

DESIGN FOR EDUCATION

New Directions in Educational Policy

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THE BATTLE over education rages fiercely. Fights are going on in many British boroughs and counties over proposals to establish comprehensive schools, and in some areas feeling has run so high as to ensure packed public meetings — a phenomenon quite unusual in this day and age. In one London borough a "Save Our Schools" campaign has been able to exert sufficient pressure to influence the local council against the establishment of a comprehensive school system.

Yet despite all this activity and argument, prejudice and fashion seem to predominate rather than common sense. The present schooling system is highly unsatisfactory and those who wish to "save" it have nothing in the way of real improvement to offer, but it takes only a little thought to predict the effects of a one hundred per cent compulsory comprehensive system of schooling run by the state—and then to recoil in horror at the prospect.

One important factor in this debate that has contributed to the confusion is the deliberate narrowing of the meaning of the word "education" until it is now almost completely synonymous with schooling. This attitude was highlighted recently when it was seriously proposed that nursery schooling for three-year-olds would mean that children could start their education at three rather than at five!

As soon as it is realised that schooling is only part, and not even the most important part, of the educational process (which includes the absorption of experience from those near and dear, and also the special contribution of the environment, i.e. the country as opposed to the town, etc.), then a more relaxed attitude to the schooling system is engendered. When we understand that there is nothing we can do to give all children the "advantage" of having a film star, or an artist, or a footballer or just an ordinary homely commonsense mum as a parent, then we are able to allow the educational process to be fluid, without trying to alter it or influence it by rigid control of the school system. The school system can then be used to broaden and balance the educational process, which begins, and has its foundation, in the home.

Fashion, and "the system", however, are all against the home as a major educational influence. The system of "free" education (schooling) allows only marginal participation by parents in the schooling of their children. In some areas parent-teacher associations are discouraged or just not allowed—and even where allowed, the most they can contribute is a new sports pavilion or a new organ for morning assembly. They are denied the opportunity to club together for, say, an extra teacher to reduce the size of classes or to decrease the strain on the other members of the

staff. The present practice of zones and catchment areas allows for little choice of school, unless one is prepared to pay twice—that is, fees for a private school *and* the cost of "free" schooling via taxation.

The home as the basis and centre of education has been steadily undermined over the past twenty years and the state with its experts has become predominant. The social repercussions of this policy are only too evident. The prevailing fashion in educational thinking is to "improve" the present system by even more state control, and by a deliberate policy of "saving the child from the family"—a policy of despair if ever there was one.

All this implies that if allowed to choose, most parents would choose wrongly, and that a few other parents (the experts) would choose rightly—and yet the state system allows parents, who are judged likely to choose wrongly for their own children if given the chance, to choose via the ballot the right system of education for everyone else's child. Fashionable thinking also implies that experts mostly agree on what is right and wrong, and that the only policies to be implemented—always on a massive national scale—will be the right ones. Fortunately we have had too much experience of experts to believe their statements without question.

Proposals for a fully nationalised school system include the integration of the private sector into the state system, and the main purpose of these proposals is social and not educational; viz., to break down class barriers and force every child to go to the same kind of school, social cohesion being the goal. In fact one expert, Professor Mark Blaug, gives this as the only justification for prescribing a nationalised system, but if we considered that social cohesion was a goal worth achieving, even at the expense of a child's education and the family, there is still the question of whether a nationalised school system would achieve it. The evidence we have, and human nature as we know it, are all against the scheme from the start.

Much of the private sector would emigrate to places like Eire, and the rich that the system would be trying to integrate, would be creamed off into "Etons" and "Harrows" abroad. Even if this did not happen, and only legislation is likely to stop it, the results would still be the opposite of what was intended. Those parents who had been using the private sector would now be given "free" education (i.e., they would only be paying once) and they would have money to spare to supplement the state system. In addition there would be the reasonably well-off prepared to supplement state education from their own pockets, and the children of such parents would be better off in the way, perhaps, of extra coaching, more

books, home teaching aids, records, trips abroad, and a host of other educational advantages that can be bought by the better off.

In addition, good residential districts would be likely to have better schools and facilities; and the good teachers would be induced by fringe benefits, e.g., environment, housing, etc., to move to these areas. The poorer



districts and the vast council house estates with their own schools would suffer not only from having poorer facilities and poorer teachers in general, but from having in those schools children from only one social class.

An equally powerful argument against coercive legislation is the fact that the people who would supplement the state system are also the more politically conscious and active class. As an organised group, perhaps via local residents' associations, the pressure they would be able to bring to bear on the political scene would be disproportionate to their numbers.

Unless one is prepared to envisage Draconian taxation measures to equalise everyone's income, one is unlikely to achieve, through a system of nationalised education, the social cohesion that is its main justification—and to such a failure would be added all the harm to the broader aspects of education and to the family as a stable social unit.

Fortunately, starting from the present system, the road to state compulsion in education is not the only road to take. Some interesting proposals in the field of social welfare have appeared on the scene in the past few years. Suggested first in America by Milton Friedman, they have been taken up and expanded in this country by Messrs. Peacock, West and Wiseman, largely through the good offices of the Institute of Economic Affairs.

The main proposal is that instead of administering and providing the means of schooling (i.e., building, teachers, equipment, etc.), the state should provide only the finance for schooling, and this by way of vouchers to parents, allowing all schools, including those run by local authorities, to charge fees.

The vouchers would be available only for the education of a specified child at a recognised school, and, of course, could be of varying amounts according to income, so as not to disadvantage the lower income groups. The vouchers could be supplemented out of income to send the child to any private school charging fees above the amount of the voucher. The local authority schools would compete with all other schools, private, denominational or the like, on an equal basis. Parents would be free to choose the kind of schooling that their children were to get, and

would very likely want the best for their children and demand a very high standard from the recognised schools.

But vouchers would be only a first step to a completely free school system because the question of standards for schools, teachers, and examinations, would eventually have to be left to the responsibility of the parents, headmasters and governing bodies of schools, and independent universities and educational institutions. The state would be left only with the responsibility for compulsory school attendance up to a certain age, and with the legal prosecution of any educational body resorting to misleading advertising. There is a point of view, widespread even among libertarians, that the state should, at first anyway, still be responsible for minimum standards in schools. Be that as it may, the hope is that this form of state intervention would soon be unnecessary.

The scheme is eminently flexible and the advantages would seem to outweigh any imperfections in it.

The most flexible feature would, of course, be the amount of the voucher itself. As incomes rose, and more especially if income were distributed fairly, the value of the voucher could be decreased, with a proportionate reduction in general taxation.

Also, by providing the finance to the parents and then allowing them free choice of the recognised fee charging suppliers, there would be less chance of political pressure being exerted—a pressure impossible to prevent if the finance goes to the suppliers as at present.

Many problems of finance would be solved under the scheme.

It is an intolerable situation that the state spends some fifty per cent of what we earn, but happily a government's desire for votes makes it politically impossible for the state to attempt to spend more. This situation does, however, cause problems in the services provided by the state. For instance, many reforms that are recognised to be necessary in the present schooling system are held up by lack of funds, and this is, therefore, a further indictment of the system. The state determines the priorities of its own spending, but this may not accord with the wishes of the people. In fact, there is evidence to show that, given the choice, people would spend a great deal more of what they earn on welfare services, such as health and education, than the government does. This kind of situation is bound to arise, of course, when any government takes it upon itself to provide services, often from a position of monopoly, that are properly outside the function of government.

These financial problems are lessened to a considerable degree under the voucher system, because as vouchers are supplemented out of income, so the total amount spent on education will increase, the ceiling of expenditure matching the value placed on education not by the state but by society.

Competition between schools would raise standards generally, make for greater efficiency, increase the varieties of educational establishments and make schools more responsive to parents' wishes—all the time remem-

bering that safeguards could be present in the form of state inspection relating to standards for buildings, teachers, advertising, etc.

With publicity and expert help and guidance, parents would begin to learn to choose competently, and the challenge thus presented would be a stage in the development of their own education. Some parents would choose more wisely than others at first, but experts can validly help here by providing information and advice. The framework of the system would tend to encourage wise choice, whereas the present system usurps, and extension of state control would usurp, the functions of parents and engenders apathy and indifference. In fact the state system positively discourages the participation and interest in education of just that class of parent the system is designed to help.

Competition and the market system generally would be as beneficial to a school system as it is to other commodities. For instance, under competition it is likely that the pay and prospects of teachers would be more in keeping with their real worth to the community. But the real value of the system of vouchers and competing schools would be to the children, who with the likely tendency to small classes and less specialisation, could be sure of an education where their individual capacities would be stretched to the proper degree. Parents, prompted to take more interest, and to participate in their child-

ren's education, would not only be helping to improve the school system, but would have the spur to become better parents.

There has been little argument so far about vouchers; in fact, as one educationist points out, there has been a conspiracy of silence on the matter. What is needed now is a large-scale public debate so that comparisons can be made between the fashionable nationalisation ideas and the freer voucher system.

On one point we can be sure: if it is considered necessary to have a state controlled system, it will be a sad indictment of government educational policies over the last hundred years. They will be judged to have failed in educating children to a maturity where they are able, as adults and parents, to think for themselves. The voucher system, however, does offer hope to society, that as individuals, we shall not be for ever dependent on the state, and that we may become cultured as well as educated persons.

The Institute of Economic Affairs has been instrumental in bringing the voucher system to the public attention. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the voucher system it is refreshing to find educationists challenging and questioning ideas, slogans, and practices that are fashionable and taken for granted. The publications of the Institute have given established authority in the field of education a knock, which I for one applaud.

The Future of Cities and the Land Problem

P. R. HUDSON

"San Francisco's Bay Area Rapid Transit project will give land owners a windfall profit of more than \$800 million."

THE FUTURE INVESTMENT in reshaping America's cities will probably run into trillions of dollars before the end of the century. Within the next generation, if the population projections are correct, it will be necessary to almost completely rebuild the major cities at twice their present size.

These staggering facts emerged from a high-level round table conference of thirty-three specialists in the land development field, organised by the National League of Cities, the American Institute of Architects, Luce magazines and the Lincoln Foundation. Described by New York's mayor as the "Who's Who of Urban Development," the list of participants included town planners, architects, planning commissioners, economists, tax specialists, transport leaders, administrators, government officials and developers. The conference lasted three days and dealt with every aspect of town and city development in an attempt to answer the question: What kind of city do we want?

The published report of the proceedings fills a forty-eight page supplement of *Nation's Cities*, April, 1967. In it are to be found more amazing facts. Between now and the year 2000:—

- * \$1,800 billion will be required for housing.
- * \$1,000 billion will be needed for commercial, industrial and utility construction.
- * \$1,000 billion will be needed for new community facilities.

At a scale more readily grasped, New York will require sixty-one college campuses for 1.3 million more students, one hundred more hospitals, or 45,000 beds.

The pressures on the nation's cities will be built up by a population of more than 250 million urban residents. Among the vitally important problems to be solved are these:

- * Pollution. At the moment it costs as much (\$500 million) each year to clear up the soot and garbage as it