

Irish dramatist and critic George Bernard Shaw was an active Socialist who often wrote about moral, political, and economic issues. A severe critic of secondary education, he argued that school should be purely voluntary and conducted only by charitable organizations.

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What Is Wrong With Our System of Education?

by George Bernard Shaw

This question unconsciously begs another question, which is, whether our school system is really a system of education at all.

I have alleged, and do still allege, that it is not a system of education but a cloak for something else. And that something else is the sequestration and imprisonment of children so as to prevent them being a continual nuisance to their parents.

That children and adults cannot live together comfortably is a simple fact of nature which must be faced before any discussion of their treatment can advance beyond the present stage of sentimental twaddle.

The blood relationship does not matter: if I have to do my work amid noise and disorder, and break it off repeatedly to console the yelling victim of a broken shin or to act as judge, jury, and executioner in a case of assault with violence; if I have to be at call continually as a dictionary and encyclopedia for an insatiably curious little questioner to whom everything else in the visible universe requires an immediate explanation; if I cannot discuss the Billing case with an adult friend because there is always a small chaperone within earshot; if I have to talk down to the level of a child's intelligence, and incidentally to humbug it in the interest of my own peace and quietness, for hours every day; if I have to choose between spending my time either answering the question "May we do this?" or shrieking "Don't dare do that"; if I have to be medical officer of health, wardrobe mistress, sanitary inspector, surgeon for minor operations, fountain of justice and general earthly providence for a houseful of children, the effect on my career is the same whether the children are the issue of my own body or of my neighbor's: that is, I shall be so interrupted and molested and hindered and hampered in any business, profession, or adult interest, artistic, philosophic, or intellectual, which I may be naturally qualified to pursue, that I shall have to choose between being a mere domestic convenience and getting rid of my children somehow.

Under these circumstances a modern humane parent who can afford it always does get rid of the children by handing them over in their infancy to servants and later on to schoolmasters. The humane parents who cannot afford it let their children run wild. I insist on the word

humane because there is a third alternative open to inhuman people.

By simple cruelty they can tame their children to sit still and ask no questions, to make no noise, not to tear their clothes, not to speak until they are spoken to, to be instantly obedient, and to take extraordinary pains to keep their misdeeds concealed (mostly by lying) from their elders.

Many people are so constituted that an occasional exercise in breaking a child's will, punishing it, and seeing it flinch and scream under the rod or go pale with terror, is pleasurable to them. But this is bad for the child.

Any dog trainer will testify that a spaniel can be spoiled for life by a single of terrorization; and many human beings have been spoiled in this way. It is no doubt desirable that little boys and girls should have sufficient self-control to sit quietly throughout a suitably short religious service once a week, or to hold their breath whilst swimming under water across a bath; but for most of their time they should be as noisy as nightingales, as restless as squirrels, as curious as monkeys, and quite indifferent to the tidiness of their hair, the integrity of their clothes, or the scrupulous cleanliness of their persons.

The humane parent knows this and puts up with it when the children are about; but that is precisely why humane parents are the first to get rid of their children under pretence of "sending them to be educated."

The schoolmaster is the person who takes the children off the parents' hands for a consideration. That is to say, he establishes a child prison, engages a number of employee schoolmasters as turnkeys, and covers up the essential cruelty and unnaturalness of the situation by torturing the children if they do not learn, and calling this process, which is within the capacity of any fool or blackguard, by the sacred name of Teaching.

That is what is wrong with our so-called educational system. Every genuine teacher knows it. Every person who understands children and sympathizes with them, like Dr. Montessori, knows it. Everyone who, like the wife of the Master Builder in Ibsen's play, has a genius for fostering the souls of little children, knows it. But I am the only person who ever mentions it; and not one of those who have pretended to discuss my views has ever dared to allude to it.

When I tell the story of my friend who, in a hasty fit of sympathy with a beaten child, punched the head of an elementary schoolmaster, and was fined two pounds and informed that he would have been fined six if he had hit a gentleman, elementary schoolmasters, against whose scandalous underpayment I have always protested, rage at me for disparaging their gentility (as if the valuation had been made by me); but they have never squarely faced the fact that the wages and the social standing of the skilled and earnest teacher of genuine vocation is kept down by the competition of the fellow who, because he can lock a school gate and hurt a child with a cane, can therefore do all that the children's parents pay for. Such an unskilled ruffian can always depend on the parents supporting him in any further pretensions he may make; for do they not owe to him the quietude and freedom of their lives?

The result is that when war emergencies subject the so-called education of our governing classes to a stringent practical test, we discover that their ignorance costs millions of money and thousands of lives, and is quite staggering to the two classes who have to save the situation: namely, the self-educated and the truants.

By the self-educated I mean those who have taken advantage of the voluntary associations, the Summer Schools, the professional societies, the propagandist organizations which continually keep up a supply of lectures and controversial discussions under free conditions, and also of the access to literature and art and music provided by our libraries, galleries, concerts, theatres, and the like.

If every secondary school and university in the kingdom were wiped out by an air raid tomorrow, and their staffs buried amid the ill-concealed exultation of their unfortunate pupils, thereby throwing our young people on the agencies I have just named, there would be an immediate and enormous increase in the number of really educated persons in England, and a quite blessed disappearance of a mass of corruptly inculcated error and obsolescence, and of that intense hatred of intellectual and artistic culture which exists today among our public schools and university graduates because it is known to them only as an excuse for loathsome prison tasks.

When young people are as free to walk out of a classroom where they are bored by a dull teacher as grown-up people are to walk out of a theatre where they are bored by a dull playwright, the schools will be far more crowded than the theatres, and the teachers far more popular than the actors. Until then we shall remain the barbarians we are at present.

Formerly, when games were forbidden in schools, and children were expected to study Latin for twelve hours a day, the children were keen on games and fighting.

Now that games have been made compulsory school subjects, boys will soon hate athletics and fighting as they now hate "English literature," and their country will be gathered like a daisy by the first vigorous nation that ventures to cultivate its wits and its muscles in freedom.

For my part, I thank my stars every day that as the German "system of education" differs from ours only in being more thoroughly carried out, and much more sincerely believed in, we may win the war by virtue of being less "educated" than our chief antagonist.