

Education and Politics: Learning, Inequality and Social Justice

Discussion led by Bob Fryer

Summary

There is no dispute about the importance of education in our society. It may be the most important driver of human development, and the capability to transmit knowledge and understanding from one generation to the next may be the basis of civilisation.

Given the perceived importance of education it might be expected that a priority of policy-making and government would be to “get it right” in some sense. Achieving a consensus on what education is for and how best to do it would seem to be near or perhaps at the heart of good governance.

The theme of the discussion was that education policy does not seem to address the issues of inequality and social justice.

Education is failing many of those who need it the most.

Why and what to do about it are the unresolved questions.

Discussion

Several themes recurred in the general discussion..

Teaching and teachers

In order to learn pupils have to be motivated to do so. So teachers have to be effective motivators. But the selection procedures for those in teaching positions rarely consider their abilities as motivators.

Local entrepreneurs could make a great contribution to motivating pupils in schools

Large class sizes make learning difficult.

The rewards available for teachers do not reflect their importance.

Purpose and benefits of education

These were identified considerably as financial in the sense of obtaining a higher paying job, and consequently being able to benefit from better housing, food, medical attention, leisure and all the other aspects of life that can be improved by the ability to pay more.

However not all educated people achieve higher paying positions; and conversely some of those who actually achieve financial success are not particularly well educated in the formal sense. This observation though obviously true did not seem to be a justification for more or less formal education, merely noted as an anomaly.

Some considered that the benefits of education are not necessarily or exclusively financial. Some forms of outstanding achievement might not lead to financial success. Achievement of individual potential was considered to be a valid goal of education, whatever that potential might be.

Assessment and grading

Educational progress is defined by assessment and grading. Normally a particular grading is the prerequisite for further education or a career path, which might lead to job or professional opportunities and eventual financial benefit. The consequence of failure to meet a particular grade at a young age may effectively be to bar progress and advancement.

The UK system tests and assesses more than any other country. Educational priorities seem to be centred on identifying and recognising as winners those who achieve the grades. But little thought or comfort is given to those who do not achieve.

Choosing one's parents.

The choice of parent is perhaps the most important "decision" that a child makes in relation to his or her future in relation to life opportunities and personal development and particularly so in connection with further or higher education. Progressive educators consider that education systems should make this choice less important in the sense of providing a good education for all irrespective of parental background. To some limited extent this has been achieved, but far and away the most important determinant of a child's future remains the background and relative prosperity of the parent.

Education providers

Major organisations such as the NHS and British Army provide education; no private organisations are comparable.

Parents, extended family and the community all educate.

The Market in Education

The introduction of quasi markets in both education supply and demand has been the strategy.

Whether this approach has been effective in addressing the issues around social justice and inequality seems doubtful.

Conclusion

There is clear evidence that successful learning and educational achievement can lead to improved life chances; and also clear evidence that the many who do not succeed in this way remain disadvantaged.

That too few people benefit from education is a major unaddressed failing.