

What Are Schools For? Alternative Philosophies of Education

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Thank you for inviting me to your country to participate in this important and exciting discussion. It is a great honor for me. Before I speak to you about my understanding of alternative education, I think it is very important to acknowledge that my cultural identity, which has shaped my worldview including my educational thinking, is very much outside the context of Turkish history, religion and culture. What I am going to talk about today may be relevant to your concerns in some ways, but may be very foreign and irrelevant in others. I would welcome any opportunity to discuss these ideas with you, to explore together which of them address your cultural realities and which do not. It is not my purpose here to proclaim universal “truths” that you should accept, for such proclamations have too often been the basis for the kind of cultural imperialism that I certainly do not intend to practice. While there do seem to be some well-established basic principles of human development, and while we can identify an emerging global civilization that shapes schooling in similar ways in both our countries, I want to emphasize that authentic education, what I call “holistic” education, celebrates the diversity of human possibilities and therefore aims to respond to the specific historical and social contexts in which people live. I encourage Turkish educators to be critical and selective in adopting educational ideals: be true to your own history and culture, to the needs of your society and your people. With this consideration in mind, let me now talk about educational alternatives as I have come to understand them.

First, why do we call various types of innovative or progressive schools “alternative”? The word “alternative” means a choice, an option, that is substantially different from the common or prevailing practice. Exactly which ideas or institutions do alternative educators want to replace? When we look closely at the social/historical context of conventional education, we see that what goes on in a typical school reflects the cultural, political and economic characteristics of *modernity*. By “modernity” I mean

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a cluster of ideas, beliefs, technologies and institutions that emerged with the rise of corporate capitalism and nationalism in the early nineteenth century and became solidly established in the Western world during the early twentieth century. Modernity is a culture, a worldview, a way of establishing what a society should value and strive for. According to various cultural historians whose work has influenced my thinking, modernity essentially views society as a great *machine* that needs to be managed by expert technicians, a machine whose purpose is to turn natural and human "resources" into commodities and profits. Based on this view, modernity emphasizes rapid progress and growth over tradition and stability. It places a higher value on material wealth than on spiritual richness. It promotes private success over communal responsibility. And it strives for technological mastery rather than respect for the organic processes of nature.

This modern worldview replaces local, traditional, earth-rooted cultures with an abstract national identity that in recent years has been further abstracted by globalization. Human relationships become "abstract" when they are conditioned by distant impersonal forces, such as the so-called free market or the mass media, or by huge institutions like powerful governments or corporations. We can see the history of schooling in the West over the past two centuries as the triumph of abstraction and bureaucratic management over local, communal, and organic ways of living and learning. Public schooling was conceived as a form of social discipline that would enable the industrial state to harness the energies of the young generation to the demands of a competitive system of production serving the interests of a national state. For example, corporate industrialism became an increasingly powerful force in American culture after the 1860s, and its emphasis on expert management was deliberately applied to schooling by policymakers who sought what they called "social efficiency." One of the leading historians of American education, David Tyack, demonstrated in his classic study *The One Best System* that school leaders in the late nineteenth century believed that "obedience to bureaucratic norms" was essential to industrial development and social progress, and so "they tried to create new controls over pupils, teachers, principals, and other subordinate members of the school hierarchy."

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They succeeded. Consequently, public education as it developed in the twentieth century became a mechanized process of inducting young people into the culture of modernity. By "mechanized" I literally mean machine-like; a mechanized society or educational system is carefully managed and controlled by a central authority, so that it operates efficiently, smoothly and predictably. In such a system, the personalities of individuals, their unique desires and aspirations, are made subservient to fixed standards and pre-established roles. During the past twenty-five years, education has become ever more standardized, ever more mechanical, as it serves a political and economic agenda of competition, production, and corporate profit. Young people in the present system are not perceived as growing, active human beings who seek meaningful connection to their community, society, and natural world, or to the realm of the spirit, but as units of production whose academic achievements contain primarily economic value. Today, even first graders--six year old children--are rigorously tested to ensure that they fit into the system, while those who resist mechanistic discipline are sedated with powerful drugs. In some schools in the U.S., young children no longer enjoy recess—time to play and relax during the school day—because this is perceived as unproductive and inefficient.

Something vital in our humanity is lost when organic functioning, such as the young child's need to play, is replaced by abstract efficiency. Something vital is lost when personal relationships and the unique qualities of individuals are overwhelmed by standardization, mechanization, and hierarchical control. The essence of alternative educational philosophies is their insistence that we recognize the vital human qualities that have been sacrificed on the altar of modernity, and that we strive to place our essential humanity at the heart of teaching and learning. There are various styles and methods of pedagogy that can be called "alternative," but what they hold in common—that which makes them truly alternative—is that they begin with a genuine, passionate concern for the essential nature of the human being (as this is expressed through diverse cultural forms), rather than with an abstract program of managing or controlling human energies in the service of a vast, impersonal, mechanistic system.

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Let me briefly review the philosophical history of alternative education in Europe and the U.S. During the early years of modern schooling nearly two centuries ago, humanist educators such as Johann Pestalozzi in Switzerland, Friedrich Froebel in Germany, and Bronson Alcott in the U.S. resisted the rising impulse to mechanize learning and instead practiced pedagogies based on authentic, caring relationships, freedom of inquiry, and the innate human quest for meaning and purpose. In the early twentieth century, educators such as Maria Montessori in Italy, Rudolf Steiner in central Europe, Celestin Freinet in France, and John Dewey in the U.S. developed sophisticated approaches to teaching and learning—all very different from each other, but all based on deep respect for the organic growth process of the young human being. After World War Two, educators in the Italian city of Reggio Emilia, led by Loris Malaguzzi, wove many of these ideas into a model of early childhood education that has inspired numerous schools in many parts of the world. Meanwhile, libertarian (anarchist) thinkers, such as the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, a Spanish radical educator named Francisco Ferrer, and the British educator A.S. Neill, insisted that *freedom* is the essential element of genuine learning; this idea was particularly expressed in the anarchist “modern school” movement of the early twentieth century and the countercultural “free school” movement of the 1960s. In the 1970s, inspired by the writings of Ivan Illich and John Holt, a new movement, called “homeschooling” or “unschooling,” began to attract thousands of families, especially in the U.S., Canada, and Great Britain, who came to believe that authentic community and meaningful learning simply could not occur within the formal and artificial institutions of schools.

There are also educational alternatives rooted in spiritual or religious teachings. One example that comes to mind are schools founded by the Quakers—a small but influential group of liberal Christians—that place a strong emphasis on equality, justice, and personal discovery of truth. Other examples are schools based on the teachings of certain yoga masters from India, or schools founded by the respected Indian philosopher Krishnamurti. For such alternatives, an education rooted in spirituality does *not* mean indoctrination into a specific religious sect; rather, it means that the teaching process holds a deep respect for the mysterious, unseen potentials within the soul of each child,

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and aims to cultivate the basic goodness, intelligence, compassion and love that are believed to exist at the very core of our human identity. Whether or not we call the source of this goodness “God” or “Allah” or some other identifiable Being, when an educational approach is concerned with spirituality, it holds a deep reverence for students and seeks to nourish what is highest, most sacred, in the human soul. Instead of standards and efficiency and management, such an education is concerned with compassion, kindness, service, respect, community, and above all love. It is difficult to fully practice this kind of education in a modernistic culture. It is also difficult to explain such spirituality outside of conventional religious understandings. In the U.S., these kinds of educational alternatives tend to arouse suspicion among conservative Christian believers; I wonder how such ideas would be received in the Islamic world. This is something I hope to discuss with you here.

Around 1980, a perspective known as “holistic” education began to explore the common foundational elements of these different strands of radical educational thought. Holism is a worldview that tries to understand the interconnections and relationships among all phenomena in the cosmos. Rather than solving isolated problems, pursuing narrow goals, or holding to rigid ideologies, a holistic perspective looks at the larger contexts that give meaning to any situation. From a holistic point of view, the human being is not merely a worker or manager in the economic system, and not merely a citizen of the state. The human being is a marvelously complex organism engaged in many layers of meaning, many connections to the living world. So a holistic education is concerned with more than vocational training or moral discipline or intellectual development; it aims to cultivate the emotional and spiritual life of the growing human being, and to deepen the young person’s awareness of his or her place in nature, as a member of the “biotic community” of all living beings. With such complexity, we must be able to accept the paradoxes and tensions of human existence. So, a holistic education is concerned with freedom *and* community, with practical intelligence *and* intuitive insight, with moral and cultural traditions that keep us grounded *and* the unknown possibilities and new visions that arise from some mysterious source within us. Above all, a holistic approach to education calls upon us to respond sensitively, with our nimble

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minds *and* our feeling hearts, to the authentic needs of our students, our community, and our world as we can best identify these needs in a particular time and place.

Whenever I write about educational alternatives or speak to groups such as this, I try to make the point that no single method of teaching, no single model of school or non-school is the best or correct one. Because I am a holistic thinker, I strive to view educational alternatives in the context of psychological, social, historical, political, cultural, ecological and, to the humble extent I can, spiritual realities. So, for example, when an anarchist declares that individual freedom is the single most important element to consider in educating young people, I am likely to respond that while more freedom is indeed greatly needed in modern education, we must not ignore the natural limitations on personal freedom: The individual is, necessarily, shaped to some extent by history and culture, and humanity does live within ecological limits, as modern civilization is just beginning to realize; the earth cannot support our wish for complete freedom to satisfy our desires. Moreover, deeply spiritual people, such as the American Christian mystic Thomas Merton, have suggested that the surface of the personality, comprised of the roles we take on in relation to family, society, and the mass media, is a “false” self and we need to learn to be skeptical of its whims and desires; we must instead cultivate the deeper dimensions of ourselves, and this requires discipline—a measure of self-restraint and self-sacrifice. A paradox: We achieve spiritual freedom by relinquishing some of what, on the surface, feels like our personal freedom. So I would ask the anarchist, the radical unschooler, whether a totally free, self-guided person (if there is such a person) can respond intelligently or compassionately to the complex challenges and demands of our deeply troubled world.

But on the other hand, when I am discussing a more structured and teacher-guided alternative such as Rudolf Steiner’s Waldorf approach, I want to know why every student in such a school must follow the established curriculum and cannot have more freedom to pursue inquiry into questions of genuine personal interest. How can one curriculum, even one as creative and psychologically insightful as Steiner’s, fully address the personal experiences and individual destiny of every child in the classroom? I have great respect for Steiner education, just as I do for free schoolers and homeschoolers and Montessori

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educators and nearly all the other alternatives, because it takes great vision and courage to challenge the modernist worldview that shapes dominant educational beliefs and practices. Defying the oppressive monoculture of modern schooling, we need to explore the many different facets of human development and discover how we can nourish the fullness of our humanness. We have important things to learn from all these alternatives. My point is that we must be careful not to become obsessed with any one of them to the exclusion of others. Why not? Because the world is complex and dynamic, not simple or static. Holism is informed by the work of leading edge scientists in fields such as quantum physics, chaos theory, systems theory, autopoiesis (self-organization), and theories of dissipative structures and morphogenetic fields, among others; these scientists strongly emphasize the *emergent* nature of reality. Our lives, and our civilization, are engaged in a grand process of cosmic evolution, and therefore we need to be alert and open minded in order to respond to new structures, new meanings, new manifestations of reality. I believe that the creative forces emerging in the human spirit promise a more hopeful future. If we want to support the further evolution of consciousness and civilization, we need to pay careful attention to these forces, and integrate them into our social and educational practices.

From a holistic perspective, it is the dynamic interplay between freedom and structure that best educates a young person as he or she grows into this evolving world. If education is a response to a dynamic world, to the dynamic process of growth, discovery, evolution, and development, then teaching methods must not be rigidly fixed or prescribed. Education itself must become dynamic, spontaneous, self-organizing and emergent. I believe that at its best, this is what “alternative” education strives to be.

As long as the culture of modernity dominates the world, educators who attempt to nourish the most sacred and creative aspects of our humanity will be considered “alternative” educators. Schools that emphasize human relationships, a caring community of learners, and sensitive responsiveness to the emergent personalities of young people will exist on the margins of society, often struggling to survive. The fundamental question, as I asked in the title of my first book 15 years ago, is *what are schools for?* The modern world, the world of global corporations, technocratic management, social

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efficiency and the ominous power of the national state, gives one answer to this question, and alternative educators propose a radically different answer. Ask this question of yourselves. Ask your colleagues in the university and in the schools. Ask parents of the students in your classrooms, and the young people as well. Ask those who determine educational policies for your country. *What are schools for?* And then look deeply within your heart and wonder, *what could schools be for*, if we truly wished to cultivate the sacred creative spirit that guides the evolution of humanity?