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Turner, John Derfel

1970
Johannesburg College of Education
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/27480
Turner, J.D. (1969/1970). Some educational tensions in developing countries. Symposium: A Journal of Education for Southern Africa, pp. 37-40.

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Some Educational Tensions in Developing Countries

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NO COUNTRY in the modern world has the money it requires to develop the educational system it would like. Even in the most wealthy countries the educational aspirations of the citizens greatly surpass the educational provision currently available. The path both to national development and to individual prosperity is seen to lead through the educational system.

In every country the demand for more education involves the making of difficult choices between national priorities. The economics of education has therefore developed as a respectable and influential study in recent years. Chief amongst the problems studied by the educational economists is the question of the degree to which money spent on education can be regarded as an investment and what degree of return on this investment a nation or an individual can expect to receive. The tools and techniques for this type of evaluation are still being devised but it is clear that money spent on educational provision can, under certain circumstances, be regarded as an investment but that money can also be invested unwisely in education in such a way as to be counter-productive.

One of the main problems of the education industry is that an exceptionally high proportion of total expenditure is consumed by salaries. If a new teacher has to be employed for every 30 children who remain at school for one more year, then it is clear that per capita costs are going to remain high and that economics of scale are not going to operate to anything like the same extent as in industry. No way has yet been found of reducing this part of the cost of education. Indeed, the normal expectation would be that spiralling prices and the already depressed comparative earnings of the teaching profession in many countries will ensure that the education bill will continue to rise rather ahead of the normal rise in the cost of living.

Every country, then, is faced with difficult decisions with regard to the amount of money it can afford to spend on different sections of the educational system and the priorities which should be determined as between more schools, raising of the school-leaving age, more hospitals, more roads, and so on. Under-developed countries, however, face these problems in a much more acute form, both because of their much lower income per capita and also because of the under-developed state of the economy. To decide between more hospital beds and more school places in a country where the provision of both is far below that which would be considered tolerable in a richer society, is an exceptionally difficult decision to have to make. It is not made only in health and educational services, but in transport, water supply, agriculture, and so on.

Within the field of education itself the planner is faced with many very difficult decisions in attempting to make the inadequate amount of money available to him, fulfil the greatest and most pressing needs. Some of the tensions which arise when such decisions are being faced are unique to countries in such an under-privileged position. Other tensions, however, are common to many nations, whether or not they are under-developed, but are shown up more clearly in a position of poverty. Let us examine a few of these points of tension.

The first group of difficulties surrounds the age of entry into primary school. In under-developed countries it has been customary to have no minimum or maximum age of entry into primary schools. Consequently in many developing countries in Africa and elsewhere one tends to find a very mixed age range in each class. In the first standard one will find children of 5, 6 or 7 years of age sitting side by side with youths of 18, 19 or more who have not previously had an opportunity, for one reason or another, of attending school. It is quite clear that both educationally and socially such a situation is quite impracticable. Two decisions therefore need to be made on maximum and minimum age entry. The first concerns the age above which children will not be admitted to schools for the first time. Most developing countries reduce the maximum age of entry into schools year by year over a number of years. In the first year pupils over 19 will not be admitted; the next year the maximum age is 18, the next year 17, and so on, until the age is reduced to that which is thought to be the maxi-

mum desirable age of entry, say: 8 or 9 years of age. It seems clear that a decision of this sort is to be welcomed and that, from the educational point of view, it can be described as essential. Nevertheless, attempts to lower the maximum age in this way usually meet great hostility from the people. The reason is not far to seek. Many parents have kept their children to take care of the flocks or help on the farm while they have been gathering together sufficient funds to enable the children to go to school, or while they have been waiting for a younger child to become old enough to relieve the elder one of his agricultural and domestic duties. If one suddenly closes the door on the educational opportunity by saying that over-aged children will never be admitted to school, then the aspirations of the family as far as that particular child is concerned, are defeated permanently. It is no wonder that parents will campaign strongly in order to retain a privilege on which they had been counting for many years.

The second decision, on the minimum age of entry into primary schools, is also a very vexing one. Britain has a compulsory entry age of 5, and the United States of 6 years. Six years is probably the most common single age of entry, although some countries do not begin compulsory schooling until the age of 7 years. It is to be remembered that most countries which have a compulsory education system also make secondary education available to all or to the greater number of their children. This cannot be counted on, however, in under-developed countries. In many such countries only a small proportion of primary school completers is able to enter secondary schools. This implies that primary education is terminal for many and should lead to employment opportunities for the graduates of the system. If, however, one has lowered the age of entry too much, then the children, when they have completed the course, are still far too young to enter any type of paid employment. If, for example, one has a seven-year primary school course and children are admitted at 5 years of age, then they will have completed the programme by the age of 12 years. In many countries the employment of children of this age would be illegal, and certainly it is difficult to see what paid employment they could effectively undertake. Many people therefore have been found to argue that rather than reduce the age of entry too much, one should peg it at 8 or 9 years of age so that the children who complete the primary educational programme will be employable when they leave school. President Nyerere of Tanzania, for example, concludes his own examination of this subject by stating: "The problem calls for . . . the raising of the primary school entry age so that the child is older when he leaves and also able to learn more quickly while he is at school."[1] There is, therefore, a considerable tension set up between the desire of the educator to lower the entry age on educational grounds, and the necessity on social grounds for ensuring that children do not leave school before they are able to enter employment.

In considering the content of the educational programme we encounter a whole series of related problems. There is only time here to deal with one of these. It is clear that the end product of the educational system is already determined. Every nation requires a small number of highly trained experts who will conform to the best known international standards. There must always be a number of doctors, of dentists, of veterinarians, of structural, electrical and mechanical engineers, and so on. The type of training which these people require is well known and conforms to international standards. The problems involved in building bridges are similar all over the world. The degree of skill required by a surgeon and the type of knowledge he must have is the same in whatever country he is practising. It is therefore necessary that an educational system in any country should be able to produce at the end of its programme the necessary number of people to enter the higher grades of the different professions. In an under-developed country, however, the education needed to provide people of this sort may be largely irrelevant to the needs of the majority. In an industrialized society, the point of divergence may be comparatively late and the degree of divergence small. In a predominantly small-scale agricultural country, however, the degree of divergence is very great. When the educational system terminates at different stages for different groups of children, then the problem becomes even more perplexing. Should the primary school programme, the real general programme, be used to prepare children for the practice of small-scale agriculture? Should it teach them those things which are necessary in order for them to raise their living standards albeit by a comparatively small amount? Or should the education at primary level be geared to producing a certain number of secondary school students from whom a small number will ultimately go to university, and a still smaller number become the high-grade specialists on whom the country will depend in future years? It is clear that there is no simple solution to a problem of this sort. On the one hand the educational system must be designed for the

1 Julius Nyerere: *Education for Self-reliance* p.60.

needs of the greater number of citizens. On the other hand the system must not inhibit the production of highly skilled manpower. A compromise between the two aims is essential, a compromise which may mean that students will not be ready to graduate until several years later than their contemporaries in industrialized societies. The tension between quality and relevance cannot be easily resolved.

One must also question seriously, in a condition of scarcity, whether education should be free or whether those who are benefiting from it should contribute towards the cost of it. Where one can afford to provide education for all as a public service, this question does not arise. When, however, education can only be provided for a minority and the education thus provided leads to a greatly increased income for the rest of one's life, then one is inclined to ask whether this privilege should not itself be paid for. The corollary, however, is clear. If education has to be bought then it is only available to those with the money to pay for it. This has the effect of strengthening class divisions and maintaining the existing hierarchical structure. In terms of academic success, of course, this is not necessarily a bad thing. As is well known in developed societies, those children do best who come from a home where education is appreciated and where there is money to buy books and educational toys and to provide an environment conducive to mental development. If there is only room in the schools for a small proportion of children, then it may be asked whether the school places should not go to those children who are most likely to succeed there — namely, to those from homes which are already cultured and comparatively wealthy. This, however, is the very opposite of a democratic system.

These considerations also raise the question as to whether the amount of money which is available should be used to spread education to more and more children, or whether it should be reserved to provide education of a high level for a small proportion of children. Once again the democratic answer is clear; most nations have committed themselves to universal primary education. At the moment, however, any approach to universal primary education in Lesotho implies that every teacher may have to teach upwards of 70 children in classroom conditions which are not at all conducive to learning. Is it better to provide an education of this sort for the majority, rather than an education of quality for the minority? Most of the readers of this article would constitute the minority if they were in a similar situation. They would know that their own children would acquire educational opportunity whatever may be the case with the others. If one is a farmer or building labourer, however, the answer is not at all so clear. And it is to be remembered that farmers and building labourers have more votes than educationists!

Closely related to this matter is the question of the siting of schools. If one is to bring education to the majority of the people, then it becomes necessary to have schools within reasonable walking distance of every community. Many of these communities, however, are extremely small and can provide sufficient children only for a one-teacher school. A school of this sort is likely to be extremely poor in quality since the one teacher, who herself may not be well educated, has to teach all the subjects to children of a wide age-range who may in any case be too numerous for even a skilful teacher to handle adequately. Experience everywhere indicates that the small school cannot offer a sufficiently rich curriculum to give a good education to children of many different age groups. On the other hand, in a country with a rural population it is equally clear that if one attempts to build schools only in places where an institution of reasonable size is viable, this will take it out of range of a high proportion of the nation's children. Once again, the tension exists between the democratic right of the individual citizen to receive some sort of education, and the demand for quality in the education provided.

The same factors operate in secondary education to an even more marked degree. It is clearly impossible to provide secondary schooling for even half of the children who complete the primary school course. How is one to select those who are to attend these schools? If one is to select those children who are likely to succeed, then one will concentrate on the children of the rich and the educated. This way, too, one can anticipate that a proportion of the cost of education will be provided by the parents in the form of fees, thus enabling the educational provision to go further. On the other hand, a method of selection based on wealth is not in the least democratic and once again will only serve to confirm those barriers of class which already exist. If, on the other hand, selection is to be based on a form of testing, should the testing be primarily of attainment, or of ability? If attainment, then one is testing primarily the schools rather than the candidate. In a country like Lesotho, or Botswana, where the quality of the primary schools varies so tremendously from place to place, this would hardly seem a fair method of selection, nor one that is likely to select those children who will succeed in their secondary career. However, there has not yet been devised a genuinely culture-free ability test which will help to sort out those children who,

though they cannot reach a high level of attainment because of the poor quality of their primary education, nevertheless should be able, with good teaching, to excel in the secondary school. The basis, then, of selection for secondary education is by no means clear since every form of selection open to us suffers from major disadvantages. Once again the tensions inherent in the situation are very difficult to resolve.

We have already seen that it is important in a developing country to provide an education which is relevant to the needs of the children and we have seen how difficult this is in primary education, as well as in secondary education. One of the main problems facing secondary education in any developing country is to determine at what point one should change from a small, highly academic, élitist education for the few who can afford or who have qualified to enter it, to a system based on the expectation that sooner or later the majority of children will be able to enter the secondary school. At some point one has to say that one is deliberately changing the system from minority to majority provision. This involves, however, a complete revision of the curriculum and the provision of courses which are suitable not only for those few who will proceed to higher education, but for the majority for whom perhaps three years of secondary education is going to be terminal. This in turn implies that there must be a great variety of courses offered in the secondary school, some of them practical, some of them vocational, some of them purely academic. This in turn indicates the need for a large school. We have already seen, however, that in rural areas it is difficult to provide large schools because the population is not sufficient to support them. For this reason, therefore, in many developing countries one finds that secondary schools tend to be boarding schools. This has many advantages from the point of view of aiding the study of children whose homes may not be well adapted to homework. Neverthless it also has the unfortunate side effect of increasing the cost of secondary education very considerably because of the necessity for providing accommodation and food for all the children in the school. Once again tension is created by a variety of forces and arguments pulling in different directions.

Finally, we should note again the problems caused by the lack of qualifications of the great majority of teachers in developing countries, especially in the primary sector. Once again the reformer and planner are faced with perplexing difficulties. One of the first priorities is to replace the rote learning which is all too prevalent by a type of education which leads to the development of the personality of the children and enables them, not only to succeed in the educational tasks which they are set, but to be adaptable for the needs of a community in which they are constantly going to have to adopt new roles in life. How is it possible for the teachers to teach in this way? They have never themselves witnessed any such teaching; their own education was by rote learning; they are unable to conceive of any alternative. Only the most massive re-training programme would be sufficient to alter in any significant degree the way in which they teach. May it not even cause more difficulty to attempt to get these teachers to teach in a way which does not carry conviction with them and for which they have not been prepared? How, then, is one to attempt to introduce into the schools some of those new methods and techniques which seem essential if the children are going to have their chance in life?

The same sort of tensions exist at an earlier stage, in the teacher training colleges and in other initial training centres for teachers. Is one to provide teacher *education* or teacher *training*? Should one simply drill the teachers in a variety of different teaching techniques appropriate to different sorts of instruction, or is one really going to attempt to educate the teachers so that they can be largely self-motivating and self-directing in classrooms in which they are allowed considerable freedom? We, of course, have no hesitation in saying that the latter is the correct solution. The lower the level of ability of the teacher, however, the more difficult it is to agree that this solution is correct. Time does not permit one to give an education adequate to form a firm basis for freedom. Is it perhaps better to equip the teacher through drill with a confidence in handling a few typical types of lesson which he can handle with complete adequacy? Once again the answer is not an easy one to discover.

We have enumerated above a few of the problems which cause the planning of education in developing countries to be of such absorbing interest. The solution of these problems, in one sense, is not possible. The situation itself is intractable and when combined with a completely inadequate supply of the necessary finance, one can only take decisions in the knowledge that the decisions fall far short of what is desirable. If progress is to be made, however, one must take decisions consistently and with the intention that they should lead, step by step, to a situation which is better adapted to the needs of the developing nation.