
What should 'education for all' mean today?

We print here an article version of a talk given by Colin Waugh in a session with the above title at the Raymond Williams Foundation Residential Event on 19th May 2018 at the Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool.

I'm the editor of *Post-16 Educator*. I'm involved in the Independent Working-Class Education Network and the Liberal and General Studies (L/GS) Project. The IWCEN seeks to build a modern equivalent to the Plebs League. The L/GS Project seeks to develop a modern equivalent to the Liberal and General Studies that once existed across further and higher education (FHE). I'm speaking here, in personal capacity, about 'What should education for all mean today?' So what's involved in this?

We must have some shared ideas about adult education or we wouldn't be here today. Moreover, people here probably agree broadly about what pre-school and primary education should be like - for example, that they should be: publicly provided; universal; properly resourced; conducted in decent premises, by committed practitioners; and that they should not be beset with testing. But when it comes to secondary schooling, further education and higher education - broadly, arrangements for 14-25 year olds - agreement is not so easy to achieve - for example, on a question like how work-related do we think such provision should be?

The closer education gets to the labour market, the more dispute there is likely to be about it. All the 14-25 sectors are in a state of chronic crisis, which has the appearance of a maze of interlocking vicious circles. Against this background, I would like first to pose the question: what does the ruling class want from the education system as a whole?

To me, it wants the system to produce a labour force with capacities like literacy and numeracy, to pick out and develop people in such a way as to expand the pool of technical and scientific expertise available to it, to pick out and train people who will help to keep the rest under control, for example some categories of civil servants and local government administrators, and to spread the idea that anyone who works hard can go as far as they choose in a career. On this view, then, the ruling class uses 'education' as a class struggle instrument in the economic, political and ideological spheres. However, we also need to understand how the system has developed.

Over the period since the industrial revolution (and especially since 1870), the ruling class has

arranged for an education system to be brought into being partly to meet requirements of its own as sketched out just now, but partly also in response to pressure from working-class campaigns and movements, and partly under the influence of efforts made by teachers and students within that system itself. The history of education can be understood as a long chain of interactions between these forces.

Campaigning

For example, in 1867 union campaigning won the vote for better-off workers living in towns. Up to that point, people like the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Robert Lowe, had been opposed to universal state schooling. But now Lowe famously told parliament: 'I believe it will be absolutely necessary to compel our future masters to learn their letters', and in the aftermath of this, the 1870 Education Act introduced compulsory elementary schooling. It further provided for this schooling to be controlled by directly elected school boards - a set-up which had formed part of the programme of demands put forward by the working class in the Chartist period. However, by the 1890s socialists such as Mary Bridges Adams and Stuart Headlam were active in these school boards, and in 1902 a new Education Act replaced these structures by local education authorities (LEAs) that were less democratic, and stuffed with ex officio members from churches and other interest groups not accountable to electors. It's crucial to understand that we are still living with the effects of this. However, we also need to see how the education system has been - and is being - destabilised by de-industrialisation.

By 'de-industrialisation', I mean the offshoring of big areas of the UK economy to cheap labour under repressive regimes in other countries, starting from the 1980s. This has dispersed most of the large blocks of unionised industrial workers that existed up to that point, and it has polarised the workforce into, on the one hand, a layer of relatively secure service sector paraprofessionals, and, on the other, a large body of precarious service sector routine workers. (I am not suggesting that the economically active working class consists only of these two groups.) And by destroying the bulk of the union power that private sector industrial workers' are able to exert, de-industrialisation has also reduced the pressure on the ruling class that had previously led it to provide Keynesian-type welfare measures, including in the sphere of education.

In that sphere, the results of this have included: cutbacks and the siphoning off of public money by private interests, for example IT contractors,

academy chains, builders and property developers and exam boards like Edexcel/Pearson. Meanwhile, higher education has been massively expanded, and reshaped into a marketised system based on tuition fees, on the direction of research funding even more than hitherto towards elite institutions which aspire to compete in a global, effectively for-profit, market, and on a steadily increasing integration between university science faculties and drug companies, IT companies and the like.

Further developments in the same period have included the destruction of time-served apprenticeships. One consequence of this is that FE has been stripped of its main traditional purpose: the provision of non-advanced technical education. This has undermined the morale and motivation of broad swathes of working-class young people, at the same time that they have been driven off benefits and pressured to participate in education to 18 or beyond. The last few years have also seen the growth of a vocational higher education sector extending from the former polytechnics into many FE colleges.

The system has also been shaped by two specific strands of ruling-class thinking, a point discussed by Raymond Williams in chapter 3 of *Culture and Society*.

Intellectuals

Ruling-class intellectuals borrowed the first of these strands from the rising bourgeoisie in 18th century France. Adopted by industrial capitalists here in a version put forward by Jeremy Bentham and James Mill in the early 1800s, this focused on structuring the environment of working-class people to produce a contented and hence, it was hoped, docile workforce. At a practical level, the legacy of this strand of thinking includes Fabian municipal socialism. The second strand was borrowed from late 18th century German philosophy, and adopted by a section of the landowning class here in a version put forward by Samuel Taylor Coleridge around 1830. This focused on what Coleridge termed a 'clerisy' - that is, a layer of intellectuals who would define culture, and extend it from above to selected sections of the less well-off. A key legacy of this strand was the university extension movement, including the creation by upper class Christian Socialists of the Workers' Education Association.

In the 1830s these two approaches were in conflict with one another as the rising class of industrial capitalists tried to break into the existing ruling class, dominated as this was by landowners and city merchants. However, once the factory owners had done this (for example through the 1832

Reform Act) this conflict became more akin to a division of labour within the overall ideological dominance exercised by the reconstituted ruling class. In short, the two strands became more and more like two sides of the same coin. An example of this was the 1902 Education Act. In the leadup to this, Sydney Webb (then chairperson of the London Technical Education Board), from the Benthamite tradition, and the Board of Education secretary - that is, highest ranking civil servant - Robert Morant, from a Christian Socialist background, jointly organised a situation in which directly elected school boards were replaced by LEAs. I believe we need to get past this approach, both in theory and in practice.

Natural

Both the Bentham and Coleridge models assume that it's natural and normal for a minority to decide and for the majority to implement. Both contain some valid aspects, but they can only form the basis of education for all if they are embraced within a deeper and wider model. We can, should and must develop such a model. Only we can do that. Unless and until we do that, to a threshold level, everyone whose life chances depend on valid, publicly-provided education will remain locked in the vicious circles we talked about earlier on. This is true no matter how active we and others may be within schools, colleges and universities (for example in union or curricular struggles) and/or outside these institutions (for example in community struggles against cuts, closures, academies, fees and the like). This requires that we do three things.

First, we need to develop our own philosophy of education. In particular, we need to stop thinking in terms only of 'education' and start thinking also in terms of 'education properly so-called'. Why?

In 1837, a meeting took place in the Crown and Anchor tavern in London. At this meeting, according to a newspaper report by James 'Bronterre' O'Brien, a worker speaking from the floor said: 'They [meaning the upper and middle classes CW] pretend that our ignorance is the sole cause of their excluding us [from the franchise CW] . . . It is our knowledge not our ignorance they fear. If we were really ignorant, they would give us the franchise . . . expecting that while we had it in name and appearance, they themselves would possess the substance and reality!'

To me this implies two things. First, knowledge comes from intervening in - that is, working in and on - the world, and thus changing ourselves and it. Secondly, therefore, the overwhelming bulk of

knowledge built up since the dawn of class society must have originated from what Antonio Gramsci called the 'instrumental classes' - slaves, serfs, peasants, artisans, industrial workers and so on. Or, as Ralph Chaplin's song Solidarity Forever says: 'Without our *brains* and muscles not a single wheel can turn'. Robotics and artificial intelligence cannot fundamentally alter this. Thirdly, in all forms of class society, workers' insights have been appropriated from them, and elaborated into complex ideas by groups loyal to the ruling class - for example (at various times) priests, scientists or academics. And at the same time, workers' efforts to reflect for themselves on their own insights have been disrupted - for example by overwork and by exclusion from access to written media and valid education. Fourthly, therefore, working people themselves need to take control of the elaboration of their own insights. This is a - if not the - central aim of education for all.

The second requirement is that we need to organise a from-below education movement alongside the mainstream system. This is because a philosophy on its own cannot change that system without a movement which sets out both to spread that philosophy to wider circles and at the same time to develop it further. How, then, can we bring such a movement into being?

First, we need to re-learn the history of independent working-class education. This history includes: in the 1790s, the discussion method used in the London Corresponding Society; in the early 1800s, the free-and-easy debating clubs; in the 1820s, the rebel mechanics institutes (for example, the one in Manchester); in the 1830s, the 'war of the unstamped'; in the 1840s, the Northern Star reading groups; in the 1860s, the workers' discussion clubs on which the Democratic Federation was based; from 1908 onwards, the Plebs League; in World War 1, the Scottish Labour College; in the 1920s, discussion circles; in World War 2, the forces parliaments; and in the 1970s, the work of the Lucas Aerospace shop stewards.

Avoid

We need to re-acquaint ourselves with this history so that we can learn from what they did and avoid mistakes they made, and on this basis build a modern self-education movement equivalent to these earlier ones. Such a movement needs to be collective, democratic, dialogic, mutual and holistic. It should probably start amongst union and community activists across the main economic sectors but it should aim all the time to spread beyond existing activists to wider and wider circles.

The third requirement is that we form links to activists within the mainstream education system. Universities monopolise the machinery by which knowledge that we need is elaborated, for example, knowledge of history, of science, technology, engineering and maths, and of other languages are all locked up in these institutions. Therefore we need the involvement of university teachers. The Plebs League was arguably hamstrung by a lack of this, but an academic proletariat exists now on a vastly greater scale than in the early 1900s. This proletariat includes people working against the grain within mainstream institutions to provide valid teaching and learning there. We should support these efforts, and thereby draw people like that, where they are on the same wavelength as ourselves, into the independent movement. Each wing of the overall movement will be strengthened by learning from the other, for example at the level of teaching and learning strategies.

Climate

In conclusion, then, I think that a movement like this could fundamentally change the climate of public debate around mainstream education, and that no other way of doing so is open to us. Therefore my answer to the question 'What should education for all mean today?' is: 'It should mean what people like ourselves collectively and consciously decide that it should mean.'

Where we stand:

Post-16 Educator seeks to defend and extend good practice in post compulsory education and training. Good practice includes teachers working with students to increase their power to look critically at the world around them and act effectively within it. This entails challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, inequality based on disability and other discriminatory beliefs and practices.

For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.

Post-16 Educator seeks to persuade the labour movement as a whole of the importance of this demand. In mobilising to do so it bases itself first and foremost upon practitioners - those who are in direct, daily contact with students. It seeks the support of every practitioner, in any area of post-16 education and training, and in particular that of women, of part timers and of people outside London and the Southeast.

Post-16 Educator works to organise readers/contributors into a national network that is democratic, that is politically and financially independent of all other organisations, that develops their practice and their thinking, and that equips them to take action over issues rather than always having to react to changes imposed from above.