Book Reviews

INSTEAD OF EDUCATION: Ways to Help People Do Things Better
by John Holt
Dutton, 1976, $8.95
Reviewed by Kim Marshall

John Holt is a changed man from his days as a school reformer and since the immense popularity of his first book, *How Children Fail*. Now, after a gradual evolution of his thinking through several other books, Holt has been metamorphized into a deschooler; he's opposed, for philosophical and practical reasons, to all compulsory schools.

No good, meaningful learning can take place in situations where learners are forced to learn what teachers decide they should learn, says Holt. Unless learners ask their own questions and decide their own curriculum, their education will be invalid and irrelevant to their lives. Compulsory learning in compulsory school is, he writes, "a crime against the human mind and spirit."

In practical terms, Holt thinks that it's impossible to change schools into decent learning environments. Citing the failures of many of the exciting reforms of the '60s and the current swing back to basics as proof that the schools are impervious to change from within, he tells well-intentioned teachers that the most they can do for the next generation is to try to make things a little less painful for their students until compulsory schools whither away.

But how can millions of kids be taught without schools and compulsory attendance laws? Holt's new book is filled with specifics about what he has in mind. He sees kids as autonomous, curious people who naturally seek out the knowledge and skills they need to survive and grow. This is why he sees compulsory education as such an atrocity—he believes that kids can do better on their own. Everyone who knows something useful can be a teacher, he says, and everyone who wants to learn, a student.

A number of well-written anecdotes about spontaneous learning encounters—how Holt taught a supposedly tone-deaf friend to sing, how he taught himself to play the cello by watching and listening to the masters—are included, along with descriptions of voluntary learning centers that offer courses in everything from electronics to bicycle repair. Holt is at pains to emphasize the difference between these voluntary schools and compulsory schools. In the former, students freely choose whether to learn what's offered, and enter into a kind of contract with the teacher as virtual equals.

Although he personally prefers open teaching methods, Holt insists that teachers in these freely chosen learning situations can use highly structured methods and still maintain their integrity because students freely chose them in the first place. If the students really want to learn what is being taught, the teacher can use the methods he thinks will be most effective. Holt cites the strict methods of teaching a foreign language in Ivan Illich's school in Mexico.

On the other hand, in a compulsory school where students have not chosen to be, even the most open and humane and individualized teaching methods won't help. Education under these circumstances is still an atrocity, Holt believes; even the best-intentioned and most talented teachers have limited success here and are basically wasting their time.

Holt looks forward to the gradual supplanting of compulsory schools by voluntary learning centers and countless spontaneous teaching acts as more and more kids desert the sinking ship of compulsory schooling. He foresees a much wider sharing of knowledge and skills: printing presses made available to anyone who has ideas to share, more *Whole Earth Catalogs* to bring "experts" and learners closer together, mini-libraries in every neighborhood, reading tutors to help and encourage younger kids with their reading when they are ready to learn. People would "learn about the world from living in it, working in it, and changing it, and from knowing a wide variety of people who were doing the same." It sounds great, doesn't it?

It's certainly refreshing to read Holt's advocacy of voluntary learning. But what would happen if informal, voluntary learning completely replaced conventional schools? Does every person, let alone every child, know in advance what he or she wants to learn, or do we all discover new interests as we bump against various obstacles and opportunities in our life course? Are schools always limiting and frustrating influences in people's lives, or do they sometimes (perhaps unintentionally) open new horizons by leading kids (often unwillingly) through a wide range of experiences and materials? Can every person shape every act of learning based on his or her own free will, as Holt seems to want, or is life a more existential drama involving countless incidents over which we have little or no control?

Even if Holt's writing could bring about a complete deschooling of America, there are serious questions about the social impact this would have. He blames the schools for helping the rich stay rich, but doesn't deal with the question of whether there would be even more inequality without compulsory schools. He blames the schools for turning out people all too willing to obey authority, but doesn't contemplate the possibility of a worse tyranny from parents, police and peers in a truly deschooled society. He accuses schools of not involving kids in *doing* things, but doesn't deal with the very real possibility that millions of kids out of school would become vegetables in front of their TVs.

Holt's call for all kids to tune in to themselves as doer/learners and drop out of compulsory schools is only defensible, it seems to me, if it would lead to real opportunity for everyone. In fact, the opportunity would probably be taken up by a select few, those who already had certain advantages, and this would ensure inequality on at least as great a scale as what we have right now, probably much greater.

Holt's advocacy of voluntary learning centers and his criticisms of our schools are constructive, but his call for complete deschooling and his contention that teachers are wasting their time are not, and lead us in precisely the wrong direction. He won't shake too many teachers with this book (he admits that few of them will read it), but I'm worried about the new generation of idealistic, energetic college students who may read this book and decide that going into teaching is a waste of their time. This we can ill afford. What we need is not pie-in-the-sky talk of deschooling that saps talent and conviction from the teaching profession, but a wholehearted, tough-minded, humanely based commitment by the best people in our society to make our schools better places for both children and adults. ■

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