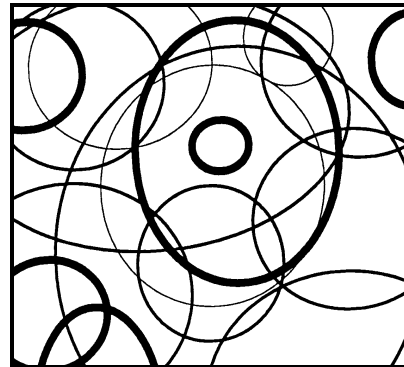
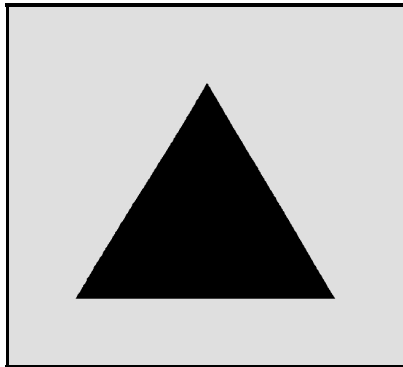


AGAINST PLANNED EDUCATION

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Throughout the world today, the systems of mass, compulsory, centrally-planned state schools established in the 19th and early 20th centuries are in severe crisis, in many countries verging on collapse. In Britain, Labour politicians argue that the crisis will be solved by spending more taxpayers' money — even though far such money is already spent in real terms per pupil than ever before. Conservative politicians claim that wicked socialists captured certain critical positions of power within the centrally planned system, and used their positions to impose un-Tory curricula, methods of teaching, methods of training teachers and so on. Now the government intends to by-pass these centres of power, and have the central planning system run much more tightly in the hands of the Education Secretary. Only change the person running the system to a True Blue Tory, the government claims, and the impossible will happen: central planning will produce an abundance of wisdom and learning among British youth which will put the Academy of ancient Athens to shame.

Those who have studied Austrian economics know better. The problems inherent in the central planning of education are the same as those inherent in the central planning of the economy: the former is, after all, the central planning of the lives of young people, and the latter the central planning of everybody's lives. In an educational free market, by contrast, every individual would be free to learn what he or she wants, from whomever he or she wants, and under terms and conditions that are acceptable to both consumer and producer. The enormous diversity of knowledge and skills which exists among millions of disparate individuals — which could never be known by any central authority — would be available for individuals seeking to gain access to

it. As each individual developed and learned more, his or her educational demands — which would necessarily be different from those of every other individual — would continuously change in the light of knowledge gained in the educational process itself.

Under central planning, the educational facilities made available to the individual consumer can never be any wider than what the planning body, whether it be the head teacher and school governors, local education authority or Cabinet minister, believes to be “appropriate” education for their conception of “the average pupil”. This remains the case even when there is some flexibility in central planning, and a measure of “choice” offered in the curriculum. The degree of choice available to the individual school pupil can never be wider than that available to a consumer of retail goods in a Soviet-style planned economy where a “choice” between two or more models of a particular good may be included in the central economic plan. Yet even under Soviet central planning, the consumer could at least “choose” to buy from a number of different state-owned retail stores (and of course the black market and the small legal market as well) when he or she wished to purchase it; when educational central planning is combined with compulsory school attendance, the individual does not even enjoy this measure of “choice”.

As these words are being written, British media attention is being paid to the way in which the 1992 GCSE results, initially hailed as the most successful ever, were soon exposed as a fraud because the examining boards had simply made the examinations easier than ever before (for example, using 1979 O level physics questions in 1992 A level papers). Government ministers are now furiously railing at the examining boards, threatening them with loss of autonomy if they do not make the questions harder next time. One is reminded of the faked economic statistics of the former Soviet Union, and of the imprisonment and shooting of “saboteurs” who were used as scapegoats for the failures of economic planning. In a free market educational system, these absurdities would disappear. When individuals are free to learn what they want, from whomever they want, it is up to them as individuals to decide whether they have gained consumer satisfaction. While there would almost certainly be many varied tests and examinations, to discover whether the individual has mastered the skills and knowledge he or she set out to acquire, the spectacle of millions of 16- and 18-year



Educational Notes No. 17

ISSN 0953-7775 ISBN 1 85637 159 X

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
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The views expressed in this publication are those of its author,
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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

old people taking the same examinations on the same curriculum at the same time every June would be consigned to the same intellectual rubbish dump which already contains the doctrine of central economic planning. Just as it is ridiculous to imagine that a central authority can somehow “examine” the extent of consumer satisfaction in the market for retail goods, in which people are largely free to buy what they want from whom they want and at a time which suits them, so also in an educational free market there could be no universal forced simultaneous curricular examinations, because everyone would be learning different things, in different ways, from different types of people, according to their own individual tastes and requirements.

THE TECHNOLOGY OF TRAINING

Because the school system is run on the basis of both compulsory attendance and central planning, it has no incentive to take advantage of developments in the techniques of transmitting knowledge. The model of the school with which we are familiar, in which a teacher stands in front of a group of 30 or more young people, all of whom are forced by law to be there, and many of whom have not the slightest interest in what the teacher is saying, and recites the contents of a curriculum decided upon in Whitehall, is about as inefficient and useless a means of conveying knowledge and skills as it is possible to achieve. In recent decades, enormous progress has been made in the technique of training individuals in both commercial industry and the armed forces, to master complicated and extensive skills and areas of knowledge. During the 1940s, military equipment became much more sophisticated than had previously been the case, with the appearance of radar, atomic weapons, jet aircraft, helicopters and other innovations. This led the armed forces to radically overhaul their training methods, with the introduction of such techniques as skills analysis (defining exactly what skills the trainee is to acquire), operational testing, the use of simulation (the design of special training environments), programmed instruction (allowing the trainee to proceed at his own pace and make his own responses), and other innovations, which were subsequently adopted by commercial firms for the purpose of training their employees in the performance of complex tasks. Since then, this “technology of training” in both industry and the armed forces has become ever more refined and sophisticated, as it has to be in order to maintain the effectiveness and safety of the company or military unit.¹ The fact that each soldier or employee wants to be there, and is highly motivated, is central to the success of the training process, which is one reason why the professional military are so strongly opposed to the reintroduction of conscription. One dreads to imagine what would happen if training in the assembly and handling of nuclear weapons was carried out in the same way that teaching in schools is conducted.

One recent development in the “technology of training” is multi-media, an information medium in which the personal computer is linked to a CD-ROM (compact disc-read-only memory) player. Each compact disc can contain a large quantity of digitally-stored data, including still pictures, sounds, and limited moving pictures, while a more extended video capability can be obtained by linking the system to a video player. The key factor in multi-media is interactivity: the user determines his or her own path through the software, can select pictures, sounds, text and video at random, and can proceed at his or her own pace. Multi-media soft-

ware is already commercially available in such areas as encyclopedias, point-of-sale information, entertainment, gambling systems, as well as education and training, where instant on-line response and repeatability allow the system to adapt to the individual user’s specific aptitudes and interests. Many private companies, such as the retailers B&Q, already use multi-media to train their employees, and it is highly significant that when the state wishes to train its own personnel in methods of exercising control over individuals, it largely dispenses with classroom lectures and uses interactive multi-media technology. For example, police officers in Britain are trained in methods of crowd control using the VISTRAIN (Video-based Integrated System for Training Applications) system, which simulates crowd trouble at such events as football matches and trains the officers in appropriate responses to different situations.²

Multi-media offers enormous potential benefits in educating young people, but the nature of the technology directly contradicts the model of compulsory attendance and a uni-directional, imposed curriculum. The use of all the facilities of multi-media offers the individual the opportunity to learn any skill or body of knowledge in his or her own way, for his or her own purposes, and the opportunity, where required, to branch off in any direction in accordance with his or her wishes. Let us take the single example of foreign language learning. Mike Picciotto has had 30 years’ experience of language training and interactive courseware design, and is executive director of Vektor, a British company which sells multi-media language courses in over 30 countries and in 40 national language versions. Mr Picciotto has to provide his adult customers with products that actually enable them to speak to and understand foreigners in their own languages, and to read and write those languages; if he does not, they will cease to buy his products and he will go out of business. Neither has he any legal power to use or threaten violence against people who elect not to use his services. The design principles he uses to create his courses are therefore worthy of attention from anybody who wishes to understand the methods which would in all likelihood be used in an educational free market:

Motivation is a critical factor ... Users of all types relate better to material which they see as appropriate to them. Material should not be patronising in tone ... Since acquiring competence in speaking the foreign language depends absolutely on doing enough intensive practice of each foreign language phrase, the course must offer:

- a) the ability to repeat each phrase, broken down into a manageable size, as many times as required and at the user’s own pace.
- b) fast enough response times to replay the phrase instantaneously or near instantaneously — while short term memory is still active, in fact.
- c) the ability to solve comprehension problems immediately.
- d) the ability to record the voice and replay within the same response times.
- e) the ability to consult other forms of support — on-line dictionary etc., on demand.
- f) A courseware design which eliminates activities known to be damaging to the language process.³

Compare this to the way languages are taught in British schools. In every classroom, some 40 individuals are forced together to learn the language which the National Curriculum Council has decided they are to learn. Among these 40 individuals, some will have not the slightest desire to be taught these languages, and will understandably respond in a hostile manner to being forced to sit for years on end through classes they are only attending under threat of violence. Those who do have some interest in these language will vary greatly in their purposes in learning the language, and in their aptitude for the varying skills involved in mastering it. Some may wish merely to be able to stock up on duty free alcohol at Calais, others to become more serious tourists, others to do business with people in the country in question, others to be able to appreciate Hugo or Goethe, one perhaps to become a don in comparative linguistics at the Sorbonne or Heidelberg. Yet the test of achievement in learning the language is none of these. It is passing an examination set by a British board, based on an estimate on what an average pupil "ought" to have learned in the years of teaching allotted to him or her. It is hardly surprising that the versions of "French" and "German" taught in British schools bear little relation to these languages as they are spoken and written on the Continent.

I once made the acquaintance of a rather frail-looking and sensitive young Welsh woman who had recently undergone a nervous breakdown and left the teaching profession as a result of her experiences in attempting to teach French and drama at one of the toughest, most violent "problem" comprehensive schools on the rough side of Cardiff. A large minority of pupils in each class she taught had subjected her to an unrelenting barrage of personal insults, obscene abuse, physical intimidation and disruption of her attempts to teach. Sometimes the entire class would join in these scholarly activities, and the climax of her career came when on one occasion a whole class of 40 or so 12- and 13-year-olds organised a spitting contest, with her face as the target. Supporters of equal opportunities in education will doubtless be inspired to hear that the girls were just as enthusiastic as the boys in playing this new mixed sport. This incident demonstrates the extent of consumer dissatisfaction which results from the gross mis-match between what consumers actually want and what they get allocated when supply is controlled by central planning, and consumption is coerced. An economist who values econometric methods of analysis, and who had been on the spot with suitable measuring equipment, might have sought to quantify this consumer dissatisfaction by gauging the size, velocity and accuracy of the lumps of saliva hurtling through the air of that seat of learning, and devising relevant equations. While Austrian economists might dispute the value of this analysis, doubtless they too would recognise the monstrous nature of a system which not only coerces young people into learning things they do not wish to learn, and forcibly prevents them from learning things they would prefer to learn, but also destroys the careers of individuals motivated by the noble ideal of transmitting knowledge and skills to the young. Multiply this one example by thousands like it in schools across the country, and the magnitude of the disaster becomes insupportable.

THE ADVANTAGES OF A FREE MARKET

A free market in education is not primarily dependent for its effectiveness on high technology, but can be greatly assisted by it. The technology of multi-media offers the chance for

each individual to explore any field of knowledge in any direction and at any speed he or she chooses. An educational free market would produce thousands of items of multi-media software, covering every conceivable area of knowledge and skill, from which the individual could choose the ones he or she most wanted. The nature of the technology renders the practice of forcing people to sit through classes in subjects which do not interest them as absurd as it is offensive. Multi-media, by its nature, cannot play a significant role in the present school system: every user, if using the system to its full power, would quickly go off in his or her own direction, thus undermining the very basis of the standard curriculum, compulsory attendance and collective teaching.

In an educational free market, suppliers of education would seek to utilise these and other developments, and also scientific research such as the recent discoveries relating to the mechanism of the brain, and how it stores knowledge by building connections between cells, to provide ever-improving technology to assist the learning process. This would by no means eliminate the need for the human educator, but it would certainly render his or her work more interesting and fulfilling by allowing the machines to teach the more basic and repetitive aspects of a given skill or body of knowledge. In addition, educators and students could agree between themselves their own agendas for learning, rather than having to be restricted to any national or school curriculum. Above all, because there would be a fairly exact match between supply and demand, with individuals free to learn whatever they considered valuable, from whichever supplier and by whichever method they considered most appropriate to their unique requirements, consumer satisfaction would be optimised, and educators would not have to combine the job of conveying knowledge with that of riot cop and prison warder.

Under central planning, schools can no more take advantage of new technological developments than could the Soviet planned economy. Because the principal purpose of the state school system is to shape the individual into the model approved by the political authorities, it — like the former Soviet regime — has every disincentive to adopt technology and methods which would tend to empower the individual as an individual. We all remember with amusement how the Soviet Union used to boast of making "the world's largest micro-chip". At least there were relatively free economies outside the Soviet bloc producing technology which the Soviet Union could copy and incorporate in its economic plans. However, in the case of education, every major country has a system characterised by nationalisation, compulsion and central planning, so a free market educational system would have to look to sources such as Mr Picciotto's company, which operate in comparatively small markets, for the technology and methodology of educating free individuals.

Another problem of central planning is highlighted by the complaints of Conservative commentators about the domination of the school system by adherents of "progressive" and socialist ideology. We are told that since the 1960s these people have taken over the local education authorities, the Department of Education and Science, HM Inspectorate of Schools, the National Union of Teachers and the teacher-training colleges, and have used these positions to impose disastrous socialist teaching methods and curricula on the schools, and to both exclude the "traditional curriculum" and

prevent the employment of teachers who believe in “traditional teaching methods”. In response to this situation, the Conservative government has introduced both the National Curriculum and legislation aimed at by-passing the power of the LEAs and the NUT and concentrating control over schools in the hands of the central Whitehall bureaucracy. Yet it is only because schools are the subject of central planning, nationalisation and compulsory attendance that it has been possible for these socialist “educators” to gain such a stranglehold over it. By taking over the key positions of power in such a system, a relatively small group of like-minded individuals can control the training of thousands of teachers and the schooling of millions of pupils. As a result, what Marxists and other collectivists think about schooling becomes extraordinarily important, the subject of detailed documentation and condemnation by Conservative critics. In an educational free market, characterised by myriads of private suppliers producing educational services according to the requirements of consumers with the power to vote with their feet, these collectivist theories would be of interest to almost no-one. Quite possibly these same collectivists have detailed ideas about how clothing or computer software or plumbing equipment or insurance services should be designed, manufactured, distributed, and retailed, and on how the staff involved in each process should be trained. But who cares what these ideas are, in the case of goods and services provided predominantly by the market? It is only when a good or service is created and distributed by state central planning that Marxist ideas about how it should be done become a problem.

Both the government and many Conservative writers on education favour the “restoration of traditional teaching methods”. They believe that the system of central planning of schools was once highly effective, and was brought to ruin only by the impact of “socialist egalitarianism” and the rise to power of the “progressive educationalists”. Get rid of these, they believe, and the system will successfully process millions of children into passing their state-imposed exams. Quite apart from libertarian objections to such a system, the empirical evidence suggests that these Conservatives are wrong. Between 1937 and 1945, for example, a huge drop in “standards of educational attainment”, as defined by central planning, caused a national outcry, decades before “egalitarianism” and “progressivism” were heard of. The central planning of young people’s education is just as disastrous as the central planning of any other activity.

PHILOSOPHICAL DIFFERENCES

Closely linked to this problem is a fundamental philosophical difference between the two systems. In the libertarian conception of education, every individual is an end in himself or herself, exists for his or her own sake, and is free as an individual to choose both the content and suppliers of all aspects of his or her education. While the individual may elect to take advice and suggestions from others on the best choices to make in any particular circumstance, all choices are ultimately those of the individual consumer. The call for “parental choice”, therefore, is not strictly speaking an accurate description of an educational free market. While parents will certainly play an active part in advising and assisting the young person about the best choices to be made in his or her unique case, they would have no more power to force the consumer to avail themselves of the services of

any particular supplier than would the local education authority, the Department of Education or a truancy officer — none of which would in any case exist in an educational free market.

Any values adopted by the individual, such as loyalty to certain individuals or institutions, and any political, philosophical or religious convictions, would be the voluntary response of the individual to what he or she has learned. While individuals or organisations of any ideological orientation would be free to promote their particular set of ideas in an educational free market, none would have any legal power whatsoever to force them on anyone. By contrast, the purpose of state-owned schools and compulsory attendance is — in most countries quite openly — to mould the individual into the object of somebody else’s values, to produce “the good subject”, “the good democrat”, the “good Catholic”, (or Protestant, or Muslim or whatever), the “socially integrated individual”, and a hundred other formulations, far more than to teach the individual how to calculate cosines or appreciate poetry.

Both the technical and the philosophical problems of central planning of education have been more than evident in the 90 years in which it has prevailed in Britain. For example, the 19th century private schools we examined above had developed a substantial curriculum in science and technology. In 1904 the prime minister, James Balfour, disapproved of this, and favoured the learning of Latin and Greek instead. Thus the government’s *Regulations for Secondary Schools* (1904) instructed the state secondary schools to abandon the teaching of science and technology and replace them with the Classics. After 40 years, this was recognised as a disaster, and technical schools were recreated under the 1944 Education Act. During school comprehensivisation in the 1960s, they were abolished again, only to be set up yet again in 1988 as City Technology Colleges. To take a second example, the Plowden Report of 1967 led to methods of teaching children to read that are now recognised to be catastrophic. These methods could only have survived, and continue to be imposed today, in a system characterised by a (literally) captive market and the central planning of teaching methods. In an educational free market, suppliers of the service of teaching young people to read would compete with one another to provide the most effective method of teaching. Consumers would gravitate towards those suppliers most efficient at achieving this goal. Given the enormous differences between children, it is certain that many different methods would emerge which would be effective in achieving literacy among different children, rather the single method for everybody imposed by central planning. But ineffective methods of the sort used in British state schools would be avoided by consumers, and suppliers who used these methods would have to either abandon them for better ones or go out of business.

NOTES

1. See Michael Macdonald-Ross, “Acquiring and Testing Skills”, in Peter Buckman, ed., *Education Without Schools*, Souvenir Press, London, 1973.
2. See John Eary, “VISTRAN — A multimedia network system for police training” in *Multimedia '92*, Blenheim Online, London, 1992.
3. Mike Picciotto, “Multimedia Language Learning” in *ibid*, pp. 33-34.