worse than not having such courses. The knowledge of Christianity is taught in accordance with the law and, in effect, becomes a history class. But it is a rather improbable history, at odds with everything else that is taught. In all other subjects, another world is taught—a world completely untouched, and unaffected by religious issues and events, since these are presumed covered in the course on Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

This is perhaps all well and good, given how the school is set up today. Young people are left to their own devices in their efforts to make sense of and gain perspective in their lives. But in the *school-society*, these themes must not be left in the shadows: they must be included, not as subjects of learning, but in the manner of life experience. Once again, we arrive at the need for *complete school-societies*, offering a life of rituals and possibilities for artistic development or to experience art.

It is important that the sad fate of Christianity studies in schools should not become a pattern. At the same time, it is crucial that we acknowledge the need for new forms of spirituality. Fredrik Barth (1961) describes how his search for religious experience led him to wander with a Persian nomadic people. He did not discover their religious practices until after he finished his book—his portrait can be found, in any case, in the book's appendix. Here, he describes how wandering itself *is* the religion of these people, how it is to depart, pack up, and set out on their journey to a distant and promised land, moving ever more quickly as they approach their destination, leaving before daybreak, making camp in the evening, and then finally the journey's climax: they arrive, they have reached the place where they will live until the

change of the season, at which point they will do it all over again in the opposite direction. Tarjei Vesaas (1934) depicts something similar in *The Great Cycle*. To a large degree, it is probably the same thing that Norwegian peasants have experienced and are experiencing, the absence of which causes city dwellers to yearn and search clumsily for *something else*.

Again, we see this yearning for something else most clearly in the more recent generations that have only experienced the current society. We see its importance in the consumption of hash as well as other and more dangerous drugs. We see it in pilgrimages toward the mysticisms of the East. We see it in the many music festivals. And we see it in small gatherings. The historian Theodore Roszak (1969, 194) provides a description that applies to many of these cases:

The tribalized young gather in gay costume on a high hill in the public park to salute the midsummer sun in its rising and setting. They dance, they sing, they make love as each feels moved, without order or plan. Perhaps the folklore of the affairs is pathetically ersatz at this point—but is the intention so foolish after all? There is the chance to express passion, to shout and stamp, to caress and play communally. All have equal access to the event; no one is misled or manipulated. Neither kingdom, nor power, nor glory is desperately at stake. Maybe, in the course of things, some ever discover in the commonplace sun and the ordinary advent of summer the inexpressible grandeur that is really there and which makes those who find it more authentically human.

Humans are not good animals. Even when they are well off and well fed, they are afflicted with restlessness and longing—states that are by all means unworthy of a technocracy. But if the schools we seek to create are to live and breathe, they must spring from and exist for these longings.

Once again, we must recognize that we, along with our schools, are works in progress. The conventional church no longer holds the power it once did. We do not need to worry about becoming entangled in its web. And even if we were to become entangled, it would probably be because the church did have something to offer after all, so it would be fine. Today, our lives have been stripped of the possibility for rituals. But again, material suffering has become so remote for us that we have the capacity to long for something more and enable others do so as well. The ninth graders brave enough to spend the entire school year staging an adaptation of Finn Carling's (1966a) play about his zoological garden—besides, of course, baking bread, taking care of the community's elderly, and participating frenetically in the political life of their school—probably did the most important and meaningful thing they could have done that year. They read the play, became absorbed with its plot, built the stage sets, hated each other's differing interpretations, and experienced themselves and one another in the characters as well as in relation to the play as a whole. And when it was all over, they had learned something that was worth knowing.

### **A USELESS SCHOOL?**

Some will hold that this would be worse than if the school were to be closed. Schools as school-societies would create useless people. But the division of subjects, vast differences in status within the school system, hectic wandering from one subject to another, external administration, and students divested of responsibility—all this contributes to the creation of the indifferent human being. Overall this indifference,

admittedly, is in accordance with the needs of society. It is *exactly* such people that society needs for the activities carried out on the assembly line or in the office, for all kinds of services. Society has no need for critical and dedicated people; everything would grind to a halt if society had too many of them. Maybe there is in fact no grand scheme behind the current system, no wish or intention to indoctrinate students in specific ways. Maybe the organization of the school arrived at its current form due to other—internal—reasons. Yet it was permitted to acquire this form because it somehow *fit*—and not just in terms of the demands for storage and stratification but also with respect to the type of human being created. Another type of school would not supply society with the type of citizens it needs. It would be doomed to failure.

I have already admitted that the chances of creating another type of school are minimal. This is, first and foremost, due to the requirements currently addressed by the schools. In important areas, a different type of school would demand or prompt other solutions—that is, a different society. Here too the chances are miniscule, chiefly due to the inner organization of schools. Differences in status would have to be equalized, and this would be a painful process. Many conflict-reducing mechanisms would be removed. The subjects that control our schools share the characteristic of being largely *harmless*—or at least that is how they are presented in schools. Subject specialists get along well as long as they experience each other and themselves as subject specialists. The physics teacher talks about physics, the Norwegian teacher talks about Norwegian, and then they talk among themselves about something else entirely during recess. They



each have their own kingdom, and the borders are secured by the weekly schedule. The only real conflict that could possibly arise would be if an especially zealous teacher assigned overly ambitious amounts of homework, calling unreasonable amounts of attention to *their* subject. With the exception of this scenario, everyone proceeds in an atmosphere of peace and tolerance. Another teacher's subject is another teacher's property; there is little reason to interfere. There is also no reason to disagree about students—in part because the teachers are a bit fed up with them, and in part because such disagreements risk exposing a teacher's difficulties with them in front their peers. Ingrid Eide (1962) identified this as an important aspect when attempting to explain the remarkable tendency among teachers to avoid conversations about students and disciplinary problems.

A different type of school would eliminate all possibilities for finding refuge in the seemingly neutral subjects. Every single day, disagreements regarding views of life that are bound to exist in both the teachers' staff room and all other rooms where people meet would be mercilessly forced out of the shadows. Subject specialists would be obliged to step aside to make room for whole human beings. Harrowing divides would appear, and conflicts would erupt. There would no longer be a divide separating teachers from students. Instead, it would appear internally among the teachers, on the one hand, and internally among the students, on the other. The school would live an arduous life.

The chances of creating a different kind of school are minimal. But how minimal?

Pretty minimal. But a number of circumstances give cause for hope.

While life in this school might be arduous, it would also be rich. The current organization of schools is neither without its costs. The teacher's life is lonely; the breach between the teacher and students comes at a price. The subjects may provide a buffer, but they also supply a barrier. A different type of school would *offer* its members a great many things—including possibilities for developing a community based on an outlook on life. Important forces in our society may also make such a shift an urgent necessity. Uselessness is constantly on the rise. The storage function of schools has become so self-evident that the need for a different school appears increasingly justified. We cannot simply proceed as usual. This will soon be clear for the majority.

An additional hope lies in the growth of the technocracy. Irrespective of the ownership of the means of production, the number of manual tasks to be done is on the decline. This will increase surplus and uselessness—but it will help shift the attention to other people and away from things too. Our fellow human beings will be all that remains for us to work on. I do not hope, however, that the school I am proposing will educate its students in the reworking of human beings. But I do hope that it will educate students in how to *be together with other people* and thereby will begin to be more acceptable. The spontaneous dissolution of the education society also instills hope. Many with knowledge become many who doubt the value of knowledge. The emperor's new clothes become more and more threadbare.

And finally, the growth of the counterculture of youths. The students attending lower secondary school are far from empty rooms. They are young individuals with strong opinions and values that have no place whatsoever in the current

school, but do have a place front and center in the school I have sought to promote. What a wonderful group of Native American students they might have been had we dared to let them assume the responsibility for creating a school where they could realize themselves and their values.

The school would not be a playground. It would not be a place for kind, cheerfully ruminating intellectuals. Not only that, at least. It would be a critical school and a space for conflict, not just harmony. This is where the protests commence. Some will be quick to say that it is impossible. Society could never tolerate such a school. I have doubts about such a critique. The word “society” denotes wholeness. Who—which person, or at least, which function—would endeavor to shut down such a good place to be and learn? Besides, many of today’s counterculturalists finished school a long time ago and would do everything they could to ensure that their children were spared experiencing the same type of education.

There can be no theoretical answer to the questions raised above. There can only be the attempt to create a different school.

This is a portion of the eBook [doi:10.7551/mitpress/12093.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12093.001.0001)  
at

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/12093.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12093.001.0001)

# **If Schools Didn't Exist**

## **A Study in the Sociology of Schools**

**By: Nils Christie**

**Edited by: Lucas Cone, Joachim Wiewiura**

### **Citation:**

*If Schools Didn't Exist: A Study in the Sociology of Schools*

**By: Nils Christie**

**Edited by: Lucas Cone, Joachim Wiewiura**

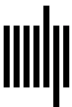
**DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/12093.001.0001**

**ISBN (electronic): 9780262358477**

**Publisher: The MIT Press**

**Published: 2020**

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from Arcadia – a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin



**The MIT Press**

This edition © 2020 Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
Originally published as *Hvis Skolen Ikke Fantes* © 1971 Universitetsforlaget

This work is subject to a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND license.

Subject to such license, all rights are reserved.



The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding from Arcadia—a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin.



This translation has been published with the financial support of NORLA.



All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher.

This book was set in ITC Stone and Avenir by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Christie, Nils, 1928-2015 author. | Cone, Lucas, translator. | Wiewiura, Joachim, translator.

Title: If schools didn't exist : a study in the sociology of schools / Nils Christie ; Translated and edited by Lucas Cone and Joachim Wiewiura ; With a foreword by Judith Suissa.

Other titles: *Hvis skolen ikke fantes*. English

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2020] | "First published in 1971"-- Title page. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019034678 | ISBN 9780262538893 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Educational sociology--Norway. | Education--Norway.

Classification: LCC LC206.N8 .C45 2020 | DDC 306.4309481--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019034678>

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1