

‘High-quality education for all children’

an essay in celebration of the life of Phillip Hughes

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It seems that I have been involved in education all my life. I started in first class at Ainslie Infants School in 1943, listened to my parents, both teachers, talking about the New Education Fellowship after the war, wanted to be a primary school teacher, then wanted to be a high school teacher, then wanted to be a university teacher — and became one for a time. I have talked to almost every kind of class, from kindy to post-doctoral to U3A, in Australia and overseas, been a P&C member, and continue to be a ‘grandfriend’. I have helped to review a lot of Commonwealth principles and practice in education, and chaired a review of school legislation in the ACT. And the longer I live, the more important I think education to be, for any society.

Although I no longer have remedies to propose, it is always possible to suggest incremental improvements to this or that aspect of any educational system. Nevertheless, I do not think that ‘fixing’ education will fix all society’s problems. It is true that almost every human baby comes into life with immense potential, but not necessarily potential for good. The baby’s parents themselves, the nature and extent of their parenting, sibling order, sex, the circumstances of the time, the availability of extended family, the quality of schooling — all these factors will be important in the development of the human adult. Education cannot do everything, and should not be asked to. Indeed, schools are in danger of serving in part as therapy centres for children who are already strongly and wrongly shaped when they reach school at age five.

Of course I agree that every child should have ‘effective, relevant, high-quality education’. How could one argue the reverse? But that goal comes with two major problems. The first is establishing, for a particular child, what kind of education will be relevant, effective and of high quality. The second is making it available, for that child. For the moment we look at a particular child, rather than at children, we move into a new world of educational provision. Our current schools, at every level, our TAFE institutes and our universities, no matter how ingenious their provision of alternatives, are based on the ‘one size fits all’ principle. And it is plain to me, especially after twelve years in a university that prided itself on its capacity to give young people a second chance, that our educational institutions are not especially *effective* in what they do. There are just too many failures, too many uninterested kids, too little real learning. And that is not in any way to disparage teachers and their often Herculean efforts.

If we were to take seriously the notion that every child needs to be well educated, then we would organize education rather differently, I think. Howard Gardner, the Harvard scholar whose work has greatly affected my own thinking in this area, has said somewhere that the major advance in school education in the last thousand years has been in bringing children in out of the rain. Ideally, we would have much more knowledge than we now do about each child’s portfolio of skills and interest, and we would design a

program for that child so that his/her development proceeded steadily. We would try to balance that development, so that we did not in the end produce lop-sided adults who were extraordinarily proficient in one field but quite undeveloped in others. Since we would not know what occupation that child would have we would do our best to prepare him or her for a variety of possible areas of life and work, recognising that by late adolescence the future career path or paths might be quite plain.

The child would still be in a school, but the school would have quite a lot more staff, both teachers and support people. It would be organized differently too. High schools might start after lunch, in recognition of the different circadian rhythms that come in adolescence. Some might be co-educational in part, but mostly single-sex in specific areas, recognizing that puberty can interfere with good learning. The desired outcome would be the development of skilled, self-confident, productive, altruistic adults who would in time be the parents of children whose development they supervised with encouraging, disinterested love.

It's not that today's parents and our educational institutions do a bad job in this domain. In my judgment, and comparing now with the 1940s and 1950s, when I was in school, things are a lot better than they were. Every time I visit a school or a university I am encouraged by what I see. The problem is a little like that in road safety. In that domain there have been dramatic improvements in mortality and morbidity in the last 40 years. But the improvements have 'flat-lined'. If we are to achieve even lower death and injury statistics we will have to tackle road safety in a new way — by involving all drivers in what amounts to an ethical examination of our attitudes when we drive, our attitudes to other drivers, our vehicles, other drivers, our time, and so on. This is part of the 'Vision Zero' goal that is being adopted slowly by each jurisdiction in Australia.

To do that in education we will have to go past thinking of improvements to our schools, our teachers and the timetable, important though they are. We will need to start with the decision to make a new baby, the circumstances in which that baby will emerge into the world, and its likely course over its first five years. At once we face a major hurdle, because making a baby is regarded as an absolutely private matter, one in which the state ought to have no interest. And that is paradoxical, because the moment the baby is born the state moves to take notice of it. Why not start earlier? The Howard Government set up an initiative in parenting, and today there are most useful websites that are there to help new parents, if they know about them and able to take advantage of their assistance.

But I think we are long way from a community understanding that every baby is a future adult, and that babies are not possessions, or someone to love who loves us, or achievements to justify our own lives, or warriors sent out into the world to achieve what we have so far been unable to achieve. More, it is doubtful that our community understands that those first five years represent only a little more than five per cent of the future adult's life, but they are very probably the most important five years of all. In fact during our own lives we will encounter our children mostly as fellow adults, not as small people dependent on us for almost everything. From this perspective, or so it seems to me, we should be striving to ensure that our adult children are equipped to cope with life

in a resilient, confident and helpful way, and likely to see us as special friends, rather than as ‘parents’.

This is a hard ask, but it seems the obvious next stage. Is it worth it? I think so. Australia’s prisons are vastly over-supplied with young men for whom the education system was not helpful and, in so many cases, for whom parenting was not very helpful either. The school cannot replace good parenting and, to repeat, it should not be asked to do so. Our social welfare system consumes billions of dollars each year patching up problems whose genesis, in so many cases, can be traced to inadequate or indifferent parenting, or to the making of a baby at a most injudicious time, given the real needs of the growing infant. In my opinion, the making of a baby is arguably the most important decision we will ever make, and the consequences of that decision should be beneficial to the community in which we live.

I would go further. Each of us has creative potential that is, in most cases, only poorly developed. It is true that human life is finite, and that even in a long life we will never be able to do all the things we would like to do, or have the capacity to do. And to do anything well requires time and energy which will therefore not be available to undertake some other creative activity. Having said that, it seems to me that by concentrating on ensuring that high school graduates are ready for jobs, important though that is, we neglect the development of that part of us that leads to our having joy in creation, in having an art form that we can turn to when work is over, in having creative skills that lead us to others, and in possessing the right sort of self-esteem in our ability to do something creative quite well. To use the prison example again, the great majority of the young men in prison do not possess any creative skills at all, and have never been encouraged to develop them.

The success of ‘el sistema’ in Venezuela ought to be an example for us, the much wealthier Australians. ‘The system’ in question is the national network of youth and children’s orchestras of Venezuela, which has been operating now for more than thirty years. A publicly funded state foundation watches over 125 youth orchestras and the instrumental training programs that make them possible and draw the 250,000 children who attend its music schools around the country, nearly all of them from poor socio-economic backgrounds. There are several studies which link participation in the program by the two million children who have been in it to improvements in school attendance and declines in juvenile delinquency. ‘El sistema’ is moving into Venezuela’s jails, with the same over-arching goals. Other countries have seen the Venezuelan experience as something they could emulate. It’s time that we did.

I focused on music because it is my own creative partner. But in principle the same system could be applied in painting, in sculpture, in dance, in writing — in any and all creative pursuits. To be good at something creative seems to be a life enhancer, and the faster we acquire those skills and interests the better. I could add ‘sport’, with two provisos: first, that the sporting pursuits not focus too heavily on team sports, which cannot easily be continued through life and second, that built into sport is the recognition

that there is a role later in life for sportspeople to act as coaches, administrators and mentors.

In sum, if we are to greatly improve the life chances of our children, in the next fifty years we must address the need for would-be parents to be prepared and ready to nurture the babies they create so that their child's experience of the educational system will be productive and enjoyable. That is a huge ethical challenge, and we have hardly begun to debate it. Then we will need to recognize that the creative side of our potential is as important as the money-earning side, and that we need to develop mechanisms in our society that make it easy for children to acquire appropriate creative skills and develop them through adolescence. This too is hardly recognized at the moment.

There is, then, a long way to go. But I am not disheartened. When I left high school in 1953 only two per cent of my age-group went on to any form of further education. Today the proportion is some 60 per cent. In the 1940s and early 19650s most girls were not educated past age 15, on the ground that they would only marry and have babies. The money and energy should be devoted to boys. That is no longer the case, and the country is vastly better for it. I remain of the view that we can build a better society along the lines I have suggested, and this little essay is a contribution to that goal.

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