

Some Challenges to Publicly Funded Education in the New Millennium

For the last few editorials I have tried to take stock of what the 20th century has wrought educationally. But where is education now going? Prognostication is difficult and usually wrong unless couched in such general terms as the pronouncements of the Delphic Oracle or television psychics. Nonetheless we can pretty clearly see that a number of the established ways of going about education that developed over the last 160 years are under considerable strain. That 160 years represents the time since the introduction of the notion of universal state-funded education in Britain, in continental Europe, the United States, and Canada, a notion which has since spread to the entire world.

Perhaps the most important strain is with respect to the very existence of public education systems themselves. Ever since Ivan Illich attacked the publicly funded school system in the United States in the 1960s with his *Deschooling Society*, the word has been out that there may be alternatives to the system built up universally to cope with an industrial society. But the way in which this strain is usually presented is through an attack on three or four of the conceptual pillars of the publicly funded, universal common school movement. These pillars include at least: the principle of the complete separation of the family and publicly funded education; the principle of the pupil as a normal, passive, and standardized learner; the principle of the isolation of the school from other public communities; the principle of the free and universal nature of the publicly-funded common school; and the principle that "school is for kids."

The first conceptual pillar was the separation of the family and education, where education here is conceived of as schooling. This involved taking children directly from the family, on the pain of the law, and the placing them for eight hours or so a day in the hands of professional educators, for five or six days a week. On the seventh day they were expected to go to church. Thus the parents could influence their children only before and after school (and

schools around the world set such high homework standards that most of the evening hours were spent studying) or before and after church. Perhaps the extreme of this was achieved in Scotland where early in the 20th century a child might begin regular school at age 4 and attend church four times on Sunday. Whatever such a child became, it could hardly be educationally attributed to its parents who saw him or her hardly at all.

In the mid-industrial era the arguments for such removal of children from their homes except for eating and sleeping was largely based on the notion that homes were the locus of "crime, poverty, and ignorance." Thus the school was to be a haven, provided at public expense, to all children so that the wicked influences of the home could be bypassed and a better, democratic, non-criminal, and more intelligent citizenry able to generate wealth in an industrial regime could be created.

This program has succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of its originators. Horace Mann, Kay-Shuttleworth, and Ryerson must be looking down from their respective American, English, and Canadian parts of heaven with astonishment at what they and their supporters wrought in a century and a half. From bare reading literacy levels of less than 10% Britain, the United States, and Canada, for example, have nearly universal bare reading literacy levels and even by much stricter standards the United Nations considers all three countries essentially universally literate. Schooling has been extended beyond the initial notion of three years to roughly 12 years in all three jurisdictions. Even post-secondary education, especially university and various technical schools, has reached astonishing proportions.

In Canada and the United States post-secondary education now reaches over 40% of all those who begin school and the percentage is rising. Europe has similar figures and the numbers are rising rapidly in Asia. And, as the 19th century school promoters would have wished, industrial civilization has spread to the entire globe embracing even vast parts of India and China, with their billion plus populations. The parts of the globe which have taken part in this combination of universal schooling and industrialization have seen their living standards rise at a tremendous rate. Thus those, like the post-war educational planners in UNESCO, who argued for a correlation between

universal education and strong industrial development and rising living standards have not been contradicted in global terms.

But this main pillar of the universal movement to state-sponsored compulsory education for all, namely the removal of the right of parents to educate their children, is nonetheless under great strain in the United States and Canada. Many parents are now demanding that they educate their children at home. Indeed the fastest growing educational segment in many Canadian provinces, especially British Columbia and Alberta, is home schooling. Many other parents are demanding that special schools be developed in order that their children can have the kind of education that they the parents wish. Thus charter schools and other variations of publicly funded but parent directed schools are rising in importance. Even private schools, essentially organized around principles that parents support, and often with direct parental financing and time commitments, are now demanding and receiving public funding. Why do we have this turn of the parental worm?

There many reasons why this strain is so prominent now. But I would suggest two reasons which are the most important. First, the very high education levels of parents today relative to the levels 150 years ago. And second, the movement of industrial society beyond its early activities into new organizational structures.

The early ambitions of school promoters have been achieved. Nearly everybody in Europe and North America (and in the developed world generally) is literate. More than that, nearly everybody is knowledgeable across a broad body of understanding. This is obviously a result of the successful state-funded common school movement. Nearly everybody completes at least 12 years of schooling and many, approaching half, have education beyond that. The result is a highly educated, cultured, and literate population. Such a result is beyond the wildest dreams of our 19th century forebears who simply wanted a population who could read, write, and obey industrial and governmental orders.

Our present population supports bookstores of immense proportions, public libraries at astonishing readership levels, watches television increasingly selectively, and spends time with diverse educational pursuits on the Internet following special

interests. The present population supports the arts, travels widely all over the planet, and participates at high levels in all manner of personal interest activities from chess and bridge, to singing or the playing of an instrument, dancing, and sky diving, to name just a few.

Such a population is no longer less educated in general than the educators. The public education system has been so successful that it has made one of its pillars, the principle of the non-interference of parents, that is the principle of the separation of the family and the educational system, because of their educational disqualification, no longer possible to support. I repeat: this is not a failure of the publicly-funded common school movement. It is its primary success.

My parents' generation revered teachers, doctors, lawyers, and the highly educated generally. When that generation were the mainstay of the governments, they revered and supported public education and higher education with all their might – perhaps because they were less well educated themselves. But the next generation of politicians and public servants have no such respect for something "higher" in education. They have tasted all or most of its levels and are no longer amazed or awed. Indeed many believe they are sufficiently insiders that they see flaws in the ways that education is done at all levels and are not afraid to criticize or require accountability. These too are things which were or should have been predictable from the success of our publicly funded educational systems.

A second pillar of our publicly funded educational systems of the last century and a half is that the student or pupil was expected to be a passive consumer of the wisdom which those in educational authority wished to provide. No questions were to be asked, no answers were to be given on the question of why just this subject or fact was considered important, why just this educational method was to be used rather than another. This rather high-handed approach may be justifiable in an era of widespread ignorance and poverty, of feeble or underdeveloped democratic values, and high crime rates. Perhaps it was the only way to begin and sustain a new kind of universal and ultimately compulsory educational system at all. But the success of that system in producing a highly educated population relative to the

population even 50 years ago has been such that the notion of the student or pupil as a passive consumer, with all individuality wiped out, is no longer plausible.

Furthermore, educational research, always guarded and tentative though it is, has produced some striking new realms of understanding and has challenged many old assumptions about the relationship between teaching and learning and the optimal conditions for learning. We can now say something about learning styles and their relation to teaching organization. We now no longer think that children are simply more or less "intelligent" than one another on a single intelligence scale. Indeed, we are now nearly in a position to write the first real educational textbook along the lines of Sir William Osler's first real medical textbook of the modern kind. Such a book should be called *The Principles and Practice of Education*.

This change is perhaps the greatest of all. Any teacher who now teaches only a "discipline" to "the class" and who does not see the individuality of her or his pupils or students – as a being in various states or degrees of health, a social being, a physical and sexual being, a spiritual being, a person embedded in a cultural or personal history, a being with a variety of possibilities and talents, or as a being with different emphases on styles of learning, different natural bents, and interests – any teacher who ignores these things is in the modern understanding of students and pupils a bad teacher however well they cover the curriculum on the blackboard, in lecture, and in hand-outs. And this involves recognizing the right of every child to ask questions about where their own education is going, or if they cannot without fear of reprisal, then the right of their parents to do so on their behalf.

A third pillar of the state-funded universal common school movement was the isolation and protection of the educational system from the rest of society's other primary activities and systems. They were to be ideal communities set apart. Thus schools were isolated from the health-care system except for the occasional visit of a nurse, or in the latter half of the 20th century of a tuberculosis X-ray program, or of a vaccination program. The teacher's responsibility did not include the health or the nutrition of her or his charges. Similarly the schools, except for publicly funded, separate religious school systems in Canada, were isolated

from the religious system. They were also isolated from the social care system and the criminal system. And, of course, from the business system.

They were not, in fact, isolated from the government system. Indeed they were, in nearly all jurisdictions in Canada, the United States, and Britain (to name three, but I mean many more) subordinate to a branch of government, a department, or ministry of education. Such ministries were established more or less universally to oversee the entire publicly funded, common school system.

Perhaps most of all they were isolated from the business system, the system which provided the tax money to fund the schools in the first place. This was probably due to the fall out from the early period of industrialization and the dislocation and exploitation of families and thus of children which it caused. But we no longer see business as somehow evil and only wishing to exploit our children and break them before the age of seven. Instead, we see this as the general direction in which nearly all of our children are heading in one way or another. Not to back-breaking or killing work, since our machines tend to do that. But to interesting, diverse, cultured activities in the broad economic sphere.

Thus as the new century dawns the notion of the isolation of the school community from society is under increasing strain. A teacher, like a doctor, in our time must have some knowledge of human anatomy, physiology, and psychology and preferably of the main human diseases found in the school population, both acute and chronic. She or he should have elementary nursing knowledge and must be culturally knowledgeable and adept. Such a teacher must have a knowledge of the social context of education and must act as the front line of the health care system, the social care system, and the criminal justice system.

A teacher in our time may have a child or children in her or his class with a chronic ailment (perhaps arthritis, asthma, AIDS, or kidney disease). She or he may have a child coming to school with an acute and infectious ailment which the teacher should know how to cope with. That teacher may have to be on the lookout for family abuse or playground bullying which affects a child's learning. She or he must be aware of what provisions the social

care network has for each and every citizen, including her or his charges and their parents. The teacher must be aware of the commercial context of their time and will probably have to allay their class and their school with professional and business people, especially among the parents. She or he must be something of a fund-raiser, a task that the universities faced early but which has migrated now to the classroom. Certainly the teacher will have to understand the rapidly changing but now nearly indispensable role of the converging media on the possibilities for learning for the students. In addition, the teacher will have to be on the lookout for genius or severe mental disability where it arises and be in a position to cope with it. For the education of the severely gifted and the severely disabled are now aspects of potentially every teacher's life.

Nearly all these requirements of the teaching profession are new, not because they weren't present before but because they could be ignored. Each pupil was just a pupil and all were to be treated alike. Only the healthy and the normal went to school. Some did well and some did badly and the chips fell where they may. But in a society with so much education, so much information, and so much developed intelligence that is no longer good enough. Individualization, that is to say, discrimination, is now a necessity. And all of this puts strain on the third basic pillar of publicly funded common schooling, namely, the principle that the school is an isolated system divorced as much as possible from the rest of society. Now schools must reflect society as much as they must also distance themselves from it and function as an ideal and isolated community.

Another central pillar that is under strain is the requirement of the universality and "free" (i.e., tax based) nature of the publicly funded common school movement. One can justify diverting taxes to the publicly funded common school movement when it appears that such a diversion serves the entire population well, certainly an overwhelming majority. But voices are increasingly raised that suggest other and better ways of using those taxes for educational purposes – in home schooling, in small and intimate learning groups involving parents or parent-hired teachers, in special schools not necessarily allied to the common-school movement, in private schools within various established

educational movements or styles (Montessori schools, Waldorf schools, Suzuki-based arts schools, for example). As long as these demands remain small and relatively isolated, the common school movement has nothing to fear. But if they reach even a third of the population of school age children, then the system will be under severe strain. A significant amount of resources will be felt to be unfairly diverted to an outdated notion of education for children.

Finally, the notion that "school is for kids" is the final pillar of the common school movement which is being radically challenged. In our day the already highly educated population is demanding continuous educational opportunities, preferably at public expense. This might take the form of professional upgrading as in medicine or nursing or perhaps engineering. Or it might take the form of keeping up with technology, or language requirements. Or it might just take the form of migrating personal interests. Some of it is driven by technological change and so a transformation in the work place. Indeed, the rapidly developing information and research based economies of our time increasingly need highly intellectually mobile people, able to change their jobs on a monthly, weekly, or daily basis. But such change does not come free. It is a tremendously expensive educational task for large business, government, and even private small business, not to mention the various professions and vocations of our time. This means that increasingly taxes will be diverted to educational tasks other than the schooling of the young. If this happens the role of the family or the smaller community will increase and perhaps replace government. Certainly the notion of a lifelong right to further and further education seems all but beyond the means of an already overburdened tax system.

So although we cannot predict the future developments of publicly funded education we can pretty confidently say that the main pillars of the system built up over the last 100 years will be changed. Thus the principle of the complete separation of the family from the educational process, the principle of the pupil as a normal, passive, and standardized learner, the principle of the nearly complete isolation of the school from other public communities, the principle of the free and universal nature of the publicly funded common school, and the principle that "school is

for kids" are all likely to be transformed, perhaps completely, or they may even disappear entirely in the ensuing years.

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