

THE CRISIS IN BRITISH EDUCATION

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Our education is in crisis, as most citizens now know. Establishment spokesmen claim, limply, that everything is fine save a shortage of funds. But the poor English and mathematics of millions of our young people are apparent to everyday experience and testified in private and official research. The question is not whether but why a large minority lack this basic competence.

The government thinks the crisis is a practical one. Make everybody learn the same skills and the same compulsory curriculum. Use people with recent classroom experience in teacher "training" and cut out the "theory". Concentrate on methods courses and "practical" techniques.

This is anti-scholarly wishful thinking and muddling through. The crisis is not practical but intellectual. Educated people differ deeply on principles and priorities in English, mathematics, history and science. They dispute questions of

culture and tradition. They cannot agree whether school is about the developmental "needs" of the child, the maintenance of our economic life, or the transmission of our civilisation.

Such disagreements surface explicitly today in arguments about spelling, grammar, tables, geographical and historical knowledge, examinations, discipline and much else.

SABOTAGE BY THE ELITE

Such debate is entirely proper. The crisis has built up because one side has succeeded in imposing its views. Those who are against rote-learning and mechanical efficiency, who favour multiculturalism against our culture, who believe in child-centred pedagogy rather than traditional teaching, have largely carried the day, against the majority opinion.

Educational Notes No. 7

ISSN 0953-7775 ISBN 1 85637 057 7

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance, 25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
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The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

Clearly many people are illiterate, innumerate and badly behaved. The real crisis lies, not in these facts, but in the antinomian attempt at promoting or justifying them. The elite have persistently tried to sabotage school discipline. And they have scorned the mechanics of learning, their cant about “skills” notwithstanding. A crude example: there are now graduates who neither know nor care about the correct use of the possessive apostrophe. This is the obdurate tip of an iceberg of ignorance.

EDUCATIONAL SOCIALISM

The crisis arises because one-sided views have been institutionalised. School has been brought into disrepute. Distortion like this is not new, nor unique to education. In modern times, however, such irresponsibility has been more typical of socialist societies than of free ones.

As Milton Friedman says, Western education-systems are socialist. Take ours. It is in the main public financed, compulsory and monopolistic. Above all it pits an insatiable egalitarianism against the instincts and interests of most citizens, whose wishes it blandly ignores.

If this mixture is not socialism, then what is? Our intellectual crisis belongs to the same *genus* of misfortune as the Soviet harvest. Yet this new, dismal political economy is not widely understood. Maybe this is excusable. There are key distinctions of context. Unlike general socialism, our educational version overlaps with a free civil order and real markets. Thus it has to reach certain minimum levels. There would otherwise be mass revolt.

This limits the ability of the elite to abolish or infantilise examinations, or impose general mixed-ability secondary teaching, for example. Thus our education is only a partial failure. Most people do all right at school, though that “all right” is feeble by some international comparisons. The worst failure is confined, moreover, to the inner urban welfariat, whom most people do not care about, and on whom the progressive elite love to experiment.

THE TEACHERS ARE NOT TO BLAME

The real question is why the education-establishment is brazenly prepared to see a large mi-

nority of people so ill-equipped for the world. Arthur Koestler used to call Communist fellow-travellers the demi-virgins of totalitarian flirtation, peeping toms, watching history’s debauches through a hole in the wall. Our progressives, more abandoned, have for thirty years inspired the classroom orgy, sometimes even leaving the doors wide open.

The teachers are not to blame. Victims, not authors, they have to comply with current orthodoxies. It is the experts who wanted children to call teachers “Bill” or “Mary”, or learn to read by “osmosis”. Her Majesty’s Inspectorate now issue successive reports effectively denouncing the results of earlier solecisms. This is welcome evidence that some of the elite are changing their minds. Unfortunately, it will still leave teachers holding the baby.

CHOICE NOT BUREAUCRACY

The government seems half blind. It squanders resources on centralised bureaucracy, just when even the Soviets admit its unworkability. It permits the employment of thousands of “experts” whose dismissal would help to pay teachers properly. Indeed, it staffs new and costly quangos with just such otiose specialists.

We need choice, not bureaucracy. Traditional approaches get marginalised because, though most people wanted them, they were powerless to stop the schools dropping them.

Only competition can handle so radical a dissensus as ours. We must talk; but no amount of talking, no degree of administrative coercion, will restore consensus, subject by subject, practice by practice. Parents need real choices, schools which do old-fashioned tables and spelling and have traditional discipline and a traditional curriculum, in open competition with progressive schools. In a free society this is the only good test of opinion and effectiveness.

Some new measures - opting out, Local Management of Schools, capacity-filling, publication of examination results - will help create competition. The National Curriculum and the new Quangos must go. Above all, we need genuine competitive examinations. The old addage that competition is the consumer’s friend must be verified in education.