

Inequalities in Education

One must agree with Kenneth Muir (*New Reasoner* 7) and condemn faulty arguments even when they support desired conclusions. Peter Ibbotson's comparison (*New Reasoner* 6) between London in 1933 and Hertfordshire and Middlesbrough in 1953 is misleading. If we accept I.Q. as the measure of ability then within the state schools of a given educational area in 1953 there was, whereas in 1933 there was *not*, equality of opportunity. In this restricted sense the 1944 Act satisfied the demands of pre-war socialist reformers. But if we adopt a definition of equality of opportunity more acceptable to present day socialists the educational system remains a monument to the preservation of the social hierarchy.

Apart from the private schools and the variations in meanness of different local authorities in the provision of grammar schools, we cannot accept measured intelligence as the criterion of ability. Of course the intelligence test discriminates less against the poorer classes than does fee paying, teacher's estimates or other devices for selection. Indeed we now know that the abandonment of intelligence tests by Hertfordshire in 1953 resulted in a small but significant diminution in the proportion of working class children given grammar school places. However, as I have argued elsewhere¹, although some children are undoubtedly born cleverer than others, it is reasonable to suppose that the distribution of innate intelligence between social classes is near random. This means that the class chances quoted by Peter Ibbotson are a reasonable indication of the strength of class barriers to educational success. It means that a process of social selection takes place at every stage of the educational journey, the class character of which may be illustrated from a comparison of the professional and managerial classes with the unskilled labourers. The former contribute 15% of the nation's births, at the gates of the grammar school they step up their contribution to a quarter and among the select company of entrants to the universities they muster 63% in the case of boys and 72% in the case of girls. The unskilled labourers tail off in the educational procession in reciprocal fashion: 12% of the births, 6% of the 11+ survivors, 1.5% of the sixth forms, 0.9% of the undergraduate boys (0.6% girls).

This process of class selection is complex: indeed some of its elements are beyond the reach of social policy. But much of it is due to the structure of the educational system itself - the absence of a comprehensive educational guidance service, over-crowding of slum children in large classes and old school buildings, the tripartite division of the secondary schools. Above all the public schools and their special connection with the Oxford and Cambridge colleges (they send half the intake) remains a social organisation which is central to the maintenance of oligarchy. Incidentally the new science laboratories in public schools and the establishment of Churchill College demonstrate the need for assimilation by the oligarchy of the emerging technological elite. The essential point about education is that in technological society it has displaced private industrial property as the primary determinant of inequality. This state of affairs has come about through the development of an educational system more and more closely linked to the productive organisation of society. The elaboration of the

¹ See *British Journal of Sociology*, March 1958, and *British Journal of Statistical Psychology*, May 1959.

educational hierarchy since 1870 has to be understood largely as a response to the changing occupational needs of an increasingly technological economy.

A socialist educational policy should have two objectives. First it will recognise the need for highly trained specialists in a modern complex technology and therefore the inevitability of educational selection. It will however seek to eliminate class inequality from educational opportunity.

Second the socialist will look beyond education in the service of the economy towards the development of a genuinely educative society in which each individual is taken to the limit of his learning capacity not merely as a potential producer but also as consumer and citizen. For example our universities at present serve the function of producing the elites and the professional classes. But a country as affluent as Britain could afford to defer professional training to graduate schools and allow the universities to educate a substantial minority of its youth for life rather than livelihood.

An egalitarianism which seeks to free education from class restrictions and which promotes the education of all the desirable human talents, and not merely those with marketable value would result in a *more* differentiated society than we at present enjoy. The transformation, however, would be from undignified inequality to mutually enriching difference.

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