

The Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture 2009

Rethinking what we mean by 'education'

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Within social democracy Education is more than a public service. It is a vital part of our foundation.

In abandoning social democracy for neo-conservatism the Labour Party also abandons the one strong point of conservatism – respect for tradition. In adopting a crude materialist concept of education as mere preparation for jobs and careers it debases education as the basis of living democracy.

We need to re-examine the meaning we attach to the term “education”. The effect of equating education with mere schooling is to narrow the educational debate and to overlook the implications of some rapid changes taking place in institutions other than schools and colleges which have a role in human development.

Education does not start and finish at the school gate. It does not consist only, or even mainly, in techniques. The 3Rs are not the basis of education.

All experience conditions us for the future. Some experience is deliberately designed to do so. This I define as education, though I add to that the sheer pleasure of learning. Education is formation (as the French call it): deliberate preparation for life and an essential part of life.

[This definition has objectivity and does not carry a value judgment about the several parts of the process or even as to whether education is a good thing! By this definition brainwashing is education but perhaps not a good thing?]

The basis, indeed the heart, of education in any society is the transmission and assimilation of the culture of that society, which enables the individual to participate as a full member of that society. To regard the 3Rs as the basis of education is to deny the cultural, moral and social content of education. To use technical competence in the 3Rs as the main test of educational achievement is to compound the error of identifying education with schooling.

Education starts and continues within the home. In the home from birth we learn how to eat, to dress, to behave, to speak, to care for ourselves and for others.

The elements of the process of education broadly defined include all the efforts deliberately made, in whole or part, towards the formation of the individual, either by himself or by another body or individual.

This includes notably the efforts of

- oneself
- schools and educational institutions
- parents and family
- peers – playmates and friends
- social and religious institutions
- government
- commercial institutions, notably the media, the internet & advertising

- medical institutions
- penal institutions

The value and importance of distinguishing education from schooling is that there is large variation and overlap in the impact of these institutions. None can be considered in isolation from others. Sometimes they duplicate and support each other and sometimes they are in conflict. And this is changing as technology, institutions and society evolve. Currently change is rapid due to the speed of technological development and the growing power of central government.

Many people obtain much education by private study. There is enormous variation in the nature and effect of the educational efforts of parents, not only pre-school but alongside schooling. The influence of peers is not negligible. For education in music, sex and the use of much technology (computers, mobile phones, ipods) most British children depend mainly on education by their peers. The educational consequences of recent huge advances in TV and the internet have yet to be explored and it may be that the proportionate influence and importance of formal schooling is on the decline. Paradoxically whilst education advances schools and universities may become less important! Educationists should become more aware of the educational impact, real and potential, of commercial influences, about which government seems so complacent. I have in mind, in particular, the tendency to replace democratic control of schooling by commercial bodies and the careless attitude to the quality of broadcasting and advertising.

There are vested interests in obscuring some of this. There are those who try to dismiss the awareness of social class and maintain social privilege in and through education; those who educate surreptitiously, for example by using entertainment; those who profit financially by changing the opinion and behaviour of others.

Often institutions prefer their educational efforts to be considered in isolation and to be free from interference. Parents may resent being told how best to bring up their children. Teachers may feel that only they offer “real” education. Advertisers may resist close examination of their motives. Governments, political and religious bodies may feel entitled to special privileges in influencing opinion. In the extreme governments may assume that they are entitled to total control and direction of education.

The parts played in the educational process by these institutions varies greatly, starting with the parents, who in English law have the primary responsibility for the education of their children. There is an enormous variation in the contribution to the education of their children made by parents. Sometimes there is a big overlap between the efforts of home and school, sometimes very little. Many children arrive at primary school already literate and orally articulate thanks to the efforts of their mothers. Others find it difficult to communicate at all with people outside their immediate home environment. Children start at primary school with different levels of relevant attainment which creates a problem for the teacher who is encouraged to resolve it by “levelling up”. On this there is some simplistic thinking - that the school takes over and the parental role is over. But thereafter there can be no level playing field because the differences and influences of home background remain and continue. The educational effect of social background does not end when schooling begins: it continues throughout life. Some homes have many books, others have none. Some parents speak the same language and the same form of language as the schoolteacher, whereas many speak, literally or virtually, in a different language.

A dangerous trend is towards increasing the power of government and reducing the role of parents in the education of children. This is both anti-democratic and socially regressive – it is not applied to the private sector. You and I will not allow it for ourselves and our families. We should not impose it on others. The fundamental question here is “Is the education of the child for the sake of the child or for the sake of the state?” The safeguarding of the child’s interests is a vital responsibility of the parents.

It is sheer impertinence for a government that is so careless about social and moral education to blame parents for alleged misbehaviour of children.

A major deficiency of government policies and indeed of much contemporary educational debate is the failure to think in terms of the whole educational process and, in particular, to concentrate far too much

on schooling in isolation. This is made even worse by limiting discussion of schooling (with which I include college and university education) to the formal curriculum.

My personal experience is that only a small fraction of my education has been derived from formal curriculum studies at school and university. The experience of just being at school and at university contributed much more than the formal studies. I learnt more from my peers at school and university than from my teachers.

I am not alone in making such a judgment and of course it is well rehearsed in respect of boarding school and university education. How many former Oxbridge students would not assert that they derived more from their formal studies than from simply having been members of the university community?

Education means learning how to live and how to live better.

Preoccupation with formal school and college curriculum means failing to consider the educational impact of:

- the individual's independent efforts;
- the hidden curriculum of school and college;
- the home, parents and siblings, family, playmates, friends;
- the social environment, including churches and institutions;
- the workplace and colleagues at work;
- the media, TV, books, the internet;
- advertising;

all of which are huge.

This is highly relevant to one of the educational crises of our time – that in respect of social and moral education. The educational institutions (schools, colleges, universities) find less and less social and moral consensus on which they can base their teaching; the churches are greatly reduced; parents are unsure; in effect the lead on this is often taken by those least qualified and perhaps least trusted to take it.

The government ducks the challenge and tries to pass the buck.

In distinguishing right from wrong, good from bad, truth from falsehood, beauty from ugliness, there may be no easy consensus but that does not justify the cowardice of evasion. That answers may be controversial is no justification for dodging the questions. In education we have explore them and make them important.

But government and the political parties take the cowards way. They now seem to deny the moral and social content of education completely as though schooling were a mere branch of industrial production demanding efficient management rather than moral leadership! Irresponsible and often atrocious moral leadership in the media, television and the internet is notorious but little is done about it and the problem is not central to educational debate as it should be.

This is not necessarily to advocate censorship and oppression. Instead of simply wringing hands about declining standards government could reaffirm the importance of cultural, social and moral standards and could take major positive initiatives to encourage good media, TV and internet production.

This relates importantly to the question of *education permanente* and the thesis that education is not entirely or even mainly about children but is a lifelong matter. We must avoid the simplistic misunderstanding widespread in this country and amongst its rulers that “lifelong learning” is merely an “add-on” to traditional education or a merely trendy new term for traditional adult education. The concept demands new thinking about the whole education process and is necessitated by the complexity and speed of change of modern society.

In particular this new concept overtakes the traditional thinking that adult education consists only of vocational education and education for leisure. Education permanente is education for life; and life is much more than work and leisure.

Democracy is not easy. A significant and fundamental concept of social democracy is that substantial education is a political necessity to ensure that everyone can competently participate in the working of democracy and should be enabled to have effective control of their own lives rather than be merely pushed around by others. “Work and leisure” was the upper class thinking about the limited lives of working class people but never their thinking about upper class lives which were conceived in much wider terms, to include the use of freedom and imagination and the exercise of power.

The current official thinking about education is in two parts: education for work which can be publicly financed; and education for leisure for which people should pay. But this is inadequate and antiquated thinking about education for life because life is much more than work and leisure.

In the not-too-distant past a man had to work till 65, often bent and broken, and could hope to survive for a mere 3 or 4 years of leisure, for a much-needed rest. His wife was similarly tired and broken by the cares of motherhood and domestic labour. But work, inside and outside the home, is now less demanding and of shorter duration; life expectancy is much longer. To think of perhaps 15, 20 or 30 of years of retirement as simply holiday is silly: it is an important and substantial part of life for which preparation and support should be made in education. This, indeed the whole of education, should include social education including, most importantly, the care and cultivation of the family, especially children, the sick and the elderly. It should include teaching of how to cope with the increasing complexities of society and its institutions. And it should include for the elderly some teaching of skills of survival – how to adjust to declining health and competence. Much of this can only be done outside the formal curriculum of educational institutions.

A vital part of the education of adults is in helping and encouraging their role in the education of their dependents. Most parents want to play a part in the education of their children but feel inadequate for it. To improve the education of children we have to make up a deficit in the education of their parents.

It is not generally recognised in this country that we are, and for many years have been, regarded in continental Europe as in some respects poorly educated, in the sense of general, as distinct from specialist, education. We have technical expertise but lack culture, high and low. Our incompetence in language is notorious and many of us are inarticulate in our own language.

Generally in Europe the transmission and assimilation of the culture is regarded as the basis of education but in this country, particularly England, there is little concern with or awareness of cultural tradition either in the home or further afield.

The English are renowned for, indeed proud of, their anti-intellectualism and pragmatism. Only the Englishman or woman can be too clever by half.

In sport we are renowned for our contempt for theory. Our footballers are brave and ignorant. Those of our leading football club managers who speak good English are mainly foreigners.

Our popular newspapers are a disgrace and are generally matched by much TV. Most homes have virtually no books. Public libraries are in decline and are used by only a small minority. Only a minority of university graduates read a quality newspaper and by international criteria the university curriculum followed by many students is extremely narrow. We have a high reputation for research but England is the only country in Europe in which it is possible to graduate as PhD without knowing the meaning of the word “philosophy”.

We pay a price for this - through monolingual exporters, engineers ignorant of economics, doctors ignorant of statistics, politicians ignorant of history and teachers ignorant of science.

The familiar assertions that British education, British schools and British universities are the envy of the world owe more to arrogant isolation than to detached observation.

The deficit will not be corrected from the bottom up. Ignorance has an effective defence mechanism. A

major reform in the education of adults (social education, not vocational, not recreational) is necessary to sustain an effort of school reform.

It would be valuable to expand adult education alongside the schooling of children, increasing and encouraging the involvement of parents and grandparents, indeed the whole community, in schooling. School premises should be used for much longer hours and for many more activities, and this should influence the location of schools and schooling. It strengthens the argument for keeping open and reopening village schools.

It has been widely argued that the recent reforms to secondary education have all tended to increase middle class privilege. A look at them in the light of a definition of education broader than mere schooling reveals even greater flaws.

The government's recent pre-occupation with "choice" of schools is very damaging. Often it means, in practice, not choice of schools by parents but choice of pupils by schools and hence social selection and privilege of pupils from "better" homes. Deliberately to promote competition between schools and publishing league tables and the like makes no sense. It encourages attending schools other than those near home.

It thus creates time wasting in travel by pupils and parents; it increases dependence of pupils on parents for transport; it creates difficulties in participation in extracurricular school activities; it separates school friendships from home friendships; it discourages "playing out" and social life associated with home; it militates against involvement in schooling by parents, grandparents, family friends; in these and other ways it isolates schooling from the other types of education.

The decline of community schooling is educationally, socially and economically much more damaging than is generally realized. It substantially contributes to the huge social and economic costs of traffic congestion – our towns and cities now have a weekday "rush hour" starting at 3.30 during term times. Large numbers of children, even adolescents, are now incapable of travelling to school or visiting schoolfriends by walking, cycling or public transport – as their parents did even as juveniles.

The idea of developing specialist secondary schools is also nonsensical. It is practicable only in conurbations. How many specialist secondary schools can be meaningfully offered to the children of Melton Mowbray, Barnoldswick or Tiverton? And the last thing English education needs is an increase in early specialisation.

The form of the "academy" policy makes explicit the government's denial of the cultural, social and moral dimensions of schooling. Its criteria of quality is simply managerial efficiency and it offers control of schools to institutions that have money and are managerially competent, no matter who or what, be they B&Q, M&S, Man U, BAE or Beelzebub plc. What an obscene mockery of educational ideals!

In summary, the common practice of identifying "education" simply with "schooling" is damaging, not merely by limiting debate but by debasing the educational process. In evading the cultural, social and moral dimensions of education we are betraying our children and cheapening ourselves. This is a major factor in the current decay of our society.