

Why I Left School and Never Went Back!



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Home-educated students typically score 15 to 30 percentile points above publicschool students on standardised academic achievement tests. They live active, social lives and are considered above average when it comes to matters of self-esteem and community engagement. Homebased education is practiced in many countries around the world, for example, the United States, Australia, Canada, France, Hungary, Japan, Kenya, Russia, Mexico, South Korea, Indonesia. Thailand, and the United Kinadom.*

By Ahmad Damen



have never let my schooling interfere with my education."

Mark Twain (1835-1910)

Our home phone rang one September morning and my mother picked it up. It was the school principal asking why I hadn't come to school at the start of the semester.

"Did you transfer him to another school?"

My mother put the phone to her chest, looked at me, and asked: "Are you sure you want to do this? This is your last chance to back away."

"I'm sure," I replied without the slightest bit of hesitation or regret.

She spoke to the principal again and said: "I'm sorry, but my son has decided he's not going back to school anymore and I support him all the way."

"What do you mean he's not coming back?!" asked the principal. "He's one of our top students. Tell him I'll make sure he won't be bullied anymore here."

"No, you don't get it. It's not really about the bullying," my mother replied. "He's not going to go to ANY other school. I will make sure he gets the best education here at home."

The principal laughed at this ridiculous claim and tried her best to learn the name of the new school that I was transferring to.

This conversation could be interpreted as the setting of a fictitious situation or a wishful thought in some child's fantasy world, but this happened for real, down to the smallest detail. This is a story about something much more important and real than anything that's taught in

schools today; a story about reclaiming education as a tool for seeking and acquiring knowledge. The school system has been obsolete for a long time now, but we still like to engage in the same old habits even if they are no longer useful. Our fear of change might



end up being the greatest threat to our future in this fast-changing world and in light of Palestine's continual struggle with occupation.

I was not suffering from any physical disability, autism, or psychological disorder. I simply hated school immensely, like almost all students today. Going to school every day was a nightmare and nobody explained to me the purpose of this continuous suffering. I was constantly pushed by the system to try to become the top student in my class. I realised that in the process I was losing myself, my purpose, my creativity, and my common sense

Another brick in the wall

Students have every right to hate school and despise it. Why? Several thinkers believe that schools are simply another

form of modern prisons. Let us think about the similarities.

In both the school and the prison. inmates are restricted to one room for long periods of time and have to adhere to a common dress code. They even have to ask for permission to go to the toilet. They are treated like numbers and not as unique persons with various and diverse interests. They are each assigned a numerical value at the end of the year to facilitate comparison with others. They have to walk in lines and conform to certain illogical rules. If one of them breaks the rules then all are subject to collective punishment; negative re-enforcement is imminent and is the common factor. At the end of the day, nobody asks them what they would like to learn or what they would like to do with their lives. They are simply told to shut up, sit still, and trust the system.

This is because the school system was inspired by the eighteenth-century Prussian model of education. It was designed to prepare young children for future factory work. They were taught math and writing to help them with their future jobs. No wonder these subjects still carry more weight than others in today's system. Schools used to be part of the factory establishment; where do you think the idea of modern-day school bells comes from?

This system, however, has not proven to be effective or valuable today. We are told a number of myths in school:

1) School is the only way to get to college; 2) Going to school and then to college is the only way to secure a job;

3) What we learn in school and college will give us the skills we'll need later in life; and (d) School is a place for those who seek knowledge.

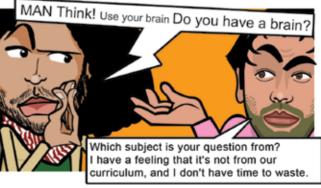
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According to Sir Ken Robinson, every child is born with a deep natural capacity and a tendency to express these capacities through various and unique forms. The current system of mass education tends to suppress and push away students from their natural talents. Children are denied the opportunity to practice what they excel in, which in turn hinders their capacity to engage in the practices and professions they'd truly love in their own lives.**



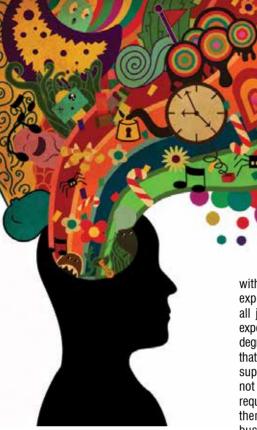






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22 23



First, with the educational advancement in many parts of the world, going to school is no longer a pre-requisite to enrolling in college, and there is no need to go very far to prove it. In Israel (yes, that close) other options such as home-schooling are allowed, and this multiple-option system for education has produced great results. Universities in many parts of the world no longer require applicants to have completed 12 years of school or to submit recommendations from former teachers.

Second, our markets are saturated with university graduates. After finishing a BA, most graduates realise that going for higher educational degrees is useful mainly for academic careers. Otherwise, having an MA, or worse a PhD, is likely to make them overqualified for any organisation that is hunting for fresh graduates. They are also not likely to get managerial jobs

without a number of years of work experience under their belt. Almost all jobs advertised now value work experience much more than university degrees. Business owners have realised that school and university settings are superficial. University graduates are not prepared for today's job-market requirements. Universities and schools themselves have turned into tuition businesses rather than knowledgeseeking institutions. Students are able to graduate because they have paid their high tuitions or school fees although they may still lack the ability to write a proper report in either Arabic or English.

Some years back, one of my friends spent a few good days searching for his university degree. He looked all over his house until he finally found it. My friend was not searching for it to secure a new job or even to hang it on a wall somewhere: his soon-to-be father-in-law wanted to make sure his daughter would be married to a university graduate! College degrees are now mainly used for social status. It's true that many businesses still ask for them, and they sometimes even ask for high school degrees, but this is again about the business's social status and not a pre-requisite for market entrance.

Third, even basic everyday knowledge is totally missed or distorted in school. I have met school graduates who know

nothing about influential Palestinian personalities, the geography of their country, or the history of the conflict. It's not that they are not interested in knowing, but the boring school environment actually discourages students from acquiring knowledge. Instead of viewing knowledge as something that is exciting, it's treated simply as mundane information that students can forget as soon as they finish their exam. This is definitely not the student's fault, or the teacher's, but it is a problem with the whole system.

Last but not least, schools are places to get degrees NOT knowledge. The only motivation to study is the desire for a high exam score. Tell students in class that a particular piece of information, no matter how vital or important, will not be on their finals and the students will lose all motivation and interest. It's the only period in their lives when they have to memorise without understanding, and when they are not allowed to debate any idea or come up with their own solutions. When it comes to educators, they believe that the solution is always at the end of the textbook.

I'm not going to talk about school textbooks or exams or the *tawjihi* nightmare because I see them as part of the total system failure. But what I think is more important is the recognition of "failure" itself, especially when it comes to *tawjihi*. According to Sir Ken Robinson, an influential international adviser on education, as we grow older we come to realise the importance of failure in order to learn from our mistakes, to grow, and to experience suffering first hand. In schools, students are told that if they try to be creative problem-solvers because

they forgot to memorise some silly number or out-dated rule they will fail.

There is no second chance in exams and no room for real learning. Even collaboration is called "cheating"! No wonder most university graduates are unable to be team players in the workplace; they are not used to developing and expressing ideas in pairs or in groups.

Walk the walk vs. talk the talk

I don't claim to know the solution for this problem, and I think a solution needs a lot of study, research, and testing, but I do know that school is definitely not for everyone. It should not be mandatory, especially because it is not the answer! We like to think that we are teaching our kids something, but whatever we value today will probably NOT be of any value 20 years from now, by the time they have finished college.

Unlike conservative educators who speak from their high ivory tower, and before you tell me that leaving school with the intention of improving your life is something that can only happen in the West or in certain cultures, I beg to differ. I didn't just talk the talk, I also walked the walk and was able to enrol in college without completing 12 years of schooling. School was definitely not for me, which is why I left school in the 6th grade and never went back.

It worked out quite well for me, and whether you like it or not you are reading an article written by someone with no high school degree. Are you ready to discredit all the arguments I've presented simply because I don't have a certain piece of paper?

It's true that I went to college later, but college was also a social necessity and not a place for knowledge-seeking and self-actualisation. Although I got as far as an MBA, I only worked in that profession for seven months before I simply ditched it and entered a completely different field.

24 25

All, and I mean all, the knowledge I acquired and now use in my life was acquired outside the school setting. I have three different jobs, one of them as the editor of the magazine you are holding in your hands. These skills are not easy to learn, and I would not have them if I had stayed sitting on my butt all day in school.

School (in its current form at least) is not for minds that learn by doing things or minds that prefer to experience solutions visually. These days, people who cannot sit still in the classroom are diagnosed with ADHD and forced to deny their own individuality and valuable qualities. Diversity is not ok in a school system at a time when diversity is all that matters for a healthy and balanced society.

A way out of this paradox

Most educational experts are likely to suggest small incremental changes to improve an already broken system. They are not going to admit that the system is obsolete because they have spent a long time in academic halls studying and refining this very system. If they admit that the system is obsolete, then they have wasted their lives chasing a ghost. The experts are not likely to admit it, but seriously concerned parents should figure it out on their own.

Who would want to send their children to such a prison and feel happy about it? It's either parents who do not have enough time to dedicate to their children due to economic or other pressing reasons OR those who — eager for some peace of mind — are happy to send their children away for the day. The second group's motive, in my opinion, is narcissistic. They are not as interested in their children's future or well-being as they would like to believe they are.

I don't have a ready-made solution for this complex problem. What I know is that we can at least be honest about what is happening right under our noses. We can open our eyes wide enough to see schools for what they really are. Knowledge and curiosity are powerful tools that have guided humanity since its very beginning towards advancement and development.

A very interesting project called Hole in Wall, by the Indian researcher Sugata Mitra, is one bright example. The project enables kids to invest a lot of time and effort learning without the aid of any formal educational environment. They are simply responding to their innate curiosity and need for self-development.

Students who would like to reclaim education and make better use of the 12 hopeless years they waste in school classrooms should be allowed to make their own decisions. Parents also should be offered various ways to provide their children with a better education. Unless there is a better system in place and until students are happy to wake up every day to learn something new and something interesting and beneficial on this journey called Life, then I don't think the law should oblige me to send my kids to school ... and neither should you!

Ahmad Damen is a Palestinian writer, music composer, and filmmaker. He's the writer of several columns in Al Quds Al Arabi Newspaper (London) and online blogs. In addition to being the content editor of This Week in Palestine, he has directed, researched, and composed music for two internationally successful feature documentaries: The Red Stone (2012) and Forbidden Pilgrimage (2014). He's also a professional oud player and film composer with music credits in more than 12 long documentary and fiction projects.

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