

Chapter 14

LIFELONG EDUCATION

The non-existence or terrible inadequacy of education in the poor world was described in Chapter 1. The resulting immeasurable loss of human intellectual potential represents the greatest waste of global resources, especially because, following brain damage from malnutrition, it is largely irreversible. However, the widespread absence of education is not the only problem in today's world - its very presence is also, in certain respects, an obstacle to progress. Although many subjects by their nature are non-controversial, the teaching of others such as history or economics is almost invariably biased in favour of the status quo. There have been many instances of governing elites arranging omissions or changes in their own histories in order to present their young with glossier versions of events. But, more importantly, almost world-wide, today's educational regimes collude with the media in presenting the young with the concept of present day capitalist societies as the only possible form of environment for humanity to exist in. Schools and universities tend to be mirrors of society, rather than searchers after the truth; even in more 'liberal' countries it is exceptional for a teacher to be bold enough to suggest that there might be an alternative to capitalism.

Childhood education

The basis of education at each level in Alternative World would be the provision for every young member of world society of equal opportunities to develop their intellects and abilities to the full, in vastly better academic environments than exist today, if they exist at all. *They would be taught about all aspects of society in Alternative World, and how they could begin to participate and make useful contributions to running it. They would be encouraged to cooperate rather than to compete; to be partners rather than adversaries.* Underlying the concept of 'lifelong education' would be that of the whole of society being one big school. This would imply arranging, within reason, for the gaining of some experience by young people - outside the classroom - of various aspects of adult working lives. It would also suggest a 'freeing-up' of society, so that all young people would feel at ease when asking advice or guidance from older citizens, whether previously known to them or not, on any subject at all. By the same token, it would become natural and accepted for older people to absorb some of the latest knowledge acquired by those younger. In these ways the artificial divisiveness of 'generation gaps' could be eroded, to the lasting benefit of society as a whole.

By way of a refreshing change from the gross commercialism of education in the US, the principal of a New York City secondary school, Deborah Meier, made this comment on the educational reform debate:

The challenge is a thrilling one: to make every child the possessor of a kind of intellectual competence once available to only a small minority. This inspiring, and new, task means granting all young citizens the conviction that they can have wonderful ideas, invent theories, analyze evidence and make their personal mark on this most complex world. Such a transformation of the idea of why children go to school would transform the very nature of democratic life.⁶

A succinct definition, in *Looking Backward* by Bellamy, of factors favouring giving man 'the fullest education he can absorb and enjoy', includes 'the right of his fellow citizens to have him educated as necessary to their enjoyment of his company', and 'the right of the unborn child to educated parentage.'⁵

Alternative World would restore the bygone respect for teachers as persons of the highest importance, since the crucial responsibility for the nurturing of future citizens

is to such a large extent in their hands. It would be recognised that the key to success in education at all levels lies in the best possible relations and understanding existing between pupils and teachers. It would also be recognised that conscientious teachers' tasks are very demanding, and they should be given all possible aids to ensure their job satisfaction. Freed from the constrictions of monetarism, there would be greatly increased numbers of teachers, so that none would be overloaded, and pupil/teacher ratios could be optimised. School and university buildings would be built and maintained to the highest standards. Educational equipment aids would be supplied as required - to assist but not to supplant teachers. Lending libraries would be stocked liberally with the widest range of textbooks.

Alternative World would recognise the importance of schools as cradles of democracy, by ensuring that pupils had reasonable opportunities to participate in decision-making relating to the running of their schools generally, and actual teaching methods in particular. To this end, teachers would be expected to invite their pupils, from time to time, to answer questionnaires regarding their methods, and then to discuss with them the desirability of any changes. This practice has been described by the Head of Exeter (UK) University School of Education, as leading to much better performance by both teachers and pupils. In a report⁷ Dr Burden states: 'Pupils will be asked if teachers are friendly, helpful, and whether they consider pupils' feelings and suggestions. They will have the opportunity to comment on the way the teacher organises lessons and the methods used. Experience shows that if children are involved in the establishment of rules, they are more likely to keep to them.'

All tiers of education would be administered by the departments directly responsible to the local or regional councils of representatives. Both the overall sizes of schools, and of classes within them would be strictly limited to those agreed by all concerned to be in the best interests of both pupils and staff. It would be an axiom of Alternative World that all children attended the co-educational school appropriate to their age level nearest to their home at the time, without choice. If any parent/s had good reason to argue that a particular school was not operating to such a good standard as the majority of others, then it would be obligatory on the council's administrators to put matters right forthwith without regard for any over-sensitive feelings.

Education up to secondary level would be comprehensive, with a balance between the sciences and the humanities, and without premature specialisation. The main objectives of education would be to detect, to bring out, and then to train the capacities of creative thought. Parents would be encouraged to make use of work-place or local creches, to introduce children to cooperative activities from infancy. Similarly, nursery education from age three would be obligatory, since it has proved to be such a valuable foundation for future schooling. Both creches and nursery schools would be housed, equipped and staffed to the same high standards as all other educational establishments.

Adult education

The introduction to work (see Chapter 12) undertaken by all young people aged 18 to 20 would provide a natural transition from school life to adulthood. Through broadening the mind by involvement with the 'nitty-gritty' of society, it would result in those choosing to undertake higher education being more mature, and thus better equipped to take full advantage of it. The significance of 'Lifelong Education' is that compulsory childhood schooling would be followed by the freedom, the facilities, and the encouragement for all citizens so wishing to participate in both 'higher' and 'further' education from their 20s, right through to their 70s and 80s. *The huge release of resources away from destructive and wasteful activities which would follow the introduction of Alternative World would readily permit - many times over - the provision of*

buildings, equipment and teaching staff to cater for whatever demand this lifelong freedom created.

The first, emergency task of Alternative World in the education field would be to eradicate illiteracy globally, at all ages.

The provision of teaching environments for all schoolchildren everywhere would naturally give priority to reading and writing for them. The immense task of assisting the many millions of adult illiterates would need to be tackled in different ways according to circumstances, but it would be a task of paramount importance if all the other benefits of Alternative World were to be fully realised. Adult literacy campaigns in parts of the Third World, albeit so far on limited scales, have proved that students can well succeed in initiating older persons into literacy. A ten-year target period, for example, for the achievement of universal literacy could be publicised to catch the imagination of everyone, world-wide. School leavers would be encouraged to help run the crash courses involved as part of their introduction to work periods.

Once young people had completed their introduction to work periods, they would be free to enter places of higher education, granted only a sincere and evident intention to benefit themselves and thus society by so doing. In the interests of equality, as much intermingling of students as possible from all parts of the world would be encouraged, to maximise cross-fertilisation of ideas and cultures. Course durations would vary up to four or more years; initial groundwork courses of general education would be recommended before specialisation.

One of the most important tasks of the departments of education would be to assess the approximate needs for the many different skills and disciplines in the years ahead. With the vastly greater resources available for all the arts and sciences in Alternative World, serious over-production of particular disciplines would be unlikely; however, it would clearly be desirable to be able to guide young people's choices to some extent so as to ensure the output of as good a balance of abilities as possible. While studying, students would receive the same basic entitlements as other citizens; during spare time or vacations they could earn extra points on appropriate jobs at output rates agreed between them and the local councils of representatives.

In relation to higher education, it is apposite to quote from J D Bernal:

In a civilisation where the whole basis of knowledge is expected to change several times in a generation, the passing on of established knowledge becomes palpably inadequate and, also, from its ever increasing bulk, impossible.

It is lucky if most of what is taught is true, or supposed to be true, at the time it is taught. It is certain that it will no longer be considered true by the time those who are taught it are half-way through their lives. What is needed, therefore, is a different and lightened content of education. The emphasis will be on discovery rather than knowledge. It will be, not so much the passing on of established truths, as showing the way to criticise and discover new truths; in other words, the active part of the scientific method.⁸

The multi-disciplinary universities in Alternative World would be 'centres of excellence', with all necessary libraries, technical equipment and other resources. They would provide for the following needs: first, basic undergraduate training in chosen subjects; second, refresher courses to enable citizens to catch up with new knowledge within their existing disciplines; third, re-training in different spheres of work for those in contracting occupations, and for those simply desiring to change occupation because their original choice had proved inappropriate; fourth, further education in any desired subjects for citizens of all ages wishing to broaden their horizons.