

yes! magazine

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Building a Just and Sustainable World

DISCUSSION GUIDE | ISSUE 51 | LEARN AS YOU GO

YES! Discussion Guides are designed to help you explore your own experiences, opinions, and commitments as they relate to material found in YES! magazine. Use them in group discussions, classrooms, or study circles. We believe that when people discuss, with mutual respect and caring, the critical issues of our time, they create a powerful avenue for constructive social change.

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Lynsi Burton

Many of us are realizing that our education system is not preparing us or our kids to adapt to new realities, like a shrinking economy or climate change. This issue of YES! brings you an education in the things we need to create successful adults and kids: How do we learn to improve our communities, think critically, develop trusting relationships, and use our gifts to make societal contributions? No matter where you are in life, it's never too late to learn.

This discussion guide will focus on the following articles:

1. John Taylor Gatto, "Take Back Your Education"
2. Julia Putnam, "A Lifelong Search for Real Education"

3. Daniel Fireside, "Life's Best Lessons are Outside the Classroom"
4. Ron Miller, "Grounded Learning"
5. Parker J. Palmer, "Know Yourself, Change Your World"

Take Back Your Education

Author John Taylor Gatto, a former New York State Teacher of the Year, invites you to reject schooling and reclaim education. Instead of salvaging a public school system that prioritizes obedience and "dumbed-down" curricula over a student's self-discovery and personal strengths, Gatto says we need to return to a classical education in which independent thought trumps achievement tests. Today's education objectives are failing our students, says Gatto, but we have the power to change the system.

- Compare your education with the education you see students getting today. How has the education system changed? What do you think is missing from today's education system?

- Gatto says, "Nobody gives you an education. If you want one, you have to take it." What have you done to claim your own path in education, either inside or outside of formal schooling? Have you had mentors who have influenced your life choices? Were you encouraged or discouraged from discovering your personal strengths and abilities in school?

- How can we increase opportunities for self-discovery and mentorship in our schools?

- What's the appropriate role of testing in schools? Are grades a relevant way to measure student success? How might we evaluate kids on their creativity, critical thinking, and contributions to community, rather than just their test-taking skills? Should we separate grades and degrees from personal worth?

A Lifelong Search for Real Education

Julia Putnam describes how meeting education reformists Grace Lee and Jimmy Boggs turned her life around and signaled the start of her "real" education. Putnam became one of the first participants in the Boggs' Detroit Summer program, a project to revitalize one of America's most neglected communities. She realized that helping rebuild her city gave her life more direction than getting good grades—and trusting teens with hard work and tough challenges helps them learn the confidence and self-reliance to claim the lives they deserve.

- When did your real education begin? Who shaped it? What did you learn?

- Putnam writes that there are as many paths to success as there are children in a room. What was your unique path to success? What kinds of self-discoveries guided your personal journey?

- Putnam says kids long to hear supportive messages: "Since we are all counting on you for our very existence, we need you to be your best self—to be healthy and kind and committed." Think about the young people you know. How might you or your community build their confidence and help them understand the power they have to be their "best selves"?

Life's Best Lessons are Outside the Classroom

In many schools, policies like No Child Left Behind place so much emphasis on test-taking drills that students have little time left over for hands-on learning. Daniel Fireside reports on a group of schools that are taking a different approach: They're connecting children to their communities by giving them a stake in local interests such as food, neighborhood housing, and politics, and they're raising test scores in the process. The schools are involved in place-based education, which engages kids in service and uses community members as mentors. Students not only learn about their local environments and neighborhoods; they actively seek solutions to the problems they encounter.

- How important is it for schools to help students practice good citizenship?

- What engaged you most as a student? Was it a school project, a special teacher, or an extracurricular activity, such as Boy Scouts, 4-H, or a music ensemble? How did the experience help you learn about your skills or your community?

- What could you or your community do to supplement the education students get in school and to teach them about their local economy, politics, or natural resources? What steps might your community take to provide opportunities for students to engage in practical skills and critical thinking?

Grounded Learning

Teacher and author Ron Miller contends that our society needs a "great reskilling"—instead of preparing ourselves for careers in office cubicles, we need to learn to feed, clothe, and nourish ourselves using the resources of our local communities and bioregions. Miller is now educating himself this way, getting his hands in the dirt and teaching himself about permaculture. He says the Earth can no longer afford an education system that prepares us for an unsustainable, fossil-fuel-driven lifestyle.

- Do you agree that a sustainable future will require us to retrain in practical, hands-on skills? What practical skills might you acquire? How would you learn them? How might such an education be rewarding?

- What skills do you think your community will need to acquire to become more sustainable and adapt to a changing world and economy? How might our education system incorporate training in those skills?

Know Yourself, Change Your World

In an interview with executive editor Sarah van Gelder, educator and author Parker J. Palmer says that the key to a quality education and career is a better understanding of our inner lives. If people “mine their emotions for knowledge,” we can improve our sense of trust and make positive changes in society.

- Have you encountered a situation at the workplace in which you witnessed or were asked to carry out unconscionable tasks, like the doctors Palmer mentions in the interview? What, if anything, did you do about it? How did it change your mind about the people you worked with or the environment you were in? How might our education system prepare us to make difficult moral decisions or question unethical practices in our institutions?
- Does a larger mission guide your work and your choices? If not, how might you find that sense of moral purpose? How can you strengthen your contributions to that purpose?
- Palmer quotes Socrates: “The unexamined life is not

worth living.” Have there been pivotal events in your life that have caused you to reassess your place in the world or your quality of life? How did those events change your outlook or habits?

- Many of the problems Americans face today—inadequate health care, recession, and environmental crises—stem from a lack of “moral agents.” How can we instill a sense of morality in the choices that governments, corporations, and everyday people make? How can we make this part of everyone’s basic professional training?
- Palmer challenges us to stand and act in the “tragic gap,” reconciling the harsh realities we face with the great things we know are possible. What issues in our world require us take on that gap? And what possibilities for change might we be overlooking as a society? How can we encourage others to consider those possibilities?

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