Keyword: climate-change

Headline: Stay in school, save the world

Byline: Hyacinth Tagupa

Published Date: 05:16 AM October 05, 2018

Section: opinion

Word Count: 737

Content:

There's a thread that connects autism, climate change, and the flat-earth theory. You can probably say these are topics where ignorance and stupidity easily surface. I prefer to think of them as some convincing responses to the enduring question "Why in the world do I have to study complicated stuff in school?"

I've asked this myself, especially back in high school and college, when physics, biology, chemistry and algebra constantly brought me to tears. Teachers assured us that we needed to study science and math subjects because they are the foundations of professions like engineering, medicine and economics. But I wanted to be a writer—what use was it to me to learn that the mitochondria are the powerhouse of the cell?

They also insisted that these subjects train us to think logically in practical real-world situations. I didn't buy it. If anything, I was far more likely to "buy 20 watermelons and eat three-quarters of them" than to find a pair of 3-kilogram ball bearings and drop them to the ground just to observe gravity. I wasn't going to come up to a friend in the near future and say, "Hey, want some balanced chemical equations?"

And so, like millions of students around the world, I sailed by achieving the bare minimum in science and math subjects. Once I graduated, I considered myself free from Gregor Mendel's pea-scented grasp forever.

That is, until I discovered that some people believe that vaccines cause autism. And that many don't accept that humans are the main factor in climate change. And that more and more people, including Filipinos, now believe that the Earth is flat.

It would be funny if it weren't so worrying. Across countries, many parents are refusing to have their children vaccinated with the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine, fearing it would lead to autism. This concern has long been debunked, but now, these parents' children are vulnerable to viral, potentially fatal diseases and further put others at risk. Similarly, crucial efforts in slowing and reversing climate change are pushed back by deniers who refuse to acknowledge their role in the phenomenon.

But these are things we should have begun to understand in science classes. How vaccines are crucial for our body's immunity. How autism is largely about genetics. How human activities are the top contributor to the greenhouse effect. How centuries of planetary studies have established that the Earth is a sphere orbiting the Sun.

A wealth of carefully established facts that should guide us to healthier, safer lives is now going down the drain because a few suckers failed to pay attention in class.

Skeptics (or conspiracy theorists) argue that we shouldn't believe everything they teach us in school and that we should think for ourselves. True, critical thinking is a skill we can develop outside classroom walls. But without the input from all the great critical thinkers before us—thinkers like, say, Marie Curie or Louis Pasteur—without their robust experiments and progressive

discoveries, we are stuck thinking only on the basis of what is immediately observable to us (which, for one, doesn't include radioactivity or microbes).

We need to learn sciences and mathematics because, as much as possible, we need to be able to think like scientists. So we can get as close as we can to their level of understanding. Doctors and engineers and economists have built so much of this beautiful world that we know now, and the least we can do is to trust the process, to trust the science. And we can't trust it if we don't understand it.

This is not about unquestioningly accepting every theory or research that crops up. It's about having the intelligent basis to question it in the first place. If we keep on rejecting facts without understanding how they were established as facts, we allow ourselves to be misguided. We allow the worsening disasters from drastic changes in the climate, and the spread of diseases due to fear of immunization.

So, note to my 16-year-old self pulling out her hair at textbook problems: You need to learn. You need to understand the world so you can help save it, or at least so you're not the reason it's royally messed up. You're not ignorant or stupid. Learn.