
Education for what?

John Bynner

The author

John Bynner is with the Social Statistics Research Unit, City University, London, UK.

The new UK government's commitment to "education, education and more education" must be greeted with acclamation by everybody who wants to see the country's human capital increased. Modern societies need an educated population to generate gross national product (GNP) under new economic conditions. Individuals need education to improve their prospects, not only of getting good jobs, but also of getting any kind of continuing employment at all. But before we become too ecstatic, we need to pause to think what all this education is really for.

Evidence from the 1958 and 1970 British birth cohort studies that I have been directing now since the end of 1988 points to quite radical changes in the nature of the labour market and the prospects of individuals in it. For example, in the National Child Development Study, two-thirds of the cohort members, who were born in 1958, left school at the age of 16 in 1974. All of them were accommodated relatively easily into the range of jobs then available in the labour market (Ferri, 1993). There was little unemployment, nor the need for youth training to equip them for employment. These did not appear until 1988 with the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOPS). Their full flowering came later still with the government's New Training Initiative of 1981, which gave birth to the national Youth Training Scheme (YTS) (Banks *et al.*, 1992).

For the cohort born in 1970 we see a very different picture. For those with poor qualifications, usually lacking the basic skills of literacy and numeracy, and who left school at 16 (and 50 per cent did so) problems began from the moment they attempted to get work. Not only did far fewer of them gain entry into anything other than YTS, but also for a large proportion such training schemes were never followed by continuous full-time work. At every age between 16 to 26, when the most recent survey was done, there was a consistent level of unemployment in the bottom quartile attainment group of up to 20 per cent. Among the 1958 cohort, unemployment became more common in the low attaining group with age, but all of them had the advantage of at least gaining some kind of early continuous work experience when they left school (Bynner *et al.*, 1997).

These figures point to a more polarised society that is developing at an accelerating rate as new technology transforms the nature

of employment. We are moving to a situation where an increasing proportion of young people will be lucky to experience any kind of employment at all and if they do, it will be of a very sporadic and temporary nature, often seasonal, often part-time and often lacking security or prospects.

The counter to such experience, is education, including vocational education and training (VET). Clearly the basic skills of numeracy and literacy are essential antidotes to the unemployability of many of these young people. For without them, the attempt to acquire the skills and qualifications which modern employers are demanding is doomed to failure. But VET in the broader sense needs to pursue goals that transcend the narrow aim of equipping young people for any kind of job. It must include a commitment to improving education and employment prospects on a lifelong basis alongside improving the educational quality of work. If there is not going to be enough work to go round, then time spent not working should not be in unemployment, but in education.

Education does not only serve the labour market. It also underpins the functions of citizenship and everyday life, including active participation in the social and political structure, child-rearing and family life, and recreational activity in the broadest sense. VET that is targeted at equipping young people with a narrow range of job-related competencies appropriate to the here and now is not going to lead to fully participating citizenship nor to fulfilment on the part of the individuals concerned. For many life is likely to be blighted endlessly by risk and uncertainty as job prospects switch on and off in accordance with labour market demands (Aranowitz and Di Fazio, 1994).

The broader view of education must be both to equip people for work while providing the means of sustaining them in its absence. This means that the goals of VET, in company with any form of education, must be fulfilment in every area of life. Education is the means of transmitting cultural values as much as job-related competencies, of liberating the individual as much as socialising him or her into particular occupational roles. This is recognised in the more effective forms of VET in Germany and Scandinavia, where liberal education has always been seen as the essential counterpart to training for work-related skills (Bynner and Roberts, 1991).

We need to support the new government's commitment to education but only if it is seen as providing multiple outcomes and multiple opportunities in all the spheres of life, including work. Before the end of communism in his country, the Romanian sociologist, Fred Mahler, argued that as the need for repeated and continuing exposure to education expands the distinction between teacher and taught becomes increasingly blurred (Mahler, 1991). Students bring with them into the classroom the benefits of what they have experienced outside; teachers adapt what they have to offer in a context of learning from students as much as teaching them. This emancipatory socialisation offers not only the best hope for individuals but for the transformation of society itself.

Mahler did not live to see his prophecies fulfilled with the collapse of the Soviet Union. And of course, the role of the younger generation was only a component of the change which included globalising economic influences and the pervasive effects of the mass media as well. Nevertheless his case for the potential of youth for renewal as well as reproduction is compelling. We need continually to reinforce the dynamic between the teacher the taught and the processes and products of education if growth in the true sense is to be achieved.

Dynamic education is the fundamental basis of the learning society, which no twenty-first century state can afford to be without. If we can take the new government along this track, then their commitment to education will be working for the future rather than slavishly serving the interests of the past.

References

- Aranowitz, S. and Di Fazio, W. (1994), *The Jobless Future*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Banks, M., Bates, I., Breakwell, G., Bynner, J., Roberts, K., Emler, N., Jamieson, L. and Roberts, K. (1992), *Careers and Identities*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes.
- Bynner, J. and Roberts, K. (Eds) (1991), *Youth and Work: Transition to Employment in England and Germany*, Anglo German Foundation, London.
- Bynner, J., Ferri, E. and Shepherd, P. (Eds) (1997), *Twenty-something in the 1990s: Getting on, Getting by, Getting nowhere*, Ashgate Press, Aldershot.
- Ferri, E. (Ed.) (1993), *Life at 33*, ESRC, City University and National Children's Bureau, London.
- Mahler, F. (1991), "Transition and socialisation", in Adamski, W. and Grooting, P. (Eds), *Youth, Education and Work in Europe*, Routledge, London.