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## A DREAM OF A SCHOOL

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We have almost reached the end. At this point, some readers will look for clarification or an overview—a summary of the book in its entirety. If so, they will be disappointed. Instead, they will find a chapter about a place I am familiar with that is located way out in the countryside.

Somewhere in Norway there is a small cluster of houses, constituting a village of sorts. Some sixty to seventy people live here—the members of seven large families. The word “family” is used here in a broader sense than is usual. Some are married and have children, and others are part of the family in the sense that they live under the same roof—the house is also theirs, they share their lives in sorrow and joy, and count on doing all this in the future. The village has a bit of industry and farming. The days are spent socializing, and the evenings are divided between amusements, games, and what we might daringly label intellectual activities—reading, listening, or perhaps putting on a play. There is a lot to be learned about the self in playing the part of someone else.

Newcomers at the dinner tables of this village are always confused. It has fallen on me to bring my students to this place on many occasions, so I know what I am talking about. We travel around together and study different forms of social life. They don't know ahead of time what they will encounter, as I have found it is better to discuss this afterward. In this particular place, we are scattered among the village's seven houses, each of which accommodate ten to twelve inhabitants in addition to their guests. A meal is prepared, and dinner is served. And all the while, those of us who are newcomers struggle to put this world into some kind of order, put people into categories, and try to figure out who is who.

We will partake in many dinners before we finally make sense of everyone—and by that time, categories will no longer be of interest. A little more than half the people at the table are individuals who officially are labeled persons with disabilities. Some have serious mental illnesses on top of this. But such disabilities are barely noticed here. They are *able* within the framework that has been created. A way of life has been established that allows them to interact with “normal” people and live in a “normal” way.

And then there is one more thing about this place worth mentioning: it is teeming with young people. Officially it is defined as a nursing home—in other words, a place that ordinarily fights a desperate losing battle to make its residents stay there of their own free will. But at Vidaråsen, which is the name of the place, the problem is exactly the opposite: there are so many young people who wish to live there that the ordinary resident must be protected from not feeling alienated in their own home. Last summer this amounted to

between twenty and thirty young people in addition to the usual residents who came to stay, work, and live there.

Because of the abundance of impulses, the inevitable came to pass: the community began to organize itself, and there were activities all hours of the day and night. Then a school emerged, as if of its own accord. It emerged in the evenings, of course. The word "school" means leisure in Greek.<sup>1</sup>

From the perspective of an outsider, it appeared that something else was happening too. In our current type of society, the people of most critical importance to this story are born into an impoverished life, destined to become a burden and embarrassment. But in the village-society described here, they become key players in the creation of a new whole. Their unusual constitutions impose unique requirements on the external environment. In order to function as ordinary residents, they must live in a social system characterized by what I have termed "community-mindedness." And lo and behold: if we succeed in establishing communities that are beneficial for "special" people, these communities will also be so good for everyone else that the latter will line up in droves for the chance to join them. The "special" person functions best within a type of society that others find attractive too. Around him or her, the good society can grow.<sup>2</sup>

The good school could perhaps also be a model, an innovator. Its community-mindedness would be groundbreaking and engender new structures. This school beyond the present school would be located perhaps in the neighborhood where children and adults would meet in cooperation and leisure—that is, in school. It would be a place where we would share the work in the same manner as our time for leisure. It would be a society in which we would use our inordinate prosperity

to reflect on how we want our lives to be, free from oppression, free to direct our society in relation to values that our schools had demonstrated were worthy of realization.

My dream of a school is a dream of a society that has learned so much from its schools that the very notion of school for children and young people is defunct, has become superfluous, has become a part of life itself. It is a mode of existence in which the community-minded nature of schools has permeated our local communities in such a way that these communities have opened up to life and will no longer need special schemes to store their children somewhere separate from the society of which they are a part. The need for learning and maintenance of our shared cultural heritage will remain. But it will be a form of learning that arises in response to the actual experiences and desires of those seeking it, not stipulated by mandates on reaching a certain age.

My dream of a school is a dream of a society providing exactly the same thing as a good school would do. This can be nothing but a good 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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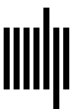
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