

Education: An Outsider's View

*John Hyde*

All of my tertiary and some of my secondary education was undertaken in shearing sheds, while driving tractors in ever-decreasing circles, from books, friends and Joint Party Room debates, and from other informal sources. Obviously I have missed something, but was it worth pursuing? The 38 years since I left school have, by any objective measure, been good to me.

Nor am I an exceptional case. Those of my friends with tertiary qualifications are not conspicuously more wealthy, more sociable, nor more content than those with less formal schooling than they have, nor do they seem to contribute more to the common weal. This is not to say that my more-schooled friends have not made good use of their schooling---we may merely have exploited different aptitudes and opportunities. The success of the relatively unschooled does imply, however, that extended formal education is not for everybody and it casts doubt upon attempts to increase retention rates. Even if, on average, formal education is an excellent thing, it may not be so at the margin.

Moreover, it may be the case that our centralised, bureaucratic education system does not offer very much to some people who could gain greater benefit from a different system. For all that we know about it, it might offer few people the education they would choose if given greater choice. If that were the case, it would be serious enough if it affected voluntary schooling, and much more serious if it affected children undergoing compulsory schooling. In spite of vast resources employed in education, most people are unhappy with it. They feel that the system often fails our children.

During my primary and early secondary schooling I benefited from some teachers who, at the time, I thought were excellent, and about whom I have not changed my mind. For better or worse, they had a considerable influence upon my view of education today. Mine is only an "outsider's" view, but for what that is worth I believe in the following heresies.

Schooling fails to educate, not because the pupil cannot "relate" to it, but because it is often banal. Some teachers

cannot, or will not, identify what is, in fact, the essence of any topic. Instead they occupy hours of pupils' valuable time doing things for which there are better uses. Let me illustrate:

A recent TV program gave high praise to a science master who had his class make vehicles powered by escaping air. This demonstrated Newton's third law---namely, that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. He wasted the class's time. No pupil would have been unfamiliar with the behaviour of balloons. A few words would have made the point as my physics master once made it. The time spent making little carts could have been better spent, say, identifying other examples of the law in action, thinking about its implications, and trying to find exceptions. Teachers who waste their pupils' time and insult their pupils' intelligence tend also to lose their pupils' attention and respect.

Students taking the Higher School Certificate in NSW were offered for study: *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* by Keneally, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf* by Albee, *Equus* by Schaffer, *For the Patriarch* by Loukakis, *The Cure and the Treatment* by Kocan, and *Catcher in the Rye* by Salinger---all, as Professor David Armstrong put it, are "contemporary works of minor distinction". Couldn't the list have included even one work that had stood the test of time---a classic that the student could be reasonably confident would reward his effort?

Professor Leonard Peikoff, a New York philosopher, in a lecture called "Why Johnny Can't Think", discussed a tendency in schooling of which the aforementioned demonstration of Newton's Third Law may have been an example. Professor Peikoff drew attention to the tendency to present children with complex concrete situations and then to leave it at that.

Peikoff said this: " An education that trains a child's mind would be one that teaches him to make connections, to generalise, to see the wider issues and principles involved in the topic. It would achieve this feat by presenting material to him in a calculated conceptually proper order, with the necessary context and with proof that validates each stage. This would be an education that teaches a child to think." I add: It is also what a child can enjoy!

Finally, there is the question of providing guidance in the choice of right over wrong---i.e. in making moral distinctions. My old school's motto is the one word, "Duty", but so passe has all discussion of morals become, that I doubt that its implications are much discussed these days. Why do cynical middle-aged teachers think that the young also have lost their idealism? The young are very concerned with the problem of making appropriate moral judgements---and not only to apply them to other people. Unfortunately, for many years, such moral instruction as they have had from their teachers has been dominated by the few Marxists and others who emphasise collective responsibility over individual responsibility. And why the screaming silence from the Christian and Jewish churches?

Finally, a word in defence of teachers. There are many "good" teachers. My children enjoyed them as I enjoyed them. But they are as frustrated and bored as their students are, by education systems which do not concentrate on the ability to discriminate wisely. And, sometimes they are also overwhelmed because some parents have abandoned the moral and intellectual upbringing of their young. Or so it seems to me, from outside the system.

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