

EDUCATION AND TRAINING TO IMPROVE EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY

"It ought to be our common aim to make education responsive to the needs of our national life, and since these continually change and develop, so ought the content of our education to be continually changing and developing."

(Dr Cyril Norwood (1875 – 1956), Educationalist, Headmaster Harrow School (address 1930))

Any education system, indeed any training system, should be concerned not solely with the concept of imparting knowledge for academic purposes but with helping to shape and improve the level of vocational and professional attainment of successive generations. So that the future existence of that society is strengthened through knowledge, skills and understanding, through access to a wide variety of employment and career patterns and with a wage that allows them to grow and progress.

Education could define as a system of removing ignorance and, in the process, as a means of bringing about social change by raising the general level of intelligence and ability of the population as a whole. Herbert Spencer, (1820 - 1903), writing in 'Social Statistics' suggested that "Education has for its object the formation of Character"; however, in my view, it is not character which produces a sound economic platform based on employment opportunities and a motivated workforce but education and training which helps to stop the decline; it is education and training that can help us to understand and negotiate with other nations; and, it is work-related skills, training and experience throughout our working life which can raise the level of confidence and belief in our ability to succeed.

The education system in the United Kingdom has always given great weight and precedence to the development of young people by concentrating commitment, effort and resources on those who are seen to be more academically capable. Rather than investigate, consider and pursue the possibilities of providing additional avenues of choice to enable less academically gifted students, the opportunity to progress to Degree level qualifications through, for example, vocational training programmes and courses and to professional qualifications.

The continued emphasis, in Britain, on academic ability being the only recognized passport to employment with career prospects is amplified in a study, entitled ***Beyond Compulsory Schooling***, conducted by Professor Alan Smithers and Doctor Pamela Robinson of the School of Education at the University of Manchester, in which they state,

"The English education system therefore operates essentially as an identifier of academic ability. The education systems' value in this respect is recognised by employers who seek graduates - often irrespective of discipline - for many posts. Success in academic examinations thus not only opens the door to further scholarly activity, but also to the better jobs and a more prosperous future."

(Smithers & Robinson, ***Beyond Compulsory Schooling*** (1991))

This has led, necessarily, to the situation where many tens of thousands of young people, already challenged by the inequality of access to primary and secondary education, especially in terms of standardization of school buildings, school facilities, playgrounds and playing fields, school equipment and even quality of teachers and teaching methods, leave secondary education without any relevant qualifications and therefore with less chance of gaining employment.

Dealing with the subject of equality of opportunity and access to superior secondary schooling during the 1960's Halsey, Heath and Ridge, renowned academics in the field of education relating to family and class, state, in ***Origins and Destinations: Family, Class and Education in Modern Britain*** , that,

"The costs of the different forms of education have been such that success in the selective process did not diminish but, if anything, widened the distance between those who got most and those who got least out of the public purse towards the cost of their schooling."

(Halsey, Heath & Ridge, Academics, (1980)

The definition of 'education' and the provision of teachers, teaching methods and standards in terms of buildings, services, facilities and material in addition to teacher ability and training standards, to provide a nationwide system in Britain is and has been the subject of discussion by committees of politicians, professionals and academics and the subject of many books and publications for more than a century.

In the twenty year period between 1959 and 1978 there were fourteen official Reports produced by Committees of Enquiry who were set up by Government to advise on matters relating to educational theory and the practice of educating the nation; indeed, education has been used as a political football. Even with this plethora of advice finding a way of resolving the falling educational standards and academic achievements of the majority of the population, when compared to other nations, still appears to elude politicians and perhaps academics alike.

Many published works deal with the structure of the education system in Britain as a direct connection to social class based on privileged access, the inequality of opportunities for the majority and the failure of so many to succeed. Anthony Crosland, who later became Secretary of State for Education and Science in Britain, referred to this system, in 1956, as being, "divisive, unjust and wasteful". He went on to say that,

"The least we can ask for is that all ordinary children, irrespective of social background, should enjoy a good primary and secondary education in decent buildings, with classes of reasonable size, and up to a reasonable age. This the children of 'better-off' parents enjoy in the independent schools. But many working-class children, owing to the appallingly low quality of parts of the State Educational system, are still enjoying nothing of the sort.....and we shall still not have equality of opportunity so long as we maintain a system of superior private schools, open to the wealthier classes, but out of reach of poorer children however talented and deserving."

(Anthony Crosland (1918 – 1977), British Labour politician (Halsey, Heath & Ridge (1980))

Clearly this was one of his pet project areas, the desire to see every child attend a school at the same level, with the same facilities and the same level of education facilities because, even though he attended a public school and Oxford University, he was responsible, in part, for the continuing implementation of the Comprehensive school education system, begun in the late 1950's, and designed to, allegedly, provide an equality of access to a standard secondary education system to replace the system of selection at 11+ into academically-minded and more practically-minded children, at which time some went to a Grammar School and others to a Secondary Modern, and he vigorously pursued this policy in the mid 1960's when he was made Secretary of State for Education and Science.

However, in my view, the Comprehensive system is not and never has been a resounding success because, in the first instance, it did not provide equality of access to standardized school buildings and facilities, including laboratories for science and biology subjects, and many still have to make do with lesser quality buildings and facilities. Second, instead of raising the level of all students it pulled down the academic standards of some because children of unequal academic ability are put in the same class as brighter and quicker students. Third, in order to be seen to succeed the basic 'Gold' standard of academic achievement, the strictly marked and much more challenging Ordinary Level or 'O' level General Certificate of Education examination, was replaced by a two-tier system of academic achievement, for those academically capable they continued in a stream to take GCE qualifications and for those less able a lesser qualification called the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE).

Over time, approximately 20 years in 1984, GCE 'O' Level and CSE examinations were replaced by the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and, in an effort to show the system was succeeding, standards and marking systems were both lowered, presumably to massage statistics to show improvement, and replaced by Grades A - G.

These examinations, taken at or about age 16, reduce, by a process of elimination, the number of young people going on to higher education to about 33% by selecting only those gaining 5 or more passes at Grades A – C, the accepted and recognized pass level grades because all others are deemed to be failures, as worthy of going into the next phase, to study 'A' level or Advanced (A) or supplementary (AS) subjects. The 67% or more who fail to achieve the accepted academic standard have the option of either trying to find employment, usually at the more mundane levels, or, re-sitting some GCSE examinations to try to increase their score and thereby improve their employment opportunities in the future.

The pass rate in this examination was improved by allowing coursework, work carried out during the term and perhaps even with help, advice and support from parents and teachers, was also introduced; then, it was decided to make examinations modular; and, teachers were allowed to coach students to pass a test and not necessarily teach a broad curriculum. Worse, the system, by that I suggest the government and academics, have allowed students to challenge the grades awarded and now appear to be combining to suggest examinations can be 'dumbed-down' even more by re-sitting some sections of examinations in order to boost grades.

However, over the last decade or so the number of young people who leave secondary education without any academic qualifications, that is at least 5 GCSE examination passes at Grades A – C has continued to increase such that in Britain there are, allegedly, in excess of 1 million young people who are now referred to as NEETs, Not in Employment, Education or Training programmes and schemes. So much for the governments much vaunted 50% of children going to University programme.

That is, surely, an indictment of the gradual decline of the state education system in the United Kingdom, although standards do not appear to have fallen quite so far in Scotland and Northern Ireland where there is still a process of selection. It begs the question why are children not selected, similar to the 11+ scheme, where at say age 14 or 15, to pursue academic subjects or give serious consideration to taking practical course relevant to a career or profession that does not necessarily demand academic subjects, for example, motor engineering, all trades associated with the building industry?

Apparently business, industry and commerce find it difficult to recruit young British people with the right skills and work ethic such that they can contribute to the success of a company, preferring instead to recruit foreign workers because they have better skills. Therefore, it begs the question, what better skills do eastern European migrants have that so many of our indigenous population appear not to have? Because, until such time as industry and commerce provide academics and the education system, even the government, with guidance or guidelines on skills the system will continue to fail.

What, therefore, is the point of putting young people through the national educational programme if at the end of that process they are unfit for work and have to follow-on with Government sponsored training schemes sometimes as a means of keeping them off the streets and off the national record of unemployed people? In the more deprived and heavily populated council estates and in the inner city areas there are even fewer opportunities for these young people to find work. As Sir William Alexander, later Baron Alexander of Potterhill, wrote in **'Towards a New Education Act, (1969)'**,

"It is never easy to say what is education and what is industrial training but it becomes imperative that the respective functions of the Industrial Training Boards and of education authorities should be clearly stated so that they can co-operate and secure in harmony the effective education and training required in the interests of the Nation. The present situation is unsatisfactory."

(Baron Alexander of Potterhill (1905 – 1993), Scottish author and educationalist)

During the 1970's there was considerable discussion, amongst politicians and academics, as to how well schools and teachers were doing their job in educating children and whether the 'traditional' or 'progressive' methods were more effective. On the one hand the traditionalists seemed determined to retain the concept of selective education through academic testing and the progressives were concerned with trying to continue with the concept of a 'fairer deal' based on the comprehensive school system introduced in the early 1960's. Both sides were, apparently, driven by political motives and lost track of the fact that the discussion was about educating all the people of the country by providing the best possible education system for young people, and a programme of vocational training to prepare them for work as part of a highly qualified and motivated workforce.

The Labour Government of the late 1960's and early 1970's established a Committee, under Alan (later Lord) Bullock, to consider how present practices in the teaching of English, including reading, writing and speech, might be improved. The Committee found that while standards at the lower end of the ability range had improved in most socio-economic groups poor readers among the children of unskilled and semi-skilled workers had not really followed other groups. This re-enforced the opinion that children from poorer families started and usually finished at a disadvantage. As reported in a book entitled ***Crowther to Warnock: How Fourteen reports tried to change Children's lives***, written in 1980, the committee concluded that,

"no matter how current standards compared with those in the past, they had to be improved to meet the demands of a more complex and literacy-oriented society. Action was needed on a broad front with a full appreciation of the many complexities in teaching these skills."

(R. Rogers, Crowther to Warnock: How Fourteen Reports tried to change Children's Lives)

If that is still the case, and there seems little to contradict that assumption, then surely much more effort and support should be expended on trying to improve the general standard of education and the record of achievement for the majority of the population if the current process of creating an underclass in Britain is not to increase to endemic proportions; and, the only way to achieve that is through a process of selection based on academic ability and not by forcing everyone to follow the same path.

The first problem lies not only in presenting and teaching a standard curriculum but also providing standardization of teaching methods, standardization of school buildings and facilities; and secondly, ensuring that there are sufficient job opportunities, in a variety of sectors, available for people once they leave full-time secondary education. If governments, companies and organizations fail to provide the opportunities for employment then academic and vocational training will count for nought and the level of frustration is likely to increase leading, at some stage, to increasing social unrest. The educationalists and academics Halsey, Heath and Ridge addressed the part that education has to play in bringing about social change, and vice versa, when they suggest, in the study *Origins and Destinations*, in 1980, that there are two basic theories covering the subject:

"The first is that education is the rock on which a modern and prosperous civilization is built. It creates new knowledge, ensures that people can use advanced scientific cultures, and brings individuals into the jobs they are able to do well. Education is investment in human capital."

(Halsey, Heath & Ridge, *Origins and Destinations*, (1980))

The second theory is that,

"education is essentially an organization of control by one generation over the next. Schooling is the major public instrument for the production of appropriate social personalities."

(Halsey, Heath & Ridge, *Origins and Destinations*, (1980))

Getting the whole system of education and training in Britain right is something which appears to have eluded both politicians and the teaching profession for more than a century; and, for the time being, it seems we will continue to muddle through because politicians and academics will not accept streaming according to ability.

It appears that many of these problems stem from the divisive financial and educational class structure which provides only a few with the passport to successful academic and professional careers; the gap between those with access to good schools and good standards of education and those to poorer levels remains high and is increasing not decreasing. And, in Britain, there are still those who believe that people should not be allowed the opportunity to rise above their perceived social and academic or vocational station in life and this is based on background and parental status; the notion of social mobility in Britain, based on more than a degree of meritocracy, is almost dead because of continuing political interference in education and academic standards.

Second, school in Britain is still generally perceived and accepted as being the only place of learning and not as the first stage in advancing a career pattern. Teachers, indeed all academics, should change their attitude and approach to education by appreciating that the requirement of education is not just to instil knowledge but also to prepare young people for the world of work by providing practical applications where possible.

Increased opportunities for employment and a much greater choice of career with higher levels of remuneration is still available only to the few who can afford to pay for the privilege of better education, and often better school facilities, mostly within the public school education system. Ability is still measured in terms of academic achievement and therefore the divisive structure of society in Britain is, somehow, supported and maintained through the divisive status system.

Third, education and training in Britain has not progressed, as it has in other countries, to a system which is designed and geared to the concept of providing the nation with professional, practical and vocational as well as academic, courses to enable every individual access to qualifications, personal achievement and promotion prospects throughout their working lives. It is crass to impose a grammar-school education programme on every child for the fundamental reason that we do not all learn at the same pace, we do not all have the same academic ability and there are still many who would do better following a vocational rather than academic route.

Many have still not embraced the notion of Continuous Professional Development (CPD), so that people continue to learn and update their knowledge and qualifications throughout their working life. Despite technological advances, effort and sufficient funds have not been provided, as they have for example in Germany and Holland, to support professional and vocational training centres specifically linked to the requirements of business, industry and commerce.

Four, in Britain, the higher the level of academic qualification one achieves the greater the opportunity of gaining meaningful employment, the greater the opportunity to pursue a profession and the greater the choice. But greater academic ability does not necessarily mean greater ability and often academic ability is inversely proportional to common sense. Unlike other countries, more noticeably Germany and Holland, there is no clear route, at least not for the time being, to senior managerial appointments through professional and vocational qualifications and no system of providing that type of further and higher education. It must be accepted that people have differing levels of academic and vocational ability and that to succeed the system should be flexible enough to meet all forms of education and training to allow people to progress in one direction or another.

Five, despite efforts to provide a standardized format for primary and secondary education, through the national curriculum, there are no laid-down minimum standards for teacher qualifications nor for teacher training methods; neither are there minimum and stringent standards for the provision of school buildings, equipment and services. Many buildings in the state education sector remain in a very poor state of repair.

Six, private education and fee-paying public schools is a form of elitism which helps to maintain the 'status quo' through the ability of the wealthier levels in society to purchase education and thus career prospects, for their offspring. The subject of which school one attended is still likely to affect career prospects in some areas and more especially in the banking and finance sector, the legal profession and even the medical profession.

Seven, progress in education depends on having a sound baseline and therefore the provision of pre-school facilities for any children between age 3 and 5 should be considered and, in continuation, primary education should concentrate on the basics of reading, writing and sums.

Eight, employers in Britain should not be allowed to recruit young people into their workforce at age 16 to 18 without offering and providing them with the opportunity to progress their career or profession through full-time or part-time education programmes or vocational and academic training courses. If necessary the government must ensure that employers either provide the right training courses or allow younger employers to have time away from work for off-the-job training and advancement courses.

Nine, stringent standards for people in the teaching profession should be applied. It is not enough to have a basic degree, a master's degree or even a teaching degree, B. Ed; somehow the system of teacher selection and training must be able to show that, on completion of such training, teachers are capable of teaching, imparting knowledge to children, are qualified to teach the subjects they are tasked with teaching and doing it in a positive and controlled manner in the classroom.

Politicians and educationalists must set aside their political prejudices and reach agreement on the type and standard of schools required in the state sector; reach consensus on the most appropriate national curriculum which will educate the children of this nation to at least the level of other advanced nations now and for the future; and, they must accept that there is a need to identify and recognise the strengths and weaknesses of children and advise them and their parents of the appropriate path. Academic or vocational, which is most likely to provide them with future employment and career opportunities.

It is regrettable that with every change of government so often we have a change of policy and procedure and even a change in emphasis and funding more often than not as a way of introducing political dogma into the education system; and, every change in direction and every change in policy leads to lower standards and perhaps even confusion among teachers, parents and children and is one reason why the state education system in parts of UK is in something of a mess.

After many changes to the overall system of state education and in the provision of state funding during the past decade, the introduction of the national curriculum and the introduction of set testing at different stages during compulsory education, and proposed changes to the way in which Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) of schools will be established in future, what is really needed now is a period of stability to allow students, teachers and parents the time to assimilate those changes before any more are introduced. And, any future changes must be based on what is best for the children and not what is best for politicians and academics.

As the Austrian-born American management writer and thinker, and also International Lawyer, Peter F Drucker suggests in his book *'The New Realities'*, written in 1989, the social purpose of education now has a number of clear key requirements which are paraphrased as follows:

- a. Education in and for the knowledge society will have a social purpose. It will not be value free; no educational system has ever been.
- b. The educational system needed must be an open system. It must not make into an impenetrable barrier the line between the highly schooled and the 'other half'.
- c. There is no such thing as a 'finished education' in the knowledge society. It requires that people with advanced schooling come back to school again and again and again.

d. Education can no longer be confined to the schools. Every employing institution has to become a teacher.

e. It will be the social responsibility of education to prevent 'meritocracy' from degenerating into 'plutocracy'. To make access to good jobs and careers dependent upon academic diplomas is tolerable only if the diploma is given for talent and diligence rather than for wealth. It must not become a symbol of 'class' - as Dr Arnold's public school became in England.

Peter F (Drucker (1909 – 2005), Austrian-born US Management writer and guru)

In my opinion those statements, those ideas from Peter Drucker, sum up much of what appears to be wrong with primary, secondary and tertiary education and training in Britain. It is, by and large, a system which remains elitist and which fails a great many children save for those who have greater academic ability or provided with access to higher standards of education, and those who remain within academia.

However, it is not the duty or the responsibility of society to educate and train successive generations but the fundamental responsibility of parents, assisted by teachers following government guidelines based on national policy, to ensure that children not only attend school but learn and progress throughout their primary and secondary education years. In some areas and in far too many instances, parents have little or no control over their children who are allowed to 'run free' and parents appear to have little or no idea how to help their children recognise letters and figures. This is how the nation continues to decline driven downwards by perpetuating programmes of ignorance.

One way of beginning to level the playing-field of opportunity, for the benefit of the children, might be to provide nursery or kindergarten facilities for all those between the ages of three and five. If nursery or kindergarten facilities were provided the transition from life at home to sharing classrooms and equipment and interacting with other children would be made that much easier for the child and that much easier for the transition to full-time education in primary school.

Further, by beginning the 'process of learning' somewhat earlier we may even find that children in Britain will, like many of our European neighbours, have the time and ability to learn a second European language that much more easily. However, in the first instance the most important priority seems to me to concentrate initial learning, in primary school, on the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic, or sums as we used to call it, before the system begins to attempt to fill children's heads with, for example, music, art, science, history and geography, subjects that become more important as education progresses. The reasoning is simple, until a child can read, write and understand and carry out basic equations it cannot begin to understand what it sees and reads in all other books.

(4444 words including quotations)

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