

Compulsory Education

Written by Vishal Wilde.

Everyone loves learning. The thing is that not everyone likes studying and what's even more frustrating is to be told how we should study, why we should study etc. Making education available to everyone is benevolent but making education compulsory for everyone is something that we are so used to that we do not see the blatant problem with it – the deprivation of freedom that prevents the flourishing of precisely those who have the most potential in society; children. Indeed, this same deprivation goes on to inhibit and discriminate against individuals whilst constraining the development of civilisation and ever higher forms of humanity. It also ultimately serves to reinforce entrenched, socioeconomic inequalities and injustices that we have become accustomed to and have come to associate with the prevailing paradigm. Children, when you think carefully about it, are the most oppressed class across all human societies.

We sometimes only see the value of things once we have gone through them. Some of our experiences as children may never have occurred without the guidance of parents, loved ones, or other influential members of the community. There is, however, an important distinction between gentle guidance and legal coercion. Imagine if we made undergraduate degrees, master's degrees and doctorates compulsory. This would, likely and justifiably, result in public outrage due to the deprivation of liberty involved.

When children are forced to go to school, we do not listen to their outcries since they are unable to argue comprehensively against the injustice of the situation. Certainly, there are children who enjoy going to school and who do not protest but what about those who neither enjoy it nor want it? What about those who have genuine passions and interests outside of the syllabus and classroom? The crude manner in which we are systematically organised according to our “ability” or “academic potential” from an early age is hardly representative. Within each “ability” set, there is still a wide spectrum of potential with respect to the taught material and there is, therefore, an oft-documented tendency for some to feel bored and disinterested and for some to be “left behind.”

One way to tackle this problem is to reduce class sizes and this can be done through making education voluntary whilst *still allowing* people to attend the classes *that they want to*, in order to attain the skills and knowledge that they themselves think would be useful. For example, if a child realises that they'd like to learn how a computer works, they will quickly realise that in order to effectively learn about this (like many other things), they will need to become numerate and literate. Therefore they will, more naturally, come to appreciate the value of numeracy and literacy and, most likely, expend more effort in attaining the necessary level of proficiency in these skills as a means to their final end(s).

Furthermore, the way in which various subjects are taught in school is essentially a form of paradigmatic, scientific indoctrination. Yes, teachers are taught to be unbiased and impassionate when teaching subjects such as History, Economics, etc. but this does not prevent the syllabus itself from being biased toward a particular methodology, ideology, interpretation or analysis. Thomas Kuhn (1962) argued in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that sciences such as Physics, Chemistry and Biology are taught as if they had progressed in a linear fashion and the History of Science is completely misrepresented to students from a very early age. The education system is the method by which we are trained to think dogmatically under the rules of a specific paradigm rather than rationally and independently whilst being aware of the prevailing rules of the paradigm. Ultimately, this stifles the speed of articulation and shifting of these paradigms. The representation of 'scientific' knowledge that many are so quick to praise because of the rapid development it has enabled will also, in future, be deemed the dogma of our era, whose limitations were self-imposed, unnecessarily prolonged and continuously reinforced by means of compulsory education.

However, what would children do if they were not forced into education? Play? Work? Whatever they want? All of these might seem like horrifying propositions to some but this is because we have been conditioned to believe that education means being up to the standard of certain bureaucratically-determined metrics, sitting in a classroom, being passively taught and raking in the qualifications that correlate with higher earnings. Making education voluntary does not mean that people would not learn, it would just mean that *people would, from a young age, be empowered to learn how they learn best* rather than be shoehorned into a one-size-fits-all educational model. They would have a more holistic understanding of what constitutes an education and this would enable them to think more creatively with less regard to the standards currently imposed by civilisation.

What about those children who do not feel motivated to advance scientific knowledge and are, rather, interested in pursuing labour opportunities? After all, not everyone is interested in working at the so-called frontiers of knowledge. The phrase "child labour" rightly appalls people because it conjures imagery of children working in horrific, mind-numbing and often life-threatening conditions. I'm certainly not advocating that children should be sent up chimneys or work with dangerous, heavy machinery once more, but I am saying that children should be allowed to work in jobs that they feel they might gain some valuable experience from. For example, if a child who has taken a particular interest in computer programming was allowed to do some coding jobs for a software developer, would it not be wrong to disallow them from doing so? Coding is not life-threatening, it pays well, the child might love it and, indeed, the child may be able to think in ways that adults cannot (resulting in their potentially being far more suited to the job than any adult).

Similarly, if a child has a passion for art and he wants to work as an assistant or apprentice

in an artist's studio (and thereby learn according to their passions), why on earth should we deny him the opportunity and instead force them to go to a classroom to learn the things the State (or anyone else, for that matter) thinks he *ought* to learn? One of the arguments put forward is that children need to go to school in order to be economically productive in society and work well within it. However, if they find that they don't need to go to school to do this or that only certain classes taught within school are worth attending to attain this end, then education cannot be made compulsory. In fact, studies, life experience and even common sense repeatedly reveal to us that much of what we are taught in formal education turns out to be of very limited use in the interests we choose to develop in future. Rather more worryingly, the prevailing institutions seem to privilege education as a means to economic productivity over all else rather than education for the sake of education or as a means to other ends; thus, education as it is currently sold to the general public is used as a means to perpetuate the current socioeconomic paradigm and, thereby, its associated injustices, rather than seen as a means to alleviate those very same ills, articulate that paradigm and/or ultimately replace it with something more conducive to the aforementioned development of civilisation and higher forms of humanity.

The gendered differences in educational attainment (such as girls outperforming boys) and in pathways (such as boys being over-represented in mathematics, engineering and the sciences versus girls who are over-represented in the arts and humanities) may also possibly be (at least partially) addressed when individuals are able to express their passion for a subject in their own way rather than being subjected to formal institutional impositions, stereotypes, and expectations that may not be so pronounced when individuals are able to choose how they would like to be educated.

Indeed, we may encounter far more passionate teachers outside of the classroom than within it. By making education voluntary, children would be able to pick and choose their teachers and they would naturally gravitate towards those who complement their personalities and this would, in turn, naturally foster passion for their interests.

The gist of many of the arguments for compulsory education is as follows: since we went through it and it has done something good for us, they should go through it as well. This argument is overly broad in that it considers the entire compulsory educational experience as a whole without examining its individual components. Not even the most stalwart defender of his or her compulsory educational experience would argue that it was not tainted with at least some negative aspects.

What about those negative life experiences that we should not wish to repeat? Should children be rammed through those as well? Compulsory education advocates should consider some of the horrendous eras in modern history (Mao's Great Leap Forward, Gulags in the Soviet Union, Hitler's Third Reich etc.). Although we may concede that some good things came out of those eras, those good things are quite independent of their

larger, statist, coercive infrastructures. We would certainly not wish for them to be repeated again for the sake of experience.

The three aforementioned examples are not meant as hyperbole. Mao thought that his reforms would do good for China, Hitler suppressed and slaughtered entire peoples because he thought the world would be better off without them and Stalin thought that imprisonment and forced labour was the optimal way to deal with political dissidence. None of them, however, were right in their thinking since they essentially suppressed freedom and, as a result, this suppression resulted in suffering and evil on unprecedented scales. There are many children who love going to school and get a lot out of it but, again, what about those who don't? When those children who love reading their fantasy stories, learning about dinosaurs, ancient civilisations etc. get told to put down their books, lay aside their passion and listen to *what must be taught*, their thoughts are suppressed. Their "education" becomes the slow-slaughter of the people they could be. It becomes forced labour as punishment for intellectual dissidence.

Of course, we don't see this when the child cries not to go to school because they would rather do something that we perceive as unproductive. "But how will they learn the skills necessary for economic independence from their parents? How will they learn to be good, functioning members of society if they do not go to school with their peers?" Isn't there more than one way to learn from and interact within society? Do we really want to indoctrinate and condition individuals from a young age with the conception that what really matters is how much income they earn from their education? Should education be viewed *purely* as a *financial* investment?

Perhaps, in future (depending on the road we choose to take), we might one day look back at this period in time where there had been compulsory schooling, compare it once again to preceding periods where such educational systems were not compulsory and then realise that just because there were problematic aspects with previous periods (such as inequality in educational opportunities), this does not mean that the answer is to enforce and impose upon others a particular system of values that actually serves to reinforce entrenched socioeconomic inequalities despite its good intentions.

Surely by telling children what they must learn and what is best for them without allowing them to properly and holistically think for themselves from a young age we are preventing them from thinking independently about how best to tackle the world – it is, after all, independent thought that is the necessary precursor for all other forms of independence (such as, but not limited to, the financial variety) and a vital ingredient for advancing civilisation.

In a free society, when children leave the classroom to embark on their own personal journey of learning, a high proportion of those who remain in the classroom will see value

in the taught syllabus, for one reason or another. This leaves together those who see value in what they are doing and the mutually shared interests of the class will enable all of them to collectively cover more ground and explore deeper questions. Incidentally, the ideal world of voluntary education would also be voluntarily funded but, while we're stuck with the taxpayer-funded model, voluntary education will at least reduce the taxpayer's overall expense, all else being equal.

Even though life expectancy has increased over the centuries, this does not give the State (or any other person, for that matter) the right to encroach upon and dictate what we do with our time. Parents might say "but they are *my children*, I need to guide them" and no-one would deny them the opportunity to guide their children but you should never forget that though you might think of them as *your* children, their lives will never be *your* lives. This logic relates directly back to legally enforced private property rights which has historically extended not only to material possessions but also to peoples' entitlement to one another – think, for example, of slavery, of historically legal 'ownership' of women's bodies, of even the current entitlement that many feel towards others' bodies, and of viewing otherwise autonomous persons as your private property to do with as you please. Obviously, the vast majority of parents do not think of children as their private property but it is implicitly assumed in legal, political and social discourse that this is the case and this is deeply (though not often obviously or apparently) problematic.

Many anarchists would argue that current education policy reinforces social control, imposed political socialisation and the perpetuation of existing inequalities (economic, political and social). It inhibits the generation and dissemination of ideas (which are necessary for social progress), it limits the development of alternative education systems, environments and so on that are tailored to the needs of individuals and these limitations, therefore, will ultimately inhibit society. Indeed, the scope for self-education, for those who have the potential to be prolific autodidacts, are severely stifled due to the emphasis on rigid, regulated and heavily institutionalised schooling.

Specifically, William Godwin said of the state and state-sponsored education: that it does not fail "to employ it to strengthen its hands, and perpetuate its institutions" even if that is not the explicit, stated intention of policymakers. This ultimately feeds back into inhibiting the innovation of governance structures. Emma Goldman makes an important analogy when she argues that "the school of today, no matter whether public, private, or parochial... is for the child what the prison is for the convict and the barracks for the soldier – a place where everything is being used to break the will of the child, and then to pound, knead and shape it into a being utterly foreign to itself."; this, I believe resonates with my aforementioned comparison of compulsory education with the brutality of totalitarian regimes in modern history. Of course, I don't believe that most educators are aware of these deeply problematic aspects of compulsory education but, nevertheless, there is no

use in sugar-coating the facts.

Ivan Illich further contends that, in the modern context, much of the useful education that people acquire results from work or leisure that is aside from or in addition to their regular schooling (especially since they are more motivated to learn according to their interests and passions). Restraining these innate interests, passions, talents, skills and abilities is what regulated education does and, furthermore, when the child does not perform to the arbitrarily imposed standards of contemporary schooling, this feeds back into the youth's perception of their ability more generally and, therefore, either stunts or even wholly prevents their development in fields that they may have otherwise flourished in were they simply given the *choice*. Illich claims that only through unregulated and unrestricted *learning* (which is not always effectively done through formal schooling) can the individual develop their creativity to its fullest extent. Illich felt that the goals of alternative education systems should be "to provide access to available resources to all who want to learn: to empower all who want to share what they know; to find those who want to learn it from them; to furnish all who want to present an issue to the public with an opportunity to make their challenges known..."

Our current system privileges for-profit providers and crowds out non-profit motivated educators whilst discouraging learners from experimenting with alternative education systems, developing their faculties and pursuing their passions. One might argue that the state is supposed to be a non-profit provider but the issue here is that the forceful redistribution of resources required for state-funded and state-provided education means that it is often done so not with monetary profit in mind but with the possibility of improving prospects of re-election, approval of policy, public support and popularity (for example) – indeed, there are many non-pecuniary benefits for the powers that be to provide and forcefully impose educational systems.

This system is in dire need of reform, though it is often overlooked because we too have been indoctrinated and convinced of the overwhelming benefits of it whilst being turned away from the potential benefits of the alternatives. We do not question adults when they choose to take gap years, sabbaticals and other such breaks but we apply some arbitrary social, biological and psychological standards if a child even expresses interest in pursuing their own interests.

The distinction between schooling and education must be emphasised in policy and society more emphatically if we hope to make a tangible impact. Ultimately, it's a long and difficult road that lies ahead for anyone who would like to convince people of the merits of making education optional due to our being confronted with problematic (often negative) preconceptions and reasoning that is not grounded in the primacy of freedom in principle. Nevertheless, it is worth laying the ground work for it so that it can, one day, be considered a serious policy option in a very different world.

The government continuously inhibits children's' development, albeit with good intentions. By all means, make education more available, but make it optional. Compulsory education tramples upon that most powerful, cherished and important civil liberty – freedom of thought – and prevents children achieving their fullest potential whilst simultaneously undermining the foundations of a truly flourishing, free society.

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