
EDUCATIONALIZATION: ON THE APPROPRIATENESS OF ASKING EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS TO SOLVE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PROBLEMS

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ABSTRACT. Educationalization is a term most frequently used to indicate that government (in particular) has inappropriately imposed on educational institutions responsibility for providing the solution to some social or economic problem. In this essay David Bridges illustrates, however, the way in which educational institutions collude in this process, where they see doing so as in their interests. He also points to the way idealistically (rather than cynically) educators might seek to contribute to the wider social agenda of their age. Indeed it is arguable that there is a conceptual link between the idea of education and that of social improvement. These observations frame the question about educationalization as one concerning the appropriateness or otherwise of looking to educational institutions to solve social problems and how one might determine such appropriateness. To what extent, Bridges asks, *can* and *should* educational institutions play a role in addressing the wider social and economic political agenda? In this essay he attempts the beginning of an answer to both these questions.

INTRODUCTION

In this essay I shall interpret “educationalization” as referring to the tendency to look to educational institutions (schools, continuing education colleges, and universities, in particular, but also parents in their educative role) to resolve pressing social problems.¹ Of course this tendency immediately invites a distinction between circumstances in which it *is* appropriate to look to education for the solution and those in which it *is not*. I take educationalization to refer, in particular, to examples in which this expectation is not appropriately made, but I shall return to this distinction in the second part of this essay.

The notion of “educationalization” is most frequently invoked in the context of a recurring critique of processes that displace the more radical political and economic attention that ought properly to be paid to underlying structures of injustice and various forms of breakdown of social cohesion and normativity with educational solutions for which responsibility is typically vested in educational institutions. Bert Lambeir and Stefan Ramaekers, for example, write:

1. The term is used rather differently in some of the educational literature. Thomas Meyer, for example, writes of “a polarity between ‘vocalisation’ and ‘educationalisation’ or ‘generalisation.’” He argues that the narrower concept of “vocalization” is less appropriate in an unpredictable labor market in which such specialized training will “increase the risk of [labor market] de-qualification.” Thus he commends “a reinforced ‘educationalisation’ or ‘generalisation’ of VET, with a strong focus on securing the ability for lifelong learning (and the maintenance of labour market relevant qualifications as a secondary goal).” See Thomas Meyer, “Vocalising Education or Educationalising Vocational Training? A Lab Report from Switzerland” (paper presented to the European Research Network on Transitions in Youth Workshop on “Vocalisation of Education: How? Where? When? Why and In What Sense Does It Matter?” Marseille, France, September 7-9, 2006), pp. 9–10. I take it, however, that this is not the contrast with which we are concerned in this context.

When speaking about the “educationalization of social problems,” theorists often adopt a condescending tone. Given their confidence with postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives, the educationalization of social problems is easily perceived as a set of questionable interventions of governments in educational practices. For to what extent can a political agenda do justice to public education? Indeed, from such a perspective, schools are first and foremost subject to modernist mechanisms and Foucauldian control systems, and democratic governments appear to be slightly totalitarian when educationalizing or “overschooling” social reality.²

Part of what renders this displacement more problematic or even more sinister is that it seems to be driven by governments anxious to offer the appearance of addressing these issues while actually shifting responsibility for them to institutions that are incapable of producing the necessary change. Tough and perhaps unpopular economic and political action can be displaced by delegating responsibility (and blame) to educational institutions and programs that stand little chance of success but create the impression of a government taking action.

I am readily persuaded of this sort of analysis — and so will be thousands of teachers who are weighed down (in the United Kingdom at least) by the burden of social problems (including teenage pregnancy, obesity, antisocial behavior, the “knife culture,” drug abuse, and so on) that the government dumps on them for instant resolution through yet further additions to the requirements of the school curriculum.

I do, however, want to set alongside this analysis two considerations. The first is to point to the way in which educational institutions collude with and even exploit this tendency of government as a way of raising their status in society or perhaps their income from government. For this I shall draw from my recent experience working for the Association of Universities in the East of England (AUEE). The second consideration will bring me closer to what I think Bert Lambeir and Stefan Ramaekers suggest when they wonder what would be left of an education freed from the burden of social problems.³ I want to ask whether the critique of educationalization nevertheless leaves some space for the sort of idealism that has motivated many teachers: the possibility of achieving a better world through education.

This discussion seems to me to lead to the unremarkable observation that there may be some cases where it is appropriate to look to educational institutions to address important social and economic problems and others where it is not. This then invites consideration of how one might decide on this “appropriateness.” That question is the focus of the final part of this essay.

2. Bert Lambeir and Stefan Ramaekers, “Humanizing Education and the Educationalization of Health,” included in this symposium. See, by way of example, Naomi Hodgson’s discussion of citizenship in “Citizenship Education, Policy, and the Educationalization of Educational Research,” included in this symposium.

3. Lambeir and Ramaekers, “Humanizing Education and the Educationalization of Health.”

EDUCATIONALIZATION AS SERVING THE INTERESTS OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS:
THE CASE OF AUÉE AND THE EAST OF ENGLAND DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

I am probably not alone among British educators in recalling some excitement (albeit a certain nervous excitement) at the point in 1976 at which Prime Minister Jim Callaghan announced a “great debate” on education in which the nation was invited to join, nor when Tony Blair set out his priorities in government as being “Education, Education, and Education.” If your working life is devoted to education, that work is sustained in part by the belief that education is something of a power for good, that it does bring benefit to society as well as to its individual members, and you yearn for some social or even political recognition of its importance. For my generation of educationalists, this belief went along with a well-schooled understanding of the ways in which deeper economic and social injustices interact with educational success. We sought social and economic change to enable people to access the full benefits of education as much as we looked to education as a vehicle for social change.

I shall return to this somewhat idealistic motivation in the next section. However, I want first to acknowledge a more instrumental motivation that drives those in education (at all levels) to collude in or positively to invite educationalization.

The elementary point is that if educational institutions can convince government that they are the ones who can deliver on social and economic change, then they can call in the additional financial support that is attached to advancing such policies. In some circumstances this additional support is, of course, simply money in and money out, but in other circumstances some of it can be siphoned off to support what the institution might regard as its core agenda.

This happens at all levels. Tony Blair’s administration sought to emphasize the importance of interdepartmental cooperation in the civil service and some government expenditure was reserved for this purpose. Thus when he announced his “Respect” agenda (an attempt to capture the street notion of “respect” and harness it to the cause of orderly behavior and inner city revival), he invited all departments of state to indicate what contribution they could make to this agenda. So, if you are in charge of the Department of Education and Skills, are you going to say — on this or almost any other matter — “Sorry, education has nothing to contribute; you have to address the underlying economic structures”? Probably not. Similarly, when such policies are offered down to the school system with the promise of additional funds, schools are not (on the whole) going to turn it away. It is not just the promise or possibility of funding that is persuasive, it is also the importance bestowed, the status that you can capture as an institution that the country should look to in order to address its pressing social problems.

I observed this process at particularly close quarters in my role (over six years, from 2000 to 2006) as Director of the Association of Universities in the East of England (AUÉE), a membership organization set up (somewhat reluctantly to begin

with) by the higher education institutions of the East of England⁴ in response to the British government's regionalization of economic development and its flirtation with the idea of regional government.⁵ The East of England Development Agency (EEDA), in whose offices I was lodged, was tasked with developing a regional strategy for economic development and was endowed with substantial funding that it could put behind such a strategy. It was the smell of this money rather than any deep-seated collegial instinct that drew the universities together, though I think the universities also understood quite genuinely that they had some sort of duty of good citizenship, especially in relation to the townships or localities in which they were immediately located.

So how was economic development — and more especially the regeneration of economically disadvantaged parts of the region — to be achieved? The processes of consultation that were devised to answer this question brought together diverse "stakeholders." The business community was especially powerfully represented, but so also were environmentalist groups, the arts, the health service, the voluntary sector, faith communities, local politicians, government departments, local education authorities (responsible for schools), the Learning and Skills Council (responsible for mainly vocational, continuing, and adult education), and the AUEE. One of my tasks, on behalf of the AUEE, was essentially to ensure that what universities did and could contribute to regional economic development was recognized and that funds in the hands of the EEDA were directed to this purpose.

So, we made sure we were present and heard at every consultation meeting; we insistently made the case in subgroups and panels across the region; we submitted our own written contributions to EEDA; and we wined and dined senior EEDA officers. In fact, that argument for the importance of higher education to regional economic development was not difficult to win. We had the stellar example of the University of Cambridge in our midst with over 200 high-tech businesses that had grown directly or indirectly from its research and one of the most dynamic local economies in the country. Our problem was not so much to convince the EEDA of what universities could do as to explain that not all higher education institutions would necessarily be able to replicate the Cambridge phenomenon and that we needed to look at other kinds of contribution.

The outcome was that higher education in the region featured prominently in the regional strategy and that this provided the leverage for very considerable investment in the region's universities.⁶ In particular the agency contributed capital investment for the development of five new university campuses in the region; for the establishment of business innovation centers and business development

4. Similar organizations were established in all nine English regions.

5. This extended to the establishment of regional assemblies made up of nominated representatives of all the county and district councils in the region as well as nominees representing other regional groupings (of which AUEE was one).

6. East of England Development Agency, *A Shared Vision: The Regional Economic Development Strategy for the East of England* (Histon: East of England Development Agency, 2004), http://www.eastofenglandobservatory.org.uk/RES_Review.asp.

offices in all of the universities; for the development of science parks; for the improvement of roads and access routes as well as recurrent investment in staffing and activity linked to knowledge transfer; for the development of new degree programs aimed at meeting the needs of local people and local employers; and for widening participation in higher education (we successfully ensured that there was a social as well as a more narrowly economic agenda to this investment) and facilitating higher education's engagement with local communities through the arts, sport, access to facilities, and so on.⁷

There are lots of things one could observe in response to this story. In this context I provide the illustration primarily to make the point that the process of educationalization — in the sense of looking to education to provide the answer to social and political problems — is not just a one-way imposition of expectations by government on overburdened educational institutions. In this example, and I suspect in many others, the educational institutions were eager to put themselves forward as offering a solution, partly, I think, because they had a very high, perhaps even inflated, opinion of their own importance in this agenda, but also because they could see how their engagement with regional development could serve their own ambitions for expansion and campus improvement, for generating new sources of income from services to business, for drawing a wider range of students into higher education, and for building good relations with their communities. Of course, not all sections of the academic community visibly benefited from these developments and not all were equally enthusiastic, but senior management, in particular, clearly saw a reciprocity of interest between what the EEDA was offering and what the universities themselves were seeking to develop. The action that emerged (in the construction of new university campuses, for instance) satisfied both agendas.

So is this a case of “educationalization”? It is certainly a case of government (through the EEDA) seeking an educational solution to an economic and social problem (though this was only part of a much wider set of interventions). And it could be argued that although the universities entered enthusiastically into this responsibility, this was only because their loyalty to it had been bought or otherwise contrived by their desire to win the approval of their government providers. But perhaps, too, the educational institutions in this case really did hold one of the keys to the problem (through the knowledge and skills that they can put into the economy, through their creativity and inventiveness, through their intellectual property, through their magnetic effect on inward investment). So was this a case of *appropriate* rather than *inappropriate* expectations of education in relation to social change?

The inappropriateness of looking for educational solutions to social and economic problems that is implied in the notion educationalization seems to me to

7. For more on all this, see David Bridges, “The Role of the University in Regional Economic Development,” in *Higher Education and National Development: Universities and Societies in Transition*, eds. David Bridges, Palmira Juceviciene, Robertas Jecvicius, Terence McLaughlin, and Jolanta Stankeviciute (London: Routledge, 2007). See also <http://www.auee.ac.uk> and <http://www.eeda.org.uk>.

invite two sorts of considerations. First, approaches might be inappropriate because they rest on expectations about education that go beyond what education can deliver. I think the jury is still out on this point as far as the initiatives I have described are concerned. The impact of the EEDA investments in higher education will probably not be evident for some time if they ever become evident at all. Second, approaches might also be inappropriate because they divert the attention of educational institutions from the purposes to which they ought to be giving priority. I am not sure that the pluralistic “postmodern” university is of a single mind as to the purposes to which it ought to be giving priority, but there certainly was controversy, especially among some of our more traditional institutions, as to the benefit or otherwise of engaging with “the regional agenda.” I shall return to the issue of “what is appropriate” in the final two sections of this essay.

EDUCATIONALIZATION AND EDUCATIONAL IDEALISM

In discussing the case of AUEE and the EEDA, I have presented a picture of educational institutions accepting some responsibility for resolving social and economic problems out of a mixture of ambition, enlightened self-interest, and an appetite for government funding. I believe, however, that many have been drawn into education out of an honest conviction that they can thereby contribute in some general or more specific way social benefit, perhaps even help to build a better world (though in English cultural circles they might be a bit embarrassed about expressing it in these terms). I recall in my early days as a teacher being part of a network of educators (brought together for a period in Robin Richardson’s World Studies Project⁸) whose agenda included achieving world peace, justice, sustainable development, and the eradication of poverty — and at the time we did not even have a single slot on the school timetable. I frequently quoted the words of the postwar British prime minister Clement Atlee — “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that we must construct the defenses of peace”⁹ — as my rationale for Education for Peace.

Perhaps this was a little overambitious, but the connection between education and some kind of search for individual and social improvement is almost an analytic one. We cannot really conceive of education without reference to some selection of the human qualities we want to cultivate and of the kind of social world we expect or perhaps want our pupils to occupy — and that selection requires an inescapable responsibility to invoke some normative conception of the human qualities and the social world we see as desirable. A number of us in philosophy of education have been revisiting the debate around Alasdair MacIntyre’s notion of “practice.”¹⁰ I have been among those that have argued that MacIntyre’s notion of practice as something through which “human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended”

8. Robin Richardson, *Learning for Change in World Society* (London: World Studies Project, 1976).

9. Perhaps in this particular example the gendered language might be thought appropriate.

10. See the symposium on “The Changing Practices and Social Relations of Education,” ed. Paul Smeyers, in *Educational Theory* 56, no. 4 (2006).

is entirely appropriately applied to education.¹¹ More broadly, Christopher Winch and John Gingell remind us in their collection of essays on educational policy that

Education is at least partly about the overall aims that society has for itself and how these aims are realised in practice. It cannot, therefore, be a neutral technical exercise, but is invariably a deeply ethical, political and cultural one bound up with ideas about the good society and how life can be worthwhile.¹²

In short, any educational policy will be linked in some significant sense to social and political aims or values, and these will bear on *how* we proceed educationally as well as on *what* we are trying to achieve. It is difficult to conceive of educational interventions disconnected from some sort of hope for social improvement.

But does the reverse also apply — that is, do all social and political programs carry requirements for educational interventions?

POLITICAL POLICIES AND THEIR EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS

I want to look briefly at three different responses to this question: first, the response that all social, economic, and political policies demand (among other things) educational interventions; second, that educational institutions have no significant part to play in the achievement of social and political change; and third, that there are some social, economic, and political demands that appropriately require an educational response and others that do not.

ALL SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND POLITICAL POLICIES HAVE EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS

It may be possible to sustain this view if one takes education in its widest sense as learning and includes learning in both non-formal and formal educational settings. One might plausibly argue that any political change, anything that starts to address a defined social or political problem, is going to require change in at least some people — changes of attitude, changes in their behaviors, changes in the ways in which they understand the world, the development of new skills or patterns of work and behavior, and so on. One could say that such change clearly involves learning and that learning is more or less synonymous with what (in ordinary parlance at least) is understood by education. Of course it does not follow from this sort of analysis that these changes are the responsibility of schools or other specific educational institutions. Addressing a given problem effectively may require changes in industrial practice, in parenting, or in behavior in the street — and change may be achieved through all sorts of interventions, including new signage in the city center, new financial incentives or penalties, stronger law enforcement by the police, or public advertising.

In short, then, the point that all social, political, and economic policies have educational requirements may be confirmed almost as an analytic observation of what is implied in policy and in change, but without carrying any direct import for educational institutions as such. Thus one would still need to ask which change

11. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1985). See also Paul Smeyers and Nicholas C. Burbules, "Education as Initiation into Practices," *Educational Theory* 56, no. 4 (2006): 439–449.

12. Christopher Winch and John Gingell, *Philosophy and Educational Policy: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2006), Preface.

requirements of a particular policy initiative or government solution to a set of problems were appropriately carried forward by educational institutions and which were not.

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS HAVE NO SIGNIFICANT PART TO PLAY IN THE ACHIEVEMENT OF ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND POLITICAL CHANGE¹³

This is the kind of view that might follow from a radical economic determinism that extended, for instance, to seeing educational institutions as inexorably bound to the reproduction of a particular economic order to the point that they are incapable of contributing to its change. In the most radical forms of historical and economic determinism, change can only occur at the right revolutionary time as the result of specific historical forces. I do not think that any of those most closely associated with such a stance — including Karl Marx himself — take quite such a strongly deterministic line. Contemporary analyses of the relation between economy and education, however, point to a weaker and more empirically grounded thesis concerning the way in which “reforming” educational initiatives *tend* to end up reproducing rather than transforming the systems that they set out to change.

Pierre Bourdieu, for example, described how *practice* (what you do) is shaped by the interrelations between *habitus* (mental disposition), *capital* (which includes social and cultural capital as well as more obvious economic resources), and *field* (the arena in which social relations play out). He argued that these components should not be separated out and treated as discrete — not least because capital and field are mutually defining concepts: the field is determined by the capital within it, and the value of capital is determined by the field in which it is located. All of this Bourdieu expressed as: [(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice.¹⁴ He described habitus as a mental disposition that generates understandings of what it is “reasonable to expect”¹⁵ and that “leads one to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded.”¹⁶ Habitus thus plays an important role in the reproduction of unjust distributions of capital, but, in turn, these unjust structures contribute to the shaping of habitus.

I do not propose to enter into a comprehensive critique of this sort of position here, but let me offer at least two observations regarding the idea that it is impossible to bring about economic and social change through education.

To begin with, education is itself integrally part of the economy and of society, so changes in education *constitute* changes in the economy and society. It is not just a matter of taking a means to an end (and wondering whether the means will

13. I am grateful to Michael Watts for his assistance with this section of the essay, though I take exclusive responsibility for any errors or misunderstandings that remain.

14. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 101.

15. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (London: Sage, 1977), 226.

16. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 471.

achieve the end). Knowledge, skills, intellectual property, and the social networks built through education all have an economic value, and all form and make up part of our cultural and social capital. The student's acquisition of new marketable skills or new career ambitions *constitutes* a small change in the economy. The failure of a cohort of pupils to achieve a basic level of numeracy or literacy is an economic as well as a personal failure. A change in attitude in a generation of pupils toward conditions of fair trade or conditions of employment changes the conditions under which the market operates. Anything that happens in or through educational institutions with respect to the extension, distribution, or development of any of these is in itself an economic change, an extension or redistribution of that cultural and social capital. It is not simply that educational change may lead to an economic change; rather, in an economy that is defined as a "knowledge economy" educational change *constitutes* an economic change. Failure of the educational system to be "productive" (or its being productive of the "wrong" sort of outcome in economic terms) creates an economic problem — a failure in the generation or distribution of capital of one sort or another — and the solution to this problem must lie in part in educational change. In other words, the direction of effect is not simply one way between economic structures and education; there are at least some ways in which the impact runs in the other direction, in part, at least, precisely because education is part of the economy and its institutions both generate and distribute its capital.

Second, there are no economies without people, and the value that lies in different elements of these economies is a value bestowed by virtue of people's particular preferences and aspirations. Money, steel, rice, credit, water, food, houses, cars, oil, employment, property, poverty — whatever one sees as the elements that constitute an economy or indeed a polity — derive their meaning, their significance, and their value from human consciousness and in that shared or collective consciousness that is social culture, or *habitus*.¹⁷ Changes in that consciousness create, shape, and change that meaning, significance, and value. Marx of course drew attention to the way in which economic and social structures form human consciousness, but you cannot represent the relation between economy and consciousness as a unidirectional flow (with the idea that an economy that is independent of consciousness provides the force for change) when consciousness (as we have seen in recent turmoil in the financial markets) is itself so integral to the functioning of and of value in that economy.

Bourdieu's account of the triadic relation between *habitus*, *capital*, and *field* draws attention to the interrelation between these three arenas — and the way in which each one shapes the others. This interdependence means that the possibility of change in one arena is limited by intransigence in another. However, what is interesting and distinctive about educational interventions is the possibility that they offer of addressing all three together. For example, educational interventions

17. Consider, for example, under what social conditions pork, beef, shrimp, sea slugs, snails, frog's legs, dogs, or human flesh might be considered as "food" — or the intimate relation between credit or almost any form of finance and human confidence.

intended to widen participation in higher education¹⁸ can and do address *habitus* by actively seeking to challenge prejudice, to inform, and to raise aspirations among students and their families; *capital* by raising academic achievement levels, building students' networks of connections with higher education, equipping them with the social skills that will enable them to appear in the higher education space "without shame,"¹⁹ and providing grants; and *field* by working with families and communities to raise their understanding, hopes, and aspirations for their young people as well as to address underlying issues of social and economic deprivation. Thankfully, we are not locked into an environment in which *habitus* determines all: if it did, as Diane Reay points out, there would be no students in the system from "nontraditional" backgrounds at all.²⁰

None of these considerations is intended to suggest that achieving change through education is easy. At best it is no doubt incremental. But they do suggest that dismissing entirely the capacity of educational programs and institutions to contribute to social, economic, and political change is overly pessimistic.

The strong complaint (that it is always inappropriate to look for educational solutions to economic and social problems) seems difficult to maintain without totally emptying education of rationale and content. The weaker case (that it is sometimes inappropriate) invites us to consider under what circumstances the expectation will be appropriate or inappropriate. How do we begin to decide?

WHEN IS IT APPROPRIATE TO LOOK FOR EDUCATIONAL SOLUTIONS TO SOCIAL,
ECONOMIC, AND POLITICAL PROBLEMS?

There seem to me to be to be two main types of inappropriateness, and I have already begun to indicate what these might be. There are, first, things that it is inappropriate to ask educational institutions to do because they simply lie outside their powers or competence (that is, broadly empirical considerations concerning what they *can* do); and there are things that it is inappropriate to ask them to do because they lie outside what is properly their role (that is, broadly normative considerations concerning what they *should* do). Both of these have, however, some different dimensions.

18. There has been a major policy thrust in the United Kingdom — most recently labeled "Aim Higher" — aimed at raising overall participation rates in higher education and, more particularly, participation by "nontraditional" students (mainly students from lower socioeconomic classes and from certain ethnic minority groups). For more on this, see Michael Watts and David Bridges, *Whose Aspirations? What Achievement? An Investigation of the Life and Lifestyle Aspirations of 16–19 Year Olds Outside the Formal Education System* (Cambridge: AUEE, 2004); and Michael Watts and David Bridges, "Enhancing Students' Capabilities: UK Higher Education and the Widening Participation Agenda," in *Transforming Unjust Structures: The Capability Approach*, eds. Severine Deneulin, Mathias Nebel, and Nicholas Sagovsky (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006).

19. This is a notion that Amartya Sen borrows from Adam Smith to indicate a condition for effective social functioning. See Adam Smith, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1791; repr. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

20. See Diane Reay, Miriam E. David, and Stephen Ball, *Degrees of Choice: Social Class, Race and Gender in Higher Education* (Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham, 2005). On the connections between Bourdieu and Sen's capability framework, see Michael Watts, "Capability, Identity and Access to Elite Universities," *Prospero* 13, no. 3 (2007): 22–33.

The question of what educational institutions can do sounds like a straightforwardly empirical one, but I have already indicated that some of the more radical skepticism that surrounds the notion of educationalization is of an almost a priori nature or at least based in historically grounded social theory. It is not difficult to see why educational institutions — and schools in particular — are so attractive to government as a channel for social change:

- they are, for the most part, owned by the government, which has power to direct their priorities and their programs;
- they are in every community in the country — churches are the only institution that can claim such a well distributed network;
- they have the next generation constantly under their sway and available to them, but they also have routes through them to their parents and the local community; and
- if change is needed in what is required of the schools, they have established mechanisms for retraining teachers to new purposes.

With all this in their favor, the question might be “what can’t educational institutions do?” — at least as part of a wider set of initiatives.

Well, the answer to this question is “quite a lot”: the collapse of the local industrial base or agricultural economy as a result of international competition is almost certainly outside the scope of educational institutions, but a response to such a collapse in terms of facilitating the development of new kinds of business may well depend on local capacity to make available the right kinds of skills. The shortage of low-cost housing in a region is not going to be solved by educational change, though we know that the location of successful schools has a major impact on the distribution of demand for housing. Global warming will not be solved by educational change alone, but the worldwide response clearly depends in some measure on the development of an educated understanding of the issues and the measures that are required. The “war on terror” will not be won in our classrooms, but if we fail to develop a better public understanding of the sources of the conflict and indeed to undertake some commonsense deconstruction of the discourse, it will not be “won” in any other forum either. In other words, while education will rarely provide the whole solution to social and political problems, there are few such problems that would not benefit from some sort of educational input *as part of a more broadly based social or economic intervention*.

Of course this capacity may also depend on the level of educational resources that government is prepared to devote to the problem, in other words, the extent to which government is prepared to divert resources from other parts of its political agenda to this end and the extent to which this is given priority over other requirements within the overall educational effort. The question of what an educational intervention might achieve is not one that can be answered in absolute terms: it will depend on the priority and resources that are attached to it.

This rather daunting conclusion sheds a slightly different light on the question of what educational institutions *can* do. There may well be ways in which educational institutions could contribute to the resolution of social and economic problems of many kinds. What is clear, however, and this is precisely what teachers in the United Kingdom have been complaining about, is that they cannot attempt to deal with them all without becoming overwhelmed. As Geoff Whitty has argued, "Society needs to be clearer about what schools can and cannot be expected to do and what support they need. The relationship between individuals, institutions and society is complex and blaming schools for the problems of society is both unfair and unproductive."²¹

So, out of the wide range of things that these institutions might be able to do, how do we decide what it is most appropriate for them to do? Here we enter the territory of several forms of normativity. What kind of criteria can we erect to help us decide what schools might be expected to contribute and what not? Note that in answering this question we are providing a basis for distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate forms of "educationalization" or, if we see the term as restricted to the illegitimate cases, to distinguishing cases of educationalization from cases of appropriate intervention. We might consider the following criteria:

1. *Educational institutions must engage with social and economic problems in a way that is educational and not indoctrinatory.* In other words, we might argue that it is not the proper function of educational institutions to inculcate a particular set of beliefs in line with a government agenda, but they must always treat such beliefs skeptically, examine them against the arguments and evidence, and treat contrary opinions as worthy of respect and attention. Echoing one of the premises of the seminal Humanities Curriculum Project in the United Kingdom in the early 1970s, we might expect to teach the problem rather than any particular solution to the problem.²² Is this a defensible requirement?
2. *Educational institutions must treat learners as ends and not means to the ends of others.* This basic ethical principle has particular force in an educational environment in which government is inclined to see (as I have illustrated previously) learners as the new raw materials of the economy and their "skills" as a primary commodity to be engineered into new products and traded in international markets.
3. *Educational institutions must not be distracted from their primary educational responsibilities.* Such a principle requires, of course, the articulation of what these "primary educational responsibilities" might be, but it is precisely the lack of clarity on this point that opens the door to the multitude of expectations that are placed on our educational institutions.

21. Geoff Whitty, *Making Sense of Educational Policy* (London: Paul Chapman, 2002), 124.

22. Lawrence Stenhouse, *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development* (London: Heinemann, 1975).

Perhaps one criterion for what are the primary educational responsibilities is reflected in my fourth principle...

4. *Educational institutions must look "beyond the immediate and the particular,"*²³ escape "*the parochialism of the present.*"²⁴ Their focus should be not on this week's particular social issue, but on what is of enduring significance in human and social experience. There has to be some check on the incursions into education of the transitory requirements of contemporary politics and the initiative mania that issues from politicians' need to make a splash during their short term in office.

These normative criteria require both fuller explanation and fuller justification. I offer them, however, not so much as the answer to the question, "How can we decide what is appropriate for educational institutions to take on?" but rather as an illustration of the direction in which the question takes us. It will be inescapably normative, and it will have to be attached to a normatively and philosophically laden view of what it is to educate — a view perhaps of the forms of human excellence that it is the particular purpose of educational institutions to cultivate; a view of the social values that one would expect to find expression in the norms and ethos of educational institutions; and a view of the values and principles that might govern the way students are educated.²⁵

Without such a view our educational institutions will find their energies sapped by the burden of social and political requirements that leave them precious little time for their properly educational responsibilities. If schools are to devote large chunks of their time to providing the physical exercise that children are apparently lacking outside the school environment, this can only be at a cost to the development of their intellectual abilities. If colleges are to substitute a narrow conception of a conformative and containing "education" for citizenship for a questioning liberal education, is this going to take us closer to a democratic society? If universities are required to get undergraduates ready to start work on their first day of employment, what will happen to the broader cultivation of their creative and critical capacity and their engagement with the rich tapestry of their cultural heritage? And if our educational institutions are not taking responsibility for this educational agenda, who will? Government is too ready to redirect the responsibilities that ought properly to lie with parents, with employers, with sports organizations, with the health service and other social agencies toward educational

23. Charles H. Bailey, *Beyond the Immediate and the Particular: Theory of Liberal Education* (London: Routledge, 1984).

24. G.H. Bantock, *The Parochialism of the Present: Contemporary Issues in Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

25. A great deal of the literature of philosophy of education is occupied with these questions, of course, but for some particular examples, see Richard S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966); Michael Oakeshott, "Education: The Engagement and Its Frustration," in *Education and the Development of Reason*, eds. Robert F. Dearden, Paul H. Hirst and Richard S. Peters (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972); John P. White, *Education and the Good Life: Beyond the National Curriculum* (London: Kogan Page, 1990); and Bailey, *Beyond the Immediate and the Particular*.

institutions rather than to demand that they are properly exercised by other sections of society and to support *them* in this exercise.

The first part of my essay indicated, however, that this diversion of attention from what is arguably the properly educational function of schools, colleges, and universities is caused not only by the aspirations of government to engage educational institutions with a multitude of social and economic problems but also by the ambitions of leaders of educational institutions who are tempted away from what might be regarded as their core agenda by the opportunity to achieve new status and resources. Both need a clearer focus on the more strictly “educational” purposes that are properly and perhaps only served by our educational institutions. These purposes are already complex and ambitious enough, and also of a social significance that we neglect at some peril. Our educational institutions need to be able to focus fully on these rather than being distracted by a constant requirement for new quick-fix educational solutions to problems for which responsibility properly lies elsewhere in society.

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