J. DONALD WILSON

The University of Western Ontario

Vocationalism in Education: Some Comments from Ontario*

In Ontario today education has become a topic of lively public debate. Foremost perhaps among the issues raised is the matter of financing education. This issue is of common concern to every property owner and taxpayer. Moreover suggestions to reduce education costs on property owners at the local level have usually focussed on requiring the provincial government to absorb a larger share of these costs. Such proposals, however, throw into question the concept traditional in this country of a large element of local control of education.

Another major area of popular concern in the province relates to the desire to ensure or attain equality of educational opportunity. The three major provincial political parties, cognizant of popular opinion, have all stressed programmes ensuring the attainment of this desire in their political platforms. Here we may concur with R. S. Peters' assessment of the politician's concern for democracy in education:

> Some politicians whose noses quiver at the scent of any sort of under-privilege, have found in education a quarry that they think they may more safely run to earth than the ferocious old foxes of private ownership and disparity of income.[1]

Some people, particularly university students, point to the attainment of universal accessibility to elementary education in Ontario one hundred years ago and to secondary education in the interwar period as evidence of the inevitability of universal accessibility to post-secondary education in the near future. They consider this likely development to be the crowning achievement of democratic education. Supporters of this position urge the adoption of tuition-free university education oblivious of the consideration that at this junction such an arrangement would likely prove to be a transfer of payments from the poor to the well-to-do and not the reverse, and therefore would be less than demo-

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[1]R. S. Peters, "Education as Initiation," in *Philosophical Analysis and Education*, R. D. Archambault, editor (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 87.

cratic.[2] Others urge the provision of easy transfer arrangements to allow graduates of the new Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (C.A.A.T.'s) to enter university.[3] These urgings are made without consideration of the effect such provision would have on the curriculum of the new colleges which are intended to serve the needs of students who, for years, have been avoiding university-bound courses for lack of interest or intellectual capacity.

There seems to be a general acceptance among Ontarians that the 1962 Reorganized Programme for Secondary Schools, which created four- and five-year programmes of study in each of three branches — Arts and Science, Business and Commerce, and Science, Trades and Technology — was an enlightened piece of educational reform catering to the personal needs of individual teenagers as well as the industrial needs of Ontario society. However, the four-year stream of this programme is proving to be a dead-end, necessitating the creation of a system of community colleges (C.A.A.T.'s). Also, the two-year Diversified Occupations course is proving to be a very expensive way to keep "underendowed" teenagers off the labour market while they are in school. Furthermore, the superficiality of the training only temporarily keeps them out of the ranks of the unemployed. Catch-phrases like "learn more to earn more" and "no school, no job" seem to have blinded some critics and nearly all parents to reality. At the risk of being labelled "undemocratic" or being accused of blocking educational opportunity, our political and educational leaders have seen fit to put "more children in more schools for more hours studying more of something,"[4] and have sat back content in the conviction that they are being "democratic" and "progressive."

What are the public schools of Ontario trying to accomplish? It seems to this writer that the sole aim is to serve as a means of status placement, i.e., the educational system serves to determine what occupation, what salary, and ultimately what social status an individual will attain. Only those who follow the dictum to stay in school and go through the various levels of educational "boxes" can be assured of a decent job. The entire system is job or vocationally oriented.

Most students realize this situation. Whenever they are asked why they go to school, they invariably reply, "To get a job" (or "To get Grade 13" which permits them to go to university in order to get a better-paying job). The high school diploma or university degree has become a union ticket, a necessary acquisition to ensure a reasonable

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[2]The dangers inherent in the adoption of such a proposal have been ably demonstrated by Ian M. Drummond in "Some Economic Issues in Educational Expansion" in *The Prospect of Change*, A. Rotstein, editor (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1965), p. 267.

[3]Typical of this sort of argument is the letter to the Editor written by Timothy E. Reid in the Toronto *Globe & Mail*, May 8, 1967.

[4]Margaret Mead, "Thinking Ahead: Why Is Education Obsolete?" *Harvard Business Review*, XXXVI (1958), p. 24.

standard of living. If the student decides the means or the end or both are not worth the effort, he drops out. The experience of learning doesn't keep him in school. How can it when so little learning, in the real sense of the word, occurs in school? As Marshall McLuhan has reminded us, the student today is bombarded by more information that is relevant to him outside school than inside it. In fact, the five-year-old is brimming over with information by the time he hits school, having spent an estimated 3,000 to 4,000 hours in front of the television set before Grade 1.[5]

The vocational orientation of Ontario's educational system is, however, nothing new. From the time of Plato, man has considered an educational system of some sort as the most effective means of preparing the rising generation for its future occupational duties. In the Middle Ages, these tasks were divided into three categories, *Lehrstand, Wehrstand,* and *Nährstand* and for each there were distinct ways of training. Grammar schools and university were erected for professions such as the priesthood and law, military training was provided for warriors, the guilds provided apprenticeship for craftsmen. As late as the eighteenth century in England a similar pattern was followed among the aristocracy. Younger sons were sent to Oxford or Cambridge to train for the collar or the bar if places could not be found for them on the family estate or in the army. Then came the industrial revolution. The bourgeoisie displaced the old aristocracy as the ruling class and demanded the same education for their sons as had their predecessors. This was the heyday of classical schools and "liberal" education. A new factor, however, emerged about the same time in the form of the industrial working class.

Up to the first half of the nineteenth century there had never been any thought of the necessity or social desirability of educating the mass of the people. But the needs of an industrializing economy changed all this. Some education became a necessary prerequisite to operate factory machines. As machines became increasingly complex, more education was demanded of the operator by his employer. This process has, of course, continued apace over the last hundred years so that today corporations are demanding high school graduation for some of the most menial of tasks. The aim of mass education in industrialized countries has always been to prepare workers for industry, and thus mass education has always been vocational in its orientation. As John Dewey has noted, it was concluded from the time of Aristotle and the scholastics that "the education which is fit for the masses must be useful or practical education in a sense which opposes useful and practical to nurture of appreciation and liberation of thought."[6]

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[5]John M. Culkin, S. J., "A Schoolman's Guide to Marshall McLuhan," *Saturday Review,* March 18, 1967, p. 71. Culkin estimates that by the end of Grade 12 the average American student has clocked 15,000 hours of television time as opposed to 10,800 hours of school time.

[6]J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York, Macmillan, 1961), p. 257.

Today this basic prerequisite for a class-structured philosophy of education continues in the form of intellectual training for some of the people, vocational training and "life-adjustment" for the rest. All claims to the contrary, the presence of this distinction in Ontario's education system is clear to those who will take the time to examine it.

Although the vocational orientation of Ontario's system is tailor-made for the needs of business and industry who remain happy in the realization that the cost of basic training of their future employees is borne by the taxpayers, one wonders what the impact of this emphasis will be in the Nineteen Eighties when the products of the present school system enter the work force. By that time, thanks to the advance of automation and cybernation, machines will continue to eliminate jobs faster than new jobs can be provided or invented. If society reaches a point where all adult citizens are ensured a reasonable standard of living regardless of work, through a guaranteed annual income and where only limited opportunities for work will be available to each individual, what benefit will today's vocationally oriented school system serve? Instead of considering education as a process of "tooling up," we must regard it more in terms of the type of education traditionally reserved for the few. In classical times only those with "leisure" could be educated.[7] Today it seems certain that "leisure" is about to be extended from the few to the masses. Education therefore should be and should do for *all* men what it once was and did for the few in the aristocracies of the past.

Moreover in this age of rapid change, how can schools any longer train for specific jobs? The day when principals and guidance counsellors could encourage students to select a particular occupation they might expect to make a lifetime career is at an end. Within a few years the notion of serving a single occupation for life will seem for most people quaint indeed. Instead of teaching penmanship, welding and the like, schools must turn their attention to preparing students for a life without "job centredness," a life where it will be common for an individual to train for three or four different occupations during his working career.[8] Professions will be required more than ever to update themselves periodically and in the process learn to unlearn things that were taken as given in earlier days.

It is true that youth must still be prepared for jobs. This training can, however, be better accomplished in most cases on the job following a good solid general education. The obsolescence of vocational instruction in the schools is already painfully obvious. Yet valiant efforts are

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[7]It is interesting to note that "school" and its equivalent in all European languages is derived from the Greek word meaning "leisure."

[8]The task of retraining has even reached a ridiculous stage if we are able to believe a member of the U.S. Department of Labour who was recently quoted for saying: "We retrain them, but before the course is finished, that job too has vanished. So we begin again. But after the fourth or fifth retraining he has a job that doesn't vanish: he becomes a Teacher of Retraining." Paul Goodman, *Compulsory Mis-Education* (New York, Horizon, 1964), pp. 71-72.

made to keep apace of technological changes with the purchase of new and expensive equipment. The result is that shop department budgets in the average composite school in Ontario often exceed $25,000 annually. The implication is clear: industry must be made responsible for on-the-job training and the schools liberated from training technical and commercial students in specific job skills. Similarly plumbers, gemologists and the like should be trained with a combination of apprenticeship and trade school training.

In-service training is the cheapest, quickest and most effective way to train people in industry. The extent of its effectiveness is shown by its frequent application now even in the case of high school graduates. In a recent book, Paul Goodman asserts that three weeks of training is sufficient to prepare individuals who have no education whatever for the average job in General Motors' most automated plant. "It used to require six weeks," he continues; "for such jobs automation has diminished rather than increased the need for training [an interesting point!]. In the Army and Navy, fairly complicated skills, e.g. radar operation and repair, are taught in a year *on the job,* often to practical illiterates."[9] In Ontario, by contrast, students in the Diversified Occupations course take two years to learn such skills as janitorial service and meat-cutting. And moves are afoot to extend this program to three years!

This is not a plea to abolish technical education. Quite the contrary. It is the vocational not the technical emphasis which is misplaced. In fact it is becoming increasingly apparent that a knowledge of practical science and technology would be helpful to every adult today whether to assist him to repair intelligently the standard household machines or to engage in hobbies of this nature during leisure hours. As Alfred North Whitehead has pointed out, "There can be no adequate technical education which is not liberal, and no liberal education which is not technical . . . education should turn out the pupil with something he knows well and something he can do well."[10] This philosophy is, unfortunately, not exemplified in Ontario schools.

An interesting example of a curriculum combining both liberal and technical education for all students is that of Nova High School in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. At Nova there is no streaming of students as in Ontario. All students learn the intellectual skills needed in the age of technology. To this end all students learn to type, learn graphics, geometric drafting and electricity. Each student must complete a project in a technical science such as electronics, engineering, drafting or mechanical technology. In the province of Quebec, similar provisions are made in the recently published *Parent Report.* The commissioners recommended that "all secondary school students, whatever their future occupation, take a practical option course of at least one hour a week in Grades IX, X, XI."[11] The Ontario Department of Education would do

[9]*Ibid.,* p. 67.

[10]A. N. Whitehead, *The Aims of Education* (New York, Macmillan, 1959), p. 74.

well to apply this recommendation in this province. For this to happen, Department officials would be obliged to adopt a philosophy of education that differentiates between training and education. Only when this important distinction is realized and accepted by all connected with education in Ontario will the schools of the province be able to truly educate.

A survey of curriculum foci during the past few decades proves interesting in this regard. In the thirties progressive education gave primary attention to the child. Then the impact of sociology and the post-war world stressed society-centered curriculum. Now the curriculum is becoming subject or discipline oriented. The launching of Sputnik brought to light the instructional failings in mathematics and science, resulting inevitably in the "new math" and the "new science." Social studies are now taking their turn with emphasis on teaching concepts by inductive or "discovery" methods. Each discipline has had its own modes of inquiry and is studied from this perspective.[12] Expressed in McLuhanese, the new approach might be capsulized as follows: "We can no longer teach kids all about a subject; we can teach them what a subject is all about."[13] The next stage will likely be the day of the total curriculum for all children, the day when the curriculum is viewed as a whole rather than as bits and pieces. Then the arts, formerly a luxury item in the curriculum, will play a new role in education. Labelled "frills in education" by critics such as Admiral Rickover, the arts must play a more prominent role in the curriculum to enable the individual to cope with the life of increased leisure. The meaningful use of leisure is becoming of equal importance to the training required for a working skill or profession. As Erich Fromm has suggested, "Man, in order to feel at home in the world, must grasp it not only with his head but with all his body."[14] Hopefully by the end of the century we may have attained a truly humanistic curriculum — for all students. This curriculum would include science and technology as well as the traditional humanities and social sciences. All subjects would be expected to contribute to the student's understanding of man and his environment both physical and social. No longer can we content ourselves with an education "for routine skill jobs in a conventionally work-oriented society." Thus the vocational orientation of Ontario's public school system must be replaced. What better credo for the guidance of decision-makers than R. S. Peters' definition: "To be educated is not to have arrived at a destination; it is to travel with a different view."[15]

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[11]Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Quebec, *Report* (4 vols., Quebec, 1963-1966), Vol. III, p. 177.

[12]Typical of recent studies in this field is Edwin Fenton's important book, *Teaching the New Social Studies in Secondary Schools: An Inductive Approach* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966). A recent report shows thirty-two major curriculum projects were launched in the United States in 1966 alone.

[13]Culkin, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

[14]Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Rinehart, 1955), p. 301.

[15]Peters, *op. cit.*, p. 110.