



RECEIVED 18 MAR 1988

Education Quartet Part 3

# Aims of schooling the importance of grounding

Oliver Letwin



CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

This is a version of a paper recently delivered to the Tory Philosophy Group, expanded in the light of subsequent debate and conversations. The author would like to acknowledge the helpful comments made by the Group.

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ISBN 1-870265-22-X

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*Printed in England by G. Donald & Co. Ltd.  
92-94 Church Road, Mitcham, Surrey, CR4 3TD*

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## 1

### Aims of schooling

SINCE THE 1870S ENGLISH POLITICIANS HAVE BEEN WORRYING ABOUT the organisation of schools: Church or State? Local or national? Comprehensive or selective? Large or small? Sixth form or tertiary? These are choices which have become familiar to every politician. The merits and demerits of each possibility have been exhaustively discussed, and a whole new breed of 'educationalists' have come forward to participate, equipped with enough technical jargon to sink a battleship.

It is remarkable that, in all the discussion about systems and organisation, not much has been said about the aims of schooling. Indeed, for many years, the discussion has been carried on – and huge changes have been brought about – with hardly any reference to the school's ultimate purpose.

The time has come to stop talking and acting in such a cavalier way, and to ask instead what schools are for. Why do we force children to attend, day in day out, these delapidated brick and concrete buildings with their smell of stale cabbage and detergent, their strange assortment of teachers and their large quantities of paper and ink? Is it just, in reality, a holding operation – a way of penning up the little dears while their parents get on with their work? Or is there something more to it, something that is actually meant to be achieved in a school which could not be achieved by leaving a child free to wonder and watch like the children of gypsies and nomads?

Two kinds of answer are usually given to this question. One concentrates on the input – what the pupil is taught. The other concentrates on the output – what the pupil learns. Those who concentrate on the input invest the curriculum with enormous powers. Teach the right things, they say, and all will somehow be well. In this, they find powerful support not only from a long tradition of thought stretching back to Plato – probably the first designer of a 'core curriculum' – but also, more recently, from Matthew Arnold. In his *General Report* of 1880, Arnold made clear that his aim was to ensure a proper input by introducing children to a curriculum that included a wide range of subjects. 'In general', he wrote:



our schoolchildren, of from eight years to ten, should all be receiving instruction in these eight matters, reading, writing, arithmetic, poetry or poetic literature, grammar, geography, elementary natural science and music.

This is not so much the wrong thing as the wrong kind of thing. By concentrating on what is being taught instead of on what is being learned, the advocates of input (like the people who concern themselves with the organisation of schools without considering the aims of schooling) run the risk of attempting to provide cures without having diagnosed the disease. To say anything sensible about the aim or purpose of a school, one has to concentrate on the output – the end of a pupil's schooldays.

Many teachers would no doubt say that the quest for such a description of the desired effect is fruitless because any given form of schooling will have different effects on different pupils; but this argument is invalid. Of course it is true that every pupil is different from all others; but the proper conclusion to draw is that to have the desired effect each pupil needs to learn different things in a different way, not that the same things should be taught to all pupils regardless of the fact that this will have different effects upon them.

In a relatively clear-cut form of training such as medicine, the point is accepted as obvious. Everybody knows that the aim is to produce doctors who are capable of curing people, and medical training is adapted to meet this commonly agreed goal – with courses and teaching methods following rather than dictating the desired end. In schools, the aim is not so obvious; but the principle ought to be the same: first decide what effect you want to have on your pupils by the time they leave, and then arrange things so that all of them, with their different capacities and inclinations come as close to achieving this as possible.

To advocate this is by no means to advocate that every pupil should, on leaving school, look exactly the same as all other pupils. Nothing could be less desirable. Pupils should be, and will be, as different from one another at the end of their schooling as they were at the beginning – indeed, in a good school, they will be more different (and certainly more interestingly different) from one another at the end than they

were at the beginning. But the differences ought to have a common theme. This is true of morality. We all aim to be morally good – but this single aim does not compromise our individuality, and would not do so even if we all fulfilled the aim by becoming morally good, because we would be good in quite different ways. That is the characteristic of a quality like goodness: it is sufficiently general not to constrain individuality.

If schooling is to avoid constraining individuality, its aim must be to produce similarly general qualities in the pupils. What are these qualities, sufficiently general to allow for the particular character of each pupil, but sufficiently specific to establish a school as something with a definite role of its own?

## An educated person

The usual answer is that children are sent to school to become educated. This, at least, concentrates on the general quality of the output – what the pupil has learned – rather than on the input. But there is debate and confusion about what ‘becoming an educated person’ means. At one time, education and eternity were thought to be closely linked. When Dr Alington, headmaster of Eton, was asked by an anxious mother what he prepared his boys for, his answer was short, unequivocal, and pious: ‘Death, madam, death’. More recently, and in other places, secular morality has sometimes taken the place of eschatological ambitions; the American philosopher, John Dewey, wrote that:

when the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within . . . a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely and harmonious.

Others have seen education as a cultivation of the individual. Coleridge, for instance, described it as ‘that which draws forth and trains up the germ of free-agency in the individual’, and D.H Lawrence said that it meant ‘leading out the individual nature in each man and woman to its true fullness’. Others yet, regard education as something intrinsically intellectual: Michael Oakshott, in a famous essay described it as ‘the process of learning, in circumstances of direction and restraint, how to recognise and make something of ourselves’.

The collection of widely differing views about the true nature of being educated, and hence about the aims of schooling, has been enough to dizzy and appal the administrators – particularly when they are also faced with the views of philistines pressing for more practicality, and with the opposing clamour of the Arts lobby who want every child to learn Dante and Caribbean music. The British Civil Service has dealt with this problem in its time-honoured fashion. With absolute sang froid

and total lack of discrimination, it has collected every current idea about the purpose of schooling and the nature of education into a grandiloquent but entirely incoherent melange, aptly summarised in Burgess and Adams’s account of one Green Paper as the cultivation of ‘enquiring minds, respect for people, world understanding, use of language, appreciation of economic controls, mathematical and other skills, and knowledge of cultural achievements’. What are our schools meant to do when they are served up with that kind of administrative pea-soup?

But the trouble is not just that people have unclear ideas about the nature of education. Indeed in practice most of us know how to spot an educated person. We recognise, in practice, that someone can know a lot without being in any sense educated, as is true of many people with PhDs. We recognise a certain scepticism (however deeply buried) which marks out the educated person from other, possibly knowledgeable, but uneducated people: an understanding that no knowledge is complete, that one does not and cannot in any ultimate sense have ‘the whole answer’ to any complicated question. And we recognise, with this, a certain intellectual tact, a sense of how to approach a new set of ideas, a certain capacity to feel at home in the world of thought.

The real trouble is that this highly desirable condition of being an educated person is not, and could never be, the aim or result of schooling for most people at most schools. It depends too heavily upon fortunate circumstances. Many teachers are not themselves educated people: they may know something or other, but lack any sense of discrimination, intellectual refinement or scepticism. Such teachers may well be able to provide their pupils with something valuable, but they are not able to provide the level of critical self-awareness which will help their pupils to become educated. Moreover, becoming educated is not something which happens automatically to the pupil even if the teacher is himself an educated person and teaches conscientiously, since conscientiousness may fail utterly to produce the spark of inspiration which is required to light the necessary flame of critical self-awareness in the pupil. Becoming educated also requires special qualities on the part of the pupil; he has to be capable of going beyond the mere performance of tasks; he has to be able to abstract from his immediate practical



concerns and understand at least to some degree what he himself is doing, and what steps he might take in the future; he has not merely to reach conclusions but also to understand how those conclusions might be qualified and refined. These are not ordinary capacities. There are plenty of pupils, including some who are competent and intelligent in various respects, who may never become educated, no matter how conscientious or how inspired the teaching. Of course, in any school, there may be some teachers who are sufficiently educated and sufficiently gifted, and some pupils who are sufficiently imaginative. Even in the very worst schools, there may be one or two of each: and in such circumstances, there will be some true education going on. But it will only be in a great school, a school with large numbers of superb teachers and of imaginative and highly intelligent pupils, that one can hope to see large numbers of educated people emerging and even then there will certainly be some pupils who go through a great school and bear no marks of it whatsoever, remaining fundamentally uneducated to the end of their days. It is therefore absurd to impose upon every ordinary school an unfulfillable duty to ensure that all their pupils emerge as educated people. Providing an education is something wonderful, but special.

One of the qualities which marks out a great school is the presence within it of a certain intellectual tolerance – a sense of the importance of eccentricity. This is a vital ingredient if a school is to enable large numbers of its pupils to become truly educated; because eccentricity, properly understood, draws attention to possibilities beyond the obvious and entices pupils to take their eyes off the immediate task, so that they become able to see their own intellectual position in relation to other possible (more refined or more profound) positions. In a great school, there will be large numbers of really interesting eccentrics both among the teachers and among the pupils: people so imaginative that they do not conform to any obvious social or intellectual pattern. But in a great school, eccentricity is not merely tolerated and admired, it is also kept rigorously under control. That is the peculiar quality of such a school: the sense of tradition, the deep orderliness of its daily transactions, the prevailing sense of discipline (both intellectual and social) are such that eccentricity can flourish, entice, enlarge the mind of the onlooker, without

degenerating into mere absurdity and decadence. In anything other than a great school, this delicate balance is unlikely to be achieved. Either eccentricity will be ruthlessly stamped out – depriving pupils of an incentive to transcend the obvious, to acquire a real sense of self awareness and thereby to start becoming educated – or it will rapidly degenerate into a loose absurdity, inspiring nobody. If an ordinary school, in a too concentrated attempt to avoid mediocrity, attempts to cultivate eccentricity without the necessary underpinning of discipline and orderliness, it is all too likely to end, as many of our schools have ended, by falling into sheer pretentiousness and failing to provide anything of real value.

The sad and paradoxical-sounding, but nonetheless important and unchanging fact is that providing an education in the true, full sense of the word – rendering pupils educated people – is not something that most schools can hope to do for most of their pupils. What, then, is their purpose? What is it the duty of most schools to provide for most pupils?

## Grounding comes first

I maintain that the strict duty of every school is to ensure that, by the end of their schooldays, every pupil has what I shall call a grounding. By this, I mean an understanding of those things which it is necessary to understand in order to take a properly independent part in the life of our society. To be such an independent actor, people must be able to read and comprehend information of divers sorts; otherwise, they are unable to make properly independent choices about their jobs, their houses, their everyday purchases, their travel and so forth. They must also be able to make sense of the newspapers, and the spoken words of public life, since how else can they hold independent, informed attitudes about their governors, and the political system? It is essential, too, that people should grasp enough mathematics to see the simple effects of their decisions upon their lives, since otherwise they are constantly at the mercy of others, who will use their ignorance as an opportunity for themselves. And, perhaps most important of all, people must be able to express themselves with sufficient clarity both on paper and in speech, to make themselves fairly understood, since they are otherwise virtually unable to cope with the choices which are the stuff of an independent life in our society, or to be recognised by others as possessors of an independent voice, worthy of being heard in its own right. A person who lacks such a grounding, and is therefore unable to take an independent part in the life of our society, clearly represents a failure on the part of the school or schools which he attended. If we care at all about living in a liberal democracy, in which people are permitted to make choices for themselves, then we are duty-bound to provide everybody with tools which enable them to make and express such choices, on the basis of understanding what is being chosen, rather than as mere arbitrary leaps in the dark. This involves enforcing schooling upon all potential citizens; but it also involves providing, in school, the grounding that validates such compulsion. A person who fails to receive a grounding represents a paradox, because he has been the subject of compulsory schooling which would be justifiable only if the

life of our society is somehow dependent upon his having attended school; yet he has not received what would have justified such compulsion.

Grounding involves acquiring both a range of skills and a certain amount of knowledge – at a level where knowledge and skill are almost indistinguishable from one another. Reading and writing, understanding simple mathematics, and expressing oneself clearly, are of course skills: one has to know how to do them instead of merely knowing that something or other is the case about them. But, in the course of learning, one inevitably acquires certain specific items of knowledge. One learns that certain words refer to certain objects and activities, that  $2+2=4$ , probably also (on the way) that the moon is not made of cheddar cheese, and a number of other items of sheer information. Whether the skills are taught by teaching the information, or whether the information is acquired through teaching the skills, is a matter of teaching practice, rather than of teaching aim – or indeed, simply a matter of luck. But about the aim, the duty, there is no room for disagreement. Every child needs, by whatever method, to have acquired the combination of knowledge and skill which enables him to live in a liberal, democratic society.

The provision of such a grounding is, I believe, the only absolute duty of a school.

Many people concerned with education – and certainly almost all the present educational establishment – would deny this, to the point of finding it outrageous. They would argue that such a concept of schooling is hopelessly narrow, and that any school which provides its pupils with no more than a rudimentary grounding is failing miserably in its duty.

These arguments fail to recognise the extent of the opportunities which are opened up for someone who has a grounding. An individual is, in a most fundamental sense, someone who makes decisions for himself rather than having them made for him by others – someone who has sufficient access to the fruits of civilization to enable him to understand something of what is on offer and to develop real preferences. That is just what a grounding enables a person to do. Like the working man at the Workers' Educational Association, and the audience at the improving lectures of the last century, a person



with a grounding can go to the library and read, go to lectures and listen, ask questions and apprehend any answer that is given in clear English. A person with a grounding has what nobody without one can ever have – a basis upon which to build an understanding of the world.

Of course, a grounding is not the crowning achievement of a school in relation to the encouragement of individuality. A school which provides only a grounding has no right to claim that it has done all that could be done for its pupils' capacity to make independent judgements. That would be to suggest that individuality is an open and shut affair – which it most certainly is not. A person is not simply capable of individual judgement or simply incapable of it. Some people are more capable of it than others. As a person's understanding of his world, of the possibilities within that world, becomes larger, his range of choice widens: he becomes aware of possibilities which his imagination was previously unable to furnish. This is a product not of grounding, but of true education. The two aims of schooling, the essential duty to provide a grounding and the larger, hoped-for goal of enabling pupils to become educated both contribute – at different levels – the encouragement of individuality.

Many educational theorists, and amongst them many who count themselves as conservatives of one sort or another, will no doubt argue that it is both wrong and dangerous to describe the aims of schooling in this very general and abstract way. They will complain that these aims make no mention of the teaching of English history, of scripture, of the encouragement of artistic creativity and musical ability, of training for jobs. Above all, they will complain that no mention is made here of the need for schools to teach sound morals to their pupils. But these omissions are intentional. Contrary to the prevailing fashion, it is neither safe nor right to lay down, from the pulpit or from Whitehall, a whole range of specific skills and items of information that should be taught by every school. Beyond a grounding, which is the indispensable prerequisite for playing an independent role in our society, there is no specific skill which needs to be acquired by every pupil: schools which fail to teach their pupils how to conduct physical experiments or how to speak French or how to play the piano may nevertheless be adequate or even very

good schools. In some narrowly religious schools, for example, none of these things are taught. But still the pupils receive a grounding and (in some cases) emerge as educated people through their study of sacred texts, the languages of their own community and the traditions which are attached to these languages. On what basis has anyone the right to object if children are, by the choice of their parents, provided with a schooling so manifestly suited to their way of life and so clearly justified by its social results?

The idea that a school's aim is to train people for jobs is equally noxious. Acquiring a grounding is probably as important for most jobs that are now done, as it is for living as a citizen in a liberal democratic society; but there are still many jobs that can be filled adequately without any grounding; and there are many more that can be done well by people who are in no sense educated. This is an utter irrelevance from the point of view of schooling; if both grounding and education were unnecessary for every job in the world, that would not detract in the slightest degree from their importance. Jobs are done to provide those who do them and their customers with economic benefits which have some human value because they contribute to a civilized existence. Schooling, both in providing a grounding and in attempting to yield educated people, is making a direct contribution of its own to the sustenance of a civilised existence. It is therefore on a par with, not subservient to, economic work.

The teaching of sound morals is a much more delicate issue. The instilling of moral principles and practices is a prime aim of a school, in the sense that everything done in a school, not only in the classroom but also on the sports field and in the example set by the teachers should obviously encourage pupils to become better rather than worse people. In the days when it was taken for granted that every school had a duty to provide its children with a grounding, this moral aim could be stressed without danger. When Tom Brown was told that his moral education mattered more than any deep learning he might acquire, that was perfectly sensible, because it was assumed by his father that he would receive a decent grounding as a matter of course. But things are different now. It is not taken by any means for granted that every school will aim to provide a grounding for its pupils by the time that they leave school.



Instead, a large number of teachers and 'educationalists' take the view that the provision of a grounding is unimportant so long as the children emerge as nice, compassionate, sensitive, socially progressive people. This is as dangerous as any educational doctrine that has been perpetrated during the last forty years. The pupils who attend schools dominated by this doctrine may emerge with delicate consciences; but they are likely to be so unsuited to play an independent role in society, that they will soon turn into embittered, miserable adults. Moral training is not therefore a substitute for providing a grounding. It is something that ought to go on through, rather than in addition to, the specific activity of teaching and learning.

## Some failures

Why all this stress on the provision of a grounding? Is it not something that every British school already does handsomely for all its pupils? Can we not simply assume that a grounding is being provided, and go on to more interesting matters?

Unfortunately, the answer to these questions is a resounding 'no'. For a large number of pupils, many of our schools are failing to provide a grounding.

This appalling fact can be illustrated by many pieces of evidence. I shall take just one: the surveys of reading and writing ability conscientiously undertaken by the Assessment of Performance Unit of the Department of Education and Science. In his pamphlet on the teaching of English\*, Dr Marenbon has with some justice, made a number of critical observations about the attitude taken towards grammar and syntax by the Assessment of Performance Unit: but, despite such observations, the sheer factual material unearthed by the Unit remains invaluable evidence of what is going on in our schools.

Here is a passage, reproduced in one of the Unit's reports, in which a pupil describes one of 'the three most interesting things . . . learned during the last two weeks':

### History

We learnt that poor people suffered very painfully towards illnesses in the 1800's because they couldn't afford to pay for surgery Common deceases in the 1800's Still born – caused by the mother working too hard whilst pregnant. Trophiad Fever – Drinking polluted water

The poor were cramped by having five family's into one house as they couldn't afford anything better One family lived in each room and one lived in the cellar This caused decease to spread very quickly The part of a town around a

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\* ENGLISH OUR ENGLISH: the new orthodoxy examined, John Marenbon, CPS, June 1987

the factory's are called 'The Slums' Rich people lived farer out into the country. The farer out the richer they were. The rich and the poor mixed very rarely. (APU: *Language Performance in Schools*, Secondary Survey Report No.2).

What age was the author of the passage? Eight? Eleven? Thirteen? No, fifteen. After ten years of compulsory schooling, this pupil had achieved no greater mastery of writing than one would expect of a child five years younger. The misspellings, the bizarre capitalisations, the absence of full-stops and of all other punctuation, the neologisms, the misuse of prepositions, the wrong tenses, the inability to organise a sentence with anything other than a single, main verb, the consequent inability to link complex propositions into a coherent sequence – all these tendencies mark out the writer as someone who does not feel at home, and cannot feel at home, in his own language. And this, at the age of fifteen, with just one more year of compulsory schooling and with every chance that the egregious errors will go uncorrected in that final year! The author is likely to have remained in this condition for the rest of his or her life.

An exceptional case? By no means. The script was rated 3 on a scale running from 1 (worst) to 7 (best); no less than 26% of the 15 year olds tested fell into the same or lower categories. This, in other words, is the best that can be achieved by one pupil in four, a year before leaving school – and that figure of course, excludes pupils in special schools for the handicapped (who were not tested), but includes pupils at grammar and independent schools, who were tested; moreover, it disguises what are no doubt significant regional and local variations. If one were to conduct a similar test in maintained comprehensive schools in certain inner city areas, there is little doubt that the proportion of pupils achieving the same, or lower, standards would be far greater.

For one pupil in ten, nationally, the position is far worse. For those pupils who score a 2 or less (representing over 9% of the population, or over 10% if one includes those who did not even attempt the writing test) the problem is not just one of failing to feel at home in the language: they are constantly on the brink of collapsing into incomprehensibility. Witness this 15 year old, who scored a 2:

In the last two weeks I went to the R.A.F. for information and I learned a lot from going, like the pay the age the training the signing years and reservered, and what I have to do to get the job. and I have learned about the Coil in physics because I have always wanted to know it. I was interesting to know all the different trades off all discibsn in engerneering and other trades.

What is this young person trying to say? What are 'the signing years and reservered'? Does the author know? Certainly, the reader is in no position to guess.

The trap in which these pupils are caught is unimaginably awful and made no better by being shared with hundreds of thousands of others.

They are about to leave school; some £15,000 (in today's money) has been spent on their so-called 'education'. They will shortly be expected to take their place in the big world, to play an intelligent part in a liberal, democratic society, to express their views, to conduct their affairs in an orderly way. How on earth are they to do it?

Perhaps some commentators will say that this is overstated, and that writing does not matter too much. Do they take the same view of reading?

The sad truth is that a high proportion of pupils leaving secondary schools cannot make their way through a simple story and understand clearly what it is about. The APU's 1979 Secondary Survey Report contains a straightforward tale about Billy, a lad who arrives in Bath to start a new job, takes lodgings with a landlady and is duly murdered by her. To judge by the number of right answers given to a series of questions, about one pupil in ten was almost completely lost; about one in seven was unable to spot even very simple points, such as the warm and cosy look of the room as seen by Billy from outside; and almost one in two were unable to say either why Billy started off by thinking the landlady dotty (though this is clearly described in the story) or why he later begins to get suspicious (though this, too, is painfully obvious).

This may all sound rather abstract. To put it more concretely: if any ordinary upper middle class parents who sent their children to independent schools were to discover that their



fifteen year old son or daughter was at this reading-level, they would conclude that the 'child' was subnormal. And that is the condition in which millions of the sons and daughters of other ordinary, but not so affluent parents are emerging from our schools. It is a catastrophe that can be sustained and tolerated only because of the hopelessly low – and hopelessly wrong – estimation which most schools have of the abilities of most of their pupils.

## Conclusion

A really solid grounding – a sure and certain grasp of written texts, an ability to be and feel at home in the written and spoken language, a basic numeracy – these are treasures beyond value that could and should be acquired by every normal British schoolchild. Until and unless that is being universally achieved in our schools, we should be concentrating the entire efforts of our administrators and teachers on that task. Only in those schools where the basic minimum is so well established that it is taken for granted, can there be any excuse for diverting effort to any other task.

The failure to take this approach is in a true sense tragic. It is a case of the best being the enemy of the good. That, indeed, has been the theme of British education for the past forty years: noble but grandiose ambitions to do the impossible resulting in utter failure to achieve the possible. Perhaps in the next forty years British schools will adopt more modest aims and will achieve more as a result, attempting to educate only when they have already provided a thorough grounding and encouraging depth only when they have already given solidity. Certainly, if they continue with the destructively pretentious aims of the recent past, they will go on providing their pupils with what Lewis Carroll so accurately describes as: 'the regular course . . . the different branches of Arithmetic . . . Ambition, Distraction, Uglification and Derision'.

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