



Postindustrialism & Education

(Written for Education Otherwise Magazine in October 1997)

Over the last couple of months I have been considering why home education is becoming more popular. I understand that home education is rising at the rate of around 1000 per month in the UK and I find it difficult to accept that such a large trend is solely the result of recent changes in educational policy. There are probably a number of reasons. But, I am beginning to think that there could be an underlying social trend.

There are those who suggest we are in the throws of a social change as fundamental as the industrialisation of the 19th. Century and are now moving away from an industrial to a post industrial economy. I felt the need to clarify my thoughts on this subject and I have not seen any popular literature examining the impact post industrialism could have upon education, hence this article.

Industrial society is characterised by large scale manufacture centred upon factories employing large numbers of workers who, due to restricted access to transport, live and play in close proximity to their place of work and each other. Such communities possess a high degree of homogeneity in behaviour and belief. The work on offer requires a moderate level of education and that, therefore, is what is provided for the mass of the population. Individuals who deviate very far from a variety of norms are ejected from the community perhaps by a shift in their class status or straight forward ostracism.

Post industrial society is characterised by much smaller units of production. Often requiring a high level of technical education. Concepts such as self managing teams and home working become common. Individuals rarely live close to their place of work and even more rarely close to their colleagues. Work becomes fragmented and less hierarchical. This radically effects the concept of community. The "local" or "neighbourhood" community holds less significance. Individuals relate more to a matrix of like minded individuals scattered throughout a large geographical area. Contact is maintained through telecommunications and improved transport. For the first time in human history community ceases to be centred upon a geographical location ultimately expanding to the virtual communities of the world wide web. The power of the nation state may even come under threat. (Perhaps reflecting the EEC concept of interlocking communities).

Individuals are no longer tied to belief systems regulated by an homogeneity of life experience. Rather post industrial society is characterised by an explosion of new beliefs and attitudes to go along with the explosion of new or different experiences and opportunities and a break down in the restrictions placed upon individual thought and expression. The concept of multiculturalism could extend to include not only those of differing ethnic backgrounds but those of the same ethnicity whose world views are so radically different as to describe them as being culturally divergent.

Not all of society participate in the change but only a significant proportion in the same way that Britain still has large rural areas and can yet be classed as industrialised (in fact the definition adopted by most economists is more than 50% of the population as living in cities). The process is anything but complete. But in the same way that 10% of anything is a market, 10% of a population is a movement. When that 10% are no longer isolated individuals



thinking the unthinkable, but part of a large minority who have the power to communicate they expect the right of expression and the freedom to follow their chosen life style.

The question is: if such a transformation is underway what effect might it have upon education? The education system reflects industrial culture. The education debate of the mid 19th century centred upon keeping young people off the streets, freeing their parents to work in factories and preventing them falling into immoral practices. Education (that is the three R's, plus Religious instruction, geography and history) was almost incidental. Indeed, for the usual reasons, there were those who objected to the very idea of education for the masses. The primary point of education was socialisation and in the early days the education system was run by church boards controlled by the Church of England and nonconformist churches. Much of so called education centred upon the Catechism (Church doctrine). The very structure of schools reflected life in a factory, large classes, a rigorous code of discipline and strict hierarchical structure. School was a microcosm of society and a foretaste of the future for its alumna. Later the 1944 education act created Grammar, Technical and Secondary schools whose intakes were roughly proportional to industry's needs at the time and later still Calahan's white heat of technology debate again aligned education with industry. This has reached its final expression with the department of education being joined with the department of employment. While for the rich, public school education was seen as a good in itself education for the masses was always justified by the needs of industry.

A large part of educational effort still has nothing to do with the overt curriculum. But rather with the hidden curriculum; the socialisation of the young and the teaching of those mores and attitudes which give society its cultural identity. But what identity can a post industrial society possess? How does a school teach social attitudes and mores (other than the very basic like, "murder is bad") in a society where few people agree upon anything? Divergence rather than homogeneity is the theme of the day.

What is the likely reaction of parents faced with schools teaching attitudes etc. with which they can no longer identify. It seems to me that traditional mass education aimed at creating a more or less homogenous society will be rejected by more and more parents as they feel themselves more and more at odds with the values of the education system. My guess is that as a home educating parent reading this you are probably not employed in an industrial occupation (nor is your partner if you have one).

The relationship between education and work has not escaped at least some managers either. The director of one company now working on a home working model draws directly upon the current education system to explain what his company is not about (BBC's "20 steps to better management 9.2.97).

Even those parents who would subscribe to traditional moral values will have difficulties within the mass education system since schools themselves will drop the most traditional policies in favour of more "relevant" attitudes. Examples that come to mind are the difficulties some Christian parents now have with the style of religious education and the concerns felt by those parents who are concerned about discipline and the rejection of corporal punishment by schools. Disaffection will therefore come from both (or rather all) ends of the political spectrum. Indeed many of the problems faced by EO have been due to the diversity of thought of its members pulling it in different directions.

The very idea that teaching young people in groups of 30 or more (let alone schools of up to 1500) is an acceptable preparation for adulthood will fall into ridicule as it becomes more of



an anomaly. Even now there are fewer and fewer situations outside the education system where people work in groups of more than a dozen or so.

The Government of the day will need to make some hard and radical decisions. Not only does the education system face the social tensions of a transforming society but also a rapidly changing technological base. I am sat at a computer bought as "cutting edge" two months ago. Last month Radio 4 announced the introduction of a new Intel chip which makes it utterly obsolete and now I understand that a break through in bio-logic technology, using DNA for components, will lead to computers the size of a tear drop possessing the memory of all the worlds current computers working at 1000 times the speed of the fastest super computer. Schools, like large scale industry, cannot keep pace with this change. They cannot be expected to retrain thousands of teachers year on year to keep up with new technology while maintaining huge buildings and infrastructure costing tens of millions in which to house it all.

Perhaps reforms similar to those currently being mooted within the health service could be the future. There is a suggestion that the hospital system should be abandoned. Rather we should adopt small scale specialist units scattered throughout the country combined with a highly responsive community care system paid for by the savings made from not having to maintain huge hospital buildings. Perhaps the open university and open college systems may be used as a model and of course the Internet is fast becoming an important tool in education e.g. distance learning. Already as we know a large minority of parents and children are opting for home based alternatives to schooling in addition to which schools are abandoning ever growing numbers of children as "unteachable". The exclusion rate is growing so fast that even the government is beginning to recognise it as a crisis and despite the exclusions many schools are being labelled as disrupted and failing.

Education has always been a microcosm of society and the problems of today's education system reflects the fragmentation of belief within society. Whatever the future of education I believe we will live to see the end of the use of schools comprising traditional classes for mass education which in Britain has had a history of a mere 150 years in any form and only 50 years or so in its current form.