

THE ACER FINDINGS

I was once surprised to find that the headmasters of some State Government Schools, a senior employed official of the Teachers' Union, and so many Labor MPs should choose private education for their own children. All these people enjoyed high incomes and could obviously find the money to pay school fees by forgoing other expenditure, but I had expected them to have more faith in the government sector. They were all people who were in an excellent position to be well informed about education.

I was also surprised that a friend, employed as a fireman, should pinch and scrape to put two sons through one of WA's most expensive private schools, and I never cease to be surprised at the number of children from broken homes in the boarding houses of private schools, or how much less well equipped most of the private schools are now, compared with the gear and plush buildings of the State schools.

For some reason many middle and lower income people choose to forgo holidays, better homes, cars and financial peace of mind to pay for an education for their children in less well equipped schools instead of using the taxpayer financed State system.

Most private schools are run by churches, but it is not for religious education that children are sent to church schools. Most of the parents neither attend church themselves nor require it of their children.

In the early 1970s Whitlam ran advertisements showing pictures of Canberra schools and won votes promising to build schools everywhere like them. That advertisement wouldn't work now; people say less about the quality of facilities and more about the quality of teaching. The goodwill, educators commanded then, has now been dissipated by teacher excesses, but parental concern is no less because it has shifted focus.

In spite of the Whitlam funding, which improved the State schools relative command over resources, there has been a considerable flight to private schools. In 1970, 78.2% of all children were educated at government schools, but by 1982 this proportion had slipped to 76.3%.

If the flight from government schools is a flight to quality, then a system which discriminates against private schools also discriminates against children whose parents cannot afford to buy them out of the State schools.

In 1975 the Australian Council of Educational Research published findings concerning the basic levels of literacy and numeracy of 10 and 14 year olds. These findings also facilitated comparison of the success of three different groups of schools in imparting these basic skills. The schools compared were government schools, Catholic parochial schools and the better endowed and known private schools. The government schools did least well.

While the success of the non-Catholic schools could have been explained in terms of the unrepresentative children which attended them, or more resources per pupil, no such explanation was possible in the case of the Catholic parochial schools. These schools had bigger classes, poorer buildings, and fewer teaching aids than government schools and drew their children from relatively low income families.

The tests only measured two aspects of education - basic reading and basic arithmetic - and it is possible that schools which taught these poorly taught other skills well. The evidence is silent on the point.

In 1980 the surveys were repeated. It would have been instructive to know whether 1975 data was repeated, or whether the government sector had improved its relative performance, but the researchers were forbidden to release comparative data.

Families who sacrifice so much to educate their children, saving the taxpayers millions of dollars, are entitled to any evidence which might indicate whether their sacrifice is well or ill made. Suppressing information is like burning books.

We now spend 6.1% of gross product on education (4.5% in 1970). Even if the value of education is no more than cost, we have much to gain from an education system which best educates. Comparison of present practices is the surest way of knowing how to best provide for the future. People too afraid to release research findings have no place in an education system which should pride itself on dissemination of the truth.