The Crisis in Education

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Abstract

In this article it will first be demonstrated that those who think that the educational system should be fostering the competencies which make for enterprise are correct. Thereafter the often surprising barriers which must be overcome if educational programmes which foster such qualities are to be more widely introduced are discussed.

Overview: Fostering Competencies

Education involves Fostering Competencies rather than Conveying Knowledge.

Most official documents[10, 11, 17, 21, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28] which specify the goals of general education emphasise problem-solving ability, the ability to work with others, enterprise skills, leadership, and the ability to understand and influence what happens in society. This is true for the UK, the US and other countries. These views are echoed in surveys of the opinions of teachers, pupils, parents, employees and employers — in Ireland, England, Scotland the USA and Belgium. The opinions of all of these groups are supported by research into the qualities which are actually required at work and in society. The qualities which have been mentioned and others like them are required by machine operatives, navvies, bus drivers, small businessmen, civil servants, doctors, scientists, managers, and by politicians. They are also required to use leisure in a satisfying way if economic and social development, rather than conflict, is to occur. At the present time, these qualities are at a particularly low ebb in the UK in comparison with societies like Germany and the US, and, in particular, in comparison with such places as Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore. In the UK there is very little interest in innovation, finding ways of doing things more efficiently, finding new things to do or better ways of doing them, working as part of a team to accomplish a worthwhile goal, contributing to a public debate about what is in the long term interests of society, or working for the long term good of society. Understanding of such concepts as "participation in management", "industrial democracy", "management", and even "wealth" are highly dysfunctional.

Despite the demonstrated importance of fostering these competencies, values, and understandings, most schools — at least in the UK, France, Belgium, the US, and Australia — do not even attempt to foster them. As a result, schools are among the least developmental institutions in our society. More than two thirds of 20 year olds say they have been better able to identify and develop their talents at work compared with school. Not only do schools generally fail to foster these qualities, many actually stifle them and foster inappropriate beliefs, understandings and values. The bottom line is that some two thirds of the money spent on secondary and third-level "education" is wasted. Nowhere in the world has efficient full time secondary education for all been provided. Yet we spend more than 12% of GNP on "education".

The fact that we spend so much on a useless activity is not, in itself, a bad thing: the great engines of economic development — the myths which make it possible to organise labour in productive activity — have always involved useless activities. These have included building pyramids and churches, trading in opium or gold, building nuclear "defence" systems, and developing a warehouse, transportation, banking, and accounting system which makes up two thirds of the "cost" of every article.

Barriers to Continuing to Provide "Useless" Education

There are, however, serious barriers in the way of continuing to offer a costly but useless educational system[1]. These hinge on the public's disillusion and mistrust.

1. **Public awareness.** The first of these barriers is that the general population is now well aware that the educational system has been unable to deliver the promised benefits: economic and social development, jobs for all, equality, and the opportunity for each pupil to identify, develop, and get recognition for, his or her talents.

2. **Public mistrust.** The second barrier is a corollary of the first: more and more people now appreciate that when most educationists speak of developing human potential they are either creating jobs for their colleagues or are engaging in a form of double talk which enables them to legitimise an extremely expensive system which does little more than allocate occupational position and status. This has been described by Jencks as a means of legitimating the rationing of privilege in a secular age. The public now mistrusts educationists.

3. The certification dilemma. The third reason why it will in future be more difficult to use "education" as a Keynesian hole-digging-and-filling operation is that many people now understand the horns of the certification dilemma It has, on the one hand, become obvious both that examination courses do not foster many useful competencies and that examination passes do not testify to the possession of important competencies. On the other hand, it has become clear that educational "qualifications" are used to control competition for jobs and thus create protected occupations whose members are able to command high salaries because of the "shortage" of "qualified" personnel. As a result, certificates which afford entry to protected occupations have great economic value. People are therefore prepared to pay heavily for an opportunity to compete for them — especially when teachers claim to be able to help them to compete successfully. As the public has become aware of this dilemma they have demanded a more cost-effective, "no frills", educational system and emphasised the need for a single, clear, and unarguable criterion of merit for allocating position and status.

Despite these problems, many people still recognise that educational environments both could and should develop the skills and talents of those being educated. This is why many people still insist that schools should embrace more of the wider goals of general education. In our surveys[3] more than 50% of pupils wanted schools to do more to achieve 90% of the objectives we asked about.

4. Barriers to Re-Deploying Existing Resources. The problems facing educational policy makers is to re-deploy existing resources. But they have to do so in a situation in which there is considerable resentment at what is going on, hostility toward those responsible for administering the system (they have, after all, conned the public in the past) and toward those who are likely to do well out of it, and widespread recognition that what is going on at present, while educationally unjustifiable, is nevertheless extremely important from the point of view of gaining a relative advantage. This means that teachers who are able to work the system for the benefit of their pupils will strenuously resist change. So will those pupils and parents who are doing well out of it.

5. Other barriers. If these were the only barriers to introducing a more developmental and cost-effective educational system, those interested in promoting it would have a hard enough task. But these are not the only barriers. One of the other barriers is that the kinds

of educational programme which are required to foster qualities like the ability to make one's own observations, the ability to identify and solve problems, the ability to take initiative, and the ability to get other people to work together effectively demand educational processes which are most easily provided in homes, communities and workplaces.

Fostering Competencies in Workplace and School

1. Individualised learning. If one is to foster such qualities one must create situations in which people can practice doing these things and thus learn to do them more effectively. Yet these are all difficult, demanding and frustrating activities. No one is going to make the effort required to practice them unless what they are doing is important to them. This not only points to the need for individualised educational programmes — individualised, that is, in relation to each pupil's values, priorities and talents — it also suggests that the tasks undertaken must be important to society.

2. Learning by example. But practise is not the only way in which qualities like initiative, adventurousness, and leadership can be developed. People can also learn from the example of others. But one only learns from example if those from whom one is learning are doing something one believes to be important. And it is not only their observable behaviour — the *results* of their thinking and planning — which it is important to see and to copy. The mental, emotional and striving processes which lie behind that behaviour are also important. So, if people are to develop the competencies which make for adventurousness, enterprise, leadership, and the willingness and the ability to understand and influence the direction in which society moves, those who are to learn to do these things must be exposed to people who already do them — and exposed to them in such a way that they can share in their thought processes, their feelings, their anticipations, and their reflection on things which have gone wrong. In this way they can learn to be sensitive to the cues which beckon and point toward an activity which is likely to pay off, which tell one when corrective action is necessary, or which tell one that things are getting out of hand and one had better either get help or stop doing whatever one is doing. They can learn how to turn a chance observation to advantage.

3. Learning on the job. Experienes gained in the course of working on tasks which are personally

important and when working with other people who share one's concerns are special. The Youth Training Scheme branch of the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) is thus correct when it asserts — to the annoyance of many educators — that such qualities are best fostered and developed on the job[21]. The problem with their standpoint is that few British supervisors and managers think it is part of their job to think about trainees' talents and interests, to create developmental environments in which the trainee can practice and develop these qualities, or to share with their trainees their own thoughts and feelings as they carry out important tasks. Confronted with this observation, most British people exclaim "Of course not!" However, not only have researchers like Lyle Spencer[34] shown that the tendency to think about, place and develop the talents of subordinates is one of the competencies which distinguishes more from less effective supervisors and managers, our own work[31] shows that managers in Japan and Singapore do it as a matter of course. Since there is no way anyone other than supervisors and managers can provide such assistance throughout life, it follows that the target of MSC's intervention must be supervisors and managers, not trainees, and that educators have a crucial — if nonconventional — role to play in the process of developing the talents of supervisors and managers.

4. School-based programmes. Fortunately for educators, work is not the only setting in which such qualities can be fostered. If teachers adopt such processes as interdisciplinary, competency-oriented, enquiry-based, project work grounded in the environment around the school and explicitly set out to embody the important features of work in that activity — a *real* task to do, variety, the ability to tap a wide range of alternative talents — then educational environments can be made more developmental. In this context it is of great interest to note that more effective teachers, like more effective managers, are the ones who show a greater tendency to think about, harness, build upon, and develop the talents of their pupils. And they are also more likely to share their own thoughts, their own strivings, and their own feelings with them.

Unfortunately, the view that our most important competencies are best developed on the job (or through educational programmes which have many of the features of work) is threatening to many of those who have dedicated themselves to traditional forms of education.

The resources required by teachers

A major barrier in the way of introducing competency-oriented education into schools is that, if teachers are to foster such qualities, they need to be able to assess each student's concerns, interests, and talents, invent an individualised developmental programme for each student, monitor his or her reactions to those experiences, intervene to take corrective action when necessary and, at the end of this difficult and demanding process, identify the particular competencies which each student has developed in such a way that they will stand to the student's credit when the time comes to scramble for a job. This is an extraordinarily demanding set of activities and it explains why only about 5% of teachers undertake "project work" effectively.

To implement competency-oriented education effectively it is not only necessary, as Burgess and Adams[8] almost alone emphasise, to devote a great deal of time to guidance, counselling and appraisal. It is also necessary for the teachers concerned to have both a good theoretical framework to enable them to think about the talents which might be developed and the ways in which they are to be developed, and tools to help them to implement such individualised educational programmes.

Such demands may seem unrealistic. But the reality is that such diagnostic and prescriptive tools are required if teachers are to foster effectively even such fundamental competencies as the ability to read. This may strike the reader as an absurd statement — until it is acknowledged that very few children — particularly those who have learning difficulties — learn to read at school. As Tizard[36] has shown, it is parents who, in general, provide the sensitive help and encouragement which is required to enable children to find material which interests them and who provide the individualised help which is required to identify the child's specific difficulties so that remedial action can be taken. Once again, it is those teachers who have, personally, privately, and painstakingly — over perhaps 20 years — developed strategies for providing such individualised reading programmes who are the apparent exceptions to this rule.

Another barrier to the wider introduction of multiple-competency-oriented educational programmes into schools is that the qualities we have been discussing are value-laden. Not only will people only practice and develop these competencies in the course of pursuing goals they value, competent behaviour is dependent on having a view of society and one's role in it which leads one to feel that one has a right to ask questions, a right to expect people in authority to answer those questions, and a right to seek to influence the wideer social constraints on one's behaviour. Many parents, teachers, managers and politicians find this notion threatening — not least because they lack the competencies which are

required to manage independent, thoughtful, people who identify and tackle their own problems.

Re-educating teachers and parents

One corollary of this observation is that much "education" is directed towards the wrong people. The most important targets for educational programmes emerge as being teachers, not pupils; managers not employees; the leaders of our society, not "the disadvantaged"; adults not children. We can no longer lay the blame for our social and economic ills at the door of the poor and those who are least advantaged in the educational system.

A second corollary of this observation, taken together with the fact that such qualities can only be practiced and developed whilst people are working toward goals they care about, is that any attempt to introduce genuinely educational programmes into schools will be met by opposition at all levels from PTAs upwards. PTA committees which aspire to influence the curriculum repeatedly dissolve in internal strife. All their members want change. But as soon as some parents start talking about encouraging question-asking, independence, initiative, or adventurousness, chaos ensues. Some parents, worried that they will no longer be able to control ("manage") their children, start to raise doubts. It is then suggested that their children need not join the programmes. This in itself creates problems because it challenges deep-rooted beliefs about equality and uniformity in public provision. It is feared that the children of the best managers will, yet again, get the best deal. But, before long, a more serious objection emerges. What is being said is, not that these qualities are unimportant, but that they are *too* important. If schools helped some pupils (and not others) to develop them, those children would do better in life than the others. That would be unfair. This is one example of one of the most important dilemmas facing educators: many people want their children to obtain benefits which are more likely to be attained if they possess competencies like those we have discussed. But they often do not want their children to possess those competencies (e.g. independence), still less others (such as abrasiveness or pushiness) which are psychologically bonded to them. They do not want their children to devote their time to their careers — or even to improving society — if this means reducing the time they spend in affiliative behaviour with their families. They do not want their children to become socially and geographically mobile — particularly if this means that they are likely to neglect them in their old age. Finally, as it becomes clear that competent behaviour involves tackling some of the

wider social constraints on what one can do and that encouraging pupils to tackle these constraints means influencing their beliefs about society, how it is structured, and how it should work, some parents articulate their (justifiable) fear of political brainwashing. In Britain the Manpower Services Commission(MSC) has found itself in precisely the same trap as a result of advocating that schools (through TVEI) and employers (through YTS)[39] foster those qualities which make for enterprise and personal effectiveness[21, 22, 23, 24]. Finding that this led schools, colleges, and employers to encourage their trainees to consider political processes the MSC reacted by banning political education!

Neither the members of PTA committees nor teachers in general are equipped to handle the tensions which stem from the value laden nature of any education worth the name. As a result, attempts to introduce educational programmes which would foster these qualities simply die. Schools end up working toward the lowest common denominator in education i.e. "working class values" ("sit still, do as you are told, learn what is put in front of you") and examination achievement.

Ironically, the strength of private schools is that they can avoid this dilemma, foster these more important competencies, and inculcate both values and political beliefs. Their very effectiveness in these overwhelmingly important "non-academic" areas is precisely why they are so unpopular with parents who would refuse to send their children to them even if they could.

The point is that state schools will continue to be unable to foster the qualities which most people think they should be fostering without radical changes in beliefs about the way public institutions should function and without opportunities for adults to consider and resolve some of the dilemmas which have been mentioned being made available. It follows that if education is to be introduced into schools adult civic education is a top priority.

Certificating value-laden competencies.

A further barrier to wider dissemination of competency-oriented educational programmes in schools stems from the fact that what happens in schools is determined by what is *assessed* at the point of interface between schools and society. It is not determined by the wishes or priorities of ministers of education, government committees, employers, parents, teachers or pupils, or by objective employment needs. It follows that, if schools are to foster the qualities we have been concerned with in this article, and, equally importantly, if employees are to be able to get credit for qualities they

have developed "on the job" (or in the course of YTS programmes[21]) — and thus become able to compete for promotion with those who enter their occupations with higher "educational" "qualifications", some way of assessing these other qualities must be found.

The thought of assessing these value-laden qualities makes most people — including myself — extremely uncomfortable. Yet I can see no other way of preventing social vandals like some of the people who currently occupy a number of the most senior positions in our public and private sector organizations getting into those positions. Nor can I see any way of avoiding the problem that, at present, evaluation research, and, as a result, all subsequent discussion of its implications, tends to focus on the goals which are easily assessed and neglects the more important goals of general education. The costs of *not* developing such measures are enormous: These costs include inability to create developmental climates in schools, inability to develop, utilise and reward people's talents for their benefit and for the benefit of society, inability to undertake useful evaluations, and inability to keep social vandals out of influential positions. Instead of resisting the development of means of assessing these qualities, therefore, we must think about how to guard against their misuse. This means ensuring that their use is publicly supervised.

Innovations needed
A final barrier to the dissemination of competency-oriented educational programmes stems from the forms and procedures of accountability employed in the public service. At present, teachers are not really expected to pay attention to their pupils' needs and concerns and then invent better ways of meeting their needs. Rather, they are viewed as mere hired hands whose job it is to do the bidding of distant elected representatives — to whom they are accountable for little more than the petty cash.

To overcome this problem we need to develop new expectations of teachers, new criteria of accountability, new tools to help us to find out whether those criteria are being met, and new structures to promote and encourage innovation.

1. Expectations of teachers. We should expect teachers to invent ways of tapping individual pupils' motives and meeting their needs. We should expect them to stimulate, and thereafter contribute to, the debates which are required to evolve new ways of thinking about society. We should expect them to contribute to the evolution of the structures which are needed to enable adults to develop the competencies which are required to manage society effectively and to enable them to help each other to develop their talents. We should expect teachers to try to influence the wider social forces (such as the expectations of parents and directors of education, and the narrow range of competencies tested by examination boards) which otherwise so much limit the competencies they are able to help their pupils to develop. We must expect them to insist on the collection of relevant information about how well their pupils are developing and how well their schools and the educational system as a whole is performing and to take the steps which are needed to ensure that good decisions are taken on the basis of that information.

Obviously no one teacher can do all of these things. But the teaching profession does need to encompass and support a significant number of people who do each of them.

2. Criteria of accountability. If teachers are to do the things just mentioned they must be able to get credit for having done so. That is, the criteria against which their performance is judged must include them. The obvious difficulty of doing this leads one to tend to recoil . . . until one encounters one of those elegant rare strokes of genius. Burgess and Adams [g] have suggested that the procedures which they — together with such people as Stansbury [35] and Spencer[34] — have developed for making statements about pupils' competence be applied to teachers. Teachers would be asked to keep records of events which went well and poorly for them, what led up to them, what they did, and what the outcome was. In this way they would be able to get recognition for their concerns, talents and accomplishments.

3. Structures to promote innovation. The structures which are required if a more innovative and more effective educational system is to evolve must promote more contact between innovative teachers and enable them to initiate more concerted attempts to advance basic understanding of fundamental educational processes so that chronic problems can be tackled. The network of monitoring and validating groups supported by a measurement and educational research service proposed by the Irish Minister for Education's Committee on the Intermediate Certificate Examination — which is in many ways similar to the framework of validating and accrediting agencies later advocated by Burgess and Adams[k] — would meet this need. It cannot be too strongly emphasised that considerable time needs to be allotted to what Kanter has termed "parallel

organisation" activity concerned with innovation. But this does not mean that more teachers are required. The data which were briefly summarised earlier shows that if teachers spent less time in front of their blackboards and more time managing the educational process, the benefits for pupil development would be substantial.

4. Monitoring structures. To initiate an effective programme of school improvement it is not only necessary to create an innovative climate, to provide tools to enable teachers to find out on an individual and on a collective basis how they are doing, and to implement alternative monitoring and accounting structure, it is necessary to give teeth to information. We are all too familiar with evaluations which simply gather dust. If this problem is to be tackled it will be necessary to make the work of individual administrators, teachers, schools, clusters of schools and administrative departments much more public. A network of public monitoring groups is required to examine the information collected and monitor action taken[12]. Significantly, such a network of monitoring groups would also help the public to discuss and resolve some of the dilemmas mentioned above and thus promote the evolution of new ideas about how public institutions should work. Unfortunately, one does not know many people who would voluntarily devote the necessary time to such activities. It is therefore necessary to recognise that, just as such activities are essential to the success of commercial enterprises, so they are necessary for the effective operation and development of society. The implication of this is that they are truly wealth-creating activities and, as such, merit remuneration.

5. New administrative concepts and tools. It is worth making explicit a message embedded in the last few paragraphs. This is that to run modern, information-based, societies effectively we need new concepts of bureaucracy and democracy and new tools to administer them. One of the most important functions of education — significantly not one emphasised by parents, teachers, or employers — is, therefore, to promote the evolution of these new concepts, understandings, and tools.

Concluding Comments

I have chosen to devote the space allotted to me to describing some of the causes of the chronic crisis which has persisted in education for the past 25 years and to discuss the many non-obvious steps which need to be taken if that crisis is to be tackled. The suggestions which have been made in many ways contradict con-

ventional wisdom. The philosophy of the Department of Education and Science in England, the Scottish Education Department, and the US Department of Education over the past 40 years has been that if teachers were told to do things they would do them. If they did not, that demonstrated a lack of ability or goodwill. Such incompetence or insubordination, when discovered, was thought to indicate a need for more training or a harsher staff appraisal system. Our work shows that this is naive. The problems in education have multiple and deep-rooted causes. To overcome them we need new ways of thinking about the issues and new ways of doing things. In most cases a great deal of fundamental research is required. However, the research which is needed must be carried out in an action context and must address issues which at first sight seem far removed from the problem. It is a symptom of the deficiencies in the system we have created that neither developing better ways of thinking about things nor the execution of fundamental research in an action context (and tackling problems not immediately obvious to civil service administrators) attract funds. What Schon[12] has termed the Technical-Rational as contrasted with the Reflection-in-Action model of the professions — including education — has become deeply embedded in our thinking. Research is not seen as a route to the solution of pressing problems. Rather, in line with the educational system in general, it is seen as a route to the personal advancement of the individual concerned — and this advancement is most easily achieved by doing "pure" "academic" work which tackles problems identified in the "disciplinary" literature. The question now is: Given that taxpayers have seen through both the educational and the research rhetoric, how can a more appropriate set of expectations and structures be created? If there is a single key issue which educators need to address, this is it.

Notes and References

1. This may not be true in America, where there seems to be a greater willingness to turn a blind eye to what is going on, both in the educational system and elsewhere. Indeed it can be argued that American schools may foster the ability to engage in rhetoric required to justify immoral activity and in this way teach more people to "labour", in Willis's (1977) sense, more effectively than did the British schools he studied.[18] (Ref.)

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