FORUM
Volume 53, Number 1, 2011
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM

Can Education Compensate for Society?

RICHARD PRING

ABSTRACT The extent to which education can compensate for social disadvantage is a matter of political controversy, especially in the context of policies for social mobility. On the one hand, to blame poor achievement on social class or poverty was seen to dodge the professional responsibility of teachers. On the other, the strong correlation between social disadvantage and school attainment would suggest that schooling alone cannot compensate – more radical social changes are needed. This article analyses what it means to explain educational attainment in terms of social background, and seeks to avoid the confusion of such explanatory accounts with those of causality.

Introduction

The title of my article in *FORUM* in 2009 (Volume 51, Number 2) was 'Education Cannot Compensate for Society'. This had been the title of Basil Bernstein's influential paper in 1970 – which put weight behind the growing belief that more was needed than the reform of schools if there was to be genuine education for all.[1] For example, Educational Priority Areas were established for the allocation by Government of extra resources for school building in low-income areas and for supplementing the salaries of teachers working in those areas. Indeed, David Donnison (1974) referred to the 'boom in priority area policy', namely, the various compensations for the economic and social disadvantages which held back the hoped-for educational achievements of so many young people.[2] Perhaps the title of my paper should have been 'Education alone cannot compensate for society'.

However, to give a deeper understanding of the issues which underpin this claim, I wish to make the following points.

First, there had been and no doubt still is the belief that a reformed educational system (for example, the creation of a fully comprehensive one) would provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for *secondary education for*

all, in particular for Newsom's 'half our future' [3], the educational neglect of which was the focus of that report.

Second, by contrast, there was, and still remains, the belief that education cannot compensate for the wider inequalities which exist in society, though there may be individual exceptions. Major disparities remain in educational achievement and in social mobility, strongly correlated with social and economic contexts, despite the massive investment in education.

Third, the consequences of these competing views enter into the political arena in a most damaging way – even where confidence is given to the effects of educational intervention.

Fourth, it is essential, in reconciling these positions to go a little into the more philosophical questions concerning the explanation of personal and social behaviour. On the one hand, the educational hopefuls recoil at any suggestion of 'determinism' – namely, that, despite educational intervention, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are pre-determined to low educational achievement. On the other hand, the educational sceptics, suspicious of non-causal explanations of behaviour, point to the overwhelming correlations between achievement (or lack of it) and background; we are, or should be, determinists after all. How might we find a synthesis of such contradictory positions.

Thesis: education can compensate for society

The post-war settlement in education created secondary education for all. That surely was a step in the right direction. Everyone, not just the privileged and the academic few, could benefit from continuing with their education. But it was but a small step because that settlement, resting on the recommendations of the Norwood Report of 1943, advocated a tripartite system – grammar schools for the few who were capable of abstract thought and interested in learning for its own sake, technical schools for a few who were capable of applying ideas and more interested in technology, and modern schools for the majority who would be motivated by practical activities and an interest in the immediate environment.[4] There was a strong correlation between the type of school and the social class from which the students came. And, although the selection examination for grammar schools was supposed in theory to transcend such class differences, few from the working class so-called made the transition, and of those that did many subsequently performed badly in their O Level examinations.

Inequalities of educational achievement there will always be in society, but those who believed that 'education can compensate for society' strove to overcome the grossest of those inequalities and to make sure that they were not caused by such non-educational factors as social class or wealth. The creation of the comprehensive system in 1965 was a major reform to ensure that greater equality not only of opportunity but also of outcome. It would create the 'common school' with a 'common curriculum' reflecting a 'common culture'. As

Lawton (1975) argued, a common school would 'transmit a common culture, and provide an adequate means for individual development within the general framework of that culture'.[5] This sentiment was echoed by Holt (1978), in his aptly entitled book *The Common Curriculum* [6], who drew upon Tawney's advocacy of 'the common culture which at present we lack', for 'to serve the educational needs, without the vulgar realities of class and income, is part of the teacher's honour'.[8]

Along similar lines, Pedley, in his pioneering book *The Comprehensive School* [8], referred with approval to the 'common school' in the USA. And, indeed, it was that common and community school which John Dewey believed to be at the centre of a more egalitarian society where everyone would be enriched by the communication with others of different faiths, different ethnicities, different social and economic backgrounds.[9] Such common understandings, and indeed such growth through the interaction with other young people from different backgrounds, would create a more respectful society and would mitigate the social and economic disparities within it.

The Rutter Report in 1979 gave firm evidence that schools do make a considerable difference. Of twelve comprehensive schools, matched carefully in terms of socio-economic context, some out-performed others against a range of significant criteria.[10] The only variable which could account for such differences was the quality of teaching in the schools. Following from that Report there emerged project after project on school improvement and school effectiveness. Schools really did seem to make a difference.

Antithesis: education cannot compensate for society

The dream that 'education can compensate for society' – that is, help overcome the gross inequalities of social class, of disrespect for differences, of lack of social mobility and of diverse talents and accomplishments – seemed, however, to fade following so many criticisms of under-performance, especially in centres of disadvantage. Perhaps these inequalities are too deeply rooted in our society for education to have the required impact.

Beverley Shaw's book in 1983, *Comprehensive Schooling: the impossible dream?,* expressed the doubts, which many felt, that changes to the educational system could not achieve what they set out to achieve – 'in short, comprehensive schools have failed to fulfil the aims so confidently set for them by their advocates'.[11] And Nick Davies' reports to *The Guardian*, significantly entitled 'The School Report: why Britain's schools are failing', questioned, not only the politicians' and the Chief Inspector's attribution to teachers of the blame for poor performance, but also the facts and statistical evidence upon which such blaming might be based. The scene for the battle over explaining educational success or failure is set nicely in this passage:

> I emerged [from his investigations] with the clear view that school failure was primarily caused by bad teachers, and in particular by

> bad teachers who had been led astray by 'trendy teaching methods' from the 1960s.

Then, however, Davies started to go into schools !

> I realised that my working theory was complete garbage, that the truth was simpler, nastier and very plain to see …. You cannot make sense of why some schools fail and some succeed without taking account of the corrosive impact of child poverty, which has soared in this country in the last 20 years.[12]

This was a conclusion which the then Secretary of State, David Blunkett, could not accept. In his reply to Davies, he argued:

> [the facts quoted are] an antidote to Nick Davies, who implies that we should ring our hands in despair and accept that you can't expect poor kids to do better … I have never pretended that, in general, schools with a poorer intake don't perform less well than those with a better off intake. What I don't accept is that we should have lower expectations on the basis of class …[13]

Who is right? Can education (the curriculum, the structure of provision, the quality of teaching) make much impact upon the aspirations and achievements of those who live in communities characterised by economic and social disadvantage, and by a social class culture which seems inimical to the educational ideals and measures of success which characterise the system? Can, in other words, education compensate for society?

Those who believe education cannot so compensate (though admitting exceptional individuals who go against the trend) point to the evidence. It is clear, for example, from the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training [14] that, despite the very considerable public investment in education, the more disadvantaged a child, the lower the level of educational attainment. 'Disadvantage' includes: the 16% of young people growing up in workless homes; the 25% growing up in households with one parent (where there is a strong correlation between one parent households and poverty); the 10% of young people suffering from psychiatric disorders; the 60,000 who are in care; the 40,000 who are teenage mothers. Increased economic prosperity generally speaking is counterbalanced by increased poverty for many and growing segregation of the well-off from the disadvantaged. This further embeds inequality in society, reflected in the differences in attainment between children at an early age – differences which accumulate throughout formal education and affect individuals in later life.[15] And the rather damning conclusion of Joseph Rowntree research is that

> all the evidence over many decades and from many countries seems to show that family background continues to be a major determinant of educational outcomes … far from offering a route out of poverty, education seems simply to confirm existing social hierarchies.[16]

The point is that education does not occur in a vacuum. It is *influenced* by social and economic contexts in which policies are developed. But so much depends on the strength of that word 'influence' ('cause'? 'explanation for'?) and thereby on the possibilities of countering it through educational intervention either alone or along with other non-educational interventions. The sceptics would argue that such influences are too great (indeed 'causal') to be affected by educational interventions – except at the margin. And, indeed, such scepticism has a long and pervasive history. The Jenks and the Coleman Reports in the USA in the 1970s concluded that schools made no difference.[17] Those who were trained to be teachers in the 1970s had these texts on their reading lists. And it was the case that many young people were dismissed in terms of educational achievement because of 'their background'. (That is why the Rutter Report in 1979, referred to above, was such an important piece of published research.)

Interlude: the political responses

The question is: how far may one put the blame for educational failure or under-performance on the schools and teachers, and how much on factors which are outside the control or influence of the school?

It is certainly in the interest of policy makers to hold schools and colleges responsible for the effects of wider social problems for two reasons. First, it passes the blame to others than themselves. Second, it makes the solutions look much simpler - for example, getting rid of the 15% of poor performing teachers identified by Woodhead, when Chief Inspector, or detailing a National Curriculum for all young people, or providing pedagogical instruction for the teaching of literacy. If education can compensate for the ills of society, one needs to know 'what works', and then to ensure that schools and their teachers 'deliver what works'.

That, in turn, requires the close specification of what it means for the educational system to work, and this is duly done in the setting of precise targets and the measurement of these. A system of testing, of publication and league tables of results, of financial incentives and of 'customer' choice of provider becomes the machinery for making educational provision effective and thereby overcome the disadvantages which previously had been seen to be insuperable. Education *can* compensate for society if we know and apply what works.

However, Diane Ravitch's recent book on such policy solutions in the USA gives a different story as she speaks of how testing and choice, targets and performance indicators, measurement and incentives – the instruments politically chosen for ensuring that 'education' has an impact even amongst the least advantaged – are themselves transforming and thereby impoverishing what it means to educate. Following such approaches borrowed from the business world, schools might be seen to succeed (raising standards as measured, achieving higher scores) but what they are succeeding in has little to do with

education. The parallels between what Ravitch so graphically describes and what is the case in England are powerful.

Synthesis: reconciling the differences

Let me recap. The *thesis* is that Bernstein was wrong – education can compensate for the social and economic disadvantages which prevail in our society, even though research, particularly from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, would suggest that social and economic disparities in our society are increasing and that the society is becoming more segregated between the most and the least advantaged.[18]

The *antithesis* is that Bernstein was right – so great are the social and economic forces militating against educational achievement for a large minority of young people that the system is bound to fail them, whatever the investment in and quality of the teaching in schools.

The *synthesis* which reconciles apparently contradictory positions needs to question two often unexamined assumptions.

The first requires pondering a little what it means to explain social norms and human behaviour. There is a view, already referred to, that education policy and practice need to research empirically 'what works', to communicate this to the teachers and to ensure that the successful recipe is vigorously applied (or 'delivered'). There is, in other words, a 'science of teaching'. Once one knows what the causes of human behaviours are (and we are seeing increasingly the application of Randomised Control Trials to solve empirically 'what works), then one can change those behaviours.

There are, indeed, ways in which causation in human affairs does resemble causation in those of the physical world (for example, drowsiness in the classroom might be 'caused' by overheating and lack of fresh air). None the less, there are logical differences between causal explanations of physical phenomena and causal explanations of human behaviour, encapsulated in such explanatory concepts as 'motivation' and 'intention'. It is difficult to guarantee that a policy will work because an instruction which is clear to the politician gets re-interpreted within the modes of understanding, the desires and the aspirations of those who are being instructed. And further down the 'causal chain' that such instructions go, the greater the chance of yet further re-interpretation.

Those 'delivering what works' (the teachers) and those 'in receipt of the delivery' (the young people) dwell in a world of ideas through which they interpret the social worlds they inhabit. The students bring with them to the school understanding and interests which are rooted in the cultural lives of their families and social groups. It is not surprising that the targets set for them seem totally irrelevant – indeed inimical to their conception of what is worthwhile and in their interest. Similarly with the teachers. They too come to school with understandings of what is educationally worthwhile and rooted in a professional culture as teachers of literature or history or what ever. The school is where

these different cultures interact, and the good teacher is engaged in a dialogue between these different cultural worlds.

A straightforward account of causality (where a particular intervention can be predicted to have a desired effect) is hardly applicable in human affairs and *a fortiori* in educational engagements. In that sense, 'education cannot compensate for society' – and so much educational policy and intervention, based on that assumption, is grossly mistaken.

But causality in some form permeates human and social, as well as physical, explanations. How young people engage with formal education (with meeting the targets set for them, with taking or not taking an interest in the content of the curriculum, or with appreciating the learning styles promoted) depends upon the preconceptions, the values, and the cultural understandings which they have inherited from their respective families and social groups. Where educational provision takes these seriously and gets to grip with the social understandings and concerns of those to be educated, then it can have an impact and 'education can compensate for society'.

The second assumption, therefore, which the *synthesis* needs to question lies in the aims of education and values which dominate the educational system. Brian Simon, in answering the question 'Can education change society?' argued that in one sense it cannot, but, in another more educationally defensible sense, it can:

> We will not, I think, find our answer from the techniques of contemporary social science since these studies … necessarily leave out of account, or lose sight of, the crucial human factor – subjective experience; and it is this which determines outcomes – not whether it can be shown statistically that schooling and/or a particular innovation, has a marginally positive or negative effect on the distribution of income, or life opportunities, however measured, or on social mobility. …. Certainly, it seems to me, contemporary theorising and empirical studies on this issue – that is, on the relation between education and social change – are both seriously misleading and, in many ways, short-sighted. They ignore human subjective experience – people's capacity for movement, for acting on the environment, transforming it and so for self-change. It is this process which is educative, and profoundly so.[19]

Such a transformative experience of education, as the wider cultural achievements communicated by the teacher engage with the different modes of understanding and concerns of the young learners, is nothing fanciful. It is what so many teachers aspire to and what, despite the pressure of targets, many continue to attain.

The main purpose of the arts and humanities, as they are engaged with through reading, discussion and performance, is to provide the cultural resources and the stimulus for addressing these questions of deep concern to young people. What is to be learnt from previous explorations in the arts,

drama, literature, poetry, history and theology about what it means to be human?

The recent Channel 4 series 'Ballet Changed my Life: ballyhoo' illustrates what I mean. The Birmingham Royal Ballet provided the opportunity and training for young people, disengaged from education and in many cases in troubled situations, to participate in the ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, an engagement with a classical ballet that may at first sight seem remote from their interest and experience. But think again. As the Chair of the Arts Council argued:

> it was an inspired choice of story: cross-starred lovers, dysfunctional families, gang warfare, macho games, self-harm, drug abuse and knife crime; it had them all.[20]

Through participation in ballet these young people were able to get deeper insight into human relationships and emotions, which are encapsulated by those arts, and which have a universal as well as a personal dimension. The evidence from this and other involvements in the performing arts suggests a transformation of how young people come to see themselves, their situations and future possibilities opened up. Success lies in the powerful insights which they provide.

A further example from more mainstream education would be that of the Humanities Curriculum Project, which used the distinctively human studies as resources upon which the learners would draw as they explored issues of deep personal and social concern – social justice, relationships with parents, the exercise of authority, racism, poverty, relations between the sexes, and so on. Discussion was central, but discussion carefully chaired by the teacher who would insist that views expressed were related to evidence to be found in literature, history, sociology, theology and other areas of the arts and humanities.[21]

In both these examples, it would be inappropriate to grade and to put into hierarchy of competence the deliberations and transformations which transpired. Should the lady Capulet be given Grade A for the insight she gained into her own feelings about her mother?

What is central to educating young people, and what can 'compensate for society', too often gets marginalised in a system which, working from very different premises and seeking very different targets, inevitably fails so to compensate.

Notes

[1] Bernstein, B. (1970) Education Cannot Compensate for Society, *New Society*, 15.

[2] Donnison, D. (1974) Education and Inequality, *Journal of Social Policy*, 3.

[3] Newsom Report (1964) *Half Our Future*. London: HMSO.

[4] Norwood Report (1943) *Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools*. London: HMSO.

[5] Lawton, D. (1975) *Class, Culture and the Curriculum.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

[6] Holt, M. (1978) *The Common Curriculum.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

[7] Tawney, R.H. (1943) The Problem of the Public Schools, in R. Hinden (Ed.)[1966] *The Radical Tradition.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

[8] Pedley, R. (1963) *The Comprehensive School.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

[9] Dewey, J. (1916) *Democracy and Education,* p. 81. New York: The Free Press.

[10] Rutter, M. et al (1979) *Fifteen Thousand Hours: secondary schools and their effects on children.* Shepton Mallet: Open Books.

[11] Shaw, B. (1983) *Comprehensive Schooling: the impossible dream,* p. 151. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

[12] Davies, N. (2000) *The School Report: why Britain's schools are failing,* p. x. London: Vintage.

[13] ibid, p. 54.

[14] Pring, R. et al (2009) *Education for All: the future of education and training for 14-19 year olds,* chapter 3. London: Routledge.

[15] See latest report from Equality and Human Rights Commission. Field Report commissioned by Cameron, 2010: By the age of 3, a baby's brain is 80% formed, and his or her experiences before then shape the way the brain has grown and developed. That is not to say, of course, it is all over by then, but ability profiles at that age are highly predictive of profiles at school entry. There is little sign that schools close these attainment gaps, with children who arrive in the bottom range of ability tending to stay there.

[16] Raffo, C. et al (2007) *Education and Poverty: a critical review of theory, policy and practice.* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

[17] Coleman, J. et al (1966) *Equality of Educational Opportunity.* Washington: US Department of Health, Education and Welfare; Jenks, C., et al (1972) *Inequality: a re-assessment of the effects of family and schooling in America.* Washington: US Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

[18] Dorling, D. et al (2007) *Poverty, Wealth and Place in Britain 1968-2005.* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Policy Press

[19] Simon, B. (1985) *Does Education Matter?,* p. 30. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

[20] Quoted in Pring (2009).

[21] Stenhouse, L. (1975) *Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development.* London: Heinemann.

RICHARD PRING was Professor of Education at the University of Oxford, and Director of the Department of Education, 1989 to 2003. From 2003 to 2009 he led the Nuffield Review, published as *Education for All: the future of education and training for 14-19 year olds in England and Wales.* The recent Review

of the Cambridge Primary Review, the Nuffield Review and the NIACE Lifelong Learning Review, which was produced with Professor Pollard of TLRP, can be found at http://www.tlrp.org

Correspondence: richard.pring@education.ac.uk