From its beginning in Sumerian times, the school was created for the transmission of, first, scribal skills, then, more generally “literate” skills and activities—which include not only the forms of knowledge that these skills develop and generate, but also the ways of knowing (“cognitive skills”) that they encourage and require. Require, that is, by the process of indirect and “decontextualized” learning that reading tablets, scrolls, and books involve. One of these requirements, more valid for the manuscript cultures than for post-printing societies, is for verbatim memory tasks, and it is significant that deliberate and decontextualized memorizing was a central exercise in the very first schools, not primarily because it was a hangover from oral societies (as McLuhan, 1962, and Ong, 1971, wrongly suppose), but because it was a requirement of the reproduction and development of the new literate culture. In oral societies, however, the transmission of more abstract and developed forms of knowledge, like the Bagre myth of the LoDagaa, was often accomplished without the emphasis on exact repetition. Changes that I find occurring in the Bagre myth over time should not be regarded as a failure of verbatim recall. In the first place, such an aim is probably unattainable for longish texts subject to oral transmission; unless one engages in visual checking, the verbatim learning of continuous “utterances” is scarcely feasible.

I would also argue that exact repetition is not the aim of the teachers of the Bagre and that people are tolerant of changes (as the instructions to future reciters seem to imply). But in any case, they are forced to be generative because they do not normally have the techniques to make perfect copies of long utterances. There is a danger that one will take the word “generative” as implying more than it should, as a reason for jumping on the “down with school” bandwagon—away with literacy and up with electronics. But the exact repetition of utterances, which is rendered so easy by the appearance of written “text,” has advantages as well as disadvantages for the growth of human knowledge. Its disadvantages are clear in everything we know about the earliest schools and the work of scribes (the copy, the scriptorium, and the role of literate intellectuals). Its advantages are equally obvious; the system was a condition of the growth of knowledge. Advances in fields such as astronomy and mathematics (chronicled by Neugebauer, 1957), and others in medicine and in classificatory and observational fields, depended upon the exact, repetitive accumulation of information by scribes—indeed the same procedures were required both for cultural transmission and for cultural acquisition.

From their very beginning in the Near East, then, schools have been in the business of training individuals for literate tasks. As such, they trained a limited percentage of the population for the clerical professions, while most other kinds of work were learned on the job. Initially, while it bestowed prestige, writing was not considered essential to earthly success, and it was perfectly possible to be a king or warrior without knowing how to read or write; if you needed a scribe, you hired one.

With the shift to mass democracies in the 19th century, compulsory education, that is, school, became the counterpart of universal suffrage. With mechanization and mass production, it was argued, universal education (i.e., high literacy rates) was essential to economic development. But school for everybody means school values for everybody—training in literate procedures, training for clerks and for the higher professions. And such training for certain tasks also means a training away from those activities that do not demand much by way of formal literate education. Consequently, only those who are “unsuccessful” in school terms (and, since the last century, school is, in effect, the only accepted educational channel) can be recruited for the basic jobs that the community has to have done, whether bricklaying, garbage collection, labouring in the fields, or working down the mines. These elements inevitably include all immigrants and lower-status groups—Blacks and Puerto Ricans in the United States, Indians and Irish in the United Kingdom, and Arabs and Orientals in Israel.

One may be able to get round the problem of school
success by introducing better teaching methods and by scheduling instruction over longer periods. But this doesn’t, to my mind, get round the basic problem, that schooling, however satisfactory to the individual, is in some measure dysfunctional for society as a whole if it makes us despise what has to be done, despise jobs that in many developing countries even include farming, the basic productive process itself. Indeed, if the situation is unsatisfactory for the wider community, it can be satisfactory for the individual only in the short term, since it creates insoluble problems, of which the degradation of labour and the importation of disadvantaged groups are only the most obvious manifestations. To put it another way, maximizing the potential of every individual is possible only by taking into account communal goals as well as individual ones; a nation of scribes cannot be a viable national goal.

We could make schooling more flexible in terms of the individual’s life-span, as Rohwer (1971) has suggested—a reform that is certainly worth trying out—so that those who wished could learn at a later age. This reform might also be enhanced if the bulk of instruction for everybody were to be postponed to a later age, when social and psychological research suggests it would often be more effective. However, unless the focus and evaluation of instruction were also changed, schools would just become more efficient at producing scribes (academics and accountants, teachers and typists) than before. And unless the evaluation of occupation were to change, even this reform would stand a great risk of failure, since the teaching of reading and other literate skills would simply be taken over by parents, with the result that mobility would be reduced rather than increased. One cannot legislate against learning out of school.

If we accept the intrinsic link of “school” with “literacy” and the temporary suppression of creativity as a condition of further development, then we have to be careful of tinkering with the system. Or, to put the same point in a different way, we have to be sceptical about what reforms can be achieved within the framework of the school. The main problem, then, lies in the universalization of literate education, which was accepted as part and parcel of the democratic state, and rests in the very end that all liberal and right-minded people want to promote, the maximization of opportunities. While schools were training only a proportion of the population and, either by force or preference, other members of the society chose other tasks, the objectives of training in schools and universities were straightforward. The aim was to train clerks, administrators, scholars, literate specialists of all kinds. With the introduction of compulsory universal education, the school system did not change in any basic way. In England, some 70 years later, an attempt was made in the 1944 Education Act to institutionalize a secondary-level, “non-academic” school, the Secondary Modern.

The attempt failed, mainly because both parents and teachers believed the values of an academic education to be superior to those of any other. But it was not simply a matter of “re-educating” parents and teachers but of revaluating the structure and function of the school and the overall view of occupations. More recent changes towards comprehensive education have meant that the secondary level was homogenized to give everyone the opportunity of becoming a clerk or a teacher, while apprenticeship was increasingly brought within the formal system, the system of schools, colleges, and universities. It could be argued that if everyone has to be educated in schools, we can easily diversify rather than homogenize the curricula. This, I believe, should and must be done, and many people, educators and others, have made similar comments. Indeed, brave efforts have been made, especially in developing countries, to change the situation, for example, by introducing agriculture into the curriculum. It is obvious that developing countries, where, say, 80% or 90% of the population are involved in agriculture, are in much greater difficulties with a type of universal “education” that effectively devalues villagers as rustics and agriculture as a non-literate occupation, than are those advanced societies where only 10% or 20% of the population are involved in these and similar jobs.

The situation has been put with customary insight and clarity by Julius Nyerere (1967), president of Tanzania, in his statement, “Education for Self-Reliance.” Arguing that an educational budget of 20% of the government’s revenue is excessive, especially in view of the results, he proposes the integration of the school into a farm community, which not only produces what it needs but also educates in doing so. To enable this to be effective at the level of the primary school, which is what most children will attend, he suggests the postponement of the age for starting school as well as the radical transformation of the curriculum.

But can this transformation take place within the school context? Perhaps. But when the president’s remarks are followed by a report of the Institute of Education on the “Re-introduction of Agriculture in the Primary School Curriculum,” by a document from the Ministry of Education concerning projects for “school-farms,” and by a well-intentioned report suggesting that craftsmen such as village tailors be employed as “temporal teachers” (Zanolli, 1971), one wonders whether the noble sentiments will not once again get swamped by the educational hierarchy of scribes and administrators.

Cuba is another country that has attempted radical educational reform. “Existing buildings were converted and new schools built at a furious rate. Children were brought from particularly remote areas to boarding schools in Havana” (Gillette, 1972, p.12). The result of this intense activity was to place more children in