
Education for the Good Society

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ABSTRACT The Left is facing a crisis of its approach to education highlighted by the 'education revolution' of the Coalition Government. The authors argue that it is important to step back and present a positive vision of education based on the key pillars of the Good Society – fairness, democracy, sustainability and well-being. This values-led agenda, whilst offering an opportunity to take the moral and philosophical high ground, will also present a number of difficult strategic questions.

Why This Debate and Why Now?

The Left has suffered a huge defeat. No, not the defeat and the election of the Conservative-led Coalition Government in 2010 but the intellectual and hegemonic defeat of over 30 years ago. That defeat transformed education into a battleground for the soul of our young people and their teachers and parents. What sort of people do we as a society want to create? What is our vision of humanity? In the face of such immense questions and the onslaughts of the Right, the Left crumbled. New Labour did some good things in terms of school investment and standards, but its purpose was almost entirely neo-liberal – to better create a workforce fit for free-market fundamentalism. This enlightened neo-liberal approach was better than its crude Thatcherite alternative, but has allowed Gove and Cameron to slip into its jet stream and continue the same lineage of reforms based on break-up, individualisation and commercialisation. While these reforms need to be fought and resisted, there is a deeper struggle to be engaged in. The Right won because they dared to dream of a different world – and they made their dream a reality. The Left will set the terms of the debate again only once we have a vision of the world we want to create and understand the role of education in pre-figuring, making and sustaining that world. This is the Good Society Project.[1]

Arguably the greatest problem arising from that hegemonic defeat has been the narrowing of a vision of education and a disconnection between much

of professional and popular opinion. This is despite the fact that we now know more about how people learn and increasingly appreciate the relationship between wider factors in the economy and society and the experience of education. With regard to popular perceptions, it is interesting to compare attitudes to health and education. The National Health Service remains sacred to the public despite repeated assaults from the Right, because of the compelling vision of free health care, regardless of waiting lists, rationing and persistent inequalities. Education in England, on the other hand, never had its 1948 moment, nor did it ever really experience a golden age that captured the public imagination. The comprehensive school movement remained underdeveloped, despite islands of inspiration in Leicestershire, Oxford or the ILEA, and the idea of an inclusive and comprehensive curriculum and qualifications system did not emerge until the 1990s.[2] Instead, education became increasingly associated with the search for social advantage; and divisions deepened, even though the education system expanded and became better resourced. At the centre of this 'modernisation' was a restrictive vision of education and a loss of optimism; a process that began in the mid 1970s and continued under Thatcherism, New Labour and now the Coalition.

The concept of Education for the Good Society is an attempt to address the crisis of education vision. This is not the first attempt – many others have tried before. However, looking across Left interventions it is possible to see negativity, where a positive vision of education has become subordinate to a fear of the adversary. As the Right advanced its agenda, so the Left's vision of education also appeared to narrow, often retreating into a set of apprehensions about unequal outcomes as a result of the very successes of neo-liberalism. Furthermore, New Labour did not help. It adopted much of the tone of neo-liberal thinking and conducted education's extremely complex policy in a top-down and politicised way.[3] As the 2010 general election approached, it was the Right that came to talk in more positive terms about change, taking command of key terms concerning rigour, knowledge, freedom and innovation. Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, has taken this ideological offensive to a new level.[4]

The Education for the Good Society Project can be seen as a response to the narrowing of the vision of education and to the Left's partial response, by connecting the meaning of education with the kind of society we want to build for the future.[5] It has to be morally courageous, yet thoroughly grounded. Moreover, a progressive vision is not about constant innovation or permanent revolution; something that is increasingly associated with the Radical Right. Education for the Good Society may be about a recognition of old truths and beliefs about what should be treasured – for example, the joy of learning, inspiring teachers and how education can transform lives – to be applied to the age in which we live and to the future we seek to create.[6]

Expansive and Restrictive Education: the neo-liberal turn and its effects

It is worth pausing in order to reflect on the promise of education. In its most ambitious form, education is a most remarkable endeavour. The idea of devoting years of our lives to learning and reflection – some would say it requires a lifetime – is what helps mark us out as human. Education fosters the skills and knowledge to participate in the world and can provide ways of seeing beyond our current condition. Such a vision of education, for all and not just a few, did not simply happen. It had to be fought for and we are struggling for it still. What we are fighting for is the idea of an *expansive education* that develops the talents of all individuals throughout the life-course, helps us understand how we live together, contributes to a vibrant economy and promotes the ability and desire to participate in wider society.

An expansive and human vision of education has, over the last 30 years, been overshadowed by the ‘neo-liberal turn’.[7] Forces of the Right, successive governments, including New Labour, have promoted a marketised view of education in which the main aim has been to gain the best results to secure social advantage; education as the means by which we learn to compete. A view of education which reduces a noble venture to a commodity has permeated the popular psyche. The interests of competing schools, colleges and profit-making companies in an education market are the institutions to create possessive, calculating and competing individuals. Education has also become the object of electoral politics, as governments have stirred up a climate of permanent revolution in order to seek political advantage. In a world of markets and political manipulation, the voice of the teacher has been marginalised, expert educational research belittled and there is little genuine regard for the learner. An artificial quasi-market, with its narrow culture of targets, a burgeoning of bureaucracy and a regime of over-testing, has acted as surrogates for the real thing. It has produced a system that essentially serves an elite and fosters wider discontent. Nothing is allowed to settle and, like the market, everything that is solid melts into air.

Yet there have been quantitative gains. Post-16 participation rose rapidly under the Conservative governments of the 1980s, although this was fuelled by economic recession and the collapse of the youth labour market. Later in the decade, there was the development of the GCSE common examination, a surprising outcome from Thatcherism, although much of the early 1990s was spent trying to reverse some of these developments through, for example, the division of GCSEs into A-C grades and below. New Labour subsequently provided the education system with more teachers, assistants and better buildings, one of the major achievements of 13 years in office. As a result of New Labour’s interventions, it is generally accepted that students (and their teachers) are working harder than ever to promote educational attainment and, as a result, more young people are staying on beyond 16 and in higher education. However, the prime motive of New Labour’s policies was economic

efficiency and, as such, it was part of a now flawed political economy. Not only was this based on a deregulated financial sector, rising house prices and increased personal debt, but supply side measures to educate and train people for jobs that did not exist.

Quantitative gains cannot conceal, however, a sense of concern about the restrictive mindset of neo-liberal education that has reduced the most impressive of human achievements to an individualised, commodified, utilitarian act with little meaningful sense of a better future. It has also proved to be a regime of winners and losers. The losers, usually from low-income groups, are often filtered out of general education and offered instead a future in vocational education, although increasingly without a prospect of a job or a proper apprenticeship. Even the so-called winners, the ones with the top results, cannot claim to have had a rounded education in the narrow A-level regime. Moreover, these quantitative gains, which have held the neo-liberal project together over the past three decades, now look in doubt. Severe reductions in public expenditure and a Conservative-led government bent on a more elitist and static view of education could see an actual reversal of attainment and educational participation. Everyone outside the top 25 per cent could suffer setbacks, not least those deprived of an Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA).

The Good Society: challenging the neo-liberal settlement

What we have described here has been the experience of England. However, you do not have to travel to Finland or Sweden to see a different approach to education: you merely have to visit Cardiff or Edinburgh. Scotland has had its own distinctive system of education for decades and, since parliamentary devolution, Wales is developing its path along more social democratic lines.[8] Within England too, there is an undercurrent of alternatives and progressive ideas – policies from the teacher unions, from civil society organisations, from research and from campaigns like ‘Whole Education’.[9] At grass-roots level, each and every day, teachers and others involved in schools, colleges and work-based training struggle to make education the enlightening and life-changing process it ought to be. A vision of education which is both very new and very old is stirring beneath the surface of politics, with the potential to break the neo-liberal mould.

Building on the progressive policies of our most immediate neighbours and innovative professional, research and policy developments, the Good Society is a route map out of this condition that has come to dominate our lives over the past three decades. We have to rediscover hope and the possibility of a different future that emerges from the globalised world in which we live. There is no shining city on the hill, an opposite and existing world to inspire us. But there is injustice that, combined with the crisis of neo-liberalism, gives us the potential for something different and better. Inequality has widened nationally and internationally, the economic system is highly unstable and our very

existence is threatened by climate change. But collective responses have been undermined by the sense of disconnect between peoples and governments and the lack of a popular alternative. The old is dying and the new is yet to be born.

In this complex context, the Good Society has to be a qualitative extension of our very best experiences. It will involve treasuring some of the things we have lost because of uncontrolled capitalism, particularly the solidity of public institutions that can embody collaboration and reciprocity.[10] Public libraries, for example, are not just for the middle classes; they are hubs for the wider community. What we founded in the public realm will have to be defended even in the most difficult times. But the Good Society also has to be an envisaging of relations beyond our current condition, built around a profound sense of equality, democracy and sustainability, with a focus on community, time, care and well-being. At its heart it is a project centred on the human condition.

These features imply, in the first instance, a different form of capitalism in which the market is controlled and socialised. In the longer term, the full realisation of the Good Society suggests its complete transformation, but the word that conjures up the Good Society more than any other is freedom. It is a word we have allowed the Right to capture and we need to take it back. Not just the freedom to earn and own but real freedom; the freedom to shape our lives, which we can do in a meaningful sense only collectively and if we have sufficient resources and are, therefore, much more equal. Freedom in this deeper sense starts with the individual, but recognises that we have meaning only in relation to others. Given this starting point, education is about the most important thing we can ever learn: teaching us to live together and to collaborate to build a better future.

The Good Society will be signalled by a greater willingness to build social relationships, to strengthen the sense of community to combat the 'social recession', to exercise a different lifestyle in support of sustainability and to tackle inequality. These ambitious aims can be pursued only when ordinary citizens take greater control over their lives and communities. They cannot be imposed successfully from above. Democracy is the means by which the four pillars – equality, sustainability, democracy and human well-being – are bound together. But it will be a far more participative and deeper democracy than we currently experience. It will also mean a greater accent on the local and civil society, a toleration of differences and a greater belief in persuasion and argument rather than force. Such a vision of the Good Society has the potential to be popular and to span political, social and cultural boundaries. The Good Society is fashioned by a politics that gives primacy to means over ends and the recognition that social institutions are the places in which progressive values live, breath and thrive; that is why education is critical to building such a society.

The Good Society: a vision for education

We need a 'serious utopianism', both visionary and practical, to create a new common sense about education. Education must become both means and ends. The meaning and practice of the Good Society will be realised by developing confident, empowered and aware citizens, through a process that is profoundly democratic, egalitarian and considerate of others. Education thus forms an integral part of the Good Society and its realisation. Becoming educated is about the development of awareness and higher levels of knowledge and skill and learning to live together, all of which will be needed in building a different type of society from the one we have presently.

Education, understood in this broadest sense, will need to be guided by clear and explicit principles that both fulfil our current needs and contribute to a possible future.

Fairness and equality – there are several reasons why this principle should be the first for consideration. The neo-liberal vision of education for personal advantage has unfairness built into it. One person's gain is another's loss, producing a system of the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. Within these divisive arrangements operates an 'inverse law of care'; those who have the most tend to get the most. Interacting with social and economic unfairness is also race and gender discrimination, adding additional dimensions of difference. If education is about a wider sense of togetherness, in which greater equality benefits all, then disadvantage has to be tackled head-on and resources allocated according to need to ensure that everyone can participate fully and realise their potential. Moreover, the battle for fairness and togetherness provides a renewed rationale for the common school and an education linked to community and place. Conservatives argue that schools based on communities will accentuate difference. To counter this, the linking of the common school to wider issues of fairness means having to confront social and economic inequalities in localities that drive divisions.

Personal development and the freedom to exercise democratic control – following arguments about fairness, education has to be universal in order that everyone is able to develop their full potential. Yet the aim of education is more than individual fulfilment – it is about developing the collective capacity of the people to be able to govern themselves, to transform wider civil society, the economy and government. Education is, therefore, a fundamental democratic issue. It can truly promote the values of democracy only when education itself is more democratically organised. This suggests a democratising agenda that includes greater local accountability, a stronger voice for professionals organised in communities of practice and the development of interdependent relations between educators and their students. It is also about devolving powers to the local level so that communities have powers to actually change their localities. This means moving from 'freedom from' and institutional autonomy to 'freedom

to' whereby social partners working together exercise more democratic control.[11]

State education and self-organisation – the Left has traditionally argued that it is only the state that can guarantee equity. The problem is that the state has also delivered privatisation (the aim of the Coalition Government) and bureaucratisation (the record of New Labour).[12] A democratic vision of Education for the Good Society poses the question of what is meant by 'state education'. The scale and quality of freedom envisaged requires both reform of the formal education system and greater capacity for the self-organisation of education by the community, civil society organisations and by individuals. It points us towards more emancipatory concepts of organisation associated with the early days of the labour and socialist movements and an understanding why the concept of 'free schools' might possess a grain of truth, despite the all too evident flaws. Education for transformation cannot be rooted solely within the state as it is currently constructed.

Institutions that promote learning and living together – the values of mutualism, reciprocity and a sense of place require educational institutions that embody these values. The Right advocates institutions of segregation and selfishness – each for themselves – despite its more rational case for independence and freedom. The vision of the Good Society, on the other hand, suggests the remaking of the moral argument for the common school, for democratic participation and accountability in communities and localities to meet the needs of all learners and to promote a sense of interdependence.

Lifelong learning – an expanded concept of education, formal and informal, has to be nurtured over the life-course and is not simply confined to schooling for children and young people. The idea of lifelong learning is compelling because it makes sense in terms of economic, social and individual well-being. The education of adults is, therefore, a key indicator of a successful education system for the Good Society.[13]

A curriculum and qualifications – learning, curriculum and the process of becoming qualified are of vital importance. Learning should be about openness and discovery. Young people and adults learn more effectively when they are motivated, understand why they are learning and can use knowledge to make sense of the world. A curriculum for the Good Society will thus place value on all types of knowledge and skill. The skill of the craftsperson, doing a good job for its own sake [14], deserves as much recognition as the quest for knowledge and greater awareness. The curriculum will have to encourage confrontation with the great challenges of the age – poverty, oppression and the climate crisis – so that education plays its role in helping society address its deepest problems. Learning for the Good Society will also mean educators finding ways to help all learners engage with what has been termed 'powerful knowledge', so this

does not become the preserve of the few.[15] In the future, becoming qualified will have to focus far less on selection and far more on developing the highest standards and nurturing personal development – the music test principle in practice.

Education, the economy and innovation in the workplace – workplaces are prime sites of learning and have enormous educational potential. However, evidence suggests that existing workplaces – often exploitative, oppressive and undemocratic – provide restrictive learning opportunities and can fail to harness creativity. Education for the Good Society needs to have a vision of the workplace that promotes democratic participation and more collective control as an integral part of learning [16], moving them from a restrictive to more expansive learning environments.[17]

The first stage of the education for the Good Society project is to establish the principles and point of education. Then and only then will we discuss and debate the shape of the education system. Form must follow function. An e-book will shortly be published by Compass dealing with these big themes and issues. After they have been debated, refined and developed we will begin the second stage to discuss how. This is where it will get hard and we will need help, ideas, experience and critical engagement from all who want a Good Society and know education has a central role in delivering and being that Good Society. So we finish with some of the difficult questions we know we must face.

Facing Difficult Questions in Order to Create a New Common Sense

Education for the Good Society will involve a battle of ideas and practices. A humanitarian and transformative vision of education will be strongly opposed by those seeking to preserve division and privilege and to narrow the purposes and functions of education. This contest is much more explicit under the Conservative-led Coalition than it was under New Labour and, in many ways, the challenge should be welcomed. But it is much more than a struggle for policy; it involves the longer-term transformation of popular common sense. Here the task is enormous because neo-liberal ideas have become deeply embedded in cultures and institutions and the Left has not really learned important lessons from wider successful political campaigning.[18] Nevertheless, neo-liberal ideas and policies are also vulnerable, not least due to the looming economic crisis of education and because they cannot adequately speak to the world in which we live and to which we aspire.

Precisely because this is a battle of ideas, practices and structures, the journey of education towards the Good Society will involve confronting demanding issues. The greatest difficulty may arise from the very strength of this new and expansive vision – its utopianism – and the sense of distance from where we find ourselves presently. The Good Society concept has to be seen as

a general moral guide and compass that helps us steer through the rapids of difficult deliberation in order to make mature and balanced decisions. There is no shortage of challenges, and below are just a few which the Labour Party and the wider progressive movement face now:

- How can individual choice and freedom be combined with the common good? People like choice, but choice-based systems tend to lead to division. The challenge may be to create strong frameworks (organisational and curricular) within which effective and more equitable choices can be made. Indeed how do we humanise and localise the system to permit and encourage participation but, at the same time, stay true to universalist principles?
- What needs to be taught and learned in order to create the basis for wider change? This is a long-standing debate, which has resurfaced again under the Coalition. Can traditional/difficult subjects, referred to as ‘powerful knowledge’, be the basis of a curriculum for all, or should low achievers (often students from working-class backgrounds) experience a more practical and motivational curriculum? The challenge is to combine both, but this is easier said than done.
- How do we resolve the tension between the everyday need to learn to earn alongside the priority of education being the means by which we learn to cooperate rather than compete. So how do we protect and extend a social form of education and its institutions within a society that itself its being steadily commercialised and individualised?
- How should policy be made? Both New Labour, and now the Coalition, have treated education as a political object – what Ewart Keep referred to as ‘playing with the biggest train set in the world’.[19] Should we be proposing that education decision making be made less political by devolving powers to commissions that include a wide range of social partners and which aim to provide a sense of continuity and solidity? And linked to this, how can respect for achievements of the past be part of the mission to create a new type of education and society?

To succeed in this contested world, transformative strategies for education will have to work in tandem with wider change in the economy and society so that new ideas can be seen to work in practice, becoming embedded in new structures and cultures and thus become part of a new common sense. These are just some of the challenges to which we commit ourselves as we continue to strive to build the Good Society with and through education.

Notes

- [1] This article has been developed out of an initial statement, ‘Education for the Good Society’ (February 2011), that has provided a reference point for the Compass Education Group and its Good Society project.

- [2] The vision of a comprehensive system is now being revisited. See, for example, the recent edition of *FORUM* (Volume 53, Number 1, 2011) on the theme, 'A Comprehensive Curriculum: reaffirmation and renewal', edited by Michael Fielding.
- [3] For recent critiques of politicised policy-making in education see, for example, David Raffe & Ken Spours (2007) *Policy-Making and Policy Learning in 14-19 Education*. Bedford Way Papers. London: Institute of Education, University of London; and Richard Pring et al (2009) *Education for All*. London: Routledge.
- [4] Michael Gove (MP) *What is Education For?* Speech to the RSA, 30 June 2009.
- [5] Education for the Good Society is part of the wider deliberations of Compass: New Direction for the Democratic Left in building an alliance for democratic and social change. See *The Good Society*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford & Hetan Shah, 2006. <http://www.compassonline.org.uk/publications/item.asp?d=182>
- [6] A debate about 'radical conservation' can be found in a recent Compass/Soundings publication, *The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox*, edited by Maurice Glasman, Jonathan Rutherford, Marc Steers & Stuart White. http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings/Labour_tradition_and_the_politics_of_paradox.pdf
- [7] The concept of the 'neo-liberal turn' refers here to the dominance of ideas and practices in wider economic and public life over the last 30 years that have emphasised privatisation, competition and performativity.
- [8] For an analysis of commonalities and differences in education and training systems across the UK, see Ann Hodgson, Ken Spours & Martyn Waring (Eds) (2011) *Post-Compulsory Education across the United Kingdom: policy, organization and governance*. Bedford Way Papers. London: Institute of Education, University of London.
- [9] A number of campaigns for progressive education have emerged in recent years, such as Whole Education (<http://www.wholeeducation.org>), which acts as an umbrella for a range of related initiatives.
- [10] An interesting set of articles on mutualism and reciprocity (e.g. Anthony Painter) can be found in *Labour's Future*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford & Alan Lockey, published by Soundings and Open Left. <http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/ebooks/laboursfuture.html>
- [11] Lawrence Pratchett suggests that strategies for localism have to distinguish between 'freedom from' higher authority and 'freedom to' bring about change, which involves possessing the power to collectively reshape localities – see L. Pratchett (2004) Local Autonomy, Local Democracy and the 'New Localism', *Political Studies*, 52(2), 358-375. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2004.00484.x>
- [12] Janet Newman offers an excellent account of New Labour's 'adaptive managerialism' in (2001) *Modernising Governance: New Labour, policy and society*. London: Sage/Open University Press.
- [13] The most comprehensive recent researched case for lifelong learning is a volume by Tom Schuller & David Watson (2009) *Learning through Life: inquiry into the future for lifelong learning (IFLL)*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

- [14] See, for example, Richard Sennett (2008) *The Craftsman*. London: Allen Lane.
- [15] See an upcoming piece by Michael Young for an argument from the Left about the importance of subjects in the school curriculum: 'The Return to Subjects: a sociological perspective on the UK Coalition Government's approach to the 14-19 curriculum', *The Curriculum Journal*.
- [16] This is an aim of UnionLearn and its approach to workplace skill development through union bargaining (<http://www.unionlearn.org.uk>).
- [17] See Alison Fuller & Lorna Unwin, *Towards Expansive Apprenticeships*. ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme.
<http://www.tlrp.org/pub/documents/apprenticeshipcommentaryFINAL.pdf>
- [18] See Martin Yarnit (forthcoming) Retaking the High Ground: towards a persuasive progressive position on schooling, in *Education for the Good Society*. Compass publications.
- [19] Ewart Keep (2006) State Control of the English VET System: playing with the biggest train set in the world, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 58(1), 47-64. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13636820500505819>

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