

STATE INTERVENTION AND NINETEENTH CENTURY EDUCATION

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There is some debate in Britain as to whether the remaining private schools should be allowed to exist or whether they should be abolished in the interests of 'fairness'. To argue for the expansion of private education is not at all popular. Even most of those who think of themselves as good, solid supporters of free markets dismiss a free market in education. Privately owned schools financed by state-provided vouchers are a good idea, they think. But privately owned and financed education? Now let's not go too far! After all, look at the history books. Don't they tell us that before state finance, compulsory education, and inspection, children received only a small amount of poor quality education? Don't they say that many children received no education at all? We don't want that to happen again. One way to go about replying to these worries would be to point out that incomes are vastly greater now than 150 years ago. We could discuss loans, savings schemes, the methods of voluntary financing. But to do only this would be tactically to accept the traditional statist historical view. But there is every reason to reject this view.

HOW MUCH EDUCATION?

If one studies the work of Professor E. G. West, a challenger of this orthodoxy, one may be struck by the gullibility of those historians who take any and all evidence at face value without digging deeper. But then the suspicion may occur that it is due less to gullibility than to a desire to believe in order to support their politically statist views. The sources from which information has been gathered should immediately provoke suspicion. For instance, state employed inspectors will be tempted to denigrate private schools so as to increase the number of inspectors, their responsibilities, salaries and prestige. The officials of the Education Bureau (who would obviously be asked to advise committees) would favour an expansion of state provision, finance and control for the same reasons.

Looking at the quality of education we run straight into a piece of statistical sleight of hand. As West says, nineteenth century statisticians "typically used 5-15 years as the definition of school age over a century ago and used it as the benchmark of attendance deficiencies. Yet as late as 1922 only 31% of the 14 year olds were attending school. In 1972 average schooling in England began at 5 years and ended at 15. It is unrealistic to assume that a similar 10 year schooling was an appropriate definition of the base 'population of school age' a century and a half ago." An

explanation of Gladstone's questioning of Kay on the 1838 select committee reveals the effect of this statistical manipulation. In this dialogue Kay says: "One third of the children between 5 and 15 are not receiving instruction of any kind whatever." Upon further questioning by Gladstone he conceded a criterion of 8 years of schooling, rather than 10. Using the same calculations, a figure of 80% schooling is produced, in place of the previous 67%. A few days later in committee alas, Kay had returned to the assumption of a 10 year schooling.

But this stated 10 years of schooling was what Kay thought "desirable and practicable", not what was actually the case. Information on the true duration of schooling appeared a year after the committee had reported, in 1839, from an intensive house-to-house survey of Pendleton, a typical town of the Industrial Revolution near Manchester. It concluded "That not more than 2 to 3% of the juvenile population are at present left entirely destitute of instruction." Of the school-goers "one third appear to remain less than three years; one third from three to five years; and one third remain above five years." On the basis of this evidence, which seems to have been carefully obtained with doubtful cases being discarded, the majority of children left school at ten years old, and well over 90% of children received instruction.

In 1839 the Manchester Society surveyed Hull. It found that though Hull had only a marginal lead over Pendleton in the length of average school life, it had a significantly greater lead in literacy attainments. While 90% of the adults in both towns could read, in Hull two thirds could also write compared to one third in Pendleton. As West states: "The figures suggested that the ability to stay at school until the age of 12 years was the most critical variable as far as writing was concerned and 9 to 10 years for reading. But this was only 1838 and there was an upward trend in schooling. Towns such as Pendleton were clearly on the threshold of full majority literacy over 30 years before the 1870 Forster Act." There is much that could be said about national figures, but rather than going on at length just consider the following: in England and Wales in 1851, the percentage of children at primary school was already in excess of the world total reached in 1961. The nineteenth century English figure was nearly twice that of Africa and the Arab states in 1961 and about 30% bigger than that of Asia in 1961.

QUALITY AND PARENTAL CHOICE

Despite the lower incomes of the period then, children were being schooled. But what about the quality of that schooling? Isn't it true that parents choose the cheapest schools rather than those that provided a sound education? It's interesting to note that, if anything, better student/teacher ratios existed than over a century later in state schools. The number of pupils per teacher at common day schools was on average 26.8% in the 1930's in Bury, Salford, Liverpool, Manchester, York and Birmingham. In 1967 in English primary schools (the nearest equivalent to the nineteenth century common day schools) the figure was 29.7 pupils per teacher.

It has been suggested that the parents, many of whom were not educated, could not or would not choose good schools. The Assistant Commissioner, Mr Coode, showed the Royal Commission on Popular Education (1861) that in his district the parents did



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make use of good schools and withdrew their children from the bad. The alertness of the parents is shown by the many cases where a previously badly run school (with few or no pupils as a consequence) would be taken over by efficient staff. The newly invigorated establishment invariably found itself in great demand in a short time. Similar reports came from other districts, and the 1861 Newcastle Commission, discussing the parents, said that they preferred to pay more for an efficient school than less for an inefficient one. Even in these early days then, parental choice was being exercised, and exercised responsibly. The effect was to weed out ineffective schools. Parents were much better inspectors than the official ones since there were so many more of them, and they kept a continuous rather than periodic check.

A look at some literacy figures from before 1870, when substantial state intervention began, will indicate the effectiveness of the education of the period. The 1838 report on the Training of Pauper Children in workhouses shows that 87% of these children could read, and 531 could also write. Compare this to some UNESCO literacy figures for 1950: Portugal 55-60%, Egypt 20-25%, Algeria 15-20%. The UNESCO figures refers to pauper children between the 9 and 16 years. The report from the Assistant Handloom Weavers Commissioners in 1839 reveal that over 92% of handloom weavers could read. These people could not have benefitted from state subsidies to day schools which had only begun, in a very small way, in 1833. The average school leaving age was 11 and most of these adults were at least 15 in 1833.

There was quite a rapid growth in literacy before 1870 as living standards rose so more schooling could be afforded. It is true that state subsidies increased between 1833 and 1870 (though the opposite is true of the mid 1860s) but, as late as 1869, two-thirds of school expenditure was still coming from voluntary sources, especially from parents. Also the state subsidies, it must be noted, came from a regressive tax system, i.e. one which hit the poor harder, so it would be problematic to argue that the subsidy system was responsible for expansion.

THE SQUEEZE ON PRIVATE SCHOOLS

State subsidies to schools, paid for by taxes levied primarily on the less well off, started at a very low level in 1833. They were gradually increased until the 1870 Education Act (or Forster Act). The country was divided into districts and in any district where officials believed there was a shortage, new Board schools could be built. These were financed from local rates and central government taxation-theft. It was recognized early that the expansion of the state sector was having an adverse effect on private schools. This displacement effect was noted by the Newcastle report of 1861 which observed that state schools could undersell and therefore ruin the private schools. This expansion of the state system was facilitated by a ruling of the Education Bureau, following the Forster Act, that where Board schools existed they had the first right to supply the deficiencies of the gaps. Gaps, of course, were continually appearing due to population growth, and each was now filled by state schools. It could then be claimed that additional private schools were unnecessary. The takeover was further aided by an over-estimation of the size of the gaps (often with the connivance of the Education Bureau).

But rather than increasing, or, due to the state/private displacement effect, leaving the rate of expansion of education unaffected, the extension of state education after 1870 actually slowed the expansion. How can this be? An analysis by Sam Peltzman shows why this was so: simply put, those who choose state aid must take a fairly standard quantity of education from state schools. If a family wants to purchase a larger quantity, after intervention, it has to forego the state aid entirely. Thus many families may accept the free (at point of use) state-provided education even though they would have purchased more education had there been no intervention.

COMPULSION ARRIVES

The 1870 Act gave school districts the power to make schooling compulsory up to certain ages even in non-board schools which were not fully subsidized. In 1880 Mundella's Act universalised compulsion and established attendance inspectors. The school leaving age was set at 10 and was gradually raised to 12 by 1900. Compulsion was craftily used to accelerate the movement from private to tax financed state schools. From 1880, with the introduction of compulsion, it was argued that it was wrong for the government to force parents to do something they could not afford ... therefore education should be made 'free'. Free schooling meant full subsidisation and it was then argued that only the new government-sponsored Board schools should receive this treatment. It was said that private schools that were run for profit should not be given aid because this would be subsidising profit makers.

It was a common attitude of legislators that profit seeking was rather distasteful. The next argument was that these should not receive the same degree of aid accorded to the Board schools because this would amount to using Protestants' taxes to support Catholic schools and vice-versa. The result was that the Board schools ostensibly set up to complement the private schools eventually pushed them out of the market.

Some historians, presenting figures to prove their case, have said that compulsion increased attendance significantly in the two or three decades after Mundella's Act. But their arguments are vitiated by at least four factors. First, at the same time there was a steady reduction in fees which would obviously increase demand. Second, incomes were rising and, since education is a 'normal good' more of it would be purchased with higher incomes. There was also a decline in loan interest rates which would aid finance. Third, the population was expanding so there were more children of school age. Fourth, many writers have given figures showing increased attendance at state schools but this was the result of switching from private schools which could not compete with tax-subsidized fees.

Compulsion, by accelerating the decline of competitive private schools, reduced the quality of education. Some families also lost out directly if they could have done better with the children doing some work for a year rather than spending it at school. Thus poor families in particular would suffer as their income-earning capacity was reduced while they still had to pay taxes to support the children of other families. Compulsion also meant a loss of practical, on-the-job training which could no longer be chosen in place of possibly less beneficial schooling.

The policy of compulsion was supported by teachers and Education Bureau officials. If parents were forced to buy their product they would expect higher salaries and bigger establishments. As they grew in numbers their influence on legislators naturally grew. They were joined by the departmental school Inspectors for obvious reasons.

History cannot be used to support the claim that, without state intervention, children would not be properly educated. With the historical evidence on our side we can confidently argue not merely for a voucher system (except perhaps as a temporary half-way stage), but for a completely free market in education.

RECOMMENDED READING:

E. G. West:

Education and the Industrial Revolution, Batsford, London, 1975.

Education and the State, Hobart Paper 42, Institute of Economic Affairs, London, 2nd edition 1971.

Economics, Education and the Politician, IEA, London, 2nd imp., 1976.