

THE VOCATIONALIZING OF EDUCATION

By RICHARD PRING

1. *The context*

IN THE RECENTLY PUBLISHED REPORT of the National Commission on Education, *Learning to succeed*,¹ chapter 5, which is concerned with innovation in learning, starts with the statement 'Education is big business'.

The Report reveals that that is so in more than one sense. In the first place, we spend £27 billion of public money on it annually. There are 700,000 teachers employed in the United Kingdom and there are at least 14 million students in any one year. Therefore, 'education' must be seen as a business – with investment, input, measurable output, value addedness, and judgements about cost-effectiveness. And, as money gets tight, it is increasingly being run as a business. Deputy headteachers are sometimes referred to as Directors of Human Resources, and headteachers are Chief Executives. In other words, the language is changing, thereby reflecting a different perception of education. The shared language of business brings schools and universities much closer to the world of work.

The second sense in which education is big business is reflected in the second chapter to the Report. There the context is set out within which the Commission pursued its deliberations. Education is essentially a preparation for life, and 'life' must be seen in basically economic terms, namely, the employability of young people and the enhanced economic welfare of the nation.

The argument is, generally speaking, as follows. A good standard of living (never defined, a point I shall return to later) requires a flourishing industry and commerce. That in turn needs well-trained and appropriately educated young people. If this seems obvious to readers, then one should say (as the Report does) that it has not always been so. Despite dire warnings for over a century, the country has not felt any urgency to invest in education and training to the same extent as other countries in order to maintain the competitive edge over them in industry and commerce. Speaking of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century, the Report says:

Our industrial success had not depended on education and training . . . The education of the workforce was scanty and its training mostly took the form of new recruits 'learning by doing' under the supervision of experienced workers. (p 14)

That, however, has now changed. There is a sense of urgency about the need for a better trained and a better educated workforce if the country is to maintain, let alone improve, its economic position – and thus its 'standard of living'. No longer can home markets be protected; they are in competition with goods produced elsewhere, often in places where labour is very cheap. The position may be reflected in the following points.

First, on living standards, by 1991 the UK was eighteenth among the twenty-four countries in membership of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, and eighth amongst the twelve countries of the European Community – a position reflecting steady decline comparatively.

Second, unemployment is roughly 3 million – and that figure does not count the youth unemployed taken off the register or the many poorly paid, part-time, mainly women workers. The point is that there is less and less room for the unskilled worker.

Third, the country cannot compete in low-skill occupations with those countries which have much cheaper labour costs. The only alternative, so it is claimed, is to focus much more upon the high-skill, knowledge-based industries. On the other hand, there is the problem of what Finegold² refers to as breaking out of the low-skill equilibrium – poorly educated and skilled management accepting poorly skilled workers and poor quality work, with no real demands upon the educational service to raise standards for all.

Fourth, the social consequences of unemployment and low-skilled, poorly paid employment are dire. What we have seen in recent years, within an *overall* improvement of standards of living, is a massive gap between the rich and the poor. Between 1979 and 1990, the real income of the bottom fifth of households did not change at all; for the middle fifth it increased by 23%; for the top fifth it increased by 40% (Report, p 20).

These and other facts produced by the Report are used as arguments, as indeed they have been in other Reports from the Confederation of British Industry³ and the Trades Union Congress,⁴ to draw the conclusion that the education and training of *all* young people must be geared much more to preparing them for the world of work. We need a much more highly educated and skilled workforce at every level.

What does that mean?

First, it says the UK must prepare people much more effectively for the 'knowledge revolution' which is taking place. Thus, if the UK is to shift from the 'low-skills equilibrium', in which it simply cannot compete with cheap labour countries, then it must have an extremely sophisticated workforce in high-tech industries, based on high quality design and production. Reference is made to 'the knowledge society', to 'knowledge workers', and to knowledge (not capital) as the basic economic resource. Part of that preparation for young people lies in the retraining in information technology, and much of the Report is devoted to that.

Second, however, Britain must change the attitudes of young people towards education and training. Such is the changing pattern of employment that it cannot predict what knowledge and skills will be needed a decade ahead. The sort of society, therefore, that young people should be prepared for is one in which they will recognize the need for constant updating of knowledge, renewing of skills, learning of new techniques. In other words, it must have a 'learning society', and that means that everyone must see the value of continual learning. Everyone must be educated to want further education.

Third, the educated person, suited to the changed economic climate, must have certain qualities which too often have been neglected. Thus, there will be much less emphasis upon highly specific skills, much more upon flexibility of mind, preparedness to try out something new, cooperatively in teams. Greater self-confidence in one's own creativity, in one's own capacity to contribute to problem-solving will be needed. Especially is this the case as monolithic industries are broken up into smaller ones, and as there is an increase in the number of small businesses and self-employed people. There will be a greater proportion of people in a management role, albeit managing people to make their own contribution to economic success.

These, then, very roughly and briefly, have been the economic factors which are the basis of educational thinking of a major report. What are the educational consequences?

2. Educational consequences

In many respects, what the Report says is not new. It articulates a debate which has lasted since the then Prime Minister Mr Callaghan's Ruskin College speech in 1977. There the Prime Minister argued that standards in our schools were too low, and that they must improve if young people were to play a part in the increasingly tough economic life

of the country. There are two reasons why they should play a part. The first concerns their own personal welfare: the young person without a job or without security will have an impoverished life with all the personal and social consequences of that. The second concerns the welfare of the country at large: investment in people is the way of ensuring the maintenance or enhancement of the quality of life.

The Prime Minister, therefore, picked out those areas where educational standards had to improve: basic literacy and numeracy, the skilled use and intelligent grasp of information technology, the personal qualities required for continuous and flexible learning, communication skills, and attitudes towards industry and commerce.

With regard to literacy and numeracy, there has been much concern about poor standards. A recent survey by the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit into literacy and numeracy among 21-year-olds and further education college students reported:

... almost 15% have limited literacy skills and 20% have only very limited competence with basic maths. A further larger group will need some additional help because the skills they have are not likely to be good enough to cope with changing requirements and demands . . . We have also demonstrated the major effect that poor basic skills have on job prospects, unemployment, housing and health . . .⁵

Of course, literacy and numeracy are basic to a general education irrespective of vocational relevance, but the idea of 'functional literacy' related to the economic necessities in a competitive world and the consequent international comparisons are relatively new. The relevance to the world of work gives a sense of urgency which was not apparent ten years ago.

With regard to information technology, a mastery of this is seen to be essential to the 'knowledge revolution', where prosperity lies in the accumulation, the classification and the dispersal of knowledge. As the Report says:

Information will be transmitted cheaply and instantaneously more or less anywhere in the world. It is foreseen that it will be possible to store the entire contents of the US Library of Congress on a silicon disc thirty centimetres across. It will be possible also to produce computers small enough to go in a pocket which will be as powerful as the largest supercomputers of today. (p 31)

The consequences of this technical revolution in how learning might be transformed, how businesses might be run and how society might be

organized – and people controlled – are hard to visualize. But, so the argument goes, any country whose citizens are not at the forefront of this revolution will be reduced to the low-skills economy (with massive unemployment).

With regard to personal qualities, there is a need for greater stress upon the personal – the way of articulating one's thoughts, of relating skilfully to others, of being self-confident and personable, of being prepared to tackle new problems and of working co-operatively with others. Implicit is a critique of so much schooling which, in making education a set of hurdles at each of which a sizeable group falls and is removed from the system, encourages a sense of failure and a rejection of the world of learning.

With regard to communication skills, there is an increased emphasis upon listening and talking, not just reading and writing, of being able to express feeling and articulate complex ideas, of being able to see things from others' points of view.

With regard to attitudes, it is argued that for too long the educational system has nurtured a contempt for the doing and the making, for the worlds of industry and commerce. It is as though success lies ultimately in the kind of academic achievement which makes one a successful Oxford don rather than a manager of a business. The argument of such people as Martin Wiener in *English culture and the decline of the industrial spirit*⁶ is that the 'liberal idea', which has dominated the educational tradition of Britain, has created the contempt in the élite minority for the industrial and commercial life which is the lot of the majority. The leaders of society – educated in the famous private schools and in the old universities – have themselves been cut off from a culture which is essential to future economic prosperity. In the Capability Manifesto of the Royal Society of the Arts, signed by leading scientists and philosophers, it was stated that:

There exists in its own right a culture which is concerned with doing and making and organising and the creative arts. This culture emphasises the day to day management of affairs, the formulation and solution of problems, and the design, manufacture and marketing of goods and services.⁷

What lies behind so many of the changes in schools and colleges and universities is the attempt to renew that culture, essential for economic progress.

Briefly, this changed emphasis, this insistence upon economic relevance, is reflected in many innovations which have recently taken place

within the educational system. In 1982, the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative was introduced to secondary schools, costing over £1 billion, and organized by the Department of Employment, not the Department of Education and Science. 'Mini-enterprise' has become popular in schools, whereby pupils learn how to run a business by running one themselves. Enterprise in Higher Education has put millions of tax-payers' money (once again, through the Department of Employment) into universities on condition that they teach enterprise to all undergraduates, including those studying Old Norse and ancient Greek. Following the example of the USA, local businesses have entered into compacts with local schools, whereby pupils will be guaranteed training and possibly employment if certain educational objectives are met. Teachers are put on placement in industry and pupils have to engage in work experience, an initiative from the Department of Trade and Industry. Employers sit on Governing Bodies of schools. The Training and Enterprise Councils, in the hands of employers, have taken from the Colleges of Further Education responsibility for funding training. The National Council for Vocational Qualifications, again established under the Department of Employment, is providing a framework of qualifications which will help define qualifications taken at school and college, particularly the General National Vocational Qualifications. There is even a Burger King School in Tower Hamlets, an idea borrowed from the USA in which good behaviour and academic achievement is rewarded with vouchers which can be cashed in at the local fast food store.

We have seen, in other words, a rapid vocationalizing of education, as schools, colleges and universities attempt to make education more relevant to the world of work.

But are there not grounds for concern? Is the 'economic imperative' endangering other educational ideas?

3. Education

There is no doubt that education, as a formal system of learning that any community establishes, cannot ignore the skills, knowledge and attitudes which are necessary for that community to survive. In different societies, founded on different economic bases, there will necessarily be differences of emphasis. Society quite rightly expects the products of the educational system to have learnt what is essential for subsequent employment. Quite rightly, there will be condemnation of an education which, whatever the moral ideals behind it, does not enable the students to earn a living. There is a necessary connection between a worthwhile

education and quality of life, and that quality of life includes the capacity to manage at work and at home. Hence, the importance of shifting the balance in the educational and training system – balance in those deemed educable, balance in the knowledge to be acquired, balance in the attitudes to be nurtured – as the economy changes and as fresh demands are made upon people. Different things need to be learnt; different processes of learning need to be encouraged; a wider group of people needs to be taken seriously as learners; the period of learning needs to be extended.

However, 'education' is not simply a descriptive term, that is, a term identifying the processes and institutions of learning as they are. Indeed, we call it an *educational* system because we believe that something worthwhile is happening. 'Education' is an evaluative concept. It assumes that the successful products of the system will be educated people, and the idea of the educated person depends upon the values that one has. Indeed, it is difficult to talk about 'education' without some implicit notion of 'worthwhile learning', and worthwhile learning is in turn parasitic upon one's idea of the quality of life worth living.

In preparing young people for life, we select certain sorts of learning rather than others – certain literature worth reading rather than others, certain subjects worthy of study rather than others. We are implicitly making judgements about the kinds of thoughts, skills, attitudes, feelings, beliefs which we want to pass on to the next generation. It is impossible to disconnect education as a system from one's idea of the educated person, and thus from what it means to be a person and to be one more abundantly.

Part of that notion of being a fulfilled person will include 'capability' – and the capacity to survive in a competitive world, to obtain and to hold down a job, to contribute to the economic welfare of society, and so on. But, one might ask, for what purpose? Economic success may be a necessary, but it is not a sufficient, condition for a worthwhile life. Much more needs to be said than that.

What is so disappointing about the Report is that no attempt is made to spell out that quality of life – the moral framework – within which that preparation for the world of work is to be placed. Hardly any reference is made to the place of the arts in 'successful learning' or the place of moral or religious education. In countering the disdain 'within the liberal tradition' for the practical and for work-related activities, the Report reflects so much of what is happening in schools by ignoring the deeper moral questions about the quality of life worth pursuing.

That is surely one of the most important tasks that confronts those working in our schools and universities, because, as the relation of

education to work is emphasized, so the language of education changes, impoverishing the liberal ideal which we have inherited. Education becomes a commodity to be bought and sold; teaching becomes the delivery of a curriculum prescribed by the Secretary of State; success is measured against performance indicators; teachers are subject to quality control and assurance; schools are put in league tables according to the various audits. Somehow one has lost that sense of education being a transaction between teacher and learner, wherein the next generation is introduced to a world of ideas. Education can so easily become the means to someone else's ends, not that critical look at the ends themselves, which surely all good education is. Central to that 'world of ideas' are the ways in which we have come to understand ourselves, indeed to define our humanity – through poetry, through literature, and through religion.

I put the matter in this way for a very good reason. Our schools contain pupils of many different beliefs and persuasions. Above all, there is an indifference to religious practice and to religious belief. Religious Studies, therefore, are not easy to teach, especially if they are seen as an initiation into a religious form of life, as opposed to the sociology of religion or general knowledge about different religions. If religious studies are seen as having a formative and spiritual dimension, then, in a world of secular indifference, teachers will be asked by what authority do they introduce pupils to a set of practices and beliefs which are a 'private affair', most likely not shared by the pupils' parents. At worst, the teachers will be accused of indoctrination. Therefore, a spiritual dimension to education, linked closely to religious teaching, will have no place in the education of the next generation, especially in an educational system which is increasingly driven, as we have seen, by economic considerations. And yet we do live in a 'world of ideas' through which we define ourselves as human.

Such a world, if narrow and impoverished, will give us an impoverished definition of our humanity. It will leave no defence against other distorted definitions, those which borrow their language from economics and business, and which leave pupils vulnerable to the rather cheap form of utilitarianism which now prevails. They become but economic means to some economic ends. Economic expansion is important. But we need occasionally to ask 'expansion for what?' The answer must lie in the welfare of people. But, then, we are back to those deeper questions concerning the distinctive qualities of being human.

No *educational* programme can avoid those questions which explore what it is to be human. They cannot avoid them for two major reasons.

These are the questions which young people are concerned about, even if they are not articulated very clearly. They are concerned with their own image and identity, with the values which are worth pursuing, with their relationship with others and with society, with their life-style determined to a large degree by the employment they train for, with matters of justice and fairness, with their personal capacity to change conditions. Moreover, in posing these questions and in accepting solutions, they are fed with ideas through which they make judgements and establish for themselves what is possible and what is not. They themselves, therefore, are developing an idea of what it is to be human as part of their growing up. Moreover, they will often reject those subjects and activities as trivial which are not seen to be relevant to these deeply personal and human questions.

The second reason why educational programmes cannot avoid these questions about what it is to be human is that they are, irrespective of the personal wishes of the learners themselves, the most significant questions to be asked. They are explored through the different cultural traditions and subject disciplines to which young learners are introduced. Literature, history, geography, science are *educationally* all transforming pupils' understanding of being human. We simply cannot step outside the world of ideas through which we see both ourselves and other people.

A significant part of that 'world of ideas' is that of religious language and practice, and the connected spiritual ideals which have inspired so many to live their lives in particular ways. There is no way which the young learner can have a balanced understanding of what it is to be human, how one comes to be human and how one might be more so (to paraphrase Jerome Bruner's reference to 'Man: a course of study'⁸) without a sympathetic grasp of that religious and spiritual dimension – without being introduced to the voices of religion and morality, as well as to those of science and of poetry.

There is a danger, exemplified in the National Commission Report, that the 'conversation between the generations of mankind', which the young learners want to participate in and which as teachers we want to share with them, might be a rather one-sided conversation, and the deeper, moral and more significant parts of the conversation might get left out.

NOTES

¹ National Commission on Education, *Learning to succeed* (London, 1993).

² D. Finegold, 'Breaking out of the low-skill equilibrium', NCE Briefing Paper No. 5 (London, 1992).

- ³ Confederation of British Industry, *Towards a skills revolution* (London, 1989).
- ⁴ Trades Union Congress, *Skills 2000* (London, 1989).
- ⁵ Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (London, 1993).
- ⁶ M. Wiener, *English culture and the decline of the industrial spirit* (London, 1983).
- ⁷ Royal Society of the Arts, *Manifesto for capability* (London, 1979).
- ⁸ J. Bruner, *Towards a theory of instruction* (London, 1966).