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## The Potential of Public Education\*

To me, one of the most interesting of all educational studies is the study of educational aims. As put forward by various individuals and groups, they reveal a variety of intriguing things, not only the way people think about education but the way they think about life in its most important manifestations. The study of educational philosophies is equally revealing — for our educational values, of course, are in many instances clear extensions of the more general values which we strongly hold.

As a practical exercise, however, the promulgation of both educational aims and educational philosophies turns out to be somewhat less fruitful than we could wish.

The trouble with the “aims” approach, especially in policy statements emanating from high places, is that they seem to have little influence on either educational policy or educational practice. There is a startling sameness about them: they often appear to have been copied from a common source, or point by point from one another. And their generality, their abstractness, their piousness — these tend to deprive them of almost any functional applicability to actual school programs. Indeed it is sometimes difficult to resist the conclusion that they are mere flourishes (after the event), and that the actual nature of the school program, or its guiding policy or (policies), has already been separately determined.

Something of the same difficulty attaches to philosophy as an educational determinant. Theoretically philosophy underlies and provides the validation for educational aims. But this approach is characteristically too grand and remote.

Consider, first, what philosophy is, or was — the proud and arrogant “queen of sciences,” dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the endeavour to live the good life; also to the clarification of the bases whereby one could know that he was knowing and evaluating correctly. Bit by bit and one by one the sciences broke away, developing their own specialistic fields of study and their own criteria for knowing — physics,

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astronomy, geology, biology and all the other natural sciences, then the social sciences and psychology.

Meanwhile the development of various "schools" of philosophy, with esoterically varying or opposed views of the nature of reality (whether spiritual or physical, etc.) removed formal philosophy still further from everyday experience and concerns, and from educational concerns. Indeed, as Peters observes, "questions about the nature of space and time, about the reality of the external world, and about substance and personal identity are not so glaringly relevant to educational problems as are questions in ethics and theory of knowledge."<sup>1</sup>

It is because of this remoteness, both with respect to educational philosophy and educational aims, that a good many educators have begun to wonder whether a less formal approach to the improvement of education might be more effective. An approach, let us say, through commonly recognized needs, or expectations, or aspirations — which might give us some kind of vision of what public education, imaginatively viewed, could do for us and for society. Hence my title, "The Potential of Public Education."

There will be plenty of opportunity in this approach for reference to aims and philosophy. But the aims will be relative to needs. And the philosophy will, I think, be with a small "p" rather than a capital "P" — with reference to the definition of terms, the clarification of assumptions, concepts, and pre-eminently of values.

I am not, of course, unaware that an approach through "needs" may suffer from some of the uncertainties that I have indicated for "aims." The story is told of the eligible bachelor who was deemed by the daughters and more particularly by the matrons of his community to be greatly in *need* of a good wife who would love and cherish him, even though the bachelor himself was wholly unable to diagnose his case in any such fashion. (What is the criterion for a *need*? Who is its arbiter?) Nevertheless, it is my experience that we are likely to get more consensus on needs than on aims, especially as some of the major ones become more and more obvious, taking on the quality of expectations or even of aspirations as our century unfolds.

I want now to review briefly some of the social and other conditions that face us, and that are changing our educational milieu. I want then to discuss some of our educational needs and expectations, and as best I can to assess their validity and the prospects of their satisfaction through public education. In conclusion, I want to direct your attention to a number of associated matters — problems of access, ideas of culture, its relationship to formal education and teachers — and so return to the topic indicated in my title.

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<sup>1</sup>R. S. Peters, "The Philosophy of Education," in *The Study of Education*, J. W. Tibble, editor (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 67.

A very important category of environmental change has to do with the disintegration of various groups which historically exerted a socially binding effect: the family, the church, the small community, even to some extent national and international groups and alliances. Despite some influences making for conformity (including "protest" conformity), the kind of unity shown by most of these groups for long historic periods has disappeared or is disappearing. Members of the family group — with the lessening of parental authority and control, more cars and motorcycles for individual transportation, and the decreasing incidence of hereditary occupations — tend to live more as individuals. (Even much of our television watching is done, mentally and emotionally if not physically, as individuals.) Church authority and attendance have decreased; the church is no longer the centre of fraternal and social activities that it was in earlier days on this continent. Communities are less tightly knit both socially and numerically: the exodus to the cities from the rural areas and the towns continues — thereby lessening and dispersing, in turn, the "community" of the cities. The ideological unity (or, in some cases, the clear dualisms) of our western nations seems to be waning: as life becomes more complex, so also do our reactions to it. At all levels our moral, political, aesthetic and other convictions become dispersed, and reflect themselves in a variety of subtle manifestations (including sit-ins, teach-ins, love-ins, and other group processes) so that it is increasingly difficult to identify a consensus on many vital issues. International consensus is more difficult still. Alliances between nations and groups of nations, of course, have never been too stable. Despite the United Nations, however, we seem to be as far away from the abrogation of national sovereignties as ever.

The sort of change that I have been describing is usually referred to by the term *breakdown*, and is often accompanied by a sense of nostalgia or regret. Some of our most romantic memories have to do with the sacredness of the family circle, the stern but simple commitments of the pioneer church community, the various kinds of devotion and sacrifice associated with patriotism and national loyalties. Yet in any enlightened sense there is nothing ethically imperative about all this. Family and small-community loyalties are often akin to group selfishness; community folkways and church dogmatisms have often been ignorant, brutal, and repressive. On the grand scale, church and state policies and alliances have often led the world from harshness to brutality, from tragedy to catastrophe.

Perhaps what we are really facing is in some respects not a breakdown at all but a *breakthrough* — to a new social maturity, to a new moral authority, even perhaps to a new and more viable concept of community. Breakdown or breakthrough, it unquestionably provides one of the most difficult and challenging situations in the entire school context.

A second category of change has to do with science and technology. This reference will be brief because the nature of these changes has recently been so well documented and publicized that all we need is a reminder. Scientific developments *per se* and their philosophic implications have, of course, a great deal to do with the ideological changes that I have just been talking about. Anthropological findings, for instance, have had an impact on our thinking about race groups and relations. Findings in astronomy, biology, physics and chemistry have altered our thinking in matters broadly pertaining to religion.

Scientific and technological developments have, of course, had their greatest impact on physical (as opposed to ideological) outcomes. It is now to technology, rather than to artisanship and handcraftsmanship, that we look for a continuation of, and indeed an increase in, the material productivity and well-being to which we have become accustomed in recent years.

The significance of science and technology for survival needs the shortest reminder, though it may receive the greatest emphasis of all. Let me mention only such matters as population control, the development of natural resources, manipulation of land and water masses, and armaments both conventional and atomic. The latter item may in fact have nothing to do with survival (only with its reverse), but it still figures prominently in our thinking.

The third and last category of change that I want to mention has to do with leisure activities of all kinds. The development of the shorter and shorter work week is a clear fact — though you and I may have a little difficulty in detecting its impact on *our* particular jobs. But at least in a second-hand way we all know that more and more people seem to have more and more free time, and that there is need for them to learn to spend it wisely. We may or may not have associated with this development what is called the “obsolescence of the work ethic,” and just what this may mean for our value systems as well as for the more practical aspects of our private and group lives.

Some other consequences of increased leisure are, I think, less generally recognized and consequently more novel. We have rather generally accepted the value of sports (spectator and other), arts and crafts, and hobbies. Must we now, perhaps, consider more carefully the importance of continuing and adult education in relation to leisure time?

Of the two terms, *continuing education* best describes the emerging pattern. Until very recently one either was a schoolboy or he was not, he was a student or he was a worker — two mutually exclusive, self-sufficient categories. We are now in the process of mustering our resources at most institutional levels for the continuing education of anyone interested in *continuing education*. It is not yet clear what all these resources and levels will be, or how they will relate to the

interests and needs and preferences of our clientele. What does seem clear is that there *is* a clientele.

I come now to the second and major part of this paper — to a consideration of our educational needs, together with some estimate of their validity and of their satisfaction through public education. I have already pointed out that one cannot be dogmatic about *needs*. I have also suggested that I am using the term in a very general way, and that I would wish to associate with it such terms as wants, desires, expectations, and even aspirations. Almost any classification would do. For better or worse, I have organized what I want to say under the following heads: *economic, civic, humane, creative and recreative*. I hope that you will take the 3 R's sort of thing for granted, at the same time allowing me to point out that skills are made functional (if at all) in some sort of context. I hope also that you will not require me to distinguish too carefully between individual and social purposes, although I expect to make something of this distinction from time to time.

I begin with the *economic* need — not by any means because it is more important than the others, but because it seems to be so generally recognized and obvious. We in the western world, and certainly those of us in the new world, have come to accept as normal during the past several decades an extremely high degree of physical well-being, and to expect still further improvements of a material kind. Nationally the fulfilment of this expectation is measured by productivity indices, and by the state of the budget. Individually it can be measured in terms of the available goods, gadgetry and devices related to sheer physical excitement and comfort — newer and better cars, boats, television sets, refrigerators, heating systems, automatic door openers, etc. These things are important to us. And while it may be argued that economic well-being is more of a want or a desire than a need, it now appears to fall within the latter category because we are accustomed to it, and because it provides us with some of the leisure to attend to other needs.

How realistic is our expectation that the economic need will be subserved by public education?

Of all the expectations that have been held in recent years for public education, the economic one seems least in doubt. It is true that, from time to time, a rugged individualist succeeds mightily in business, industry, or other human enterprise without benefit of much formal education. It is also true that, by adapting technology to the worker rather than the worker to technology, one may at least temporarily by-pass the need for skill — I am told that Switzerland and West Germany have recently imported thousands of South European and North African unskilled labourers to overcome a shortage of *unskilled* labour in their highly advanced technologies.

These, however, are the proverbial exceptions. Whether for the individual or for the nation, education does seem to pay off — and at

any stage of the educational ladder. There is virtually no gainful employment for illiterates, for persons without an elementary school education. There is only restricted employment for persons without a high school education, or in lieu of this, a comparable trade or technical training. And while it would not be true to say that white-collar jobs are entirely dependent on a university education, they are (and have for some time been) increasingly so.

In addition to earlier studies showing a positive correlation between national productivity and education levels, we have now had the benefit of the report of the Bladen Commission, and of the Deutsch Report:

Accumulating evidence and analysis point more and more to education as a persuasive and basic element contributing to the income potential of a people, and therefore also of a whole economy or society, or of particular regions or localities . . . <sup>2</sup>

Well, there is no need to labour this one. The clichés are true. The productive individual is the educated individual. Wealth and education *do* go together. Our greatest resources *are* human rather than physical.

Of those who have addressed themselves to what I have called the *civic need*, Harry S. Broudy has, in my view, put the case as cogently as anyone:

When in the history of the world has it been so difficult to understand the problems of citizenship? When has it been so hard to master the knowledge needed to understand such an ubiquitous problem as taxation . . . ? How many well-intentioned citizens would care to expound on the intricacies of foreign affairs? The day when the average citizen reading his local newspaper and conversing with his cronies at the general store could arrive at intelligent decisions about problems, foreign or domestic, is gone.<sup>3</sup>

One third of a century ago George Counts asked: "Dare the schools build a new social order?" As a good Democrat he now asks: "Dare the schools build the great society?" The phrasing in each case, as you will have noticed, is "*Dare* the schools . . . ?" rather than "*Can* the schools . . . ?" — because of the assumption that the schools in fact *can* if they will. Of course, many educators took issue with him, claiming it to be both ethical and inevitable that the schools should follow, rather than lead society. Dewey rejected the alternative, arguing that if the spirit of public education were one of open enquiry, the schools would indeed be effective agencies in the building of a new social order, or of greater societies — even though they would not themselves directly fashion the new order.

Whether we like it or not, the new order, the new society will be pluralistic — even if only to ensure survival. The 1962 Report of The Carnegie Corporation put it this way:

<sup>2</sup>Economic Council of Canada, Second Annual Review, *Towards Sustained and Balanced Economic Growth* (Queen's Printer, 1965), p. 85.

<sup>3</sup>H. S. Broudy, *Paradox and Promise* (Englewood, Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1961), pp. 7-8.

It would be hard to over-emphasize the importance of pluralism in helping a society to escape the cycle of growth and decay. The ever-renewing society is not convinced that it enjoys eternal youth. It knows that it is forever growing old and must do something about it. It knows that it is always producing deadwood and must, for that reason, look to its seed beds. If a society is dominated by one official point of view, the tentative beginnings of a new point of view may be a matter of devastating strain of conflict. In a pluralistic society, where there are already various points of view, the emergence of another is hardly noticed. In an open society, freedom of communication ensures that the new ideas will be brought into confrontation with the old.<sup>4</sup>

A short while ago I suggested that from what has been called a *breakdown* of old established institutions (family, church, and other groups) there might emerge a *breakthrough* — a new kind of community, a more mature society, its moral authority stemming from something more akin to enlightenment than to institutional prestige and power. I am now prepared to suggest, in line with the implications of the Carnegie Report, that we cannot have a mature society if it is not at the same time politically at least, an open society. I am further prepared to suggest that we cannot have a truly open society without schools and colleges and universities which are themselves dedicated to the spirit of free enquiry, and which in one way or another are more widely available than ever before to virtually all of our population.

Meanwhile we have to keep reminding ourselves that the recognition of pluralism at our time in history has to be global as well as merely regional or national. "The war we have to wage today," said U Thant, "has only one goal, and that is to make the world safe for diversity." It is increasingly obvious that we would do well to think of an enlightened pluralism, rather than merely of science and technology, when making our plans for survival.

I am not sure that I am right in differentiating so categorically between what I have called the civil need, and the *humane need*. The one is, if you like, the complement of the other. Certainly much of what makes a man human or humane is of social origin. (It was John Fischer who said that "man can make no more of the world than he makes of himself.") At any rate, what I have in mind under the heading of *humane* is the realization of the individual human personality, the achievement of its intellectual and spiritual quest, and the moral interplay — in terms of imaginative sympathy, benevolence, and compassion — of this personality with other personalities and indeed with all living things.

I know of no better single term for these outcomes than Cicero's *humanitas*, and no better exponent of this than Robert Wellman. "Cicero's conception of *humanitas*," he writes,

encompassed at once the Greek ideas of *philanthropia* and *paideia*. In the former sense the term included the qualities of helpfulness and considera-

<sup>4</sup>"Renewal in Societies and Men," *Report of the Carnegie Corporation*, 1962.

tion of one's fellowman. In the same sense it comprehended the social graces: appropriate manners, tolerance, politeness, and moderation. . . . *Humanitas* denotes a civilized and cultivated man, one who would be "the opposite of wild, brutal, bestial. He will be mild, gentle, merciful, compassionate, benevolent. He will be loyal to duty, upright, virtuous. He will have the social graces, possessing tact, courtesy, forbearance of others, *savoir faire*."<sup>5</sup>

Cicero saw the study of philosophy as the most effective means of fulfilling the humane need, of achieving *humanitas*. Philosophy was for him an inclusive term, mostly referable to the maximum "know thyself," and encompassing not only ethics but science and generally a study of what we might call "the human condition" — all of which lead to wisdom.

There was, of course, no assurance in Cicero's time — nor is there in our own — that theoretical studies would result in human application. For Cicero, however, thought and action were likely to be continuous, or at least more continuous than discontinuous: the expectation of implementation therefore seemed a fair one. In a general way it still does. There is some reason to believe, for instance, that the study of great literature dramatizes and generates broad human sympathies. The learning of maxims is probably sterile, but the study of ethics may well promote sensitivity to the need for, and discrimination in making moral decisions. Graciousness, courtesy and tact presumably bear some relationship to theoretical models as well as to exemplars in real life.

It would no doubt be hazardous to assert in any categorical way that the exemplars are to be found more broadly among "educated" people than among others, or that our degree of humaneness varies directly with our degree of formal education. Yet it is, I think, as good an hypothesis as any — always recognizing, of course, that any one of us could point to some notable exceptions.

By the terms *creative* and *recreative* I intend the usual kind of reference to activities which are originaive and refreshing, respectively. This includes the fine arts, for which I hope I need not develop an extensive plea here. Cizek may have overstated the case in positing art as the essential base of all education. He did not, in my view, overstate the case when he urged the importance for everyone of learning to understand and appreciate and as well to conceive and fashion those graphic and tonal patterns that give inner satisfaction and sapidity to our lives. The fine arts have long provided a major index of the stage of development of civilizations. "The significant thing," wrote August Heckscher, "is not that there should be a relation between the creative arts and the liberal arts, but that there should have developed within American education so sharp a division between them."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Robert P. Wellman, "Cicero: Education for *Humanitas*," *Harvard Educational Review* 35 (Summer, 1965), p. 351.

<sup>6</sup>August Heckscher, "The Relationship of the Arts and Humanities to Higher Education," unpublished paper prepared for the 21st Conference on Higher Education of the National Education Association, Chicago, 1966.

When we come to conjecture about the potential of the arts in public elementary, secondary and higher education, we have, of course, very little to go on. We have never given them much of a chance. In the light of the European experience, however, it does seem fair to assume that attention to the arts in schools would pay dividends in terms of understanding and appreciation, and probably of performance as well.

A more pervasive aspect of creativity has of course to do with what the psychologist calls "divergent" thinking, and with the cultivation of the disposition on the part of both individuals and societies to think independently, adventurously, experimentally. Quite obviously — and mostly because of the conservatism of teachers, textbooks, and schools as institutions — public education has been so largely concerned with convergent thinking that creativity in the broader sense has hardly been a school objective at all.

Whether or not creativity in this sense — and with it the achievement of social maturity — is realizable by virtue of public education will depend in part on the development of understandings and techniques now under investigation in a number of places. But it will depend even more largely on whether or not society will encourage or at least permit the development of a public school environment genuinely hospitable to creativity in matters of values as well as in matters of the arts.

From all that I have been saying you will understand that I personally believe that there exists in our institutions of public education the potential to satisfy our human needs. In fact, as long as they are truly *public* institutions, I for one am prepared to see them try.

I say this despite the many objections that have been raised to the position that I have taken. Perhaps the most significant of these rests on the argument that the school is likely to become too monolithic an organization. Indeed, many proponents of this position take the view that our institutions of public education are already trying to do too much, and urge that they should retrench — either because the satisfaction of the broad needs I have been outlining seems too big a job for them, or because it "invades" the so-called *private* sector (notably the family, the church, and political institutions).

There are, of course, dangers in any large institution — especially one as comprehensive as the public school. But I am not here suggesting that the school, by attending to value fields, should "take over" from, nor in any way deny the right of, individuals and groups to foster such individual, group, or institutional viewpoints as they wish to promote. Neither am I suggesting that the school should champion any one of the many competing sectarian viewpoints. Its approach would, instead, be objective, scholarly, intellectual — as befits the role of the school. Meanwhile the argument for retrenchment as such ignores one of the central facts of learning. For the work of psychologists the

world over attests the interdependence of learning, and the importance of physical, emotional, social and moral factors in academic achievement.

Two other objections need to be mentioned: that public education is now costing "too much money," and that there can be some such thing as "too much education." The first of these objections is surely refuted by the kinds of evidence which I have tried to present under the heading of the economic need. The second it is difficult to treat seriously — either because it seems selfish, or ignorant, or simply irrational.

The too-much-education thesis is in a way not too surprising when we remind ourselves of the comparative recency of the whole movement for freer and higher education. It is only slightly more than one hundred years since Horace Mann issued his dramatic proclamation of what he called the "absolute right" of everyone to an education. Pre-nineteenth century history shows no instances in which institutions like our schools were available to all youth, nor institutions like our universities to so many of them.

It is hardly surprising, then, that access to higher education, free or otherwise, remains somewhat controversial with us at this time. It is clearly much less so in the United States. Rexford Moon, at the 1966 meeting of the Association for Higher Education, asserted as follows:

Higher education no longer has to fight for recognition; no longer is there a need to debate with businessmen the relationship between higher education and work performance or with the politicians over the relationship of education to economic and cultural growth, or with parents over the material and intrinsic values of higher education for their children. Americans are sold on higher education . . .<sup>7</sup>

I have suggested that we in Canada are not quite so fully or so broadly sold on higher education. We tend, of course, to interpret the term rather more narrowly — thinking of it mostly in terms of universities. Perhaps this is why we tend also to be more conservative in our ideas about access. At the extreme, I know of some university spokesmen whose main objective in coping with the larger and larger numbers of students wanting university entrance seems to be that of devising bigger and better ways of *keeping them out*. Whereas the only valid statesmanship, obviously, is that of devising bigger and better ways of *getting them in*.

The administration of access is, of course, especially difficult for two particular kinds of student who are likely to do themselves less than justice at any school level: the so-called divergent thinker, and the underprivileged student. Either one may find himself graded and streamed away from academic programs — the divergent thinker to the degree that certain aspects of creativity may prevent his responding to the usual tests in mark-gaining ways, the underprivileged student to

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<sup>7</sup>Rexford G. Moon, Jr., "Universal Higher Education in the United States: Kind, Access, Substance," unpublished paper prepared for the 21st Conference on Higher Education of the National Education Association, Chicago, 1966.

the degree that achievement and indeed intelligence are themselves functions of educational opportunity.

Hence the importance, for the creative, of programs and tests which give scope and recognition to creativity. And hence the importance, for the underprivileged, of what has come to be called compensatory education.

We obviously need to reconsider the whole question of human abilities. And it is hardly too much to say that the degree to which we are likely to enlarge educational access is directly proportional to our faith in children and in people. If this is high, we will admit more and more students to higher and higher levels of education (including adult education) and try rigorously to adapt and improve the educational experiences we make available to them at all levels. If on the other hand our faith is low, we will try to screen out as many as possible, and certainly most students at the end of high school. But if we choose the latter course let us not pretend that it is economically, or socially, or politically, or psychologically, or spiritually, or in any other way necessary or desirable for us to do so.

Enlarged access must, of course, be accompanied by improved quality. With insights now available from the behavioral sciences and with new kinds of technological development, it is possible to make vast improvements in the quality of curriculum and teaching. At the same time, the ethos of the school must change — primarily in the direction of greater open-mindedness and maturity in all curriculum areas.

What I have been doing in this entire paper is, I suppose, simply stating my conviction that it is indeed possible for us to produce, if we elect to do so and are prepared to make the necessary resources available, a nation of genuinely cultured men and women.

What are the characteristics of cultured men and women?

One of the more intriguing efforts of scholars and thinkers throughout the ages has been that of trying to describe the cultured man or, if you like, the educated man. Plato, you will remember, had a go at this one. So did Cicero, as you will recall from the bit that I have already referred to. So did Francis Bacon, and Lord Chesterfield, and — directly or indirectly — a whole host of modern writers.

While the detailed characteristics of the educated man as seen in various historic periods may differ somewhat, and while the detailed emphases will certainly differ from age to age, the recurrent outlines are clear. They relate rather directly to the categories that I have tried to set forth in the main body of this paper. The educated man is a *producing* member of society in some respect or other — in goods, or in services, or in artifacts, or in ideas. He is a *social* member of society (if you don't find these terms too duplicative): that is, he is a worthy and cooperative (contributing) member of its social units —

from the family on the one hand, to national and international communities on the other. He is, finally, an *individual* in society — living his own life, thinking his own thoughts, pursuing his own quest — yet all within the framework of social sensitivities and obligations which relate to his society or to his concept of an ideal society.

Admittedly there are degrees of education or culture — degrees of productiveness, degrees of socialization, degrees of personal excellence. You would, I know, agree with me that the higher the degree, the better. Would you also agree with me that — teachers, of all people, ought to be among those exhibiting the highest degrees of excellence?

In my view, we are all too easily satisfied with our teachers. While some of them are excellent, too many are poor or mediocre — relatively unselected, inadequately prepared. We are therefore much less sensitive than we should be to the gap that exists between what they are and what they could be. Are we prepared to demand and pay for quality? Do we really mean what we say about the paramount importance of good teaching and teachers? Then let me put the question another way. What would it be like if teachers characteristically were personally as impressive as the most impressive people you know, and professionally as mature and alert and sophisticated as the most professional teachers you know? What would our society be like if we had all, during our formative school years, been under the influence of such teachers?

Would you go so far with me as to agree that the characteristics and qualities I have associated with the cultured man tend to vary, in a general way and perhaps with some notable exceptions, with the extent of the individual's formal education? If so, would you go just a little farther and agree that we cannot afford — simply dare not afford — not to capitalize on what I have called the potential of public education: that we cannot retrench, cannot compartmentalize, cannot set arbitrary limits to our educational investments and dividends, to our endeavours and to our expectations — but can only go on.

If you will go so far with me we have, I think, caught something of the vision of public education. We now have the knowledge and the resources to work more closely toward it. If as societies we have the courage and the determination as well, we may capture the vision, and from this vantage point look even farther ahead.