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## Critical views on schooling system – selected reformatory views in the framework of alternative pedagogy: deschooling and democratic education (free education)

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## Critical views on schooling system – selected reformatory views in the framework of alternative pedagogy: deschooling and democratic education (free education)

Критические мнения о системе образования – выбраны реформаторских взглядов в рамках альтернативной педагогики: освобождение от школы и демократическое образование

### Introduction

In last months Polish educational system has come under the fire of criticism because of the article *We Are Looking for Those Who Think Independently* (*Szukamy tych, którzy myślą samodzielnie*<sup>1</sup>) by Andrzej Klesyk, President of PZU Group, that was published in „Gazeta Wyborcza”. This article caused storm in Polish education. Many authorities started discussion whether a Polish school teaches thinking, as well as how good it prepares students for professional life. Meanwhile Minister of Education and Minister of Higher Education convened a round table for scientists and entrepreneurs. Apart from what were the intentions of President of PZU Group or Minister who first of all wanted to cram students into the labor system and business services the least, the issue itself is extremely actual: what actually teaches a school and does it teach thinking? We would like to introduce the most important trends of alternative education in the modern world in a series of several articles as mainstream that paid special attention to changes in patterns of thought education. Many different mainstreams may be found under the alternative education, such as homeschooling, deschooling, Waldorf method and Montessori, e-learning based on the open-source, democratic education (free educa-

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<sup>1</sup> A. Klesyk, *Szukamy tych, którzy myślą samodzielnie*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, 23.04.2012, source: [http://wyborcza.pl/1,75515,11593341,Prezes\\_PZU\\_Szukamy\\_tych\\_ktorzy\\_mysla\\_samodzielnie.html](http://wyborcza.pl/1,75515,11593341,Prezes_PZU_Szukamy_tych_ktorzy_mysla_samodzielnie.html)

tion) and many others. In this article we would like to focus on two important concepts, that are deschooling of Ivan Illich and democratic schools (free schools), and their implementation in the world and in Poland.

## Deschooling

In his the most famous work *Deschooling Society* (1971), Ivan Illich stated that the school system falsifies the reality by replacing learning with teaching, calling improvement of conditions of local communities a social work, security a police protection, but rat race – productive work. Institutionalization of life takes place in modern times, in universal illusion that every problem needs a particular institution (or a project) for solving it. Institutions of school system attract state budget and money, people and good will for education, while discouraging and deterring other institutions from providing knowledge. Compulsory school system has become a religion for us now, promising salvation in a form of “returning from investment to education”. Ivan Illich, similarly as Goodman, considers it is very important to change the educational system in a way that a person not a diploma decides about opportunities to make a carrier. He allows possibility organizing tests of competences, while removing a nonsense preference of the person who acquires the same knowledge thanks to public funds and through the official education system in relation to the person who learns by itself. In this case, the teaching itself is discriminated against in relation to the school system based on compulsory attendance and imposed curriculum subjects. One of the biggest illusions of modern educational system is mixing up process of teaching and learning. Often there is a situation in a contemporary system that, for example, teachers of foreign languages know foreign languages worse than students who have spent, e.g., a year in particular countries, which only confirms that self-learning may be more effective than teaching following instructions. Illich defines a public school as age-specific, teacher-related, requiring a fixed curriculum and compulsory attendance. In this way, a school is an institution recognizing that increasing knowledge is the result of teaching. In the contemporary world more than a half of world’s population never had a chance to attend school, so people were socially excluded, in the sense of isolation and being worse. A school is a total institution which gets back the opportunity to learn through the 750–1000 meetings (classes)

per year<sup>2</sup>. Modern education is also supporting the myth that everything is measurable and countable just like SMART design method that is popular in contemporary times. Even names of objects are unreal at the present time (e.g. Math 3). Educational innovators even believes that education can be described as a funnel through which we pour knowledge into the student who is like a white page (latin: *tabula rasa*) before that<sup>3</sup>.

As a possible mean of reforming educational system, Illich introduces four possible ways how to get knowledge through learning<sup>4</sup>:

1. Reference services to educational facilities – facilitated access to the materials used in the process of formal education, some in such traditional places as schools, libraries, others in museums, companies or in the area. If we want to deschool, we shall break school's monopoly in access to educational materials, and students shall have access to them in a self-learning process but not only as part of curriculum. The presence of games is particularly important in the learning process. Games may loosen children's interest in sciences, let them to get acquaintance with the world in a free way, but there is need to be careful, because a school may throw them back in the formal curriculum by eternal desire to organize tournaments between classes (schools) for comparing children thus killing the joy of playing.
2. Exchange of skills – creating of platform for exchange of skills between those members who want to transfer knowledge and those who are interested in the science. Exchange of skills is not popular in contemporary education market, taking into consideration institutional requirements that request showing a certification for starting a formal learning process.
3. Peer matching – in this way students could join the groups according to their interests. That would be the opposite of the current curriculum imposed by the order to participate in the classes obligatory. Deschooling means that possibility of one person to compel the other for participation in the meeting disappears<sup>5</sup>. At the beginning meeting had a meaning of grassroots individual initiative meeting, now it means a schedule of some institution<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> I. Illich, *Deschooling Society*, New York, 1971, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 50.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 56.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

4. Professional educators – those would be people with knowledge of both theoretical and practical, who would support the learning process, or *de facto* persons today known as mentors, coaches or facilitators.

As states Władysław Zaczyński<sup>7</sup>, all the elements of deschooling, i.e., “society without school”, we can find at the current idea of e-learning where everyone will have access to the base of knowledge and use it as they want without the imposed compulsory education. In some cases e-learning already displaces traditional school. The best example of such initiative is Khan Academy ([www.khanacademy.org](http://www.khanacademy.org)) that was established by MIT graduate Salman Khan. It offers more than 3000 lectures of different fields of science – generally main sciences. As says the author “my project might be the begging of a real school where students spend 20 per cent of time watching videos and testing themselves at their own pace, but other time they spend on building robots, painting pictures, composing music or anything else”<sup>8</sup>. Nowadays more than 2 million people per year visit that webpage. In 2009 it received Microsoft Tech Award in the field of education. In a certain sense Khan Academy is a real realization of vision of Ivan Illich more than 30 years after publication of his work *Deschooling Society*, in which he prophesied the usage of computers for supporting their own initiative in the educational process.

### Paul Goodman and critique of educational system

Schools have an educational and non-educational role. In the case of primary school, it has a role of a baby-sitter and gives important support in situations of family breakdown and urbanization. However, in the case of older youth – the age of grammar school or secondary school – a school is responsible for militarized and quasi-police oversight<sup>9</sup>. However, educational role is first of all practicing and preparing students for work in corporations, governments, being a teacher itself, and subordination to authorities<sup>10</sup>. At the present time even discounting needs to have a degree, but it is not because of gained knowledge. It

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<sup>7</sup> W. Zaczyński, *Internet krytycznym okiem pedagoga*, retrieved: 24.04.2012; source: <http://www.up.krakow.pl/ktime/ref2009/zaczynsk.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> J. R. Young, (2010-06-06), „College 2.0: A Self-Appointed Teacher Runs a One-Man ‘Academy’ on YouTube”. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

<sup>9</sup> P. Goldman, *Compulsory Miseducation and the Community of Scholars*, New York 1966, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

is because of features at school: punctuality and submission. Reasonable social policy for young people from disadvantaged social classes should not focus on the problems of not taking next classes or sifting in the process of formal education, but it should concentrate on creating alternatives to traditional path of education. Goodman offers different solutions that could improve the work of educational system, including:

1. Leaving a school building for a part of lessons – on the street, to cinemas, cafés, museums, parks or factories.
2. Usage of knowledge of non-licensed teachers from local communities, such as pharmacists, shopkeepers or mechanics of animation classes, both within and outside the university. In this way, it could fill the characteristic gap between adults' and children's world at least a bit.
3. Making attendance at lessons not-obligatory. Attractiveness but not dutifulness of lessons should invite students to lessons. As an example you can take a rule adopted by Frank Brown. Young people can skip lessons for a week or a month if they take some new initiative (e.g., practice at social institution) or want to explore new environment<sup>11</sup>.

Goodman also argues about assessment system in Western Culture and America and suggests that schools should leave the malicious system which leads to the “rat race”, degeneration in a form of downloading and plagiarism. In this way, a student never matures, never creates for himself if his main motivator is a mark or opportunity to be better than other classmates.

Goodman considers that such contemporary educational system as long-life learning is disadvantageous and does not attract young people in order to deepen knowledge. It only teaches fast memorizing of many facts that are taken out of some analysis' context and mostly forgotten after the exam. He proposes to start experimenting with other additional forms of learning, e.g., self-learning, rural schools, practices, guided trips, work camps, theaters, local newspapers and journalism etc. The sense of education, based solely on diplomas, is undermined, because it excludes those people who have fallen out of the educational system at some point and can no longer return because of lack of earlier education. He also provides an interesting appendix of master's thesis or doctoral dissertation to see how many eminent specialists in the period of 1900 to 1920 had formal education and how many gained knowledge through practice and self-learning. Higher education appeared like a new phenomenon of the educational system. Only 30 per cent of people finished the secondary

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 31.

school in USA in 1930 (11 per cent started studies), but in 1963 it was already 65 per cent (a half of it started studies)<sup>12</sup>. The remaining 35 per cent is for the so-called dropouts of modern society who were never able to make carrier in such fields valued by society as architecture, medicine, economy, etc.<sup>13</sup> All this is because in the modern social system, there is no other way to achieve success as having a diploma from educational institution (which does not correlate with knowledge). Goodman does not argue about the need to have knowledge for practicing certain professions and acknowledges the need for verification of knowledge, e.g., for an architect. The obligatory issue is a gradual educational system that prevents a person who has knowledge of certain jobs only because he/she does not have a certain link in the education. The biggest side effect of this system is that possession of diplomas (certificates) of higher education institutions but not knowledge describes an educated person. Young people who learn more slowly (and often deeper) and can not withstand the educational rat race is the subject of study for psychologists and national conferences on social exclusion. In contemporary system the weakest ones are humiliated, the average ones are not certain about their future, but the best ones are destroyed mentally and physically because of exhausting competition. In this case, we need institutions for those who do not have diplomas but who want to be well-read at the same time, acquainted with the latest knowledge, cultural citizens. The best example is Danish People's University where young people at the age of 18–25, who have not completed formal education, can gain knowledge without having present certificates of secondary school. Idea of Danish People's University is also aligned with the recently popular concept of flexicurity in which one of the pillars is long-life learning focused on enabling under-educated people without diploma to successfully re-enter educational system and as well connecting educational system with labor market needs and demand.

Neill A. S. "Summerhill School" and democratic school (free school)

The school in Summerhill was established in 1921, in Leiston region, placed approximately 100 miles from the present location of London. In this school students are 5 to 15 years old and are divided into 3 groups according to their age: 5 to 7 years old, 8 to 10 years old and 11 to 15 years old children. What

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem.*

concerns rules, the number of boys and girls is similar, usually approximately 20 girls and 25 boys. All lessons are optional in Summerhill. There are schedules of lessons but they are binding just for teachers. Students have lessons according to their age or sometimes according to their interests<sup>14</sup>. The school does not apply any unified system of learning, because it does not consider this to be important in the long-term learning. There is no educational system, tests are sometimes used as a joke for playing together. There is no assessment used in learning subjects in Summerhill. The only concession is giving symbolic prizes to winners of sport competitions (the decision of General School Meeting). Athletes do not have a status of heroes as it is in other schools. Derogation of sport has been done due to the fact that sport is inherently based on competition, while such subjects as History or Geography should not be used for competition between youth. Summerhill treats negatively also such subjects as Math, Latin or Greek, because they are considered to be abstract and most of children approach them with reluctance. Similar situation is with assignments, because they enforce students to learn, and very often kids do not like them.

Sometimes Summerhill is criticized by psychologists that the institution is detached from Leiston society, but this is done intentionally. Most of the students come from outside the community of a small city, a big part of them come from foreign countries (students of Summerhill are mostly upper-middle class). The school is also free of ideology, that is why they do not work with town's religious society. A.S. Neill criticizes the standard educational system as inconvenient to the child's need, not preparing for enjoyment of life and being innovative. Criticism is subjected also to Montessori, alternative educational system, where children learn through playing games under the teacher's supervision, where the normal system is learning by doing and having anything creative in it.

The school is managed by General School Meeting, where every child and every employee and teacher has an equal vote. Every meeting there is a different chairman/chairwoman whose duty is to provide access to voting for everyone. Not all the elements of Summerhill society are decided by General School Meeting. The Principal is competent for following activities: salaries of employees, decisions about hiring and firing employees, setting menu, decisions connected with economy or very rarely expelling a student who threatens society with its aggressive behavior. A.S. Neill believes that no school can be called progressive

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<sup>14</sup> A. Neill, *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*, Hart Publishing Company, 1960, p. 14.

if there is no self-government of youth that has real power. There is no freedom and democracy if there is a boss. This particularly applies to the kind and friendly boss who makes an impression that children are helpless and uncertain of their intentions, because there is a rebel in case of authoritarian Principal<sup>15</sup>.

Rules of coeducation prevails in Summerhill. Relationship between students are not encouraged, but they are not also discouraged. Young people are free to make a decision in this issue.

In United States Sudbury Valley School is an equivalent model of Summerhill. It was established 20 miles from Boston in 1968, having several branch-schools in the USA and around the world. Another British progressive school that worked in time 1926–1987 was Darlington Hall. During its times of brilliance, it was more popular than Summerhill. This school was based on similar principles as Summerhill, full of democracy and the rights of children. Many descendants of British elite and well-known people had studied there, including Lord Young – the founder of Open University in the Great Britain, Lucian Freud and Clement Freud. The school was closed in 1987 due to financial problems and a series of scandals connected with the current Principle Dr Lyn Blackshaw who admitted in an interview with press that some students of Darlington Hall were involved in crime, drugs and sex, as well as in practicing voodoo and black magic<sup>16</sup>. The final point was appearance of archive photos of the Principal and his wife in “New QT” – the magazine of pornographic content<sup>17</sup>.

One of the most popular representations of progressive education is that children assume much greater willingness to learn sciences and gain knowledge as it can be in reality. There was a reflection in memories of some graduates of Summerhill and Darlington Hall that in youth, when knowledge is acquired very fast, they were not able to learn as much as they wanted. The democratic model meant that children often chose playing with contemporaries instead of learning sciences, e.g., geography. However, graduates often remember that progressive schools gave them much warmth, happiness, respect and the opportunity of making decisions. There was also a practical problem of terrorism by contemporaries and pressure of teachers, and other problems that are met in traditional schools. As says Maurice Punch, who tried to research the influence

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 44.

<sup>16</sup> *Nude photograph costs principal Job*, Ottawa Citizen, 10.09.83, retrieved: 23.04.2013; source: <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2194&dat=19830910&id=FaQy-AAAAIIBAJ&sjid=D-8FAAAAIIBAJ&pg=1370,4831435>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

of progressive schools on young people, it is very hard to make an objective evaluation of achievements of those schools because there is a lack of data and wish to make any form of evaluation.

### Democratic school (free school) in Poland

Certain elements of progressive pedagogy in Poland are found in Orphans House (Dom Sierot) (1912–1942) lead by Janusz Korczak and Stefania Wilczyńska. Similarly as other schools, Orphans House also had students' self-government, their own friendly court and special methods of communication such as bulletin board, mailbox and children's magazine "Little Review" ("Mały Przegląd"). The aim of the children's magazine was to develop skills of civic thinking, scrupulosity and skills of expressing their opinion to society. This magazine was an addition to a newspaper "Our Review" ("Nasz Przegląd") and had a nationwide range, dense net of children – correspondents and was able to organize conferences for some hundreds of people. Another authority of Orphans House, student's friendly court, was able to act not only against other students, but also against employees of Orphans House. There were many differences between such progressive schools as Summerhill, because the role of self-government was decreased, children had many lessons and compulsory activities – they were imposed on call. Similarities included autonomy and the rights of children, as well as relationship between students and teachers that were full of humanity. Korczak supported children's empowerment. All those mini-institutions as children's parliament, the magazine or the friendly court were to teach children expressing their opinions and living in democratic society, to be an element of children's emancipation.

In 90's there was an experiment in Poland to create a secondary school in Łódź based on anti-authoritarian rules of Summerhill. After three years of the experiment in the public school, Board of Trustees and the Ministry of Education ordered to stop the introduction of that initiative<sup>18</sup>.

Currently the best example of free (democratic) schools in Poland is Multicultural Lyceum of Humanities of Jacek Kuroń in Warsaw. This is a small public lyceum for about 100 persons. Nearly 70 per cent of students pay tuition fees,

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<sup>18</sup> N. Duelholm, *Polityka oświatowa państwa nie powinna naruszać terytorium rodziny*, wywiad z Prof. Bogusławem Śliwskim, source: <http://www.edukacjadomowa.piasta.pl/sliwski.html>

while 30 per cent receive a public scholarship from the fees paid by parents. Scholarships are given to people from 3 groups: immigrants, people socially excluded from the Prague region (where the school is located) and children from orphanages. Dr Piotr Laskowski, the author of *Sketches of History of Anarchism* (*Szkice z dziejów anarchizmu*), is the Principal and co-founder of the school. First of all, he sees the school as a community and not as an institution with clear division of students and teachers or place of categorization. It is a democratic school, because all the issues regarding the school are decided at so called "meeting" or gathering of all members of community and everyone has a vote (teachers, students and parents of students). Dr Piotr Laskowski also criticizes students' self-governments that are popular in Poland. They are groups of students representing interests of other students, reminding fictional institutions that are often occupied by so-called apparatchiks<sup>19</sup>. Piotr Laskowski criticizes the perception of education only as a commodity where the only value of acquired knowledge is use in the carrier and CV. He describes this trend and need for change in a following way<sup>20</sup>:

We need to change it. But how to do it if I read texts that encourages students to choose philosophy? It is written that it is useful to study philosophy, because its graduates are highly wanted by advertising agencies. If a university makes a promise: read Hegel, because it will awake creativity in you that will be bought by an advertising agency. Who can read Hegel seriously then?

Summerhill inspired the school, which, as says Laskowski, is more libertarian than Lyceum of Humanities of Kuroń and has less frames. The school is set to release students' minds. However, it is not oriented to the labour market and practical approach, e.g., enrichment of CV and carrier. In contrast to Summerhill, the school is highly politicized and closely associated with so-called new left-wing and feminist movements that are found against this institution in newspapers of the right-wing (for example „Rzeczpospolita”). Politicization is connected with one of school's rules which believe it is very important for students to participate in and influence the external life (in contrast to Summerhill), as well as participate in civic movements. The school considers the system of grades as repressive and as an empty form. The only exception is the

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<sup>19</sup> P. Laskowski, *Musicie biegać szybciej*, „Krytyka Polityczna”, 19.07.2011, source: <http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/Wywiady/LaskowskiMusiciebiegacszybciej/menuid-77.html>

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

final grades on certificates which are recognized as a compromise with Polish educational system. The Principal Laskowski says frankly that grades do not mean anything to the school. Although, it happens that students do not move to a higher form. The main reason is that persons who receive public scholarships often are culturally backward in comparison to other students. Due to the division into 2 groups, very often there also arises the division of students' wealth. This is one of the biggest problems. The school is considering the introduction of a zero year – equalizer for students from socially excluded communities. The journal of presence is also not carried out, because students' being at school is not compulsory. Dr Laskowski says that running a libertarian school is much easier in the case such as Summerhill, because it is located in a rural area and has its own dormitory house, so it is easier to make a closed and trusting society. It is opposite when a school is just a part of student's day. It is even worse for students from socially excluded communities who need to spend a half of a day at school and then return to their communities. The school is a socially open space. There is no such thing as teachers' room or Principle's office. Administrative work is performed in the evening after 20 o'clock. Absence of teachers' room is designed to prevent teachers' ghettoisation who lock themselves in the rooms, often gossiping and separating themselves from students.

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## SUMMARY

In this article we described concepts of deschooling and democratic education (free education) and their practical implementation in such educational institutions as, e.g., Summerhill and Multicultural Lyceum of Humanities of Jacek Kuroń in Warsaw. Although those two concepts have rebounded very loud echo in the pedagogical environment, you can count the institutions who use the democratic system on fingers of one hand. However, the system of deschooling might begin taking on the shoot together with increasing the opportunities of e-learning and self-learning communities such as Khan Academy.

**KEY WORDS:** schooling system, education, democracy, alternative pedagogy.

## РЕЗЮМЕ

В этой статье авторы сосредоточены на описании двух заметных потоков альтернативной педагогики. Во-первых, это “освобождение от школы”, которой концепцию составлял Иван Ильич, австрийский философ, полиглот и социальный критик, который в возрасте 30 лет стал вице-ректором известного католического университета в Пуэрто-Рико, который принадлежал Ватикану. В своей книге «Общество без школы» (1971) он описывает школу как основную причину отсутствия мышления и угнетению сознания. Он считает, что единственное решение для системы образования это отмена школьных учреждений вообще и их замена с добровольными группами исследования. Второе понятие, которое описано в этой статье, это демократическое образование (также называется свободное образование) и ее практическая реализация в мире. Авторы описывают несколько школ, которые основаны на этой модели, и представляют Summerhill A. Нила и его польского коллегу – Мультикультурного лица Яцека Куроня.