

the educational role of schools; the school curriculum; and social values, public policy and education. Under these three themes, short essays present arguments on a range of important educational issues. Each essay focuses attention on key aspects, presents a point of view and forms a basis for further discussion.

Some of the issues include

- characteristics that make for a good school
- developing democratic values
- moral education
- rights of parents and children in education
- excellence and equality
- current emphasis on work-related skills
- basic philosophical questions about the nature of knowledge in general

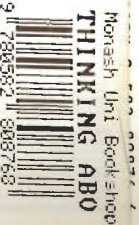
Each essay is followed by a number of questions to provoke discussion and a list of suggested titles to stimulate further reading.

Thinking About Education is essential reading for students preparing for careers in both primary and secondary school teaching. It is also a useful text for established educators.

Brian Crittenden has recently retired as Professor at the Graduate School of Education, La Trobe University. He is one of Australia's leading educational philosophers and is a member of the executive committee of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia.

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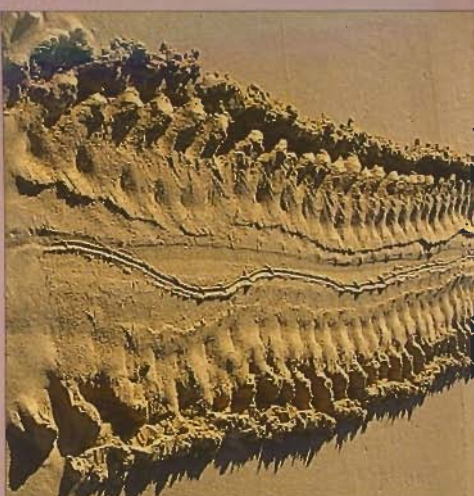
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Thinking about Education

Brian Crittenden



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Essays for Discussion
in Teacher Education
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Introduction

The essays in this collection (excluding 'Postmodernism and the Practice of Education') were originally published between 1988 and 1993 in a section on education in *The Melbourne Report* (now *The Melbourne Review*). They have been collected in this volume as part of the Education Today Series (edited by Peter Langford) and have been revised as necessary (e.g. to clarify chronological references) and reproduced, not in the order in which they were written, but under several general themes: the educational role of schools; aspects of the school curriculum and assessment; social values, public policy and education.

The essays on a number of curriculum areas have been included because the latter are the concern, in different ways, of all teachers. English is the most obvious example. Although those who specialize in English have the main responsibility and play a broader role than their colleagues, all teachers can be expected to help students develop competence in spoken and written English. The other topics to which the essays on the curriculum refer—moral education, democratic values, the study of work—require the collaboration of a range of subjects and, in the case of the first two, are closely related to the organization of the school as a social institution.

These are not, of course, the only subjects that involve or affect the curriculum generally. Another example is logic. The general rules for valid argument relate to teaching and learning in every area of the curriculum. (A few readings are given at the end of 'Teaching and Learning English'.) There are also basic philosophical questions about the nature of knowledge in general and in particular areas (e.g. mathematics, the physical sciences, the social sciences) that should receive at least some attention in the course of secondary schooling. For example, students should reflect on the extent to which mathematics is a matter of invention or discovery, and they should know something of the differences involved in giving a reasoned justification for a theory in physics, an interpretation of a poem, an ideal of political order.

While the essays do not attempt to treat any of the three broad themes in a systematic and comprehensive way, they present arguments on a range of important educational issues. They can thus provide a starting point for discussion at various levels by teacher trainees and by teachers engaged in the further formal study of education or professional development. To assist this discussion, some questions and references to further reading have been included at the end of each essay.

The notion of education contains ideals against which the practice of schools and other institutions that claim to be educating can be judged. To avoid being arbitrary, we must give attention to these institutions in their historical reality. When we do this, we find that what they have actually done is related, in varying degrees of adequacy, to beliefs about what should be done in the name of education. While this normative aspect of education has always been present, its detailed interpretation has of course varied from time to time. In these respects, the concept of education is similar to that of many other human practices (e.g. justice in a social order, literary art, health care, scientific explanation).

The point I wish to emphasize here is that any serious issues about schools involve the question of what they should be doing if they are to be justifiably described as engaging in education. Thus, although this question is discussed more fully in 'Liberal Education and the Role of Schools' (the second essay in Part 1), it has been necessary to give at least a summary response in many of the other essays. Schools (and universities) may well be effective instruments for serving various political, social, economic and other purposes. The educators, if no-one else, should be concerned about how well they are serving educational values.

The Educational Role of Schools

The Distinctive Task of Schools



Throughout their long history, schools have always served a variety of purposes. This is obviously to be expected of boarding schools, but it has also been the case for day schools as well. The development of universal schooling, which began in the middle of the last century, was closely related to the emergence of modern nation states with their industrial economies. Large public systems of schools began to take shape, funded by governments and subject, in varying degrees, to their control. In many places private schools continued to exist. In several countries, such as the United States and Australia, private schools committed to the maintenance of various religious traditions developed virtually as systems parallel to that of the Government schools. But, for the sake of the public interest, they were also under some supervision by the state, and, like their counterparts in the Government system, they too served a multiplicity of ends.

Inducting the young into the systematic knowledge and the networks of meaning that make up a literate culture was at best only one of the tasks expected of schools in the movement towards universal education. They were also expected to foster a sense of national identity, to inculcate respect for civil authority and for private property, to develop the basic skills of literacy and arithmetic and the disciplined habits required for an effective contribution to the growing economy. As the balance of population shifted from rural areas to the cities, schools also provided a place for the supervision of children while their parents were engaged at work in the growing factory system.

The instrumental role of schools in the industrial economy of nation states has continued to expand over the past century. The offering of credentials that sort people out for different levels of employment is the most obvious aspect. But, more fundamentally, as one writer has recently pointed out¹, schools serve the modern industrial state by producing 'a mobile, literate, culturally standardized, interchangeable population'. Because of this, he claims that the monopoly of legitimate education is now even more important for governments than the monopoly of legitimate violence.

Perhaps there is some exaggeration here. But I think that the general point about the school being regarded as a kind of omnibus institution to serve all kinds of economic and social needs in our society is correct. Think, for example, of

some of the public policies for schooling that have dominated the agenda in Australia over the past fifteen years. In many of these policies, formal education has been interpreted mainly as a key instrument for promoting various interpretations of socioeconomic equality. At first this meant the provision of different levels of resources to promote individual equality of opportunity for positions of social and economic advantage. More recently, the emphasis has shifted to ensure that equal average educational outcomes will be recognized, if not actually achieved, among the different groups that make up our society.

The policy of keeping as many young people as possible in full-time schooling until the end of the secondary level reflects a broad variety of reasons and motives. One powerful factor has been the high unemployment rate among fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds. Another is a vaguely egalitarian conviction that having everyone stay on in the one kind of institution and complete a common certificate from what is ostensibly a common range of studies will in some fashion promote greater social equality in our society—or, at least, will give the disadvantaged a better chance for the prizes. There are, of course, economic arguments relating to the demands of a technological economy for a more highly and more broadly skilled work force. There are also some educational arguments to the effect that the vast expansion in areas of knowledge and the complexity of life in contemporary society require a longer and more systematically planned program of formal education for everyone.

At a more familiar level, hardly a week goes by without a demand being made in the newspapers or other media that the schools should be doing more to solve some particular social problem. This list includes youth unemployment, drug taking, the sexual practices of the young, child abuse, the death toll through car accidents, the health risks of smoking, response to violence on television. In summary, if young people need to learn anything—from driving safely to using sex safely—it is commonly assumed that schools can do the job and should take the primary responsibility.

Without attempting any detailed argument here, I would want to defend the view that in many cases other agencies in the society have a more fundamental responsibility and competence than the school. When the family and other social institutions are failing in their proper role, we need to give much more attention to how they might be improved, or to devising effective alternatives, rather than simply taking the easy way out of loading yet another task onto schools and teachers.

One of the worst consequences of this tendency is that it distracts teachers from the fundamental work that they are uniquely qualified to perform. Teachers are not trained primarily to be social workers or psychologists or career guidance

officers or surrogate parents and so on—although they need to exercise some aspects of these and other roles. Collectively, their special competence is to help young people develop an understanding of the main modes of systematic knowledge and reflection that inform the practices of a literate culture and profoundly affect the way we think, feel and act. When teachers are distracted from this work, schools become relatively inefficient instruments in the service of other ends and neglect the very activity that justifies their distinct existence.

I recognize that the work of educating that is proper to a school cannot, and should not, ignore other important issues affecting the society generally or the school-age group in particular. If teachers perform their distinctively educational role effectively, they will be dealing, under some aspects, with the kinds of social problems mentioned earlier. But what I wish to emphasize is that schools and teachers are not equipped for the full resolution of such problems. If other appropriate agencies cannot be reformed or invented, then at least the work of teachers would need to be supplemented by a range of appropriately qualified people who would work within the context of the school. Even in these circumstances, there would still be the likelihood of confusion over the school's distinctive role.

It has become fairly common for a school community to be referred to as a family. As long as the metaphorical use of the term 'family' is recognized, there is no difficulty. However, there is a danger in this usage that the school will tend to be seen as a kind of substitute for the family. This is a particular, and very important, example of what I have been stressing about the confusion that affects the scope of the school's role. Schools need to collaborate very closely with families. They may have to make special efforts to encourage parents to carry out their distinctive responsibilities, but they should not displace the family.

Emile Durkheim, writing early in this century on the place of schools in moral education, made a very important point on this topic. He argued that the quality of the moral relationships distinctive of a school should provide a transition for children between the family, that is characterized, ideally, by relationships based on close personal affection, and the general society, characterized by impersonal relationships of justice.

The task of being a good teacher is always difficult. It calls for considerable qualities of moral character as well as intellectual competence. The naive view of the school as an all-purpose institution has increasingly confused the role of teaching and made its exercise more difficult. It is crucially important for teachers to recognize and assert the scope and limits of their work and the educational activity that justifies the existence of schools—whatever other purposes they might serve. Even when the conditions are unpropitious, teaching has its rewarding aspects. These are likely to be greatly enhanced if we can clarify the role of schools.

QUESTIONS

- What would you list as the main purpose being served by schools in Australian society at present?
- To what extent is it appropriate for the school to serve these purposes?
- In the education of children and adolescents what broad division of labour should there be between the school, the family, social welfare agencies, counselling services etc.?

Note

- 1 E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988, p. 46.

Further reading

- Crittenden, B. *Education for Rational Understanding*. Melbourne: ACER, 1981, Chs 3, 9.
- Dore, R. *The Diploma Disease: Education, Qualification and Development*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1976.
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Liberal Education and the Role of Schools

One of the most striking changes in Australian formal education over recent years has been the dramatic increase in the retention rate to the end of secondary schooling. The percentage of seventeen year olds still at school rose from 8.7 in 1955 to 33.5 in 1983. In the next six years the proportion of students staying to Year 12 increased from 36 per cent to around 55 per cent. The Commonwealth Schools Commission Report, *In The National Interest* (1987), endorsed the objective of increased retention to Year 12 and proposed a target of 65 per cent by 1992. In fact, dramatic increases in 1991 and 1992 (reflecting the influence of the economic recession) pushed the retention rate to around 80–85 per cent.

One important consequence of this development is that it poses the basic question of the nature and scope of the curriculum in the senior years of the secondary school and thus, indirectly, in the whole of primary and secondary education. There are also serious repercussions for the undergraduate programs of universities and colleges.

From the beginning of universal education in the last century, schools have been seen mainly as useful instruments to serve various political, social and economic purposes. They were to develop in children a sense of national identity and commitment to certain political values; to inculcate personal virtues and respect for civil authority and private property; to provide everyone with the basic skills for taking a useful place in the developing industrial economy. Schools were also supported as a useful way of keeping children under adult supervision while their parents worked.

Since the Second World War the purpose of schooling that has come to dominate is the contribution that it is believed to make to the economic prosperity of individuals and society. It is not surprising that when students are asked to give their main reasons for coming to a university, the one that stands out above the others is the desire to get a good job. I don't want to suggest that this is a bad reason for being at a university or staying to the end of Year 12 at school. However, when it becomes the dominant purpose it seriously distorts public policy in education, the practice of educational institutions, and the way in which the engagement in education affects the quality of individuals' lives. What come to be neglected are those purposes for being educated that are associated with the long tradition called 'liberal education'.

In the history of Western education, the liberal humanist tradition—in its diverse forms—has probably exercised the most pervasive theoretical influence. It was first developed as a reflective theory in the Athenian society of the fourth century B.C. In this context, liberal education was linked with being free in two related senses: (1) as the education that is appropriate for free and responsible citizens, and (2) as the education that sets people free from ignorance and a limited awareness of what is of human worth. It focused on developing the characteristics of human nature that were thought to constitute the excellence of human life. The theory directly linked the practice of education to the achievement or maintenance of what was believed to be of most worth in human culture.

With many variations of detail in cultural ideals and educational practice, this broad approach has been reflected in Roman education, the schools of early Christian Europe, Renaissance humanism, the Enlightenment, the more recent interpretations of liberal (or general) education as expressed by such writers as Newman, Mill and Arnold in the last century, and T. S. Eliot, John Anderson, Northrop Frye, Daniel Bell, R. S. Peters and Raymond Williams in the present.

The broad ideal of education in the liberal humanist tradition can be summarized as follows. It is the development of the knowledge, skills, attitudes and ways of acting that are thought to be constituents of human excellence within a given culture and social order. The objective is to enable people to live well as human beings in all the major aspects of life in contrast to technical training for some specific task.

Historically, what we now call primary and secondary schooling has generally attempted to provide the introductory and intermediate stages of an education in the liberal humanist tradition. What schools have actually done in the name of liberal education has often fallen far short of the ideal. In particular, the ideal should not be confused with the traditional subject curriculum in the form in which it concentrates on static, isolated bodies of information to be memorised for reproduction at times of examination. However, it is equally wrong to regard learning any particular content as of little account. In one interpretation of this approach, virtually any content that interests the learner will do as the object on which skills are acquired and exercised. In another, the value (perhaps even the truth) of any systematic knowledge is measured by its utility in solving what we perceive as important human problems, whereas knowledge that simply advances understanding, appreciation, enjoyment—that satisfies our curiosity to know—is undervalued. What must be stressed is that the mastery of significant content and the methods of inquiry and critical reflection (which includes, but is not restricted to, the solution of social, economic and political problems) all have a place in liberal education as an ideal.

In the course of schooling, liberal education requires a curriculum that combines a broad study of the humanities, arts and sciences along with depth in some areas. Any systematic effort to explain or interpret features of human life or the

world can be an object of liberal education. What is required is that the main emphases should be on what such systematic inquiry enables us to understand about being human or the physical world we live in, how to use its methods and to recognise their power and limits, how it connects with other ways of explaining or interpreting, and the human values on which it throws light or to which it is subject. The curriculum as a whole should aim at a balanced range of intellectual perspectives.

Mathematics, the physical sciences and technology form part of liberal education when approached in the way I have just indicated. However, the prestige that they now enjoy depends mainly on their usefulness in our economy—as prerequisites for entering many important occupations and as contributors to our high material standard of living. But, even as part of liberal education, they are deficient in one crucial respect. They do not deal with any of the questions about what makes for a worthwhile human life, about the ideals and standards by which we should live individually and socially. In the present century the achievements of science and technology have been stupendous: access to nuclear energy, techniques of genetic engineering, in vitro fertilization, micro-computers, robotics, television and communication satellites, and so on. But in themselves they give no guiding values on how their products should be used. This is where the study of language and literature, the arts, history, philosophy and other subjects that make up what are called the humanities have a distinctive and fundamental role in the development of a liberally educated person.

A liberal education at school provides a broad introduction to those major aspects of literate culture in which human beings have most significantly expressed their intellectual, imaginative and emotional capacities. This experience enriches the students' personal lives by making them aware of the various dimensions of public reflective culture beyond the narrow limits of each one's own immediate experience and background, and by equipping them to participate with critical appreciation and enjoyment. The experience also provides them with the intellectual skills and a sense of the values and historical perspectives that form the basis for acting intelligently and responsibly as citizens of a democratic society.

Liberal education is concerned primarily with knowing (which includes feeling and imagining that is informed by reflective thought). But it also extends to aspects of making (e.g. critical appreciation of the arts, crafts, products of technology) and of doing (e.g. moral judgement and action, informed participation in social and political roles). In the primary school, the theorizing activities central to a liberal education are firmly embedded in the context of making and doing. In the course of liberal education through junior and senior secondary school to undergraduate studies these theorizing activities increasingly become the focus of attention and the context of making and doing recedes to the background. However, even at the most advanced level, the latter is never entirely out of sight. A modified form of advanced liberal education can be devised that is closely

related to vocational education or practical interests. However, if it is to be liberal, the main objective must be a better understanding of the practice and its place in the wider scheme of things, not the improvement of technical proficiency in the practice.

At its full extent, liberal education includes a broad comparative study of the achievements of reflective, literate culture. In Arnold's well-known words, its object is 'to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere'.¹ In primary and secondary education within our society the scope is largely concerned with Western culture and its origins. Apart from other reasons, we can hardly engage in a serious study of other cultures without first gaining a thorough grounding in our own.

On the question of diverse interests and abilities, it is important to notice, in the first place, that within the broadly common content of a liberal education, there is considerable scope for choice. Identical content can, of course, be studied at various levels of difficulty. In regard to methods, as long as the primary emphasis is on the enlargement of understanding, a very broad range of procedures is compatible with a liberal education. I have noted the changing emphases between theorizing activities and practical contexts in the course of a liberal education program. For adolescents whose interest in continuing with formal education is dominated by the desire to acquire practical skills and knowledge, it is possible to integrate at least some elements of a liberal education with their mainly vocational or other practical studies.

It is not possible to determine with precision the level of liberal education that people generally should attain in our society. As we have seen, liberal education is a systematic induction into patterns of meaning that are fundamental constituents of a worthwhile life in a literate culture. Given that in a democracy we accept the basic equality of all members of the society as human beings, it follows that everyone should have adequate opportunity to achieve the level of formal liberal education that is necessary for effective participation in the cultural, social and political life of our society. Moreover, the nature of our economy is such that successful training for many jobs depends on a sound background of liberal education. In relation to the stages of liberal education that I have sketched, it should be possible for young people to acquire the necessary level of formal liberal education by the end of Year 10. This supposes that the curriculum throughout primary and secondary schooling is carefully designed to ensure breadth, interrelatedness, and cumulative development of learning. Given a rigorous, systematic approach, directly liberal education might not need to occupy more than about three days of the school week over the ten or eleven years. This leaves plenty of time for other kinds of learning that are not strictly part of liberal education and for various worthy non-educational activities.

Given that a liberal education is centrally concerned with enabling the members of a literate society to live with deeper understanding of human values

and to participate more reflectively and critically in the cultural, political and economic practices of their society, it clearly can claim to have a high level and pervasive utility.

The following are among the characteristics of our society that have intensified this utility:

- With advances in technology and changes in the patterns of work, the time people actually spend at a job is being substantially decreased. They are in a position to exercise more fully the intellectual resources of a liberal education.
- The tremendous pace of technological change needs to be subjected to the control of the relatively permanent human values that are the object of study in liberal education. Scientific technology produces increasingly sophisticated means for the efficient achievement of diverse ends. But in itself it gives no answers about the ends that should be pursued.
- Television now exercises a pervasive and powerful influence on what people think and feel and how they behave. There are many good aspects to this influence, but the problem is that everything tends to be presented as though it were entertainment and, as far as possible, through simple and compelling images.
- The presence of television makes more urgent the habits of critical analysis and judgment in reading and discussion that are outcomes of a liberal education. Finally, a liberal education can have direct vocational utility—for jobs that require intellectual flexibility, the capacity to think critically, to express ideas with precision, and so on. But it has these outcomes only by not being treated in a narrow, instrumental way. English for business is simply no substitute for the liberal study of English language and literature.

QUESTIONS

- What are the main constituents and objectives of a liberal education?
- In what ways does the achievement of these objectives serve various practical purposes?
- In the mixing of liberal and vocational education, what conditions should be met if the aspects of liberal education are to retain their distinctive character?
- Can a liberal education program avoid the criticism that it is simply the reflection of what one section of the society believes is the most worthwhile learning?

Note

- 1 J. Dover Wilson, (ed.), *Culture and Anarchy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961, p. 70. On p. 7, Arnold expresses the same idea in the words 'the last that has been thought and said in the world'. The book was first published in 1869.

- Bantock, G.H. *The Parochialism of the Present*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, Ch. 4.
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- Hirst, P.H. *Knowledge and the Curriculum*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974, Chs 3, 6.
- Postman, N. *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993, pp. 171–99.
- Williams, R. *The Long Revolution*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1973, Part Two.

Metaphors play a central part in the understanding we have of human life and the physical world we inhabit. As Iris Murdoch has emphasized, they 'are not merely peripheral decorations or even useful models, they are fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition; metaphors of space, metaphors of movement, metaphors of vision'. It is not surprising that in the course of Western culture several metaphors have significantly shaped the interpretation and practice of education. Before referring to them specifically, I shall say a little more about metaphors in general.

A metaphor proposes the transfer of some familiar association we have with one thing in order to highlight features of another. 'O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall frightful' says the poet Hopkins. Of course, the claim is not literally true, but it suggests the complex mental anguish that people can experience. Much of our everyday language is lightly tinged with metaphor (we talk about seeing a problem, staying cool under pressure). There are many words that began life as metaphors and are now used literally (the word 'examine', for example, originally meant 'to weigh').

Speaking metaphorically, we refer to these words as 'dead' rather than 'living' metaphors. But there is another category (perhaps neither dead nor living): that of metaphors which have been worn out by overuse and have become clichés. Politicians and media commentators play a leading role in this process. Think of how often in recent times we have heard someone refer to 'the bottom line' or 'an even playing field' or 'the pain that the recession is causing'. Fresh metaphors are like miniature theories that shape our accustomed way of thinking about something and draw our attention to what we had not observed before.

As I have noted, it is in the nature of metaphors not to express what is literally true. Still, there are truth claims embedded in the use of metaphors. If human beings lived in a state of undisturbed mental tranquillity, Hopkins' metaphor would be misleading. However, there is an important distinction to be made between metaphors where the meaning would remain virtually unchanged if they were replaced by a literal description and those that evoke attitudes, feelings, ways of interpreting that cannot be captured by efforts at literal translation. In the discussion of tariff arrangements, for example, there are quite satisfactory literal alternatives for 'a level playing field'. In contrast, the metaphors of significant literature usually carry subtleties that are lost in a literal translation. Would other words adequately capture Eliot's introductory lines to *The Waste Land* ('April is the cruellest month...')?

As a first step into metaphors of education, I shall refer to the fortunes of two books. *School is Dead* by Everett Reimer and *Deschooling Society* by Ivan Illich were published at about the same time (1971). Illich begins his introduction with the sentence, 'I owe my interest in public education to Everett Reimer'. Both authors (on the basis of discussions over several years) argue against universal compulsory schooling and in favour of alternative ways of interpreting and practising education. In addition to Reimer's influence on Illich, I believe his book presents a more thorough and cogently argued case. Yet it was *Deschooling Society* that became a best-seller while Reimer's suffered the fate attributed to schools in its title.

Illich no doubt presents the message in a more dramatic way, and he had the advantage of being better known to the East Coast literati (of the United States) than Reimer. But I would suggest that the different success of the books was in no small part a consequence of the metaphors in their titles. 'Deschooling Society' (which includes a change in cultural outlook, not just the dismantling of institutions) was an inspired choice by an editor at Harper & Row. It suggests a program of action in contrast to the passive connotation of 'School is Dead'. On the competition of books (and theories) in the academic marketplace, various commentators have noted the importance of a catchy metaphor. The point is well illustrated, I think, in these books.

Before leaving this case, I should note that, for Illich, 'deschooling society' is intended almost literally. One of the interesting metaphors in the book itself is his comparison between the role of the school in contemporary society and that of the Church in earlier times. The doctrine of 'no salvation' outside the Church has been translated into 'no learning' outside the school—and as schools provide the certificates that lead to employment, one could say that outside the school there is no material salvation. At least, as our increasing retention rates indicate, this is the message that has been taken up.

Historically, there have been two main groups of metaphors for education, each focusing attention on a part of the complex process of educating. The one that tended to dominate until the time of Rousseau (in the eighteenth century) regarded the learner as a largely passive recipient of bodies of belief who was shaped, often against natural inclination, to reflect habits of thought and action. So the learner was an empty vessel into which the teacher poured knowledge, skills and attitudes. Or the learner was a block of stone or clay that the teacher moulded to a certain shape in the manner of a sculptor. Another closely related image was that of the learner as a tablet of wax on which the teacher inscribed the content of education.

I have been using the past tense, but metaphors of this kind still often capture the main style of educating. Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) spends a chapter attacking the above approach, which he describes in the metaphor of banking. The teacher deposits pieces of information in the learner as one deposits money in a bank. On the appropriate occasion, the time of examination, the

students can at best simply reproduce what has been deposited. Freire's metaphor does not even allow that the original deposit of knowledge might have gathered a little interest. In what he depicts, students are simply objects of the learning process.

The account of education that Rousseau gives in *Emile* (1762)³ has as one of its basic objectives to equip human beings for life in a society. He was, of course, very critical of the social order of his day and proposed a pattern of education that would reflect the values of a reformed society. While the 'general will' was to be dominant (even to the extent of determining what counted as true and good), Rousseau insisted that the freedom of each individual will or person must be respected and developed. For the practice of education, his key metaphor is that of 'natural readiness'. The teacher must organize the content of learning so that it coincides with natural stages of growth in the life of the child, each of which is to be respected for its own values. Hence, in the content of education Rousseau endorsed social authority, but in method he was a romantic individualist.

The metaphor of growth or unfolding became the keynote of the 'progressive' educational theorists in the following century and up to the present time. Johann Pestalozzi (who died in 1827) spoke of the education of children in terms of the tending of young trees by a gardener. Like Rousseau, he wanted to stress natural readiness and the innate capacity to learn through direct experience while at the same time taking account of the social character of education. In the present century, John Dewey was a leading exponent of the growth metaphor. He stressed that immaturity was a positive capacity for development. However, on the criteria of what changes were to be identified as growth he was always vague. For Dewey, a change was growth if it did not close off the possibilities of further growth. But this provides no clear ground for distinguishing between an experience that is educative and one that is not. In Dewey, more than in Rousseau and other exponents of natural readiness and learning through doing, the communal nature of education has clear priority over the unfolding of individual capacities. His theory of education is an attempt to strike an appropriate balance between the two.

It should be emphasized that the general shift in the dominant metaphor for education from moulding to unfolding did not introduce entirely novel views. One has only to recall Socrates' belief in innate ideas and his metaphor of the teacher as a midwife. Throughout the history of Western education, the leading theorists (from Quintilian and Augustine in the early centuries to Comenius and Locke in the sixteenth) had always given attention to the active capacities of the child as a learner. For Augustine, knowledge depended on divine illumination; for Locke, it came through sense experience. But both advocated activities that would engage the curiosity and effort of children to learn for themselves under the predisposing guidance of a teacher.

Another point to notice about the popular switch of emphasis in education to the development of natural capacities is that it affirmed a belief in the innate

goodness of children in opposition to common religious views about the effects of original sin. For Rousseau, the causes of evil were to be found in a corrupt social order, not in any individual dispositions to evil. In the present century, the metaphor of growth or unfolding has been sustained by psychological rather than theological views. Various psychologists, most notably Piaget, have claimed to map a series of innately determined stages in the conceptual, moral and emotional development of human beings. Different environments may affect the rate of development and the level achieved, but the pattern is genetically determined. The metaphor of unfolding has also gained support from Chomsky's account of the genetic structures that shape human languages and the ways of learning.⁴

The pervasive and exaggerated influence of the metaphor of growth or unfolding has been propagated by what has commonly been called the progressive education movement (particularly that large segment of adherents who interpret education almost exclusively in terms of individual development). It reflects one strand detached from the context of Rousseau's complex, not to say contradictory, total theory: his passion for individual freedom. It has also espoused various subjective theories about the nature of knowledge.

This interpretation of education as unfolding is expressed by one of its advocates (C. H. Rathbone) in the following way: 'open education views the child ... as a self-activated maker of meaning... Because knowledge is basically idiosyncratic, it is most difficult to judge whether one person's knowledge is "better" than another's.⁵ In this account, teachers are rather less active than gardeners. They are often referred to as 'facilitators' or 'assistants'. One has the image of a storekeeper whose job is to keep the shelves stocked with the 'goods' that the customers want.

A somewhat curious aspect of the popularity of the metaphor of unfolding is that it seems to run counter to the current fashion (at least in social theory and practice) of treating genetic factors as insignificant in comparison with environmental influences. The fixation on the latter seems to fit better with the moulding metaphor.

There are, of course, some influential current versions of the moulding metaphor, and to this extent compatibility with the preference for environmental over genetic factors is upheld. One is the appeal to the imagery of computer programming. Human beings are regarded as complex cerebral machines, and learning is essentially a process by which one such machine transmits a package of information to another. (What has happened to the emotions and imagination in this process?) Another metaphor treats human beings simply as animals whose spontaneous behaviour can be shaped or conditioned as desired through appropriate positive and negative reinforcement. B. F. Skinner's behaviourism is the main theory that this variant of education as moulding has adopted.

It is clear that the metaphors that interpret the practice of education are strongly influenced by beliefs about the nature of human learning. Thus, any attempt to assess their adequacy requires us to reflect on theories about human

learning. This leads to the question of what might distinguish such learning from that of other animals. And at this point we can hardly avoid moral questions about what is fitting as distinct from what is possible.

Although, as we saw, Dewey appealed to the metaphor of growth, he did not support a theory of human development based on the image of an unfolding flower. While he agreed with the progressives' emphasis on the active role of the learner, his criticisms reveal serious weaknesses in the metaphor that has characterized their approach. The most important are these: confusion of the ideal of self-determination with the policy of allowing children to be the arbiters of whatever they should learn; the non-directive supervisory role of the teacher; the preoccupation with learning skills to the neglect of content; and an individualistic emphasis that neglects the social dimension of human life.

Richard Peters, a more recent critic of the plant and gardener metaphor, suggests that, while it has application to the manner of educating, it does not relate to what the process should be about. As he points out, human beings, in contrast to plants, are not genetically predetermined to develop to a particular end state. Given general innate capacities, what we become as human beings depends largely on the beliefs, values, and practices that we acquire from the store of common experience that we call a culture. In arguing for much the same position, Michael Oakeshott stresses that 'the educational engagement is necessary because nobody is born a human being, and because the quality of being human is not a latency which becomes an actuality in a process of "growth"'.⁶ (The views of Oakeshott are further discussed in a forthcoming essay on pp. 29-35.)

The metaphor that Peters (and Oakeshott) prefers is that of an initiation ceremony. Education is the long process of initiation by which we are inducted into the well-grounded beliefs, standards of thought and practice, and the related skills and habits that form the life of a civilised human being. The initiation is unbalanced unless it combines both a content of significant knowledge and the skills of critical reflection by which this knowledge is tested and applied.

In the background of the various metaphors of education there are other influential metaphors that have attempted to interpret what does (or should) distinguish humanness. Some have tended to the extreme of individualism (the atomic self driven by self-interest, and social life merely a voluntary association for the more effective advancement of self-interest). Others have embraced the extreme of collectivism (society as an organism, or an ants' nest, or a beehive). Obviously, the first is closely linked with education as unfolding, and the second with education as moulding. Any challenge to these metaphors of education must reflect an interpretation of human life that avoids both individualism and collectivism. As noted earlier, assessment of the metaphors inevitably leads us back not only to questions of fact about human life but also to what ought to be.

To adapt Karl Marx somewhat, we may say that the main metaphors of education that we have inherited tend 'to weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the

Further reading

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- Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1972, Ch. 2.
- Illich, I. *Deschooling Society*. New York: Harrow Books, Harper & Row, 1972.
- Peters, R.S. *Authority, Responsibility and Education*. London: Allen & Unwin, rev. edn. 1973, Ch. 8 ('Education as Initiation').
- Reimer, E. *School is Dead*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1971.
- Scheffer, I. *The Language of Education*. Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1966, Ch. III ('Educational Metaphors').
- On metaphor:
- Black, M. *Models and Metaphors*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1962.
- Richards, I.A. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. London: Oxford University Press, 1936, Chs 5, 6.
- Education theorists past and present:
- Bowen, J. & Hobson, P.R. *Theories of Education*. Sydney: John Wiley & Sons, 1974. (This book contains commentaries on a number of past and recent educational theorists and excerpts from their writings. Among those included are Rousseau, Dewey, Skinner, Peters and Illich.)
- Curtis, M.A. & Boulwood, M.E.A. *A Short History of Educational Ideas*. London: University Tutorial Press, 2nd edn. 1956.
- D'Cruz, J.V. & Hannah, W. (eds). *Perceptions of Excellence*. Melbourne: The Polding Press, 1979.

living'. It is evident that a satisfactory approach depends on finding a middle ground between moulding and unfolding (individualism and collectivism, genetic and environmental influences...). There is a broad stretch of territory between the extremes. Peters' metaphor of initiation may be more appropriate. However, Emile Durkheim used the same metaphor but understood it as suggesting much more emphasis on group identity than in Peters' account. Dewey made a sustained effort at finding a middle position. He sought to dissolve conflicting elements (such as individual growth and the welfare of the social order) in an Hegelian type of synthesis. However, his objective was achieved more by the vague use of key terms than by rigorous thought.

Like arguments about the ideals of justice, the debate on education is likely to go on indefinitely. Metaphors that seek a middle position between moulding and unfolding will give more adequate interpretations. Some will be more defensible than others, although it is unlikely that any one metaphor will ever be regarded as pre-eminent.

To end on a metaphor, I suggest that we need to see the teacher more as a travel guide whose task is to identify the main features of the terrain and thus enable students to engage more effectively in their own work of detailed exploration.

QUESTIONS

- What strengths and limits do 'moulding' and 'unfolding' have as metaphors of the educational process?
- How accurately does Freire's metaphor of 'banking' (see the Further reading list) apply to the current practice of education in Australia?
- What consequences do various metaphors of the social order (e.g. as a body, as an ants' nest) have for the interpretation of the educational role of schools?

Notes

- 1 I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, p. 77.
- 2 W.H. Gardner, (ed.) *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. London: Osgood University Press, 3rd edn, 1956, p. 107.
- 3 J.-J. Rousseau, *Emile*. Allan Bloom (trans.). London: Penguin Books, 1991.
- 4 N. Chomsky, *Topics in the Theory of Generative Grammar*. The Hague: Mouton, 1966.
- 5 C.H. Rathbone (ed.) *Open Education: The Informal Classroom*. New York: Citation Press, 1971, pp. 100, 102.
- 6 M. Oakeshott, 'Education: The Engagement and its Frustration', in R.F. Dearden, P.H. Hirst & R.S. Peters (eds), *Education and the Development of Reason*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972, pp. 21-2.

What Makes a Good School?

In 1991, the then Prime Minister (Mr R. J. Hawke) announced the expenditure of ten million dollars on a project to discover the characteristics of a good school. I do not know whether the promise was ever carried through. But, if so, it was one matter on which our Commonwealth government could have made a budget saving. Certainly, there are significant differences over the main purposes that schools should be serving; but when the emphasis on objectives is much the same, there also tends to be broad agreement on what makes for a good school.

It might seem that funds of this order would better be directed to settling what the main objectives of schools should be. For better or worse, this is one of those topics (like freedom and determinism, or the nature of knowledge, or the relation of individual to society) that is likely to be debated perennially. The arguments may be more or less illuminating, but there is no high probability of settling the issue once and for all.

Distinctive role of schools

I propose to start with an assumption about the distinctive work that schools should be engaged in, and then draw attention to characteristics that make for a good school of this kind. This topic is discussed more fully in a previous essay 'The Distinctive Task of Schools'.

The assumption—one that is widely and, I believe, defensibly held—is as follows. The basic role of schools and those who teach in them is to induct the members of each new generation into a culture's systematic bodies of beliefs and values together with their related ways of thinking, feeling, imagining and acting. Such knowledge and skills are not the kind that we acquire informally in the course of everyday life. They depend on a sustained and deliberate effort of learning, one that is at least facilitated by the guidance of qualified teachers. This is the activity, I am assuming, that is central to the institution of the school.

The outcomes of schooling in this sense may usefully serve many vocational and other objectives. But their main justification is that they are constituents of the quality of human life; thus they are desirable for all members of a society regardless of the particular occupational and other roles they happen to play. In a literate culture, learning to read with critical appreciation, for example, is desirable whether or not it helps one get a better job.

I should emphasize that, beyond its central and distinctive task, a school might justifiably include activities more loosely described as 'education', and others that

occur in the context of a school simply as a social institution. Whatever else schools may do (from teaching safe sex to providing mental therapy, vocational guidance, sports facilities and so on), there are two basic conditions to be observed. Firstly, these other activities should be consistent with the values of the school's central educational role; secondly, they should not become so prominent as to distract the school from its major task.

The systematic knowledge and modes of inquiry, interpretation and the like to which schooling gives access are, of course, directly related to the intellectual disciplines. For this reason, what I am talking about is often simply labelled as an 'academic' curriculum. While this may be convenient as a summary, it is misleading in that it indicates nothing of how the intellectual disciplines may be organized in a school curriculum, how they may be linked to associated practices (e.g. moral theory and acting morally, literary studies and writing), or by what methods they may be taught and learnt. These are all matters that need to be worked out in detail, and on which there can be justifiable diversity.

Given that the main work of schooling is grounded in the intellectual disciplines, what can be said about the characteristics that make for a good school?

A school in New York

A few years ago, Diane Ravitch (a professor of education at Columbia University) wrote an article for *The American Scholar* entitled 'A Good School'. She refers to work in the early 1980s by R. Edmonds, who was a member of the Harvard School of Education (and happened to be black). He studied a variety of schools in which academic achievement seemed to be independent of students' social class. Edmonds reached a fairly obvious, but by no means popular, conclusion that 'such schools had an outstanding principal, high expectations for all children, an orderly atmosphere, a regular testing program, and an emphasis on academic learning' (p. 481). If Edmonds had not been black, his views would probably have been rejected as reactionary. In fact, they were received with the excitement of a significant discovery.

As Ravitch points out, American high schools have generally taken the view that only about one-third of their students can cope with, or are interested in, a program that develops the broad range of systematic knowledge and intellectual skills. Instead, they offer either vocational training or what is called 'the general track'—a soft option that is neither vocational nor academic. Unfortunately, about forty per cent of students in American high schools go down this blind alley. No wonder the idea of a good school as one that actively encourages its students, regardless of their ability, to follow an 'academic' curriculum sounded revolutionary. Apart from distinctively educational values, it is surprising that ideals of democracy did not impel schools to exert their ingenuity in giving everyone access to 'the best that has been thought and known' (as Matthew Arnold expressed it).

Australian schools have perhaps not slipped so far as their American counterparts from the objective of an 'academic' curriculum for all. But they are subject

to severe pressures in this direction. One of the strongest is the desire to hold as many adolescents as possible to the end of high school. It is assumed that this is more likely if they are offered what they find practical and of immediate interest. This pragmatic consideration is supported by the ideal of freedom advocated by 'progressive' educators—and still exercising some influence—that students should simply follow their felt needs and interests in what they learn.

In her article, Ravitch describes various characteristics of what she regards as a very good public high school in Brooklyn, New York. She emphasises that, when it comes to details, there is no single model for a good school. The school she discusses illustrates one effective way of combining traditional goals with non-traditional means.

The school has an enrolment of 3000 students. There is about an equal number of white (including a variety of ethnic backgrounds) and black students. As a policy, the school enrolls students at all levels of academic ability. On the basis of reading competence, about one-third are below average and one-third above average. The school buildings are of very poor quality, occupying a cramped site near a busy freeway.

In Ravitch's view, the main features that make this a good school are the following:

- 1 It insists that all students regardless of ability must undertake a substantial core of academic studies.
- 2 Intensive remedial instruction is provided for students below average in reading and writing.
- 3 The curriculum is a structured mixture of core studies and carefully designed electives. All subjects involve homework and written exercises. There are no 'content-free' subjects.
- 4 Subjects are organized into four 10-week units over the year (this encourages more adventurous choice), and each subject has four meetings a week. This leaves students some free time each week to follow their interests outside the formal curriculum.
- 5 Demanding conditions are set for successful graduation from high school. Students may have to stay on longer in order to satisfy them.
- 6 The teaching style deliberately mixes instruction with debate, inquiry, problem solving.
- 7 The Principal is frequently in the classroom and is an excellent teacher. Despite obstacles in the system, he has managed to select a staff of generally competent teachers who accept the basic objectives of the school. There is a high level of interaction among them in teaching and on general educational issues affecting the school.
- 8 All students are encouraged to achieve to the full extent of their ability, but there is no pseudo-egalitarian pretence.
- 9 Discipline is low-key but firm.
- 10 Because of its objectives and approach, the school receives a very high number

of applications. It has a selective process (which is not simply an admissions examination) and enrolls about one in twelve applicants. This process itself has the effect of engendering high morale in the school. As noted earlier, the school deliberately selects for a broad mix in levels of academic ability.

Twelve schools in London

A study of twelve non-selective secondary schools in the inner-city London area is reported by Michael Rutter and co-authors in *Fifteen Thousand Hours* (1979). Although the schools were similar in many respects, some were better at promoting academic achievement than others. The more successful were those that set high expectations, respected students and encouraged responsibility, had competent teachers who knew how to use discipline fairly but sparingly, and included all levels of academic ability. The authors stressed the importance of teachers with the ability to maximise the time spent on topics of study in comparison with discipline and other activities. They also stressed that the more successful schools were characterized by a constructive atmosphere, which arose from the willingness of teachers to reach a compromise between their individual values and the needs of the institution. The less successful schools were marked not so much by conflict among teachers as by apathy.

The methods used in this study have been subject to serious criticisms. One of the more significant refers to the inadequate analysis of the influence of home background. The authors classified according to occupational level (which in the schools studied did not show marked variation), but critics have emphasized that parental interest in, and encouragement of, children's work at school are the crucial factors, and these are not necessarily indicated by occupational level. The authors' response is that parental support tends to be an effect of a well-organized and efficient school rather than a cause of this development.

American high schools: a national study

A 1988 national study of American high schools (*What Price Democracy? Politics, Markets and American Schools*) has particular bearing on this last point. Its basic claim is that the way schools are organized, both individually and in their wider institutional contexts, has a crucial influence on their ability to promote academic achievement.

In comparing high-performance and low-performance schools, this study found very little difference in the formal structures and classroom practices but dramatic differences in informal organization and characteristics of the student group. In a national sample, the variations among student groups (particularly the related family background) and the effects on performance are not surprising. What is less obvious is the influence of different internal styles of organization.

The study concludes that in successful schools the staff are organized as teams rather than hierarchies; there is substantial delegation of authority to a classroom teacher; all teachers have a part in school decisions; the leadership of the school is pedagogical rather than managerial. (On these matters, it is interesting to note that Australian universities are rushing headlong in the opposite direction.)

A necessary condition for the internal style distinctive of the more successful schools is that they should have substantial independence over the setting of goals and the appointment of teachers. The exercise of local autonomy is closely linked with another fundamental condition for effective schooling: the involvement of parents. From this study, it seems that, given local autonomy, the interest of parents is not simply a consequence of sound internal school organization but one of the driving forces. In any case, it is ranked above such factors as material resources and class size or even the aptitude of students in promoting the academic effectiveness of a school.

This study recognizes that the autonomy of a school must be balanced with the need for accountability to the society as a whole. However, the authors point out that efforts of a central administration to achieve accountability (such as the setting and monitoring of standards) can effectively undermine any genuine local autonomy. On this point, I should note that strictly diagnostic tests of achievement in key areas, applied at various stages of schooling, seem highly desirable. Of course, schools must have the resources to do the remedial work that may be necessary.

There is also the temptation for system administrators to respond to various pressure groups for better quality schooling through a policy of external directives and programs. This process usually generates an impossibly large number of 'top priorities' for schools to deal with.

A particular obstacle to independence for state schools is that the market does not usually exert any rigorous check on the quality of what they do. An obvious response is to make state schools much more open to parental choice. However, any efforts in this direction must guard against the danger of turning education into a product like soap powder or sausages.

The Australian scene

Studies done in Australia broadly support the conclusions about characteristics of good schools in the writing to which I have been referring. For example, J. Ainley and co-authors (1986) emphasize the importance of frequent communication among teachers on matters affecting their work, and the development of a well-coordinated curriculum.

A publication by the Schools Council, *Australia's Teachers* (1990), comments on the broad features that make for a good school and provides a useful summary (see in particular pp. 72-84, 131-8). On moves towards self-management in Australian schools, it sets out what had been done to that time in the various States

and Territories (Appendix 3). But it also notes that the evolution of decision making has tended to be accompanied by the introduction of increased forms of control by the systems over their constituent schools. I would suggest that the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), with all its details of curriculum and assessment, is in fact an example of this tendency. It not only includes Year 11 but will extend its influence to the whole of secondary schooling. Ironically, despite its regimenting effect, the VCE will not necessarily promote an intellectually rigorous program, one of the key conditions for a good school. While generating a lot of busy work, there is enough elastic in the fabric to enable it to cover very soft options as well as systematic intellectual work.

Final comments

Conclusions about what makes for a good school do not give a high rating to the physical plant, and most studies do not view class size within the range of about 15 to 40 students as making any significant difference to the quality of learning. At the same time, it should not be supposed that decent physical conditions and a reasonably small ratio of students to teachers make no difference. Perhaps more important than class size is the size of the institutional group of which students are a part. Schools with large enrolments should ensure that students and teachers are associated in clearly defined small 'sub-schools'.

One of the critical factors mentioned in many studies is that the student group should reflect a broad range in levels of academic ability. Students of average and below average ability tend to have higher academic achievement when working in schools with above average students. This is in no way inconsistent with ensuring that the latter have special opportunities to extend their capacities to the fullest, just as some proportion of students will need intensive remedial teaching. Nor is it a decisive argument against selective schools. But it shows that there are important educational and social values that favour schools of mixed abilities.

On the question of specialist schools, there may be a case for supplementary institutions for young people who seem to lack the ability or interest to undertake any kind of academic studies. For Years 11-12 there is a strong argument for schools that specialize in certain areas, as well as providing the common core of intellectual studies.

Competent and dedicated teachers are essential for a good school in any list of conditions. The complex problem of how to provide an adequate number of these teachers is beyond the scope of this discussion. (See the final essay in Part 1, 'Postmodernism and the Practice of Education'.) The Schools Council's Paper to which I have referred considers many of the issues and makes sound suggestions. On the educating of teachers, I would say that good quality depends on at least the following: a thorough grounding in the areas of knowledge in which they teach (acquired in the context of an advanced general education); systematic induction

over two or three years into the practice of teaching under the guidance of teachers who have demonstrated high competence; during this period (in which their teaching would be part-time), a thorough introduction to the philosophical, psychological and other intellectual foundations of education and its institutional forms.

In Australia there are about 3 million students and 200 000 teachers in 10 000 schools. It would be absurd to suggest that they could all be accommodated by a single detailed blueprint for what makes a good school. Any attempt to construct and implement such a blueprint would not only be misguided but damaging to the quality of education. However, in the light of diverse experience in various countries, there are a few general characteristics of a good school that can be confidently claimed without the need for any further expensive inquiry. For a summary of these characteristics we may go back to Diane Ravitch's article: 'A strong academic curriculum, a principal with a vision and the courage to work for it, dedicated teachers, a commitment to learning, a mix of students from different backgrounds, and high expectations for all children' (p. 493). To this list we should add: parents who take a strong interest in their children's schooling.

QUESTIONS

- How is the organization of a school likely to affect the quality of education?
- What relevance does a student enrolment containing mixed abilities and diverse social backgrounds have for the quality of education in a school?
- Under what conditions may the devolution of decision making to individual schools be expected to improve their educational quality?
- How would you rank order what you regard as the half dozen or so main contributing factors to the quality of education in a school?

Further reading

- Ainley, J., Reed, R. & Miller, H. *School Organization and the Quality of Schooling: A Study of Victorian Government Secondary Schools*. Melbourne: ACER, 1986.
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Learning to Engage in a Civilized Life: Michael Oakeshott's View of Education

Michael Oakeshott died at the end of 1990, shortly after his eighty-ninth birthday. He continued writing well beyond his retirement from the chair of political science at the London School of Economics. Among political theorists in this century, he was the leading exponent of the tradition of conservative thought that goes back through Burke and Hume to Hooker in the sixteenth century.

Within his distinctive account of conservatism, he gave more than incidental attention to questions about the nature of education. A collection of his writings on education (*The Voice of Liberal Learning*) was published as late as 1989. He also claimed that his theory of knowledge grew from reflection on the practices of teaching and learning. His view of education radically challenges some dominant current trends. It also contains a surprising mixture of ingredients. A discussion of several of its key features is thus both worthwhile and opportune.¹

The background of political conservatism

Before we turn to features of his educational theory, it is necessary to refer at least briefly to his version of political conservatism. He has been described as 'a Tory anarchist'. This fits with his own claim that he belonged to no political group but voted 'for the party likely to do the least harm. To that extent, I am a Tory'. Like others in the conservative tradition, he endorsed the following beliefs. First, there should be respect for the common experience and wisdom of a society existing over many generations. As a consequence, changes should generally be made in a gradual, piecemeal way. Second, individual human development depends fundamentally and inescapably on one's social and cultural context. Third, comprehensive schemes of political order are to be viewed with scepticism.

Oakeshott put particular emphasis on an enabling but limited role for governments in the life of a society. They should be constrained, he thought, more by traditions of behaviour than the terms of a constitution. Another of his major themes was the crucial importance of practical knowledge—acquired through experience and perhaps unable to be expressed in propositions—for political and

most other human activities. Because of this, he insisted on the relatively limited part played in human conduct by technical knowledge (deliberately organized in schemes for the achievement of predetermined objectives)—despite the widespread assumption that this was the very model of rational behaviour. He also defended his position by arguing that important human practices are generally not engaged in simply as means to a specific end.

Oakeshott's view of education

The basis of Oakeshott's educational theory is that one becomes fully human only by being inducted into the diverse patterns of meaning that make up a culture. To be human is to enact one's life in a world of meanings; it is not a given but something to be acquired. In Oakeshott's metaphors, a human culture is a 'conversation' to which various 'voices' contribute (science, history, poetry, political theory and so on). Each of these voices has its distinctive 'language' and 'literature'. If we are to realize our potential for human life we need to gain some familiarity with the voices expressed in these languages and literatures and thus participate in the conversation that is the essence of culture.

To use Oakeshott's own words², the idea can be summarized in this way:

As civilized human beings, we are the inheritors neither of an enquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is a conversation which goes on both in public and within each of ourselves.

We do not acquire the facility for participating in this conversation through the spontaneous unfolding of innate capacities, nor are we innately programmed with the necessary knowledge. We acquire the skills and knowledge and understanding only through a sustained effort of learning and the transaction between the generations that is called education. In any complex culture this requires the deliberate effort of teaching in a distinct institution, the school.

On education in this sense, Oakeshott proposes five characteristics of the historical ideal of a school. (He acknowledges that schools have often fallen short of this ideal.) It is an institution committed to:

- 1 'a serious and orderly initiation into an intellectual, imaginative, moral and emotional inheritance';
- 2 'an engagement to learn by study';
- 3 'detachment from the immediate, local world of the learner';
- 4 'a personal transaction between a "teacher" and a "learner"; and
- 5 'an historic community of teachers and learners, neither large nor small, with traditions of its own' (pp. 24-6).

Several of these features relate directly to what has already been said, but some further comment should be made on points three and five. The third runs completely counter to the present emphasis on social and personal relevance. For Oakeshott, an adequate induction into the 'voices' of a culture could not be constrained by what happened to be the present economic political and other social needs, much less by the limited range of interests and needs that the individual student happened to feel. The sufficient purpose of schooling is the very general one of enabling a person 'to be at once an autonomous and a civilized subscriber to a human life' (p. 26). This is not to deny that a well-educated person will be socially useful, but it rejects the policy of trying to determine the content and process of education by consideration of what is likely to be socially useful (or personally satisfying).

On the fifth point, it is worth noting the importance Oakeshott places on each school as a community with a distinctive character and a sense of its continuity. There is particular need to keep this in mind at a time when even universities in Australia are being shaped on the model of a chain of department stores.

To gain an accurate picture of Oakeshott's ideal of formal education, we need to give special attention to some surprising features that could easily be overlooked. In the first place, although he highlights initiation into the public traditions of meaning in a culture, he also underlines the importance of the particular way in which each individual reflects and engages in these traditions. In coming to understand them, each person should be a living mirror 'acquiring the ability to throw back upon the world his own version of a human being in conduct which is both a self-disclosure and a self-enactment' (p. 22).

A second crucial matter is the distinction Oakeshott draws between information and judgment. It is directly related to what was noted earlier on the difference between technical and practical knowledge. Information is knowledge that can be expressed in statements and is taught through instruction. The main objective, however, is not to acquire an extensive body of inert ideas or simply to be familiar with a canon of texts. For Oakeshott, education consists in becoming proficient in the 'language' of each of the voices of culture through a study of its 'literature' so that we can actively participate in the conversation that makes up a culture's life.

Judgment is knowing how to do something, whether one is making a scientific conjecture or a moral judgment or a piece of furniture. In Oakeshott's view, judgment and the virtues that go with it can only be 'imparted' by a teacher's example. To a large extent, learning occurs through the direct experience of engaging in practice. Although Dewey's tendency to reduce the voices of culture to a single version of the scientific method (as a problem-solving procedure) is quite at odds with Oakeshott's interpretation, there is a large place in the latter's account of education, as in Dewey's, for 'learning through doing'.

Oakeshott does not comment in detail on the various phases of formal education. However, education at any level is distinguished by its breadth and the

broad objective of developing an educated person without regard to any specific purpose. In these respects, it stands in contrast with graduate or technical studies. Oakeshott does not deny the importance of these other activities. However, because they are preoccupied with a specific body of knowledge and its relevance to a specific practice, they do not, in his view, count as education in the strict sense.

Education at the primary and secondary levels is largely a systematic introduction to the range of 'literature' in which the main modes of thought have expressed themselves. This can be done in various ways. The conventional school subjects, for example, are not themselves the modes of thought but convenient categories for organizing information about facts, rules, and explanatory theories. Universities should be characterized by direct attention to the 'languages' of the diverse conversations that make up a culture and how they relate to one another. At this level the 'literatures' are studied as models of the various 'languages' at work, and students are expected to develop their own style of engaging in the common conversation. Oakeshott makes no comment on the relationship between teaching and research. His vision of a university is really that of a liberal arts college.

Major distortions of genuine education

According to Oakeshott, the ideal of the school has been at least 'frustrated', if not undermined, by two main counterviews. They are by no means new, but their influence has grown significantly with the development of universal primary and secondary schooling. I think it is correct to say that they are particularly virulent in the policy and practice of contemporary Australian education.

The first is the group of doctrines and practices that come under the general label of 'progressive' education. The agenda of schooling is set not by any tradition of public modes of knowledge but by the felt needs and interests of each individual child. If children are allowed to pursue their particular interests, it is believed that they will surely 'discover' significant knowledge. There is an impatience with past communal experience; a yearning for romantic innocence (which, ironically, has a long tradition). Problem-solving in the direct experience of things dominates the process of learning. It is guided by a simplistic empiricism in which conceptual schemes and theories are regarded as obstacles to 'real' learning. Oakeshott ruefully speaks of schools being corrupted 'by the characteristics of a very indifferent kindergarten' or turned into 'technological parks', and of teachers as taking on the role of 'interior decorators' (p. 28).

The second major threat to genuine education is the interpretation of schooling as predominantly a process of socialization. The preoccupation is with 'useful'

learning, the kind that will most effectively equip people to serve the perceived political and economic needs of the present social order. Government agencies tend to play the leading role in setting the priorities. Although there continue to be elements of genuine education, the 'social function' approach treats education—whether in schools or universities—as mainly 'a systematic apprenticeship to domestic, industrial and commercial life in a "modern" State' (p. 37). Even many of those who criticize present educational practice do so on the ground that it is not efficient enough in fulfilling its social function.

Oakeshott illustrates the shift of emphasis by reference to science and language. The first tends to be taught and learnt not as a significant component in the inheritance of human understandings and beliefs, but for its practical utility. Languages are approached not as repositories of human understanding, feeling and imagination but as instruments for conveying useful information.

In the present Australian educational climate it is interesting to notice Oakeshott's belief that the corruption of education in the name of socialization has probably gone furthest in the universities. It is a self-destruction that academics have undertaken, 'hardly needing to be bribed' by governments (p. 44).

Some criticisms

While Oakeshott presents a powerful account of education as the process by which we come to understand and engage in the main patterns of meaning that shape a distinctively human life, there are various aspects that call for criticism. The following is a summary of what I regard as among the more serious difficulties:

- 1 Insufficient attention is given to the need for critical evaluation of what is contained in the various traditions of meaning. Apart from the conflicting beliefs and practices that exist among cultures, there are fundamental differences within any of the 'voices' that speak within our culture. We simply must make choices, and these should be, as far as possible, reflective and rationally justified.

- 2 The point is illustrated clearly in the priority Oakeshott gives in moral education to habits of feeling and behaviour over reflection on principles, ideals etc. While he offers a sound corrective to abstract rationalistic approaches, the need to evaluate conflicting moral practices remains. It is also the case that principles and rules do not have to be abstracted from practice; they are constituents or presuppositions of practice and are better understood as such.
- 3 In his preoccupation with conceptual schemes and other ingredients of the patterns of meaning, Oakeshott underplays the importance of attention to the independent physical characteristics of things in the world, including those of human beings. Unless the construction of meanings is answerable in some way

political administration. In learning that claims the name of education, both of the basic kinds of knowing must be included. Otherwise, the process will inevitably be deformed.

QUESTIONS

- What implications does Oakeshott's metaphor of human culture as a 'conversation' have for the role of teachers?
- What is the relevance of his distinction between 'information' and 'judgment' for the practice of education?
- On what grounds does he criticize the view that education should be regarded as predominantly a process of socialization?
- What does he mean by the distinction between the 'language' and the 'literature' of a mode of thought? (Consider some illustrations from the area(s) in which you teach or one preparing to teach.)

Notes

- 1 It's worth noting that Oakeshott's writings display an impressive style. There can be few more elegant accounts of an ideal of education than the article he wrote in 1971 entitled 'Education: The Engagement and its Frustration'. All page references in the text refer to this article as reprinted in R.F. Dearden, P.H. Hirst & R.S. Peters (eds), *Education and the Development of Reason*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972.
- 2 M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. London: Methuen, 1962, p. 199.

Further reading

- Fuller, T. (ed.). *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989.
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On Oakeshott:

- Peters, R.S. *Essays on Education*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1981, Ch. 6 ('Michael Oakeshott's Philosophy of Education').
- Watt, A.J. 'Michael Oakeshott: The Mind of a Conservative'. *Peregrinations of Excellence*. J.V. D'Cruz & Wilma Hannah (eds). Melbourne: Polding Press, 1979.

- 3 To these characteristics, it degenerates into wishful thinking or arbitrary preference. While Oakeshott correctly rejects the simplistic slogan of 'things not words', there is a tendency for him to veer to the opposite extreme.
- 4 This tendency is perhaps reflected in what seems to be a too sharp distinction between teaching information and imparting judgment. He is right in stressing that the learning of 'know how' in all its forms depends substantially on the direct experience of practice. But, contrary to Oakeshott's view, instruction can play a significant role in this context. As outstanding coaches in many sports illustrate, it is possible for someone not very proficient in a practice to improve even a champion's performance by appropriate instruction. This is itself a particular kind of 'know how': how to give advice that will improve someone else's performance in a practice.
- 5 Oakeshott's flair for metaphors often leaves crucial distinctions somewhat blurred. We have seen the problem with distinguishing 'teaching' and 'imparting'. Another good example is his use of 'conversation', which he regards as quite different from argument.
- 6 His insistence that 'know how' comes through participation in the traditions of a practice leads him to exaggerate the link between family background and occupation. Equality of occupational opportunity through education has been interpreted with gross simplicity, but there is justification for a qualified version of the principle. In recent years, the field of finance has, of course, provided a conspicuous example of the disastrous consequences of advanced technical knowledge combined with virtually no practical experience. While in some cases a family tradition may provide the latter, what we probably need is a far more sophisticated system of apprenticeships to supplement the acquisition of relevant technical knowledge.

Concluding comment

As I have noted, there is a tendency for Oakeshott to go too far in the opposite direction from current extremes in education and for some key features of his theory to be rather vaguely expressed. However, his writings are an eloquent expression of the ideal of education as a systematic induction to the ways of thinking, feeling, imagining and acting of a civilized human being in contrast to a practice dominated by the objective of producing well-adjusted units in a political system or efficient instruments of the economy.

Perhaps the most important particular point he makes for the conversation (or argument) about education is that technical or propositional knowledge is no substitute for the 'know how' that can come only through direct participation in an activity. This applies to any making or doing—whether cookery or sport or

Postmodernism and the Practice of Education



Modernity and modernism

The term 'modern' is not a very useful label for an historical era. In the fifth century, Christians were referring to themselves as 'moderns' in contrast to the pagan Roman past. 'Enlightenment' applied to developments in eighteenth-century Europe or 'Renaissance' to cultural changes in fourteenth-century Italy are more informative. However, the fact is that we have come to refer to industrial society (with its origins in the scientific rationality that took shape in the eighteenth century) as 'modernity' and the accompanying beliefs and attitudes as 'modernism'.

Recently, it has been claimed that a radical change has occurred; that we have moved into 'postmodernity' with a set of accompanying doctrines called 'postmodernism'. These labels are even less informative than the ones they claim to have replaced. Will the next major shift in social and cultural life be called 'postpostmodernism'?

Of course, what is more important than the labels is what they are supposed to stand for. This is the topic I shall attempt to address, along with what seem to be some basic connections with education. But as a final introductory note I should emphasize that there are serious differences among both modernists and postmodernists on the cultural features to which they refer, and just when the radical transition occurred—if, indeed, there has been such a change. This obscurity is compounded by the fact that postmodernity seems to have come earlier for some aspects of modern social and cultural life than for others.

In trying to identify the main features of postmodernism, we should keep in mind the distinction between the main characteristics of social life in an era and the cultural beliefs that shape, and are shaped by, that social life. Postmodernity (and modernity) refer mainly to the former, while postmodernism (and modernism) refer mainly to the latter. David Lyon discusses and applies this distinction in *Postmodernity* (see Further reading). For our purpose, the main point is that while changes in the social sphere (e.g. developments in communication technology) may be linked with changes in beliefs about the world and human life, the latter cannot be justified simply by appealing to social changes and may, in fact, emerge in a largely independent way—although they might then exercise a significant

influence on social change. Thus, we should not confuse the question of whether the doctrines that go under the general label of postmodernism are justified with the question of whether the conditions of modern society have changed so radically that we are now in a new era called postmodernity. (I do not believe that Lyon gives sufficient attention to this distinction.)

As noted above, theories that informed the modern age had their origins in eighteenth-century Europe during the period known as the Enlightenment. There was an immense confidence in rationality to solve the problems of the physical and human world and to promote the quality of human life. As industrial society developed, this was expressed as a belief in the inevitability of progress through the rational planning of means to achieve desired ends. All truths tended to be seen as absolute and as fitting into a grand unified scheme. There was a preoccupation with the standardizing of means in order to achieve maximum efficiency in the production of goods—whether knowledge, or material objects, or social and political services.

It should be emphasized that modernity (and the doctrines of modernism)—even assuming that no radically new era has emerged—have not been without internal tensions. In its origins, the preoccupation with 'cold' reason was challenged by Romanticism. As David Harvey points out in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Ch. 2), the Enlightenment belief in one right form of representation was subject to increasing challenge (in art, music, literature, architecture, mathematics etc.) from the middle of the last century. One need only think of the work, early in this century, of Joyce, Picasso, Stravinsky, Einstein (just a few examples) to realize that many heretical voices were challenging the orthodoxy of the modern world. There were difficulties at the economic and political levels as well; capitalism was not working nearly as smoothly as Adam Smith and others had anticipated. The emergence of socialism highlighted the existence of class divisions within society. Modernism was forced to accommodate diversity and relativism while still holding to a unified, underlying reality.

A key modernist metaphor that did exert strong influence through much of this century is that of the machine. The city was said to be 'a living machine'. The home was 'a machine for living in'. Ezra Pound considered that language should conform to machine efficiency. William Carlos Williams even spoke of a poem as 'a machine made out of words'. It should be noted that not all modernists agreed with the machine ideal.

Whether modernity and modernism have been displaced or merely modified in recent times is an issue we need not try to settle in the present discussion. What can be said is that they have displayed some serious deficiencies and that one of the challenges to emerge is a set of doctrines that go under the name of postmodernism.

Among the deficiencies are the following. Despite dramatic progress in certain areas, preoccupation with technical rationality has generated confusion on such

fundamental questions as personal identity, the nature of political authority. Bureaucratic organisation has come to exercise a pervasive influence on human life. Advances in scientific technology, while producing benefits, often generate serious unanticipated problems; and although technology is supposed to be instrumental, it commonly exercises a deterministic influence on human life. In industrialized society, a substantial majority live in large impersonal cities. These have produced what one writer calls a 'society of strangers'.

Because of the connection with some versions of postmodernism, it is important to note the effects of dramatic advances in air travel and the development of increasingly sophisticated forms of communication and information technology (from television to the internet). As various writers have pointed out, such inventions have promoted a significant change in our sense of time and space; they have produced a multiplicity of relationships that leads to a more or less fractured awareness of the self; the diverse elements of the physical and social world tend to be experienced as a chaotic montage of images; the vast increase in advertising and omnipurpose shopping malls has intensified the idea that people are primarily consumers and that everything (from education to the latest in clothing fashions) is an object of consumption; advances in communications technology are leading to a 'globalized' economy (which, ironically, while threatening the role of nation states, seems to be encouraging a move to more locally defined communal identity).

These and similar changes may mark the emergence of a new era or may simply be an evolution of what we have known as modernity. The fact is that several related theories under the title of postmodernism have taken shape over the past twenty or so years. In varying degrees, exponents appeal to the kinds of change to which I have referred. However, as I noted earlier, the justification of the theories is not simply a matter of appealing to such changes and their effects.

Postmodernist theories

Jacques Derrida (1930–)

He has focused on the way in which he believes that language shapes human life. In his scheme of things, there is a kind of superintendence that has the character of written language ('archi-écriture' as he calls it). Historically, it has shaped all language use, whether spoken or written. Although we use such expressions as 'I think' and 'I feel', we have no distinct existence as individuals; we are simply part of the vast network of language. One of the latter's most significant features is what Derrida calls 'différance', related to the verb 'différer', which means 'to differ' and also 'to defer'. Derrida employs both senses and claims that, in the vast system of language, meaning is endlessly deferred.

In Derrida's scheme of things, the author (writer or speaker) does not exist—or, at least, has no privileged position on the questions of what he or she meant

by a particular use of language. The text (in whatever form it comes) is open to unlimited possibilities of interpretation (or 'deconstruction'). The curiosity of Derrida's position is illustrated in a discussion he had with the philosopher John Searle. When the latter gave his interpretation of something Derrida had written, he was angrily rebuked by Derrida for misrepresenting what he meant.

Given Derrida's radical separation of meaning from truth, ordinary conduct becomes inexplicable. Despite this and other chaotic consequences that follow from Derrida's theory, it has gained considerable popularity—particularly in the areas of literary and cultural studies. Perhaps this is not surprising, given that it is a licence to ascribe with impunity any meaning we like to linguistic and other symbols. It is ironic that the influence on Derrida and other postmodernists of Nietzsche (1844–1900) has helped to promote the nihilism that he predicted, but strove to avoid.

Michel Foucault (1926–1984)

Foucault presents a rather different version of postmodernism from that of Derrida. For one thing, he firmly rejects the notion of 'deconstruction'. In his early writing¹ he adopted what he calls an 'archaeology' of the nature of knowledge in European history. He identifies several successive 'epistemes' as he calls them. Each is a closed system of beliefs and methods of thought. The picture that Foucault presents of these water-tight systems is grossly oversimplified. Although he avoids Derrida's more extreme relativism, he himself is caught in a relativist net. He also comes close to Derrida in obscuring, if not eliminating, the human subject in knowledge making. As he says at the end of *The Order of Things* (1970), an 'episteme' could emerge in which 'man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea'.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) Foucault shifts to the notion of 'discourse' (a very popular word among postmodernists). Discourses include 'language games' but extend to a whole range of practices. Their boundaries are not as sharply drawn as in the case of epistemes. There is no place for human subjects in the scheme of discourses. Although they claim to deal with knowledge, their whole organization and operation has to do with the exercise of power. What the word 'true' means and what counts as true varies from one discourse to another. The groups with most power impose their ideas of what is true on others through the control of key social institutions, including schools. (Ian Hunter is an exponent in Australia of this aspect of Foucault's theory as it affects schools². It should be noted that many theorists who are not postmodernists—e.g. Pierre Bourdieu, Michael Apple—have emphasized the ways in which schools serve the interests of hegemonic groups.)

A remarkable feature of Foucault's thought is that in his last book, *The Care of the Self* (published in French in the year of his death) he strongly affirms the reality

of the self, a force that shapes conduct. In this book, he attends systematically to the work of classical Greek, Roman and early Christian writers and affirms the need we each have to care for our self in a morally responsible way. At the end of Part Two of *The Care of the Self* he refers to an art of living (both aesthetical and ethical) that refers 'to universal principles of nature or reason, which everyone must serve in the same way, whatever their social status'. Clearly, he had moved a long way from his earlier position, shared with Derrida, on the annihilation of the self. What he is rejecting is the still popular postmodernist talk of the self as though it were an empty stage on which a variety of discourses, like different coloured spotlights, cast an ephemeral pattern.

Jean-François Lyotard (1924–)

Lyotard coined the term 'postmodern' in the title of a book originally published in French in 1979 (see Further reading). His approach is mainly philosophical. In the introduction, he offers a broad definition of 'postmodern' as 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. By the latter, he means any large-scale, systematic effort to provide a defensible account of the human or physical world. Science itself has fragmented, says Lyotard. What we have are a vast number of 'language games' (a phrase he adopted from Wittgenstein). These are very similar to Foucault's 'discourses'. Each of us is shaped at any time by the interplay of several such language games. They reflect the fractured nature of the human world and of the individuals who inhabit it. There is no longer any sense in asking whether a belief is true or a practice is just. With the recent developments in communication and information technology, legitimization has become a matter of processing large amounts of information in order to learn how it can most effectively be used. Criteria of efficient management replace those of understanding. It is not surprising that Lyotard's obituary list includes the teacher as well as the self. The job of the teacher is reduced to training students in how to use computers to retrieve and apply the information contained in computer data banks.

It should be stressed that not all postmodernists are optimistic about the changes they perceive in late modernity and the cultural theories they believe these changes require us to adopt. Derrida is clearly an optimist, whereas Foucault and Lyotard are, in varying ways, pessimistic.

Jean Baudrillard (1929–)

This final postmodernist to whom I shall refer is strongly pessimistic. In a book entitled *Forget Foucault* (1987) he regards Foucault as not being pessimistic enough. Baudrillard is preoccupied with the electronic mass media and their effects on human life. In his view, everything tends to be reduced to TV simulacra—media montage on a vast geographical scale. He suggests that the Gulf War had more the

character of a television production than an actual conflict. He has coined the term 'hyperreality' for the role of mass images and the way they have submerged the traditional sense of 'real'. He also argues that TV advertisements fuel consumerism, which is the strongest feature of contemporary class domination. (There are echoes here of Marx's influence on his thought. However, it should be noted that critical postmodernists see the problems of our time as going well beyond capitalism.)

Postmodernism and education

If we were to accept the doctrines of postmodernism and its interpretation of contemporary society, anything like systematic education would be impossible. Although the details vary, the fundamental problems with all versions of postmodernism are their advocacy of a radical form of relativism and the dissolution of the self in the montage of 'discourses' or 'language games' by which we happen to be shaped at any given time. The black hole of postmodernist relativism is most obvious in the dissolution of all meaning. No interpretation of a text can be said to be more or less accurate than any other. In these circumstances, there is no way that postmodernism itself could be expounded with any kind of definite meaning.

The rules of a language game might define limits of meaning and truth claims. But they can apply only to those who are within the particular game. Hence, although postmodernists may acknowledge all kinds of diverse voices (those of minority groups, the oppressed and so on), they cannot consistently grant them any general validity. Anyone outside a particular 'language game' is simply an 'opaque other'. If the 'language game' metaphor is taken seriously, there can be no genuine debate in a society on such matters as the legitimate exercise of power or what constitutes just treatment.

For some postmodernists, the perceived chaos in contemporary society and culture is, as I noted earlier, a source of deep pessimism; for others, it is a source of enthusiasm—even ecstasy. However, both types reflect serious contradictions in their theorizing. Among these are: the use of procedures of reason to undermine these procedures; propounding their own metanarrative while rejecting the validity of any theory at that level; expressing moral concern despite the rejection of any criteria for recognizing or resolving such concern—all they can accept is 'difference', so that any deeper grounds for distinguishing, say, the exploiter from the victim are denied.

Some educators have been supporters of postmodernism because they see it as attacking narrow orthodoxy and opening the way to a much broader range of positions. (This influence has been particularly strong in the study of literary texts.) But there is an enormous price to be paid for this freedom. All points of view are reduced to expressions of taste. Hence, there can be no serious argument and no

grounds for challenging the arbitrary exercise of power. It is difficult to see how a teacher committed to postmodernism could, in good faith, continue to be a teacher.

Another general negative consequence of postmodernism for the practice of education is its insistence that schools inevitably inculcate the 'discourses' of the hegemonic groups in society. This deterministic view is shared, of course, with various other theories (such as those of Bourdieu and the neo-Marxists). One difference is that given the tenets of postmodernism, teachers cannot even argue for the possibility of developing in their students a critical, reflective grasp of knowledge, even as it relates to the society in which they live.

Despite what I regard as radical flaws in postmodernism, exponents have highlighted features of contemporary industrial societies that have clear relevance for the practice of education. They have pointed to the tendency for images to dominate over language; the throwing together of diverse ideas, images, practices in a chaotic montage, the fragmenting effect that this kind of experience and the multiplication of ephemeral relationships has on the sense of self; basic changes in the experience of time and space; the relentless emphasis on the consumer mentality, and so on. Educators must take account of these changes. For example, they need to develop a deepened sense of 'citizenship' that can challenge the subtle manipulation of the 'consumer-citizen'. In taking up environmental issues, they can help to promote a 'conservative' society in opposition to the pressures of consumerism.

Perhaps the most important challenge of postmodernism for education relates to the development of a coherent, morally responsible sense of self. One of the paradoxes of our time is that while various technological developments have been promoting a very diffuse, fragmented sense of self, the doctrine of individualism has taken a strongly self-centred form—criticized in such terms as 'narcissistic self', 'me-generation', 'permissive society'. The quest for 'authenticity' or self-fulfilment has often been driven by egocentric notions. The postmodernist denial of the self and the rejection of any objective criteria of value have also encouraged the 'free play' of the self. Hence, in its effect, postmodernism supports self-centred images of authenticity. In a world devoid of meaning, individual choice is assumed to confer meaning.

The task for educators is to help offset both the dissolution of the self and an obsessive preoccupation with one's own self. In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Charles Taylor provides a lead for educators by arguing that any defensible account of personal authenticity must be morally bounded because of the inescapable dialogical character of human life. Language (in its broadest sense) always involves others. Within each self, an inner dialogue goes on all our lives with 'significant others' (e.g. parents, marriage partner, children). Even the hermit or the solitary artist leads a dialogical life. Taylor argues that in manner authenticity is self-referential but, if it is to be reasonably justified as an ideal, the matter must contain elements that are independent of the self. Any efforts to develop a self must recognize our

essentially dialogical condition (including ideals for how we ought to relate to others); if not, it will inevitably lead to distortion.

- Put schematically, the education of the self includes the following ingredients:
- Self-determination based on rational beliefs and subject to moral and other ideals of a worthwhile life.
 - The integration in the self of cognition, imagination, emotions, needs, desires, action; an ideal that avoids the extremes of rationalistic planning and mindless drifting.
 - The self and a sense of the meaning of life. In regard to one's own life, the continuing process of constructing an inner 'story' of the self that reflects critical and realistic self-knowledge.
 - The self and others—both personal and impersonal relationships. Special attention to such values as care, compassion, benevolence, fairness, self-concern without self-absorption. An ideal of the relationship of the individual and the social group that takes a middle ground between possessive individualism and collectivism.

As we saw, Foucault in *The Care of the Self* came to see that practices of self-formation could overcome the random construction of the self by various 'discourses' of power. The systematic cultivation of the self—learning to evaluate our desires rather than taking them for granted; reflecting on and assessing our self-interpretation; taking responsibility for shaping, as far as possible, the characteristics of our self—is at the core of educational practice and extends to a lifelong effort.

A concluding note

Whatever the intentions of the proponents, postmodernism is a license for 'anything goes'. This might seem to offer teachers and students a carnivalesque freedom. In fact (as Lyotard has argued) it leads to the destruction of the teacher's role, and leaves the student open to the whims of power immune to any rational criticism or moral censure.

QUESTIONS

- What are the main features of modernity and the doctrines of modernism?
- What are the most distinctive beliefs of postmodernism?
- What changes in social and cultural life do postmodernists invoke on behalf of their position?
- How might the subject you teach (or are preparing to teach) contribute to a reflective, morally responsible sense of the self?

- 1 For publication details on Foucault's books, see J. G. Merquior, *Foucault*. London: Fontana Press, 2nd edn. 1991.
- 2 See, for example, *Culture and Government: The Emergence of Literary Education*. London: Macmillan Press, 1988.
- 3 M. Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, volume 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, R. Hurley (trans.). New York: Pantheon Books, 1986, p. 67.

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The School Curriculum

The first two essays consider the arguments about a common curriculum. (Political as well as educational values play an important part in the debate.) The third essay discusses the general question of the relationship of process and content in learning. Several areas of the curriculum that concern all teachers are then considered. English is treated in some detail because there is a pressing need to raise the quality of its use, in both speech and writing, and because this is an objective to which all teachers should contribute. Finally, there is an essay on assessment.

The Question of a Common Curriculum



At Hobart in April 1989, the State and Commonwealth Ministers of Education at their annual meeting reached agreement on a set of national goals for schooling in Australia (see Appendix 1). Ten broad goals were announced. They referred to such matters as excellence in education, equality of educational opportunity, the acquisition of a broad range of knowledge and skills for personal development, the responsibilities of a citizen, engagement in work that helps to meet the nation's economic and social needs. The list is comprehensive and, given the generality of the language used, is hardly controversial.

The stated goals form part of what is called 'The Hobart Declaration on Schooling'. The declaration contains other items of widely varying significance: from improving the quality of teaching to establishing a national agency for collaborative curriculum development to the adoption of a common handwriting style throughout Australian schools. The declaration relates to fundamental policy questions about unity and diversity in education. It also has at least indirect links with the political issue of the role of the Commonwealth government in primary and secondary schooling. This, in turn, is part of a general argument about what the scope of the authority of government at the national level should be in relation to that of State governments, given that the latter continue to exist at all. As millennial fever, if not hysteria, grows with the approach of the magical year 2000, this relationship will no doubt play a part in schemes designed to lead Australia as a more efficient nation into the twenty-first century. The last phrase is already being commonly used by our politicians.

I would like to detach the present discussion from this context and focus on some issues that directly concern one of the stated national goals, the sixth, which sketches the elements of a common curriculum. Although the expression itself is not used, the common curriculum would comprise:

- the skills of English literacy, including skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing;
- skills of numeracy, and other mathematical skills;
- skills of analysis and problem solving;
- skills of information processing and computing;
- an understanding of the role of science and technology in society, together with scientific and technological skills;

- a knowledge and appreciation of Australia's historical and geographic context;
- a knowledge of languages other than English;
- an appreciation and understanding of, and confidence to participate in, the creative arts;
- an understanding of, and concern for, balanced development and the global environment; and
- a capacity to exercise judgment in matters of morality, ethics and social justice.

There is nothing new about proposing a common curriculum for schools in Australia. Although there are important differences on details and interpretation of scope, there have been many suggestions of this kind in the past few decades. Since the Wyndham Report on secondary education in N.S.W. in 1957, most public statements in Australia on curriculum (particularly in the secondary school) have advocated that everyone should receive a general education in all the basic areas of knowledge. Between 1975 and 1978 the annual reports of the Australian Schools Commission referred to the need for a common curriculum. It is interesting to notice that it shifted from the idea of an inclusive common curriculum to a core of common studies compatible with extensive diversity. In its 1978 report, the Commission referred to work being done by the then Curriculum Development Centre. The outcome was published in 1980 in a document called *Core Curriculum for Australian Schools*. What it presented was not a core of common studies that might be linked in various ways with a range of electives, but almost a full curriculum containing nine broad areas. It was so comprehensive that only languages other than English were left as the elective area. (See pp. 53–5 for various examples of proposals for common curriculum areas.)

Arguments for a common curriculum

Some defenders argue for a complete common program in all schools, others argue for what they regard as an essential core of common learning. Very few of either group would suggest that there should be no variation at all in the details of curriculum content, how it is organized, and the particular methods of teaching and learning. The following are the main arguments in favour of at least a common core of broadly described content:

- 1 There are several distinct systematic modes of meaning or forms of knowledge in human culture. Full human development depends on entering effectively into these modes of meaning. Education is the process deliberately designed for this purpose. Hence, whatever detailed form a curriculum takes, it must essentially provide for a cumulative program of learning in each of the main modes of meaning.

This kind of broad common curriculum is also defended on the grounds that it is essential for the intelligent performance of the duties of a citizen in a

democratic society and that it provides the broad understanding and skills on which any effective vocational training and retraining in a technological society depends.

- 2 A somewhat different reason for why a curriculum consisting of the main systematic forms of knowledge and meaning should be available, even compulsory, for everyone was proposed by John White in *Towards a Compulsory Curriculum* (1973). It is necessary, he argues, for people to engage in all these activities before they can appreciate what they involve and thus be in a position to make an informed choice about the particular worthwhile activities they wish to explore and the whole way of life they wish to live.
- 3 The defence of at least a range of core studies has been grounded on the claim that certain areas of knowledge or skill have a basic and pervasive role in the whole curriculum, whatever its details may be. From the time of Plato, mathematics and language have probably been the main candidates for a common core curriculum in this sense. In the present century various theorists—particularly John Dewey and Jerome Bruner—have argued that the scientific methods of inquiry and problem solving should form a basic common feature of any educational program.
- 4 Another line of defence for a common core curriculum—and one that I believe is less satisfactory—highlights the instrumental value of certain skills and knowledge in the economic and political life of the society. Everyone, it is argued, needs to reach a certain minimum level of competence in the skills of literacy and numeracy, to develop the attitudes and habits on which the economic system depends, and to acquire basic information about our political institutions. In the past few years, this has been the approach that many people have taken to identifying and defending a common core curriculum. It is the rather narrow view usually reflected in the slogan 'back to the basics'.

Arguments against a common curriculum

The following have been among the most influential, although I do not claim that the list is exhaustive:

- 1 Individualist progressive theory rejects a common curriculum because it believes that the basic purpose of schooling is to respond to each child's felt needs and interests. Exponents of its more extreme form adopt a subjective and anarchistic view of knowledge: no distinction can be made between what an individual believes about the world and the way it actually is.
- 2 Some have argued that there needs to be several basically different curricula in order to respond to significant differences of ability and interests among human beings. A version of this view proposes a dual curriculum: one concerned with disciplined knowledge and the high culture for students of above

average intelligence; the other, for less able students, preoccupied with practical skills, the education of the emotions, and the development of folk culture.

3 A similar outcome is produced by those who claim that what counts as worthwhile knowledge is relative to social classes (or ethnic groups, gender, etc.). Some make the less radical claim that selection from the range of human knowledge, skills and values for transmission through the curriculum inevitably reflects the interests of the power groups in a society. A common curriculum will, therefore, reflect what the dominant groups take to be knowledge or, at least, those aspects of objectively worthwhile knowledge that they believe will sustain their position of dominance.

4 Pluralism as an aspect of liberal democracy seems to be a particularly strong basis for challenging a common curriculum. Given that there is significant cultural diversity in a society and that this diversity is respected, any attempt to introduce a common curriculum is bound to impose the beliefs and values of some members of the society on everyone and to limit the freedom of cultural sub-groups to devise a formal education that adequately reflects and transmits their values. This argument does not reject the common core curriculum. However, it would seem to restrict the core to the beliefs and values and the educational aims and methods on which there was in fact consensus among all the constituent groups in the society. In addition to differences over values more generally, proponents of this argument stress the diverse interpretations of the proper purposes and methods of education itself. While it is possible to identify several desirable candidates for a core curriculum, in the absence of an agreed set of educational priorities it is not possible to choose one which should be adopted by all the schools in the society. The interpretation of the nature of education and the role of the school is itself an aspect of pluralism and reflects group interests.

Pluralism and a common curriculum

From among the various arguments to which I have referred, I wish to give some closer attention to the one that appeals to pluralism.

Pluralism has had an important place in the conservative tradition of social and political theory: an organic pattern of intermediate groups making up a society, each with its own sphere of authority, and the central government in consequence exercising only a limited authority. It has also been a fundamental feature of liberalism, which has protected voluntary associations of individuals based on shared beliefs and interests. The contemporary theory and practice of liberal democracy reflects both of these traditions.

Because of its bearing on education, I shall refer here only to cultural pluralism—that is, to differences in moral, religious, political and other systems of belief

and in ways of life (which may be based, for example, on social class or ethnic affiliation). It should be stressed that cultural pluralism can exist in an ethnically homogeneous society and that ethnic diversity can coexist with cultural homogeneity. Usually, of course, ethnicity is an important basis for cultural pluralism, but it is not the only one.

Whatever conditions need to be met if pluralism is to be a defensible model of social order, I believe there are good reasons why a society in which diverse value systems and ways of life exist and are encouraged is, in general, preferable to one in which little or no such diversity exists or is tolerated. One important reason is this: human beings can and do reasonably differ in all significant domains of value. In some cases, there may be no single true or best position; in others we may be unable to establish what it is. Therefore, it is desirable that any defensible point of view should have the opportunity to flourish in the society. An argument of this kind is advanced in John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (first published in 1859).²

But there are clearly some important conditions that pluralism as a justifiable social policy needs to satisfy. It is fairly obvious both in theory and in practice that a pluralist society could not survive without a sufficient range of common values and procedures and the recognition of a public good that takes precedence over special group interests. Without these, the inclusive society will tend to break into a number of smaller homogeneous societies or else the dominant groups will absorb the less powerful.

There are several crucial conditions that need to be satisfied for a justifiable pluralist social order.

Firstly, everyone can be expected to accept the standards of behaviour without which life in any society would be intolerable. This basic social morality would include general principles of justice, concern for honesty and truth-telling, care for others to the extent of avoiding the infliction of injury and of co-operating in the effort to secure fundamental physical and cultural needs.

Secondly, there are certain moral values that are inextricably linked with the idea of pluralism itself: regard for personal freedom, tolerance of diverse ways of thinking and acting, recognition of the dignity and worth of each human being as a moral agent, commitment to the use of non-violent means of persuasion. It is obvious that a group committed to a doctrine of racial supremacy or the imposition of its values by violence cannot justify its right to exist in a pluralist society by appealing to principles of pluralism.

Thirdly, all the individuals and groups who make up the inclusive pluralist society must accept the central values and procedures of a common political and legal system. These systems must, of course, be compatible with the values to which I have just referred. However, in any pluralist society, the precise form of government and the details of the legal system will be shaped by the unique historical evolution of that society.

Fourthly, all constituent groups must recognize that there are claims of

public interest and common good that may take precedence over their particular interests. A pluralist society such as Australia—shaped by its own particular historical conditions and located in a land whose physical features are significantly different from those of the countries from which most of its citizens originally came—should generate over time its distinctive styles of life and expressions of culture. We are at a point in our history when our distinctive common culture, whose language happens to be English, is receiving new directions and vitality from contributors who reflect the influence of widely varying cultural traditions. Without the continuing effort to shape this common cultural identity, the constituent groups would exist as cultural colonies in relation to their place of origin and as cultural ghettos in relation to one another; they could not cohere effectively as a single society.

What I am defending as the ideal is open as opposed to closed pluralism. In this ideal of pluralism there is, undoubtedly, a difficult tension between the objectives of open interaction along with the growth of an adequate common culture on the one hand, and the protection of cultural diversity on the other. If the first is over-stressed, desirable diversity is blurred; if the second is over-stressed, the society as a whole fragments. There is no simple formula for achieving a proper balance. But pluralism as a model of social order depends on the recognition and protection of both aspects.

If the interpretation I have defended is broadly correct, pluralism, far from being a ground for rejecting a common core of learning in all schools, provides a strong justification for such a core. It also points to a general blueprint for what the common core should contain:

- The development of an adequate understanding of the principles of the basic social morality and the values on which pluralism depends, together with an induction into the practices that reflect these principles and values.
- A systematic study of the historical development of the common political and legal systems of the society, their main principles and procedures, and the rights and duties they involve.
- The acquisition of skills in speaking, reading, and writing the common language not simply as a code for basic communication in a common political and economic order, but also for the expressive and celebratory aspects of life as members of a single society and sharers in an evolving distinctive culture.
- Directly related to this second aspect of the learning of the common language, the study of the history of the society as a multicultural group shaping the elements of a common culture, and the critical appreciation of the main aspects of the distinctive common culture at both the popular and the reflective levels.
- The development of the general outlook of critical rationality and the particular skills and knowledge required for the rational discussion of controversial social issues and for detecting the forms of non-rational political and

commercial persuasion. (Ultimately, the justification and intelligibility of pluralism as a desirable social order depends, I believe, on the acceptance of at least the essential features of the tradition of open, critical rationality.)

These elements of a common curriculum cover a substantial part of the area marked out in the Hobart Declaration. The scope might be expanded if one were arguing from other perspectives—such as the connection between disciplined forms of knowledge and the development of human capacities or the conditions for a competitive economy in an age of advanced scientific technology. But given that there are serious differences of interpretation in our society over the nature of education itself, the appeal to pluralism on behalf of a common curriculum is, perhaps, the most satisfactory ground for its defence. It also has the advantage of protecting diversity in the practice of education (and the culture generally), and of opposing anything like a monolithic, centralized agency for determining curriculum and the organization of schooling.

Proposals for a common curriculum

Wyndham Report (1957) Secondary education in Tasmania (1977)

Secondary education

English	Language
Social Studies	Mathematics
Science	Investigation of physical environment
Mathematics	Investigation of cultural environment
Music, art, craft	Arts and crafts
Physical and health education	Problems of concern to adolescents
Religious education	Physical education

Core Curriculum for Australian Schools (CDC 1980)

Primary and secondary

Arts and crafts	
Environmental studies	
Mathematical skills and reasoning and their application	
Social, cultural and civic studies	
Health education	
Scientific and technological ways of knowing and their social application	
Communication	
Moral reasoning and action, value and belief systems	
Work, leisure and lifestyles	

A common core:

Primary	Secondary
English	English
Mathematics	Mathematics
Science and technology	Science
Human society and its environment	Human society and its environment
Creative and practical arts	Modern and classical language
Personal development, health and physical education	Technical and applied studies
	Creative arts
	Personal development, health and physical education

National Curriculum Statements (Curriculum and Assessment Committee, 1991–1993)

Primary and secondary education
Arts
English
Technology
Science
Health
Languages other than English
Mathematics
Studies of society and environment

For comparison

Broudy et al. *Democracy and Excellence in American Secondary Education* (1964)

Symbolic skills:	language
	mathematics
Basic concepts from:	general science
	biology
	chemistry
	physics
Developmental studies of:	cosmos
	institutions
	culture
Value exemplars from:	art
	literature
	philosophy
	religion
Social problems:	samples

D. Lawton, *Social Change, Educational Theory and Curriculum Planning* (1975)

Secondary education

Mathematics
Physical and biological sciences
Humanities and social studies
Expressive arts
Moral education

E. Boyer, *High Schools: Aspects of Secondary Education in America* (1983)

Language skills
Literature and arts
At least one LOTE
History: national, Western culture, one non-Western society/culture
Political and social structures
Mathematics
Science and the natural world
Technology
Health
Meaning of vocation (historical, social, cultural, economic)

Two examples for undergraduate studies in universities:

Harvard University: Report of the Core Curriculum Committee (1978)

Literature and arts
History
Social and philosophical analysis
Science and mathematics
Foreign languages and culture

John Searle, 'The Storm over the Universities', *New York Review*, 6 December, 1990

- Knowledge of the main features of the literate cultural tradition of our society and how it developed (aspects of social and political history; philosophical and literary works—with some comparative study in each area).
- A general understanding of the physical world derived from a study of key aspects of the physical sciences.

- A general understanding of how our political economy works.
- At least one foreign language to the level at which one can converse in it and read its best literature.
- Knowledge of the method of logical analysis sufficient for dealing with arguments about important issues in human life.
- The skills of writing and speaking necessary for expressing oneself with candour, rigour, and clarity.

QUESTIONS

- How does the question of a common curriculum in Australia relate to issues of political authority?
- To what extent can advocacy of a common curriculum be consistent with a policy of devolving decision making to schools?
- Is a common curriculum (or, at least, a core of common studies) compatible with diverse abilities and interests in students?
- How are three proposals for a common curriculum (or common core) likely to differ if one is shaped predominantly by criteria of educational development, one by political values, and one by economic efficiency in the society?
- What strengths and difficulties do you see in the argument from pluralism set out in the essay for a common core for studies?

Notes

- 1 J.P. White, *Towards a Compulsory Curriculum*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973.
- 2 There are numerous publications of this book: for example, London: Penguin Classics, 1985 (with an introduction by Gertrude Himmelfarb).

Further reading

- Bantock, G.H. *Dilemmas of the Curriculum*. London: Martin Robertson, 1980, Chs 3, 5, 6.
- Core Curriculum for Australian Schools*. Canberra: C.D.C., 1980.
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The Question of a National Curriculum: Some Comments on the British Experience



In April 1989 the Australian Education Council at a meeting in Hobart took some firm steps towards what might be called a national curriculum. The Council comprises Ministers of Education at Territory, State and Commonwealth levels. It agreed on ten very broad national goals for schooling (see the previous essay and Appendix 1) and on the need for a co-operative approach to curriculum development.

Not long after the Hobart meeting, a joint project involving the States, Territories, and the Commonwealth got underway. Its objectives were to produce national curriculum statements in eight learning areas for primary and secondary schooling, and a profile of learning outcomes for each area to the end of Year 10. The former were to be broad guiding frameworks for the development of courses in arts, English, technology, science, health, languages other than English, mathematics, studies of society and environment. Each profile was to be designed with eight levels, with the expectation that about 75 per cent of Year 10 students would reach level six and the other 25 per cent levels seven or eight.

As the project proceeded, various political leaders in the States expressed strong reservations about the motives of the Commonwealth Minister for Employment, Education and Training. They feared that his talk of a co-ordinating role was rhetoric for centralized control of primary and secondary education from Canberra.

When the statements and profiles were published in the first half of 1993, several of them (particularly mathematics and science) were criticized as educationally deficient by a substantial number of academics.

When the Australian Education Council met in July 1993 (in Perth), it voted not to endorse the statements and profiles in their present form. The Council agreed to refer the materials to the States and Territories so that each could carry out its own review and reach its own decision on how, if at all, the materials would be implemented. Since that time, each State and Territory has begun working on plans for its own adaptation of the statements and profiles.

While fears about undue Commonwealth influence and criticism of the documents on educational grounds may well be justified, the important question of

whether some form of national curriculum is defensible remains. In 1988 a national curriculum for the compulsory years was introduced in Britain (or, to be more precise, England and Wales). This move may well have influenced the agenda of the Hobart conference. In any case, it provides a useful point of reference for at least a preliminary discussion of the question to which I have referred.

The proponents of the national curriculum in Britain emphasized a kind of legal entitlement of every child to guaranteed progression in worthwhile learning which would be accurately recorded and reported. For many, however, the effort to raise the quality of education in the whole society was seen as instrumental to improving Britain's economic performance. It is worth noting that the term 'national' does not seem to have been closely related to arguments about strengthening a distinctive cultural identity in an increasingly multicultural society. The main emphasis is on achieving a common sequential program of learning as a basis for a more efficient level of performance in a technological economy. Children in publicly supported schools were to be taught a common range of subjects, for each of which there was to be a sequentially designed syllabus covering the age range of approximately 5 to 16; progress was to be assessed and graded in the light of public criteria and results reported to parents; a 'Standard Assessment Test' was to be taken in each subject at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16 and the results, in addition to being reported to the individual students and parents, would be used to judge the relative quality of schools.

The list of required subjects (although not very informative without knowledge of the detailed content) consists of English, Mathematics, Science, Technology, History, Geography, Art, Music, Physical Science and, for students from about age 11, a modern language other than English.

There have been many defenders and critics of the national curriculum scheme, or various aspects of it. In these comments I am particularly indebted to a monograph by Philip O'Hear and John White, *A National Curriculum for All: Laying the Foundation for Success* (1991). While generally critical of what has been done, they do acknowledge some positive features. Also, they agree that a national (common) curriculum is desirable, but would justify it and interpret its details in a rather different way.

The major benefit of the common curriculum that has been introduced in England and Wales is that it promotes systematic sequential learning over the years of compulsory schooling. This stands in contrast to the gaps and repetitions in a system where each school devises its own curriculum. There has also been a much more efficient use of human resources in the design of study programs and the guidelines for schools in working out cross-curricular projects.

The basic criticism made by O'Hear and White is that, while the general reasons given for a common curriculum are satisfactory as far as they go, there was no attempt to develop a detailed rationale or statement of aims. It is hardly surprising that the proposed national curriculum consisted of a list of subjects (with

important omissions such as drama and economics) and that attention focused on the detailed prescription of content.

The absence of a thoroughly worked out justification led to a statement on the formal (or timetable) curriculum divorced from the wider contexts of learning in a school. It is also reflected in various adjustments that have had to be made over the past few years (e.g. reducing the number of compulsory subjects at ages 15–16 in order to allow for electives).

Another fundamental weakness (which may or may not be connected with the lack of theoretical reflection) is in the approach to the assessment of student performance. It exerts a far too rigid and specific control of curriculum content and the sequence of learning. What is even more serious, it is to be used to monitor and rank the quality of schools. No account is being taken of the many diverse influences on student performance that vary from one school to another. The standard tests at several age levels have defined criteria of achievement too narrowly and are expressed in a summary result rather than a detailed profile. Thus, their diagnostic aspect has been submerged, and they tend to identify and reinforce failure.

To borrow a metaphor, what the national curriculum in Britain reflects is a preoccupation with plumbing to the neglect of the architecture. In their monograph, O'Hear and White attempt an account of the latter; they argue that it does justify a national or common curriculum for all but requires that its details should meet certain conditions different from those of the national curriculum introduced in 1988.

They appeal to a fundamental ideal of a liberal democracy: the capacity of all individuals in the society to determine their own lives in a way that takes account of the wellbeing of others. If this objective is to be achieved in present conditions, there is a common pattern of formal, systematic education that every young person needs over a period of at least ten or eleven years.

The primary objective to be served by education is thus not an economic one but moral values that are at the heart of liberal democracy. This is not to deny that education has a strong bearing on the political and economic health of a society. Hence, it is appropriate that there should be broad democratic involvement in what schools do. This includes some degree of central control as national identity (with international dimensions) as well as regional identity are among the objectives of education. But the overriding objective that determines the need for a national curriculum and its detailed characteristics is the development of people who are capable of responsible self-determination (in particular, who shape their own lives with due concern for others).

Given that this is the primary objective, it follows that the fostering of appropriate personal qualities (in relation to one's own life and that of others) is the first broad area that needs to be included in a national or common curriculum. The conflict of values within any individual's life and among the diverse groups of a

society should be a central concern of schools in this area. One of the most sensitive is the existence in a multicultural society of authority-centred approaches, at odds with the basic liberal democratic ideal of self-determination.

The other ingredients in the formal national curriculum are chosen for their contribution to developing the characteristic of responsible self-determination. They consist in systematic knowledge and understanding of studies related to society, the physical world, and personal life; knowledge of and experience in a range of the arts; practical competencies (communication and numeracy, physical dexterity and health care, organizing one's life, social interactions).

At each key stage (ages 5-7, 8-11, 11-14, and 14-16) there would be a distinctive core program of study involving the above elements. It would be specific enough to ensure coherence and consistency while being flexible enough to allow teachers and schools to add to the program and to teach it using a variety of methods and ways of organizing the content. A crucial aspect of the adaptation of the core program would be its relationship to the features of school life that are outside the timetabled curriculum (e.g. code of conduct and practices of discipline, collaboration with parents and other groups).

The most important difference among the four age levels would be the introduction of electives at age 11. In the fourth stage (ages 14-16), options would take up 30 per cent of the formal curriculum.

In this scheme for a common curriculum, assessment and reporting focus on the achievement of the individual student. The information to be given to students and parents is a relatively broad profile of performance rather than a simple aggregate. The emphasis is on diagnosis and improvement in the quality of a student's work. These aspects are particularly important for the assessment made at the end of each key stage. It is crucial that in the following stage the content and level of work should be matched to the individual needs of students. One of the most important challenges for teachers is to ensure that students are learning at the level of which they are capable, neither idling nor being pushed beyond their limits. The assessment of the quality of schools is important but requires a complex process of which the attainment profiles of individual students are simply one factor.

The approach taken by O'Hear and White has, I think, several clear strengths:

- 1 The parts of the common program are coherently related and justified by reference to an ideal of human life that they help to promote.

- 2 There is a good balance between uniformity and flexibility in the way in which the curriculum can be translated into practice by each school. In particular, it takes account of the wider context of school life that plays an important part in what students learn.

- 3 The vertical structure of the program recognizes several important phases in the course of schooling from age 5 to 16. It also emphasizes the importance of redesigning the postcompulsory curriculum to ensure an appropriate sequence of studies.

- 4 The related assessment procedures are primarily for the diagnosis of individual performance as a basis for promoting the highest level of achievement of which each student is capable. Such assessment is not confused with evaluating the quality of schools.

A difficulty with the scheme is that the overriding influence of the ideal which the whole program serves can be reasonably challenged. Reflective self-determination that takes account of the wellbeing of others is, of course, a basic ideal of liberal democracy and one that any justifiable version of a common curriculum in a liberal democratic society should promote. But it is not the only value by which the selection of common content and the methods of teaching and learning are to be determined. Another objective, for example, is to gain a sound understanding of the main areas of systematic knowledge and how they relate to one another in the effort of human beings to explain, interpret, or critically evaluate various kinds of phenomena. It can be argued that this objective is central to schooling even though it goes well beyond the development of self-determining individuals who care about the welfare of others.

I should also note that the other strengths listed above do not depend on the adoption of responsible self-determination as the decisive objective.

Differences over the objectives of primary and secondary schooling no doubt help to explain why public agencies are inclined to resort to a list of subjects (or topics) and skills when they propose a common curriculum. The Hobart Declaration on Schooling is only a more recent example. During the lifetime of the Australian Schools Commission (1973-1988) the possibility of a national common curriculum, or at least a core of common learning, was discussed in several of its reports. As noted in the previous essay, the then Curriculum Development Centre published, on behalf of the Commission, a proposal for a national common curriculum in 1980. The blueprint was so all-embracing and general that, if there had been a concerted effort to translate it into practice, the result would have been a common curriculum in name only.

In giving its support to a national common curriculum, the Schools Commission never thoroughly explored the nature and justification of such a policy. In fact, the interest was (and is) stimulated from several diverse perspectives. Some were concerned at the level of youth unemployment and the lack of skills in literacy and numeracy. So, they wanted a core of basic skills, knowledge and attitudes believed to be essential for effective participation in an industrial economy. Others were concerned that school-based curriculum planning would be chaotic without at least a common framework. Others stressed the need for a core of common beliefs and values that would ensure a sufficient degree of cultural cohesion in a society experiencing a dramatic expansion of ethnic and cultural diversity. These perspectives still influence the debate. Clearly, any effective common curriculum or core of essential learning depends on a thorough justification. Problems that have faced the national curriculum in Britain illustrate this need and, whether one

Content and Process in Education

agrees with the particular defence offered by O'Hear and White, they show that any proposal for a common formal curriculum cannot be internally coherent or fit satisfactorily into the wider context of school life unless it is grounded in a carefully thought-out rationale.

This requirement may seem to present a dilemma for a liberal democratic society. If such a society is committed to a plurality of values and ways of life, how can one view of the central objectives of education be justifiably favoured in a national common curriculum? There is no easy answer, but the task is less daunting than it seems if we recognize that liberal democracy and respect for pluralism depend on the common acceptance of a range of values and that there are distinctively educational values not tied to any particular social theory, including liberal democracy. These considerations themselves point to the need for some form of common curriculum in all the schools of a liberal democratic society. But they also require that any such curriculum and its related assessment procedures, if they are to be socially and educationally justified, must allow for a substantial degree of flexible interpretation of details within regions and individual schools.

QUESTIONS

- Why is it that the general level of achievement by students in a given school may not be a reliable guide to the educational quality of the school?
- Is a national curriculum desirable? If so, what should be its purposes and characteristics, and how would these be justified?
- Under what conditions would national criteria of achievement for various levels of schooling be educationally beneficial?
- Why does a satisfactory common curriculum require more than agreement on a list of areas of learning?

Further reading

For references on the question of a common curriculum see the Further reading suggestions for the previous essay.

On the British national curriculum:

O'Hear, P. & White, J. *A National Curriculum for All: Laying the Foundations for Success*. London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 1991.

For general characteristics of the Australian National Curriculum Statements and Profiles see *Victorian School Education News*, 8 April, 11 March, 27 May, 1993. (There is an outline in Appendix 1.)

It is not often that a serious book on education becomes a best seller. E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (first published in 1987)¹ enjoyed this notoriety (in *The New York Times* list) for several months. He had made essentially the same points four years earlier in a more quietly received article in *The American Scholar*. The main difference is that in the book he sets out (with the help of some colleagues) an alphabetical list of summary items of necessary knowledge extending over sixty pages. The presentation of content in such a form and the items included or excluded seem to have been the main objects of interest and debate. Although it may be imprudent to set out what looks like a quiz kid's checklist, those who criticize Hirsch on this ground have not carefully read what he says in the book on how the content should be taught. In any case, the form of the list and questions about particular aspects of its content are far less important than the general arguments that Hirsch advances.

These arguments may be summarized in the following points:

- 1 He endorses Ernest Gellner's thesis in *Nations and Nationalism* (1983)² that modern industrial nation-states require a standard literate language and culture, and that the institution of universal schooling has been the key agent for their achievement.
- 2 As with language, the content of knowledge that makes up the common core of a literate culture remains substantially stable in the course of a people's history even though particular details are continually changing.
- 3 To become functionally literate it is necessary to acquire some familiarity with the body of knowledge about people, ideas, movements, events, things of the past and present which serious writing in our culture does (and for practical purposes must) assume in the reader. The acquisition of this knowledge is what Hirsch refers to as 'cultural literacy'.
- 4 Despite this crucial link between skills and content, Hirsch contends that in recent decades American schools have been preoccupied with teaching skills independent of any essentially related content. Of course, skills have to be exercised on some content, but a pervasive tendency has been to assume that the content should be whatever is of immediate interest to the learner. Thus, the stress is on 'reading skills' without regard for the content of public knowledge on which, outside a very narrow circle, reading with understanding

depends. To take another example, there are constant references to teaching the skills of 'critical thinking' as though there were a set of such skills that existed in abstraction from any distinct content (such as morality, art, literature, politics, history, science and so on).

5 Hirsch's main conclusion for American primary and secondary schooling is the urgent need to specify the core content of the literate culture and organize it in a carefully structured sequential curriculum. The methods of teaching it are quite diverse and there is scope for variations of detail in the content. However, such a curriculum would ensure that all the members of the society would have the opportunity of acquiring a substantial core of common literate culture.

The preoccupation with skills to the neglect of significant content has probably not gone so far in Australia as Hirsch claims to be the case in the United States. But there is a strong tendency here that is working in the same direction. For example, in 1988 a report (sponsored by the Australian Teachers' Federation and the Commission for the Future) was published under the title 'Skilling the Australian Community'. It is filled with lists of skills to be acquired, with scarcely a reference to knowledge content. In fact, the document emphasizes that it approaches curricula 'in terms of skills and not in terms of bodies of knowledge to be learnt'. (See the essay 'Education as Skilling' in Part 3.)

The early versions of the study designs for the new Victorian Certificate of Education tended to focus on skills or processes and gave a very thin treatment of knowledge content. In revisions, there was some redressing of the balance, although the reluctance to identify significant content remains.

In the Victorian Curriculum Frameworks (from Preparatory to Year 10), the importance of knowledge content is clearly recognized. However, they are generally inclined to highlight skills and the instrumental role of knowledge in problem solving. Contemporary issues can very easily determine knowledge content. The approach to languages at all levels of schooling seems to stress their utility as codes for sending and receiving messages rather than as fundamental constituents of the cultural life of individuals and societies.

In 1989, the Ministers of Education at their annual meeting endorsed ten broad national goals for schooling in Australia (see Appendix 1). Although the list contains reference to important areas of content, it gives prominence to various abstractly floating skills (e.g. literacy, numeracy, analysis and problem solving, information processing).

As we shall see in the essay 'Education as Skilling', several related public reports in 1991 and 1992 placed central emphasis on the acquisition of 'key competencies'. The latter are, in the main, complex sets of skills (such as 'solving problems') unrelated to any particular content.

These examples suggest that we need to take seriously the kind of concern that Hirsch expresses to ensure that the fashion for 'skilling' does not distract us

from the crucial place of significant content in the practice of education. From an educational point of view, the question of what students read is even more important than how they acquire the skills for decoding written language.

To account for the priority being given to skills or processes over knowledge content in recent curriculum planning, we would need to go well beyond Hirsch's own analysis. Here I shall mention a few of the main influences.

During much of this century, questions of form, technique and process dominated many aspects of Western culture—from the arts and architecture to philosophy. What Marshall McLuhan said of television ('the medium is the message') might have been applied more broadly. One of the consequences was a tendency to abstract from our historical context and be indifferent to the concrete details of the human past. (Perhaps, this was a reaction to the intense concern with history in the previous century.)

The fashion for formalism has now declined somewhat. In the intellectual disciplines, for example, the intimate connection between methods of inquiry and the basic concepts and theories in which the topics of inquiry are framed has been rediscovered. It is more generally acknowledged that methods as well as content are subject to change. But given that the influence of formalism is still considerable and that the practice of education is always subject to some 'cultural lag', it is not surprising that supposedly content-free skills and processes would still have a strong hold over curriculum design.

The assumption that there are content-free skills on which everyone is assumed to agree has appealed to curriculum planners as a way of setting out a common programme of learning while neatly avoiding a number of problems that arise when any particular content is prescribed. It seems to accommodate those who think that the truth or significance of knowledge content varies from one group to another. The autonomy of individual schools is protected, at least in relation to content. For the egalitarians, levels of difficulty in content can be varied while keeping the common skills that are regarded as essential to being educated.

The work of some distinguished educational theorists (in particular, John Dewey and Jerome Bruner) has been invoked on behalf of process over content in education. Certainly, both of these theorists place problem solving and learning by discovery at the centre of educational practice. But, although they treat knowledge content as instrumental to problem solving, they do not underestimate its importance. One of Dewey's main criticisms of progressives was their failure to give due attention to content. Bruner, for his part, made the somewhat exaggerated claim that each discipline has a distinct structure of basic concepts and theories that, along with methods of inquiry, should be central to the curriculum at every stage. The fact is that Dewey and Bruner have been read very selectively.

As we have already seen, apart from the practical need for knowledge content in any systematic inquiry, skills and processes cannot be detached from the content of an evolving intellectual discipline without serious distortion. The problems that

confront the selection of content are not avoided by shifting the emphasis to skills and methods of inquiry.

The whole issue of selecting the knowledge content of a curriculum—what should be common, what should be open to choice, details of organizations and so on—is a very complex one. I shall limit my attention here to what, as we saw, Hirsch refers to as cultural literacy: a shared content of knowledge on which reading with understanding in a contemporary literate society largely depends.

Ideally, cultural literacy requires a sustained common core of liberal or general education. But in relation to the assumed background of knowledge on which serious writing in our society depends, I believe that at least the following are essential areas with which any adult needs some familiarity in order to be culturally literate:

- The archetypes, symbols, metaphors, myths and the like that have played an important part in the evolution of our broad cultural tradition and that provide a common currency in which the arts and literature (and various other modes of writing) reflect on and interpret characteristics and predicaments of human life. These would include at least selective readings from the Bible as literature and from the sources of Greek mythology.
- Works of literature and art that have exercised a pervasive influence.
- The features of national and world geography that are crucial for understanding the most important contemporary cultural, political and economic issues.
- Ideas and theories from the physical and social sciences that play an important role in shaping the way we think about the physical and human world.
- A broad sketch of the genealogy of our major cultural, social and political practices.

In terms of subjects, the main emphasis would be on English literature (and the sources from which so many of its allusions and images are drawn), history (cultural as well as political), and geography. What should be stressed is that the details of knowledge content should not be acquired as scraps of information. They need to be part of a carefully structured, sequential curriculum in which these details are related to both the pervasive concepts and the methods of inquiry that characterize an area of knowledge. The range of 'cultural literacy' that everyone should acquire in contemporary society is such that the ten or so years of formal schooling must be rigorously planned.

It would be interesting to know how many Year 12 students are aware of the background to which the poets Yeats and Eliot refer in their lines on the dead Agamemnon; how many of them could tell the parable of the Good Samaritan in their own words; are familiar with the allusion in 'Battle of the Titans' used a few years ago to advertise the Australian Tennis Championship. How many could say anything about the contribution to human knowledge made by, say, Louis Pasteur, Marie Curie, Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein? How many would have read *Aesop's Fables*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Arabian Nights*, *Grimm's Fairy Tales*? How

accurately do they grasp the proverbial statements that for centuries have been a part of common culture? (One frequently hears distortions like 'in one foul stroke'; 'I took the bit between my mouth'; 'he didn't batter an eyelid'.)

In this age of mass schooling, we have reached a point at which many people are in danger of being without either a sound literate education or the resources of a rich oral culture. It is crucial to recognize that if ideas without skills of inquiry are inert, skills without content are empty.

QUESTIONS

- To what extent is it possible to teach a complex skill (e.g. solving problems) without taking account of the content on which it is exercised? (Consider the question in relation to the area(s) in which you teach or are preparing to teach.)
- How does Bruner relate knowledge of content and learning by discovery? (See Further reading.)

Notes

- 1 E.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. Moorebank, NSW: Transworld and Schwartz (Bantam/Schwartz Book), 1989. The 1987 edition was published by Houghton Mifflin Co.
- 2 E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983.

Further reading

- Bruner, J.S. *The Process of Education*. New York: Vintage Books, 1960, Chs 1, 2;
On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand. New York: Atheneum, 1967, 'The Act of Discovery'; *The Relevance of Education*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1974, Chs 3, 4.
- Dewey, J. *Experience and Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1938.
- McPeck, J. *Teaching Critical Thinking*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Teaching and Learning English

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Even when account is taken of the increasing proportion of the population entering higher education, most academics would agree that the use of clear and accurate English by students has seriously declined. (Some of the ancients would even claim that the rot has spread to younger academics.)

Many first-year students in our tertiary institutions have great difficulty in expressing a sustained argument in speech or writing; they make elementary mistakes over the meaning of words and in spelling, punctuation and grammar; they are often unable to discover and express in their own words the main lines of thought in a piece of discursive writing. One can only wonder about the disabilities in English from which the other sixty or so per cent of our school-leavers must suffer—and most of these will have spent eleven years in full-time schooling. A recent report suggested that about forty per cent of adults in our society had difficulty in filling out ordinary application forms.

Learning to speak and write Standard (Australian) English

In the dictionary sense, people are literate if they can read and write. The degree or quality of such competence can, of course, vary enormously. It would be desirable for the practice of formal education if we had a fairly accurate estimate of the minimum level of literacy needed for adequate participation in the cultural, economic, political and other important areas of our society's life. It would certainly go beyond the directly technical skills of reading and writing to include some range of knowledge content and the skills required for thinking logically and critically in everyday life. The knowledge content would not be as extensive as envisaged by E. D. Hirsch for what he calls 'cultural literacy' (although something like the latter might be a desirable goal that schooling should help as many as possible to achieve). Interpreting the minimally accepted level of literacy, or even what is desirable, should not, I believe, tend to conflate being literate with being a fully educated person. This is clearly the tendency in Paulo Freire's writings.

There is another important general point about theories of literacy, also clearly illustrated in Freire. They often regard literacy (as roughly equivalent to being educated) primarily in terms of political and economic values. Becoming literate gives the oppressed access to political and economic power; it enables them to control and transform their world. Some theorists claim that this can occur only if the poor are given access to the literacy and culture of the dominant groups. Others see this as yet another way in which the dominant groups exercise their power and protect their interests. These ways of thinking lead their proponents to a dilemma: if the poor become literate and educated in the manner of the dominant groups they are further oppressed; if they become literate and educated in their own way, they lack the basis for escaping from their oppressed condition. Freire himself tries to break the dilemma by combining what he calls 'critical literacy' (in which the knowledge and literacy of students from lower-class backgrounds are treated as legitimate in the classroom) with recognition of the value of mastering the standard dominant language of the wider society.

To comment briefly on these theories, I would claim, in the first place, that they exaggerate the instrumental power of literacy in the political and economic domains. This is not to deny that a good level of literacy in the standard language of a society can substantially improve the political and economic status of individuals and groups. In the second place, it should be emphasized that literacy (and education more broadly) is for the cultural enrichment of one's life; for a better understanding and appreciation of all the dimensions of human life, not simply for the transformation of the political and economic order. Finally, while the experience of any group can be relevant to the process, the intrinsic and instrumental values of literacy and formal education depend on gaining access to the standard forms of language use in the society and to the best achievements in all the main areas of its literate culture. The fact that these may have been the preserve of privileged groups in the society is an historical accident. They belong to everyone.

Antonio Gramsci, one of the pioneers of Marxism in Italy, saw this very clearly. He pointed out that the great achievements of literate culture always bear some traces of their origin, but their greatness is assessed by criteria of human value that transcend the particular aristocratic, bourgeois, proletarian or other interests of their originators. On learning the standard form of a language, he made the following comment in his *Prison Notebooks* (1971):

Someone who only speaks dialect, or understands the standard language incompletely, necessarily has an intuition of the world which is more or less limited and provincial, which is fossilised and anachronistic in relation to the major currents of thought which dominate world history...A great culture can be translated into the language of another great culture, that is to say a great national language with historic richness and complexity, and it can translate any other great culture and can be a worldwide means of expression. But a dialect cannot do this (p. 325).

Unlike so many recent theorists who reflect a Marxist influence, Gramsci clearly rejected the arid fatalism of what is called 'cultural reproduction': the endless cycle in which literacy and the other elements of formal education are merely instruments by which the masses are manipulated by the ruling groups in order to serve the latter's interests more effectively.

In addition to political theories of literacy, there has been a host of other theories over the past two decades that have directly influenced the teaching and learning of English in schools. The study of literature has been the object of fiercely contending approaches. Although Arnold had other conflicts in mind, one is inclined to recall his 'darkling plain...where ignorant armies clash by night'. This turmoil over the interpretation of literature has had serious repercussions on the teaching of English as language. But the latter has also been torn by the vigorous efforts of diverse theories to pin down just what it is, or should be, all about. Some of these theories have simply reflected views on education more generally, others have been more specifically addressed to English.

Among theories about the study of English, whether as language or literature, one of the most important common themes has been a form of subjectivism. What counts as literature, or even as a text, is in the eye of the beholder. What a text means is what I, the reader, take it to mean. In this view, it is arrogance, or at least nonsense, to suggest that there are public criteria on which questions of a text's meaning might be settled or that some works of fiction have higher common cultural value than others. When it comes to writing and speaking, at least in the context of education, the subjective approach takes a curious change of direction. All the value is now concentrated in the author's self-expression; what I feel about something that interests me, expressed in whatever way I like.

On the question of learning to write, teachers have been confronted with a series of definitive prescriptions over the past twenty or so years. These have included, in particular, 'creative writing', 'process (or conference) writing', attention to genres—that is, to the style, vocabulary and so on that are appropriate in different contexts or for different audiences. There has been a tendency for each to be accepted in an oversimplified way and to be regarded as a panacea for all problems to do with learning to write.

In his book *English In Australia Now* (1973), David Holbrook was very influential in promoting creative writing. What was taken from Holbrook's approach was the emphasis he gave to encouraging children to use language to express and explore their experience and to subordinate questions about the mechanics (grammar and the rest) to the achievement of this objective. What was given less attention was Holbrook's insistence that teachers should continually be relating a child's efforts at writing on a topic to relevant exemplars from the body of high quality literature; that the emphasis was not on mere self-expression but the exploration of some aspect of the question of what it is to be human; that 'creative' writing as he interpreted it was not a form of therapy. In Holbrook's scheme the

teacher plays a very active role and needs a wide knowledge of literary works that meet demanding moral and aesthetic standards. Chapters 8 to 10 contain severe criticisms of much recent popular fiction (and films), often taken to be particularly relevant models for study at school. He refers, for example, to writing that 'is achieved by the mechanical manufacture of a cultural commodity' (p. 110), to 'the anti-intellectual irrationalism of bright new trends' (p. 137), to 'pop culture' as 'an ersatz form of pseudo-culture purveyed by a small group of impresarios whose attitude to the public is dictatorial and authoritarian' (p. 140). One wonders how many of the enthusiastic supporters of the 'creative approach' ever read those chapters in Holbrook's book.

In process writing, students choose their own topic and express their ideas without too much concern about the mechanics. They hold 'conferences' with fellow students and their teachers on successive drafts. When they are satisfied with what they have written, it gets 'published'. Although this method is useful as one among several, there are serious problems when it becomes the one and only, or even dominant, approach. Donald Graves, one of its main proponents, has himself explicitly warned against treating it in this way. It reduces the teacher as an authority in the development of good writing and exaggerates the capacity of students to give sound advice to one another on how to improve the quality of their writing. There is no requirement for students to compare their efforts with models of excellent writing. As with creative writing, unless there is systematic work on spelling and on precision in the use of words, grammar and punctuation, most students are not likely to acquire sufficient mastery of the so-called mechanics simply as an incidental consequence of writing.

An ironical feature of process writing is that it is not typical of how most adults who engage extensively in writing proceed. Committees do work together on the writing of reports, but individual authors each working on a personal project would rarely do so as members of a team. Process writing is substantially an activity that is specific to the school context. It is an elaborate exercise, even to the point of imitating publication.

Attention to genres (the third approach I mentioned earlier) appeals, in one interpretation, to an egalitarian ideology. Depending on the circumstances, all ways of writing and speaking can be appropriate. But concern for the appropriateness of style in context has been a central feature of the study of rhetoric—learning to speak and write well in the standard language—since classical Greek times. One interesting feature of attention to genres (even when interpreted very broadly) is that the role of teachers is brought back into prominence. They can reasonably be expected to possess knowledge about appropriate uses of language in context that their students lack.

Given the turmoil of theories in which the learning of English has been caught up, it is not surprising that teachers may have become confused about their task. Among other factors, there has also been the extraordinary influence of

television. Studies commonly claim that many young people spend more time before the TV screen than at school. In watching television, they are engaged in a curious form of oral culture. As they watch pictures of the experience of others, they are simply listeners to talk between characters on screen, or addressed impersonally to the viewers. In contrast to a strictly oral culture, they take no active role in what is said and done. Add to this the objective of most television (even when it purports to be serious) to entertain and to reduce the strain on the brain of the viewer to a minimum. (Although there are some important differences about radio, it takes a similar part, especially for the young, in the new oral culture). One can sympathize with the difficulties teachers face when they try to get TV addicts to engage in uses of language (reading, listening, speaking and, particularly, writing) that involve precision in the choice of words and a relatively sustained development of ideas.

On the various recent theories about learning English, the first conclusion to emphasize is that they may all contribute usefully, but none is sufficient. The processes of language use, significant content (especially the study of literary exemplars), and language in context all need close attention. It is also desirable for students to express and explore ideas in speech and writing without being overwhelmed by the prospect of grammatical and similar mistakes. But the teaching of English in schools would be seriously deficient if these and other aspects of language were not the object of sustained and systematic study.

What has just been noted leads to a general final conclusion which some modern theories, at least as popularly interpreted, have tended to undermine. Whatever varieties of English may exist in Australia, the primary task of formal education at all levels in this field is to encourage knowledge of, and competence in standard English as recognized in Australia.

The criteria for the meaning of words, how they are to be put together in sentences and so on are those accepted by the generality of well-informed users of the language. Many historical and contemporary factors influence what is accepted as standard usage in a language. The writings of those who are regarded as masters of the language play an important role in reinforcing standard usage and shaping the direction of change. The fundamental reinforcing agent is the institution of universal schooling. In contemporary national economic and political orders it is essential to have a common form of language in which the whole society can communicate effectively in speech and writing. Thus, apart from the distinctive educational values in acquiring a standard form of a language, this objective of schooling is supported for instrumental reasons.

Because a contemporary industrial society requires a common written and spoken language, individuals cannot participate effectively in the life of the society unless they are competent in the established common language. Hence, in regard to the treatment of individuals of whatever background in our society, there are also basic moral as well as educational reasons for ensuring that they become competent in standard Australian English.

In Australia, the common language (which happens to be English) is not simply an instrument for communication in economic, political and other major common activities of the national society. It is also the language in which, over many generations, much of the cultural life of the society has been expressed. In many other countries a single language plays this role; just as there are many countries in which a language (often English) is adopted as the common currency for certain aspects of life in an otherwise multilingual society. In the course of two hundred years, English in Australia has taken on certain distinctive characteristics (mainly in vocabulary and pronunciation) and has been the medium for a body of literary work of substantial quality in which themes of human significance are explored in a distinctively Australian context.

While the Australian variety of standard English is the proper object of education in this country, the variations on standard English around the world do share much common ground in grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. Thus, given that English has become a world language in many spheres (such as science, aviation, sport, business) and is the common language in many multilingual societies, there are additional educational and practical reasons for focusing on standard English in formal education.

The subject of English

Differences between written and spoken language

There is a fairly widespread view that writing is simply a way of recording spoken language. On this basis, it is argued that the teaching and learning of writing (and reading) should be closely associated with students' use of language in speech. The model for learning to write is an idealized view of how children learn to speak. This is thought to happen almost spontaneously in the circumstances of everyday life as children develop. So learning to write should occur as an adjunct to spoken language and in noncontrived ways. This view expresses stern disapproval of any systematic exercises in writing. (It is conveniently ignored that even 'free' writing activities in the context of compulsory schooling can hardly be interpreted as part of the spontaneous flow of life.)

In the early stages of schooling, there are good theoretical and practical reasons for keeping a close relationship between the learning of writing (and reading) and the already acquired skills that children have in the spoken language. However, the relationship of writing to speaking is not the simple ancillary one that is supposed, and there are fundamental differences in the ways we think when using the written and spoken forms of a language which must be recognized if the learning of these skills in the secondary school is to be educationally sound.

It is useful to remember that while the origins of spoken language go back two million years, forms of writing began only about five thousand years ago and

literacy has been a general feature of any human society for little more than a hundred years (since the beginning of universal compulsory schooling). It is not surprising that for a very long time the written language was strongly influenced by its oral form. (There have, of course, been written languages quite distinct from the oral languages in use, such as 'learned' Latin in Europe for fourteen hundred years or more.) Yet even in the early stages, distinctive characteristics and ways of thinking were present. While the relationship between the written and spoken forms of a language is a complexly interactive one, the feedback influence of the former on the latter has grown much stronger in the relatively recent history of literate cultures. Among the major influences on this development were the invention of alphabetic letterpress printing in fifteenth-century Europe and the introduction of universal schooling in the last century.

Language plays a crucial role in the activities of human thought. Even in very young children it enables them to analyze and integrate their experience in a way that would not otherwise be possible. But what needs to be recognized about learning to write is that it is not simply another way of expressing the exercise of thought that goes on in oral language; it provides a new capacity for engaging in cognitive activity and changes the relationship that oral language itself has with thought. Walter Ong in *Orality and Literacy* (1982) makes this fundamental point in the following way:

without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form. More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness (p. 78).

Plato's *Phaedrus* offers a famous defence of the superiority of speech over writing. He particularly has in mind the context of teaching and learning. The main points against writing are that it undermines powers of memory and that a text is static (unable to expand on its arguments, respond to questions, and so on). While the second point highlights the value of direct discussion, it ignores the distinct values of a written exposition etc. It is ironic that Plato's own argument can still be discussed only because it was expressed in written form. More basically, however, his whole philosophical system reflects the profound influence that written language was exerting on thought.

It is not surprising that there would be differences between an oral-aural mode of language and one that is visual. Words in the former are events, while in the latter they are things. In fact there are connections with physiological differences, the left hemisphere of the brain being superior for sound patterns and the right for visual. But I am interested here in noting several differences that are directly significant for educational practice.

1 Probably the most important difference is that in any writing there is a detachment from the context of people and things, which is present on most occasions when people are speaking to one another. Speech usually occurs at

a specific time and place, it is affected by varying tones of voice and gesture, it can be adjusted by the speaker to the reactions of a listener or audience. In sharp contrast to speech, any piece of writing has a detached character. There are few ways in which intonation can be indicated. The author may even be dead.

Jerome Bruner in *Towards a Theory of Instruction* (1968) gives a good summary of the basic difference to which I am referring here:

Written speech may bear the same relation to spoken speech that algebra bears to arithmetic. A written word stands for a spoken word used in any context whatever. A spoken word 'stands for' a thing or state or thought—not another word in a different medium....Spoken utterances are normally determined in large part by the demands of the dialogue, with the interlocutor helping frame our decisions about what requires saying. Whoever uses written speech must detach himself from immediate social interaction altogether and conjure up in his own mind a situation appropriate to the written words with which he is dealing (p. 111).

Among the consequences of the 'context detachment' of writing are that there is much more demand for precision than in speech; the author must try to anticipate and eliminate ambiguity for a diverse, and often unknown, group of readers; the nature of writing allows for, and requires, a scale of correction or revision vastly different from what does or can occur in speech. Even when we write notes on our ideas about a subject simply for our own benefit, the text becomes detached and can enable us to see more clearly the gaps and imprecisions of our thought.

2 A second important difference is that writing enables us to order our ideas in a much more systematic and logically rigorous way than in speech. Writing makes possible the use of carefully defined lists, tables, matrices and the like. This visual-spatial organization enables information to be codified and reformulated on a scale that far exceeds the capacity of purely oral language. In particular, writing enables logical capacities to be exercised much more fully than in speech. A relatively simple example is the detection of contradiction. But the more significant contribution of writing is to those modes of reasoning that depend on being set out in a visual form (e.g. syllogistic arguments such as 'All As are B, C is an A, therefore C is B'; 'If A, then B, but not B, therefore not A'). Some aspects of syllogistic argument have existed in purely oral cultures, but their full development depends on writing. The general point to be made is that writing in comparison with speaking greatly facilitates the use of logical procedures and the detection of logical errors.

3 There is a considerable number of lexical and syntactical differences between written and spoken English. Among lexical features that tend to distinguish written English are: the use of longer words and a more varied vocabulary;

a preference for noun constructions where verb constructions would be used in speech; adjectives preceding a noun are more common and personal pronouns are used less. Among syntactic differences are: the higher incidence of complex noun and verb structures; the use of subordinate rather than coordinate constructions; more use of the passive verb voice than in speech; more use of organizing and expository terms; the use of declarative and subjunctive verbs rather than imperatives, interrogatives, explanations; greater explicitness in the setting out of ideas (e.g. making assumptions explicit); less repetition and digression than in speech.

In grammar, the prescriptive rules apply more rigorously to the written than the spoken language. (An interesting development in speech is the tendency to make a mistake in applying what is thought to be the strict grammatical rule. 'Between you and I' is one of the most common examples.)

4 Writing has a more significant influence on self-awareness than does the use of oral language. The nature and circumstances of writing generally require a more deliberate, reflective use of language than is typical of speech. In writing a story (or a description of a scientific experiment) the author can consciously shape what is being presented in a way that is not possible in an oral performance. Apart from revising particular elements of a written draft, an author can reshape the structure as a whole and achieve a much more tightly organized and complex pattern than would be possible in purely spoken language.

As Jack Goody has pointed out in *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (1987)¹, writing (and reading) also affects one's psyche by making less precise the boundary between what would otherwise be regarded as internal and external to the self. This occurs, for example, in writing appointments in a diary or consulting a dictionary on the exact meaning of a word one proposes to use.

Thus, it is seriously mistaken to regard learning to write (and read) as a mere adjunct of spoken language. The former requires a distinct process of systematic practice (including the use of carefully planned exercises). In fact, as the above comments show, writing involves an extension of cognitive capacities and has a feedback influence on spoken language. This is not to suggest a simpleminded reversal of what seems to be part of the current orthodoxy in the teaching of English. As I noted earlier, learning to speak *well* does not come naturally; it also depends on a sustained effort of education. In the design of the English curriculum, it is essential to recognize the fundamental nature and role of writing (and reading) in a literate culture while giving due attention to the advancement of the distinct but related skills of speech. One might summarize this position by noting that educators need to follow a middle course between the 'deep structure' linguistic theorists (who focus on speech and overlook the different syntactical

structures of written language) and the deconstructionists (who are preoccupied with the nature of written texts without any attention to the spoken language).

The place of literature in the study of English

I should emphasize that the topic is not literature as the object of a distinct subject in the secondary school curriculum but its place in English as it concerns the development of the main skills in using the language and a broad knowledge of its role in our literate culture. As noted above, the latter has distinctive Australian characteristics which should be given special attention. But this should be done without neglecting the other significant ingredients, both historical and contemporary.

What is meant by the term 'literature' is, of course, a matter of considerable debate. Among curriculum designers, differences reflect in part their belief about what is appropriate for study by children and adolescents. But they also reflect a long history of controversy, which has intensified in recent years, among literary theorists. I shall not attempt to discuss any of the complex questions at issue. On the relationship between literature and fiction, for example, while much of what counts as literature is also fiction, a large proportion of poetry is neither fiction nor statement of fact. Also, some writings in philosophy, history, and so on could be regarded as literature (and, in fact, are). Although 'literature' is often used as a strictly evaluative term (writing that satisfies certain specified criteria for what constitutes literary art), I believe that it is preferable to qualify the evaluative aspect by applying the term to writings that purport to satisfy whatever are taken to be the criteria of literary art or that may reasonably be judged by these criteria. In this sense, we may judge a work of literature as outstanding, or moderately good, or very poor. Thus, by way of definition, I would suggest that a work of literature is a piece of writing on some important aspect of human life that, through the imaginative structuring of the work as a whole and the choice of appropriate language (rhythm, tone, metaphor, allegory etc.), seeks to engage reflection, imagination and the emotions in response to the content of the work.

Such a definition is in need of extensive elaboration. However, in the present context, I shall note only three points. First, while being entertaining (in the strict sense) is not sufficient to make a literary work great, it is nevertheless part of the complex aesthetic enjoyment of such a work. Second, a crucial test of quality in a literary work is what has been called 'artistic plausibility'. Any particular development must be plausible in relation to what is contained in the work as a whole. Alice's change of size in Wonderland is plausible in that context, but would be

quite implausible if it happened to Emma in Jane Austen's novel. Third, moral standards are relevant to the response one makes to a piece of writing as literature. (It is, by definition, presenting something that has significance for human experience.) However, the question is not whether the point of view or conclusion is morally correct, as in assessing an ethical argument or a public policy on, say, euthanasia. What is critical to the quality of a literary work is that the social and personal moral issues should be treated with insight and a due sense of seriousness.

Although various criteria influence the choice of literature for study in schooling, the fundamental condition should be that the writings satisfy to a high degree the characteristics of literary art. The practical guide in this matter is the judgment of informed readers (especially over a long period of time). However, the objective is obviously not to promote conformity to established taste any more than the expression of merely personal taste. It is central to the educational objectives in studying good quality literature that the students themselves would engage in a rigorous effort of critical understanding, appreciation, and evaluation. This involves entering into a public debate and recognizing that, while there is room for justifiable differences, it is not a matter of 'anything goes'. The process requires an insistent questioning of what is said, why, and how; what makes the form appropriate (or not); the comparison of how distinguished literary works treat common themes, and a contrast with their treatment in some examples of banal literature. Obviously, the age of students is a key factor in the selection of appropriate literary works.

One of the consequences of this engagement is to gain a sense of the power that language and imagination can have in exploring questions of human interest. It provides protection against what Northrop Frye once referred to as 'the flood of imaginative trash that pours from the mass media'. More generally, as Frye also emphasized, it contributes to the role of schools as places of education rather than socialization by encouraging students to become reflectively detached from their social environment instead of being mindlessly absorbed in it.

Within the context of the broad subject of English, the study of literature should be closely linked with the development of the basic skills of speaking, listening, reading, writing. The discussion of literary texts provides occasions for disciplined speaking and listening. Given that the texts satisfy the conditions for literary art, their careful study can contribute in a unique way to critical appreciation in reading (and listening to texts read aloud) and the refinement of writing skills. Although these outcomes may, to some extent, occur incidentally, their full realization depends on making explicit the relevant connections and on systematic practice. Works of literary art as exemplars of writing need to be analyzed closely (choice of words, introductory paragraphs, general organization, etc.) and related explicitly to students' own efforts at writing. Major essayists provide particularly helpful models for the development of writing skills. (Of course, in

addition to strictly literary art, exemplars of high quality writing in history, philosophy, journalism and so on should also be included at appropriate stages, especially when the emphasis is on exposition and argument.)

Literature in the secondary school curriculum should be able to build on a wide experience in the primary school of listening to and reading fairy tales, myths, legends, selections from the Bible and so on together with modern works of high quality written specifically for children. In the scheme suggested by A. N. Whitehead, the period of primary schooling would correspond to the 'age of romance'. As well as a broad acquaintance with many ideas that recur in various forms in literature, children during this time should have acquired an intuitive grasp of the main ways in which stories are designed. Years 7 to 10 of the secondary school would correspond roughly to Whitehead's 'age of precision'. Although it would continue into the final two years, students at this level would begin to enter on the 'age of generalization'. The middle 'age' would emphasize the close analysis and comparison of individual texts; the third would give attention to such matters as common themes and their treatment, the main genres, the differences that modes of presentation make (e.g. a play read in the classroom, performed on stage, made into a film).

It is important that, early in secondary schooling, teachers would assess the ability and motivation of students for the study of good quality literature within English as a general subject. (This, of course, should be part of a diagnosis that relates to all aspects of the subject.) While it is desirable to involve as many students as possible in the study of a common range of texts, adjustments should be made both for the very able and for those whose achievement is clearly below the minimum desirable level. However, the scope of good quality literature is such that even the least able can be accommodated without resort to trivial substitutes.

How best to assess what is learnt in English at school is consequent on answering the question of what should be learnt. I have been suggesting that among important elements in the answer are close attention to the requirements of standard Australian English, engagement with the language and thought of distinguished literature, and attention to the basic differences that mark the acquisition of writing skills from those of speech. And, although it should not need to be stressed, access to these features of English should be provided for all students—not just a privileged group.

QUESTIONS

- Should all students in our schools be required to speak and write in standard (Australian) English?
- For educational purposes, what are the main differences and connections between spoken and written language?

Structure and style in expository writing

In addition to the cultural aspects of literacy, the conditions of an advanced industrial economy require a large proportion of the population to exercise writing skills. As part of their work, many people are required to provide clear and concise written accounts of something that has happened or been done, what was said or agreed on, the directions to be followed in a certain procedure, and so on. A substantial minority are called upon to provide written summaries of documents, make evaluative reports, set out policy proposals and the like. There are also those for whom writing is at the very centre of their work: journalists, writers of fiction (from high art to soap-opera scripts), scholars. These extensive and varied uses of writing in our culture call for a relatively large number of people who have special competence as teachers in helping the young to develop skills in writing and the other constituents of literacy.

The English study design for the Victorian Certificate of Education identifies four broad purposes that one may have in writing: personal and imaginative; informative; instrumental or instructional; argumentative or persuasive. Following its description of these purposes, it appropriately adds 'the above descriptions are neither discrete nor mutually exclusive. Often a single piece of writing will contain features of a number of kinds of writing'. This comment is presupposed in the present discussion, but I wish to refer mainly to expository writing and argument. This is similar to what the English study calls 'argumentative and persuasive' purposes, but also shares much common ground with 'informative' and 'instrumental or instructional' purposes. Experience in personal and imaginative writing may, of course, help a student to write well in analyzing ideas or developing an argument. But it does not necessarily do so, and a failure to appreciate how it differs is often a serious obstacle to acquiring competence in the latter kind of writing. Exposition and argument call for the exercise of imagination, but the ways in which it is engaged in these activities are not the same as in the writing of a poem or a novel (not that 'creative' imagination is all of one piece either).

Following a period in which systematic education in oral English has tended to be neglected, there are now signs of a movement towards the opposite extreme. At least, the claim is seriously made that writing is of no more importance in the practice of formal education than the oral expression of our beliefs and feelings.

- What reasons are there for including literary works in the general study of English?
- In what ways can proficiency in English (especially speaking and writing) be encouraged in school subjects other than English?

Note

- 1 J. Goody, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Further reading

- Bruner, J. *Towards a Theory of Instruction*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1968, Ch. 5.
- Crittenden, B. *Competence in English for Higher Education*. Melbourne: Elikon Printers, 1990.
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- Gramsci, A. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971.
- Holbrook, D. *English in Australia Now*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973, esp. Chs 8, 9.
- Irmscher, W.F. *Teaching Expository Writing*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979.
- Moffett, J. *Active Voice*. Montclair, N.J.: Boynton, Cook, 1981.
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Criticisms of this claim have been set out in the previous essay. In summary, it should be emphasized that, in comparison with speech, writing has special educational value in that (1) it requires us to refine our ideas and arguments and to express them more precisely, and (2) it provides a detached perspective on our own thoughts. Hence, written language is not only the object of much systematic learning; the student's own efforts at writing are also fundamental to the process. The development of accuracy, clarity, conciseness, breadth of vocabulary and so on in the spoken language of a literate culture itself depends substantially on reading and writing.

There is a close interaction between written and spoken English in their broadly standard forms. The rhythm of written language when read aloud is a key guide to how well the task of writing has been done. But there are crucial differences between speaking and writing a language (in its standard form). Perhaps the most important for learning the skills of writing is the detachment from an immediate context of audience and things, which is normally present when we speak. (Strictly there are variations in the context for both speaking and writing, e.g. speaking to a friend who is present, addressing a group, talking on radio or television, writing a letter to a friend, writing an article for an anonymous but specialized group, writing a novel for an undefined audience.) Detachment from context has important consequences for guidelines on clear writing. It also helps to explain why children find learning to write so much more difficult than learning to speak.

In relation to the difficulties of learning to write, it is worth noting that there has been a curious tendency to regard writing (particularly of the 'creative' variety) as an almost effortless spontaneous activity. Perhaps, the proponents of this view would admit that there has to be some sweating over the acquisition of the basic skills, but after that it is simply a matter of encouraging the free flow of creative potential. The experience of most writers who are widely recognized as accomplished does not support this romantic view. Shakespeare may have been an exception but, as the interviews in *The Paris Review* (Plimpton 1982) clearly show, most modern authors acknowledge the intense effort that is required in order to write really well. They are not denying that the work gives great satisfaction and enjoyment but stressing that it requires sustained, and sometimes painful, discipline.

The interview with Hemingway is particularly instructive, as many would be inclined to regard his style as effortless and the content as simply the outpouring of personal experience and imagination. He notes that he rewrote the last page of *A Farewell to Arms* thirty-nine times ('before I was satisfied'). The problem was a technical one: getting the words right.

In recent decades, a number of theorists in education (e.g. Paul Goodman) have made a misleading comparison between learning to speak and learning to write. The former, they say, is acquired spontaneously in the course of everyday

life, without any schooling. They suggest that the same would occur for writing if only we did not try to make it the object of systematic teaching. These claims are defective in several respects: learning to speak is not nearly as spontaneous as it may seem; the skills of speaking acquired from everyday experience vary greatly with individual circumstances and, while they may be adequate for commonplace purposes, are often seriously deficient for occasions that require a relatively complex use of spoken language; the analogy fails to take account of the detachment from context distinctive of writing in contrast to the normal practice of speaking.

The conclusion to be emphasized is not that teachers should overwhelm students with a sense of the impossibility of writing well, but that they should leave students in no doubt that it is a difficult achievement requiring close attention and considerable effort. Certainly, teachers should dispel any illusion that good writing is simply a matter of 'letting it flow'.

The organization of writing

Historically, writing for a particular purpose has usually been characterized by a distinctive rhetorical structure. Despite change over time, there have been significant elements of continuity. In classical rhetoric there was a different formal pattern to be followed for deliberative (political and other) discourse, forensic (legal) argument, and ceremonial occasions (eulogies etc.). It is not surprising that the basic ordering of a discourse into introduction, exposition, proof, and conclusion was common to these rhetorical types and is still reflected in most systematic writing and speech.

There have, of course, been enormous variations in the details of organization for the analysis of ideas and the development of arguments. But in any practice in which writing has a central place there are standard forms of organization. Journalists, for example, typically organize their stories in relation to what happened, who did it, by what means, in what circumstances, and for what purpose. What can be fairly accurately claimed is that within each systematic field of knowledge there are general characteristic ways of organizing a piece of writing that relate to the ongoing inquiry distinctive of the field. Despite the variations from one field to another, any article or essay that is critically examining theories or advancing an argument will generally display the following stages of organization:

- 1 A clear statement of the particular topic (or aspects of a complex topic) that the author intends to address in the essay, a brief reference to the broader context of inquiry to which the question under discussion relates and an outline of the procedures to be followed.

- 2 An exposition and analysis of significant work on the topic.

- 3 Comparison (where appropriate) and critical discussion of this work (of an individual, or several theorists, or one or more schools of thought).

4 The position that the writer takes on the topic and the reasons thought to justify this position. This section would also include any qualifications or conditions that affect the position defended and what important consequences or implications it has in relation to the topic.

5 A conclusion that recapitulates the unifying theme of the essay and summarizes the view that has been defended. It may be appropriate to indicate further issues beyond the immediate topic of the essay that the discussion has opened up.

The above scheme is obviously not the only correct one for an essay whose main purposes are exposition and argument. However, it contains the crucial elements for an essay of this kind. Effective procedures for producing such an essay reflect great variety. In details they are probably as varied as there are authors.

Choice of language

George Orwell's 1946 essay 'Politics and the English Language' (*The Penguin Essays of George Orwell*) is worth reading for what it says about the corrupting effects that certain uses of language can have on thought and action, especially in the political domain. It should be noticed, however, that he overlooks the distorting uses to which even simple, plain language can be put. His often referred-to rules are, in fact, derived from those set out by H. W. and F. G. Fowler in *The King's English* (first published in 1906). Although Orwell, like others, takes a too rigid position on the use of words derived from Anglo-Saxon in preference to those of Latin or Greek origin, most of his rules (or rather those of the Fowler brothers) are worth noting:

- Never use a long word if a short one will do as well.
- If a word can be omitted, drop it.
- Never use passive when you can use active voice.
- Use everyday English words in preference to foreign, scientific, jargon words that have the same meaning.

The dogmatic tone is softened by Orwell's covering condition that any of his rules should be broken 'sooner than say anything outright barbarous'. There are other grounds for exceptions, but the rules contain generally sound advice for avoiding bad writing.

In the same essay Orwell suggests questions to be asked in the composition of a sentence: 'What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer?... Could I have put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?' (p. 361).

In *The Philosophy of Composition* (1977), E. D. Hirsch discusses various ways of enhancing what he calls 'communicative efficiency': the form of writing that will most effectively convey the author's intended meaning. He points out that the first condition is to observe the conventions of standard semantics, grammar, syntax, punctuation, spelling. (These are discussed in the next section.)

Beyond this basic requirement, what we know about the capacity of short-term memory (e.g. that it is accurate only to about seven items) provides an important clue for the organization of written language that will be easily and accurately read.

The general policy is that when essentially the same meaning can be expressed in more than one text, the writer should choose the text that can be most easily read. Clauses are the key semantic units for ease of reading. They and their constituent words should be relatively short (subject to the condition that intended meaning is accurately expressed). Length is only one factor that assists ease of reading; the arrangement of words is also crucially important. Several words in the same grammatical category can be more easily grasped than the same number in different categories. Hirsch cites the following example: 'a certainly not very clearly defined colour' compared with 'certainly not a very clearly defined colour'. He notes that a phrase such as 'in their big new red house' is easily grasped because grammatical categories are not mixed. For the same reason, 'a jagged broken curve that descends to the left' conveys its meaning more easily than 'a leftward, jaggedly descending broken curve'.

In summary, ease of reading depends on predictability in the grouping of words. At the same time, Hirsch recognizes that there must be some elements of surprise; complete predictability leads to boredom and loss of attention.

His guidelines are summarized in this way:

General rules (always to be applied flexibly)

- Use positive rather than negative.
- Use concrete expressions rather than abstract.
- Use familiar words.
- Use active voice.

Clauses

- Omit unnecessary words.
- Keep related words together.
- Avoid ambiguous word order.

Sentences and paragraphs

- Vary sentence structure.
- Write one theme to a paragraph.
- Use linking terms to provide integration between adjoining sentences.

The mechanics of writing

The subject of this section is the use of correct grammar, punctuation and spelling. I begin with the question of whether trying to be correct in these aspects of writing is important. I shall then refer to some of the mistakes that are commonly

made, and conclude with a brief comment on teaching and learning the mechanics of writing at school.

Before arguing that attention to correct grammar, punctuation and spelling is important, I should emphasize that they are by no means the most significant ingredients of good writing. One may be impeccable in these matters and still write badly. An author might fail to respect the precise meaning of words, organize ideas in a confused way, argue illogically, put sentences together without any feeling for the rhythm of the language, and so on.

Why the mechanics of writing are important

By 'grammar' I refer to the technical terms, rules and recommended practices that apply to the organization and form of words in the construction of standard English sentences. Our traditional English grammar has some serious limitations. Although English is largely an uninflected language in contrast to Latin, its traditional grammar derives from that of Latin.

There are many idiomatic uses of English that deviate from grammatical rules. We also perform various logical tasks in the use of English that are not distinguished in its grammar (e.g. adverbs in grammar qualify a word, whereas logically they may refer to a whole sentence: 'Brown will probably speak at the next meeting').

It would be a mistake, however, to exaggerate the deficiencies of traditional grammar or to undervalue its importance in the writing or speaking of correct and clear English. It contributes to a better understanding of the language; it equips students with necessary technical language for discussing or analyzing a piece of English; it normally helps them to use English in a more grammatically accurate way. It should also be noted that the advanced and systematic study of language in linguistics presupposes a knowledge of what is, to a large extent, traditional grammar.

Because English is a largely uninflected language, there are not different endings, as in Latin, to tell us how, say, a noun relates to a verb. The words in the sentence 'John loves Mary' can be placed in any order in Latin without confusing the meaning. In English, attention to syntax (or the ordering of words) is crucially important for the clear expression of meaning. The guiding principle for English is that the most closely related words and other units of language in a sentence should also be placed as close as possible to one another. Like any other guideline, this one needs to be interpreted flexibly. But it is a sound policy to avoid introducing parenthetical or subordinate phrases and clauses between such connected units of language as subject and verb, verb and object, verb and its auxiliary, adjective and related noun, adverb and the word it qualifies.

The rules of grammar apply more flexibly to spoken than to written English. But the differences between the two in the use of standard English are not as great

as may be supposed. David Crystal claims that over ninety-five per cent of grammatical constructions are common to both.² Although spoken language has contextual cues to meaning that are not available for the written form, a speaker's use of grammar is often crucial to interpreting what he or she means.

In speech we use many devices—such as pauses, stressing of words, intonation—to help listeners grasp just what we mean to say. Punctuation serves a similar purpose in written language. While there are rules as in grammar, punctuation depends more on the judgment of the writer. The punctuation that is appropriate often depends on the specific meaning the writer wishes to convey. In addition to serving precision and clarity, punctuation can also help to achieve various rhetorical effects. For example, the description of a crisis may be better expressed by a series of short statements separated by semicolons than by a long sentence with subordinate clauses marked off by commas. Finally, there is an aspect of courtesy in taking care with punctuation: we save our readers from temporary confusion and waste of time. T. S. Eliot, who took such care over the choice of words, also recognized the significant effect that punctuation could have on the clarity of writing. In his comments on a seventeenth-century writer, Lancelot Andrewes, he refers to 'altering the punctuation, inserting or removing a semicolon to make an obscure passage suddenly luminous'.³

The need for accuracy in spelling is often more strongly challenged than in grammar or punctuation. However, a common written language plays a crucial role in the cultural, political and economic life of a contemporary industrialized society. Whatever its defects, a system of standardized spelling protects the commonality of the written language against the diversity that would inevitably emerge if spelling were determined by the characteristics of pronunciation among each sub-group. In the varieties of English around the world, spelling conventions share much common ground. This greatly assists communication in written (and spoken) English whether the author is American, Australian, British, Indian or a member of any of the other fifty or so countries in which English is the official language or has a special status.

Whatever the origins of the conventions of grammar, punctuation and spelling that apply to standard English in Australia at the present time, it is obvious that any individuals or groups in our society who are not given an adequate opportunity to acquire competence in these aspects of standard English are being placed at a serious disadvantage.

Examples of some mistakes

Within a single essay, one has to be quite selective in referring even to common mistakes in grammar, punctuation and spelling. I shall draw attention to a few that recur very frequently in many contexts.

Because of an intervening plural noun, a plural verb is often used when a singular noun is the subject and vice versa. For example: 'The work so far done by the research teams on the causes of such diseases are promising'. 'None' is also affected in the same way. Although it should take a singular verb, we hear such expressions as 'None of the apples are ripe'. The 'neither...nor' and 'either...or' constructions are also liable to include a plural verb with a singular subject. 'Neither the Prime Minister nor the Treasurer were available for comment on the latest inflation figures.'

It is common for phrases using present or past participles to float unattached to any related noun. 'While criticizing the film's weaknesses, there are some strengths that should be noted.' There is a complication, however, in that some present participles have acquired the role of prepositions (e.g. 'concerning', 'regarding'). Thus it is grammatically correct to say: 'Considering the amount of rain we've had, the ground is in good condition for the game'.

Meaning is confused when certain adverbs (e.g. 'only', 'even') are not carefully placed. If we start with the claim 'This author gives a good introduction to Eliot's poetry', we can vary its meaning by placing 'only' at the start, after 'gives', and after 'poetry'. If 'only' immediately follows 'author', the statement is ambiguous. The problem with 'hopefully' is not that it is used as an adverb (compare, for example, 'fortunately', 'sadly'), but that it is often mistakenly placed in a sentence. Thus 'Floods will not occur hopefully this year' should be 'Hopefully, floods will not occur this year'.

The use of 'like' as a prepositional adverb or adjective is correct (e.g. 'He works like a fanatic'). Its use as a conjunction is incorrect, at least in writing (e.g. 'They acted like they were afraid'). In such cases, 'like' should be replaced by 'as if', 'as though', or 'as'.

Ironically, some common grammatical errors reflect the influence of education. They involve over-correcting. The warnings against 'you and me' as subject carry over to the first person pronoun when it is used with a noun or other pronoun after a verb or preposition. Thus, we hear 'This is a matter between John and I', 'Let you and I try to work this out', 'The committee has asked the secretary and I to prepare a statement'. In each example, 'me' is the correct form of the first person pronoun. Sometimes 'myself' is used in such cases—presumably because it sounds less ungrammatical than 'me'. But 'myself' is the reflexive form of the first person pronoun ('I blame myself') or is used for emphasis ('I did it myself').

On the notorious question of the split infinitive, I should note that there now seems to be an almost inflexible rule in its favour. However, it is still a sound guideline not to separate 'to' from the verb form of the infinitive except to avoid ambiguity or an ugly or artificial sentence rhythm. (This is H.W. Fowler's advice.) 'They tend to exaggerate absurdly their importance' is artificial. One may

justifiably write 'They tend to absurdly exaggerate their importance' or, what might be preferable, place 'absurdly' after 'importance'. It should be emphasized that expressions such as 'to be really understood' or 'to have fully recovered' are not instances of the split infinitive.

Punctuation

I shall concentrate on the misuse of commas. Many writers seem to regard commas as an inescapable convention or ornament and scatter them, more or less at random, through their writing. In fact, as we saw, commas play several important roles in conveying what we mean. Consider the following sentence: 'Adolescents who have no interest in schooling should be given other worthwhile options'. Here the relative clause ('who have no interest in schooling') defines a sub-class of adolescents. If the sentence is written with a comma before and after the clause, the role of the clause is to comment, almost in the manner of a parenthesis, on all adolescents. The confusion in punctuation between a defining relative clause and one that simply comments is very common.

It frequently happens that a word or phrase is marked off by one comma (either before or after) rather than by a comma both before and after. Instead of 'It is, of course, difficult to predict the outcome', we read 'It is, of course difficult...' or 'It is of course, difficult...'. An unnecessary comma is often inserted between a complex subject and its verb, and between a verb and a following clause (particularly when it begins with 'that'). Examples: 'The use of random phone calls and similar polling techniques, is likely to give misleading results'; 'He claims, that Yeats is superior to Eliot as a poet'.

Because 'however' is used as a connector (meaning 'yet', 'nevertheless') and also with the sense of 'in whatever way', the presence or absence of a comma provides the reader with an immediate clue. Compare: 'However, these data may be interpreted in different ways without affecting the policy'; 'However these data may be interpreted, the policy is not affected'.

Spelling

One of the most common recurring mistakes in students' essays is the confusion between 'its' (impersonal possessive pronoun) and 'it's' (the shortened form of 'it is'). The possessive pronoun should be associated with others that end in 's' and do not have any apostrophe (his, hers, ours, theirs, yours). The shortened form of 'it is' should be associated with similar shortened expressions such as 'couldn't' and 'don't'. If these associations fail, the practical test is to see if 'it is' would make sense in the context. If not, use 'its'. Other common mistakes are 'consensus' for 'consensus', 'practise' for the noun 'practice', 'occurr' for 'occur' and 'occurence' for 'occurrence'. There are many mistakes with words ending in 'able', 'ible', 'ent', 'ant'. A large number of mistakes reflect confusion between words that have the

same or similar sound. Here is a select list of ones that frequently recur: affect, effect; allusion, illusion; complement, compliment; dependant, dependent; principal, principle; stationary, stationery.

Teaching the mechanics of language

In primary and secondary schooling it is obviously desirable for students to be encouraged to write on what interests them without being inhibited by the fear of making grammatical and similar mistakes. The learning of correct grammar, punctuation and spelling can, to a considerable extent, go on incidentally in the context of such writing. However, like the more subtle aspects of good writing, a thorough knowledge of the mechanics depends on a sustained effort of careful practice. At present, there is strong resistance to what are regarded as artificial exercises. However, the mastery of English, like any other complex activity, is facilitated by well-designed, systematic exercises. This applies to the development of appropriate styles and the logically coherent expression of ideas as well as to the mechanical aspects of writing. There are important elements of grammar, punctuation and spelling that are never likely to be learnt in an incidental way. They need to be studied and practised directly. In grammar, the agreement between the form of verbs and their singular or plural subjects, the roles played by adverbs and how their placement affects the meaning of what is written are just two examples of matters that need explicit teaching and planned practice on the part of the learner. The persistence beyond thirteen years of schooling of defects in punctuation (e.g. confusion between relative clauses that define a subject and those that simply comment, the misuse of an apostrophe when writing the possessive pronoun 'its') also points to the need for a direct study of this aspect of writing.

The irregularity of English spelling might be thought to defy systematic teaching. However, it is much more regular than many would intuitively suppose. Careful studies estimate that between 75–80 per cent of English words are spelt on a regular pattern. David Crystal claims that 'there are only about four hundred everyday words in English whose spelling is wholly irregular'. The consequence for teachers is that they should give close attention to the rules that apply to groups of words; the effort of learning by heart can then be focused on exceptions to these rules and on words whose spelling is eccentric. In learning to spell it is crucial to associate sight with sound. This is not the sighting that occurs in the normal process of reading, but a deliberate effort of attending to the formation of a word, breaking it into syllables, pronouncing the word part by part (e.g. 'rest-au-rant'), noting any peculiarities (e.g. the double 'r' and silent 'ho' in 'diarrhoea').

There are all kinds of useful exercises that textbooks and ingenuity can provide. Here are some examples from W. F. Irmscher's *Teaching Expository Writing*: supplying punctuation marks that have been taken out of passages of prose written by competent authors and comparing one's corrections with the original;

correcting passages that contain common errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling; combining short sentences into longer ones and breaking down long sentences into shorter ones.

We learn from Winston Churchill's *My Early Life*⁶ that his schooling was not entirely satisfactory. However, he refers with special gratitude to a teacher who taught him 'the essential structure of an ordinary English sentence, which is a noble thing'.

QUESTIONS

- How do syntax and punctuation relate to clarity in writing?
- In addition to general features of good expository writing, what other conditions are required by a particular area of study with which you are familiar (e.g. science, history, economics)?

Notes

- 1 E.D. Hirsch, op. cit., p. 75. The conditions for clarity are discussed in chapter 5 and the general rules are set out in chapter 6.
- 2 D. Crystal, (See further reading), p. 23. Here Crystal makes quite a strong empirical claim of considerable relevance to the teaching of English.
- 3 T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1960, p. 304 (originally published in 1960).
- 4 Crystal, op. cit., p. 69.
- 5 W.F. Irmscher, *Teaching Expository Writing*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979.
- 6 W.S. Churchill, *My Early Life*. London: Oldham, 1930, chapter 2.

Further reading

The following are additional to those listed for the previous essay:

- Crystal, D. *The English Language*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1988.
- Hirsch, E.D. *The Philosophy of Composition*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.
- Orwell, G. *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1984, pp. 354–66.
- Plimpton, G. (ed.). *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 2nd in a series, 1982, Ch. 9 (on Hemingway).

When drug abuse, acts of violence, and other breakdowns in morality are vividly brought to social consciousness, there is usually a demand for more effective moral education in the schools. This expectation often exaggerates the capacity of schooling to influence moral behaviour, and tends to obscure the responsibility of others in the complex task of shaping the moral development of the young. But it does reflect the correct perception that moral education has a crucial place in the work of schools. Given that we recognize the various roles of parents, social workers, religious groups, the media, police, and others in moral education, the question I wish to discuss is what the nature and scope of the school's contribution can and should be.

The school is a special institution in which children and adolescents spend a lot of their time. Hence, even if it were no different from a day-care centre or a kind of club, it would inevitably exert a strong influence on the development of their moral beliefs and practices. But as the school's distinctive purpose is to provide a systematic induction into the main networks of meaning that make up a literate culture, it must regard education in the moral domain as among its central tasks. To consider more closely what this involves, it is useful to distinguish between the general influence on moral development of the day-to-day life of the school as an institution, and moral education as an object of teaching and learning in the formal curriculum. In the discussion that follows I shall comment on each of these dimensions in turn. Before proceeding, I should draw attention briefly to some matters that relate to both these dimensions of the school's role in moral education.

Although there are many disputed details, moral questions about how we should feel or act are distinguished by reference to the wellbeing of others (not simply our own interests) and to ideals of what is fitting or worthy in human conduct.

While there are important connections between morality and such other institutions as law, religion, government and social custom, it should not be identified with any of these. They should be consistent with, and give support to moral values, but this is by no means always so in practice.

Moral criteria are not restricted to the decisions we make for our own lives and in relation to those with whom we are in personal contact. They also apply to people as members of impersonal groups at every level. However, as there are various differences of degree, it is useful to draw a loose distinction between personal and public morality.

Australia is among the societies that are committed to the protection of cultural pluralism, which includes diversity of moral beliefs and values. Obviously, this raises problems for moral education in schools, particularly the common (public) schools. However, all schools can certainly defend the basic moral practices on which a tolerable life in any society depends. These include justice, truth telling, honesty, concern to avoid inflicting harm on others, and co-operation to achieve essential physical and cultural needs. The protection of pluralism itself involves moral values to do with personal freedom, tolerance, non-violent persuasion. And the practice of education is impossible without respect for values that have a moral aspect (such as intellectual honesty, impartiality). So, although common schools may not support any particular comprehensive moral system, they may justifiably reflect and defend a substantial number of moral values.

The fact of moral diversity or our willingness to tolerate it does not require us to conclude that morality is merely a matter of personal preference or, at least, that what each group happens to approve is right for it. Moral beliefs are open to reasoned debate. Thus, it is possible that some of our moral commitments may prove to be mistaken. It is also the case that various beliefs (e.g. that dishonesty, imposed apartheid, genocide are morally wrong) can be established beyond reasonable doubt—regardless of what certain individuals may feel or groups uphold.

The actual process of moral development tends to go through three main stages:

- 1 Self-regarding: the main deciding factors are the likely benefits or disadvantages to oneself, including moral praise and blame.
- 2 Conventional or other-obeying: conformity to the practices endorsed by the society and other groups to which one belongs. It may include obedience to particular authorities recognized by these groups.
- 3 Principled morality: decisions are based on principles that the agent has reflectively accepted as morally appropriate.

Many people do not advance beyond conventional morality. While much of its content may be included at the level of principled morality, it is obviously preferable from an educational and moral point of view that people should think critically and make reflective judgments about moral rules and issues. In broad terms, then, the objective of moral education in schools is to help students move towards a principled level of moral thought and action.

School environment and moral education

As we noted, one major way in which a school influences moral education is through its form of organization and day-to-day pattern of life. These inevitably reflect moral beliefs (e.g. about the nature of authority, the relative value of competition and co-operation). Like any other institution, the school's influence will be beneficial to the extent that its organization and the rules that affect the

relationship of its members with the values of the basic social morality (such as justice, truth telling, honesty, respect for others).

Even at this level the schools makes a unique contribution to the moral education of children. As Emile Durkheim pointed out¹, it plays a crucial mediating role between the personal moral relationship of the family and the impersonal moral demands of society at large.

In addition to the subtle influence of the moral atmosphere of the school, there are innumerable occasions on which teachers explicitly but informally engage in moral education. Apart from discipline, moral issues can arise incidentally in any aspect of school life. In these cases, a fundamental condition for moral education is that, as far as possible, teachers would engage in discussion (putting questions about the issue etc.) rather than simply delivering a definitive pronouncement.

Probably the most important ingredient in the general influence of school life on moral development is discipline. Some aspects of school discipline are not related to morality (e.g. rules that reflect the customs or traditions of a particular school, rules directly concerned with efficient learning). But many rules of discipline in a school at least indirectly reflect fundamental moral values (e.g. avoiding behaviour that could cause injury, caring for common property, showing consideration for others by not talking loudly).

From an educational point of view, the ideal to be achieved is self-discipline. In practice, however, an adequate concern for others and for the common good in contrast to one's own interests often needs to be encouraged through external discipline. Whether this is likely to lead to self-discipline depends largely on the attitude of the teacher and how punishments are applied. Among important conditions are the following:

- Wherever possible, the application of punishment should be accompanied by an explanation adapted to the child's level of understanding. Along with punishment for the undesirable behaviour should be generous praise and encouragement for good behaviour. The example the teachers themselves set in relation to the moral values of fairness, honesty, sympathy and so on has a crucial effect on children. In administering punishment, teachers must be particularly careful not to exemplify what they are trying to deter (e.g. using aggressive tactics to deter a bully).
 - Talk plays a significant part in school discipline. Verbal reprimands, criticisms (and even disapproving silence) are themselves punishments. If the application of punishment is to be morally and educationally effective, it will not do for teachers simply to appeal to their authority. They need to give an explanation of the relevant moral issue in a form that is sensitive to the child's own way of thinking.
- Finally, it is essential to avoid confusion in the minds of students between purely conventional rules of school discipline (which may have their own justification) and those that are clearly grounded on moral values.

Moral Education in the curriculum

In broad terms, morality refers to those practices and their related rules and values that are thought to distinguish a worthy or fitting way of living. They include, in particular, concern for the welfare of others, not simply our own interests, in deciding what we should do. The agents and those affected may be either individuals or groups.

The school is only one of several institutions in which young people learn to conform to moral values. But it has a special role in fostering commitment to these values and an understanding of them. There is no ideal of an educated person that does not include a moral dimension. Hence schools could not fulfil their purpose as agents of education without giving attention to moral development.

There are, of course, serious disputes of detail about the educational task of schools (as well as about the nature of morality).

Despite the differences, I believe it can be confidently claimed that, whatever else schools may do, they have a primary responsibility to help young people acquire a critical understanding of the main public modes of knowledge and of the main social and cultural practices that these modes of knowledge either directly or indirectly illuminate. Morality is evidently one of these practices. Hence, in addition to shaping moral development through institutional arrangements and informal influence, schools should be enabling students to gain a systematic, reflective understanding of what morality is about. That is, the study of morality should be part of the formal curriculum.

Learning about morality does not ensure that a person will learn to be moral; just as many people are morally good without knowing much about morality. But while morality is primarily a matter of doing and being, it also involves the emotions, imagination, belief, judgment. As morality is concerned with the ultimate standards of how we ought to act, it would seem that in this practice, perhaps more than others, we should as far as possible understand what we are doing. In difficult situations, and other things being equal, a person who understands what morality is about is more likely to judge and act in a morally better way than someone whose morality is a matter of unreflective habit. Of course, the school does not have to choose between teaching about morality and encouraging moral action. The study of morality in the formal curriculum is, or should be, supplemented by the development of moral virtues (that is, dispositions to act morally) in every context of a school's life.

I believe a good case can be made for giving the study of morality a distinct place in the secondary school curriculum. However, what I shall assume here is that over the course of schooling it should certainly be treated in a systematic way within the context of various other subjects. Moral questions can arise in relation to virtually any subject, but there are some whose content and aims link them

essentially with morality. This is the case whenever human actions are the main object of systematic study; we cannot understand them adequately without reference to moral values.

Moral values are prominent in the interpretations of human life presented by literature and various other arts. Literature of high aesthetic quality depicts in a concrete and vivid way the complex nature of moral values in the life of individuals and groups. An adequate study of literature challenges us to reflect more deeply on the moral dimensions of human life: it also trains our emotions and imagination in ways directly related to moral thought and action.

The social sciences illustrate how moral values play a part in the explanation and interpretation of human institutions. They also promote a better understanding of the nature of morality insofar as it is one of their objects of study. Perhaps their main contribution to moral inquiry is in the provision of well-founded factual claims about groups and their relationships, social influences on individual behaviour and so on.

History has some special links with moral education. Like literature, it attends to motives and reasons for acting in concrete events and in biographies. It also documents the consequences of acting on various policies in particular circumstances. Like the social sciences, it provides background for understanding contemporary problems and a knowledge of continuity and diversity in moral practice.

In the physical sciences, moral issues arise over methods of experimentation (e.g. on animals). However, more wide-ranging moral questions affect the many applications of scientific knowledge. The developing field of genetic engineering, for example, is fraught with complex moral problems. Some systematic discussion of the moral aspects of applied science is appropriate in the course of schooling. It should be recognized, however, that the topics go well beyond the domain of scientific knowledge and its methods. A satisfactory approach requires the collaboration of science teachers with colleagues in areas where moral values have a direct place in what is studied.

Religions express in various ways beliefs about the ultimate meaning of human life. Hence, they necessarily have consequences for morality. Most religions explicitly enjoin certain practices as moral obligations. The relationship of religious studies to moral education will vary depending on whether students are learning as believers or solely for a better understanding of what has been, and generally still is, an important ingredient in the life of societies and cultures. But, in either case, it is essential for students to realize that not all moral systems—much less the common basic moral practices—depend on religious beliefs, and that religions include other dimensions in addition to morality. For believers, a religion may provide special grounds for acting morally; however, there are also religions that enjoin some morally objectionable practices. A carefully designed study of religion should enlarge students' understanding of moral systems and the complex relationship between morality and religion.

Learning how to apply moral principles and other relevant knowledge in analysing moral issues and reaching a reasoned judgment is a significant aspect of moral education. It is one to which the school would seem to have a special contribution to make. The discussion of moral issues can begin in the first year of primary school. For most of primary schooling, the emphasis would be on relatively small-scale problems (e.g. between two people, between members of a family, within a school). They could be introduced, or treated as they arose, in any area of the curriculum; the discussion would be fairly unstructured and simplified. By the sixth year, issues of personal morality could be examined more fully and there could be some systematic consideration of the moral aspects of social problems.

Such discussions would continue to develop in scope and detail during secondary schooling. In the later years, students should gain some experience in examining the interaction of moral and other values in a number of large-scale social problems (such as poverty, unemployment, drug addiction, race relations, treatment of the natural environment, war). The main objective is not to encourage a particular solution, but to enable students to gain some appreciation of the range of moral and other values that are involved, the diversity of factual information and the number of theoretical perspectives required for understanding the issues.

The experience of studying such problems should also give some insight into the nature and limits of rational decision making at this level, the gap between ideals and reality in the formation of public policy, the role of pressure groups and experts, procedures for reaching agreement or compromise.

In the recent approach to the curriculum for primary and secondary schools in Victoria and other States, the area of 'values and beliefs' has been identified as one of the basic elements of a comprehensive curriculum. The guidelines for the various areas of study provide ample opportunity for the kinds of approach to moral education that I have been describing.

In many of the study designs for Years 11 and 12 (in the VCE) there are key topics in which moral values, arguments and judgment have a central place. For example, one of four areas in Australian Studies (units 1 and 2) focuses on fairness in the distribution of basic goods; Human Development has a section on the responsibilities of the family; in Psychology, aspects of units on the development of behaviour and the relationship of self to others have obvious relevance for moral education; one of the four units in Religion and Society is on ethics; various units in International Studies and Political Studies provide a context for the examination of large-scale questions of social morality; there are direct moral issues in the Geography units on management of resources and our relationship to the natural environment. A similar recurrence of moral issues is found in the recent national curriculum statements for schooling to Year 10. Their presence is particularly strong in Studies of Society and Environment.

In the background of this general discussion of moral education in the school curriculum, there are many important questions that have not been addressed. I shall conclude by drawing attention briefly to several of them.

- 1 Although teaching students to think clearly and adequately about moral issues is a particularly appropriate task for the school, it cannot be effective as moral education unless it is closely related to the other dimensions of moral development (being inducted into the moral practices of acting fairly, speaking truthfully and so on, developing attitudes and feelings of concern for the well-being of others, seeing situations from the perspective of other people...). Otherwise, the outcome could simply be the sharpening of skills for dealing with what is regarded as another kind of intellectual problem.
- 2 If schools are to contribute effectively to formal moral education, there needs to be collaboration among teachers from a range of subject areas (at least when complex social issues are the object of study). It is also clear that at least some teachers in a school should have a sound background in the systematic study of morality. This should include ethics (the philosophical study of morality), work on the psychological aspects of moral development, and the study of groups and moral values by sociology and anthropology. Systematic moral education is not an occupation for amateurs.
- 3 Teachers in state schools have a particularly demanding task in respecting cultural pluralism as it affects moral values. In expressing and defending their own moral convictions, they have to take special care to avoid indoctrination. But as I noted in the first part of this essay, state schools are not expected to attempt the impossible task of complete value neutrality. There is a range of moral values that they can and should uphold.

As a concluding comment, I should emphasize that, while schools have a crucial part to play in moral education, there are limits to what they can be expected to achieve. They will fail even in their distinctive task if parents, governments, the media and other groups in our society regard the schools as a convenient substitute for their own responsibilities towards the moral education of the young.

QUESTIONS

- Can state schools uphold moral values while being neutral towards different moral ways of life in our society?
- What conditions should school discipline meet if it is to contribute effectively to moral development?
- What is the relationship of moral values to religion? How can moral values be defended outside a religious context?
- What moral issues relate to the area(s) in which you teach or are preparing to teach? How do you think they can best be treated in the process of teaching and learning?

Note

- 1 This theme recurs in much of Durkheim's writing on education. The French original (of the title listed below) was published in 1925.

Further reading

- Crittenden, B. *Education for Rational Understanding*. Melbourne: ACER, 1981, Chs 7, 8.
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In recent times the question of changing Australia's formal status to that of a republic has returned to the forefront of public discussion. The imminent end of the second millennium might, like that of the first, be provoking an itch for change.

While the issue of a republic may be worth some serious debate, I want to emphasize what is a far more important topic for public attention: it is the quality of our society as a democracy. As many examples show, being historically a republic is no guarantee of a genuinely democratic society. In fact, having the status of a republic is neither necessary nor sufficient for a sound democracy. The extent to which we are achieving the ideals of democracy is not a question that acquires importance in the light of a special occasion or as a diversion from particular problems. To realize the ideals, particularly in a society that now contains a substantial diversity of traditions, is a demanding achievement, and one that depends on a continuing and deliberate effort. (No mere redesign of a national flag can produce or maintain a sense of community, as the Canadian maple-leaf example shows.)

How well are the ideals being reflected and encouraged in our system of political parties, the practices of our parliaments, the legal system, the economy, the media and so on? Here I shall focus on the relationship between democratic ideals and the role of formal education (in primary and secondary schools). Any discussion of how the values and practices of democracy and those of education interconnect must start by recognizing that there is wide disagreement on how each should be interpreted. However, I think a number of worthwhile points can be made without straying too far into disputed territory.

Democratic values

A key feature of what is commonly called liberal democracy is that it upholds a relatively stable framework of general beliefs and values within which diverse social theories (and whole ways of life) can contend in the shaping of public policies. In summary, the main components of this framework are the following:

- 1 Respect for each individual as capable of rational self-determination. The development of this capacity does not occur in a vacuum but depends on an appropriate upbringing within a society that treats it as an ideal.

- 2 Recognition of the equal right of each individual to the exercise of freedom compatible with a like freedom for others, and to the goods necessary for any worthwhile human life. This includes due concern (or a sense of fraternity) towards others as fellow human beings and members of a common society.
- 3 An interpretation of the role of government that limits it strictly to serving the common good and the interests of the political society; while defending the moral values basic to any social order and those on which liberal democracy depends, the state must otherwise remain impartial towards the various detailed versions of a worthwhile human life that happen to flourish in the society.
- 4 Political authority and responsibility rest finally with the whole people.

Because democracy is primarily a system of government, it is important to note the main conditions that relate to the fourth point. Subject to the constraining rights on which liberal democracy is based, decisions affecting the common political order are settled by the will of the majority of citizens directly or through their representatives. This reflects the value expressed in the first point. It involves particular stress on various equal rights possessed by everyone (to speak and assemble freely, to vote in elections, to stand for political office, to join or form a political party) and the need for uncensored information and commentary on policies and actions of those who exercise or seek delegated political authority.

John Dewey (*Democracy and Education*, 1916) may have gone too far when he claimed that 'a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience' (p. 101). However, it is true that political democracy will be sound only if the ideals it presupposes permeate the life of the society more generally. This requires, in particular, respect for individual freedom, acknowledgment of the equality of all human beings as moral agents and of their equal claim to basic human goods, commitment to the standards of rational (or reasoned) self-determination, tolerance towards those who hold different beliefs or follow a different way of life from one's own.

The difficulty of even approximating these ideals is evident. Self-determination is often capricious, driven by non-rational or even irrational motives. The boundaries of desirable tolerance can be very difficult to draw in practice. In the political order, despite constitutional and other constraints, the substantial impartiality of governments towards conflicting views of the human good within the society is always a fragile achievement.

The last example reflects, to a considerable extent, the inevitably blurred distinction between the domains of public and private morality. This, in turn, illustrates what I believe is a general problem: that none of the systematic theories of liberal democracy succeeds in giving a thoroughly coherent account of its diverse elements. Some theories draw a sharp line between public and private morality; others insist that democratic governments must be strictly neutral on what is morally good or bad and restrict their role to upholding purely procedural

principles of morality (such as treating everyone fairly). These and other sharp distinctions cannot be justified in theory nor sustained in practice. Even if there were a thoroughly coherent theory, the historical traditions of a society are bound to influence, in varying degrees, the application of the ideals of a liberal democracy. We can, of course, offer justifications for these ideals and appeal to the benefits experienced in a liberal democracy compared with other forms of social order. But it would be simplistic to expect a mathematically neat application of the ideals to practice.

Another problem can be seen in the recent enthusiasm for democracy in Eastern Europe. In part, it has been generated by some confusion between the values and institutions of democracy and those of capitalism. The capacity of a free market economy to raise incomes and provide an abundance of consumer goods (and do it overnight) is taken by some as the critical test of democracy. There are, of course, historical and theoretical links between liberal democracy and capitalism. Some theorists have even appealed to the competition of the capitalist marketplace as a model for the democratic process: political parties vying with one another to have their policies purchased by voters. (As a *description* of what happens, this is often close to the truth.) But the extent to which capitalism is desirable from the perspective of democracy depends on how well it promotes the equal freedom of all to develop their capacities and live fulfilling lives. The supervising of the economic system to ensure that it serves this end is a basic responsibility of democratic government. The stress on self-determination in the catalogue of liberal democratic values does not endorse rapacious individualism or regard humans as 'insatiable consumers', views shared by early advocates of liberalism and a capitalist economy. If the affluent majority in Australia and various other democracies are inclined to treat the less fortunate with selfish indifference, this is a betrayal—not a consequence—of the ideals of such societies. Again, no common flag or the formal status of a republic can heal such radical division in a society.

Schools as democratic institutions

It is not a requirement of democracy that the practices of the political domain (e.g. majority rule) should be reflected in all the institutions of the society. The nature of the activity and the gradual process by which human beings develop their capacities for rational self-determination are two obvious and crucial factors. They are particularly important when we are considering the extent to which democratic values and practices justifiably apply to schooling.

If the main work of schools were to ensure that each new generation fitted neatly into the current ways of the society, democratic control (either directly or through government agencies) would be substantial. However, I am assuming that socialization, although part of what schools should aim to achieve, is subordinate

to their central educational role. I take this role to be the induction of young people into the various systematic forms of meaning through which human life and the world are described, explained, interpreted and evaluated, and through which human experience is expressed. To be done effectively, this work requires a range of expert knowledge and skills on the part of teachers. It is also subject to values which, while consistent with those of democracy, are not peculiar to democracy: those that distinguish the domains of truth, aesthetic quality and moral worth.

The legitimate interest of the general society in the conduct of education should respect the distinctive values of the activity and the special competence of those directly engaged in it. In terms of democracy, the justifiable degree of public control should be exercised through a decentralized pattern of authority. Within the constraints mentioned, parents and other citizens need adequate opportunity, at regional and local levels, to influence the shape of educational policies and practices.

Within a school, the nature of both educational and democratic ideals requires that the authority of the principal in relation to fellow teachers should reflect, as far as possible, a collegial rather than a managerial model of decision making. Between teaching staff and students, the democratic guideline would be that students should have as much freedom to make choices as is consistent with their level of maturity and the nature of educational activities.

Teachers need to recognize the complexity of the process by which the capacities for mature, reflective self-determination develop. They have to adapt to different age groups (and to individuals) and appreciate that the effectiveness of the process depends on students having appropriate opportunities to take responsibility. For the broader activities of a school, particularly those affecting students as a group, there should be opportunity for debate and decision making that reflect democratic values. In these cases, it is important that students understand the status of their deliberations (e.g. the decision is finally in their hands or they are giving advice).

Education for democracy

While the schools are shaped by what is often a defective interpretation of democratic values in the society at large, they have fairly substantial scope to prepare young people for more effective participation, and can help to refine the practice by developing the capacity to submit it to critical reflection in the light of a better understanding of the ideals. As long as schools focus on the basic values of democracy, to which I earlier referred, they can transmit them without compromising educational values. The emphasis in the democratic tradition on rational decision making and on key moral values (respect for each individual as a moral agent, fairness, tolerance, freedom, the equal right of all to basic human goods)

coincides with the development of commitments that are central to the work of education. Of course, in these and other matters the school's educational role is to encourage a critical, reflective commitment.

The particular ways in which democratic ideals are translated into the practices of a society and the various general theories in which they are interpreted should be the objects of systematic study. Where practices are inconsistent with the ideals, this should be uncovered and criticized in schooling. In relation to general theories, the school's role is to present them in such a way that students can reach an accurate understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. Freedom in a democracy permits schools to exist that reflect one or another comprehensive tradition of values and practices. In these cases, the framework of democratic values will be studied in the broader context. For government schools, the boundaries beyond which they should be neutral are set by the basic moral values on which the survival of any society depends and those that distinguish liberal democracy.

As we have already noted, all schools as institutions should contribute to the quality of democratic life by reflecting the intellectual and moral ideals of democracy in their forms of organization, discipline, the attitudes of staff to students, how students treat one another and so on.

In the curriculum itself there are many contexts in which schools can develop a reflective commitment to the underlying values of democracy and a critical understanding of how the practices of our society are consistent with, or distort, these values. If schools fulfil their distinctive educational role (outlined earlier), they will lay the foundation for responsible citizenship in a democracy. However, there is a relatively specific range of political knowledge, skills and attitudes to which schools should give special attention. These include: learning about the processes of democratic government in our society and the relationship between political and economic policy; acquiring skills for detecting bias, superficiality and propaganda in the information presented by the media, political parties and interest groups; learning how to analyse political issues in a way that combines the application of theory and practical reason (the latter giving due weight to what is feasible in particular circumstances); gaining understanding of, and practice in, the tolerance and respect that are essential for political society. Many areas of the curriculum can contribute to these objectives (e.g. history, English, studies in politics, society, media, economics, law).

Australians may make a reasonable claim that theirs is a comparatively healthy democracy. Despite political rhetoric about 'the tugging of forelocks' to Britain, Australia in fact has a history of considerable initiative in its democratic practices (e.g. women's right to vote, the secret ballot, a preferential voting system, the compulsory voting condition, the constitutional arrangements for a Commonwealth with Federal and State governments). However, there are many grounds on which we should not be complacent. The following are some examples (most of which are found in varying degrees in all democracies).

There is the continual danger of slipping into mediocrity through the dominance of an ill-informed majority. Democratic values and practices tend to be associated almost exclusively with the political order. Participation in decision making has been noticeably limited in the workplace and other significant areas of social life. Highly organized interest groups often diminish the democratic process by turning it into a trade-off between conflicting groups in which the government is reduced to a kind of mediator. Our political parties have tended to fit the free-market model. This is exacerbated by the practice of three-year terms. The pressure is towards a pragmatic adjusting of policies so that they will be 'bought' by the majority of voters. Hence it is not surprising that there is widespread cynicism about politicians and political parties in our society. The information that most citizens receive on public issues usually emphasizes ephemeral, sensational aspects and, in any case, commonly lacks reflective analysis. Television is particularly prone to these deficiencies, and they become more severe near the time of elections. The problem is partly in the nature and management of the medium and how politicians have learnt to manipulate it so effectively. But it also seems to reflect a serious failure in the political education of our citizens. A final (and fundamental) sign that our democracy is not as healthy as we may like to think is the continuing presence of racial and ethnic prejudice (the egregious example of which has been the treatment of Aborigines).

It would be utterly naive to suggest that schools could provide the remedy to these and other ills in the condition of our democracy. What I do claim is that they have the capacity to promote a more reflective understanding of, and commitment to, democratic ideals, and a more critical attitude to the ways in which these ideals are translated into practice. If they can achieve this much, they might indirectly promote the continuing attention to reform that is needed in our political, legal, economic, media and other institutions in order to raise the general quality of democracy in our society. And this is surely a much more important task than designing a flag or worrying about our status as a republic or even relocating the geographical focus of our external trade.

QUESTIONS

- How should a school be organized so as to reflect and encourage democratic values? What limits does the nature of education place on the application of democratic ideals to the school institution?
- What constraints do educational values place on the authority of the state over the practice of schooling in a democratic society?
- How can units in various areas of the curriculum contribute to the development of a critical understanding of democratic ideals and practices? (Outline examples from two or three areas and indicate sequential development over, say, three years.)

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The Study of Work

The Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) for Years 11 and 12 is based largely on the Blackburn report. The latter was the work of a public committee appointed to review postcompulsory schooling in Victoria, and chaired by Jean Blackburn. The final report (and some forty-five recommendations) was published in 1985. Six years later, semester units 1 and 2 of a completely new two-year program were underway in Victorian schools. Among the more controversial recommendations to be implemented was the study of work in our society as a two-semester subject that all students were required to attempt as a condition for the VCE. For various reasons, a Ministerial decision was taken at the end of 1991 to revoke this condition.

The original recommendation reflected the committee's acknowledgment of the link between extended schooling and both the needs of the economy and individual economic opportunity. It also wanted all students, whatever their interests and backgrounds, to engage in some common studies. It seemed to the committee that, in addition to English, work was a very appropriate topic for this purpose. It was also fitting that the study should be done at the stage when students were about to enter adult life and were thinking of their future. The study of work (both paid and unpaid) was to be a 'socio-economic history' related to present issues such as technological change, the role of women, unemployment. There was also to be some direct observation and experience of work. The committee recognized that if such a study were to be worthwhile it would require 'a major curricular development project'.

The Working Party that sifted through the recommendations of the Blackburn report seems to have been influenced by arguments for the inclusion of Australian Studies as a four-semester subject. However, it followed the report to the extent that Australian Studies was to emphasize the role of work in society. The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board in its Options Paper (1987) proposed that two units of Australian Studies focused on the theme of work should be compulsory. There was substantial opposition to this proposal at the time. The special status given to work in the study, why it was particularly relevant for Years 11–12, and why it should be compulsory were all challenged. The only concession that seems to have been made was the rather curious one that the two units on work in Australian Studies, while they must be attempted by everyone, did not need to be completed satisfactorily for the award of the VCE.

The outline for the study of work in units 1 and 2 of Australian Studies contains four dimensions: characteristics of work in contemporary Australian society and the various ways in which work is interpreted; how geography and population affect the patterns of work in Australia, the changes that are occurring, and what social differences are reflected in work; how wealth is generated and distributed and the role of government and various other agencies in these processes; characteristics of Australia as a technological society; the effects on the political order, industry, living standards, environment etc.

The manual that contains supporting material for the development of the units on work offers about fifty pages of summary suggestions for treating the four major projects (or 'work requirements') on which the study is designed. A good background bibliography is provided. Despite the efforts of those who prepared the study design and supporting material, what was done clearly fell short of the major curricular effort that the Blackburn report believed would be necessary.

In relation to the study of work, several different issues became entangled during the development of the VCE. They can, perhaps, be identified in a number of questions:

1 Should the study of work be a compulsory two-unit subject at Years 11–12?

I believe that the justifiable answer to this question is 'no'. Work is an important element in our social and cultural life, but it is only one of several that could make a claim to special attention (e.g. the family, education, the legal system, unity and diversity in a multicultural society).

A good case can be made for treating the study of work as a distinct part of a common core curriculum during the course of secondary schooling. Ernest Boyer in *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America* (1983) argues for such a study, in which the place of work in society would be systematically examined from historical, comparative, social, cultural, and economic perspectives. Boyer also includes another related common study: Technology (which examines its historical dimensions, the links with science, ethical and social issues). In addition, he proposes that, in Years 9–12, students should do a minimum of thirty hours of voluntary work each year, either within or outside the school.

However, there is no compelling reason for placing the study of work in the final two years. Years 9 and 10, when virtually all adolescents are still at school, would be preferable. Despite the dramatic surge in the retention rate to the final secondary school years that the economic recession had produced in 1991, it is reasonable to estimate that when jobs are more plentiful at least a quarter of the student population is likely to leave after Year 10.

Unless there are very good reasons for a specific compulsory subject in the final two years (as is the case for English), the practical problems would seem to be decisive. Apart from questions of adequate staffing, there are the constraints on

choice when even one additional compulsory subject has to be fitted in with prerequisites for various tertiary programs. It does not seem desirable for a student to discontinue the study of a language, for example, in order to find time for two compulsory units on work in society.

What I believe would be defensible as compulsory in Year 12 is a project by each student on a significant contemporary social problem that requires the application of several disciplines. Issues on work in society would be among the many topics suitable for such a project. It would be one of the assignments students would be expected to complete satisfactorily within the context, for the most part, of subjects in which they were enrolled. Any additional study (e.g. on historical background or moral aspects) would be strictly related to the project. It would require students to appreciate the scope and limitations of particular disciplines and how these relate to the understanding of a complex social problem, to identify and argue about the moral issues involved, to strengthen such attitudes as tolerance and sympathy, and improve general skills of written and spoken English and logical thinking. To take one area, it is evident that many environmental questions involve scientific, economic, political, moral, aesthetic and other dimensions.

2 Should Australian Studies be a subject in the curriculum for Years 11–12?

It could be argued that key questions about Australian society and culture are studied in a large number of subjects within the curriculum (e.g. Art, Australian History, Economics, English, Geography, Music, Political Studies). The examples I have listed, and there are others, would probably include at least the equivalent of a one semester unit that gives particular attention to Australia.

At the same time, there are good theoretical and practical reasons for a carefully designed subject over four semesters that brings the perspectives of several disciplines to bear on key features of Australia (its geography, history, population characteristics, political order, economy, expressions of popular and reflective culture etc.). There are various defensible principles of integration but, given the complexity of such a multidisciplinary study, these would need to be worked out very carefully. Australian Studies would be no substitute for the systematic study in earlier years of History, Geography, and so on, in which some Australian content was included. In fact, without such background, Australian Studies would run the serious risk of being superficial. (This illustrates the importance of giving close attention to sequential, cumulative development in curriculum design.)

3 Should the theme of work form a substantial part of Australian Studies?

It will be obvious from what has already been said that I believe this should not be so. Of course, work has an important place in a society and in the personal life of its members. But a program for Australian Studies is distorted when work, which

is only one of a range of important topics, is required as the focus for two of the four semesters at Years 11–12. Apart from what is, or could be, done on the study of work in Years 9 and 10, there are several subjects in which work is a prominent topic (e.g. Accounting, Business Management, Commerce, Economics, Geography, History, Information Technology).

4 Assuming that the curriculum in Australian Studies is appropriately designed, should it be a common (compulsory) subject for Years 11–12? There are good reasons why all members of our society should possess some common body of significant knowledge and methods of inquiry and reflection. This is an objective for the whole of schooling, and not simply the final two years. It requires, of course, that the areas of common learning should be the same in substance and not simply in name. In our society, English is an obvious candidate for a common study (in the full sense). Whether there should be further such studies at Years 11–12 is a debatable question. Certainly, Australian Studies, however designed, has no stronger claim than, say, Australian History.

Going about the study of work

The comments on the four questions I have raised still leave the study of work as an important topic in various subjects between Years 9 and 12. It would also be one of the key areas for the kind of multidisciplinary project at Year 12 to which I earlier referred.

How teaching and learning might proceed effectively on this topic is a complex matter. It depends on the application of a variety of intellectual disciplines, on interpretations that are expressed in many cultural forms (such as novels, poems, films, songs), and on attention to current conditions of work and its organization (price and wage setting, unemployment, issues of tariff protection and so on). It is also important to recognize that an effective study of work must confront a range of controversial values. Teachers and others would make a serious mistake to suppose that the topic can be treated in a conveniently value-free way or that the inescapable values are ones on which there is no disagreement.

Some idea of the range of materials and their organization that would be required for a satisfactory study of work can be gained from the unit 'People and Work' in the Humanities Project. The Project, carried out in England about twenty years ago, was a systematic effort to organize a substantial part of the secondary school curriculum in the Humanities and Social Sciences around controversial issues in nine areas of modern life. It involved a large team directed by Lawrence Stenhouse and took several years to complete.

The topic 'People and Work' treats a substantial range of issues under eight broad headings: the meaning of work for the worker; social institutions and work values; social stratification and the meaning of work; the work environment and its impact on the worker; possible variables influencing choice of work and opportunities within it, obligations and rights in the working situation; conceptions of masculinity and femininity in work; the relationship between work and other human activities. The resource materials are carefully organized in relation to particular issues. To give an idea of their scope, there are twenty-five references to literary works, extracts from forty-four films, twenty-six folk songs, along with newspaper and journal articles, recorded interviews with people in various kinds of work, documentary films and so on. The Project measures up to the kind of curriculum-building effort that the Blackburn report seems to have expected when it prescribed the study of work.

For the treatment of controversial issues, the Humanities Project proposed that teachers should adopt a position of 'procedural neutrality'. This meant that they would draw on the range of materials in the curriculum to ensure that all points of view were clearly represented in study and discussion. They would not deny that they held a particular position but would not make it known to students. This approach itself became a controversial issue.

Although the question of teacher neutrality goes well beyond the study of work, I would think that a defensible procedure for this topic (and others about which there is genuine controversy) is the following. Teachers do not begin by making clear their own views but, as in the Humanities Project, make sure that the resources available reflect all the main points of view. When students have had the opportunity to develop an informed position, teachers should make clear where they stand and the reasons they have. They must emphasize, of course, that what is looked for is not compliance with them, but a well-defended point of view. If teachers refrain from committing themselves, then, as Mary Warnock has pointed out in *Schools of Thought* (1977), they fail to set an example of how to take a critical, reflective stand on a disputed topic and they easily encourage the impression that the issues are merely intellectual exercises of little real human significance. If I may adapt Yeats's distinction in his poem 'The Second Coming', to give the impression of no conviction is as bad as being filled with merely 'passionate intensity'. In teaching, there is a place for impassioned reasoning.

It will be obvious from the foregoing discussion that the placing of the study of work in our secondary school curriculum requires much more careful attention than it has received so far, and that any effort to implement a satisfactory program in this area will require something like the scale of curriculum design envisaged by the Blackburn report.

QUESTIONS

- What themes and principles of integration would you propose for a study of work during Years 9 and 10 in which teachers from various subject areas would participate?
- How might aspects of the area(s) in which you teach (or will be teaching) contribute effectively to such a study?
- What are some of the main contested value issues in relation to the practice of work in our society? Using one such issue as an example, how do you think it could be justifiably treated in the course of teaching?

Further reading

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Assessing the Quality of Education

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Programs and institutions

An earlier essay 'What Makes a Good School?' (in Part 1) is closely related to this topic. Here I wish to focus on what counts as an educational program and some ways of estimating its quality. The question of quality in education is not only a matter of finding ways of measuring how well schools succeed in what they are doing, and of then ensuring that they, in fact, reach a satisfactory standard in what they do. Schools may be working hard at turning out docile citizens, or inculcating a political ideology. Their program may be heavy on learning practical skills, such as how to repair a car. It is possible for schools to succeed very well in what they are doing, and yet fail to achieve what is of educational quality. So, in discussing the question of quality in our schools, we must also ask what it is they should be trying to achieve in the name of education.

It may be useful to begin by clearing the ground with a few distinctions.

First, we need to distinguish 'education' as a deliberate, systematic process of teaching and learning, historically associated with the institution of the school, from 'education' as the whole process of coming to maturity as a human being. I am concerned here with 'education' in the narrower sense and specifically with the process as it is engaged in by the institution of the school. Other institutions may, of course, engage in systematic processes of teaching and learning (e.g. family, clubs, churches, radio and television).

In relation to the school, we should distinguish between the activities in which it attempts to discharge its distinctive educational functions and the many other activities in which it may engage. The latter are often closely related to the directly educational work, but they may have no connection at all (e.g. in the provision of dental care) and sometimes they are in conflict.

Distinctively human ways of thinking, feeling, imagining and acting are not simply part of our genetic endowment nor do they emerge spontaneously in the course of growth. They depend on efforts of learning. To some extent, this learning occurs informally. But for human beings in any kind of complex culture, the acquisition of a distinctively human character requires deliberate and carefully planned efforts. Schooling, as I interpret it, is primarily concerned with induction

into those aspects of the total culture that depend on, or are at least facilitated by, systematic and sustained efforts of learning under the guidance of those who by training and experience are specially qualified for the complex tasks of teaching that are involved.

Historically, schooling has been both liberal and vocational. Here, I am interested only in the former: that is, the knowledge, skills and activities thought to be desirable for human beings as such, regardless of the specific roles they play in the economy of a society. I shall assume, without argument, that schooling in childhood and adolescence should be predominantly concerned with liberal education. I take it, then, that the school's principal task is to help new members of a society gain access to the main symbolic forms of culture: those forms that have been consciously and deliberately developed in relation to standards of human excellence and which we at present loosely classify as the sciences, the humanities, and the arts.

Although I have hardly touched on the nature of education, there is serious opposition to the moves I have already made. I should very briefly mention three main objectors:

- 1 Those who believe that the school in contemporary industrial society cannot avoid being manipulative and unjust: that the only remedy is the radical one of dismantling the institution altogether. I agree partially with this view, to the extent that the school would be more likely to achieve quality in education if it were 'disestablished'—e.g. not so closely tied with social and economic advancement, or organized in a large monolithic state bureaucracy.
- 2 Those who believe we should retain the school, but ensure that it has the primary role of being an effective instrument of political reform. I reject this view mainly because the political dimension is only one of several significant domains of human value. Interpreting the school simply as an agent of political reform does not help to define its distinctive character. If the school succeeds in its educational task, it may in fact promote political reform, but that is a different matter. In order to be able to develop the capacities for sound critical judgment on political affairs, the school must enjoy some degree of detachment from the political order.
- 3 Those who wish to expand the role of the school so that it becomes a kind of all-purpose institution. Some proponents want to add social work, mental health, social reform etc. to the distinctively educational task; others want to reinterpret 'education' so that it includes all these activities. While the second version creates more confusion, both seriously compromise the chances that the school has of performing its special task of educating, for which we have no other specifically designed institution in our society.

This fixation on the school as an all-purpose agency is at the opposite extreme to the position of the 'deschoolers'. It not only distracts the school from its distinctive educational work, but frequently it deflects the efforts of social reform away from other points in society where they would be more

effective. It also ignores the fact that the quality of what the school can do depends to a significant extent on the quality of other key institutions in the society.

In summary, I am assuming that the school exists mainly to perform a distinctive educational role, which may be expressed as the systematic development of rational understanding in the main forms that it has taken in human culture. To avoid misunderstanding, I should stress that the process of education, in this interpretation, is not occupied solely with propositional knowledge and intellectual skills. However, at least within the cultural tradition of critical rationality, the educational development of imagination, of the emotions, of moral and other dispositions, and of various skills depends on their being informed by relevant knowledge, theory, understanding.

If we adopt a mainly instrumental approach, quality in education will be determined by the effectiveness with which the practices of schooling are thought to serve the desired ends. While this is quite a rational approach, we should also be aware of its limitations. Some ends are of the same kind as the educational means and are strictly continuous with them (e.g. being able to write with precision and style; knowing enough about our political and economic system to vote intelligently). But other ends involve values of a quite distinct kind from those of education (e.g. raising the gross national product, maintaining the existing class structure, promoting equality of economic opportunity, producing well-adjusted personalities). These ends may, in fact, be served by what the school does—although the complexity of influences in the life of a society makes the ascription of responsibility rather difficult. But, in any case, we cannot infer that what the schools are doing to bring about these ends must be of sound educational quality. In fact, there are some external ends that the school could serve only by miseducating (e.g. turning out docile citizens who accept unquestioningly the authority of the state).

For these reasons, I wish to focus attention directly on the activities of educating and consider some of the characteristics they should possess if the values intrinsic to education are to be achieved to a significant degree. Incidentally, although I shall not attempt to argue for the claim here, I believe the quality of educational activities depends largely on how well they satisfy the standards of excellence in three broad domains of value: the aesthetic, the moral and, above all, the epistemic (i.e. the conditions for true beliefs, objectivity, rational understanding). In ways that vary with the object of study, understanding involves not only a grasp of knowledge content and cognitive skills but also the development of imagination, the emotions, and capacities for innovative thought and action.

Among the main characteristics on which the quality of the process of education depends are the following:

- 1 The range of learning experiences for each individual should be sufficiently broad to include examples of all the main modes of understanding that

distinguish human culture: science, literature and the other arts, history, morality, religious and other world views, the basic symbolic systems of inquiry (language and mathematics), the effort to formulate the rules of valid argument and inquiry and to reflect on the nature of human knowledge and experience (logic and philosophy). To put the matter into a more shorthand form: the quality of one's education depends on an adequate and balanced learning experience from among the sciences, the humanities, and the arts.

2 There should be enough specialization in at least one area to ensure that the learner develops something of the style that comes with mastery.

3 The various modes of knowledge should be studied primarily for the context of interpretation and appreciation they provide in relation to significant aspects of human experience. They should not be engaged in for their merely instrumental use or for the sake of training future specialists. The study of literature in a liberal education should be somewhat different from its study in the professional training of a literary critic.

4 Learning in education—whether of knowledge content or of skills—should involve the fullest extent of critical understanding of which the learner is capable. The objective of education is not simply to produce behaviour (even verbal behaviour) that conforms to rules of correctness. If this were so, the various forms of conditioning and brainwashing would be satisfactory as educational methods. What education requires is that human beings should come to act in the light of a rule or standard because they perceive it to be appropriate in the circumstances. One of the crucial conditions for measuring the educational quality of learning is to establish not only that the student gives the correct response, but also can see why it is correct.

5 Over the course of time, a person's learning in each of the main modes of thought should display an increasing discrimination in grasping the key concepts, the central principles and theories, the crucial methods of inquiry, what tests are relevant to claims being made and how these claims are tested.

6 As an important aspect of the growth of understanding, students should come increasingly to grasp the relative scope and limitation of the various modes of thought and expression that they are acquiring, and to integrate these into their everyday experience so that they are reflected in the way they typically think, talk, feel, choose, act, relate to others, and so on. To see the range of a mode of thought it is necessary to gain at least an elementary grasp of the 'second order' questions. This means, for example, not simply learning historical content and method, but also something about the kind of understanding that the historian tries to give of the past; how it is similar to and different from the explanations of science and the accounts of the human past contained in poetry and myth.

7 A crucial condition of quality in the broad sweep of the educational process is the extent to which a learner progressively acquires the skills of learning and

comes less and less to depend on a teacher. As Jerome Bruner has pointed out in *Towards a Theory of Instruction* (1968), 'instruction is a provisional state that has as its object to make the learner or problem solver self-sufficient' (p. 53).

The characteristics of quality in education that I have mentioned are admittedly difficult to assess, whether at the level of a system, or a single school, or even an individual pupil. It is understandable that attention would focus on the measurement of the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. While this approach is obviously useful, we should recognize its limitations as a measure of educational quality. Ideally, in the practice of education the skills of literacy and numeracy are not treated in a vacuum. Each has an immediate educational context: literature and mathematics. And these, in turn, play a fundamental role in relation to the rest of education. There is at least some truth in Jacques Ellul's claim that, through its promotion of mere literacy, 'the most obvious result of primary education in the nineteenth and twentieth century was to make the individual susceptible to super propaganda'.

One of the most influential recent efforts to measure the quality of education more precisely has focused on teaching and learning objectives in terms of precisely observable behaviour, which include specific questions and responses in speech or writing. It is assumed that any general or complex objective (e.g. developing appreciation of poetry) can be broken down into much more specific component objectives, which can be described in terms of changes in the learner's behaviour. This approach to measuring educational outcome has been prompted not only by the desire for greater accuracy, but also in the interests of accountability, particularly at a time when public funds for education are scarce. Much of the work on performance indicators for tertiary education seems to fit this model.

Proficiency—or competency-based teaching as it is called—or the emphasis on behavioural objectives—is useful for certain aspects of education: in particular, for the learning of skills where their success or mastery can be exhaustively specified by precise criteria of performance (e.g. spelling, arithmetical computation, typing, functional literacy) or in the accurate recall of information.

The approach is clearly not applicable where the teaching and learning objectives are not of the kind that can be achieved once and for all (e.g. in developing standards of judgment, taste, criticism) or where the desirable outcome is one that in the nature of the case cannot be completely predictable (e.g. suggesting hypotheses for solving a scientific problem; interpreting a poem).

More generally, the behavioural objectives' approach rests on the mistaken assumption that all complex learning can be analyzed into relatively simple components. The consequence is to encourage a fragmented approach to teaching and learning, to down-play the importance of understanding the whole, of grasping the coherence among ideas. The preoccupation with behavioural objectives in testing tends to narrow unduly the range of what is educationally significant. In

the three tasks taken separately, assessors (no matter how experienced) will often disagree on the quality of an essay in relation to the tasks taken together. This is a matter of educated judgment. It is a distortion of this judgment to reduce it to a process of assigning scores to criteria for each task and then simply adding them up. Even the matter of correctly using historical conventions cannot be mechanically determined in the overall assessment. The importance of accurately citing evidence will vary depending, for example, on its role in the argument.

The complexity of the qualitative judgments involved in the assessment of a large part of educational learning needs to be emphasized. The main reason is that such assessment often has a quite misleading appearance of precision. This occurs because it is commonly reported in, or converted to, numerical terms and is made subject to various statistical models and procedures. Take the relatively simple case of the assessment of learning in, say, four subjects for which there are three levels of successful performance identified by relevant criteria and reported as A, B and C. The assignment of these grades indicates that those who receive an A are judged to have performed better on the criteria than those who receive a B, and that the latter have performed better than students judged to be at C level. This assessment makes no assumption that the difference between A and B equals the difference between B and C. Yet this is just what is assumed when the grades are translated into an equal-interval numerical scale (say, 3, 2, 1). When this is done, each student's aggregate result for the four subjects can be presented as an easily comparable numerical score. So three Bs and one C are translated to 7, and one A, one B and two Cs also become 7. Before the numerical scores for different subjects are added together they can be adjusted mathematically to a common scale, a procedure that is thought to make the scores for, say, English more comparable with those for Mathematics. The original letter grades may now have become numbers to several decimal places.

While there are practical and theoretical arguments for such changes to the original letter grades, they very easily convey a sense of precision in the assessment of educational achievement that the original judgment (e.g. to grade a project report etc. as a C) could not possibly have. As we saw, in most cases an assessor cannot even claim that the qualitative differences represented by any two adjacent alphabetical grades are equal. Perhaps the clearest illustration of the pseudo-precision that numbers introduce to educational assessment is when one essay is given, say, 93 out of 100 and another gets 91.

Psychological and educational measurements have commonly shown a pattern of distribution that approximates the bell-shaped 'normal curve' (with a small proportion of the measured group being placed at each end of the scale and the largest around the mid-point). Hence, it is not surprising that the results of educational assessment would be expected to satisfy the properties of the mathematically pure normal curve. It should be noted, however, that no educational assessment of a group—even when the group is very large or is a carefully chosen random

any case, a fixation on learning outcomes draws attention away from the nature of the pedagogical means. The desirable outcomes, insofar as they can be measured in behavioural terms, are perhaps being promoted by undesirable means.

Another way of attempting to ensure quality in education is through a national assessment program. Among the dangers is that what can be relatively easily measured—particularly when it is part of a national assessment program—will tend to dictate what is taken to be educationally most significant. A program of this kind might be useful if it concentrated on developing a wide range of diagnostic tests, and tests concerned with assessing levels of attainment in relation to public criteria at various key stages in the course of education. This would entail the formidable task of determining criteria of educational attainment at, say, three levels: minimally satisfactory, desirable, and excellent: and doing this for, say, the end of Years 2, 5 and 9. The pay-off from all these tests in improving the quality of education would depend, of course, on the way they were used by teachers with individual pupils in individual schools. It would also be essential to ensure that the design of tests was clearly related to curriculum planning.

In summary, the efforts to assess educational quality have to avoid the temptation of settling for precise, easily managed instruments of measurement at the expense of a due regard for the complexity of learning that is properly educative.

Individual achievement

A matter of judgment

In the discussion of this topic it is useful to keep in mind Aristotle's well-known criterion, 'It is the mark of an educated person to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits'. Even when assessment focuses on the accurate recall of information or the routine application of a technique, the examiner must exercise judgment about the relative degree of difficulty of the items that make up, say, a multiple-choice test. When we move to the educationally more significant achievements (explaining, interpreting, evaluating, showing ingenuity in the use of techniques and so on), the demand for complex qualitative judgment in both setting and assessing tests is obviously much greater.

An essay in history, for example, may require students to describe an event, justify what they regard as the main explanation for its occurrence, defend their interpretation of its significance, and satisfy these tasks in language that observes historical conventions. It would generally be agreed that the first task is less demanding than the other two. However, its relative difficulty could vary a great deal, and informed assessors may not agree on the weight it should be given. There is also likely to be disagreement on how the second and third task are to be compared. But even when there is consensus about the importance to be assigned to

sample—ever exactly fits the normal curve. If the group of students being assessed is uncharacteristic, the relationship of results to the normal curve is obviously undermined.

Because of the large proportion of students who now continue their secondary schooling to Year 12, one could justifiably claim that they do reflect the educationally relevant characteristics of the whole population around that age. However, there are various other obstacles that confront the application of the normal curve to the distribution of results. It will not apply when, for example, a test (or the interpretation of grade criteria) is too difficult or too undemanding for the population that is being assessed. Also, various factors that influence the choice of subjects may lead to educationally atypical groups of students in particular subjects. In these cases it would be a mistake to expect a distribution of grades that approximates the normal curve.

The general point to be emphasized here is that the mathematical properties of the normal curve can be applied to educational assessment only in a qualified way and with considerable caution. There is certainly no justification for using it to predetermine the percentage of students in any subject who are to be placed at the various levels of achievement.

One of the strengths of the approach to assessment in VCE is that it attempts to award grades on the basis of how well the relevant criteria of performance have been satisfied.³ It is, of course, the case that the interpretation of the criteria that leads to the award of an A, B etc. should reflect a reasonable estimate of what might be expected of the general population of students at this stage. However, it allows for variations in the characteristics of the particular group being assessed. This use of criteria-related grading gives not only a rank ordering of students on a scale but also a clear indication of what a student at a given level may reasonably be expected to know.

The application of the criteria-related approach in VCE assessment has, unfortunately, been somewhat contaminated by the lure of mathematical precision. Except for English, the work being assessed receives a score of 3, 2, 1 or 0 (not shown) for each of the eight or so criteria; the aggregate score is reduced to a 10-point scale and the student receives the corresponding letter grade (A+, A etc.). Although the criteria are treated in a similar way in English, the key difference is that there is a final judgment on those qualities of the work regarded as decisive for the grade awarded. The earlier example of criteria for a history essay indicates (by contrast) the problems with any more automatic approach.

The procedure I have just described was developed mainly for the purpose of encouraging greater comparability among all VCE students who receive the same grade in a given assessment task. It is part of the complex process—referred to in VCE-speak as ‘verification’—of ensuring that grades given for internally assessed tasks are comparable from one school to another. Work done under examination conditions is graded independently of schools by a panel of assessors. The

comments that I have made on the qualitative judgments required for the assessment of learning apply, of course, whether the tasks are assessed internally or externally, under examination conditions or not.

External examinations: their strengths and limitations

Along with several inventions for which they are better known, the Ancient Chinese should also be recognized as the inventors of the public examination. To select applicants for their civil service in a way that was fair and free from patronage they devised a procedure in which those seeking admission wrote answers to the same questions at the same time and under the same conditions. To ensure their anonymity, candidates were not only identified by numbers but their answers were reproduced by professional scribes. A system of public examinations was introduced in England during the 1850s.

The main advantages commonly claimed for external examinations are the following: they ensure that students’ family background or school does not influence assessment; they set uniform standards across a whole system for a common range of knowledge and skills, and exercise a powerful influence on the shape of the curriculum; they give students a tangible incentive for studying and provide them with objective evidence of their relative achievements in relation to the whole cohort at a given stage; they give results that are comparable across all schools and save teachers from the difficulties that may arise in judging their own students; and in the society at large they are accepted as a fair basis for selection into programs of further education or employment.

While common external examinations do have a useful role in educational assessment, there are serious limitations—some directly related to the claimed advantages—that should not be overlooked. Examinations focus on the kinds of knowledge and skills that can be demonstrated in writing within a short period of time. There is no doubt that when they are the main instruments of assessment they have a powerful influence on the curriculum and students’ motivation. But, given their nature, the educational effect is inevitably a limiting one. Teaching and learning tend to be concentrated on what can be tested in a written examination and to the narrowly prescribed range of topics that an examination common to all schools requires.

On the matter of motivation, it is remarkable that, apart from the end of secondary schooling, virtually all other phases of formal education from the primary school to postgraduate work in universities can manage to engender sufficient motivation without recourse to a common external examination.

While such a system may be relatively free from prejudiced judgment and the effects of patronage, we have already seen that there is a considerable price to be paid in educational terms. It should also be noted that some of the circumstances in which written examinations are normally taken are educationally undesirable: for

example, the severe time constraints on anything like reflective writing, the prohibition (or restriction) on access to reference books, the competitive atmosphere. In addition, there are practical aspects that affect individuals differently, such as how they cope with a highly tension-charged situation or how well they happen to be on the set occasion.

These various matters are not unrelated to technical questions that are asked about tests. Are they valid (that is, measure what they claim to measure)? Do the assessments based on them have reliability (that is, are consistent, not subject to random variation)? Each of these questions has complex dimensions that are well beyond the present discussion. Here I shall refer to several points that relate to one of the basic purposes for a system of external examinations at the end of secondary schooling: to have a common instrument for selection into further levels of education or employment.

- Even when examinations test what they claim to test, we have seen that they are inevitably restricted to a relatively narrow range of educationally desirable learning. We should be concerned with the question of how the broad range of this learning can be more adequately assessed.
- External examinations are subject to substantial levels of unreliability, especially under the usual conditions of a large number of students being graded in a limited time.

A recent comment on the A-level examinations in England (which have played a large role in university selection) suggests that the standard error of measurement is plus or minus one grade on the scale of five grades used for assessment. This means that a student awarded a D is somewhere between an E and a C. A student who just makes a B is not reliably better than a very good D.

For educationally significant learning, there will almost certainly be some variation in the level of grading among a group of assessors. Whether the size of variation and the percentage of students affected are regarded as tolerable is not a matter that can be settled by a statistical calculation; it requires a judgment that takes account of educational and practical issues.

- Given the use of examinations for selection, one would expect that they would be good predictors of later success, especially in university courses. The experience with the English A-level results is that, except for mathematics, they are not very good predictors of academic success. In light of the measurement error noted above, this is hardly surprising.
- Assessment under examination conditions is defended as a way of avoiding the 'undue assistance' and cheating that can occur in tasks performed over several weeks. (The VCE-speak for dealing with this problem is 'authentication'.) No doubt, there are more serious difficulties with an extended task. However, we should not underestimate the extent of 'undue assistance' in external tests. For example, 'exam-wise' teachers are capable of coaching students to the point

where the latter virtually reproduce memorized responses that have been prepared for them. The issue of authentication for work done outside examination conditions should be addressed directly.

Because of the complexity of the selection process that follows Year 12 and the intensity of competition, we need to ensure that the assessment of learning at that level is as appropriate and fair as it is reasonable to expect. Common external examinations may have a justifiable place in the process. However, their limitations as instruments of assessment, especially in the range of what they can assess, should not be overlooked.

Universities themselves recognize these shortcomings. Degrees are granted on the basis of assessment procedures that go well beyond a written examination. For the most part, there is very little in the way of verification for the grades that university lecturers assign—even within the same department of a university. And they are not deterred by problems of authentication over essays, theses and other projects.

All this is somewhat ironic when one considers that various members of universities have been among the most vociferous critics of the verification and authentication procedures that have been applied to the VCE. Of course, such procedures need regular review and refinement; but a not unreasonable response to these critics would be the Biblical proverb 'physician, heal thyself'.

QUESTIONS

- For the educational quality of the curriculum in a given area covering a stage of primary or secondary education, what main ingredients should be included in its design?
- What important factors in the design of the primary or secondary school curriculum as a whole are likely to affect the quality of students' education?
- In the assessment of the general quality of a school, what key criteria and conditions should be taken into account? Why is student performance on a common test not a sufficient indicator of the relative educational quality of schools?
- What are the main characteristics of the behavioural objectives approach to the assessment of learning? On what grounds is the approach criticized?
- To what extent are written examinations (under the usual conditions) a satisfactory way of assessing a student's level of educational achievement?

1 J. Ellul, *Propaganda*, translated by K. Killen & J. Lerner. New York: Vintage Books, 1973, p. 109. The French original was published in 1962.

2 Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics of Aristotle*, translated and introduced by Sir David Ross. London: Oxford University Press, 1954, 1.3.

3 Although I refer specifically to the VCE practice in this essay, the comments apply to whatever scheme is used in assessing student achievements.

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Social Values, Public Policy and Education

In addition to distinctively educational values (discussed in Part 1), the practice of education and its institutional forms are subject to general social values and political objectives that shape the social order and its economy. The essays in this section give direct attention to some of these values and objectives as they affect education. Their influence has been noted in earlier essays (e.g. in the discussion of a common curriculum in Part 2). In recent years, formal education has increasingly come to be treated as an instrument of the economy.

Educational Excellence and Equality



There is a pressing need to encourage a commitment in both teachers and students to go as far as they can towards realizing the ideals of excellence that mark the distinctive activities of education. With a substantial majority of young people now completing Year 12, there is a strong temptation to settle for a comfortable mediocrity. (As the relative number enrolling in universities and colleges increases, the same tendency can be seen there as well.) This slide affects students at all levels of ability, not simply the most able. Similarly, dedication to the highest possible quality of education carries a benefit for all.

It is understandable that teachers have a direct interest in programs and methods for encouraging the best achievement of which each student is capable. However, there are important questions that loom in the background of this work, and these need some attention.

The scope of formal education

In the first place, when we speak of excellence in education we are immediately faced with the need to identify what activities come within the range of being educated and how we are to interpret the notion of excellence as it applies to those activities. In regard to judgments of excellence we must also see how they are linked to what seems to be the closely related notion of quality in education. The fact that someone may perform excellently in, say, mathematics but still be poorly educated suggests that the connections may be more complex than we might suppose. There is a further set of difficult questions on how the promotion of excellence in education fits in with other values, particularly those of fairness and equality.

In the present century, schools have been subjected to growing pressure to become omnibus institutions. This makes it increasingly difficult to identify the fundamental work that distinguishes schools from various other institutions and in virtue of which their separate existence is finally justified. If we examine closely the objectives embedded in the long history of the institutions that we call primary and secondary schools, it can be fairly claimed that, in ideal at least, the central tasks have been to develop the pervasive skills of literacy and numeracy and to

provide a sustained induction into the main modes of systematic knowledge and reflection that are central to a literate culture and profoundly influence the ways in which we think and feel and act.

Ideally, this induction involves both an understanding of significant content and the acquisition of directly related intellectual and practical skills. On the latter, it should be emphasized that throughout most of schooling (at least to the end of Year 10 in our system) the preoccupation should be with liberal or general education. Hence, practical skills of an immediately vocational kind would not be part of the distinctive work of the school. Of course, the activities of a school as a social institution are not limited to its distinctive educational role, and these might include elements of vocational training.

There are many ways in which the key modes of knowledge can be organized in a curriculum, and many approaches to teaching and learning. The crucial point is that any school program should be such that each student can acquire competence in the basic symbolic systems of language (written and spoken) and mathematics, and an adequate and balanced education drawn from the sciences, the humanities and the arts.

Excellence and quality in education

The notion of excellence is a complex one, and there are some particular difficulties when we try to apply it to a combination of activities as in the case of education. We use the term 'excellent' in relation to states of affairs, activities, objects and so on that we regard as worthwhile. We speak of excellent health or an excellent musical performance but not, for example, of someone being excellent at cheating. To be excellent requires the satisfying of relevant public criteria of very high quality. We do not work out these criteria in a vacuum, but determine them in the light of the actual achievements of human beings. In our tradition, the criteria of excellence in literature, to take one example, have been set by such writers as Sophocles, Ovid, Dante, Shakespeare, Austen and Dickens. It will be noticed that, unlike being dead, excellence admits of degrees. Among the excellent literary artists we can identify some as more excellent than others.

Excellence as it refers to a human achievement quite generally can also be applied to education. But, as I have noted, the diversity of ingredients in being an educated person gives rise to serious differences over the appropriate criteria. If we are referring to 'education' in the sense in which I have claimed that it is central to the role of schools, then it is possible for a person to excel in one area of learning without necessarily being well educated. The latter, I would claim, depends on the following:

- 1 Breadth of knowledge across the sciences, humanities, and arts that provides a substantial basis for understanding, interpreting and appreciating the significant aspects of human experience.

- 2 Sufficient specialization in at least one area to the level at which there is detailed understanding of what it is about and how to apply its methods of inquiry, criticism and so on.

- 3 A clear grasp of the scope and limitations of the major modes of thought and expression, and how to relate them in the thinking, feeling, imagining, choosing and acting that are involved in the various contexts of human life.
- 4 The acquired skills and the motivation to continue one's education beyond what has been achieved in the institutions of formal teaching and learning.

Those who exhibit these characteristics to a high degree can justifiably be described as being excellently educated by general human standards.

If we focus our attention on excellent achievement at the end of schooling and at various stages during its course, it is obvious that we must adjust the general public standards of excellence to what may reasonably be expected, taking account of the developmental phases of childhood and adolescence. The same principle applies to any activity. If an adolescent of fourteen excels as a sprinter or a composer of music, the criteria of general human excellence that apply to these activities have to be interpreted relative to the level of outstanding achievement that can be expected of fourteen year olds. At this age, an athlete running 100 metres does not have to break 10 seconds to be regarded as excellent. Thus, the criteria of excellence in education as a whole or any of its constituent parts—while of a kind with those that refer quite generally to educational achievement—are interpreted in the light of the best that can be expected of children at the various phases of development.

It is almost a matter of definition that only a minority of children can satisfy criteria of educational excellence interpreted strictly. As we shall see, other values may have priority, but it should normally be an objective of our schools to enable all such children actually to attain this level.

We may also speak of achievement in a sense that is relative to each individual's capacities. In this sense, the objective in the activities that make up education is to ensure that, as far as possible, all children realize their potentialities to their fullest extent. In relation to the public criteria of excellence this means that some children, doing as well as they can, will barely meet the minimal necessary conditions for an educated person in our society, while the majority could achieve, in varying degrees, a good quality education but not the level of excellence. The effort to achieve at the full stretch of one's ability is an objective to be encouraged by all schools for all children. However, it would be misleading to confuse doing one's personal best with the attainment of excellence. What could be said is that, if this more modest objective were achieved, the aggregate educational quality of the Australian society would rise substantially.

The application of 'excellence' to educational institutions rather than to individuals raises a number of different issues. We would need to take account of such factors as the educational quality of the staff, their ability as teachers, the content and organization of the curriculum, the values that are encouraged in the life of

the school (including its pattern of discipline), how effectively the school is administered for educational purposes, the resources such as library and science laboratories. Normally, we would expect an excellent school to produce a minority of excellently educated students (taking account of the conditions mentioned above) and a substantial proportion who had achieved a reasonably high quality of education. However, there are circumstances in which these outcomes may occur in a school that fails to meet the criteria of excellence. Equally, they may not occur in a school that is clearly excellent. In the latter case, most of the student population may be below average in ability (or motivation) and the excellence of the school would be indicated in the relatively better attainment of its students in comparison with similar groups in other schools. Incidentally, it should be noted that, when other conditions of quality are satisfied, a school is more likely to raise the educational achievement of all its students if the range and levels of abilities in its population are broad.

Excellence, equality and other values

It is obvious that the fostering of excellence in education, or more broadly, the highest achievement of which each person is capable cannot be compatible with equal individual outcomes. However, these objectives do not conflict with the ideal that all should have, as far as possible, an equal opportunity to develop their capacities for education to the full. There is also no difficulty if the test of equal opportunity is that the various levels of educational attainment should be approximately equal in non-educationally defined groups. Thus, for example, it would be expected that the same proportion of females as males would be satisfying the criteria of excellence at the various stages of schooling. A problem with this test is that what counts as a 'non-educationally defined group' cannot always be so confidently identified as in the example I have used.

It can reasonably be argued that, apart from the equality of respect expressed in the objective of encouraging all students to achieve the best quality education of which they are capable, the objective itself cannot be realized unless individuals are treated quite unequally. It is obvious that children who are struggling to meet the minimal necessary standards need very different teaching compared with those who are satisfying the criteria of good quality education. Those who are meeting these criteria with relative ease will, in their turn, need different teaching to enable their potential for outstanding achievement to be reached.

Natural abilities and various other conditions, such as family background, that influence the level of education a person is capable of attaining are not in themselves merited—although how they are used may be a matter of merit. But the question of what treatment people deserve often has nothing to do with that of merit. Consider, for example, two people with hereditary health problems, one

very serious, one less so. If there is a shortage of medical services, it would be reasonable to claim that there is at least one clear ground on which the first deserves priority over the second. Similarly, it would normally be reasonable to argue that a person with an exceptional natural (and thus unmerited) talent for music deserves the appropriate opportunities to develop that talent.

Of course, even for people with some extraordinary natural talent, it is almost always the case that the development of the talent depends on an enormous amount of hard work, dedication and discipline. In other words, there is generally a substantial degree of merit in any developed natural ability. The question of the rewards (particularly of a financial kind) that people deserve for their developed abilities is a quite different issue. It relates to the relevance of various accomplishments (particularly in formal education) when people are being selected for a position, and to our system of salaries and other rewards. These are matters that significantly affect the practice of education in our society but they are extrinsic to it. The focus for reform should be in the political and other institutions directly concerned rather than the schools.

The objective we have been discussing (of encouraging all students to attain the highest quality of education of which they are capable) relates closely to two other values: those of self-fulfilment and social responsibility. Both values apply to all students at all levels of ability. It is important for the individual and society that those of limited ability should reach as close as possible to a desirable quality of general education. It is also important, not just for the individual but for the society as well, that gifted students should attain levels of excellence in their education.

The objective may have to be qualified in extreme circumstances. If the educational resources of a society were severely limited, it would be necessary to establish some priorities. Justice would require that special attention should first go to those who have difficulties in reaching the minimal level of formal education that is needed for the quality of individual and common life in the society. The next priority would be to bring the majority of students to the level that would generally be regarded as desirable. Also, the social benefits of extending the educational achievement of the most able should not be underestimated in calculating priorities for the use of resources. If, for example, a government decided to severely cut funds for higher education, everyone in the society would suffer as a consequence.

It is often claimed that attention to promoting the highest level of educational achievement relative to ability gives a distorted weight to competition over co-operation. In the first place, it should be noted that, while there can be destructive forms of competition, all serious activities of life (from science to poetry to sport) are enhanced through constructive competition. Secondly, if the competition is constructive, it will be compatible with a substantial degree of co-operation. There are many occasions in a mixed-ability school when the brightest students can work co-operatively with the less able. The practice of very competent

students in a more senior year tutoring younger students who need assistance is an obvious example.

Finally, to return to the value of equality, there is a very important way in which it applies to everyone's education while being compatible with differences among individuals in the process and outcomes of schooling. It is the view that, if we take seriously the equal claim of every person to adequate development as a human being, there is a common curriculum of general education to which everyone should have access. I referred earlier to the broad characteristics of this common curriculum. They correspond to what Raymond Williams (*The Long Revolution*, 1973) distinguished as 'culture' in the sense of the process of human development according to ideals that have general human value. It is influenced by the cultural outlook of particular social classes and other groups, but is not in itself bound to any of them.

While the curriculum should be the same in its broad content and objectives, this does not imply that everyone should acquire it in the same way or to the same extent. In fact, in relation to the different levels of ability (and motivation) that we have noted, it is crucial that, within the contours of the common curriculum, students would be challenged in a realistic way to achieve their best. Just as we adjust the general criteria of human excellence to students at various stages of development, so there need to be variations in the details of curriculum content and criteria of attainment for different levels of ability at a given stage. When students of modest ability are recognized as achieving as well as they can, this need not to be confused with excellence. But to expect everyone to meet the same standards is bound to promote mediocrity or undermine the morale of the less able.

Equality as a value in education involves an equal claim by all students to whatever assistance they need in order to acquire the desired range and level of education in a curriculum whose general features are the same for everyone. Beyond this, the ideal of equality is not a decisive criterion. As we have seen, the satisfying of the claim itself requires quite unequal treatment in the process of education. And as to outcomes, it does not guarantee that everyone would reach the desired level, nor does it prevent anyone from going beyond it.

QUESTIONS

- What is the relationship between public criteria of educational excellence and attainment to the best of one's ability?
- Why is outstanding achievement in one or two subjects not sufficient for excellence as an educated person?
- What criteria should a school satisfy if it is to be regarded as educationally excellent?

- How can the objective of educational excellence be reconciled with the social ideal of equality?
- Is the objective of promoting individual excellence incompatible with a common curriculum?

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Parents and their Right to Educate



From the beginning of universal schooling in the last century the emphasis was on a common system that would reinforce national identity. The state-run systems, including those of Australia, were often subject to highly centralized control, and parents had little say in what went on in the name of education. For a long time the only significant issue of parental authority and choice in education was linked with religious freedom. The question was not only whether parents should be free to choose a school informed by a religious way of life, but whether they should be able to do so without financial penalty.

The present interest in the question of parents' rights over the education of their children is much more widely based. Choice is often related to moral, political and other values as well as those of religion; it often reflects differences over specifically educational issues (such as curriculum content, teaching methods, style of discipline, size of school). The question of choice is no longer simply between secular state schools and religious private schools. It includes choice among various kinds of non-religious private schools, and the need for choice within the state system itself.

During recent decades, there has been increasing diversity and flexibility within several countries in the provision of formal education (among both state and private schools) and in the allocation of public funds. Beneath the surface of these changes in policy and practice there is a labyrinth of complex questions about social and moral values as well as the nature of education.

- On what grounds do parents have a right to determine the kind of formal education their children should receive? (Some recent writers have even questioned whether parents within the home are justified in trying to induct their children into the values of a particular way of life.)
- Doesn't the cohesion of the society require the members of each new generation to participate in a common practice of schooling?
- If parents have freedom of choice in schooling (whether supported by public funds or not) doesn't this enable the more affluent to purchase a quality of education that undermines equal opportunity and gives their children unfair advantages in life?
- How does the authority claimed by parents in education relate to the rights of children and to the authority claimed by teachers, religious and other associations within the society, and the state itself?

- In relation to the last, how far should its authority extend over educational practice within a liberal democratic society?

I have attempted to deal with these and related questions in *Parents, the State and the Right to Educate* (1988). (Note the brief comments on the notion of a moral right at the beginning of the next essay.) In the present discussion, I shall first indicate why I believe parents are justified in shaping the general upbringing of their children and in making choices about the kind of formal education they receive. I shall then briefly consider some important constraints to which this parental freedom should be subject.

The general upbringing of children

Children depend on adults both for their physical wellbeing and social and cultural development. We start life quite unable to decide for ourselves any ideal of a fully developed self. A relatively stable pattern of interests and personal ideals takes shape gradually over many years. Its particular characteristics depend to a large extent on the decisions and influence of adults. The question is why those who bring a child into existence should have the primary responsibility and right to direct its upbringing.

To avoid complications in responding to this question, I have in mind the usual conjugal family: a man and woman in the association of marriage and the children born of this relationship. There are several ingredients in justifying the special role of parents:

- Parents are likely to be more interested than anyone else in promoting their own children's welfare and development. There are usually strong bonds of affection between parents and children.
- The quality of the life of both parents and children is enhanced by the experience of a close and stable personal relationship, and the recognition of their place in a succession of generations linked through birth.
- Responsibility for an action (in this case procreation and birth of new human life) should extend to the consequences that may reasonably be expected (the need of children for care and guidance over many years in coming to maturity).
- In most societies, including ours, marriage and the family consist of morally, as well as legally, defined relationships. The physical act of generation needs to be interpreted in this moral context.
- A distinct right of parents in the upbringing of their children is closely linked with the right to have children and the more general rights to privacy and intimate personal relationships. Among the most important of these are marriage and the personal community of a family.

Various aspects of parental influence are not controversial—for example, inducting children into the common language, the basic common moral beliefs and virtues,

the practices on which ordinary physical safety and healthy development depend. But do parents have the right to inculcate beliefs and practices that distinguish their own particular way of life? In relation to this question the social context I have in mind is that of a liberal democratic society, in which the plurality of ways of life is tolerated on the condition that each particular way of life respects certain values and practices on which depends the coherence of the inclusive society (and respect for cultural diversity itself).

Given important conditions to be noted later, the grounds on which the rights and responsibilities of parents are based require that they should be free to guide their children's upbringing according to the beliefs and standards the parents believe are appropriate, and to induct them into the significant features of the way of life which they themselves follow. In relation to diverse ways of life, children cannot be kept in a cultural vacuum until mature enough to choose for themselves. The values of any way of life are significant for children as well as adults, for the way they are reared, and for the quality—even possibility—of the family community. In any case, whatever adults are given responsibility for the upbringing of children, their influence on them will inevitably reflect the way of life to which the adults themselves belong.

Schooling and parental choice

Many people support the right of parents to inculcate a particular way of life within the family, provided the formal education of their children is conducted in a common school where only the values necessary for the life of the society as a whole are upheld. However, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for common schools to maintain strict neutrality in relation to the beliefs and values that are legitimately contested in a liberal pluralist society. Moreover, for at least some groups in our society, the question of whether certain beliefs and practices (religious, moral and so on) should form part of schooling does not simply refer to optional extras, but affects the very essence of what the education of the young is about. Quite apart from the values that distinguish a way of life, parents may radically disagree with the approach to curriculum, teaching and learning, discipline and so on in the local common school. If we take seriously the pluralist principle of respect for diversity in areas of belief where people may reasonably differ, it would seem that parents should be able to choose a school that reflects their ideas on the proper nature of formal education, or one that is more compatible with the values they are imparting to their children in the family.

As far as possible, the public system of formal education should itself accommodate diversity of choice on specifically educational issues. Where it is not possible, or where the grounds of choice relate to conflicting general values, parents in a liberal democracy should be free to choose an alternative school—and there should be no financial penalty attached to the choice.

This last point touches the very controversial issue of public funding for non-government schools. On this matter it must be recognized that the formal education of the young is crucially bound up with the range of fundamental values on which people in a society such as ours may justifiably differ. It is thus completely misleading to compare schooling to, say, transport. Consistency with the pluralist principle requires that if education in state schools is offered free of charge regardless of parents' income, a comparable per capita amount should be available for children whose parents choose a kind of education not available within the public system.

Constraints on parental authority

The exercise of parental authority in family education and the choice of schooling are subject to a range of morally significant conditions.

First, parents should respect the moral status of their children and take account of their increasing capacity for self-direction as they develop to maturity. Although genetically and morally related to their parents and physically dependent on them, children are not their property. Parental authority should be exercised in a way that adjusts to their children's growing maturity. To be consistent with values central to a liberal democratic society, this means that it should progressively facilitate their development into reflective, rationally self-determining adults.

If this general condition is respected, adolescents themselves should take increasing responsibility for choice in education. It would be reasonable to expect that in the final two or three years of secondary schooling the choice should be largely their own, rather than their parents'.

Second, whatever kind of schooling parents choose for their children, it must respect the nature of educational values themselves and the welfare of the general society. Every school should develop the skills of literacy and numeracy and provide a broad introduction to the main areas of reflective culture. In this work—and in its general style or organization—it should respect the relevant criteria of critical rationality.

Every school should also encourage an understanding and appreciation of the evolving distinctive common culture of our society and a commitment to the moral values on which depend the necessary unity of the whole social order and respect for diverse ways of life within it. To defend the interests and good both of children and the society generally, the state may justifiably require any school to meet these conditions.

Third, freedom of choice among different types of schools and forms of education has inescapable consequences for various other social values. Social unity or integration is an obvious example. As I have already indicated, an accommodation has to be made between this value and the principle of pluralism in an area so crucial to it as education. (Even a single system of government schools would be far

from reflecting a random mix of socioeconomic groups.) There are various practical ways in which individual schools (government or private) can collaborate more closely without losing their identity.

A social value that has been the object of much concern is equality or, more specifically, equality of opportunity. If expensive schools do provide higher quality education, then those whose parents can afford to pay gain a clear advantage. The objection is usually not to the added benefit of such education as a constituent in the general quality of one's life, but to the positions of higher income or status to which it gives access.

In the debate on this complex issue there are several points that should be kept in mind: the question of educational choice involves government as well as private schools; a substantial proportion of the latter are not in the 'expensive' category; if wealthy parents were not free to choose expensive schools they would still provide educational advantages (private tutors etc.) for their children; if a per capita grant is withheld from those who attend expensive schools that do offer better quality education, the group who benefit is even more narrowly defined. The fundamental response to this concern for fairness is to examine equity in the distribution of incomes and the rates of income taxation within the society. In regard to education directly, the main objectives should be to improve the educational quality and range of genuine choice within government schools, and to provide supplementary funds for the disadvantaged (whether in government or private schools). But as long as there is no means test for children who attend a government school, it is a fair general principle that every child who attends an accredited private school should receive a reasonable approximation of the cost of his or her education in a government school. Affluent parents who send their children to a government school should not be in a privileged position.

QUESTIONS

- If parents can justifiably claim a right to direct the upbringing of their children, does it extend to the inculcation of a particular way of life to which the parents are committed (as distinct from the commonly shared beliefs and practices of the society)?
- What is the current government practice for the funding of students in non-government schools? On what grounds might it be justified (or criticized)?
- (Note the questions set out on pp. 134–5.)

Further reading

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- Strike, K. A. *Educational Policy and the Just Society*. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1982.
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(For information on government funding for private schools see recent numbers of *APC Review*—the national publication of the Australian Parents Council Incorporated.)

During the present century, the notion of a right has tended to become dominant in the language of moral debate. Before saying anything about the rights of children, we should therefore look briefly at what is involved in the virtually constant appeal to rights when there is a question of how some individual or group ought to be treated.

The obvious context for talking about rights is the legal one. Laws entitle people to act or be treated in certain ways, and the legislator applies sanctions when these entitlements are disregarded. The analogy between a moral (or human) right and a legal right is rather thin. But perhaps the point of regarding certain moral principles as rights is that they involve conditions that any civil authority should be expected to safeguard, even to the point of imposing sanctions.

The intense discussion of moral rights over the past few decades has made a number of features clearer.

- 1 A human right is a moral claim, grounded on certain human characteristics, that requires others to act or refrain from acting in a certain way.
- 2 These claims are generally divided into rights of liberty (restraining interference by others) and rights of welfare (requiring others to provide certain goods).
- 3 Human rights are possessed in virtue of an individual's status as a human being, not as the member of any particular group. They identify conditions for a worthwhile life that societies should ensure are enjoyed, as fully as possible, by all individuals.
- 4 Moral rights are one ground on which questions of how people should be treated are settled. They refer to the circumstances or goods of any worthwhile human life that depend largely on social arrangements. But appeals to a moral right are not necessarily decisive. A right claimed by one person often conflicts with that claimed by another; on some occasions, there may be other moral values that take precedence over a right. It needs to be emphasized that rights are moral claims on behalf of individuals considered abstractly. In the complex actual practice of moral decision making, we also have to take account of the particular conditions that may require us to treat one person differently from another. (The obligation of parents to care for their children turns on the values of close personal relationship as well as on a child's rights of welfare.)

Several movements of 'liberation', making extensive use of the notion of

rights, have flourished over the past two decades. Children have been the subject of one such movement. Its objectives and arguments are well-illustrated in John Holt's *Escape from Childhood* (1975), one work in the flood of writing on children's rights during that period. He offers good criticism of the over-intense, too concentrated relationship between parents and children that is fairly characteristic of the modern nuclear family. The walled garden can easily turn into a kind of prison. He wants children to have more contact with a wider circle of adults, and the period of childhood to be less extended. Unfortunately, in making his case he tends to go to the extreme of disman- tling any distinction between the moral and legal status of children and adults. He proposes that 'the rights, privileges, duties, responsibilities of adult citizens be made available to any young person, of whatever age, who wants to make use of them' (p. 15). Holt has difficulty sustaining this position. Even the quotation suggests a difference between children and adults (the latter do not have the option of accepting their duties etc.). Among the rights to which he gives particular attention is the freedom of children to choose their own guardian. Obviously, this would not even be a candidate in a list of rights for adults.

The tendency to prolong the dependent status of children and not to respect them as persons is not overcome by fostering a myth of the child as adult. It is an inescapable feature of our condition as human beings that we come to maturity through a relatively slow process. Even more important than the development of physical capacities is the gradual induction into the pattern of practices and meanings that make up a culture. Children may make reasonable choices from an early age on what concerns their immediate interest. But they only gradually gain the knowledge and experience on which to make sound judgments on what is in their long-term interest or what is for their good as individuals and members of a society. Non-interference in the way people live their lives is regarded as desirable on the general assumption that they have developed the capacity to make informed judgments about their interests. Interference by parents and other adults in the lives of children is justified because this capacity is not yet developed in children and will not do so without the appropriate intervention of adults.

The gradual nature of the process by which children reach maturity not only justifies the intervention of adults but also involves a fundamental moral constraint on how their authority is exercised. As well as taking account of individual differences, parents and other adults are obliged to adjust the extent of their authority to the broad stages of development from infancy to early childhood, middle childhood and adolescence. Justification for intervention becomes more demanding at each stage.

Children attain broadly adult maturity at somewhat different ages. There are also important cultural differences in what counts as being a mature human being. The ideal of rational self-determination, although itself open to various

interpretations, is fundamental in our liberal democratic tradition and should be one of the objectives that guide the diminishing exercise of parental authority. Although the setting of an age at which people are regarded as having attained the legal status of adults is, to some degree, arbitrary, it has the practical advantage of establishing a clear limit beyond which the onus of justifying paternalist treatment is fully on those who seem to continue with it. In our society the age of eighteen seems to be a fairly reasonable dividing line.

Children belong to their parents in the sense that they are related genetically and morally, and are also dependent. However, neither legally nor morally are they the property of their parents. In addition to the moral condition that parents should gradually adapt their authority to the growing maturity of their children, there are the general moral claims (or rights) that children possess as human beings. The age at which a child becomes the bearer of such moral rights is a deeply disputed issue in our society. As our concern is with education, we can limit our reference to children who are beyond the pre-natal stage. There is now virtually unanimous agreement that from the time of birth an infant possesses whatever human rights can be intelligibly or justifiably applied to an immature human being.

The obligation to take account of the wellbeing of others does not depend on their having corresponding rights (this is obvious in regard to the treatment of animals). However, in the sense already discussed, the notion of a human right has become associated with the provision of certain goods for human beings and certain ways of treating them. The basic goods on which any worthwhile life depends (such as food, shelter, health care, affection, education, a sense of self-respect) have been identified as welfare rights that are owing to human beings. Obviously, there are no conditions to be satisfied for their actual possession. In fact, given the dependence of children, regard for their welfare rights is crucial.

Rights of liberty demand respect for others as independent, self-conscious agents directing their own lives. Children come into the actual possession (or, at least, full use) of these rights only when they can reasonably be assumed to have a sense of their long-term interests and the standards of individual and social good. However, as we have already seen, satisfying the conditions for the rights of liberty is a gradual process and thus these rights place on parents and other adults the responsibility of progressively adjusting their authority in order to encourage the increasing capacity of children and adolescents to direct their own lives. Even young children should not be prevented from pursuing their immediate interests as long as these are consistent with achieving basic human goods and with what may reasonably be estimated as their long-term interests.

In regard to education, it is useful to distinguish between general upbringing (which occurs mainly in the family and for which parents are directly responsible) and formal education (associated with the institution of the school and usually conducted by professional teachers).

Although there has been some argument about the justifiable scope of parental influence in general upbringing, I believe a sound case can be made for the right of parents to induct their children into the beliefs and practices of the particular way of life to which the parents are committed. (The main reasons are set out in the previous essay.) If this were not so, family life would hardly be possible. However, the rights of children and other moral values impose important conditions on the broad educational role of parents. The following deserve special notice:

- The values of a particular way of life must include and be consistent with the essential social moral values (such as truth telling, fairness, concern to avoid injury to others) and, in a pluralist society like Australia, a commitment to tolerance and non-violent persuasion.
- The particular way of life must not prevent children from achieving the range of basic human good (i.e. those that any rational person may be expected to desire).
- The process of induction should be done in such a way that parents progressively encourage their children to think and act independently both within and about the way of life to which the parents are committed.

Formal education or schooling is explicitly recognized in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) as a right of children. Article 26 notes that it should be compulsory for the period of primary schooling and should be provided free of charge for at least that stage. The same article recognized that 'parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children'. The same points are reaffirmed in the United Nations' Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959), Principle 7.

In our society the general right to formal education could reasonably be interpreted as requiring an adequate opportunity for about ten years of schooling (or equivalent). The right is not satisfied unless the content of schooling is organized in a systematic and cumulative way and provides a thorough introduction to the main forms of meaning through which our relationship to the physical world and to one another as individuals and members of society are explained, interpreted and expressed. These forms of meaning should certainly include language and mathematics, the physical sciences, literature and the arts, history and geography, the scheme of essential social moral values. In a number of these contexts, young people should also gain understanding of the major diverse ideals of a worthwhile human life.

Obviously, there is intrinsic value in being able to appreciate the meanings that inform the large domains of social and cultural practice. But education also contributes generally to welfare rights and the rights of liberty. In relation to the first, full access to the goods to which these rights refer usually depends in our society on a substantial formal education. In relation to the second, a thorough and broad introduction to the patterns of meaning that constitute a culture enables us to make much more informed choices about the direction of our lives.

Learning Pays?

On the right to choose a particular form of school, I think it is fairly clear that during the years of primary schooling parents should have the determining voice. Children are not yet in a position to make reflective choices for themselves. Moreover, it is very desirable that there should be consistency between the values and practices of the school and the family during these years. At the secondary level, the issue is not so clear. As students progress through secondary schooling, the case for making their own educational choices becomes stronger. Certainly, beyond Year 10 there are good grounds for supporting their freedom to choose the kind of schooling they prefer—or some other activity. Our society needs to develop a variety of worthwhile options in education, employment and community service for people at this age. In regard to education, it would be desirable to have some common senior secondary schools whose style and educational objectives were closer to those of tertiary institutions than to the earlier years of secondary schooling.

QUESTIONS

- How does a moral right differ from other rules or ideals of moral conduct?
- What is the main justification for the exercise of authority by adults over children?
- To what extent are John Holt's arguments against any distinction in the moral status of children and adults defensible?
- How much choice should children and adolescents have in relation to formal education ((a) to attend school or not, (b) to attend a particular school, (c) to take one program of study rather than another)?

Further reading

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One of the major projects recently sponsored by the British Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) is on the theme of 'a learning society'. The first stage of the project is concerned with retention rates in formal education beyond the end of compulsory schooling and how they can be increased. An interim report by Sir Christopher Ball, the director of the group working on this topic, was published in April 1991. Entitled 'Learning Pays', its content prompts some basic questions about that claim.

These questions are closely related to the heavy emphasis that recent public policy for education in Australia has placed on the role of educational institutions as instruments of economic prosperity. It is claimed that this benefit of extended schooling comes both to the individual and to the society. The Commonwealth Government's Green Paper on higher education (1987) expressed this instrumental view very clearly in its opening pages. In the light of some criticism, the White Paper that followed (July 1988) qualified the preoccupation with economic outcomes by acknowledging more general cultural and social objectives. But the economic 'argument' clearly remained dominant. It is also one of the major influences in the push for high retention rates to the end of Year 12. Given these assumptions, it is hardly surprising that the hope of a more financially rewarding occupation motivates many students to extend their schooling and seek to acquire the related credentials. Studies have shown that this is the primary motive for a substantial majority of those who engage in university courses. The economic instrumental view of education is well illustrated in the defence of the Classics made recently by an academic teaching in Classics at a leading Australian university. The defence is almost wholly in terms of the development of general analytical and critical skills that are now valued by many employers.

It should be emphasized that there is nothing new about regarding education as mainly a servant of economic interests. In the systems of universal public schooling developed in the last century, the preparation of people for jobs in the growing industrial economies was regarded as one of the major objectives. Some placed collective economic benefit over individual gain. But both aspects were influential in the growth of schooling. By the 1960s they had been closely linked in theories about the development of 'human capital' and the role of education in this process. What has been occurring in recent public policy for education in Australia simply reflects a more thoroughgoing commitment to these theories.

The report to which I referred at the start is advocating a process of learning throughout life. It distinguishes three overlapping phases: 'foundation' (to age 16) in which the habits of learning are established; 'formation' (14-21) whose main objective should be readiness for the workplace; 'continuation' (from 18 on) which is mainly a process of self-learning in the context of employment. In relation to the postcompulsory years of formal education, the report believes that everyone should be engaged full-time or part-time until at least the age of eighteen.

Before commenting critically on the 'human capital' theory, which this report so vigorously endorses, I should note that it also makes a number of very sound points. For example, it questions the desirability of trying to encourage everyone to follow a full-time program of formal education immediately following compulsory schooling (a key policy that shaped the Victorian Certificate of Education). What the report proposes is a variety of options, including separate institutions open to students of all ages. The report also puts emphasis on encouraging students at all levels of ability to succeed as well as they can by such measures as flexible programs that allow students to proceed at a pace accommodated to their capacities, and supplementary work based on sound diagnostic tests.

Like the White Paper on higher education, the report does not deny that 'learning pays' by serving various intangible cultural and social ends. But like the White Paper and various other recent policy documents in Australia, the report is preoccupied, not to say obsessed, with the capacity of a raised level of learning to pay, literally, in increased national wealth and higher individual incomes. The author acknowledges that it is difficult to provide conclusive evidence for this connection between education and economic prosperity. He thinks the problem is similar to questions about the relationship between exercise or non-smoking and health. In these cases, despite some counter-evidence, the causal relationship is virtually evident. So, with education and economic prosperity, although the author concedes that the effects are long-term, he has no doubt that there is a direct causal link. Although the report claims to draw the conclusion that learning pays in this literal sense, it does no more than reaffirm an assumption or act of faith.

The main doctrines of 'human capital' theory can be expressed in the following summary form:

- 1 The higher the level of education in a society generally (measured by the relative number who complete secondary schooling and gain degrees and diplomas of higher education), the richer the society is likely to be.
- 2 The better educated an individual is—i.e. the more years spent in the educational system—the better his or her income is likely to be.
- 3 This difference in income is justified because better educated people are more productive in the economy (both directly on the job and indirectly through such factors as health).

4 As more people attain higher levels of formal education, the economy generates an adequate number of appropriate jobs.

5 As the general level of formal education in the society rises, inequality in the range of incomes tends to be reduced.

The beliefs that underlie these assumptions are seriously misleading; they distort the role of education in human life and, specifically, its relationship to work. While the vitality of a technological economy requires a certain proportion of the population to be in possession of particular kinds of knowledge and skills to a relatively high level, the close link between extended formal education and economic benefits has been exaggerated by various myths. There is no sound evidence that productivity and wealth in a national economy increase as a consequence of extending the general level of education for several years beyond basic schooling. The health of an economy depends more fundamentally on other factors. Increased expenditure on formal education is an effect rather than a cause of economic prosperity. Given basic schooling, the skills needed for a job are in most cases acquired through experience in the workplace.

The close relationship between level of education and income is, to a large extent, artificially induced by the credentialling process. For various reasons, most of which are not directly related to the efficient performance of a job, scholastic attainment is a useful screening device in the allocation of positions. However, as the relative number of people who acquire more advanced educational credentials increases, the power of these credentials to deliver the prized positions declines; there has been a continual inflation in the scholastic level that occupations set as a condition for entry. Over the past decade or so, the average income of tertiary graduates in Australia has decreased from 50 per cent to 25 per cent above the general average.

In relation to equality of opportunity, while schooling does contribute to upward socio-economic mobility, it is only one of a complex set of factors, and its effectiveness is dependent on other conditions. As James Coleman and many others have amply shown, family environment exercises a crucial influence on school performance. But, in any case, something like 70 per cent of variance in individual earnings is a consequence of unknown factors. For the ideal of a more equitable distribution of wealth, the evidence suggests that increased participation in formal education by lower socioeconomic groups does not improve their proportion of income. Over several decades in the United States, those whose income is in the lowest fifth have increased their percentage of total years of schooling, but their share of total income has actually declined. The growth of education has been greater than the growth of productivity.

The emphasis on education as an agent of the economy exaggerates the capacity of educational institutions to respond effectively to rapidly changing social and economic conditions, and the capacity of the planners to make accurate long-term

predictions about workforce needs. A study in the United States in the early 1980s predicted that by the end of the decade the most pressing need would be for highly skilled computer operators. In fact, the biggest demand was for room cleaners, janitors and so on in response to the growing tourist industry.

The preoccupation with economic benefits from education also produces a severe distortion in the perception of the objectives that the process of education serves. Apart from important social and political roles for which people may be prepared through education, what becomes completely obscured are the values of education that are not strictly instrumental to any extrinsic end but are constituents in the quality of a worthwhile human life.

To support my general questioning of how well learning pays in the literal sense, I draw attention to an article by L. R. Maglen (*The Economic Review*, 1990). Here, the evidence for the 'human capital' theory has been thoroughly reviewed and assessed. The article points to the oversimplified methods of comparison that have been used (especially when making large-scale comparisons, as between countries with very different social structures, cultural values, educational programs, natural resources and so on). Serious doubts are raised about the use of average earnings as the indicator of productivity.

As the article notes, if the simple relationship between increase in level of schooling and economic growth is taken at face value, it often contradicts the 'human capital' theory. For example, in Australia between 1969 and 1986 the proportion of the workforce with postsecondary qualifications increased from 24.6 per cent to 51.5 per cent while those with a first degree or better went from 3 per cent to 11 per cent. Yet, in the same period, economic growth declined. Over the past three decades, the United States was clearly ahead of Australia, Japan, West Germany and Great Britain on measures of educational levels, yet its productivity growth was the lowest among these countries. West Germany was easily the best economic performer, but its proportion of graduates and postgraduates was much lower than that of the United States or Australia.

The article illustrates just how uncritical the assumptions in this area can be by referring to the Green Paper on higher education: the latter noted participation and graduate rates in education for several OECD countries but did not bother (or think it necessary) to give any comparable economic indicators.

In relation to the income of individuals, the article points out the difficulty of identifying homogeneous groups in the work force, of measuring productivity in the occupations that people with higher levels of schooling generally enter, of identifying the influence that specific on-job training has on productivity. Moreover, there are workplace practices that systematically obstruct the reward of workers on the basis of productivity. The article endorses Martin Carnoy's view that people with more schooling receive, on average, higher incomes compared to those with less schooling largely because the goods the former produce are by definition regarded as being worth more.

In summary, Maglen notes that, when comparisons between education and economic growth are made on the large scale, the evidence of a connection is 'particularly weak'; at the level of individuals and productivity it is 'fragmentary and inconclusive'. The positive conclusions that can be drawn with some confidence are that years of formal education (within fairly modest limits) relate to the ease with which workers adapt to the introduction of new technology, and that the quality of education in mathematics, science and languages, rather than the number of years at school, has important economic consequences. But rigorous studies also show that economic productivity depends more on the extent and thoroughness of on-the-job training than on the amount of schooling.

A curious feature of the report 'Learning Pays' is that, as I mentioned at the outset, it is part of a project grandly entitled 'a learning society'. It makes no reference to a book called *The Learning Society* by R. M. Hutchins (a distinguished American educational theorist), published in 1968. The whole object of this book is to argue that educational practice must shift away from a preoccupation with the development of a work force and concentrate its energies on enabling everyone 'to live wisely and agreeably and well' (words the author quotes from Keynes). This is particularly important, Hutchins argues, at a time when rapidly developing technology has increased the rate of change in society generally and the proportion of free time in relation to work. The former makes engagement in various kinds of lifelong education, for the quality of one's life, a necessity; the latter makes it possible for everyone.

A serious problem is that our culture has become so preoccupied with material production and consumption that it can hardly tolerate an educational practice which develops people capable of thinking and acting in critical, reflective and imaginative ways. Television, Hutchins notes, might have been a significant agent in supporting these objectives. Instead, it has largely become a key instrument for fuelling the consumer mentality and a way of distracting us from distraction by distraction (to adapt T. S. Eliot's words). One might expect, says Hutchins, that at least the universities would give a lead in shifting the emphasis away from a preoccupation with economic objectives in educational practice. Unfortunately, the ideal of intellectual communities has been seriously compromised by the model of a knowledge factory in the service of perceived national economic and social needs. (What Hutchins says of American universities applies as well to our own.) Hutchins' hope is that there are enough free minds in the society whose concerted effort will eventually change the dominant cultural values.

In the present context, the point I wish to stress is that, for Hutchins, a 'learning society' is one in which all people engage in education throughout their life, not primarily to enhance personal or collective wealth, but to live more fully as human beings.

To assert, as the report 'Learning Pays' does, that the benefits of education come mainly from its role as an agent of the economy grossly underestimates its

true value in human life. It is surely an irony that, in a period when advances in scientific technology have substantially reduced the proportion of time most people need to spend at a job (and when the years in retirement are expanding), there should be such preoccupation with the economic uses of schooling.

At the time of writing these comments I noted two news items which related closely to the argument. The first was a reference to the fact that the former Soviet Union, despite its appalling economy, had one-third of the world's doctorates in science and engineering. This information was not included in Mr Dawkins' papers on making higher education the instrument of economic prosperity in Australia. The second was the comment on television news by several students who had passed Year 12 (or equivalent) but were unlikely to gain entry to a university. It was to the effect that their extra years at school had therefore been a waste of time.

QUESTIONS

- To what extent can a general education be justified by appealing to its utility in the preparation of a competent work force?
- What are the main points made by Maglen (see Further reading) against the 'human capital' theory?
- If learning does not pay (in the literal sense of giving access to a good-paying job), what is the point of spending twelve or more years engaged in general education?

Note

- 1 M. Carnoy, 'Education and Economic Development: The First Generation', *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 25 (Special Supplement), January, 1977, pp. 428-48.

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Postsecondary Education: Trying to Find Our Way

Before 1988, tertiary education in Australia comprised a binary system of higher education along with colleges of technical and further education (TAFE). The universities and the colleges of advanced education (CAEs, formally established following the Martin report in 1965) made up the binary system. During 1988 the Commonwealth government adopted a scheme for higher education that, by various kinds of amalgamation, would produce a 'unified national system' with a smaller number of larger institutions, all of which would be called universities. While this scheme was to be voluntary, there would be a higher level of funding for those who joined and a reduced one for those who did not.

Although disappointing, it is hardly surprising that the academic administrators (and most academic staff) went along with the government's policy. The fever of amalgamating activity has not yet fully subsided, but the seventy-two higher education institutions of 1988 had, by the end of 1991, rearranged themselves into thirty-five universities. The recent 'disamalgamation' of the University of New England into two universities raises the present total to thirty-six.

The primary objective of the government's policy has been to make institutions of higher education more efficient instruments of the economy. They have been perceived mainly as producers of commodities (graduates and research) whose value is judged by their contribution to the national economy. They are not learning communities, but supermarkets in which students shop for credit. The arrangement of a smaller number of multicampus institutions and the sponsoring of a hierarchical managerial approach to university administration are seen as facilitating the central allocation of budgets, the shaping of national priorities for teaching and research, and the making and implementing of decisions within universities. Already, the collegial approach to decision making has been seriously compromised. Among universities, the formerly strong spirit of co-operation is being threatened by hard-nosed competition. Advertisements making outlandish claims to superiority have appeared in the media; bigness has become a key criterion of quality.

In addition to the dominant objectives of the recent government policy on higher education, there are at least two other aspects of its formulation that deserve

The Finn review

It is somewhat ironic that the Australian Education Council (comprising the Federal, State, and Territory ministers of education) set up a working party to examine links between postcompulsory schooling and TAFE in October 1988—three months after the government policy on higher education has been announced. Following this working party's report, a committee (chaired by T. B. Finn) was formed at the end of 1990 with the task of examining the future development of postcompulsory education and training for young people in Australia. What is usually referred to as the 'Finn review' was published in July 1991. It has been the subject of much discussion and seems to have spawned a multitude of related committees and reports (see next essay). I shall refer here to a few of its key features.

- 1 The review points out, correctly I believe, that the activities of TAFE are at present too diffuse; its primary role should be unequivocally identified as the provision of 'high quality entry-level and advanced training relevant to the needs and standards of industry' (p.128).
- 2 The review also makes sound proposals for a variety of what it calls 'pathways' of education and training after Year 10. It emphasizes the need to accommodate an increasingly diverse range of abilities, interests and objectives among students at this stage. The content of the curriculum should offer varying mixtures of general and vocational education appropriate to different groups, and procedures should allow for a range of learning styles. Judged by these criteria, the VCE (now fully implemented at Years 11 and 12) seems somewhat inflexible. It does not include all the 'pathways' mentioned by the review; the scope for a mixture of vocational and general education is relatively limited; in every study the learning procedures are based on a series of 'work requirements'.
- 3 It is claimed in the review that the needs of both individuals and industry are leading to a 'convergence' of general and vocational education. A consequence is that the senior secondary school curriculum should move towards a more broadly vocational education while TAFE courses should give more emphasis to general competencies. The review does not discuss the nature of general and vocational education, and thus what it means by 'convergence' remains unclear. It seems to be defending a closer association between the two, rather than a breakdown of the differences. What does become clear is that the review is largely interested in general education because of the instrumental value it is believed to have for effective participation in the contemporary work force (see, for example, pp. 54–5).
- 4 The previous point is closely related to the identification by the review of what it calls 'key competencies' for employment that should be central in the

criticism. First, although the distinguishing characteristics of CAEs had, in practice, become somewhat confused, there seems to have been no reflection on what might have been an appropriate division of labour in higher education. There was no reference, for example, to the relation between theoretical knowledge and practical skills in higher education courses, or to the difference between doing applied research and using the results of research to solve a practical problem, or the distinctive characteristics of liberal and vocational education and various ways in which they can be connected. The binary system in higher education may well be arbitrary. What is needed is not an even more arbitrary unitary system but one that accommodates greater diversity in the forms and objectives of institutions at this level.

A second key deficiency in the planning was the effort to reorganize higher education without taking account of TAFE, the other postsecondary sector (and, one might add, without reference to the postcompulsory years of secondary education). Apart from other reasons, given that the identity of CAEs had become blurred, connections with colleges in a revised TAFE sector would have been a preferable alternative, in many cases, to being yoked to a university. Fortunately, a number of former CAEs have resisted this fate and, either alone or in combination, have emphasized their character as institutes of technology. (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology is the only one to follow the example of distinguished counterparts in several other countries in not using the title of 'university'.) In most cases, these institutes already have close ties with TAFE colleges or are developing them.

I do not wish to imply that everything in the 1988 policy for higher education, or what has followed in practice, is undesirable. Attention was justifiably drawn, for example, to the need for a more efficient co-ordination of external studies, a more liberal policy of credit transfer, an expansion of special entry schemes.

The need to consider all aspects of tertiary education in their connections with the postcompulsory years of secondary education has been heightened by the dramatic increase in the 'retention rate' to the end of Year 12. Between 1980 and 1990 it went from 30 per cent (of those enrolling in Year 7) to 60 per cent. Under the impetus of the recession, it rose in the next two years to about 80 per cent. The effect of this expansion, combined with the absence of other options in a time of recession, has led to a very substantial increase in the number of applicants relative to places available in higher education. Apart from the pragmatic objective of enrolling more school leavers in some form of tertiary education rather than unemployment, there is a growing recognition that many of those who apply to higher education institutions (whether successfully or not) are more fitted for, and interested in, vocational programs that concentrate on the relevant applied knowledge and skills. Hence, government interest in TAFE has recently reawakened.

postcompulsory education and training of all young people. Six areas of 'competency' are listed: language and communication, mathematics, scientific and technological understanding, cultural understanding, problem solving, personal and interpersonal knowledge and skills. The review suggests that several strands should be identified within each competency and that criteria of achievement should be worked out for each (ranging from minimally desirable to high). On any competency, a student is likely to have a profile of varying levels of achievement in the constituent strands. Although the review does not discuss the matter in any detail, it is evident that the adoption of this pattern would have profound effects on curriculum content, teaching and learning practices, and assessment throughout the full range of schooling (not simply the postcompulsory years). There is a specific recommendation that 'competency-based' approaches should also be used in the selection of university applicants (p. 108).

The review's suggestions about 'key competencies' have been developed by another committee (chaired by Eric Mayer). The recommendations of this committee are the subject of the next essay, 'Education as Skilling'.

The Finn review is more exploratory than definitive. The committees it generated have given somewhat more attention to working out the details. It will be interesting to see how the 'key competencies' approach can be fitted to the substantial changes in curriculum content and assessment at Years 11 and 12 made only recently in Victoria and some other states. What the review does illustrate well is the complexity of the interrelationships between the various levels and sectors of formal education (and the connections with industry in the occupational aspects). Although its recommendations are not beyond dispute, it has avoided the fundamental mistake of treating one sector of education as though it existed in a vacuum. As I mentioned earlier, this was one of the glaring defects in the commonwealth government's policy of 1988 for the radical reorganization of higher education.

Diversity in higher education

In October 1991 Peter Baldwin (then Minister for Higher Education and Employment Services) issued a policy statement entitled *Higher Education: Quality and Diversity in the 1990s*. The statement makes several references to the Finn review, particularly to the contribution of TAFE colleges and universities in meeting the demand for tertiary education, and a more systematic form of credit transfer between institutions in each sector. (The 'One Nation' statement issued in 1992 shortly after Paul Keating became Prime Minister gave high priority to funding for the expansion of TAFE. In this decision one cannot discount the political objective of gaining for the Commonwealth government direct control over

TAFE as well as higher education.) Peter Baldwin's statement also refers briefly to programs in which universities have established links with secondary schools. There are some concluding general comments on teaching and research that involve collaboration between higher education institutions and industry. Apart from these wider comments, the statement's attention to diversity and post-secondary education is contained within the university sector.

There is some irony in the claim that one of the main objectives of the unified national system (which rejected any distinction in the roles of universities and colleges and applied heavy incentives in order to achieve large-scale amalgamations of these institutions) was the promotion of diversity in higher education. However, the claim probably relates to the several respects in which the Minister's statement seems to soften the policy of 1988. In particular, special attention is drawn to the cultural and social purposes of higher education as well as the economic, and on a number of occasions it is claimed that the extent of control sought by the central government is quite modest.

On the first matter, it is, nonetheless, a fact that the priority areas (closely related to perceived economic needs) have received 60 per cent of the additional places while only 11 per cent have gone to arts, humanities and social sciences.

On the question of government control, it is misleading to suggest that the amalgamations were purely voluntary and that the unified national system leaves each institution free to shape its own destiny. As I mentioned earlier, the whole process was driven by the prospect of financial incentives or penalties depending on whether centrally prescribed conditions were satisfied. Whatever the present intentions of the government may be, we now have large multicampus universities in which centralized academic administrators (reflecting a top-down managerial model in contrast to a collegial pattern) have been firmly installed. The trend is evident in, for example, the proliferation of Deputy Vice-Chancellors.

The corporate model can hardly be avoided once universities are scattered over several campuses, are required to develop 'mission' statements and profiles, respond at short notice on decisions required by the government, provide 'management information systems for resource control and performance monitoring' (to quote from the policy statement, p. 31) and so on. Even when universities are acting on their own initiative the model now drives the structural changes. For example, La Trobe University at its main campus has moved from ten faculties to four 'megafaculties'. Decisions can be made much more efficiently when the central administration has to work with just a few Deans, who hold relatively long-term appointments. Whether the educational purposes of the university are better served by such arrangements is quite another matter.

Although there are important links between quality and diversity, I shall leave aside the discussion of the former in the policy statement and focus on its treatment of diversity. It is confident that the large amalgamated institutions have generated more diversity in higher education. In fact, within amalgamated

institutions the presence of uniform procedures for the approval of new subjects and programs is likely to reduce the diversity that was previously possible. Moreover, if we accept the government's own assumption in 1988 that there were no significant differences between universities and colleges, the merging of them can hardly produce more diversity in the system. Many institutions now have a wider variety of courses, but this should not be confused with greater desirable diversity in higher education as a whole. Despite all the upheaval, there is no more significant diversity in the system than before. We have not introduced, for example, any liberal arts colleges or institutes of graduate studies. At present, the most hopeful possibility is that several institutes of technology in our system may develop at university level.

Like the Finn review, the policy statement on higher education envisages a proliferation of committees and other more permanent groups (I noted seven of them). Most are more concerned with issues of quality than diversity. On the latter, in addition to matters to which I have already referred, the policy statement comments briefly on four developments.

- 1 It refers to the importance of increased opportunities for lifelong education and seems to suggest that the main institutions for this purpose should be those of higher education. A better case can be made for the primacy of TAFE colleges in this area (given a satisfactory system of credit transfer).
- 2 It is proposed that the content and structure of the undergraduate curriculum should be reviewed. I assume that the question of a well-designed general education as a background for later specialised studies will be given central attention. Referring to the Finn review, the policy statement on higher education also speaks vaguely about the 'convergence' of academic and vocational studies. The relationship is a complex one and needs to be carefully analysed. In relation to diversity, it should be kept in mind that the principles of a sound undergraduate liberal education can be realized in a variety of ways.
- 3 Emphasis is given to exploring the uses of advanced technology for distance education and for the combination of on-site and external studies. (I would disagree with the suggestion on p. 6 that a more general use of distance education materials could effectively replace 'conventional techniques like lectures'. The challenge here is to ensure that the quality of lectures is such that they fulfil their distinctive role, one for which course materials are no substitute.)
- 4 There is a sound proposal to the effect that higher education institutions should consider, either individually or in collaboration, the establishment of graduate schools.

What the Ministerial statement says about diversity shows some awareness of the wider educational contexts within which institutions of higher education are placed. Although the increased pressure towards uniformity brought on this sector by the unified national system is bravely denied, the statement does outline a few proposals that would do something to promote desirable diversity.

In the policies that shape formal education beyond the years of compulsory schooling we need to give much closer attention both to the kinds of institutions required in order to respond appropriately to the broad diversity of interests, objectives, abilities in students, and to the ways in which these various sectors of education are related. Then, within the general principles that guide and distinguish each sector, the individual institutions should be free and encouraged to define their own identity. In such conditions of diversity, we have the best chance of meeting individual and social needs while achieving high levels of educational quality.

QUESTIONS

- What desirable educational alternatives might be offered to adolescents following the end of compulsory schooling?
- Should the postcompulsory years of secondary schooling be mainly an extension of general (or liberal) education or a preparation for work and various forms of tertiary education? If there should be options, can they be adequately provided for in secondary schools?
- What variety of programs should there be at the tertiary level? What differences, if any, are needed in the kinds of institutions at this level?

Further reading

Australian Education Council Review Committee. *Young People's Participation in Post-Compulsory Education*. Canberra: AGPS, 1991 (Finn Report).

Crittenden, B. (ed.). *Confusion Worse Confounded: Australian Education in the 1990s*. Canberra: Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, 1995.

D'Cruz, J.V. & Langford, P.E. (eds). *Issues in Australian Education*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1990.

Employment and Skills Formation Council. *The Australian Vocational Certificate Training System*. Canberra: NBEET, 1992 (Carmichael Report).

Higher Education: A Policy Statement. White Paper circulated by the Hon. J. S. Dawkins, MP. Canberra: AGPS, 1988.

Higher Education: Quality and Diversity in the 1990s. Policy statement by the Hon. Peter Baldwin, MP. Canberra: AGPS, 1991.

Taskforce on Pathways in Education and Training. Report. Melbourne: Department of School Education—Ministry of Employment, Post-Secondary Education and Training, Victoria, 1992 (Deveson Report).



An interesting feature of recent public reports has been their tendency to beget offspring. The Finn report (July 1991), which brought the assessment of performance outcomes back to centre stage in educational debate, gave birth to the Mayer committee. The latter has been busily engaged in developing this aspect of the Finn report. Another offspring, the Deveson report (April 1992), explored in more detail the suggestion for alternative 'pathways' of education and training after Year 10 (in effect, the end of compulsory schooling).

Meanwhile, these and other themes were worked over in a report of the Employment and Skills Formation Council. Laurie Carmichael led the group that produced this report, published in March 1992. As he was on the committees that were responsible for the other two reports and was also a member of the Mayer committee, the document that goes under his name can be regarded as at least a first cousin of the family.

Competencies proposed by Finn report

In what follows, my comments will focus on the Mayer committee's interpretation and intended use of what the Finn report refers to as 'employment-related key competencies'. What the latter proposed was that formal education should develop a range of very broad, transferable skills (and related knowledge content). These skills would form the main objectives of schooling (particularly in Years 11–12 or equivalent); they were regarded as being consistent with variations in the details of the curriculum and with diverse institutional arrangements. The choice of the broad areas of competency was driven by an estimate of what foundation skills were needed by the work force in an economy subject to rapidly changing scientific technology. The competencies proposed were labelled: language and communication; using mathematics; scientific and technological understanding; cultural understanding; problem solving; personal and interpersonal. Each contained several dimensions, and included a mixture of knowledge content and skills.

On the surface, this is a very expansive list. Even ethics gets a mention under the final item. Languages other than English seem to be the only notable omission (and the report suggested that they might form a separate competency). However, there are some characteristics that make the list narrower than it seems. In every case, what the competency includes is determined by the criterion of being

'employment related'. 'Cultural understanding', for example, is thus much more limited than the term suggests. It includes nothing from such areas as art, music, and literature. A second important restricting feature is the preoccupation with processes (or know-how) to the relative neglect of significant knowledge content. This is particularly clear in the identification of problem solving as a distinct competency. It seems to be assumed that we can learn a set of problem-solving skills which apply regardless of the kind of problem we face. Apart from differences in procedure that vary from one kind of problem to another, even our perception of something as being a problem depends largely on our knowledge content. (See the essay 'Educational Excellence and Equality' at the beginning of Part 3.)

Competencies as interpreted by the Mayer committee

The Mayer committee, in developing the general proposals on key competencies in the Finn report, has tried to offset the tendency to regard them as merely composites of precisely measurable units of behaviour. It emphasizes that 'performance is underpinned not only by skill but also by knowledge and understanding', and that the competencies include the capacity to transfer knowledge and skills to new situations. The competencies are said to be 'employment-related' only in the sense that, being generic, they apply to participation in work along with many other aspects of human life. It is also acknowledged that the key competencies do not encompass all the important outcomes of a general education.

The group of students on whom the committee has focused comprises fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds engaged in postcompulsory secondary schooling or other forms of education and training. The committee has modified the Finn report's account of key competencies by emphasizing the capacity to apply, in an integrated way, several areas (or 'strands') of knowledge and skills that relate to the broad range of work activities. The 'key competency strands' proposed by the Mayer committee are: collecting, analysing and organizing ideas and information; expressing ideas and information; planning and organizing activities; working with others in a team; using mathematical ideas and techniques; solving problems; using technology (see Appendix 2). The committee emphasizes that the strands describe a set of learning outcomes, not a curriculum. They presuppose a program in which students acquire the knowledge, skills and understanding that in the various strands are drawn together and applied in the workplace. The strands themselves overlap and several or all may be involved in a given work activity.

It is proposed that there would be assessment at three levels of performance in each of the competency strands. Level 1 (the lowest) is to correspond to the National Training Board's criteria for competence in a routine job. The Mayer

committee anticipates that by the end of Year 12 (or equivalent) most students will have reached the highest level (level 3) on some, if not all, of the key competency strands. This level requires the exercise of initiative, judgment, ingenuity. Students may seek several assessments in the course of their studies.

Unlike the key competencies listed in the Finn report, those of the Mayer committee are relatively well disentangled from the content of the curriculum (expressed as disciplines or areas of study). Ironically, however, this move tends to exacerbate the difficulties that a 'competency' approach to education faces. Before drawing attention to a number of such difficulties, I shall refer briefly to the potentially horrendous program of assessment, especially for senior secondary schools, that is likely to follow from the Mayer committee's approach.

Assessment overload

In addition to the assessment of learning in the areas of the curriculum—such as the studies designed for the VCE—teachers and students would have to cope with the assessment of levels of performance in tasks related to the six key competency strands. As noted, these may be repeated on several occasions at the student's request. The examples given by the Mayer committee all require a practical task to be carried out in a work-related context. For level 1 performance (a repetitive skill), a single occasion may be sufficient. But for level 3 (where initiative and adaptability must be shown), at least several different work situations would be required. It is difficult to envisage how a senior secondary school, following anything like a normal VCE program, could provide an adequate range of work-related experiences as a basis for the assessment proposed by the Mayer committee.

A crucial problem here is, of course, the relationship between the curriculum and the key competency strands, which the committee rather naively insists simply describe learning outcomes. If the competency strands did hold this relationship to the curriculum, the assessment of performance in the latter would be adequate. But, while the key competencies may draw on a program of, say, VCE studies, they require the latter to be substantially supplemented or redesigned. If the performance criteria set out for each competency strand are to be met, they will inevitably have a determining influence on the content and methods of teaching.

Another dimension of the above problem is the attempt to identify key competencies (or a set of learning outcomes) that are supposed to apply across a variety of institutional forms serving different educational objectives (Years 11–12 of secondary schooling, full-time technical education and training, part-time formal education and work, systematic training provided by an employing agency etc.).

General critical comments

There are more general difficulties with the current policy of identifying a range of learning outcomes (predominantly skills), especially when the basic criterion is the estimated needs of the workplace. Several of these difficulties are indicated in the following points:

- 1 To the extent that students are learning to perform a clearly specifiable task or to recall and apply information, the defining of such outcomes can work effectively in guiding the process and content of teaching and learning as well as the assessment of the outcome. However, the practice of education is crucially concerned with aspects of learning that involve the acquisition of systematic knowledge and methods of thought requiring initiative, flexibility, and even originality, in their application. The outcomes are often unpredictable. At the best, they can be stated in only very general terms. Some of the performance criteria for level 3 in each of the competency strands refer to learning of this kind. Inevitably, they include intangible aspects of performance that cannot be the direct object of a teaching–learning sequence, and whose assessment itself depends on complex skills of judgment.

The Mayer committee follows the Finn report in emphasizing that the key competency strands draw on related knowledge and understanding. However, the assessment procedure focuses wholly on observing the successful performance of practical tasks. For levels 1 and 2 nothing can be assumed about the extent of theoretical knowledge or understanding that is brought to the task. If assessment at level 3 were to involve an adequate range of diverse work-related situations, the performance could provide indirect evidence of theoretical knowledge and the capacity to use it intelligently. However, this is a very difficult condition for most secondary schools to satisfy.

Clearly, the setting of competency standards has a useful role in education and training. But to be effective for learning and its assessment, the outcomes and criteria of success need to be of a kind that can be fairly specifically described and measured. For this reason, they can capture only part of the objective of becoming a well-educated person (or even someone who is highly competent in a complex practical activity). This objective has no determinate upper limit; the possibilities are never exhausted.

- 2 Despite its recognition that significant content plays a crucial part in the competency strands, the Mayer committee describes them in a way that puts overwhelming emphasis on processes. The clearest example is the competency called 'solving problems'. What was said earlier about 'problem solving' in the Finn report's list applies here. No doubt, there are some very general procedures to be followed in the effort to resolve any kind of problem. But there are also significant differences in the details of procedure depending on the nature of the particular

problem. For example, a moral issue cannot be resolved in the same way as a technical problem in the construction of a bridge. In all cases, the appropriate procedures are closely related to our knowledge of the area. Moreover, the extent of this knowledge or understanding is crucial, in many circumstances, for recognizing the existence of a problem. The various recent lists of competencies highlight the solving of obvious problems but neglect the detection of covert ones.

Despite the general priority given to skills over content, it is curious that none of these lists includes logical reasoning. There is a set of rules for deductive and inductive reasoning that apply regardless of the particular content. Although evidently not sufficient, the ability to apply these rules is a necessary condition for any rationally informed activity.

3 Even when the danger of ignoring significant content is avoided, the employment-related focus of the competency strands encourages a predominantly instrumental valuing of the related knowledge and understanding. At its extreme, students would study literary texts, for example, in order to sharpen their skills in close reading, textual analysis, the identification of key ideas and so on because such skills are useful in many work contexts. *Othello* or *Middlemarch*, for example, becomes a means in the development of these skills rather than an end to which we apply the skills in order to appreciate and understand the aesthetic, moral and other values that these literary works, in their distinctive ways, embody.

4 The Mayer committee and the reports to which I have referred speak vaguely of a 'convergence' between general and vocational education. They underplay the complexity of this relationship and the diverse forms it can take. The central issue of the link between knowledge about a practical activity (how it is to be explained, interpreted, evaluated etc.) and knowing how to engage effectively in the activity itself has been the subject of continual debate in the history of Western thought from at least the time of Aristotle.

5 The competency strands have been identified as significant learning outcomes to be systematically assessed because of their claimed relevance to the characteristics of work in our society. The Mayer committee does not offer any detailed justification based on an analysis of the types and levels of workplace skills that our economy requires. One could argue that the competency strands, in their broad description, would obviously be useful bases for most kinds of work. At this level, the list could reasonably be extended (e.g. 'working independently', 'being adaptable'). It might also include a range of work-related attitudes. But if we take the more detailed criteria seriously, particularly the innovative activities expected at level 3, it is by no means clear that an economy in the age of ever-expanding scientific technology does need most of its nineteen-year-olds to be proficient in the proposed competency strands at a relatively sophisticated level.

Advances in technology have certainly led to a need for fewer employees in manufacturing industries to produce larger quantities of goods. For those

employed in these industries, it is likely that conditions of high technology leave the majority with work of a largely routine kind. The 'information industry' has been an expanding one. But, again, it would be necessary to demonstrate the extent of the demand for non-routine work. As I noted in the earlier essay 'Learning Pays', an American study in the early 1980s predicted that by the end of the decade the greatest need would be for people with advanced computer skills. In fact, it was for janitors, room cleaners and the like in response to a boom in the tourist trade. A recent United States study confirms that it is still an area of high demand. 'Guards' have been added to the list in the later study—perhaps an ominous sign of our times. Even if there were a substantial shift from manual services to so-called 'brain work' over the next decade, how much of the latter would require more than routine performance? The point I wish to stress is that we cannot simply assume that the nature of work in a contemporary industrial society requires virtually everyone to be able to exercise a broad range of generic skills at a level that displays initiative, independent judgment, creativity and so on.

6 When the Mayer committee's proposals are taken with those of its cousin document, the Carmichael report, we have the blueprint for what could be a set of very inflexible learning outcomes and standards, under the control of a central bureaucracy, imposed on all levels of education and training in all institutional forms throughout Australia. The Carmichael report refers to the six generic skills addressed by the Mayer committee as underpinning an eight-level Australian Standards Framework. The Mayer committee itself speaks of the possible use of its competency strands for selection to higher education. (Given the expectation that nearly everyone will reach level 3 by the end of Year 12 or equivalent, it is difficult to see how reference to performance in the competency strands could be of much help in selecting among applicants.)

Whatever their intentions, uniformity and centralized control are inevitable in the kind of scheme that the Mayer committee and Carmichael report envisage. Without these conditions, there would be no chance of achieving the objective of valid and consistent assessment of the designated competencies throughout Australia. Apart from the constraints placed on desirable diversity in education and training, there is the risk that haunts any highly centralized scheme: the mistakes it makes infect the practice everywhere in the society.

QUESTIONS

- How far can we go in teaching skills detached from any significant knowledge content?
- Given the criteria used by the Mayer committee, what other 'key competencies' might have been included in its list?

- How does the emphasis on key competencies compare with Ralph Tyler's approach (see Further reading) to curriculum design through desired learning outcomes?
- What position does Elliot Eisner (see below) take on the nature and role of objectives in educational practice?

Further reading

- Committee on Key Competencies (Eric Mayer, Chair) *Putting General Education to Work: The Key Competencies Report*, 1992.
- Beare, H. & Millikan, R. *Skilling the Australian Community: Futures for Public Education*. Melbourne: Commission for the Future, 1988.
- Collins, C. (ed.) *Curriculum Stocktaking: Evaluating School Curriculum Change*. Canberra: Australian College of Education, 1995.
- Crittenden, B. (ed.) *Confusion Worse Confounded: Australian Education in the 1990s*. Canberra: Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, 1995.
- Eisner, E.W. *The Educational Imagination*. New York: Macmillan, 1979, esp. Ch. 6.
- Tyler, R.W. *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949 (30th Impression 1970).
- For reference to the other recent reports mentioned in this essay, see the further reading list for the essay 'Postsecondary Education: Trying to Find Our Way', p. 157.

Educating the Educators

From the time of Plato various writers have reflected on the question: who shall educate the educators? Commenting on the materialist doctrine that humans are the products of circumstance and upbringing, Karl Marx, in the third of his 'Theses on Feuerbach', noted that it is humans who change the circumstances, 'and the educators themselves need educating'. The question of teacher education has recently been placed again on the public agenda in Australia. In part at least, it is a return to the perennial concern about the quality of teachers' own education and how it can best be enhanced.

There are, it should be noted, a number of other issues prompting the question. One is the desire of the Commonwealth government to promote common arrangements among the states for teacher registration, interstate transfer, professional education, career levels and related salaries. Another issue reflects the current enthusiasm for 'work-related key competencies'. (These have been discussed in the previous two essays.) It is being argued that in the school workplace, as anywhere else, the quality of the product—the learning outcomes for students—will be improved if we have a clear statement of teacher competencies and the standard at which they are expected to be performed. Of course, a set of competency-based standards accepted throughout Australia would also serve the objective of common national practices in education. Another related topic is the proposal that there should be a national professional body for teachers.

The debate on teacher education is being encouraged by the Department of Employment, Education and Training (which issued a discussion paper in August 1992) and the National Board of Employment, Education and Training, a statutory body that provides independent advice to the Minister. One of the Board's Councils, the Schools Council, established in February 1991 what is called the National Project on the Quality of Teaching and Learning (NPQTL). The latter organized a conference in March 1992 on 'options for a national framework for teachers' qualifications and professional standards'. Among its topics, the conference discussed the role of a national professional body and the matter of competency-based standards. In December, the Project issued a report containing recommendations on broad teacher competencies and the appropriate standards (see Appendix 3).

The discussion paper of August 1992 assumes that teacher education will continue to be conducted through universities. However, it places so much emphasis

on the practical skills that the logic of its position seems to favour some form of on-the-job apprenticeship. The paper endorses the view of the NPQTL conference referred to above that there should be a national professional body for teachers (to be called the National Teaching Council of Australia). One of its proposed tasks is 'to work collaboratively with teacher education institutions'. But, given that it is also to determine the work-related competencies and standards on which admission to the profession will depend, it is difficult to see how 'collaboration' would not become 'direction'.

Universities and teacher education

Good quality teacher education does depend on the co-operation of competent teachers in providing supervision and guidance for trainees as they gain direct experience in the context of a school. It could also benefit from advice from such a body as the proposed National Teaching Council. But the nature of education and its importance for society are such that the induction of new teachers should not be under the control of present practitioners. The proper use of techniques in teaching depends on a sound grasp of a substantial body of theoretical knowledge and skills relating to both the process of education and the school as a social institution. The practice is subject to a complex range of values and is in continual need of critical reflection and assessment. Teacher trainees need to acquire the related theory and learn to think critically about what schools are doing and should be doing. A training that simply fits new teachers for what schools are actually doing confirms the status quo and ensures that teachers are ill-equipped to question it.

The preceding paragraph contains the main reasons why universities should have the responsibility for teacher education, and why they need to maintain strong faculties of education. They require a staff who collectively have the knowledge and skills of a variety of disciplines—and sufficient experience of the practice—to study the processes of teaching and learning, the curriculum, and the institutions of formal education. This complex body of theory provides explanation, interpretation and critical evaluation of what is done in the name of education. It forms the context in which techniques of teaching, acquired through direct experience in schools, can be applied intelligently.

I mentioned above that effective teacher education depends on a partnership between university staff engaged in this work and experienced teachers in the schools. It is also very important that members of other faculties in a university should be involved. This occurs, of course, in the higher education programs that future teachers follow as undergraduates and on which they draw in their teaching of subjects in the school curriculum. There is plenty of scope for an indirect

contribution to the quality of school teaching if academics give close attention to developing a thorough understanding of the central concepts, theories and methods in the subjects that they teach. Too often the quality of teaching in schools is defective because the teachers themselves do not adequately understand the content that they teach. It would be highly desirable if academic staff in areas directly related to the school curriculum worked with colleagues in the education faculty to help teacher trainees remedy these deficiencies of understanding.

To reiterate what has been said, teacher education is, and should be, the primary responsibility of universities not because of any status it might confer on the profession but because of the nature of the educational role of schools. It is critically important for the quality of our culture and society (and, thus, for our individual lives), and it can be performed effectively only if the techniques of teaching—and the whole enterprise of schooling—are guided by an adequate theoretical understanding. As universities have the task of refining and transmitting to the fullest extent the systematic modes of knowledge that inform our culture, they are the fitting places both for the higher general education of future teachers and for their specialized education in the substantial body of theoretical knowledge and inquiry that enables them to understand and interpret the techniques they are acquiring and to apply them with critical judgment. If the 'competencies' needed by school teachers could be adequately acquired through experience on the job, there would certainly be no justification for teacher education programs in universities. (There might still be university departments that studied and taught about education, just as there are, for example, departments of politics.)

Competency-based standards and teacher education

How does the present push for competency-based teacher education relate to the role of universities in this field? It is possible and desirable to set out clearly the broad range of knowledge, skills and attitudes that teachers engaged in primary and secondary education should possess. 'A Charter for Teaching'¹ lists many of the required features (see Appendix 3). They are set out under the following headings: values and attitudes; approaches to content; methods of teaching; making teaching practice explicit. What is included is generally satisfactory. Within the framework, some additions could be made. For example, under the second heading there should be emphasis on adapting content to the differences in students' abilities and background knowledge. Under the fourth heading, the focus is on information to students; the audience should extend at least to other teachers in the school and to parents.

But there are some important matters that receive no mention at all in the Charter. Teachers should be expected to have some systematic knowledge (and accompanying skills of critical reflection) in at least the following areas:

- 1 The history of teaching-learning practice and the institution of the school.
- 2 The key models and theories that have influenced and are currently influencing approaches to methods of teaching and learning; the content and design of the curriculum as a whole; evaluation of student performance; organization of schools.
- 3 The major normative issues directly affecting the conduct of education (such as freedom and authority, the distinction between education and indoctrination).
- 4 The main social, political, economic and other questions relating to the wider context within which schools and the practice of formal education exist.

Apart from identifying the major ingredients in a competency-based approach, it is necessary to establish clearly measurable standards of performance (e.g. for beginning teachers, for those designated as having 'advanced skills'). In the conference to which I have referred, it is suggested that the standards are defined by determining what is done in the workplace and identifying the level of performance required for the various particular activities. While these steps might be effectively applied to the production of cars or canned fruit, they certainly face serious difficulties when applied to a teacher's work in 'producing' an educated person. For one thing, what is being done in the school 'workplace' may itself be a very controversial matter. In some respects at least, we will have to start with the question of what should be done rather than what is being done. Then, the criteria of being well-educated (even if we focus quite specifically—for example, on a student's understanding of physics at the end of Year 10) are quite complex in comparison with the standards for the production of properly canned, good quality peaches. Moreover, it is much more difficult to establish the relationship between input and outcome in the former activity than in the latter.

Attempts to develop competency-based standards in a practice such as education face a dilemma. If they respect the complexity of the process, they will not provide anything like precise instruments for assessment. (In the recent set proposed by NPQTL one of the criteria states that teachers 'should avoid the use of inappropriate consequences'. See Appendix 3.) If they develop a detailed anatomy of teacher practice, they may seem to provide sufficiently precise instruments for assessment, but this is at the price of ignoring (or undermining) the complex interrelationships of the components of a substantial unit of teaching and learning. How the parts fit together as a whole is crucial to a judgment on the quality of teaching.

A group of competency-based standards for teachers may be useful in setting the minimal acceptable level in the performance of teaching activities. Certainly,

such standards could be defined and applied fairly precisely when we are dealing with some of the tasks in education, such as presenting students with information that they are expected to memorize and recall accurately. But, apart from unpredictable outcomes, the broad objectives of understanding, appreciating, thinking critically etc. in any area of education are never exhaustively achieved. Hence, the criteria of success cannot be specifically described and measured.

There would be no problem for university teacher education programs in applying competency-based standards within the limits of their usefulness. But such programs must be centrally concerned with criteria which respect the complex qualitative judgments that the assessment of competence in teaching requires. They must also be sensitive to the narrow view of education that motivates the present movement for competency-based standards: to regard schooling as primarily an instrument of economic efficiency.

A final comment

It could be argued that, in placing the primary responsibility for teacher education with universities, I have simply moved the question with which I began one stage further back. But the answer to the question of who shall educate those who engage in teacher education is still, for the most part, the universities. This emphasizes their crucial role in contributing to the quality of our schools.

How well they contribute obviously depends on their own level of quality. It must be recognized that this has varied greatly in the history of universities, and that at any given time there are considerable differences among them (even within the one society). Fortunately, the issue of quality has been a central one in Australian universities for several decades. Recently, special attention has been given to the quality of their teaching procedures.

The members of our society, and governments acting on their behalf, have a strong interest in encouraging high quality in the work of our universities. Its attainment can be encouraged in many ways—through adequate funding, efficient administration, committees of review and so on. But ultimately it depends most on the scholarly excellence and dedication of those who do the teaching and research for which universities exist.

There is not, of course, any formula for achieving this condition. But it is affected by an important interrelationship between universities and schools in the matter of educational quality. Schools depend on the general and professional education that universities provide their teachers, and universities depend on schools to bring students to a level of achievement that is an appropriate basis for higher education.

QUESTIONS

- What are the main reasons for giving universities a key role in teacher education?
- How can the theoretical perspectives and the practical knowledge and skills for teaching be most effectively acquired and related?
- What difficulties are there in using precise performance criteria for assessing the quality of teaching?

Note

- 1 This Charter is set out in *Australia's Teachers: An Agenda for the Next Decade*, Schools Council, National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET), Canberra: AGPS, 1992, pp. 60–1.

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