

# Is there such a thing as 'School'?

Schools exist only in the eye of the beholder

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14-year-old Karim's face is twisted into a scowl. "I hate school!"

"What? All schools?"

"No, just this one!"

"Because...?"

"Because no one ever listens, no one ever cares! You're not allowed to do anything! They just expect you to do what *they* want you to do...."

And so he goes on. Karim's 'school' sounds suspiciously like an annoying parent or a disappointing friend or a world full of frustrations.

Everyone has strong feelings about 'school'. Everyone has stories to tell, opinions to argue, theories to propound. Yet five people talking about one particular school can sound as if they're talking about five different schools because the idea of 'school' is so personal, evoking for each one of us an experience of childhood, of parenting, of hope and disappointment, of what we've come to believe about ourselves and other people.

I sometimes wonder whether there's no such thing as a school, whether 'school' only exists in the eye of the beholder, whether we create a school in our heads and have a relationship with *that* school, rather than with the one we attend every day, or walk past, or hear about on the news. Young people like Karim love school, hate school, look forward to school, worry about school, can't wait to leave school. For them, 'school' is usually a metaphor for 'mother' or 'father' because the experience is so similar: the experience of being looked after, of authority and rules, of consistency and inconsistency, of rivalry and love. When young people talk about 'school', they're usually referring (unconsciously) to those things. Sometimes 'school' means a part of themselves or it means a dilemma that they're struggling with. Sometimes 'school' can be a way of talking obliquely about death because 'school' is about getting older and wondering what's-the-point, about a miscellany of endings and wondering whether we'll be remembered in the future.

Of course, young people aren't the only ones creating schools in their heads. Parents all have different ideas about what 'school' means, and politicians with no experience of school other than their own schooldays are forever wanting to change 'schools', less in response to actual research and more in response to an internalised, autobiographical 'school': a tyrannical, uncaring, misguided parent haunting adults since childhood and adolescence.

And it's worth wondering why teachers choose such a difficult, poorly-paid profession in the first place? Is it, as most teachers claim, because they care about young people and enjoy interacting

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with them? Is it for the holidays? Or is it because 'school' offers an opportunity to put something right, to resolve something personal about the world, about the way things have been in the past and the way things should be in the future for anyone becoming a teacher?

The Beach Boys have a particularly corny song urging people to 'be true to your school', but I wonder whether we can't help being true to our schools anyway. I don't mean blind loyalty to the institutions we attended with their bells and smells, concrete and glass, Latin mottos and arcane ceremonies, but loyalty to the ones in our heads. These are far more powerful, and our loyalty to them is far more problematic. Karim has to make better sense of the persecutory 'school' in his head if he's ever to accept that other people won't necessarily bend to his will, that life will always involve give-and-take, disappointment, frustration and the imperfection of love.

We start to talk about his 'pathetic' parents and 'stupid' siblings....

"At home no one ever listens," he says, "no one ever cares! You're not allowed to do anything! They just expect you to do what *they* want you to do...."